Competent women, subliminal group hierarchies and executive leadership

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Objective: We analysed the experiences of successful executive women leaders to ascertain how they attained appointments to roles as high as the C-suite and boardroom.

Theoretical focus: Sociologists use 'status characteristics theory' (SCT) to explain the influence of status beliefs based on salient characteristics, such as gender, on the assessment of a person's competency in group task situations (Berger et al. 1980). SCT suggests women can elevate their position from their stereotypically assigned place in the subliminal group hierarchy by shortening the path of relevance (Berger et al. 1980) between perceptions of their gender and their competence to perform a leadership role.

Research question: What strategies do successful executive women use to overcome subliminal, gender-influenced assessments of their leadership competency?

Method: In 2016, we interviewed 25 women who held positions within the executive suite and/or on the Board of Australian companies and government departments. A thematic analysis adhering to a 'contextualist' approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to examine the participants' responses.

Major conclusions: The women demonstrated their competence via two overarching strategies: active demonstrations with associated internal dialogues. Under these two strategies sit four sets of mirror-imaged tactics: balanced career choices; outcome driven; image management; and leveraged relationships. Combined, these inputs reflect physical and mental manoeuvres women have used to achieve shortened paths of relevance, suggesting that they reconfigured the cognitive, stereotypical status assessment of being less competent than the men in the group, to being viewed as a person capable of an executive leadership role.

References:

Berger, J, Rosenholtz, S & Zelditch Jr, M (1980) 'Status organizing processes' Annual Review of Sociology, 6(1) pp. 479-508.

Braun, V & Clarke, V (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology' Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2) pp. 77-101.