

Can institutionalized workplace structures benefit senior women leaders?

Abstract: Drawing on interviews conducted with a sample of 27 senior women leaders from across Australian industries, this study found that legitimate workplace structures disrupt and challenge the subliminal status effects of gender on perceived task or role performance. This related to structures such as increased opportunities for promotion into higher status roles and opportunities to participate in unstructured group-task roles. These findings were in stark contrast to traditional workplace structures where senior women leaders relied on their ability alone to reach the top. Our findings have significant implications for organizations wishing to legitimize and replicate HRM policy levers that help to formalize workplace structures of equality and counter prevailing gender stereotypes.

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Introduction

This study explores whether an institutionalized approach towards supporting women leaders can reduce the gap between gendered stereotypes and perceived performance around task and role success. A cross-theory approach between status characteristics theory (SCT) and institutional theory forms the basis of the research. SCT focuses on the group-based view of organizing processes. Status characteristics theory suggests that the status assessments of individuals occurs frequently in informal problem-solving groups. Generally, although the more obvious status assessments relate to differences in age, gender, race and ethnicity, they extend more broadly to other differences e.g., assessment of task-related skills. These subconscious assessments influence the perceived competence and status ranking of group members in the performance of a task.

Women face at least two well-known biases based on gendered perceptions of their ability according to gender narratives. First, the agentic traits associated with effective leadership - such as ambition, assertiveness, self-confidence and competitiveness are attributed less to women than men (Eagly & Carli, 2012). According to scholars, women have maternal bodies, flooded with hormones that make them incapable of rational decision-making and represent a risk to productivity (Gatrell, Cooper & Kossek, 2017). Second, to avoid either activating feminine stereotypes or violating masculine ones, women appear to be limited to a narrow band of acceptable career behaviours (Zhu, Konrad & Jiao, 2016). When women exhibit male-typed ability, they are less effective and have less legitimacy than males occupying a similar position (Joshi, Son, & Roh, 2015). In comparison to a man who is similarly qualified, extant research suggests women appointed to senior leadership positions are a risk (van Esch,

Hopkins, O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2018). For instance, women tend not to exhibit the ideal diffuse characteristics associated with the effective leader (Baretto & Hogg, 2018), yet training designed to increase the ability of group members can reduce status inequality effects (Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Ridgeway & Correll, 2006; Troyer, Younts, & Kalkhoff, 2001; Walker, Doerer, & Webster, 2014). Based on her ability alone, a woman's access to an opportunity to perform or to achieve a promotion in to senior leadership roles has not met with the same success as their male counterparts (Eagly & Karau, 1991). Therefore, studying factors other than women's leadership attributes may provide insights about how to disrupt the subconscious status assessments that occur in informal problem-solving groups. In this study, the insights sought particularly relate to senior women leaders.

In comparison to the group organizing process of SCT, institutional theory applies a broader, societal view of organizing. Institutional theory contends that an organization will 'institutionalize' its practices within its cultural framework. It does so to increase its own organizational legitimacy and chances of survival (Lucas, 2003). Lucas's (2003) explanation of institutionalization suggests that as a sector (or industry) matures, accepted practices in social thought and action emerge within and across its organizations. It is particularly the accepted practices of organizations within the sector or 'field' to which the other organizations conform, that is important. These accepted practices converge over time and become 'institutionalized' (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017; Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Institutionally prescribed structures and systems may advantage senior women leaders when they can disrupt the innate and subliminal gender status assessment(s). That is, there is a sizeable gap in the literature related to the benefits of institutionalized practices and their effects on women in leadership. We postulate that institutionalized structures and systems help to legitimize women in to senior leadership roles. Significantly, new spaces for theorising are possible through a better

understanding of the effective and ineffective approaches that women leaders adopt to increase their personal status relevant to task performance. We consider here the experiences of women working across a variety of industries in Australia. To our knowledge, this is the first examination of the empirical relationships of SCT *within an institutional theory context* that considers authentic workplace experiences.

Conceptual Framework

Gender and Inequality

A complex body of literature on gender equality has developed over the last thirty years with much attention focused on the main themes and occurrences of inequality. Because of the conflict between resources and power, the constant struggle between dominant and subdominant individuals has been commonplace (Ridgeway, 2014; Ridgeway & Correll, 2006). Deficit-model based arguments describe power and influence differentials between individuals in which those people with more resources are deemed more influential and thus perceived as more competent (Barreto & Hogg, 2018; Lucas & Baxter, 2012). Within the discussions of material struggles and deficit-based models, women are undervalued (Joshi et al., 2015). Through a combination of tokenism, role congruence and gendered stereotypes, women's efforts, next to their male counterparts, are not equal even while they display strong leadership performance (Acker, 2006; Mölders, Brosi, Bekk, Spörrle & Welp, 2018; Ridgeway, 2014). They are also subject to higher levels of scrutiny (Glass & Cook, 2016). Gender role-expectation theory posits that men place different value on the work role with greater emphasis on pay and promotion (Eagly, 1987). Women, on the other hand, identify more strongly to family roles, co-worker support, the quality of the work itself including the work environment and job security (Eagly, 1987; Huang & Gamble, 2015). We build on these discussions by

challenging the idea that women lack the attributes and abilities required of effective leadership (Heilman, 2012) and the notion that senior women leaders need to be protected in challenging work assignments (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Lee, Glick & Fiske, 2010). While prior research helps explain why women are not represented at the highest levels of the organization (Joshi et al., 2015; Ridgeway, 2014), we seek to reposition the status-performance narrative towards institutionalized structures and systems (hereafter institutionalized workplace structures) and the status of senior women leaders.

Institutional theory

In this paper, *institutionalized workplace structures* refer to the organization's legitimate attempt to embed equality processes and practices so that gender equality becomes a norm within the organizational culture. We contend that without institutionalized workplace structures, workers must rely on raw ability and are more highly exposed to conditional, ad hoc processes and opportunities to survive and succeed in their jobs. Institutionalized workplace structures provide formalized support for women. Researchers have found that in terms of exerting influence, women lack confidence because of the gender assessments of their ability (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Guillén, Mayo & Karelaia, 2018; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Here, individual-level explanations enhance or hinder women's organizational mobility according to scholars (Cook & Glass, 2014: 92). Institutionalized workplace structures do not rely on individual-level explanations of behaviour. Rather, they evolve from both external governmental and internal organizational-level policies. Examples of such structures include government legislated maternity leave, equal pay, legal obligations to report gender equality outcomes, industry policies that promote equal representation on company Boards, and organisational policies on promotion and inclusive cultures and facilities.

Institutional theory is a useful starting point to explain the narrative around these structures as it provides a robust sociological perspective to place gender strategies in context. Institutional scholars explain that normative pressures are placed on organizations by governments and other regulatory authorities in such a way that organizations, over time, change their structural arrangements to become more isomorphic with institutionally prescribed expectations (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983). Isomorphism is a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to *resemble* other units that face the same set of environmental conditions (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983: 149). ‘Competitive isomorphism’ assumes a system of rationality (or consistency). This means that organizations seek to become isomorphic with their contexts and conform to contextual expectations of appropriate organizational forms. An ‘appropriate’ organizational form will lead to a standard or common approach that similar like-minded organizations adopt. Isomorphic and competitive practices across other companies for example might occur by placing senior women in director roles and Board membership. Quota systems to increase the number of female top leaders in European countries (Fox, 2014) for instance has led to increasing competition for top leadership talent (Wang & Kelan, 2013).

‘Institutional isomorphism’ by comparison occurs because of forces pressing organizations toward accommodation with the outside world as they compete not just for resources and customers, but for political power, institutional legitimacy and social and economic fitness (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983). Driven by political and societal pressures for change, institutional pressure for instance has led to equal pay for women and men in some organisations (McGee, 2017). Similarly, Australia’s *Workplace Gender Equality Act* has propelled gender equality outcomes for both men and women as an example of institutionalised action. More recently in 2018, the Act promotes (among other things), the removal of barriers

and the full and equal participation of women in the workforce and access to all occupations and industries, including leadership roles, regardless of gender (WGEA, 2018).

Organizational systems, driven by institutional pressures and ‘rationalised myths’ about how to behave and solve problems, homogenize over time and establish an organizational field (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017; Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Thus, as an organizational field of vested and homogenous interests become more established, the development of mutual awareness between participants becomes more standardised (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983). In taking the lead from institutional theory, we postulate that homogenous influences on the formation of gender equitable practices within the workplace will become more isomorphic over time. Within the context of this paper however, what makes institutionalized workplace structures more prevalent is the cross-theory linkages between status characteristics theory and institutional theory. To explore these links, we now turn to a wider explanation of status characteristics theory.

Status Characteristics Theory

A person’s status is synonymous with their ‘social worth’ (or social reputation) within a group (Blader & Yu, 2017). Status characteristics theory (SCT) indicates that status inequalities develop almost instantaneously as group interactions unfold and as opportunities to participate in problem-solving groups evolve (Berger & Conner, 1969; Ridgeway & Correll, 2006). Status beliefs (of self and others) refers to a process of subconsciously assessing the status characteristics possessed by a group member and the likelihood of that group member successfully performing the task. Status beliefs and expectations of performance are interrelated. Berger, Rosenholtz & Zelditch (1980: 481) suggest that performance expectations not only arise out of interaction but also from prior beliefs. Expectations about future

performance arise out of the task-related interactions of members of the group. They also pertain to the expectations that people have of their own performance in carrying out their role. Status is a form of inequality based on differences in social esteem and respect that in turn, yield influence. Status beliefs relate to societal beliefs where “categorical difference among people is central to the organization of status inequality whether it be among social groups or individuals” (Ridgeway & Correll, 2006: 431-432).

Status assessments inform the power-prestige order of the group. Berger et al. (1980) posit that the power-prestige order of the group occurs by assessing two overarching salient cues: *diffused* and *specific* characteristics. *Specific* characteristics refer to the essential experience, skill(s) or competencies required for the task at hand that must be possessed by an individual (or members) of the group. Gender is a *diffused* characteristic related to an individual (or a group of individuals within the team) that is present during inherent cognitive assessments of a person’s competence and status (Ridgeway & Correll, 2006). A specific characteristic and status assessment ranking relates to a specific competence or skill. A specific and lower status assessment will occur if a mechanic is female than male. Here, the combination of the *diffused* characteristic of gender coupled with the *specific* characteristic of mechanical ability, leads to adverse judgements about competence to complete a task. SCT further proposes that group members who possess one or more desired and specific characteristics generally hold higher status positions in groups (Chizhik et al., 2003).

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 (Berger et al., 1980; Ridgeway & Correll, 2006). In comparison, the *path of relevance* is the cognitive connection between the individual and the task that links the status characteristic possessed by that individual to either a successful or unsuccessful task completion (Berger et al., 1980). A stronger cognitive link between status and perceived performance to complete a task means that a path of relevance is shorter. Group or individual status assessment will be higher. A weaker cognitive link between status and perceived performance to complete a task means that a path of relevance is longer. Group or individual status assessment will be lower. Tasks can be anything that individuals attempt in their work role. When these individuals form groups, the higher-status members are often considered more highly competent than lower-status members (Russell & Fiske, 2008), thus higher-status members have shorter paths of relevance. Studies have found that even when tasks are gender-neutral however, males received higher influence and status compared to other group members (Pugh & Wahrman, 1983; Ridgeway & Correll, 2006; Wagner & Berger, 1993).

Expectation States Theory

SCT sits under the broader umbrella of expectation status theory (EST). In EST, the implicit assumptions that group members hold about one another's influence and their ability to complete a task or role explains how interpersonal status hierarchies occur (Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977). For instance, because gender is salient in these social settings, beliefs about men's greater status and competence implicitly shape the expectations that participants form *for their own* competence and performance (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). That is, both women and men experience normative and informational pressures to conform to gender roles. They do so to avoid others' disapproval but also for guidance about 'appropriate' behaviour in new, ambiguous and/or complex settings (Konrad & Cannings, 1997; Zhu, Konrad

& Jiao, 2016). Expectations of performance through role congruence creates differential obligations for women and men disadvantaging women more than their male counterparts. For example, women more than men feel pressure to balance career and family, while men more than women feel pressure to excel in their career (Konrad & Cannings, 1997; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Similarly, male-typed roles such as engineering seem better suited to males and female-typed roles such as nursing seem better suited to females (Acker, 2006; Swim & Sanna, 1996). Such status-shaped expectations and beliefs about roles not only affect participation and influence, but they also bias evaluations of performance. A performance, idea or product concept from a person or group with higher status than lower status is more acceptable according to extant research (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004: 518).

In order to challenge this gender role conformance of expectations and behaviour in particular situations, the legitimacy of a person's 'authority' in any system becomes important (Zelditch and Walker, 1984). Thus, the ability to mobilize the support or resources necessary to ensure that subordinates comply with her directives is an important marker of the authority of a women leader. Moreover, the sources of her ability to mobilize such support depends on the recognition of her authority from people outside the local system as well as by her subordinates (Holton & Dent, 2016; Ridgeway, Johnson & Diekema, 1994: 1053). Institutionalized workplace structures that garner more support and authority for the leader external to the performance of the leader's role will help to challenge and disrupt the gendered role assessments. These workplace structures could be anything from specialist programs that encourage senior women to apply for higher status positions, to specific mentoring practices, to the creation of inclusive work practices. We suggest that the path of relevance between task and performance will be shorter and perhaps irrelevant when there is legitimate support for her

authority. Legitimate institutional practices that embody the necessary authority challenge the perceived status of her gendered role and competence to perform her role successfully.

Several cross-theory linkages emerge as a means to influence how status is perceived and operationalized. We theorise that as organizations move to legitimize women leaders through institutionalized workplace structures in the conduct of their roles and in the performance of their tasks, the subliminal status assessment between the gender and task/role performance link will be weaker and inconsequential. Institutionalized practice related to inclusion and policies that help promote women in to senior roles can disrupt stereotyped status indicators, with prior research noting the advantage of formal mentoring programs for women (Nair & Vohra, 2017). Similarly, in terms of equality practices, explicit policy settings and legislation has improved the status of women through, for example, quota systems for women on boards (Wang & Kelan, 2013) and policies that promote gender diversity and directorships (Bao, Fainshmidt, Nair & Vranceva, 2014). These discussions underpin the thematic basis of four research questions outlined next.

Research question one: Institutionalized workplace structures and equal status

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 and other matters such as sex-based harassment and discrimination policies (DFAT, 2015; DSS, 2017). However, non-compliance by organisations with the *Workplace Gender Equality Act* is an issue, producing limited outcomes from these regulatory demands. For example, Peetz, Strachan and Broadbent (2016:649) found highly gendered differences in negotiated bonuses paid to new recruits on appointment that are designed to recognise the worth of the job, i.e. market loadings. The

authors suggest that the vertical segregation between men and women was substantial, with much less representation of women at the higher-level roles. These findings build on extant research that women leaders are not promoted into profit-and-loss roles, or recognized for their worth, as a forerunner to senior leadership (French & Strachan, 2007), reinforcing the glass ceiling or glass cliff effect (Cook & Glass, 2014; Joshi et al., 2015).

There are at least two ways to connect SCT and institutionalized structures and systems. First, organizations should benefit from institutionalized equality policy settings at the government and organization level. Workplace structures that challenge common stereotypes for organizations operating within a similar field potentially become isomorphic practices. Second, presenting women leaders with equal skill and ability with respect to individual, group and organizational agency shortens the path of relevance. Here, workplace structures that reflect equality, diversity and inclusion challenge the subliminal gender status. This discussion leads to the first research question: *How effective are senior women leaders in shortening the path of relevance when institutionalized workplace structures support equal status?*

Research question two: Institutionalized workplace structures and high-status roles

According to Chizhik et al. (2003), a person may be successful in modifying and eroding status beliefs about him or herself in circumstances when workplace structures support pushback against lower-status assessments. When the male-dominant status quo is threatened however, a backlash against female leaders will occur (Joshi et al., 2015; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012), suggesting that common stereotypes of women lead to double standards in assessing ability (Acker, 2006; Muller-Kahle & Schiehl, 2013; Zhu, Konrad & Jiao, 2016). To counter these perceptions, it is possible to improve an individual's influence as other members learn to appreciate a person's talents relevant to task completion (Chizhik et al., 2003; Cohen, Lotan, Scarloss, & Arellano, 1999). In circumstances when institutionalized

policies promote future women leaders in to higher-status roles or as group leaders, this creates the opportunity for people to take on higher status roles. It also facilitates a situation where women leaders are equal in status to male leaders (Russell & Fiske, 2008). Institutionalized support in the form of workplace structures, we theorise, will help to reduce the path-of-relevance between the expected gendered behaviour and the performance of that role because of the external support provided (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018; Konrad & Cannings, 1997; Ridgeway et al. 1994). Consequently, we pose the second research question: *How effective are senior women leaders in shortening the path of relevance when institutionalized workplace structures lead to 'higher-status' roles?*

Research question three: Institutionalized workplace structures and unstructured group-task situations

The views of lower-status group members in relation to working on a group task are important. In a study by Alexander et al. (2009), *open-structured tasks*, also called ill-structured tasks (Chizhik et al., 2003), are tasks that can be solved with multiple solutions, creating opportunities for divergent thinking and enabling lower-status group members to receive positive feedback regarding their input. Such outcomes are in contrast to groups with a *closed-structured task* where there is a clearly articulated problem and solution requiring less participatory opportunity. According to SCT, it is the opinions of higher status group members that are more highly valued (Troyer et al., 2001). What we believe others expect of us (second-order beliefs) can over-ride what we expect of ourselves (first-order beliefs) in groups with closed-structured tasks. Thus, in SCT traditions, closed-structured tasks promote a stronger group collective. Conformity to others views with higher-status is often stronger given that one's sense of self arises from impressions that others hold (Kalkhoff, Younts, & Troyer, 2011; Troyer et al., 2001: 142). This situation may be particularly relevant when lower-status group members seek to

avoid status loss by agreeing with a more dominant member. These outcomes can be challenged however when group members are trained to recognize the contribution of different minorities (Cohen & Lotan, 1995). When divergent thinking is required from all members and the task is not highly specified, women leaders should have more opportunities to demonstrate their task and problem-solving skills. Unstructured group-tasks in relation to divergent thinking, we theorise, will help to reduce the path of relevance because of the institutionalized support provided for these workplace structures. This leads to the third research question: *How effective are senior women leaders in shortening the path of relevance when institutionalized workplace structures promote greater participation in unstructured group-task situations?*

Research question four: Institutionalized workplace structures and mentoring opportunities

Research generally supports that forming a developmental relationship with a mentor enhances a protégé's career outcomes (Bozionelos, 2015). The value of mentorship particularly for women leaders relates to the leadership capital that girls and young women acquire during their childhood and formative years. Fitzsimmons, Callan and Paulsen (2014: 247) for instance explored how male and female CEOs were influenced by the relationships between the personal capital valued by a 'field' and the 'habitus' of the wider range of participants who generate this capital. They found that in comparison to male CEOs, female CEOs emerged from childhood with little leadership capital relying more on mentors for leadership experiences, role modelling and advice (Fitzsimmons et al., 2014). The latter study found that a dominant group of people determine who has capital value (a desired set of attributes) in the field granting them access to additional sources of such capital, which consequently fortifies the prevailing culture for that field. Both in-group and out-group polarization can occur due to the interpersonal connections embedded in social capital relationships that can either aid or hinder a person's career trajectory

(Bozionelos, 2015). Bozionelos (2015) explains that salient characteristics such as gender and race can pre-determine the quality of accessible career-enhancing social capital. People generally succumb to finding mentors and building network ties located within their preordained social-capital group. Zhu, Konrad and Jiao (2016) similarly found that the effort managerial women expend on building networks resides heavily with other managerial women. The perpetuation of social capital networks and social value identified in these recent studies underscore the need for organisational intervention by formalising programs that facilitate access to mentors, and consequently network ties, for women (and other groups) who are disadvantaged by their existing social capital boundary.

Formal mentoring relationships where the organisation matches a protégé with a mentor are less effective in producing positive career outcomes compared to outcomes derived from *informal* mentoring relationships that occur organically through personal attraction and mutual interests (Bozionelos, forthcoming). However, this finding does not diminish the need for formal mentoring programs, with researchers also optimistic about the benefits of institutional mentoring programs. For example, Bozionelos (forthcoming) attributes formal mentoring programs with enhancing a person's career prospects, while Srivastava (2015) found that formal mentoring facilitates the protégé's access to a wider network resource - particularly for female protégés. Murray and Syed (2010) also found that formal mentoring systems institutionalized in HRM policies more effectively equipped women for future leadership roles. Formal mentoring relates positively to a protégé's affective commitment levels and negatively to turnover intentions in Chinese organisations (Chen, Liao & Wen, 2014: 1124). Menges (2016: 114) found that openness to experience improved the career support that the protégés received from their mentors. While it appears that mentoring varies in its purpose, design and function from one organization to the next (Bozionelos, forthcoming), extant research shows that formal

mentoring programs do play an important role in empowering women in their careers (Dasphar, 2018).

To conclude our line of reasoning, mentoring systems are a form of legitimation that occurs outside the group that becomes an important support structure for existence within the group (Bozionelos, 2015; Ridgeway et al., 1994). Thus, institutionalized mentoring programs implicitly shape the expectations that women leaders have of their own competence in a positive sense while at the same time, lessening the gendered-role expectations that others hold of them. These factors, in combination, potentially reduce the path of relevance. This leads to the final research question: *How effective are senior women leaders in shortening the path of relevance when institutionalized workplace structures enhance mentoring opportunities?*

Methods and Data

This study employed a thematic analysis technique as a versatile method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is both a realist and a contextualized approach to analysing data. It is a realist approach to the extent we report the experiences, meanings and reality of participants. It is a contextualized 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 & Clarke, 2006).

By using a semi-structured interview process of twenty-seven (27) women leaders representing different occupational positions, data was collected pertaining to industry experience ranging from not-for-profit organisations, accounting, computing, banking, insurance, law, communications, gaming, media and consultancy and telecommunications. This number of participants more than satisfies Guest, Bunce and Johnson's (2006) recommendation

that six to twelve interviews provides a stable list of themes, particularly if the group is homogenous due to purposive sampling, as is the case here. Each participant was a senior women leader by virtue of having 10 or more years in a senior managerial role including but not limited to senior lawyers and senior consultants. The participants were educated, mostly with degrees and some with double degrees, and representative of British-Australian and European-Australian backgrounds. Two participants withheld their age with the remaining 25 participants aged 35 to 65 years. The average age was 44.4 years (7.03 years standard deviation; 43 years median age). While women above 40 years-of-age dominated the participants, five (5) of the women were in their 30s with young school-aged children. While this small number of younger women had potential to bias the data with fewer reported experiences, our reading of the data suggested that the type of institutionalized practices experienced were remarkably similar across the participants, with the experiences of the older women only slightly more salient. All participants were located in Sydney, Australia (Table 1). Common unstructured questions related to the identification and evidence of equality, high-status roles, unstructured group-tasks and formal mentoring opportunities. Clusters of themes and their institutionalisation were of particular importance.

Insert Table 1 about here

A number of women in senior leadership roles across different industries and professions helped identify an initial group of participants. As the data collection phase unfolded, the full sample was assembled using the ‘snowball’ approach which relies upon referrals from previous participants to recruit new participants (O’Dwyer & Bernauer, 2014). The data collection phase ended in 2010 and took two years to complete. The researchers reviewed each transcript using judgement sampling to select the most relevant and productive

evidence in a data item to support the thematic analysis from a critical realist perspective. The researchers used a latent coding approach to interpret the lived experiences of interviewees' comments relevant to each theme. Latent coding refers to coding that recognizes aspects of a participant's response that addresses a particular theme or research question. From the women's lived experiences that promoted or limited their opportunities to perform their roles, the researchers were able to identify a number of institutionalized practices. MAX-QDA software enabled the organization of the participant's responses within the themes. Further, MAX-QDA table functions helped to test and explore associations, frequencies and groupings in the data.

For the coding structure, a value judgement was made whether a participant made comments indicating that institutionalized structures were either an effective (E) or ineffective (I) mechanism for *shortening the path of relevance*, i.e., cognitive assessments of a woman's assumed competency in relation to completing a task successfully or fitness for a leadership role. For example, an 'effective' code (E) referred to institutionalized workplace structures evident to the researchers relating to a clear policy, instruction and/or a cultural manifestation that supported her opportunity. An 'ineffective' code (I) was assigned when a participant's statement reflected that she had overcome or was attempting to overcome organizational resistance or adversity by relying on her ability alone to demonstrate her competence - which we treated as a proxy for an absence of institutionalized structures. Each research question represented a different factor of an institutionalized structure related to equal status (ES); high-status roles (HSR); unstructured group tasks (UGT); and mentoring opportunities (MO) in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Findings

We find overall that effective senior women's leader experiences evolved from legitimate and institutionalized workplace structures that granted them more authority to perform their roles. Senior women leaders having to rely on their ability alone was not nearly as strong. To test how broadly organizations had institutionalized their workplace structures, we used a frequency table as displayed in Table 3 to count the number of times the institutionalized structures appeared in narratives. Table 3 shows for instance, that in relation to research question one, 'effective' workplace structures represent 66 percent of the data set as distinct from 30 percent ineffective workplace structures. Four experiences relevant to question one's theme were undefined and not clear.

Insert Table 3 about here

Institutionalized workplace structures and equal status

The initial research question considered the effectiveness of senior women leaders in shortening the path of relevance in circumstances when institutionalized workplace structures support equal status. Consistent with prior research, there is strong evidence that isomorphic, institutionalized workplace structures challenge the cognitive subliminal status assessment of gender linked to the role that senior women play. This influences the perceptions of her competency for her role. For instance, one woman leader talks about the flow-on effects of corporate policies changing to better support women (and men's) roles:

'So for example having corporate policies that now say you can't schedule meetings before nine or after five like [names two competitor companies] legitimizes men and women saying it's not working for either of us. So I think there is a greater awareness of it in general. There is a discussion around work and family issues in Australia and that is advantaging women leading to

changing policy. So I think women, if I think back in the legal sector twelve years ago, there would have been a hand full of people, partners who have been working part time. But now I can't even count those women who are working part time at that senior level. ' (Law Partner, ES/E)

Similarly, in circumstances where workplace flexibility is important for executives with young children, women leaders link this to potential benefits in task-related functions and roles. Subtle but important changes to the role and their perceived competence reduces the likelihood that women cannot perform their role simply because they have to leave early, or work from home. In the following example, invoking expectations that she can mobilize the support or resources necessary to carry out her role foregrounds the importance of organizational support. This support helps her to reduce the perceived path of relevance that questions her capacity to perform her role and influence performance at senior levels. In the following example, this institutionalization relates to legitimate changes to job design around flexible hours and work roles:

'So I was lucky that my CEO said, 'fine let's just work around it, that's what we do now', and we have and it's worked out brilliantly and it's setting a really good example for other women with a positive role model of being a single working mother in an executive role and not part-time, and it can work. ' (Director of Strategy, ES/E)

For many women leaders, equal pay opportunities are consistent with organizational agency aimed at enhancing equality. For instance, women leaders in law and banking indicate that men and women *'are paid the same at the same level and there is certainly no question about that'* although, we found instances where work structures were not effective with greater reliance on individual ability alone. For example, one participant reflected on the state of women's salary negotiation skills:

'I said [to a female colleague], "you have asked for more pay didn't you?" [She replied] "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 that you've got to ask for the cash and you've got to have the balls to say I'm not doing it unless you give me X, Y and Z.' (Executive Director, ES/I)

Women leaders who have reached a senior level indicate that the status quo of a glass ceiling remains in situations where workplace structures do not reflect equal status and support, conforming more to the stereotype that men have greater status and competence. These thoughts implicitly shape the expectations of these women for their own performance and competence in dealing with difficult situations, consequently highlighting the strain of acting alone:

'And the issue for a lot of women is that they haven't got those role models who have made it to the top who can share their stories, their war stories, and say look when you get to this rocky point don't go left, go right. ... And that is the difficulty with the glass ceiling ... is it a glass ceiling or is it that there's a way to get through it, but not enough people have done it to be able to tell us the stories of how to get through it.' (Senior Tax Manager, ES/I)

Taken together, it appears that as organizations move to legitimize senior women leaders through institutionalized workplace structures to provide equal status, the cognitive link between the subliminal status assessment of gender and task/role performance is weaker and inconsequential. This means the path of relevance is shorter and the link between task/role requirements and expectations for performance is stronger.

Institutionalized workplace structures and high-status roles

The second research question focused on the effectiveness of senior women leaders in shortening the path of relevance in circumstances when institutionalized workplace structures

help to promote senior women leaders into high-status roles. Here, effective (E) workplace structures represent 61 per cent of the data set as distinct from 32 per cent ineffective (I) workplace structures (Table 3). Senior women leaders have experienced the benefits of workplace structures that promote high-status opportunities through their descriptions of experiencing attitudinal shifts and culture changes, often driven by men, that women are worthy of higher-status:

'It's probably been also from 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 sort of ensure that I'm leading projects and everything. And as well as the other team members to get them involved. And I think it's helped that our profile within the group is actually quite high when I talk to other people in other organizations.' (Senior Manager, HSR/E)

In contrast, women leaders who had progressed into their roles based on ability alone tended to experience differential status ranking and 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 that in executive roles because there's not very many of us so you've got to be pretty brave, but they're prepared to challenge that ... they're an endangered species, they are prepared to put forward suggestions and so on and be brave. But if your suggestions keep getting ignored then that's a really difficult thing to deal with.' (Senior Business Consultant, HSR/I)

Taken together, as organizations moved to legitimize senior women leaders into high-status roles, the effects of gender on task/role performance became weaker and inconsequential. In SCT terms, this means the path of relevance was shorter and the link between task/role and performance stronger. In comparison, in the situations where a women leader was relying on

her ability alone to advance her career, led to status-quo situations with her feeling isolated, alone and vulnerable.

Institutionalized workplace structures and unstructured group-tasks

The third research question considered the effectiveness of senior women leaders in shortening the path of relevance when institutionalized workplace structures promoted greater participation in unstructured group-task situations for lower-status members. Here, effective (E) workplace structures represent 57 per cent of the data set as distinct from 31 per cent ineffective (I) workplace structures (Table 3). Tasks dictated by power structures and organized in a hierarchical fashion were not dominant. Institutionalized preference for unstructured tasks fostered a sense of goodwill and greater workplace flexibility for senior women leaders:

'It's not a hierarchical aggressive sort of a role. It's much more working together with other people to achieve 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 if I go and ask direction for something. So it's a very good role, I have a lot of you know flexibility and authority with what I want to do.' (Global Manager/UGT/E)

There were examples of circumstances where workplace structures were ineffective at catering for participatory group-task situations, leaving the women to rely on their ability alone. Ineffective work practices reflected old-fashioned work models where work was designed around the needs of men consistent with extant research e.g., Joshi et al. (2015). In these circumstances, organizations paid lip service to flexible structures:

'Talking the rhetoric that 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.’ (Chartered Accountant/UGT/I).

Some participants suggest that group-task decisions favour higher status males than lower-status females. Women are ‘in the dark’ and feel less competent unless they ‘play the same game’ as men:

‘Because that’s what teamwork building is when you’re an executive. It is about you have your strategy day and you have dinner and get on the booze and you stay out and that’s what you do. And I notice that with another woman on my team that she just didn’t want to do that stuff. So she didn’t have that level of that’s where conversations take place.....If you’re not there and part of it you won’t be included in those decisions. And you know quite often we would turn up to day two of a strategy session and say oh well you know what we discussed last night is X, Y and Z.’

(Finance Executive, GTR/I)

Taken together, the number of fully effective institutionalized workplace structures that promote greater participation in group-task situations for lower-status members led to an overall finding for research question three. That is, as organizations move to legitimize open-structured task/roles, the link between task/role and performance became stronger with the path of relevance shorter. Here, senior women leaders were able to participate with equal status along with men performing a similar task/role, whereas traditional and highly structured situations were much less inclusive and unattractive to the women leaders leaving them to ponder cognitive assessments that associated them with longer paths of relevance.

Institutionalized workplace structures and mentoring opportunities

The fourth research question focused on the effectiveness of women leaders in shortening the path of relevance when institutionalized workplace structures enhanced their

mentoring opportunities. Here, effective (E) workplace structures represent 73 per cent of the data set as distinct from 18 per cent ineffective (I) workplace structures (Table 3). Workplace structures that garner career support, lower turnover intentions and establish role models relate to formalised mentoring programs that assist future senior women leaders. Women leaders clearly see advantages:

'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 female executives. A 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, MO/E)

Embedded within HR practices at different levels, institutionalized mentoring programs are evident within workplaces:

'I definitely do mentoring with 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 organization.... 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 we're looking at that next layer down and fostering some people in that arena with HR policies.... we've got a real mix with our managers.' (CEO, MO/E)

For some women leaders, mentoring opportunities led them towards networks of support for garnering knowledge and an increasing confidence to perform their tasks and roles. For instance, one senior executive suggests that *'leveraging my network hadn't crossed my mind before. But you take different approaches to things and it worked. And 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 ineffective nor made legitimate from an outside authority, mentoring was a distraction:

'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.' (General Manager, MO/I)

Similarly, women leaders who worked in organizations without a mentoring culture and who relied on their ability alone, indicated that *'searching for a quality mentor [was] not easy'*. For senior women leaders, those experiencing too few mentoring opportunities were in stark contrast to those who did. Mostly, senior women leaders valued mentoring. Taken together, the number of effective institutionalized workplace structures that enhanced mentoring opportunities for senior women leaders led to an overall finding for research question four. Institutionalized mentoring opportunities 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/role success and performance is stronger. In situations where women leaders relied on ability alone, they did not view mentoring as effective. Here, mentoring was not commonplace. Senior women leaders had trouble in identifying a suitable mentor on their own, and/or mentoring was a distraction.

Discussion

This study explored whether an institutionalized approach towards supporting women leaders can reduce the gap between gendered stereotypes and perceived performance around task and role success. A cross-theory approach between status characteristics theory (SCT) and institutional theory delved into the associations between the two approaches. Through a critical realist methodology of the lived experiences of senior women leaders in circumstances when institutionalized workplace structures were present, we investigated whether the path of

relevance between a status ranking and perceived performance would be shorter. We described how a stronger cognitive link between a status assessment and perceived performance to complete a task meant that a path of relevance would be shorter meaning individual group or individual status assessment would be higher. Conversely, we postulated that a weaker cognitive link between status and perceived performance to complete a task meant that a path of relevance would be longer meaning group or individual status assessment would be weaker. The study questioned the extent to which institutional workplace structures were effective along the following lines: 1) when they reflected equal status, 2) when they promoted women into high-status roles, 3) when they facilitated unstructured group-task situations, and 4) when they enhanced mentoring opportunities. Conversely, ineffective institutionalized workplace structures we suggested meant that the women had to rely on their ability alone to counter gender-biased expectations of their competency to perform their leadership roles. We found evidence of effective workplace structures enabling women leaders to shorten the path of relevance. In these instances, gender as a status influence was inconsequential to successful group-work outcomes related to different task/roles for doing the job. Here, certain institutionalized workplace structures worked positively to reduce the gender bias and perceived competence as noted by previous scholars (e.g. Abraham, 2017; Eagly & Karau, 1991; Joshi et al., 2015; Ridgeway, 2014; Ridgeway & Correll, 2006; Eagly & Karau, 1991).

For research question one, institutionalized changes within the workplace related to remote meetings and part-time work has helped female (and male) leaders cope with the demands of their work roles. Similarly, flexible policies relating to how these women perform their role e.g., the effects of work structures on single working mothers in an executive role, has reduced the status effects associated with the gender bias. Women have benefited from the

authority made legitimate by the institutional practice. In any system, the authority's ability to mobilize the support or resources necessary to ensure that subordinates comply with the authority's directives (Ridgeway et al., 1994; Zelditch and Walker, 1984) helps to reduce others' expectations of performances that senior women leaders lack the competence to complete a task successfully or lack the authority to perform the role. Thus, the legitimate support afforded their roles has worked to reduce the path of relevance between the perceived task/role and their own expectations of performance. The opposite is true of women without this legitimate support. Here, the lack of institutional direction meant that these women increasingly faced a glass ceiling (Glass & Cook, 2016; Ryan & Haslam, 2005) with the greater status of men implicitly shaping senior women leader's expectations for their own performance. Here, women were victims of the beliefs established around the doing of their roles and the tiresome fight against established practices.

For research question two, institutionalized practices related to promoting women into senior roles has been invoked, perhaps by organizations conscious of the gendered role congruence embedded within existing cultures (Chizhik et al., 2003; Konrad & Cannings, 1997) that clearly disadvantaged women. Helping to confuse and challenge the embedded idea that women lack the ability to perform in high status roles is fundamental to SCT (Acker 2006; Cohen et al., 1999). This finding contrasted senior women leaders who faced greater structural power and who relied on their ability alone. Here, consistent with Joshi et al. (2015) and Ridgeway (2014), tokenism and gendered stereotypes led to women feeling undervalued. Holton and Dent (2016) in confirming much earlier research by Zelditch and Walker (1984) highlight the importance of senior management support for women leaders pursuing high status roles. The findings of this paper indicate that institutionalized policies that enabled these

opportunities implicitly stimulated shorter paths of relevance between the women and their competence to perform, so that gender became inconsequential as a means for status assessment that might have otherwise worked against them.

For research question three, we argued that institutionalized workplace structures aimed towards promoting unstructured tasks enabled much more divergent thinking in how the task or role was undertaken (Alexander et al., 2009; Chizhik et al., 2003). From our assessment of the results, unstructured group-task situations legitimised through culture helped to shorten the path of relevance. Legitimate unstructured task arrangements enabled women's sense of self and their authority/esteem to be higher. Importantly, task structures around collective orientation (Berger et al., 1980) were evident as people worked together in teams to complete a task. Our reading of the data suggested that a number of diffused status characteristics related to divergent thinking became important - the higher status roles were less important and held less weight (Troyer et al., 2001) in unstructured group-task situations. Our findings suggest that this outcome was not about higher status, rather, that it related more to the spirit in which work was organised that defused the gendered role assessment and weakened the subconscious status ranking. The opposite was true of women acting alone without an institutionalized position on group-task behaviour. Here, the self/other assessment of expectations related to their performance and competence was invoked by men who knew how to play-the-game and by women who did not. The difficulty for women participating in group-task situations became salient when these senior women leaders knew that their contributions were not valued. The path of relevance for these women in carrying out their roles was longer and weaker.

Finally, for research question four, we considered the idea that formal mentoring gave women leaders more kudos and confidence within the performance of their roles (Chen et al.,

2014) thus reducing the path of relevance. In line with Zelditch and Walker (1984), we found that the authority granted to these women from external sources, such as male mentors, helped them to secure higher status assessment for their roles. Further, embedded mentoring systems in corporate policy helped the status of women leaders similar to extant research (Bozionelos, 2015; Menges, 2016; Murray & Syed 2010). When mentoring was not evident, the effects of working alone made it harder for women to achieve the same level of success at work. Our reading of situations where women relied on their ability alone to progress is consistent with longer paths of relevance and self/other perceptions where women were not confident in the performance of their role. This situation contrasts with women who were finding mentors and building network ties located within their preordained social-capital group (Bozionelos, 2015). Across all four-research questions, any differential effects between task and performance may have been for reasons other than gender, but these reasons were not obvious within the data set related to effective institutionalized workplace structures.

In circumstances where workplace structures were institutionalized, we found no evidence that senior women leaders needed to be protected in challenging work situations (Glick & Fiske, 2001) or revered because of their gender (Lee et al., 2010), which contests the burden-of-proof process that previous status assessments are transferred to future task-role situations (Ridgeway & Correll, 2006). Female leaders evaluated as less competent than males was not evident in situations of institutionalized unstructured group-task roles and in legitimate appointments to high-status roles. Our findings contrast some studies that found 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 & Schiehl, 2013:675; Lucas, 2003; Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Ridgeway and Correll, 2006).

In circumstances where institutionalised workplace structures were not evident, women leaders had to draw on their ability alone to overcome their self and other's assessments of their competence. The challenges of negotiating salary and being heard was an example of senior women leaders relying on their ability alone. Less flexibility within group-task, roles and less inclusive workplace structures left them feeling vulnerable and exposed. Experiences related to the poor design of work, structural disadvantages for women wanting to start a family, feelings of isolation and of 'going it alone' were common. Insufficient institutionalized workplace structures and job design factors appeared to mitigate motivation towards the top roles with women either opting out or not wanting to engage. The absence of institutionalized workplace structures helped to embolden common stereotypes between dominant and sub-dominant individuals and groups (Ridgeway, 2014) with those groups with more structural power more highly favoured with greater legitimacy (Muller-Kahle & Schiehl, 2013).

The major contribution of this paper is in linking SCT, and institutionalized workplace structures in such a way that challenges deficit-based gender assumptions that generalise the gender bias across all workplaces. This study has identified several normative institutionalized workplace structures that help to legitimize human resource workplace policies by challenging the gender bias for task/role success. Policies that support equal status, that recognize the importance of high status roles, that facilitate unstructured group-task situations, and that establish the development of mentoring systems, create isomorphic workplace structures that can be replicated across organizations. These structures help senior women leaders to overcome the self/other assessments that implicitly shape their expectations for task/role.

In this paper, we have argued that institutionalized forces become isomorphic practices within an organization's field particularly as the field becomes more established (Boxenbaum

& Jonsson, 2017). For instance, we found some evidence in the dataset where law and banking, and Government law agencies replicated each other's practices because they existed in proximate fields. Institutionalized workplace structures become isomorphic when the systems and policies legitimise women into leadership roles that in turn shortens the path of relevance between gender status and perceived task/role performance. Hence, similar organizations are likely to take on the institutional patterns deemed to be successful within an organizational field.

Our findings contribute to calls for more research in how job design can mitigate gender differences in performance evaluations and promotion rates. Similarly, our findings inform debates related to members of disadvantaged categories of social groups by paying careful attention to institutional arrangements (see Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018; Joshi et al., 2015; Lucas, 2003). Our findings challenge the idea of a zero-sum game that structural change is too hard and that status differences will always exist because of the underlying cultural and sociological differences at play (Ridgeway, 2014).

Limitations and implications for future research

In their study on sexual harassment of women in Pakistani workplaces, Ali and Kramar (2015) identified three major factors that influenced the effectiveness of its remedy: government legislation, organizational barriers and socio-cultural barriers. Similarly, Australian legislation had provided some impetus or framework for this to occur as a society where normative or institutional practices are gaining greater traction. Consequently, these initiatives may be different across contexts or countries where state legislation is limited, where institutional practices are still formative and may not even exist and (or) where religious and social customs present socio-cultural barriers for women at work.

Recent advances in institutional practices such as paid maternity leave, and greater expectations by society of equal pay and a more recent focus on strategies to accommodate more women on company boards, may not be representative of the current data. A study of both women and men would be welcome in contexts where recent institutional practices have started to benefit both sexes e.g., paternity leave and its effects on the structure of work and family outcomes. Given this sample's results of *effective* institutionalized workplace structures compared to non-institutional *ineffective* workplace structures was about three to one, this suggests future empirical studies should monitor the effects of sample classifications on future theorising. Similarly, future research might explore the impact of specific social and organizational policy agendas embracing equality practices, along with different occupational positions, experience, time in the position, and type of industry on senior women leader experiences. Similar studies of women in entry-level supervisory roles in future studies would be beneficial as distinct from mid-range, senior level leadership and management roles. Comparative studies would be particularly beneficial.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored gender disparities and stereotypes through the lens of status characteristics and institutional theory by placing the discussions within the context of group performance. We argued that gendered and status differences in places of work related to senior women leaders can be challenged through institutional change related to different isomorphic equality practices. The link between a status ranking and performance will be shorter and stronger when institutionalized work structures are present formed the basis of our study. Organizational policy and practice, and more broadly governmental and agency regulation, are providing the bedrock of change that undermines the deeply rooted stereotypes

of women and their abilities to perform in leadership roles. This paper provides evidence that organizations are responding to external influences and adopting isomorphic structures within a given industry. We suggest that a mix of institutionalized norms related to workplace structures of equality can advantage senior women leaders. Here, we remind our fellow scholars, regulators and policy makers that the benefits of institutionalizing help to facilitate and leverage increased cultural change at both the macro and micro levels of work and that the effectiveness of such changes are salient.

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