

Board level Invisibility and Critical Mass in South African Companies

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Abstract

Purpose: Women still face barriers that delay their upward mobility in organisations. This study aims to examine whether women experience critical mass as sufficient to shift deep level discursive dynamics, theorised as an (in)visibility Vortex.

Design/methodology/approach: A qualitative method was used to collect and analyse data on the lived experiences of 16 board-level female leaders who have been appointed to male-dominated boardrooms in South Africa.

Findings: The findings confirm that numeric representation is too simplistic to resolve deep level gendered dynamics. At a personal level: self-confidence, a bigger purpose and competence-experience were found to be counter-forces to Vortex. The role of the chairperson was also crucial.

Practical implications: Organisations must be reminded that even where the number of women on a board has reached beyond a critical mass, hidden barriers still exist. When developing women leaders, practitioners need to penetrate below the surface to appreciate the undercurrents and address them at that level. Organisations need to nurture the personal attributes that counter the forces of the Vortex. Mentorship, sponsorship and coaching may be beneficial. The role of the chairperson is especially important in disrupting deep level dynamics. Chairpersons need to be more deliberate and proactive to refute behaviours that exclude and undermine women's full participation.

Originality/value: Contrary to the (in)visibility perspectives, the women in this study did not "withdraw" or "conceal" their gender when "exposed" in male-dominated boardroom dynamics. Reasons for this are explored including the potential for further research on the construction of a "trailblazing" identity.

Keywords: Women on boards; Gender

1. Introduction

Corporate boards remain male-dominated territory, and the lack of women in the boardroom remains a significant problem (Elting, 2017). Men hold 80.3% of board seats in Fortune 1000 companies (Twenty-Twenty Women on Boards, 2016). For every seven board seats in an African listed company, men occupy six. Only 7% of executive directors are women, and just 2.2 % of South Africa's Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) listed company CEOs are

women (Bain & Company, 2017; McKinsey & Company, 2016). Only 15% of South African women are represented on boards compared to 19% globally and 26% in the BRIC economies. By 2016, 23 countries had imposed quotas for gender participation in corporate and state-owned entity boards (Navitidad, 2015) resulting in noticeable progress compared to the 1980s (Elgart, 1983). However, female boardroom participation is still not adequate because symbolic gender representation or 'tokenism' is preserved (Kogut, Colomer, & Belinky, 2014).

Boardroom dynamics are complicated by intersections of race, colour and class (Holvino, 2010) and what Hewlett & Rashid (2010) refer to as a triple whammy of bias, where women face prejudice on three dimensions, gender, ethnicity, and cultural attitudes. Additionally, structural forms of inequality, socio-political regimes, cultures as well as diverse geographic territories are underrepresented in gender frameworks, leaving organisations with a shallow understanding of gendered dynamics or completely ignoring them. When these dynamics are addressed, the approach tends to be to 'fix the women' so that they could be assimilated into the masculinised culture (Metcalf & Woodhams, 2012).

Even with the plethora of research conducted on the subject, very little is understood about the deep-level discursive dynamics that shape experiences of minority female board members on male-dominated corporate boards (Stead, 2013). The dynamics faced by women are deeply invisible, intangible, difficult to articulate (McKinsey & Company, 2016). Consequently, organisations give considerably less recognition to them. These dynamics function as an undercurrent to boardroom interactions and have been theorized to operate as an (In)visibility Vortex (Lewis & Simpson, 2012). They are possibly more dangerous than visible barriers because they are subtle yet powerful.

The study brought together two bodies of literature around which there is limited integrative scholarship: Critical Mass Theory (CMT) and (In)visibility Theory. CMT suggests that an increase in female representation in leadership reduces their negative experiences of gendered norms (Stichman, Hassell, & Archbold, 2010). The study examined how critical mass helps to expose and address deep-level boardroom dynamics that are experienced by female board members. It aimed, therefore, to assess the substantive (rather than descriptive) impact of numerical representation in the boardroom with regards to (In)visibility (Childs & Krook, 2008).

In South Africa women account for 50% of its potential talent base. Male-dominated boards can lead to the exclusion of relevant and qualified social groups and to a lack of

representation of primary stakeholders like female employees, in decision-making (Perrault, 2015). Perrault (2015) found that gender diversity matters because, through real and symbolic representations, women enhance boards' legitimacy and trustworthiness. This fosters shareholders' trust in the firm and contributes to its market performance. A study of Fortune 500 companies found that the top quartile for women's board membership reported a 42% higher return on sales and 53% higher return on equity (Catalyst, 2007). Generally, the relationship between women's representation and firm performance is complex with competing evidence for positive, neutral or negative results (Joecks, Pull, & Karin, 2012; Torchia, Calabro & Huse, 2011).

2. Critical Mass Theory

Evidence has shown that women's mere presence in leadership does not guarantee their impact or valued contribution in the firm's decision-making process (Songinil & Gnan, 2009). The argument for the Critical Mass Theory (CMT) is that women are not likely to have an impact on outcomes and decisions until they transform from 'token' individuals to a substantial minority (Childs & Krook, 2008). Proponents of CMT such as Torchia, Calabro, & Huse (2011) contend that women have a chance to exert influence if they constitute at least thirty percent of group membership. Joecks, Pull, & Vetter (2013) found that the thirty percent can be loosely translated to an absolute number of three women per board, what they refer to as 'the magic number'. The dynamics and manner by which decisions are reached changes when there are more women on the board (Omarjee, 2016). Organisations such as the 30% Club and Twenty-Twenty Women On Boards aim to achieve numeric gender balance in the boardroom (Twenty-Twenty Women on Boards, 2016; 30% Club.org, 2015).

Stichman, Hassell, and Archbold (2010) suggested that women leaders' experiences can be improved by increasing the participation rates of women in leadership (Stichman, Hassell, & Archbold, 2010). In line with much of this thinking, countries have responded with quotas for women in leadership roles. Norway set a quota law enforcing a 40% women participation in the boardroom. By 2016, Norway had the highest world participation of women on boards of listed companies, with a 37% share and a Critical Mass of women on corporate boards (Navitidad, 2015; Torchia, Calabro, & Huse, 2011). Norwegian female directors do not experience boardroom dynamics more negatively than their male counterparts as a result of having reached a critical mass of female board members (Mathisen, Ogaard, & Marnburg, 2012). Norway has taken female directorship beyond 'tokenism' (Torchia, Calabro, & Huse, 2011).

Critics of the numerical representation of female leaders contend that the concept is too simplistic. They argue that the negative experiences of women are a function of society's inferiority perception towards women and not an issue of numerical representation (Stichman, Hassell, & Archbold, 2010). Other critics add that the preoccupation with numbers gives false comfort while the elite cadre of male board members sustains the grip on power and gendered dynamics continue unchallenged (Lewis & Simpson, 2012).

Several studies show that improved numeric representation does not equal more power or strategic influence because women tend to look after non-strategic portfolios (McKinsey & Company, 2016). Paxton, Kunovich, and Hughes (2007) found that having more women occupy office does not necessarily make a difference. Studies found that males in female-dominated groups did not negatively experience a gender imbalance - suggesting that it is not necessarily just a numbers game but rather a form of bias against women (Stichman, Hassell, & Archbold, 2010). For this reason, we bring together theorizing on CMT with recent work on (In)visibility.

3. The (In)visibility perspective

The concept of (In)visibility is a conjoined term which refers to both visibility and invisibility. This points to the ways in which gendered norms are difficult to articulate and challenge (yet essential to address) as women navigate the gendered practices in their careers (Lewis & Simpson, 2012). The (In)visibility perspective articulates the often-hidden gendered practices and spells out how these practices can be concealed within norms, practices and values (Lewis & Simpson, 2010). This concept can be linked to second-generation bias - which is a bias embedded in informal norms and subtle patterns of interactions in an organisation. These biases exclude minority groups (Sturm, 2001). They are not tangible, but they create an unfavourable atmosphere, 'like something in the water' (Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013). These biases are typically unintentional but still very detrimental, impeding women's advancement (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013).

Some practices are so deeply embedded, taken for granted and hence very difficult to articulate and confront (Munian, 2013). Lewis and Simpson (2010) put forward that where there is a masculine culture that marginalises women, that it is protected and enforced by masculine models, norms and stereotypes. The male-dominated boardroom in which women operate is the representation of such a culture.

3.1. Surface-level (In)visibility

The concept of (In)visibility is classified into two types, Surface-level (In)visibility and Deep-

level (In)visibility which is explained further below. Surface-level (In)visibility occurs when a minority is isolated, marginalised or labelled as different (Stead, 2013). Surface-level (In)visibility speaks to women's negative experiences in male-dominated workplaces potentially due to the lack of a critical mass of women in leadership (Stead, 2013). These experiences can be overcome by increasing women's numerical participation (Lewis & Simpson, 2010). They will feel less like 'the odd one out' amongst their peers, which should reduce their feelings of exclusion (Stichman, Hassell, & Archbold, 2010). According to Lewis and Simpson, Kanter's (1997) 'tokenism' theory suggests that once tokens reach a tipping point of fifteen percent representation, they begin to experience fewer workplace problems (Lewis & Simpson, 2010).

3.2. Deep level (In)visibility

Deep level (In)visibility looks at the hidden dynamics of deeply subtle yet powerful discursive gendered dynamics. They are a challenge to identify and address because they are entrenched and weaved in as the usual way of doing things. Deep-level (In)visibility deals with unspoken dynamics such as hidden meanings, embedded norms and invisible power relations. It includes rituals and practices as are invisible levers and undercurrents that influence the functioning of a group (Stead, 2013).

Uprooting and challenging these invisible norms is particularly challenging in a male-dominated corporate board. It can be hard to point out the issues making it difficult to challenge them (Lewis & Simpson, 2010). The dominant group or holders of a 'normative position' and the system itself will endeavour to retain the invisibility of their status-quo position while the minority will seek to challenge this imbalance (Lewis & Simpson, 2012). Those who dare to question the deeply invisible gendered dynamics render themselves visible and exposed; they live the consequences of challenging the status quo (Lewis & Simpson, 2012). A deeper understanding of these deeply invisible gendered dynamics needs to be explored as they remain hidden, unchallenged and problematic (Metcalfe & Woodhams, 2012).

The turmoil of concealing the privileges of deeply invisible gendered norms by the normative group while the minority group attempts to expose them can be demonstrated using an (In)visibility Vortex.

3.3. The (In)visibility Vortex

Lewis and Simpson (2012) state that invisible gendered practices require tactics and maneuvering by the normative group in order to preserve the norms and practices that favour

them (Lewis & Simpson, 2012). However, these norms can be exposed and challenged through radical acts and rebellious stories (Lewis & Simpson, 2012).

The (In)visibility Vortex demonstrates, in a spiral motion, the turmoil and struggles that occur in the battle to expose invisible gendered practices (Lewis & Simpson, 2012). The Vortex captures the behaviours around gender power and the consequential disciplinary process when that power is tempered with (Munian, 2013). Lewis & Simpson's (2012) Vortex illustrates that when these dynamics and practices are challenged, there are altercations that move in the form of a Vortex (see Figure 1).

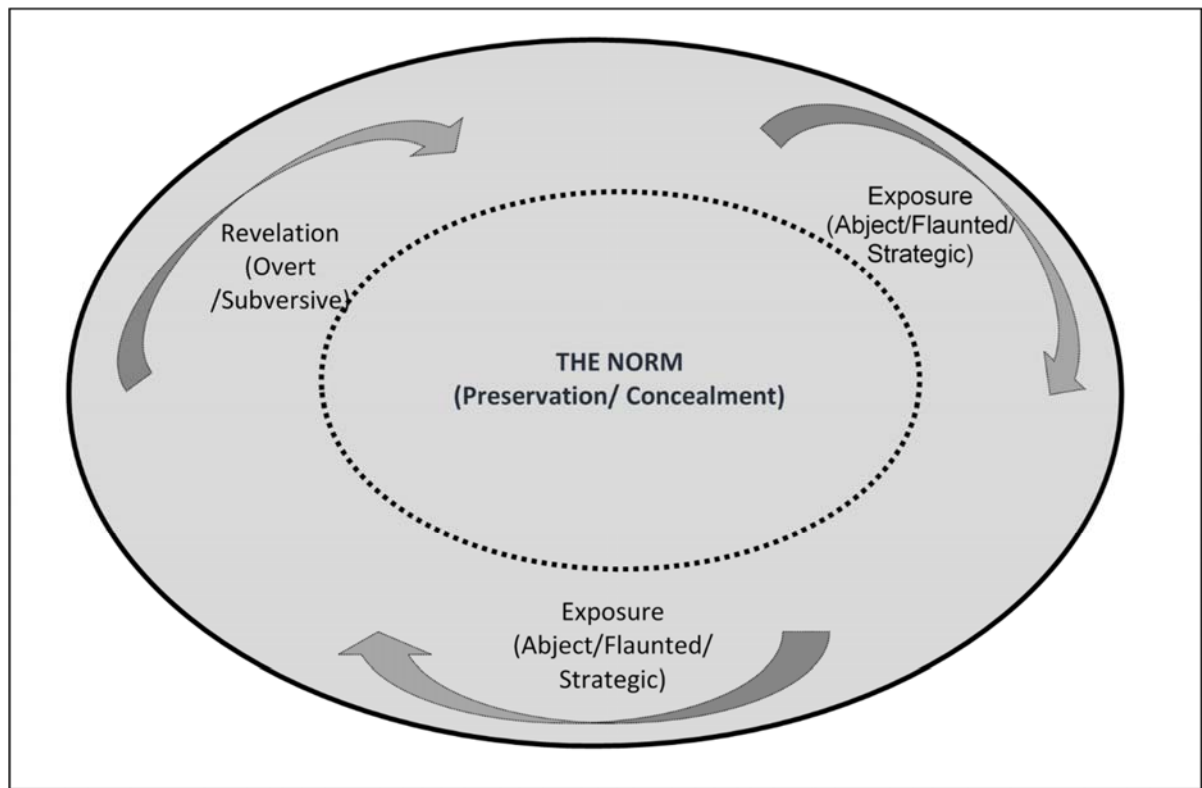


Figure 1. The (In)visibility Vortex (Adapted from Lewis & Simpson 2012).

The inner circle of the Vortex represents those closest to the normative groups, experiencing first-hand, the turmoil and struggles of concealing and revealing these deeply invisible gendered dynamics. The centre is the power hub where the dominant normative group preserves their power. The speed of the spiral motion is accelerated at the centre and reduced as one draws away from the power hub. The boardroom, which is a nominated space, perfectly represents this centre and its power hubs.

The outer part of the Vortex represents the flow experienced by those who challenge and shed light to the hidden gendered dynamics. Within the outer circle, there are three phases of altercations:

1. The first phase is the 'revelation' of invisible gendered dynamics through radical acts, subversive stories and interpersonal relations (Lewis & Simpson, 2010). The revelation phase is about drawing attention to gendered behaviours and challenging the status quo (Stead, 2013).
2. Revealing the deeply invisible gendered dynamics leads to 'exposure' and visibility of the one who challenges them or exposes the privileges enjoyed by the normative group. They render themselves open to the unpleasant consequences of high scrutiny. This visibility would lead to higher noticeability and may draw unwelcome attention and scrutiny (Stead, 2013). The person becomes so exposed that they believe or see things differently than the normative group. Speaking up against deeply invisible gendered dynamics poses the risk of being labelled as difficult (Stead, 2013).
3. Exposure leads to vulnerability and isolation of the one who challenges. This will eventually lead one to withdraw, seeking cover into 'disappearance' (Lewis & Simpson, 2012). Stead (2013) speaks about another form of disappearance referring to concealing gender. This is gender disappearance where women attempt to blend in with the normative group to avoid being isolated. They make sure they do not cross the line of acceptability by assimilating to the stereotypical roles and acting like 'one of the boys' (Stead, 2013).

Gendered dynamics are characterised by a plethora of double standards. Women must navigate contradictions where they must fit-in while making sense of dichotomous roles (Munian, 2013). The (In)visibility problem represents the paradox where women minorities in leadership are highly visible and therefore highly scrutinised yet the measures that are used for that scrutiny are invisible (Lewis & Simpson, 2012). It is also a paradox because the deeply invisible gendered dynamics that underpin this high scrutiny are, in fact, hidden. The heightened scrutiny refers to the fact that for women leadership is more than what she does or says, it is also how she looked when she said it, her executive presence, how she dresses and how she wears her hair.

Furthermore, women are taught to downplay their femininity but not to be aggressive as if she's trying to act like a man. She must strike a perfect balance between the two, not too feminine and not too aggressive (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). Women who were seen to

display male traits are perceived negatively and seen to be stepping out of their boundaries (Kark, Waismel-Manor, & Shamir, 2012). When women 'put their hand up' for significant positions, men accuse them of being aggressive, yet men receive praise for such an action or less (Moodley, Holt, Leke, & Desvaux (2016). Contradictions are experienced when one seeks belonging, validation and similarities with their group while attempting to maintain their uniqueness at the same time (Shore, Randel, Chung, Dean, Ehrhart & Singh, 2011).

3.4. Organizational Impacts

Organisational values, culture and norms act as signifying practices that result in concealment, constantly excluding and marginalising the female. The invisible gendered practices are not new dynamics, but they are perpetually experienced by women with little evidence of improvement. Some examples of these underlying gendered dynamics are illustrated below:

3.4.1. Performance evaluation bias

This bias refers to how women tend to be evaluated strictly on results while men are evaluated based on potential (Moodley et al, 2016). Gender stereotyping literature also revealed that when there are fewer women than men in a group, women tend to receive lower performance ratings than men (Sackett, DuBois, & Noe, 1991). Women often report anecdotally that they must be twice as good as a man to go half as far (Singh, Terjesen & Vinnicombe, 2008).

3.4.2. Homophily and the 'Old Boys Club'

The homophily dynamic is an invisible gendered phenomenon where demographic characteristics are inclined to act favorably towards each other (Gavin & College, 2014). Since the boardroom is a male-dominated space, the homophily dynamic will play out against the few female board members as males are more inclined to form cliques. Similarity breeds connection, therefore, people tend to gravitate towards someone that is demographically more like them (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). This means people's networks are homogeneous which can be detrimental for women who are statistically a minority in boardrooms. Board structures are typified by a 'small-world' topology in which board members belong to elite groups and social, local clubs that are networked into each other (Kogut, Colomer, & Belinky, 2014). These relations are normally invisible, taking place on the golf course, hunting trips or other social clubs. Therefore, the token experiences exclusion and isolation.

3.4.3. *Monoculture*

The notion of “think manager–think male” refers to a successful manager being described in masculine terms (Kark, Waismel-Manor, & Shamir, 2012) leading to the perception and practice where certain roles in the boardroom may be characterised to have a masculine gender while other roles are described as feminine. The monoculture in this context reflects a masculine ideology embodied in the nature of the work itself (Murray & Syed, 2010). This embodiment of roles is a form of a tacit understanding and expectation. For example, a good leader must be strong, assertive and firm, which are typically masculine qualities. These cultural pressures seem to indicate that there are roles women simply are not suited for, C-suite and directorship roles for example (Elting, 2017). As a result, women resort to ‘cloning’ of the male work model, institutionalising what is deemed acceptable behaviours while outlawing other behaviours (Murray & Syed, 2010). Consequently, if a woman was to ‘make it’ to the top, then she must adopt male-type characteristics and become ‘one of the boys’ (Murray & Syed, 2010).

3.4.4. *Tokenism*

Corporate boards include only a symbolic minority of women directors. Therefore, female directors can be classified as ‘tokens’ (Torchia, Calabro, & Huse, 2011). In group compositions, skewed groups are the most problematic (Joecks, Pull, & Karin, 2012). In an asymmetric group, one dominant gender controls the group dynamics, norms and group culture. The few are token representatives for their category, for example, females (Joecks, Pull, & Karin, 2012). Tokens are highly visible and highly scrutinised; however, there may be less scrutiny as the minority group grows (Stichman, Hassell, & Archbold, 2010).

This study explored how the presence of a critical mass of women board members impacted on gendered norms. Two research questions were at the centre of the empirical research:

RQ1. What hidden norms were experienced in the boardroom?

RQ2. How did women navigate and overcome deep level (In)visibility?

4. Methodological Approach

The study used both deductive and inductive approaches (Thomas, 2006) within an interpretive approach (Schwandt, 1994). It explored how a critical mass changes the underlying dynamics and consequently the manner of gendered interactions in a boardroom context.

The researchers allowed the theory to emerge from the data without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies, and then connected those patterns with the theorizing of the operations of the (In)visibility Vortex.

In total, 16 semi-structured, mostly face-to-face interviews were conducted in South Africa. Two interviews were conducted via Skype and one telephonically. All efforts were taken to enable the interviewees' narratives to be expressed freely and with little researcher intervention (Anderson, 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Cresswell (1998) recommends between five and twenty-five interviews as suitable to be able to articulate and answer the research questions (Creswell, 1998) and Guest, Bunce & Johnson (2006) recommended twelve (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The principal objective was to reach evidence of data saturation. This was largely achieved as indicated by the declining presence of new codes by interview 13.

A pilot interview was conducted with a director to test the appropriateness of the questions and assist in improving the interview-guide (Kimberlin & Winterstein, 2008)

The research population was female board members on large corporate boards, most with majority numerical male membership. Snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling method, was used. Because women board members in male-dominated industries are few and not easily accessible, referrals and networks were leveraged to gain access to them.

The women board members had between one to thirty years of experience and served up to fifteen boards in their careers, which helped to assess their experiences over time. The industries in which these women worked included Mining, Banking, Construction and Information Technology where female representation is lowest (McKinsey & Company, 2016). They were all based in Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa's commercial, financial, and industrial centre. It is home to Africa's largest stock exchange, the JSE. South Africa's largest Banks, Mining and Construction companies are located here. The sample comprised a mix of female board members, across industries, years of experience, number of boards served, and roles played in the boardroom. The sample included female board members from boards with and without a Critical Mass of female board members. The descriptive data about the participants, their professional background, years of experience and roles they play in the boardroom are presented below (see Table 1).

Table 1: Profile of all the Participants

Interview Sequence	Participant (Pseudonyms)	Boardroom Roles	Industries Served	Presence of a Critical Mass	Number of Boards Served	Year of Board Experience
0	Angela Smith	Angela Smith	Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG)	N/A	N/A	N/A
1	Dawn Everton	Non-Executive Director	Banking	No	4	30
14	Amanda King	Chair, Non-Executive Director Executive Director	Sports, State Owned Entity, Finance, Telecommunications, Automotive, Social Development	Yes	15	25
15	Hope Winters	Chair, Non-Executive Director Executive Director	Sports, State Owned Entity, Finance, Telecommunications, Automotive, Social Development	Yes	15	25
2	Lizelle Roberts	CEO	State Owned Entity, Banking, Retail, Forestry	No	6	20
9	Kimberly Dorr	Business Unit Executive	Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG)	No	2	16
8	Zoe Mannic	Chief Financial Officer (CFO)	Infrastructure, Entertainment, Oil, Gas, Construction, Property, Telecommunications,	No	10	15
6	Liza Collins	Company Secretary	Construction	Yes	5	10
11	Elle Louw	Non-Executive Director	Construction, Hospitality, Academic Institutions, Insurance, Agriculture	Yes	4	9
12	Fiona Chugh	Non-Executive Director	Finance and Insurance	No	3	9
3	Mandi Modise	Non-Executive Director	State Owned Entity (SOE)	Yes	3	5
4	Pam Just	HR Director	Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG)	Yes	1	5
13	Hanna Vungu	Non-Executive Director, Chairperson	IT, Mining Trust, Charitable Trusts	Yes	4	4
7	Enza Xulu	Chief Executive Officer (CEO)	Media	Yes	9	3
5	Lusanda Koors	PR & Communications	Information Technology	Yes	1	1
10	Ayanda Phaleng	Marketing Director	Electronics, Consulting, Media, IT	No	1	1

The respondents in the study served on multiple boards over periods of time (1–15 years) and for varying periods. Each of the boards had different proportions of female participation. In lieu of that complexity, we therefore, focussed on the simple question of whether, in their experience, they had served on a board with at least 30% female participation. Table 1 above shows that nine (56 %) of the participants had experience of being on a board with a critical mass. Column five entitled presence of CM is an indicator of whether there is at least one board on which the interviewee is a member that has greater than 30% female representation. Table 1 is not intended to indicate how critical mass operates or whether or not it is a problem. The more boards a woman sits on the more likely there is going to be at least one with 30% female representation.

The remaining 7 (44%) of respondents spoke to the experience of not having critical mass. Furthermore, the companies the women were on the boards of are expected to follow the patterns of the JSE in which only 7% of executive directors are women, 2.2% of company CEOs are women and only 15% of board members are women (Bain and Company, 2017; McKinsey & Company, 2016)

The unit of analysis were the perceptions of women board members in South African corporate boards.

The research was conducted with a sample sourced from Johannesburg South Africa.

Johannesburg, as the base of most corporate head offices in South Africa. We identified databases of directors and found that contact details were seldom available. We found that interviews were very difficult to set up in lieu of the participants not knowing of the research project and where contact was made, busy schedules made meetings difficult to arrange. We were able to secure only six interviews out of a large group initially approached. Therefore, we switched to snowball sampling, which is appropriate when access to a group is difficult – as it was. The amended approach allowed us to access the additional 10 interviews through the personal networks of the initial 6. We believe Table 1 illustrates the wide variety of experiences among those interviewed. We engaged a subject matter expert, which assisted with providing an additional assurance of the value of the findings. Written consent was secured from all participants to granting permission to partake in the study. Pseudonyms mask participants' identity.

For the analysis process, interviews were coded inductively using Atlas–ti. Through this process, we identified 14 initial codes. In a review of the process, we identified that some of these codes could be combined into key themes. Five themes were identified (Table 2 below). These themes capture the essence recurring concepts and ideas across the data set. These themes were collected in an analytic process through engagement with data throughout the interview process (Braun and Clarke, 2016).

Table 2. Codes summary:experienced invisible dynamics

Research question	Codes	Frequency in transcripts	Theme (count)
<i>Question 1:</i> what invisible dynamics have you experienced in the boardroom? In other words, what have you experienced as subtle or tacit practices or norms in the boardroom as a male-dominated territory?	You must earn their respect	7	Inferior perceptions towards feminine traits (36)
	Observed masculine and feminine traits	6	
	The unheard, soft voice	5	
	Superiority of masculine traits	6	
	Positive comments about feminine traits	5	
	Feminine traits are a sign of weakness	3	
	Undermining and put down of women	4	
	High visibility, higher scrutiny	9	High standards high scrutiny (25)
	Negative visibility	16	Are women their own worst enemy? (19) The old boys "decision-making" club (18) Paradoxes and contradictions (5)
	Self-disservice	19	
	Social exclusion	12	
	Elitism and exclusion in decision-making	6	
	The paradox with masculine and feminine traits	3	
The double standards	2		

5. Findings

5.1. *Experiences of hidden norms and (in)visibility*

The female board directors shared their personal experiences of the subtle, tacit practices and invisible norms in male dominated boardrooms. They identified six critical issues: Inferior perceptions of 'feminine' traits, higher scrutiny, the Old Boys Club, women's own role, double binds, and pressures to assimilate. These issues are largely documented in the literature.

5.1.1. *Inferior perceptions of 'feminine' traits*

Several female board members experienced that their feminine traits contradicted what is associated with good leadership in the boardroom. Feminine traits were often associated with weakness, indecisiveness or lack of ambition. These included, collaboration, speaking softly and emotional sensitivity. They experienced being unheard and put down. For example:

“Sometimes even our voices, these soft voices can be a disadvantage. Even your idea is taken as a soft idea. Man will come with his booming voice, and then everybody is listening to this voice like the voice of authority. Dawn Everton”

5.1.2. *Higher scrutiny*

The women interviewed shared that it is a common expectation that women must work much harder than men work to be rated competent. Participants perceive that they are held to a higher standard than men are. There was widespread acceptance and frustration for this dynamic. These standards were experienced as hard to pin down. The extra scrutiny was also not on hard performance measures, neither was it even on softer measures like leadership behavior and upholding company values.

“I think it is just that you've got to work much harder, you've got to do back flips, you've got to show them that you are almost a magician and yet it doesn't apply to men. Liza Collins”

5.1.3. *Women's own role*

It was a prominent perception that women play a big role in their own negative experiences. This brought complexity to gendered dynamics in that both genders were experienced as contributing to negative dynamics. Many women also spoke about how women put themselves under unnecessary pressure, holding themselves to a standard higher than necessary, in part because the boardroom is perceived as not being their terrain.

“A guy would say something, and if it is wrong, it is wrong! Whereas women might go, I cannot say that because if it is wrong, then they are going to think this, that and the next thing. Enza Xulu.”

5.1.4. *The Old Boys Club*

Participants relayed that their issue with the ‘old boys club’ is that it is, in truth, the ‘decision-making club’ from which they are excluded. This is an invisible dynamic because while the old boys club itself is visible, the decisions and canvassing for certain decisions are invisible.

“Most of the time these gatherings are where decisions are made. You can tell there has been a pre-decision. I come in on Monday, and they’re talking. And I’m like, when did this happen? How did I miss this decision or this discussion? Pam Just”

5.1.5. *Double binds*

Several interviewees relayed their experiences with a ‘double bind’:

Women are taught to downplay their femininity, at the same time they must not be too aggressive and act like a man. If they speak up about an issue, they might be causing problems but if they stay quiet, they are perceived as being tentative and not adding value.

“When you get aggressive, it doesn’t help. When you shrink away, it does not help. Just trying to keep that like (making a balancing hand signal) ... you know. Enza Xulu.”

5.1.6. *Pressures to assimilate*

There is a single dominant male culture where acceptance sometimes comes from behaving in more masculine ways.

“He was like, lady, you’re one of the boys, and I was like, no, I’m not. Saying it as if it is a compliment, to say you should be happy that we see you as one of the boys, and I was, but, no, I’m not. Fiona Chugh”

5.2. *Navigating and overcoming deep-level (in)visibility*

Participants were asked how the presence of three or more female directors drives a change in the boardroom dynamics. Participants said that a critical mass of women in the boardroom could help but that it did not help in shifting deep level norms. The numbers were perceived

to be a good start in enabling a sense of visibility, diverse discussion and in shifting some of the practices.

“If you have males in the boardroom it probably is more of a financial or an operational discussion, but it doesn’t bring social dynamics into the discussion and females tend to be more pragmatic in solutions, and very solutions focused. That’s the different dynamic that females bring into the boardroom. Mandi Modise.”

“It will definitely help if you can get to a 40% to 50% balance. Practices change. Yes, norms change when we talk about meeting outside the office and in small groups and being more structured. Elle Louw.”

But despite these positive elements, there was a perception that on its own, critical mass was insufficient.

“For me, if you had 30% that did not have the ability to express their views or to make that difference ... then I do not think that 30% is going to be significant enough. It is all about quality. Zoe Mannic.”

In looking past the limited, superficial benefits of critical mass, these women board members identified what they believed could overcome the deeper norms. They identified four areas which enable them to overcome these issues. These were: Self-confidence, the role of the chairperson, a bigger purpose, and competence-experience.

5.2.1. *Self-confidence*

Self-confidence was especially important in mitigating the dynamic of inferior perceptions about female leaders.

“For me these things come back to one thing, your self-worth. If you know what you’re worth you do not really have to try hard. Elle Louw”

5.2.2. *Competence and experience*

Participants felt competence is critical in the boardroom. Not only to overcome assumptions of tokenism but also to earn respect, to be treated as an equal member of the board. Competence disarms the high scrutiny and the high standards that are typically imposed on female minorities.

“First and foremost, you need to earn your seat at the table ... You do not want to

be there just because of a quota system ... You need to be able to show that I deserve to be here as much as you do. You need to bring your expertise to the table. It is very important to earn respect. Pam Just”

5.2.3. *A bigger purpose*

Several women explained they are purpose driven and that purpose is what keeps them going despite the dynamics. It helps them to silence the noise.

“I just had to put my head down and say, what do we need to do, put the teams together, get the job done. Whether they praise me ... I am not particularly interested in human praise. Lizelle Roberts.”

“I take governance very seriously, so regardless of who’s seated around me, or how many males or females, levels are on the board, I’m always going to speak up for what’s right. Hanna Vungu.”

5.2.4. *The role of the chairperson*

The participants regarded the role of a chairperson as one of the most important drivers of boardroom dynamics. The ‘Old Boys Club’ is a problem when it excludes one from board interactions and decisions. The role of the chairperson is to address any forms substantive exclusion.

“Because a chair is the one that can manage the dynamics by saying ‘so-and-so, can we first allow Hope to finish that point ... let’s just stay with her until we understand where she was driving at. So, there is a very big role that the Chair plays. If there is a woman Chair, it is very important because I think the tone at the top gets set. Hope Winters.”

“It (the Critical Mass) changes the way that decisions are made and introduces a greater degree of questioning and discussion before decisions are made. This change, however, must be championed by the Chair of the board. Amanda King”

5.3. *Nuances around navigating and overcoming deep-level (in)visibility*

Participants were asked about the approaches they use to highlight or challenge gendered dynamics to establish whether challenging these norms leads to isolation and high scrutiny even when there is was a critical mass of female board members.

These trailblazing women indicated strongly that there is value in what we call '*radical acts*'. Radical acts refer to women's attempts to expose gendered practices to create urgency and challenge to problematic behaviours.

"So, we need to be smart in how we approach it. By the way, sometimes the smartness might mean throwing a tantrum now and again. Hope Winters."

"I had CEOs ... refusing to come to my meetings. I phoned the Minister, I said ... this is what I am going to do to fix these people. We are going to write a statement which will be on the front page of a business newspaper. Lizelle Roberts."

"If inappropriate remarks are made, take a stand! That is how men get educated. If we leave inappropriate behaviour unaddressed, it compromises one's power. For example, a fellow board member once called me 'my girl' and I immediately responded and said yes daddy! Amanda King."

Respondents argued that gendered norms cannot be changed easily so, women need to find ways to cope with them. The respondents spoke of a willingness to sometimes be patient and tactical in the way one accepts some of the dynamics.

"There's one board where I've got a much senior woman; when I got there, I was impatient, thinking that she hasn't dealt with the issues. But the truth is, she has, but it has been difficult sitting there on her own and for her to make the switch took a long time, I almost got despondent. Hope Winters."

Avoiding the unknown consequence of exposing invisible, gendered dynamics also seems to lead one to accept the status quo. The risks associated with exposing invisible gendered dynamics included being treated in a patronizing manner and being isolated.

"Men are not going to argue and fight with you. They will just nod, they will just say sorry, and they will not defend, they will say we will make sure it does not happen again ... but it will continue to happen. Dawn Everton."

"It depends on how they are raised. If they are raised in a confrontational manner, then it will be counter-productive Amanda King."

The women strongly indicated that they embraced being a woman and negatively judged

other women who adopted masculine behaviours. In their responses, the women generally referred to themselves as 'originals' and other women who they had observed as 'clones'.

The clone refers to those who adopt the male persona to be accepted and fit in as one of the boys. Only one of the women admitted to adopting this cloning strategy (in her youth only) however, many know someone who assimilated to the masculine ideal.

"They must survive so, without even noticing, sometimes they adopt those traits ... way of speaking to try and fit in. Angela Smith."

"Some of our [women] colleagues who are on the board; I'm not talking about those who take male tendencies because you do have that. I'm very comfortable being a woman, I have no desire to be a man, at all. Fiona Chugh."

The originals represent those women board members who refuse to change their preferences, styles and behaviours to fit in. They insist on maintaining who they are even if it leads to isolation. This group largely relates to those who strongly expressed the value of self-worth and confidence highlighted earlier. There was a view that trying to be like everyone else, in fact, compromises diversity, which is of high value in the boardroom.

"I am unique for a reason, and if we were supposed to be clones and be similar, how do you then bring diversity? I was never part of those, and I've never, ever been interested because I do not need them to progress. Kimberly Dorr."

6. Discussion

6.1. *Experiences of hidden norms and (in)visibility*

Critical Mass theory suggests that when the number of women on the board reaches thirty percent, there will be a change dynamics and interactions in the group (Childs & Krook, 2008; Joecks, Pull, & Karin, 2012). The study supports the positive role of a critical mass of women in shifting dynamics. But it also shares concerns regarding the limits of a critical mass of women to shift many of the deeper level more nuanced and hidden gender norms at the board room level (Childs & Krook, 2008; Lewis & Simpson, 2012; Paxton, Kunovich, & Hughes, 2007).

Surface-level (in)visibility speaks to women's negative experiences in male-dominated

workplaces due to numeric gender imbalances (Stead, 2013). Lewis and Simpson (2012) suggest that surface-level (in)visibility is associated with being a token representative of a group and being alone or highly visibly different. It can be overcome by increasing women's numerical participation (Lewis & Simpson, 2010; Stead, 2013). A strong theme that emerged was that a critical mass was recognised as essential to bring diversity in thinking and decision-making. It made it easier for the women and disrupted surface level (in)visibility.

The female board directors shared their personal experiences of the causes of deep-level (in)visibility in male dominated boardrooms. They identified six critical issues: Inferior perceptions of 'feminine' traits, higher scrutiny, the Old Boys Club, women's own role, double binds, and pressures to assimilate. These issues are largely documented in the literature.

Inferior perceptions arise when there is a mismatch between stereotypical feminine traits and the qualities that people tend to associate with leaders (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). This relates to the notion of 'think manager—think male' where a good or successful manager is described in masculine terms (Kark, Waismel-Manor, & Shamir, 2012). The monoculture model in this context reflects a masculine ideology embodied in the nature of the work itself (Murray & Syed, 2010). This embodiment of roles is a form of a tacit understanding and expectation. For example, a good leader must be strong, assertive and firm, which are typically masculine qualities. Stichman, Hassell, & Archbold (2010) argue that negative experiences of women minorities may simply be a function of society's inferiority perception towards women. Deeply embedded societal norms continue to actively discourage and hinder women who aspire to ascend to senior management levels from reaching their full potential (Bain & Company, 2017).

Higher scrutiny and double standards are a feature of the gendered reality of leadership standards which, can be ever changing and shifting, making it difficult to capture and articulate this as a problem (Stead, 2013). Gender stereotyping literature reveals that when there are fewer women than men in a group, women tend to receive lower performance ratings than men (Sackett, DuBois, & Noe, 1991). Women often report anecdotally that they must be twice as good as the men to go half as far (Singh, Terjesen, & Vinnicombe, 2008). Women on boards in this study affirmed this assertion.

Gendered practices are so engraved into the culture of the organization that even women tend to contribute to them, interpreting them as gender-neutral meritocracies (Munian, 2013). The literature show that women are often encouraged to make it their responsibility to increase the numeric representation of women in leadership. This, even though women

generally prefer to be recognised for their individual contribution. This can lead them to distance themselves from other female colleagues (Lewis & Simpson, 2012).

Board structures can represent a small world of elite groups and social clubs that are networked into each other (Kogut, Colomer, & Belinky, 2014). These relations are often invisible, taking place on 'the golf course' or 'social clubs'. In other words, the internal relations extend to beyond the boardroom impacting the alignment on issues and lobbying for decision making. Despite a numeric representation, women continue to be excluded from the power base (Lewis & Simpson, 2012).

Double binds occur when women must navigate contradictions where they must fit-in while making sense of dichotomous roles (Munian, 2013). Women must strike a perfect (sometimes impossible) balance between the two (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). This is because women who were seen to display male traits are perceived negatively and seen to be stepping out of their boundaries (Kark, Waismel-Manor, & Shamir, 2012). Women face pressures to assimilate where they adopt the male work model, institutionalising what is deemed acceptable behaviours while outlawing other behaviours. Consequently, if a woman wants to succeed - she must adopt male-type characteristics (Murray & Syed, 2010).

6.2. Navigating and overcoming deep-level (in)visibility

Deep-level gendered norms continue to resist disruption in historically male-dominated boardrooms. These norms are hard to shift because they are entrenched and weaved in as the normal way of doing things (Stead, 2013). Therefore, they are not easy to debate (Munian, 2013). A critical mass of women did not disrupt deep-level (in)visibility.

The (In)visibility Vortex is a conceptual 'map' developed by Lewis & Simpson (2010; 2012) in order to identify and discuss the dynamics experienced when encountering deep-level (In)visibility. It highlights the turmoil and struggles experienced when minority groups challenge subtle but powerful gendered norms. It was developed out of a post-structural interpretation of gender dynamics. This approach highlighted the way power operates through a hidden but ever present 'gaze'. When asked what the women board members interviewed believed was needed to disrupt norms (beyond a critical mass), they especially focused on three personal characteristics as well as the role of the chairperson.

Handling deep-level (in)visibility required a high degree of self-confidence. The women identified the reality of inferior perceptions of 'feminine' traits and the risk of one's own role in perpetuating norms. Self-confidence enabled the women to weather the storms in the

(In)visibility Vortex (Lewis & Simpson, 2012; Stead, 2013). It was also evident in the findings that self-confidence is a trait they have built over time and through experience. This can be linked to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) but it is a deeper level belief, more closely linked to a women's own self-worth that allows one to remain present and contribute.

The women expressed how competence and experience (even when held to higher standards) were essential to overcoming the deep-level (in)visibility. Prior scholarship points to the challenge of demonstrating competence where women must be twice as good as the men to go half as far (Singh, Terjesen, & Vinnicombe, 2008). In the context of the (In)visibility Vortex, competence and experience can reduce the pressures of the spiral flow of revelation-exposure-disappearance as men come to see a women's role differently. We suggest that as this happens, the fierce intensity of the 'gaze' diminishes (Lewis & Simpson, 2012).

Mentoring and sponsorship were identified as enabling confidence, competence and experience especially as the women developed to the level they are at. These are important levers in developing women (Ibarra, Carter and Silva, 2010).

The women drew inspiration and courage from those they view to be successful. Mentorship has gained increasing attention as an effective tool to enhance one's career development (Scandura & Williams, 2001). The women found that mentors enabled them to face their challenges with perspective and clarity. They gave them context and perspective which helped them build resilience to face the challenges they may encounter in the boardroom.

One of the prominent features of this study was the role of a bigger purpose in handling the pressures of the Vortex. This study found that if the issues at the board level are experienced as important enough, the women would stand up for matter despite the pressures imposed.

We see these three attributes as key to operating through the identity of a 'trailblazing' woman in the boardroom. But the women also highlighted the crucial role of another boardroom role-player – the chairperson.

Deep-level norms are protected and defended by those who benefit from them. Dominant male privilege can remain unchallenged and un-problematised (Munian, 2013). The women also experienced the 'exposure' in the vortex. But they emphasised that a chairperson can lighten these pressures. This is irrespective whether they are male or female. The

chairperson should allow and encourage the status quo to be challenged and questioned. Their view was that the chairperson must drive invisible dynamics to the surface by pointing them out and encouraging constructive conversations about them.

These four responses to the pressures of the (In)visibility Vortex are illustrated in the figure below. The deep-level response moves in the opposite direction to that of the (In)visibility Vortex. This demonstrates a counter-clockwise motion which counteracts the turmoil, calming the storm, and creating a more stable inner and outer environment.

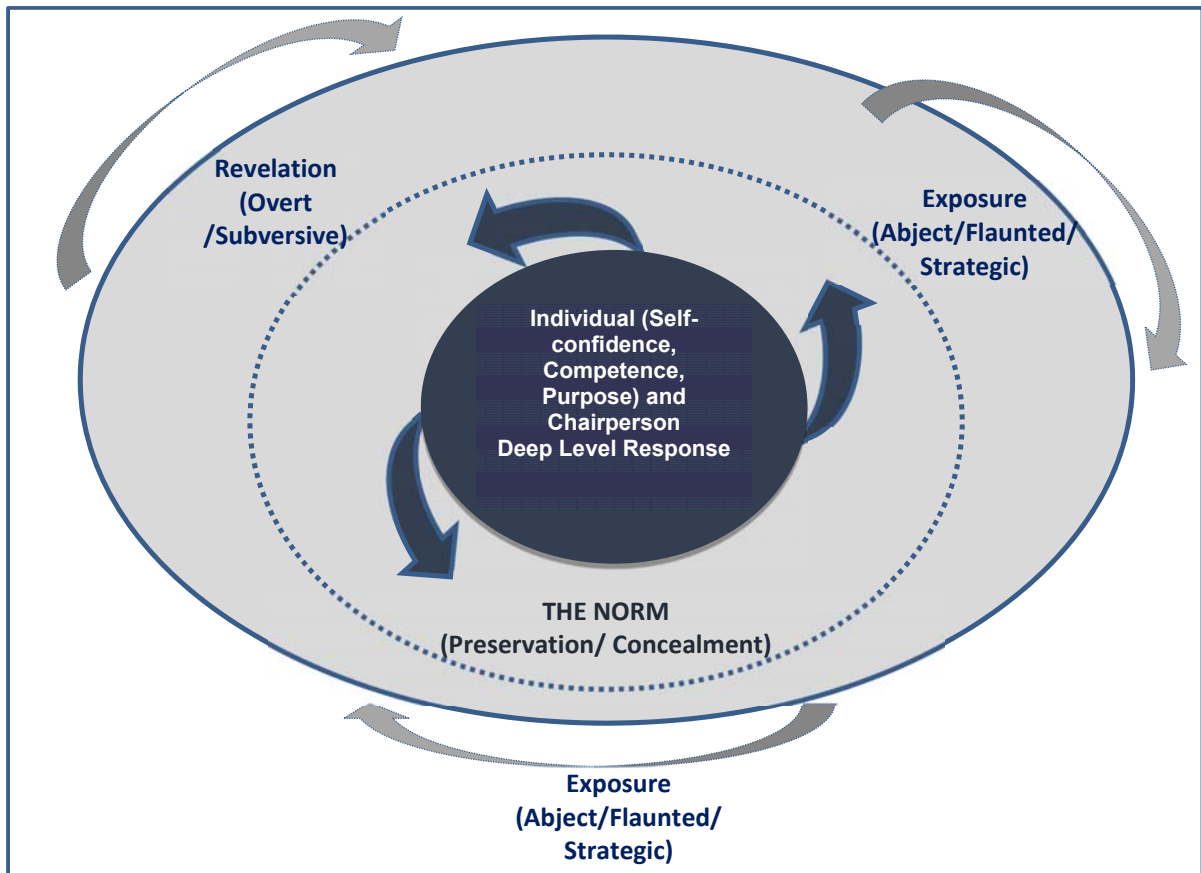


Figure 2. Deep-Level Responses: Adapted from Lewis & Simpson (2012) with additions from this study.

Integrating the earlier findings around the hidden and subtle norms experienced by the women, 'exposure' leads to higher scrutiny and performance biases. Performance standards were experienced in this study as constantly moving, changing and often hidden. It is only through the counter responses, especially of competence and experience that this pressure can be reduced. Stereotypes and contradictions conflict and confuse women, causing them to doubt they are a fit for leadership roles. At a personal level, therefore, capability building programmes for female leaders must pay attention to and support the establishment of their

self-confidence alongside competence and experience. The women interviewed highlighted that women tend to be too hard on themselves.

Staying connected and being driven by a bigger purpose allows women to avoid 'Disappearance' and remain visible. The ongoing norm of subtle group dynamics associated with the Old Boys Club can maintain the strengths of the norms at the centre of the Vortex. The role of a chairperson can be a counter response that exposes hidden privileges of the normative group. The chairperson can address forms of exclusions that drive 'Disappearance' and prevent 'side' discussions that maintain entrenched norms.

This study found that the women experienced the first two phases of the Vortex, the 'revelation' and 'exposure' phases. However, they did not experience the 'disappearance' phase. Concealing gender is mentioned as a tactic to deal with 'exposure' by the minority. The term 'invisibilising gender' is used to denote the process of making one's gender 'less different' from the normative gender to seamlessly fit in with the normative group. They attempt to blend in, making sure they do not cross the line of acceptability by acting like 'one of the boys' (Stead, 2013; Lewis & Simpson, 2012). This was not found to be a behaviour that the women interviewed demonstrated.

Stead (2013) speaks about another form of 'disappearance', which was also not experienced by participants. Stead (2013) refers to "Concealing Gender" as a coping tactic where women attempt to "downplay" their femininity. They make sure they do not cross the line of acceptability by assimilating to the stereotypical roles and acting like "one of the boys" (Stead, 2013). There was strong pushback from the interviewees on Murray and Syed's (2010) observation that if a woman was to 'make it' to the top, then she must adopt male-type characteristics and become 'one of the boys' (Murray & Syed, 2010). The women interviewed strongly voiced that women who display masculine traits are not received positively. They are viewed instead as unauthentic and pretentious. The women in this study stated that they did not hide their femininity. They seemed to embrace the identity of *women*. They insisted on maintaining who they are even if it leads to isolation. It is also possible that 'disappearance' and 'cloning' happen subconsciously. Because it is subconscious, the women interviewed do not recognise themselves doing it.

This is further demonstrated with the radical acts that these women stated they undertook to disrupt the Vortex. They were willing to be further isolated and in doing so were able, in an unusual way, to disrupt the norms. This study therefore strongly supports the nuanced findings of Lewis & Simpson (2012) around how women avoid 'disappearance' and might

strategically emphasise their visibility.

One potential way to understand the lack of 'disappearance' is that these women can be understood as 'trailblazers'. It is possible that their identities are bound to their abilities to work in the dynamics of the (In)visibility Vortex. The women seemed to orient themselves around the identity of being a 'woman' and also being 'original' (as opposed to being a 'clone'). Another possibility why trailblazers do not disappear may be that the combined influence of their personal attributes (self-confidence, a bigger purpose, competence-experience) empowered them sufficiently not to "have" to disappear. Particularly important is their prior experience of working at senior levels in corporates and serving on boards. From these experiences they may have learnt strategies and tactics that enable them to survive and thrive in male dominated environments. The trailblazers in our study see themselves as both powerful and as equal to the men they served on the boards with. Theirs is not a subordinate-superior relationship. While negative consequences may follow from speaking up and becoming visible, these are not a deterrent to cause them to disappear. We propose that more research on trailblazing identities are needed within the scholarship of women in leadership (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016).

There is a risk that the findings from this study means that it all depends on women themselves (with a little help from the Chairperson). This is not the case. The study simply highlights those elements that women on boards identified as important in addition to a critical mass. Further studies should continue to look at the broader organisational dynamics and the culture and environment needs to be addressed to remove norms and processes that undermine women and their leadership capabilities.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to identify the presence of deep-level norms and examine how to navigate and overcome, (in)visibility). It focused on a group of women with substantive boardroom experience in South Africa. The main contribution is to extend theorizing on gender in the boardroom through a post-structural perspective.

There were three major findings. It has been proposed that when the number of women on the board reaches a critical mass, there will be a change in the nature of dynamics and interactions in the group. Firstly, the presence of a critical mass of women does not (alone) address deep-level gendered norms in the boardroom.

Secondly, four responses to (in)visibility are identified. Three of these responses (self-

confidence, competence-experience and a bigger purpose) are personal attributes. This illustrates an important way in which these women understand their experience. It would be valuable to statistically establish the relative strength of each of the four forces.

Finally, the participants on the study did not experience the 'disappearance' phase as expected in the (In)visibility Vortex. Further research will be useful to establish when minorities don't experience 'disappearance' in a group. It is possible that the four counter responses enabled diminished pressure in the Vortex. It is also possible that these women's identities as a board-level 'trailblazing' women provided a buffer against the pressures expected.

In terms of practical implications, organizations that wish to increase the level of board level participation of women must be reminded that even where the number of women on a board has reached beyond a critical mass, hidden barriers still exist. Practitioners that wish to develop female leaders need to penetrate below the surface to appreciate the undercurrents and address them at that level. The role of the chairperson was highlighted as especially important in disrupting deep level dynamics. Chairpersons need to be more deliberate and proactive to refute behaviours that exclude and undermine women's full participation.

Self-confidence, purpose, competence and experience are deep level forces that organisations need to nurture in future female leaders. Organizations can drive this by opening opportunities that accelerate women's competence and broaden their exposure. Mentorship, sponsorship and coaching can play a supporting role in this regard.

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