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Minimising the Gender Status Effects on Performance for Women in Leadership

Abstract

This study explores how different workplace structures are institutionalised such that women in leadership are better able to address lower status assessments associated with the gender stereotype. Using a sample of 27 women leaders across industries, the study found that legitimate workplace structures such as opportunities for promotion into high status roles, increased opportunities to participate, equality and mentoring practices embedded in HRM policies, confuse and challenge the subliminal status effects of gender on perceived task or role performance. For instance, when institutionalised practices were prevalent, the study found that the link between the subliminal gender status and performance was irrelevant and inconsequential with women leaders displaying as much influence as men. When workplace structures were absent by comparison, women leaders had to work harder to overcome common stereotypes that they were less competent and less suited to senior roles. The study outcomes have major benefits for organisations wishing to legitimise HRM policies that help to formalise workplace structures and counter prevailing gender stereotypes.

Introduction

The primary aim of this study is to explore how women in leadership address lower-status assessments associated with being female and their perceived competence to complete a task in informal problem-solving groups. A secondary aim is to determine how an institutional approach towards establishing women leaders can reduce the gap between gendered stereotypes and perceived performance around task and role success. The study achieves this by using a cross-theory approach between status characteristics theory (SCT) and institutional theory. Status characteristics theory explains how stereo-typical evaluations of competence to complete a task occur subconsciously in informal problem-solving groups. Anderson and Kilduff (2009) define status as an individual's prominence, respect, and influence in the eyes of others. For instance, SCT suggests that a cognitive connection exists between status rankings and power-prestige orders (Berger et al., 1980; Webster & Rashotte, 2010). The application of SCT relates to the cognitive status assessments of others on the basis of some categorical difference such as age, gender, race, ethnicity and perceived ability complete a task (either successfully or not). In comparison to SCT, institutional theory concerns how social processes or structures take on a rule-like status that become accepted practices in social thought and action (Lucas, 2003), practices that converge over a period of time and become institutionalised (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996). When certain policy levers are implemented, organisations may change their structural arrangements to become more isomorphic by imitating the institutionally prescribed expectations of all organisations facing similar environmental conditions.

In extant research, status rankings are based on gendered perceptions of ability where women face at least two well-known biases: 1) women are assessed with less agentic leadership and male-typed ability than men; 2) women exhibiting male-typed ability are viewed as less effective than their male counterparts who display the same behaviour (Joshi, Son and Roh, 2015: p.1519). Studies suggest women encounter expressions of sexism reflecting status assessments that they should be protected and revered (King et al. 2012; Hebl et al. 2007). Even in situations when female leaders are evaluated at least as competent as male leaders, female-led groups have been evaluated as less effective than male-led groups (Russell & Fiske, 2008; Lucas and Lovaglia, 1998). For instance, Muller-Kahle and Schiehll (2013), found that even while a growing numbers of women in the U.S became the CEO, they were not awarded the dual role of CEO and Board Chair in the same way as male CEOs culminating in less structural power (2013: p. 675). These studies and others pose a useful question, that is, whether legitimately appointed women leaders in informal (or formal) groups will be perceived by their member constituents as likely to be successful? Thus far, SCT research is equivocal and not convincing that promotion based on ability alone or with some other added attribute e.g., increased participation opportunity, raising positive status information by confusing status signals (Cohen and Lotan, 1995), has been indicative of success for women in senior leadership roles (Eagly and Karau, 2002). In informal group

settings however studying factors other than leadership, there is evidence of reducing status inequality effects (Walker, Doerer, & Webster, 2014; Ridgeway and Correll, 2006; Troyer, Younts, & Kalkhoff, 2001; Cohen and Lotan, 1995), by increasing the abilities of women and men in ways that confuse status signals.

In supporting the primary and secondary aim of this paper, the study explores how institutionally prescribed structures and systems disrupt the innate and subliminal gender assessment. This study moves away from role-congruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 1991), tokenism (Kanter, 1977), and lack-of-fit theory (Heilman, 2001), the foundation of which is that women lack the skills required for effective leadership. At their most basic, these theories project a common theme that women are not afforded the same opportunities as men, lack some common attributes of successful leaders, and do not possess the same level of competence as their male counterparts (Joshi et al. 2015). A common stereotype for instance is that women need to be protected and revered (Glick and Fiske, 1996). This study informs however deficit-based models by addressing a sizeable gap in the existing literature related to how senior women leaders are advantaged by institutionalised structures and systems that legitimise their leadership roles. Significantly, new spaces for theorising are possible through a better understanding of women leader's capacity to increase their personal status relevant to task performance. To our knowledge, no study has explored the empirical relationships of SCT within an institutional theory context that enhances homogenous HRM settings in a field.

The study is organised as follows. First, we discuss the conceptual framework, explaining the relationships between SCT and institutional theory. Several research questions emerge from the discussions. Second, the methodology for the study is outlined. Third, the results are presented and evaluated in respect of each research question. Finally, we discuss the results of the study in more general terms of the extant literature outlined and the general implications including areas for future research. We offer here some insights for future research based on the integration of SCT and institutional theory including a theoretical lens and a way forward.

Conceptual Framework

Gender and Inequality

There has been a growing and quite complex body of literature on gender equality over the last thirty years which is beyond the scope of this study. Extant literature focuses much attention on the main themes and practices of inequality on the basis of resources and power, the constant struggle between dominant and subdominant individuals (Ridgeway, 2014, p. 3; Ridgeway and Correll, 2006). Deficit models often frequently describe power and influence differentials between individuals or groups; those with more resources are deemed more influential and thus perceived as more competent (Lucas and Baxter, 2012; Stewart & Moore Jr, 1992). Women appear to be undervalued in these material struggles (Joshi, Son, and Roh: 2015), and that even when women display strong leadership performance, their efforts are discounted on the basis of tokenism and gendered stereotypes (Ridgeway, 2014; King et al,

2012; Acker, 2006; Kanter, 1977). However, gender role expectation theory posits that men place different value on the work role with greater emphasis on pay and promotion while women identify more strongly to family roles, co-worker support, the quality of the work itself including the work environment and job security (Huang and Gamble, 2015; Konrad et al. 2000; Eagly, 1987). Here, we build on these findings by challenging the idea that women lack the competence required of effective leadership (Heilman; 2001); given institutionalised structures and systems, we contest the idea that women leaders need to be protected in challenging work assignments (Glick and Fiske, 1999). While prior research helps explain why women are not represented at the highest levels of the organisation (Joshi et al, 2015; Ridgeway, 2014; King et al. 2012), we seek to reposition the status-performance narrative towards institutionalised structures and systems (hereafter workplace structures) and the status of women leaders.

Institutionalised Workplace Structures and SCT

Workplace structures are explained by institutional theory. The theory posits that organisations exist in fields of other organisations (organisation fields); as the fields become more mature, organisations adopt institutionalised workplace structures that conform to their organisation environment in an effort to gain legitimacy (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983: p. 147). The pressure to conform to other organisations leads to common belief systems and practices that dominate the field (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996). A key part of institutional theory is isomorphism, a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face similar environmental conditions (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983, p. 149). Institutional isomorphism occurs through *coercive isomorphism* - political influence and the problem of legitimacy; *mimetic isomorphism* - resulting in copying or replicating other firms; and *normative isomorphism* - standards that are enforced through professional bodies and associations (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983, p. 150). Before institutionalised workplace structures can be understood however, it is necessary to ascertain the cross-theory linkages between SCT and institutional theory. If such linkages can be identified, opportunities for legitimising workplace structures are possible in ways that challenge the subliminal status assessment of gender linked to perceived performance. To achieve this, we now turn to a wider explanation of SCT.

Status characteristics theory can be used to explain how stereo-typical evaluations occur. The theory indicates that status inequalities develop almost instantaneously as opportunities to participate in group problem-solving evolve (Balkwell and Berger, 1996; Berger & Conner, 1969). For instance, Berger et al. (1980) posits that the power-prestige order of the group occurs by assessing two overarching salient cues that embody socially categorised phenomena: *diffused* and *specific* characteristics. Gender is a diffused characteristic related to individual or group competence that presents itself during cognitive status assessments that are inherent and unavoidable (Ridgeway and Correll, 2006). For instance, studies have found that even when tasks are gender-neutral, males received higher influence and evaluation

compared to other group members (Ridgeway and Correll, 1996; Pugh and Wahrman, 1983; Wagner and Berger, 1997). Gender is a specific characteristic if it is associated with a narrow range of tasks or roles e.g., humour for an entertainment task; math ability for a problem solving task.

Two processes in particular emerge from status assessments of specific and diffused status characteristics: the burden-of-proof and the path of relevance. The *burden-of-proof* process suggests that the initial or original status assessment of an individual's ability to complete a task (either successfully or not) will be stable over time, from one task situation to the next, unless the original assessment is disproven (Ridgeway and Correll, 2006; Berger et al., 1980). In comparison, the *path of relevance* is the cognitive connection between the actor and the task that links the status characteristic possessed by the actor to an outcome state of the task, either success or failure (Berger et al, 1980: p.485). When a path of relevance is shorter, individual or group status is assessed as higher meaning a stronger cognitive link between status and perceived performance to complete a task. When a path of relevance is longer, individual or group status is assessed as lower meaning a weaker cognitive link between status and perceived performance to complete a task. Tasks can be anything that organisation actors attempt in the doing of their work role. These can be divided into sub-tasks such as solving specific group-work problems, making decisions, formulating budgets, working on goals and seeking resolutions (Berger and Conner, 1969). The context in which groups meet is not a rational process, rather, it is a process as the group proceeds, a division of a task into subtasks and a product not a pre-condition of the interaction (1969: p. 187). Actors can shorten the cognitive link between a status assessment and task performance by presenting alternative skills and abilities (Thye, Willer, and Markovsky, 2006; Berger et al. 1980). When these actors are linked to groups of people, the higher status groups are often considered more highly competent than lower-status groups (Russell & Fiske, 2008), and higher status groups have shorter paths of relevance.

Based on the discussion thus far, several cross-theory linkages emerge as opportunities for applying institutionalised workplace structures. Our proposition here is that as organisations move to legitimise women leaders through institutionalised workplace structures, the subliminal cognitive status assessment of gender and task performance link will be weaker and inconsequential For instance, in terms of equality practices, scholars note that explicit policy settings and legislation has improved the status of women through quota systems for women on boards (Wang & Kelan, 2013), and policies that promote gender diversity and directorships (Bao et al., 2014). Wang and Kelan (2013, p. 463) found that the quota system in Norway had some effect on the gender gap with respect to independence status, age and education in the compliance stages and that board independence and the average number of qualifications held were positively associated with the presence and appointment of a female CEO.

Workplace Structures: The Australian Context

The Australian Governments *Workplace Gender Equality Act, 2012* aims to strengthen the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) capacity to monitor improvements in gender equality. While within Australia quota systems are not legislated, employers are directed to report against a number of gender equality indicators including workforce gender composition, equal remuneration, practices relating to flexible working arrangements, consultation of gender equality and other matters such as sex-based harassment and discrimination;[i] non-compliant organisations are named in Parliament. Legislation however has limited compliance at the organisational level with a recent study of equal pay highlighting pay and loading discrepancies. For instance, Bailey et al. (2016) found that Australian universities need to reduce gendered differences in negotiated outcomes for market loadings in particular; also, that vertical segregation between men and women was substantial with much fewer representation of women in higher level roles (2016: p. 661). The nexus between SCT and institutionalised structures and systems however is twofold: 1) Organisations clearly benefit from institutionalised equality policy settings at the Government level which become isomorphic workplace structures at the organisational level, and 2) When workplace structures reflect equal opportunity for both men and women, the subliminal gender status assessment can be challenged by presenting women leaders with equal skill and ability with respect to individual, group and organisational agency. The path of relevance, the cognitive link between a status characteristic and perceived task performance, can be shortened when workplace structures embody a number of isomorphic institutional policies leading to the first research question.

Research Question 1: How effective are women leaders in shortening the path of relevance when institutionalised workplace structures reflect equal status?

According to Chizhik et al. (2003), organisational actors may be successful in modifying and eroding status beliefs in circumstances when workplace structures embolden push-back against lower status assessments. Recent research suggests a backlash against female leaders will occur when the male-dominant status quo is threatened (Joshi et al. 2015; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan and Nauts, 2012), suggesting that the denigration of women appears to be the highest when perceptions of fit are at their lowest (King et al. 2012: p. 1839), such as double standards that appear to be applied to aspiring women leaders as they work their way to the top (Muller-Kahle and Schiehll (2013) To counter these perceptions, it is possible to change group members' relative influence when other members learn to appreciate a person's talents relevant to task completion (Chizik, Alexander, Chizhik, and Goodman, 2003; Cohen, Lotan, Scarloss, and Arellano, 1999), such as creating opportunities for people to take on high status roles. For example, French and Strachan (2007) found that in a study of the Australian finance industry, women leaders were not afforded opportunities in profit-and-loss or direct client roles meaning they were less likely to influence decisions widely considered essential for rising to the top (French and Strachan 2007). Previous research found that when the task can be modified by administering positive task-relevant feedback to academically lower-

status students, contributions were nearly equal to those of higher status students (Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Cohen & Roper, 1972). Similarly, studies indicate that women leaders are assessed as equal to male leaders (Lucas, 2003) in circumstances when institutionalised policies position future women leaders in higher-status roles or as group leaders (Russell & Fiske, 2008), leading to the second research question.

Research Question 2: How effective are women leaders in shortening the path of relevance when institutionalised workplace structures promote women leaders into high-status roles?

The specific framing of a group problem can establish a participatory environment where lower-status group members are also taken seriously. In a study by Alexander et al. (2009), open-structured tasks, also called ill-structured tasks (Chizhik et al. (2003), are those tasks that represent many possible solutions that allow lower-status group members to receive positive feedback regarding their input creating more opportunities for divergent thinking. Studies of black women in mixed groups have found that raising participation rates increased their influence over group decisions even while whites had greater influence overall suggesting that it was possible to partially overcome the unwanted effects of race in task groups (Walker et al., 2014, pp. 374-375). This is in contrast to closed-structured tasks, those with a clearly articulated problem and solution with less participatory opportunity. According to SCT, opportunities to perform within a group with opinions more highly valued are naturally given to actors whose status is higher (Troyer, Younts and Kalkhoff, 2001; Berger et al. 1977). In true SCT traditions related to what we expect of ourselves (first-order beliefs), establishing stronger group collectives begs the question about what we believe others expect of us (second-order beliefs). According to a study by Troyer, Younts and Kalkhoff (2001) and Troyer and Younts (1997), and even in group situations where member's views may be highly valued, conformity to others views with higher status is often stronger given that one's sense of self arises from impressions that others hold (Troyer et al. 2001: p. 142). This situation may be particularly relevant when lower-status actors seek to avoid status loss by agreeing with a more dominant member. These outcomes can be challenged however when group members are trained to recognise the contribution of different minorities (Cohen and Lotan, 1995). Also, the greater the inconsistencies created in a task function, including open-structured tasks as noted, the less the number of distinguishing features available for status assessment (Chizhik et al. 2003; Berger et al. 1980; Humphreys and Berger; 1979). In circumstances where the nature of the task is not highly specified and where divergent thinking is required from all members, women leaders have more opportunities to demonstrate increased task performance, leading to the third research question.

Research Question 3: How effective are women leaders in shortening the path of relevance when institutionalised workplace structures promote greater participation in group-task situations for lower-status members?

A recent study explored how male and female CEOs were influenced by the relationships between the 'capital' valued by a 'field' and the 'habitus' of the wider range of participants

who generate the field (Fitzsimmons, Callan and Paulsen, 2014: p.247). The study found that in comparison to male CEOs, female CEOs emerged from childhood with little leadership capital. Mentors for female CEOs were more prevalent than for men however in providing leadership experiences, role modelling, and advice (2014: p.260). Chen, Liao and Wen (2014) suggest that mentoring relationships can be forged by formal programs that influence employee attitudes and work outcomes consistent with prior studies (Bozionelos and Wang 2006). According to Chen et al. (2014), formal mentoring in Chinese organisations was related positively to protégés affective commitment levels and associated negatively with turnover intentions (2014: p. 1124). Previous research suggests that formal mentoring systems institutionalised in HR policies will better equip female (and male) leaders for future development roles (Murray and Syed, 2010). For instance, Weinberg and Lankau (2011: p. 1548) found that mentors with higher levels of commitment to the organization put forth more effort in serving as role models to their protégés than did mentors with lower levels of organizational commitment. Similarly, Menges (2016: p. 114) found in a study of formal mentoring in a Swiss business school that similarity in openness to experience improved the career support that the protégés received and similarities in openness to experience and conscientiousness enhanced the psychosocial support that protégés received from their mentors. While mentoring programs and networks of support are different from one organisation to the next, extant studies suggest that formal mentoring programs are beneficial to aspiring women leaders at different stages of their careers (Haggard, Dougherty, Turban and Wilbanks, 2011; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng and DuBois, 2008; Baruch and Bozionelos, 2010). The discussion leads to the final research question.

Research Question 4: How effective are women leaders in shortening the path of relevance when institutionalised workplace structures enhance mentoring opportunities?

METHODS AND DATA

This study employed a thematic analysis (TA) technique guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Miles and Huberman (1994). Braun and Clarke describe thematic analysis used in qualitative research as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. The approach can also be used as a powerful method to interpret various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). For this study, TA is used as both a realist and a contextualised approach to analysing data. It is a realist approach to the extent we report the experiences, meanings and reality of participants. It is a contextualised approach in the form of critical realism since the researchers were careful to acknowledge the ways individuals make meaning of their experiences and in some instances how broader social contexts impinge on those meanings (Braun and Clarke, 2006: p. 9). Our method here was not to seek to identify patterns across the data in the same way as thematic discourse analysis (Burman and Parker, 1993) and grounded theory (Glasser, 1992) through an inductive process. Rather, we avoided a passive account of the process of analysis noted by Braun and Clarke (2006) by

playing a more active role in identifying patterns and themes. Thus, we searched for themes in the data set that related to the research questions which were derived from our conceptual framework.

The data set was collected by employing a semi-structured interview process of twenty seven women in leadership representing different occupational positions with industry experience ranging from Not-for-Profits, Accounting, Computing, Banking, Insurance, Law, Communications, Gaming, Telecommunications, Media, and Consultancy. All participants were located in Sydney, Australia (Table 1). Common unstructured questions were phrased in such a way to forge discussion(s) related to the identification of a culture of equality, opportunities for unstructured tasks and participation, the evidence of women leaders in high status roles, and formal mentoring systems. Common themes were driven by the literature and the research questions. The extent to which this cluster of themes were institutionalised were of particular importance.

Table 1 about here

Initially, a small group of participants was contacted by phone and email to seek their interest to be involved after which a snowballing approach was used to recruit new participants. We gained permission from a popular woman's association to initially identify women in senior leadership roles across different industries and professions. A participant information sheet was used to protect the privacy of individuals. MAX-QDA software enabled the organisation of responses within the themes. The researchers used a latent coding approach to interpret the lived experiences of interviewees' comments relevant to each theme. Further, MAX-QDA table functions allowed the researchers to test and explore associations and groupings in the data. The researchers used judgement sampling to select the most productive evidence in a data item to support the thematic analysis from a critical realist perspective. We repeated the process for each transcript across the whole data set using a contextualised and realist approach aimed at determining which parts of the data set were important, significant and recurring.

Table 2: Coding Structure

Coding Structure		Coded Item Categories RQ 1	Coded Item Categories RQ 2	Coded Item Categories RQ 3	Coded Item Categories RQ 4
Themes	Coded Items	Theme/Fully effective /Not effective	Theme/Fully effective /Not effective	Theme/Fully effective /Not effective	Theme/Fully effective /Not effective

	EQ-P/FE/NE	N/A	N/A	N/A
Equality practices e.g. equal remuneration & representation EQ-P	EQ-P/FE/NE	N/A	N/A	N/A
Legitimate appointment to high-status roles; LA	N/A	LAHS/FE/NE	N/A	N/A
Open-structured tasks & participatory environment; OST	N/A	N/A	OST/FE/NE	N/A
Mentoring systems e.g. mentoring; networking. MS	N/A	N/A	N/A	MS/FE/NE

For the coding structure, a value judgement was made whether a data item reflected leaders being fully effective (FE) or not effective (NE) at shortening the path of relevance based on the institutionalised factor for RQ1 through RQ4 (Table 2). After saturation was reached, frequency tables were then tabulated for a data set related to each theme to ascertain percentage responses. An identical process was followed for each subsequent research question.

RESULTS

Findings for Research Question 1

The findings related to research question 1 indicate that fully effective workplace structures based on equality practices represent sixty six per cent of lived experiences while practices that are not effective represent thirty per cent of experiences (Table 3). Four experiences were undefined and not clear.

Table 3: Thematic Matrix and Frequency of Influence

Influence of Data Item	IS/Equality Freq	%	IS/Legit appnt Freq	%	IS/Open Struct Freq	%	IS/Mentoring Freq	%
Fully effective/Path of relevance	66	66.00	70	61.40	61	57.55	36	73.47
Not effective/Path of relevance	30	30.00	37	32.46	33	31.13	9	18.37
undefined	4	4.00	7	6.14	12	11.32	4	8.16
Total	100	100.00	114	100.00	106	100.00	49	100.00
Missing	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Total	100	100.00	114	100.00	106	100.00	49	100.00

Research question 1 sought to determine the effectiveness of women leaders in shortening the path of relevance in circumstances when institutionalised workplace structures reflected equal status. Consistent with prior research, there is strong evidence that workplace structures challenge the cognitive subliminal status assessment of gender linked to task performance. For instance, multiple experiences reflect organisational agency supporting workplace structures of equality. One women leader talks of institutionalised child care facilities:

'They bought a child care centre you know which has benefited the staff. Which because the organisation understands that to have someone working in your organisation where you've developed skills and ability with that person, to lose them just because they've had a child is ridiculous.' (CEO, EQ-P/FE/POR)

Similarly, in circumstances where workplace flexibility is important, women leaders link this to major benefits for achieving task-related functions:

'Personally for me you know I had to travel to New Zealand for a couple of months the year before last because I had a sick parent and it was great to know that I could work from New Zealand and I was very fortunate that there was that flexibility. There is another female here that's been in, she's had a sick parent in the UK and she's been away working from the UK office for about four months.' (Manager, EQ-P/FE/POR).

For many senior women, equal pay opportunities are consistent with organisational agency of enhancing equality. For instance, senior women in Law within public institutions indicate that men and women 'get paid the same at the same level and there's certainly no question about that' although, we found instances where institutionalised practices were not effective and equally pervasive. For example, another CEO reflected on the state of women's salary negotiation skills: '*I said* you have asked for more pay didn't you? Oh no, but we're going to negotiate that *is what her manager said*…I've been pretty wise to it all along, partly because I've had a lot of male mentors and they've told me like it is that you've got to ask for the cash and you've got to have the balls to say well you know, I'm not doing it unless you give me X, Y and Z.' Other not effective workplace structures led to women leaders comparing their needs for flexible work and not feeling supported. For instance, a Business Consultant indicated that 'women are more likely to be a board director in an organisation which is small…. in a service sector.....and to me that represents that women kind of opt out of the main game because the main game is just not inclusive of their way of wanting to balance work and family.'

Taken together, fully effective workplace structures of equality are dominant in lived experiences. At the same time, it is much harder for women to shorten the path of relevance when they rely on ability alone without a legitimate support structure. This led to an overall finding for research question 1. That is, as organisations move to legitimise women leaders through institutionalised workplace structures of equality, the cognitive link between the subliminal status assessment of gender and task performance is weaker and inconsequential. This means the path of relevance was shorter with the link between task and performance stronger.

Findings for Research Question Two

The findings related to research question 2 indicate that fully effective workplace structures that enable women to achieve high status roles represent 61.4 per cent of lived experiences

while practices that are not effective represent 32.4 per cent of experiences (Table 3). Undefined experiences represented 6.14 percent.

Research question 2 sought to determine the effectiveness of women leaders in shortening the path of relevance in circumstances when institutionalised workplace structures help to promote women leaders into high-status roles. Much prior research points to the value of perceived status when women leaders are given opportunities in high-status roles particularly related to profit and loss or general manager roles as noted earlier. Women leaders clearly see the benefits of workplace structures that promote high-status opportunities:

> 'And certainly I think within the insurance industry there is a bit more equality in terms of the ratio of male to female. And given that there have been a number of females who have progressed to quite senior levels in organisations probably some of those barriers have been chipped away at a little bit (Executive Manager, LAHS/FE/POR).

Many workplace experiences have benefited by a change in culture often driven by men, not only in institutionalising change and identifying ability but also attitudinal shifts that men are not the only agents worthy of higher status:

> 'And look in a way it's probably been also from like my boss, who is a man, has been, quite a lot of the time, developing the profile of the group and he's very keen to you know sort of ensure that you know I'm leading projects and everything. And as well as you know the other team members sort of to get them involved. And I think it's helped that our profile within the group is actually quite high when you, when I talk to other people in other organisations (Senior Manager, LAHS/FE/POR), and

> '…..Particularly men and parenting and so on and embracing that. And so I know a number of women including here where I work where the men are staying at home with the kids and the women have the senior roles.'

Women leaders who had progressed into senior roles based on ability alone where workplace structures that were not institutionalised elicited much harder experiences with evidence of less structural power and perceived status ranking more pervasive and evidence of workplace benevolence. Here, women needed to be brave, felt insignificant and sought alternative pathways:

> 'I notice with women that, well, they're just braver and you know that in executive roles because there's not very many of us so you've got to be pretty brave, but you know they're prepared to put, they are prepared to put forward suggestions and so on. But you know if your suggestions keep getting ignored then that's a really difficult thing to deal with (Business Consultant, LAHS/NE/POR).

> And

> 'I sat down and thought to myself why are you doing this? And that's why I decided to actually take a slightly different career path and to actually, and I was doing it because of

all of these things. And then I thought well actually no I've got a lot to offer just the way that I am and if I'm not finding that in this environment then I need to find an environment where I am being recognised for what it is that I have to offer (Business Consultant, LAHS/NE/POR).

Taken together, the number of fully effective institutionalised workplace structures led to an overall finding for research question 2. That is, as organisations moved to legitimise women leaders into high-status roles, the effects of gender on task performance became weaker and inconsequential. This means the path of relevance was shorter with the link between task and performance stronger. In situations where women leaders achieved high-status roles, or some other role variation, workplace structures were not effective leading to status-quo situations of women feeling isolated and alone.

Findings for Research Question Three

The findings related to research question 3 indicate that fully effective workplace structures that promote greater participation in group-task situations for lower-status members represent 57.55 per cent of lived experiences while practices that are not effective represent 31.13 per cent of experiences (Table 3). Undefined experiences represented 11.32 percent.

Research question 3 sought to determine whether women leaders are effective in shortening the path of relevance when institutionalised workplace structures promote greater participation in group-task situations for lower-status members? According to SCT, the female gender is a diffused characteristic subject to status ranking indicating that the path of relevance between task and performance will be longer because status will be assessed as lower. Workplace structures that promote greater participation in terms of how tasks are structured however suggest that paths of relevance can be shortened when lower-status members are given increased opportunities to participate suggesting that individual or group status will be assessed as higher. Women leaders clearly see the benefits of participatory workplace structures that promote a stronger link between task and performance:

'The team has been in working you know longer days, working weekends. But because we can plan that that's actually not stressful. That's just about getting a lot done in a short space of time, having some agreed targets and strangely I think the team and myself included we quite enjoy that because it's about, it's almost like being part of a relay race, everybody is pointing in the right direction, you know what you've got to do by when and you know that there's an end to it' (Financial Controller/OST/FE/POR).

Open-structured tasks moreover are not organised in a hierarchical fashion, nor are they dictated by power structures that have often been attributed to men in prior studies as noted earlier. Rather, they foster a sense of goodwill and greater workplace flexibility:

'It's not a hierarchical aggressive sort of a role, it's much more working together with other people to achieve the you know the reporting requirements that we need, the

management information that we need and the business planning and stuff like that…..in terms of infrastructure I pretty much decide exactly what I'm going to do except for the occasional can you do this? Or when I go and ask direction for something. So it's a very good role, I have a lot of you know flexibility with what I want to do (Global Manager/OST/FE/POR).

For other women, and in circumstances where workplace structures are not effective, there is a stronger disconnect between tasks attached to roles associated with game playing and unrealistic demands:

> 'And the demands up there are so huge it's generally quite political as well…. there's a lot more game playing as I would see it. And I think a lot of women just can't be bothered from the ones I've spoken to.…they want to get to a level of seniority where they've got some control over their lives and they're paid and they're remunerated and they feel professional working women. But it's another game to be at the highest levels' (Senior Executive/OST/NE/POR).

Workplace structures that are not effective appear to fit old workplace paradigms with one Practice Manager indicating her experiences were based on organisations 'talking the rhetoric and they're really trying to *change the nature of how work is done* but a lot of them are not doing what they say they're doing. They've still got the same work ethic in terms of expecting a certain number of billable hours to be achieved per day and a lot of women find it very hard to manage those expectations.' Others suggest that a man's work identity is completely different and less open to inclusive workplace structures suggesting that 'You know they're focussed on their area of the business and they just don't really have the mental space to think through and act upon how do we create more inclusive workplaces…..but the rest of it is just kind of like well business as usual at the senior levels is just not inclusive' (Business Consultant/OST/NE/POR).

Taken together, the number of fully effective institutionalised workplace structures that promote greater participation in group-task situations for lower-status members led to an overall finding for research question 3. That is, as organisations move to legitimise open-structured tasks, the link between task and performance became stronger with the path of relevance shorter. This was because women leaders were able to participate with equal status along with men performing a similar task, while traditional work structures and highly structured tasks were much less inclusive and unattractive to women leaders representing longer paths of relevance

Findings for Research Question 4

The findings related to research question 4 indicate that fully effective workplace structures that enhance mentoring opportunities for women leaders represent 73.47 per cent of lived experiences while practices that are not effective represent 18.37 per cent of experiences (Table 3). Undefined experiences represented 8.16 percent.

Research question 4 sought to determine whether women leaders are effective in shortening the path of relevance when institutionalised workplace structures enhance mentoring opportunities. Workplace structures that formalise mentoring programs have been shown to assist future women leaders to garner career support, lower turnover intentions and learn from role models, among others. Senior women leaders clearly see advantages:

> 'So you know we do a lot of work inside *this company* with women coming through, junior women coming up…..we have programs like Step Up programs and things about letting your voice be heard and building self-confidence and role modelling and shadowing you know female executives. Very strong program of mentoring so that we can try and address these issues with women as they're starting out their careers (Strategy Director/MS/FE/POR).

Other senior women indicate how workplace structures of mentoring are institutionalised at different levels and embedded in HR practices:

> 'I definitely do mentoring with you know middle managers and also some potentials in the troops if you like. Because I always say it won't be the middle managers running the organisation…. if you've got a succession plan it's going to be someone from the troops because we're not going anywhere for a while. So you know we're looking at that next layer down so we are fostering some people in that arena with HR policies…. we've got a real mix with our managers (CEO/MS/FE/POR).

Women leaders indicate that mentoring systems work pointing to networks of support that led to garnering knowledge and increasing confidence to perform tasks. For instance, one senior executive suggests that 'leveraging my network hadn't crossed my mind before. But it was you know…. you take different approaches to things and it worked. And you know and I know I had the blessing of the CEO in this company which is a good way to come into a company.' Conversely, in situations where mentoring was not effective, women leaders saw this as a distraction that should be part of formal work, not really understanding its value in a busy work day:

> 'But I don't want a mentor because I don't want someone who is going to go hurry up and what do you need and I've only got five minutes and off you go kind of thing, I don't want that. I don't want to feel like I owe someone and they're doing me a huge favour in that sort of sense. It's got to come as part of the job.

Taken together, the number of fully effective institutionalised workplace structures that enhance mentoring opportunities for women leaders led to an overall finding for research question 4. That is, organisations see direct benefits for mentoring systems at different levels of the organisation. Consistent with research, institutionalised mentoring systems facilitate increased knowledge around tasks and roles and in developing future leaders meaning that the path of relevance is shorter because the perceived link between task and performance is

stronger. In situations where mentoring systems are not evident, and therefore not effective, unsupported workplace mentoring is a distraction with no clear benefits.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to explore how women in leadership address lower-status assessments associated with being female and their perceived competence to complete a task in informal problem-solving groups. We applied elements of status characteristics theory to achieve this. A secondary aim was to determine whether an institutional approach towards establishing women leaders reduces the gap between gendered stereotypes and perceived performance related to task success. A key tenet of institutional theory was that institutionalised workplace structures conform to their organisation environment leading to common belief systems and practices that dominate a field of other organisations (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996). In connecting SCT and institutional theory, our central thesis was to determine whether women leaders were effective in shortening the path of relevance when one or more workplace structures were institutionalised or legitimate.

Workplace structures that were Fully Effective

In this study, workplace structures were legitimate or institutionalised when they were fully effective, that is, when they reflected equal status (RQ1), when they promoted women into high-status roles (RQ2), when they promoted greater participation for lower-status members (RQ3), and when they enhanced mentoring systems (RQ4). Across all themes, the evidence of fully effective workplace structures was approximately three to one. We found strong evidence of fully effective workplace structures enabling women leaders to shorten the path of relevance. In these instances, gender as a status assessment was inconsequential to successful group-work outcomes related to different tasks for doing the job. Here, institutionalised and legitimate structures removed the gender bias, was not a consequence or by-product of male-typed jobs or inequality practices, and did not lead to differences in perceived competence as noted by previous researchers (Joshi et al. 2015; Ridgeway, 2014; Ridgeway and Correll,, 2006; Eagly and Karau, 1991). For research questions 1 to 4, any differential effects between task and performance may have been for other reasons other than gender but were not obvious within the data set related to fully effective workplace structures.

Workplace structures as a whole facilitated equal practices across themes that seemed strongly associated. For instance, equal status around flexible work, equal pay and conditions, and institutionalised child care facilities benefited both men and women; lived experiences of women leaders showed many instances of men staying at home while their partners had senior roles. Open-structured tasks led to women leaders feeling much more supported and equal with men, and in many instances, strong collective team work was a virtue of flexible work around task and performance requirements (Alexander et al. 2009; Chizhik et al. 2003; Troyer et al. 2001). In relation to fully effective workplace structures, these findings stand in contrast

to extant studies where women are considered as less effective than their male counterparts (Joshi, Son and Roh, 2015). In circumstances where workplace structures were legitimate and institutionalised, we found no evidence that women leaders needed to be protected in challenging work situations (Glick and Fiske, 1999) or revered because of their gender (King et al. 2012), and few instances where women leaders had to continually prove their competence over a period of time (Ridgeway, 2014; Berger et al. 1980). We found no evidence of female leaders being evaluated as less competent than males particularly in situations of unstructured tasks and in legitimate appointments to high-status roles (Russell & Fiske, 2008; Lucas, 2003; Lucas and Lovaglia, 1998), even while some studies suggest that women leaders do not attain the same structural power as male leaders and as a result, do not attain the same level of legitimacy (Muller-Kahle and Schiehll, 2013: p.675). Given that our sample of women leaders suggests gender can serve as a diffused status cue, we found little evidence in fully effective workplace structures of highly educated women being evaluated lower than less educated women by other male team members (Joshi, 2014).

Workplace Structure that were Not Effective

While fully effective workplace structures were dominant across the data set, structures that were not effective were evident from the lived experiences of women leaders. In these circumstances, the absence of legitimate workplace structures related to equality practices (30%), legitimate appointment to high-status roles (32.46%), greater participation for lower-status members (31.13%) and mentoring opportunities (18.37%). For instance, non-legitimate equality practices meant more effort having to negotiate salary arrangements, less flexibility within roles and less inclusive workplaces, meaning that these women were mostly reliant on their ability alone for career progress. Many other experiences related to the poor design of work itself, structural disadvantages for women wanting to start a family and feelings of isolation of 'going it alone' and feeling unsupported. These experiences parallel situations of tokenism (Kanter, 1977), conform to common stereotypes of male-typed jobs being unsuitable for women (Wang and Kelan, 2013), or roles that appear to favour men more than women (Acker, 2006), including feelings of workplace benevolence when attitudes (mostly from men) reflected second-order beliefs that women leaders do not have the same level of experience and 'couldn't possibly know the answers' (King et al. 2012). If anything, the absence of legitimate workplace structures helped to embolden common stereotypes between dominant and sub-dominant individuals and groups (Ridgeway, 2014)

In supporting the aims of this study, our major contribution is in linking SCT and institutionalised structures. For instance, normative institutionalised workplace structures discussed here particularly in relation to legitimate HR practices of equality, participation in unstructured group-task situations, and legitimate promotion to high status roles, are isomorphic practices that can apply to all organisations. Institutionalised workplace structures can be isomorphic when they legitimise women in leadership roles which in turn shortens the path of relevance between gender status and perceived task performance. Taken together, our findings contribute to calls for more research in how job design can mitigate sex differences

in performance evaluations and promotion rates, how extra-organizational networks - such as mentoring systems within and outside work – facilitate women's advancement, and how organisations can increase the influence of members of disadvantaged categories of social groups by paying careful attention to institutional arrangements (see Joshi et al. 2015:p.1534 and Lucas, 2003: p. 477). For instance, consistent with an earlier study by Lucas (2003), we found that women who attained leadership based on ability in institutionalized structures (fully effective workplace structures in this study), attained higher influence than did women who attained leadership on ability alone. Our findings demonstrate that in the absence of institutionalised opportunities to participate in unstructured tasks and more flexible job practices as well as the absence of legitimate opportunities to become leaders of groups, led to a kick-back by women leaders ostracising their organisations for 'talking about' but not acting upon, more inclusive work designs. The current study found that in situations where women leaders achieved higher status roles but without legitimate structures of support, frequently led to women opting out and choosing their own path relying on ability alone to achieve more structural power. Here, it was much harder for women leaders to change the cognitive link between status and perceived performance to complete a task consistent with SCT research (Lucas and Baxter, 2012; Ridgeway, 2014; Berger et al. 1980). Also, networks of support for women leaders were dominant in lived experiences across occupations through formal mentoring systems that significantly aided women's career prospects, aligning to what Menges (2016) found that openness to experience improved the career support that the protégés received.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

There may be other reasons for these findings not generated by this study. For instance, research related to role-congruity research (Eagly et al., 1992; Eagly and Karau, 1991), tokenism (Kanter, 1977), stereotypical expectation gaps of competencies in different occupations (Eagly and Makhijani, 2002), and perceptions of 'fit' around leadership abilities in male-typed environments (Eagly and Karau, 1991), was conducted at a time when institutional support at the Government or macro level in many advanced countries was still formative. Also, organisational-level support for diversity practices were still in their infancy (Syed and Kramer, 2014). The study findings are limited to the Australian context in an advanced society where normative practices are gaining greater traction. Consequently, these findings may be different across contexts in countries where such practices are still formative and may not even exist. Future research could extend this study to contexts that reflect stronger cultural embeddedness around workplace stereotypes such as in more masculine cultures where the power distance is more prevalent. Comparative studies would be particularly beneficial.

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TABLE 2 *Occupational roles and classifications of research participants*

Occupation	Industry Classification
Business Consultant	Consultancy Services
Chartered Accountant	Accountancy Practice
Chief Operating Officer (COO)	Not for Profit
Corporate Advisor	Freelance Consultancy
Director (Strategy)	Multinational Computing
Executive Director (Business Management)	Merchant Bank
Executive Director (People)	Law Firm
Executive Manager	Insurance
Executive Trainer 1	Bank
Executive Trainer 2	Consultancy Services
General Manager	Gaming
HR Director	Insurance
Lawyer	Law Firm
Management Consultant	Consultancy Services
Online Manager	Telecommunications
Partner (Communication	Communications
Partner (Global Accounting)	Global Accounting
Risk Manager	Merchant Bank
Senior Executive (Media)	Media
Senior Executive (Manager Women's Markets)	Banking
Senior Executive (National Head Markets)	Banking
Senior Tax Manager	Gaming

(106 words)

TABLE 3 *Cluster analysis of domains of enquiry based on word similarity*

Domain	Domain	Pearson correlation coefficient
External factors	Path of Relevance	0.719
Path of Relevance	Burden of proof	0.736
External factors	Burden of proof	0.770

[i] Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012 Fact Sheet. Accessed online 26 October, 2016*;*
https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/11_2012/factsheet_amended_201112.pdf