

# Am I the Right Candidate? Self-Ascribed Fit of Women and Men to a Leadership Position

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**Abstract** Women are assumed to show a self-ascribed lack-of-fit to leadership positions compared to men (Heilman Research in Organizational Behavior 5:269–298, 1983). The present study examined whether this gender difference would diminish when agency is accounted for and whether a stimulus person's gender would alter women's self-ascribed fit. German management students (91 women, 95 men) received a fictitious recruitment advertisement for a leadership position that portrayed a man, a woman, or both a man and a woman. Participants indicated their perceptions of agency and suitability to the advertised position. As predicted, women judged themselves as less suitable for the leadership position than men and participants' self-reported agency mediated this effect. Furthermore, all participants felt most suitable if a male and a female stimulus person were portrayed.

**Keywords** Sex differences · Gender stereotypes · Leadership · Agency · Self-Perception

## Introduction

Recent research has indicated women's steady movement into powerful positions during the last decades (for an overview, see Eagly 2003). Despite these recent developments, statistics pertaining to leadership roles show that women compared to men are still underrepresented in top

management positions: In the United States 16.4% of corporate officers in the largest companies of the country are women (the "Fortune 500"; Catalyst 2006); in Germany only 6.9% of top management positions are held by women (Hoppenstedt 2004). There is considerable evidence that stereotypes or prejudiced attitudes may form one barrier for women to pursue and/or access leadership roles (for an overview, see Eagly 2004; Eagly and Sczesny *in press*). The crucial question that guides the present research is whether women's self-views affect their perceptions of suitability to managerial positions, which in turn may contribute to their under-representation in these roles, and how contextual factors (e.g., the presence of a gender-congruent person in job advertisements) could increase women's suitability perceptions.

In her lack-of-fit model, Heilman (1983) suggested that an individual's expectations about success are determined by the fit of the job requirements in terms of skills and abilities and the individual's own attributes. Moreover, traditional portrayals of leaders are predominantly masculine in their emphasis on agentic qualities or *agency*, which describe primarily an assertive, controlling, and confident tendency (e.g., Deal and Stevenson 1998). This image of leadership appears to be more congruent with men's than women's self-perception: Women see themselves as less agentic (e.g., assertive, individualistic) and more communal (e.g., gentle, affectionate) than men (e.g., Bem 1974; Spence and Buckner 2000). These beliefs that are part of women's and men's self-concept are learned very early through social training, expectations, observation of gender-related social roles (e.g., men in leadership roles, women in subordinate roles), and role modeling (e.g., Eagly and Steffen 1984; Santrock 1994); they are also maintained and reinforced by schools, work settings, and the media (e.g., Durkin 1995; Martin et al. 1990).

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Nevertheless, recent research indicates a decrease of gender differences in self-descriptions in communal and agentic traits that is primarily caused by an increase in women's self-reports of agentic traits (e.g., Sczesny 2003; Sczesny et al. 2004; Twenge 1997, 2001). Such beliefs about one's own gender may affect men's and women's career choices and careers (e.g., Van Vianen and Willemsen 1992). Following the lack-of-fit model by Heilman (1983) and the role congruity theory by Eagly and Karau (2002) women might experience an incongruity between the required agentic traits for leadership positions and their belief that they lack these traits. It follows that women who have internalized the traditional female gender role may be less attracted to leadership roles (Lips 2000), and therefore be less likely to strive for promotion into such positions (Van Vianen and Fischer 2002). For example, research has demonstrated that gender stereotypes may lower women's belief to succeed at masculine-typed tasks and occupations (e.g., Heatherington et al. 1993; Sieverding 2003) or even impair their performance or career aspirations (e.g., Davies et al. 2002, 2005). Moreover, in a longitudinal study, Abele (2003) demonstrated that, self-ascribed agentic traits, but not communal traits, predicted objective and subjective career success for both men and women. The idea that gender differences in self-ascribed agency underlie the differential fit perceptions of men and women has not yet been tested according to our knowledge.

Moreover, the present study sought to explore whether contextual factors could contribute to a better fit. In her lack-of-fit model, Heilman (1983) emphasizes that women's incongruity with masculine-typed jobs such as leader roles can be situationally influenced. One means of influencing men's and women's perceived suitability for a leadership position may be to provide the candidates with a stimulus person of their own gender or of the other gender. Similarity seems to be an important factor that affects identification with a communicator (e.g., Berscheid 1966). For example, research on personnel advertising shows that individuals make similarity judgments between themselves and the stimulus person (e.g., race or gender of the person). If the person is perceived as similar to them, favorable reactions toward the job and the advertising organization are enhanced: For example, Perkins et al. (2000) found that African Americans felt more attracted by a racially diverse group of employees depicted in the advertisement than by homogeneous white employees. Also, Avery et al. (2004) observed racial congruence effects for African Americans when viewing recruitment advertisements. Similarly, a gender congruent role model might foster such favorable reactions. In this line of reasoning, female applicants' suitability perceptions for a leadership position are likely to be higher if a stimulus person of their own gender rather than a stimulus person of the other gender is depicted. Instead, a

gender diverse group is likely to increase men's and women's suitability perceptions. As job seekers rely on available, imperfect information to make job choice decisions (Rynes and Barber 1990), images portraying stimulus persons of a certain gender may serve as an important means by which potential applicants realize in relevant situations that they suit or do not suit to the respective position.

To sum up, the aim of the present study is to investigate men's and women's self-ascribed fit to leadership positions. Specifically, we tested whether self-ascribed agency mediates the relationship between gender and suitability perceptions for the advertised leadership position. Moreover, we explored whether men's and women's suitability perceptions would vary as a function of the gender of the stimulus person depicted. Thus, women and men were asked to make judgments regarding their perceived suitability for an advertised leadership position that varied only concerning the stimulus person's gender, that is, a man, a woman or both a man and a woman. Our predictions were as follows:

- Hypothesis 1: Women's perception of lower suitability for the leadership position than men's will be eliminated when their self-ascribed agency is taken into consideration. That is, the gender difference in the self-ascribed fit to leadership positions will be fully mediated by agency.
- Hypothesis 2: Women will feel less suitable for the leadership position if a man is depicted rather than a woman or both a man and a woman. In contrast, men will feel less suitable for the leadership position if a woman only rather than a man or a man and a woman are depicted in the recruitment advertisement.

Thus, the present study was based on a 2 (Participant's Gender: male vs. female)  $\times$  3 (Stimulus Person's Gender: man vs. woman vs. man and woman) between-subjects design with participants' perceived suitability as dependent variable.

## Method

### Participants

A sample of 186 Caucasian management students (91 female and 95 male students) from the University of Mannheim, Germany, was recruited. In general, the majority of German management students possesses prior professional training such as a banker or has work experience based on internships

in companies. Thus, this sample represents young professionals for whom an application for a leadership position will be of relevance soon. Of those approached, 88.6% participated. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 31 years (Mean age: 22.9 years, SD=2.24).

### Independent Variables

Participant's gender was included as a quasi-experimental factor in the design. A fictitious advertisement was developed based on actual advertisements found in German business magazines. The advertisement versions were standardized concerning the layout, the company name (*Haber Incorporated*), the descriptive paragraph and the company's logo. Specifically, the fictitious advertising organization "Haber Incorporated" addressed graduates by offering managerial positions in their company:

We offer you the chance to embark on a great management career in our company. You are an essential investment in the future of Haber Incorporated. Right away you will be in charge of challenging tasks in your specialty and you will take part in international projects. You will work with the top management of our company on a regular basis and you will have to accomplish a range of demanding management tasks on a daily basis.

However, the advertisements varied by the gender of stimulus person depicted. In a pilot-study, twenty-three students of the University of Mannheim evaluated ten pictures (in black-and-white colors) taken from actual recruitment advertisements. Three photographs of female faces and three photographs of male faces who participants believed to be similarly attractive, likeable, and of the same age were selected for the advertisements of the present study. These pictures were used to comprise the three conditions of the independent variable 'Stimulus Person's Gender'. The advertisement showed either a woman only or a man only, or both, a man and a woman. To ensure that gender (and not other features of physical appearance) was manipulated each gender was represented with three exemplars. In addition to this same/other gender cue, a third condition consisted of pictures containing both a man and a woman and thus all nine pairs of men's and women's faces were realized. For the analyses, we combined the data across the three exemplars for the same/other gender condition and across the nine pairs for the condition in which stimulus persons of both sexes were depicted. (Since advertised leadership positions usually require the candidate to possess agentic and/or communal traits, we explored the impact of such requirements by describing the advertised position as demanding either agentic or communal traits. As the respective analyses showed no significant

impact of this factor, we excluded this factor from the final analyses and do not discuss it further).

### Dependent Variable

The dependent variable concerned participants' ratings regarding their perceived suitability to the advertised position. Participants' perceived suitability to the leadership position was measured by four items: "I think that I am very well qualified for the advertised position"; "It would be difficult for me to fulfill the job requirements" (reverse coded); "I fit the profile of the desired applicant"; "This position will likely meet my skills and abilities". These items were derived from the Attraction, Image, and Compatibility Scale (AIC) of Perkins et al. (2000). Respondents indicated their level of agreement with these statements on a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 *strongly disagree* to 5 *strongly agree*. The four items were combined to a scale 'Perceived Suitability' by averaging participants' responses ( $\alpha=.74$ ); the scale ranged from 1 *not at all suitable* to 5 *very suitable*.

### Additional Variables

To test whether self-ascribed agency mediates the assumed relationship between gender and suitability perceptions, participants' agency was also measured. In the research literature common measures of agency include the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ, Spence et al. 1974, 1975) or the Bem-Sex-Role-Inventory (BSRI, Bem 1974) that contain global traits for agency among which some can be also seen as relatively irrelevant in the context of leadership (i.e., athletic, individualistic) (Sczesny 2003). Therefore we preferred to measure agency in a context specific way by using 8 items from the 'Bochumer Inventar zur berufsbezogenen Persönlichkeitsbeschreibung (BIP) [Bochum Inventory for the Description of Personality Traits in the Occupational Context]' (Hossiep and Paschen 1998) in the present study. The chosen items measured core aspects of agency such as leadership motivation, self-confidence, competitiveness, assertiveness, and performance motivation which are also included in the BSRI and/or the PAQ: "I appear authoritative", "I avoid conversations in which I have to influence others extensively", "I believe my skills to be superior to other people's skills", "I feel uncomfortable when rejected by others", "I enjoy competing with others", "I find it difficult to assert my ideas", "From time to time, I am dominant vis-à-vis others", and "I enjoy facing difficult situations to find out how good I am". Participants indicated their level of agreement with these statements on a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 *strongly disagree* to 5 *strongly agree*. After recoding (based on a factor-analysis) the 8 items were combined to a scale

‘Agency’ by averaging participants’ responses ( $\alpha=.75$ ); the scale ranged from 1 *not at all agentic* to 5 *very agentic*.

The following question was included as a manipulation check at the end of the questionnaire: ‘What did the advertisement’s image(s) show?’ Participants were expected to mention the correct gender of the stimulus person/stimulus persons depicted in the recruitment advertisement. Moreover, we asked the participants at the end of the questionnaire to indicate the degree to which they thought that the advertised position was typically feminine or typically masculine. Responses were given on a scale ranging from 1 *typically feminine* to 5 *typically masculine*. When answering the questions for the manipulation check the participants were no longer in possession of the recruitment advertisement and had to make their assessments from memory.

### Procedure

Participants were recruited at the end of lectures on economics to participate in a study on the effectiveness of recruitment advertisements in student magazines and newspapers. Each participant was randomly assigned to view one of three advertisement versions and was unaware of the other two versions. After giving informed consent each participant received a booklet containing the fictitious recruitment advertisement and the instructions. Participants were instructed to examine the advertisement and then asked to assume the role of a potential applicant while answering the questionnaire handed to them. Upon completion of the questionnaire participants were debriefed and received a chocolate bar for their participation.

### Results

The analyses of variance (ANOVAs) implemented a 2 (participant’s gender)  $\times$  3 (stimulus person’s gender) between-subjects design.

#### Manipulation Check

The manipulation of stimulus person’s gender in the advertisement was successful: All participants when asked to write down what they saw on the pictures in the given advertisement indicated the correct gender of the stimulus person/stimulus persons. In addition, the results of the analysis of variance with the dependent variable ‘Perceived masculinity’ showed a main effect for stimulus person’s gender,  $F(2, 180)=20.33, p<.001$ . Compared to a man only ( $M=3.85, SD=.72$ ), the portrayal of a man and a woman ( $M=3.26, SD=.79$ ) in the advertisement decreased the perceived masculinity of the leadership position ( $p=.02$ ), and

the portrayal of a woman only ( $M=2.97, SD=.84$ ), led to the lowest ratings of masculinity ( $p<.001$ ).

#### The Impact of Participant’s Gender and Stimulus Person’s Gender on Self-Ascribed Suitability

Women ( $M=3.16, SD=.62$ ) judged themselves as less suitable for the leadership position than men ( $M=3.41, SD=.67$ ),  $F(1, 180)=7.54, p=.007, \eta^2=.04$ .

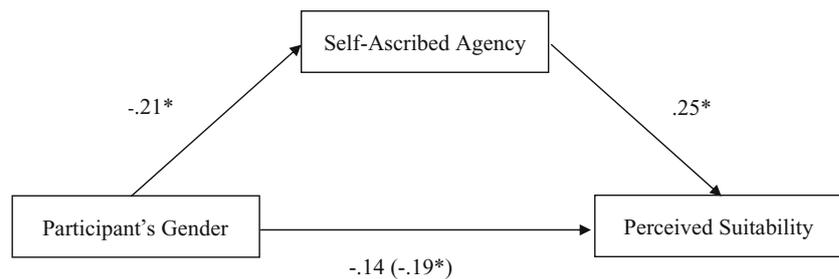
Furthermore, the main effect for stimulus person’s gender was significant,  $F(2, 180)=7.23, p=.001, \eta^2=.07$ . Participants’ suitability ratings were higher if the recruitment advertisement depicted both a male and a female stimulus person ( $M=3.50, SD=.66$ ) than only a male stimulus person ( $M=3.07, SD=.62$ ; Scheffé:  $p=.001$ ). In addition, participants who were confronted with a female stimulus person ( $M=3.29, SD=.64$ ) did not differ in their suitability ratings from participants who were confronted with a male stimulus person (Scheffé:  $p=.07$ ) or stimulus persons of both sexes (Scheffé:  $p=.09$ ).

Men’s and women’s suitability ratings were not moderated by stimulus person’s gender,  $F(2, 180)=1.45, p=.24$ . Women and men felt similarly suitable, regardless of whether a man ( $M_{\text{Women}}=3.03, SD=.55; M_{\text{Men}}=3.11, SD=.68$ ), a woman ( $M_{\text{Women}}=3.06, SD=.65; M_{\text{Men}}=3.52, SD=.54$ ), or a man and a woman ( $M_{\text{Women}}=3.38, SD=.63; M_{\text{Men}}=3.61, SD=.68$ ) were portrayed.

#### The Impact of Participant’s Gender and Agency on Self-Ascribed Suitability

Multiple regression and mediation analyses tested for the impact of gender and agency on perceived suitability. Specifically, this analytic strategy examined whether self-ascribed agency accounted for the presumed gender differences in perceptions of suitability for the leadership position (see Fig. 1). We used procedures outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986) to test for mediation. First, participant’s gender (women coded with 1) predicted their perceptions of suitability for the leadership position (i.e., the direct path from the predictor to the dependent variable), ( $\beta=-.19$ ),  $t(184)=-2.64, p=.009$ . Second, participant’s gender was observed to predict their self-ascribed agency (i.e., the direct path from the predictor to the mediator), ( $\beta=-.21$ ),  $t(184)=-2.91, p=.004$ . Third, when agency was added as a predictor to the last equation, participant’s gender no longer predicted perceived suitability. Controlling for agency (the mediator), we found that the indirect path was not significant, ( $\beta=-.14$ ),  $t(183)=-1.94, p=.054$ , and that agency predicted participants’ perceptions of suitability for the leadership position, ( $\beta=.25$ ),  $t(183)=3.41, p=.001$ . According to Sobel’s test, agency mediated the relationship between participant’s gender and perceived suitability as

**Fig. 1** Mediation of the relationship between participant's gender and perceived suitability by self-ascribed agency. Note: Standardized regression coefficients are shown. \* $p < .01$ .



indicated in a significant decline in the direct path between participant's gender and perceived suitability, ( $Z = -2.09$ ,  $p < .05$ ). As predicted, the above reported gender difference in perceived suitability for the advertised leadership position is accounted for by differences in self-reported agency.

## Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate men's and women's self-ascribed fit to leadership positions. First of all, the results indicated that women described themselves as less suitable for leadership positions than men. However, as predicted, agency mediated the sex difference in perceived suitability for leadership positions (see Hypothesis 1). This finding suggests that women rated themselves as less suitable for the respective leadership position than men because they viewed themselves as possessing less of the agentic traits typically required for such positions than men do. Generally speaking, by having internalized aspects of gender roles that do not (or to a lower extent) encompass agentic traits women restrain themselves from pursuing leadership roles (e.g., Ely 1995). Nevertheless, as women increasingly enter male-dominated occupations such as political roles and managerial roles, women are adopting and will continue to adopt the agentic characteristics that have traditionally been associated with leadership (see Sczesny et al. 2007 for an overview). This change in women's self-perception of agentic traits over time is likely to increase women's expectations to successfully assume leadership roles in the near future. Since participants' agency was assessed with a context-specific German inventory (namely BIP) and not with the more common and general measures of agency (namely BSRI or PAQ), empirical work should investigate the link between these different measures of agency in the future.

Furthermore, we investigated one contextual variable that might determine the increase or decrease of women's self-ascribed incongruity with respect to leadership, that is, the gender of stimulus person depicted. Specifically, we assumed that women's perceived incongruity with leadership roles might lessen in the given situation if a gender-congruent stimulus person or stimulus persons of both sexes were presented (e.g., Perkins et al. 2000). Neverthe-

less, in contrast to our prediction (see Hypothesis 2), women and men did not report higher suitability ratings if a stimulus person of the same sex or stimulus persons of both sexes were portrayed rather than a stimulus person of the other sex. Instead, all participants regardless of their sex felt less suitable for the advertised managerial position if a man was portrayed in the advertisements than stimulus persons of both sexes. The mean ratings show that participants' self-ascribed fit was highest when both a man and a woman were portrayed, lower (although the comparison was not statistically significant) when only a woman was portrayed, and suitability ratings were the lowest when participants were exposed to a photograph of a man only. Thus depicting a woman or both sexes made the occupation appear less "masculine" than it was perceived if a man was depicted only. Hereby not only women but also men felt more suitable for such advertised leadership roles. Moreover, depicting both sexes in the advertisement might also include more "variance" or a higher probability for participants to be the appropriate job applicant in term of sex (for race, see Perkins et al. 2000).

The present research bears important implications for theoretical issues on gender as well as the applied context: Specifically, we showed that women's perceived lack of fit with leadership roles still exists but also demonstrated that gender differences in ascribed agency accounted for this effect. Thus it is not women per se who regard themselves as less suited for leadership positions but rather individuals low in agency. These data shift the focus of attention from the biological sex to one's self-concept of agency which is an alterable and dynamic conceptualization. From an applied perspective, these data may dispel the set of myths suggesting that women in general are not suited or do not feel themselves suited for management positions as it is only women and men low in agency that report low suitability ratings. However, the negative news is that given that agency is an important prerequisite for successful leadership performance, the same data may also encourage organizations to remove low agency people (who are likely disproportionately women) from their applicant pool in an apparently gender-free way. Organizations however might be ill advised to draw this conclusion for the following reason: Even though agency may well contribute positively

to management skills experts on management now emphasize a wider range of qualities that include more communal characteristics typically ascribed to women (e.g., Fondas 1997; Rastetter 2001; see Judge et al. 2002 for an overview on personality and leadership). Contemporary features of organizational environments (e.g., an increasing workforce diversity, less hierarchical structures), require leaders to support and empower their subordinates, or briefly to show an androgynous blend of attributes (for transformational leadership, see Avolio 1999; Bass 1998; Duehr and Bono 2006; for successful leadership, see McCauley 2004).

In conclusion, change in women's self-concept toward more agency induced by women's adoption of male-dominated roles and masculine behaviors might lead women to feel as suitable as men for leadership positions in the future. However, for the time being, future research will have to identify further contextual factors that might increase women's perceived suitability for leadership roles. The present study demonstrated that depicting employees of both sexes allowed women as well as men to feel most suitable for leadership positions. Such contextual factors might contribute to a change in the female gender role toward greater agency in the long run as they encourage more women to enter masculine-typed occupations such as leadership roles and in doing so successful performance in these roles will engender an increase in agentic traits (Abele 2003).

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