

POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP SELF-EFFICACY

by

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ABSTRACT

ASPEN JANAI ROBINSON. Potential barriers to women's leadership self-efficacy.
(Under the direction of DR. ENRICA RUGGS)

Many organizations are employing women at a higher rate than seen in previous years, yet women are still underrepresented in leadership roles. In this paper, I examine factors that may influence an individual's perceived capabilities of being a leader, such as perception of self-agency and workplace incivility. The inequality seen in the workplace illustrates that there are barriers to women's advancement to leadership roles. Therefore, this study illustrates that future research is needed to discover key factors that may prevent women from pursuing leadership and obtaining positions.

DEDICATION

I would like to thank Dr. Enrica Ruggs for the opportunity to conduct research under her guidance and supervision. I would also like to extend my gratitude for her willingness to chair my committee. In addition, I would like to thank Drs. Linda Shanock and Steven Rogelberg for accepting my request to be committee members for this research project. I chose to work with these three, wonderful professors because of the passion I witnessed as I sat as a student in their lectures. It inspired me to conduct research of my own, in hopes of being a fellow contributor to the scientific community. Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank my parents, Glenda Hayes and Claude Robinson, for supporting my dreams and encouraging me to work hard every step of the way. I do not know any two people who believe in me more than the both of them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
METHOD	9
RESULTS	11
DISCUSSION	12
CONCLUSION	16
TABLES	17
REFERENCES	19

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INTRODUCTION

Organizations today are experiencing many changes, including a rise in globalization, increases in use of technology, and greater focus on diversifying the workplace (Riggio, 2015). However, a concentration on diversity has yet to yield a noticeable difference in the proportion of female leaders compared to male leaders. For example, only 39% of women in today's workplace hold management occupations, and just 28% of those women are CEOs in these organizations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). When examining S&P 500 companies, only 25% of women hold executive and senior-level manager positions, with only 4% of those women ($N = 20$ women) holding the title of CEO (Catalyst, 2016). With the overall increased representation of women in the workplace, there are questions concerning why there is a dearth of female leadership in today's organizations. It has been well documented that women still face some systemic, structural barriers to advancement in leadership (Bain & Cummings, 2000); however, other factors may serve as barriers to women in leadership. One barrier may be that women are assumed to not fit the mold of what is required of a leader (Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007). The stereotypical traits prescribed to women are communal in nature such as being friendly, expressing emotion, and being warm (Rudman & Glick, 1999). These traits are in opposition to the traits prescribed to the traditional leadership role (Eagly & Chin, 2010). The opposition between the traits prescribed to women and the traits prescribed to leaders may lead to a perception of role incongruence between gender roles and leadership roles as well as higher levels of workplace mistreatment, including incivility and discrimination toward women.

In the present study, I examine individuals' leadership self-efficacy (LSE), which is the belief that one can successfully perform leadership tasks (McCormick, Tanguma, & López-Forment, 2002). I examine gender differences in LSE, as well as factors that may influence these differences. Specifically, I examine two factors, one internally motivated and one externally driven, that may influence men and women's LSE. Using research from leadership categorization theory (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984), I explore how differences in perceptions of self-agency may lead to differences in LSE for men and women.

Over the years, the image of leadership recognized worldwide has changed very little. According to leadership categorization theory, leaders are said to be most effective if they possess the prototypical traits of leadership (Lord & Maher, 2002). The theory stems from traditional categorization theory, which outlines how individuals formulate categories to classify and register information (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984). Each category is easily distinguishable and is comprised of similar components. The prototypes that stem from the categories serve as standard examples of the other items in each specific category (Lord et al., 1984). Leadership categorization theory extends from categorization theory by exploring prototypical perceptions of leaders (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984). The traits that evaluators attach to leaders develop as a result of the shared beliefs held about the characteristics and behaviors of effective leaders (Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008). Physical appearance, masculinity, dedication, and intelligence are a few traits used by evaluators. Rosette and colleagues (2008) explain that these prototypical traits then combine to form one typical leader category: a leadership prototype. This leadership prototype may serve as an internal barrier for

women if they perceive discrepancy between their own abilities and the ideal, agentic abilities needed for leadership. The thought process is one that involves self-reflection and assumption, without direct input from external parties. This process is likely influenced by external factors (e.g., others' perceptions of self-agency, others' behavior toward female leaders); however, it is a self-perception based on the extent to which one has internalized societal stereotypes.

In addition, I examine how a common external barrier, workplace mistreatment, can lead to differential perceptions of leadership capabilities for men and women. I draw from the workplace incivility literature (Cortina, Magley, Hunter, & Langhout, 2001) to examine how subtle mistreatment relates to men and women's belief in their leadership abilities. By examining both internal and external factors as barriers to LSE, I hope to shed light on which barriers may be more related to leadership self-efficacy than others.

Leadership Self-efficacy

Leadership self-efficacy is a term derived from general self-efficacy, which is defined as one's belief that he or she is able to organize and execute the tasks required to obtain a desired outcome (Bandura, 1977). LSE differs in that it depicts how an individual feels he or she is able to successfully perform tasks specific to leadership (McCormick, Tanguma, & López-Forment., 2002). Leadership self-efficacy has been associated with many positive outcomes. Research has shown that higher levels of leadership self-efficacy are associated with greater chances that one will voluntarily seek opportunities to lead others (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). Individuals high in LSE are also characterized as committed, determined, resilient, goal-focused, resourceful, and effective at problem solving (McCormick et al., 2002). LSE is also important in shaping

individual, group, and organizational outcomes and is a favored characteristic under stressful and demanding situations at and away from the workplace (Dugan et al., 2013). Leadership self-efficacy is also associated with critical benefits relating to an individual's leadership aspirations, work-related performance, adaptability, and perseverance in light of challenges (Dugan et al., 2013).

There are several factors that positively influence one's self-efficacy, and leadership self-efficacy specifically. One of these factors includes level of self-confidence (McCormick, Tanguma, & López-Forment, 2001). Other factors that are positively related to LSE are previous leadership role experiences, personal performance accomplishments, exposure to models or similar others in the form of mentors and sponsors, feedback regarding performance, encouragement, and mood states (McCormick et al., 2002; Chan & Drasgow, 2001). Studies show that compared to men, women have lower self-confidence (McCormick et al., 2002) and fewer encounters with each of these experiences (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). Even when previous leadership experience is controlled for, women continue to report lower levels of LSE (McCormick et al., 2002). Furthermore, male-dominated environments rely on gender-based norms for leadership, which compound the problems of leadership emergence among women in several industries (Dugan, Fath, Howes, Lavelle, & Polanin, 2013; Eagly & Chin, 2010). These factors that serve as roadblocks for women holding leadership positions may also negatively influence their perceived abilities to succeed in these roles. Therefore, I pose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Women will report lower levels of LSE than men.

The Role of Agency in the Role Congruency Theory

As it relates to leadership self-efficacy, research mentions a few antecedents, both externally and internally motivated. Self-confidence and perceived internal locus of control are two variables that have been found to positively relate to LSE. An individual possessing an internal locus of control would have high beliefs in his or her own efforts when performing and accomplishing tasks (Paglis & Green, 2002). While these two internally motivated factors are related to LSE, the same relationship has not been assessed for perceptions of self-agency.

Role congruency theory has been used to examine the extent to which gender roles are consistent with other roles that people take on in their lives (Eagly & Karau, 2002). People hold shared perceptions about gender roles regarding how men and women should behave. These gender roles identify assumptions about the attributes and behaviors of men and women in a social context, and are often viewed in terms of agency and communion (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie, & Reichard, 2008). Agency is understood as the motivation toward striving for power over others, emphasizing assertiveness, efficacy, and mastery (Johnson et al., 2008). Communion can be described as the motive to form relationships and get along with others, emphasizing affiliation and harmony (Bakan, 1966; Johnson et al., 2008). Men are labeled agentic and are assumed to possess traits such as competence, aggressiveness, and independence (Eagly & Chin, 2010). In contrast, women are labeled communal and are assumed to possess traits such as kindness, warmth and gentleness (Eagly & Chin, 2010). Men and women are often expected to act in ways that are consistent with these traits. Displaying behaviors that are more consistent with the opposite gender can be seen as incongruent with their prescribed view of how men and women should behave (Eagly & Chin, 2010).

When examining leadership roles, the traits ascribed to men are closely aligned with the expectations of leadership behaviors, whereas the traits associated with women have often been seen as incongruent with leadership prototypes (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Eagly and Karau (2002) found that agentic traits are associated with both the leader role and men; whereas, communal traits are more closely associated with femininity and women. When women attempt to take on more agentic traits in an effort to fit leadership prototypes, they often experience backlash because of perceptions of role incongruity (Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007). This perception of role incompatibility has negative effects for women with respect to leadership capabilities and effectiveness; women are perceived to be less capable and less effective (Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007). Previous role incongruity research indicated that women who exhibit agentic traits risk being judged as insufficiently communal (Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007; Rudman & Glick, 1999). This may result in women not pursuing leadership positions because they do not want to be viewed as infeminine. In some instances, female leaders are expected to approach leadership in similar ways as their male colleagues. In other instances, they are expected to exhibit the communal traits prescribed to them (Eagly & Chin, 2010). Because satisfying everyone is a difficult task to achieve, when women become leaders, they are often penalized for having been perceived to violate their gender role prescriptive characteristics, whether they are perceived as too masculine or too feminine (Eagly & Chin, 2010). In other words, they are perceived as not possessing an adequate amount of what it requires to be a woman or an effective leader.

More recent research states that successful top female leaders are being perceived as having prototypical leadership characteristics, but there is still the issue of empowering

more women to acquire the top-level positions for which they qualify (Rosette & Tost, 2010). The expectation of possessing the adequate amount of both agentic and communal traits complicates women's desire to become leaders and their performance as leaders (Eagly & Chin, 2010). Because women are aware of traditional gender role stereotypes as well as the stereotypes about successful leadership traits, they may perceive greater incongruity (compared to men) between the traits they believe they possess and the traits they believe an ideal leader possesses. Thus, women may feel that they possess fewer agentic traits than men because these traits are misaligned with gender role expectations. Therefore, I expect that women's perceptions of self-agency will be lower than men's perceptions which will be negatively related to LSE.

Hypothesis 2: Women will report feeling less agentic than men, which will be related to lower levels to LSE.

Workplace Incivility

Although many organizations have policies in place to prevent overt forms of mistreatment, such as workplace aggression and blatant discrimination, there are subtler forms of deviant behavior that may slip under the radar (Pearson, Andersson, & Wegner, 2001). Incivility, a form of subtle mistreatment, is prevalent and detrimental in the workplace. There are great costs associated with this form of mistreatment, such as decreased job satisfaction, negative mood, and job withdrawal (Cortina, Magley, Hunter, & Langhout, 2001). Workplace incivility has also been shown to be positively associated with negative health outcomes such as depression and anxiety (Cortina et al., 2001).

Cortina and colleagues (2001) suggest workplace incivility may arise as a means of asserting power within organizations. The social power theory states that society grants more power to individuals who have great access to resources and higher social influence (Carli, 1999). Therefore, individuals lacking tangible resources are at risk for having power exerted against them. Employees with less power may experience more incivility than those holding the cultural and tangible resources within the organization (Carli, 1999). Examples of such resources are objects and artifacts that hold cultural value and are evidence of past accomplishments and successes. Traditionally, women have been part of the lower status group compared to men and have reported greater frequencies of incivility compared to men (Cortina, Magley, Hunter, & Langhout, 2001).

In attempts to mitigate the presence of workplace incivility, individuals who have spoken out against this mistreatment have often been perceived as being too sensitive or misinterpreting the behavior (Pearson & Porath, 2005). Illustrating another form of remediation, Pearson and Porath (2005) found that while men confronted the initiator of the incivility, women developed coping strategies to avoid the conflict. These differences in gender styles drive one's ability to obtain and utilize power. In that regard, negative experiences with incivility may serve as further impediments to women's beliefs that they are capable of successfully leading others.

Hypothesis 3: Women will perceive greater incivility than men, which will be negatively related to LSE.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

One-hundred twenty-nine faculty members from a university in the Southeast participated in this study. Forty-nine percent of the sample was male and 50% was female (1% did not provide information regarding their sex). Participants' ages ranged from 26-73 years old ($M = 48$, $SD = 10.22$). The majority of participants were White (67%), followed by Black (19%), Hispanic (7%), Asian (2%), and American Indian (1%; 4% did not provide race information). Participants completed an online survey through Qualtrics that consisted of measures of LSE, perceptions of agentic and communal traits for self and leaders, workplace incivility, and demographic items.

Measures

Leadership Self-efficacy. Eight items from Kane and Baltes' (1998) Leadership Self-efficacy Scale measured the respondents' perceived capabilities of performing leadership tasks. Examples of items include "I am confident that I perform as a leader across different settings" and "I am confident that I motivate group members". These items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored by 1 (not at all confident) and 7 (very confident). There was acceptable reliability for this composite, $\alpha = .70$.

Perceptions of Self-Agency. Five items adapted from a study done by Rosette and Tost (2010) were used to measure agentic characteristics. A measure was produced that was intended to gather self perceptions of a leader. Participants were asked to evaluate themselves on several task dimensions representing agentic traits ($\alpha = .77$). Examples of items gauging agentic qualities include "I would describe myself as confident" and "I

would describe myself as competitive”. These items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored by 1(not at all) and 7 (very much).

Workplace Incivility. The Workplace Incivility Scale created by Cortina and colleagues (2001) uses 7 items to measure participants’ encounters with disrespectful, rude, or condescending supervisors or coworkers. Participants indicated the frequency in which they experienced each behavior on a rating scale anchored 1(never) to 5 (most of the time). The measure had good reliability, $\alpha = .89$.

Control Variables. In addition to the independent and dependent variables, I controlled for organizational tenure, tenure within one’s position, and employee age. All variables were open-ended self-report. Individuals reported organizational and job tenure in years and months, and these were both converted to months. The average reported tenure in months was $M = 124$, $SD = 160$ at the organization and $M = 85$, $SD = 93$ in one’s position. These variables were included as control variables because it was believed that the longer an employee has been in his or her job and organization, the greater likelihood that he or she has been exposed to leadership opportunities at the organization. Also, it was believed that due to the age and tenure of an employee, the confidence that he or she can perform certain tasks within the organization and in one’s job specifically, would increase due to comfort, familiarity, and experience.

RESULTS

The means, SD, and correlations for all measures are presented in Table 1. I controlled for tenure at the organization, tenure within one's position, and age for all analyses. As seen in Table 1, leadership self-efficacy was positively related to perception of self-agency suggesting that employees who reported higher levels of self-agency also reported higher levels of self-efficacy. To test Hypothesis 1, a regression analysis was used regressing LSE on gender controlling for job tenure, organizational tenure, and age. The results from this analysis showed no significant gender differences in reported levels of LSE, $b = -.12$, (CI: $-.36; .13$); therefore, Hypothesis 1 was not supported. To test Hypotheses 2 and 3, a multiple mediation analysis was conducted using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro (Model 4). Perceptions of self-agency and workplace incivility were entered as parallel mediators. The results showed no significant indirect effects of gender on LSE through perceptions of self-agency, $b = -.08$ (CI: $-.23; .05$) or incivility, $b = -.02$ (CI: $-.12; .04$). Thus, Hypotheses 2 and 3 were not supported. Although the indirect effect through incivility was not significant, as seen in Table 2, there was a significant effect of gender on incivility, $b = .32^*$ (CI: $.05, .59$), with women reporting higher significant levels of workplace incivility than men.

DISCUSSION

In the current study, I examined the extent to which there are gender differences in LSE and factors that may contribute to these differences. I predicted that women would have lower levels of LSE than men; however, the findings showed no significant effect of gender on LSE. Additionally, I did not see an indirect effect of gender on LSE through perceptions of self-agency. On the surface, this finding is encouraging because it suggests that women perceived themselves as just as capable of successfully serving as leaders as men. However, these null results may be due in part to contextual factors. The environment in which this sample was collected must be taken into account. Unlike most industries, the field of academia has no distinct qualification for what constitutes a leadership position. Some individuals may see administrative duties as leadership roles, whereas others may not. Furthermore, there are fewer opportunities for advancement in academia, as reaching tenure solidifies job security and autonomy for one's entire career at an institution. Thus, individuals may see no need to pursue positions beyond what they currently hold. This factor alone may speak to the lack of effect of gender on LSE, as both men and women in academia may hold the title of tenured professor, which means they have progressed within the ranks in their career. Yet, this progression does not necessarily equate to leadership roles.

Finally, all of the faculty members in the present study have advanced degrees, with most of them holding a PhD. This level of education is unique to the field of academia and may contribute to the reason no effect of perceptions of self-agency on LSE was observed. A high level of education may be related to higher levels of confidence, a varied skillset, and the perception of power, all items on the perception of

self-agency measure used in the current study. Taking into the account the uniqueness of the field of academia however, women are still underrepresented, so there are potential factors that may still be preventing the entry of women in the field.

In addition to effects of perception of self-agency, I also examined the influence of perceived workplace incivility on women's LSE. In line with previous research (c.f., Cortina et al., 2001), I found that women reported experiencing higher levels of workplace incivility than men. However, contrary to my hypothesis, these experiences did not significantly influence LSE for women. One reason for the lack of support for this hypothesis may be related to women's coping strategies. Women experience greater levels of incivility more frequently; therefore, they have adapted coping strategies that may help to buffer their self-efficacy from incivility and other mistreatment (Pearson & Porath, 2005). Pearson and Porath (2005) found that women who experienced workplace incivility were more likely than men to rely on coping methods, turn to social networks, and turn to social support as a way to deal with these stressors. Having such coping systems in place may assuage the influence of workplace incivility on women's LSE. Taken together, the results replicate findings from previous research showing that women experience greater levels of incivility than men; however, the relationship between incivility and LSE was not seen.

The primary goal of the study was to examine how two factors, perceptions of self-agency and workplace incivility, influence women's beliefs in their ability to lead. The results show that women's LSE was not affected by perceptions of self-agency nor incivility, suggesting that there may be other factors that contribute to the dearth of women in leadership positions in today's organizations. Much of the previous research on

role incongruity has illustrated the extent to which others use role incongruity to evaluate women's ability or performance. This research has shown that women experience backlash or negativity when they behave in ways that are inconsistent with traditional gender roles (Rudman & Glick, 1999). This may ultimately serve as a barrier to women seeking out leadership positions or accepting leadership opportunities that are presented to them. The findings in the current study suggest that at least in some contexts women may not perceive the same level of role incongruity that others may perceive. Future research on gender and leadership should examine the differences in self versus others' perceptions of agency and role congruity.

Although no significant results were seen in the current study, research on gender and leadership should continue to be a topic of focus because there is still unequal representation of women in leadership. This inequality suggests that there are barriers to women's advancement in the workplace that should be explored further. The current study focuses on the self as a hurdle to advancement in the workplace. Such research is needed as previous research has shown that women engage in behaviors and thoughts that can serve as barriers to their success in leadership (Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2007). Indeed, research on women's own self-doubt and behaviors that impede advancement to leadership are highlighted in the popular book *Lean In*, by Sheryl Sandberg. Thus, future empirical research should delve further into the antecedents that may hinder women's belief in and pursuit of leadership positions.

Limitations and Future Research

As with all studies, the current study is not without limitations. One limitation of this study is that it only consisted of professors at a single institution. Given the nature of

this job, there are limited opportunities for advancement to leadership unless one moves into administration. A more dynamic organization may warrant different responses due to a greater number of leadership positions and opportunities being available as well as more opportunities to display leadership qualities. Future research should look at the effects of perceived agency, role incongruity, and incivility on LSE across different industries.

Another limitation is that it is possible that any observed relations between the variables would have been affected by common method bias, as the data are cross-sectional and self-report (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Despite this possibility, self-report is perhaps the best way to assess the constructs of interest in the current study. Specifically, I was interested in individuals' self-assessments and perceptions; therefore, the individual is the most accurate source of information. Furthermore, given the faculty sample it would have been difficult to conduct a time-lagged data collection. The response rate to the questionnaire was 27%; however, the anticipated attrition for a time-lagged study would have likely greatly reduced the power in the current study. Future research may use time-lagged to provide separation between the measures of LSE and barriers to LSE. Additionally, future studies may use longitudinal studies to examine the extent to which changes in barriers influence levels of LSE as well as actual pursuit of leadership positions.

CONCLUSION

This research sought to demonstrate the persistence of barriers to women's advancement to leadership, although the findings were not significant. The challenge for today's organizations is to both recognize men and women as capable leaders and to ensure that women in their organizations recognize this as well. Greater attention and value placed on equality in leadership may help to mitigate whatever barriers in place that are influencing this disproportionate representation of men and women in leadership roles. Over time, barriers to advancement in organizations can be removed and there can be a greater chance for parity in organizational leadership.

TABLES

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for all study variables.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	1.51	.50	--						
2. Leadership Self-Efficacy	4.94	.61	-0.12	(.70)					
3. Perception of Self-Agency	5.38	.72	-.09	.55**	(.72)				
4. Workplace Incivility	2.17	.74	.19*	-.10	-.04	(.89)			
5. Organizational Tenure	123.91	160.22	-.05	.08	.04	-.07	--		
6. Job Tenure	84.72	93.39	-.10	.07	.02	.08	.36**	--	
7. Age	48.40	10.22	-.28**	.15	.04	-.06	.32**	.54**	--

Note. Gender was coded 1 = Male, 2 = Female. Organizational Tenure and Job Tenure were coded in months. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$. Reliabilities are reported along the diagonal.

TABLE 2: Bootstrapped Mediation Analysis for the Effect of Gender on Leadership Self-efficacy

	Est.MX	Est.YM	Direct Effect	Indirect Effects	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower	Upper
Perception of Self-Agency	-.18(.16)	.44(.06)*	-.05(.13)	-.08(.07)	-.23	.05
Workplace Incivility	.32(.14)*	-.06(.09)		-.02(.04)	-.12	.04

^a *n* = 110; Gender was coded 1 = Male, 2 = Female; Est.MX = bootstrapped estimate of path from gender to perception of self-agency/incivility; Est.YM = bootstrapped estimate of path from perceived perception of self-agency/incivility to LSE; standard errors of the bootstrapped estimates appear in parentheses; 5000 bootstrap samples.

p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; * *p* < .001.

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