

Running head: *Prejudice toward tentative women*

## **If you're going to be a leader, at least act like it! Prejudice toward women who are tentative in leader roles**

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## Abstract

Role congruity theory predicts prejudice toward women who meet the agentic requirements of the leader role. In line with recent findings indicating greater acceptance of agentic behavior from women, we find evidence for a more subtle form of prejudice toward women who fail to display agency in leader roles. Using a classic methodology, the agency of male and female leaders was manipulated using assertive or tentative speech, presented through written (Study 1, N = 167) or verbal (Study 2, N = 66) communications. Consistent with predictions, assertive women were as likeable and influential as assertive men, while being tentative in leadership reduced the likeability and influence of women, but not of men.

Although approval of agentic behavior from women in leadership reflects progress, evidence that women are quickly singled out for disapproval if they *fail* to show agency is important for understanding how they continue to be at a distinct disadvantage to men in leader roles.

*Keywords:* role congruity theory, prejudice, agency, female leaders, gender inequality

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Despite important advances, the social positions of women and men in contemporary western societies remain markedly different and fundamentally unequal. Women continue to carry the burden of responsibility for unpaid domestic labor, including housework and childcare (Baxter, Hewitt, & Haynes, 2008). The paid labor force remains highly gender segregated, with women concentrated in industries renowned for poor pay and low status such as nursing, teaching, and retail (Connell, 2002; Kreimer, 2004). Women remain conspicuously underrepresented in positions of power and status, with men still holding the overwhelming majority of senior executive positions and seats in national parliaments (United Nations Development Programme, 2007).

The persistence of gender inequality in western societies is particularly striking because endorsement of traditional gender roles has substantially declined (Spence & Hahn, 1997; Twenge, 1997). However, as western societies have liberalized, barriers to women's progression have also been changing (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009; Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995). In this research, we focus on one form of prejudice predicted by role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), whereby women who meet the agentic requirements of the leader role are evaluated less favorably than equivalent men. Below, we describe evidence for this traditional form of prejudice, and argue that greater encouragement of agentic behavior from women has given rise to a more subtle form of prejudice, whereby women who *fail* to meet the agentic requirements of the leader role are instead singled out for disapproval.

### **Gender Stereotypes and Prejudice toward Agentic Women**

An important aspect of gender stereotypes is the greater attribution of agentic qualities to men, reflecting their advantaged or high-status position relative to women in society (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). Women are still seen as relatively lacking in the

male-stereotypic agentic attributes associated with, and required of, high-status positions, such as strength, dominance, assertiveness, and decisiveness (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Latu et al., 2011; Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002; Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, & Bongiorno, 2011). According to Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders, this stereotype of women's lesser agency is both *descriptive* and *prescriptive* of their behavior, generating two distinct forms of prejudice. The descriptive component (that women *are* less agentic) is demonstrated in prejudiced perceptions of women's *potential* for leadership (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997; Foschi, 1996; Heilman & Haynes, 2005; Ritter & Yoder, 2004). This creates a double standard, whereby women must clearly outperform men to be selected as leaders (Foddy & Smithson, 1999).

The focus of the current studies, however, is on prejudice based on the prescriptive component of this stereotype (that women *should* be less agentic). Here, role congruity theory predicts that women who behave agentially once in a leader role remain at a distinct disadvantage due to: "...less approval of agentic behavior enacted by a woman compared with a man" (Eagly & Karau, 2002, pp. 583-584). That is, prejudice based on this prescriptive stereotype is demonstrated in less favorable evaluations of women's *actual* leadership behavior (rather than their leadership *potential*). As agentic behavior indicates status and power, it is incongruent with women's subordinate status, and violations of this prescriptive gender stereotype are typically punished through negative social appraisals (for related theorizing, see Carli, 1999). This form of prejudice places female leaders in a bind, as the agentic behavior required of leaders (e.g., assertive, dominant) is incompatible with the non-agentic behavior required of women (e.g., tentative, submissive).

As supporting evidence of prejudice based on this prescriptive gender stereotype, many researchers (e.g., Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; Rudman & Glick, 1999) refer to Carli's (1990, Study 2)

experiment, which showed that male participants favored non-agentic to agentic behavior from women. Carli manipulated perceptions of agency through assertive or tentative speech, and found that male participants liked, and were more influenced by, women who spoke tentatively — behavior consistent with the stereotype of their lesser agency and lower status. Indeed, women who spoke assertively achieved less influence and were liked less by men. However, male speakers' likeability and influence was not affected by whether they used assertive or tentative speech, a finding attributed to men's greater legitimacy in the leader role that entitles them to employ a broader range of leader behaviors.

### **Changes in Prescriptive Gender Stereotypes and Declining Evidence of Prejudice toward Agentic Women**

While the *descriptive* stereotype of women's lesser agency largely persists, the extent of the difference has reduced over time. Thus, compared to the past, women are now more likely to describe themselves as possessing agentic attributes (Spence & Buckner, 2000), to be described as agentic by others (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Duehr & Bono, 2006), and are projected to have even more agentic attributes in the future (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Morton, Rabinovich, & Postmes, 2011).

We propose that the shift over time in the *prescriptive* gender stereotype has been more dramatic, such that there is no longer endorsement of non-agentic behavior as prescriptive for women. Indeed, the original evidence for this prediction dates back to research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s (for a meta-analysis, see Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992). In these decades, women were rarely seen in positions of public leadership (Adler, 1999), and attitudes toward women were considerably more conservative (Carli & Eagly, 2001; Spence & Hahn, 1997; Twenge, 1997).

Research conducted more recently shows that prescriptions against women's agentic behavior have eased. Based on role congruity theory, Diekmann (2007) predicted prejudice

toward agentic (dominant) women, but found that agentic women and men received similar interpersonal evaluations (for similar findings showing no prejudice based on women's agentic behavior, see Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). Greater acceptance of agentic behavior from women has led some researchers to suggest that it is now only a particular subset of agentic behaviors that remain a source of prejudice — specifically those that *also* lead women to violate the prescriptive stereotype that women should be communal (e.g., aggressive, ruthless, see; Rudman & Glick, 1999; Rudman & Glick, 2001). The implication is that the prescriptive stereotype that women should be less agentic than men is no longer endorsed, so women are no longer punished for agentic behavior unless this behavior also demonstrates that they are non-communal (e.g., unfriendly, insensitive).

#### **A Subtle Form of Prejudice toward Non-Agentic Women**

Greater acceptance of agentic behavior from women is positive, showing that it has become acceptable for women to behave with the strength and decisiveness expected of leaders, and helping to resolve the bind faced by agentic female leaders. However, assuming this is the case, we propose that there may be a previously unidentified drawback of greater endorsement of women's agentic behavior in leadership — specifically that woman who *fail* to display agency in leadership may now be punished, a consequence that will not apply to men acting in the same ways. That is, while agentic behavior from women leaders (e.g., assertive, dominant) is now met with social approval, social penalties may instead be applied to women who are non-agentic (e.g., tentative, submissive) in such roles. That is, we make the opposite prediction from research conducted at a time when women's non-agentic behavior in leader roles was preferred (e.g., Carli, 1990; Wiley & Eskilson, 1985).

A closer inspection of evidence for prejudice toward agentic women shows that there is already some support for this prediction. Although men showed prejudice toward agentic women in early studies, women reacted more negatively toward non-agentic women (Carli,

1990; Wiley & Eskilson, 1985; it is notable that these findings have received little attention in subsequent research). More recently, men have been found to react more negatively to non-agentic (self-effacing) women when their own outcomes depend on the woman's performance (Rudman, 1998)<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, Davies-Netzley (1998) interviewed men and women in elite corporate positions and noted that some people described significant social pressure on women to display agentic traits in order to fit in and be taken seriously. For example, a male interviewee reported non-agency in women as unsuitable: "If you're going to be a frilly little sweetheart and *have people open your doors*...that isn't what it's about" (Davies-Netzley, 1998, p. 349, italics added).

Unlike traditional prejudice toward women's agentic behavior, prejudice toward women's non-agentic behavior in leadership is subtle, and may prove more difficult to overcome. This is because it is likely to appear fair and legitimate to evaluate women's non-agentic behavior negatively, without considering that male leaders avoid the same level of scrutiny (cf. Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000, who highlight a similar form of subtle prejudice toward black Americans). Consistent with past theorizing and findings for men (e.g., Carli, 1999; Eagly, et al., 1992), the association between being male and being a leader (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011) can provide legitimacy to men in leader roles, affording them the benefit of the doubt on occasions where their leader behavior diverges from the ideal. As reported above (Carli, 1990, Study 2), men's use of assertive or tentative speech did not affect their influence or likeability (for similar findings, see Wiley & Eskilson, 1985). Similarly, Eagly and colleagues (1992) provided meta-analytic evidence showing men are granted a wider scope of acceptable leadership styles. Numerous other studies have shown that prescriptions for men's behavior in leadership and other workplace roles are less restrictive than prescriptions for women's behavior (e.g., Carli, Lafleur, & Loeber, 1995; Foschi, Sigerson, & Lembesis, 1995; Heilman & Chen, 2005; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010).

Based on these findings suggesting that prescriptive stereotypes for women (but not men) may have changed over time, resulting in diminished prejudice toward agentic women leaders, we propose that women's agentic behavior in leadership will no longer be evaluated more negatively than men's. In contrast, our central and novel prediction is that women who behave in *non*-agentic ways in leader roles will now be evaluated more negatively than both agentic women and non-agentic men. As recent research has linked some forms of agentic behavior with (non-)communality (e.g., Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001) we will show that this prejudice can be distinguished from attributions of communality to leaders, and hence represents a form of prejudice that *specifically* relates to the agency displayed by women in leader roles.

### Study 1

To test our predictions of prejudice toward women who *fail* to behave agentially in leader roles, Study 1 used a method based on Carli's (1990, Study 2) classic and widely-cited study, which demonstrated men's disapproval of women's agentic behavior. In Carli's study, participants responded to speeches about an unpopular proposal (to charge students for using college buses), delivered by male or female students in an agentic (assertive) or non-agentic (tentative) style. In the present study, we replicated this speech style manipulation, but used politicians as targets to emphasize a leadership context, and used speeches advocating for action on climate change to maximize the relevance of the topic to contemporary political contexts. The assertive version of the transcript was written to indicate dominance, confidence and strength — agentic attributes that are more stereotypic of men and those with status. The tentative version was written to indicate deference, hesitancy, and a lack of confidence — non-agentic attributes that are more stereotypic of women and those with low status (Lakoff, 1976; for a meta-analysis, see Leaper & Robnett, 2011).



The study had a 2 (speech style: assertive, tentative) x 2 (leader gender: male, female) x 2 (participant gender: male, female) between-participants design. Prejudice was measured through two key leader evaluations. The first was *likeability*, to capture the sense in which the leader was considered easy to connect with and similar to the self in important ways, with lower likeability indicating an increased likelihood that the leader would be socially excluded. The second was *influence*, to capture leader persuasiveness, with lower influence indicating a diminished capacity of the leader to convince others of their position.

Contrary to role congruity theory predictions that women's agentic behavior in the leader role elicits disapproval (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and Carli's (1990) findings for male participants, prejudice toward tentative female leaders was expected. Thus, it was predicted that there would be a speech style x leader gender interaction, with tentative female leaders regarded as less likeable and achieving less influence than assertive female leaders and tentative male leaders. Assertive female leaders were predicted to achieve similar levels of likeability and influence to assertive male leaders, and speech style was not expected to impact upon the likeability or influence of male leaders.

## **Method**

**Participants.** One hundred and eighty-five participants (47% female:  $M_{age} = 28.3$  years,  $SD = 12.49$ ) completed the study. Participants were approached on an Australian University campus or via email if they had joined an online research database available to students and graduates of the University. Participants approached on campus received 5 Australian dollars, or those enrolled in psychology could opt for psychology research participation credit. Participants from the online research database received credit points (worth approximately 5 Australian dollars) toward a shopping voucher.

**Materials and procedure.** Participants were informed that the study was about effective communication, and were randomly allocated to experimental conditions. All participants

read a transcript of a speech attributed to an Independent (nonparty-aligned) Senator in the lead up to a recent election, using one of two female names (Annette/Susan Hayes) or one of two male names (David/Andrew Hayes). The content of the speech was at the strong end of proposals to address climate change, to ensure room for influence even amongst those who already supported climate change action. The transcript included statements about the threat posed by climate change, the importance of developed nations acting on climate change, and advocated the implementation of strong climate change policies, including deep, rapid and early cuts to carbon emissions, beginning with a reduction of 50% by 2020. After reading the transcript, participants completed a series of measures, and were debriefed. The study took most participants 15 minutes.

***Agency manipulation.*** The assertive version of the transcript contained italicized words to indicate strong emphasis, and contained no indication of hesitation or uncertainty (e.g., “Scientists believe a total increase of 2 degrees *significantly* increases the chance of dangerous climate change...If the warming continues, sea levels could rise by 6 metres, *devastating* coastal areas and creating *millions* of refugees”). In the tentative version, no words were italicized, and numerous hedges (e.g., “probably,” “you know”), qualifiers (e.g., “I think that,” “It seems to me”) and hesitations (e.g., “um,” “ah”) were included (e.g., “Um scientists now believe that a total increase of ah 2 degrees significantly increases the chance of you know dangerous climate change...If the warming continues, I think that sea levels could rise by 6 metres, um devastating coastal areas and creating millions of refugees”). The transcripts were identical in every other respect.

***Measures.*** In addition to demographic questions, participants responded to the following key measures.

***Likeability.*** This was measured using 5 items, including how likeable the leader was (adapted from Carli, 1990), whether participants could see themselves getting along with the

leader in a social setting (adapted from Diekman, 2007), and how similar they felt to the leader (e.g. “To what extent do you think this speaker could be described as likeable?”, “I feel that I am similar to this speaker”; 1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*;  $\alpha = .91$ ).

*Influence.* Following Carli (1990), the influence measure captured participants’ level of agreement with the position proposed by the leader, using a single item (“I think this country should commit to reducing its carbon emissions by 50% by 2020”; 1 = *completely disagree*, 9 = *completely agree*).

*Agency and communality.* Six items adapted from Bem (1974) and Eagly and Karau (2002) assessed the agency and communality of leaders (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*). Three items assessed agency (dominant, forceful, confident;  $\alpha = .89$ ) for use as a manipulation check. Three items assessed communality (friendly, sensitive, warm;  $\alpha = .85$ ) to check that agentic female leaders did not violate prescriptions for women’s communality (cf. Rudman & Glick, 1999; Rudman & Glick, 2001), and to include as a covariate to show that results for agency were independent of perceived leader communality.

*Comprehension and suspicion checks.* Participants indicated whether the politician believed this country should support a 50% reduction in emissions amongst developed countries by 2020 by circling “yes” or “no”. They also indicated whether the politician was a man or a woman. To test for suspicion, at the end of the questionnaire participants were also asked to indicate whether the politician described in the transcript was real.

## Results

**Preliminary analyses.** All participants correctly identified the gender of the politician and passed the comprehension check. Eighteen participants failed the suspicion check by indicating they knew the politician was not real and were excluded, leaving a final sample of 167 (50% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 27.58$  years,  $SD = 12.19$ ). A 4 (leader name) x 2 (speech style) analysis of variance, conducted separately for agency and communality, revealed no effects

involving leader name in either analysis (all  $ps > .22$ ), so leader name was not included in subsequent analyses.

Agency and communality were analyzed separately using a 2 (speech style) x 2 (leader gender) x 2 (participant gender) analysis of variance. The agency manipulation was highly effective,  $F(1, 159) = 275.39, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .63$ , with assertive leaders ( $M = 6.46, SD = 1.16$ ) perceived as considerably more agentic than tentative leaders ( $M = 3.39, SD = 1.32$ ).

Qualifying this main effect was a significant interaction between speech style and participant gender,  $F(1, 159) = 6.05, p = .015, \eta_p^2 = .04$ . Follow-up comparisons revealed that male participants rated assertive speakers ( $M = 6.33, SD = 1.07$ ) as considerably more agentic than tentative speakers ( $M = 3.72, SD = 1.45$ ),  $F(1, 81) = 88.48, p < .001$ , however this difference was greater for female participants (assertive speakers:  $M = 6.57, SD = 1.24$ ; tentative speakers:  $M = 3.03, SD = 1.06$ ),  $F(1, 82) = 192.62, p < .001$ . No other effects were significant.

For leaders' communality ratings, there was a marginally significant effect for assertive leaders ( $M = 5.27, SD = 1.32$ ) to be seen as more communal than tentative leaders ( $M = 4.86, SD = 1.33$ ),  $F(1, 159) = 3.89, p = .05, \eta_p^2 = .02$ . No other effects were significant. Thus, agentic female leaders were not perceived as non-communal. Communality was controlled for in subsequent analyses to ensure findings are attributable solely to agency (for correlations, see Appendix).

**Tests of hypotheses.** To test hypotheses, 2 (speech style) x 2 (leader gender) x 2 (participant gender) analyses of covariance were used for likeability and influence, with communality as a covariate.

**Likeability.** The predicted interaction between speech style and leader gender was significant<sup>2</sup>,  $F(1, 158) = 3.98, p = .048, \eta_p^2 = .03$ , qualifying a main effect for speech style,  $F(1, 158) = 11.21, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$ , and leader gender,  $F(1, 158) = 6.19, p = .014, \eta_p^2 = .04$ .

The means are shown in Figure 1. There was also a significant main effect for participant gender,  $F(1, 158) = 11.74, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$ , with likeability rated higher by male than by female participants ( $M = 5.38, SE = .13; M = 4.75, SE = .13$ , respectively). The three-way interaction was not significant ( $p = .224$ ), indicating that participant gender did not moderate the main findings. No other effects were significant.

To interpret the speech style x leader gender interaction, comparisons were made within leader gender and within speech style, controlling for communality. Comparing within leader gender, assertive female leaders were more likeable than tentative female leaders,  $F(1, 77) = 10.42, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .12$ , but there was no significant difference in the likeability of assertive and tentative male leaders,  $F(1, 84) = .86, p = .357$ . Comparing within speech style, tentative male leaders were more likeable than tentative female leaders,  $F(1, 74) = 8.30, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = .10$ , but there was no significant difference in the likeability of assertive male and assertive female leaders,  $F(1, 87) = .22, p = .637$ .

***Influence.*** The predicted interaction between speech style and leader gender was significant<sup>3</sup>,  $F(1, 158) = 6.49, p = .012, \eta_p^2 = .04$ . No other effects were significant, including the three-way interaction ( $p = .970$ ). To interpret the significant interaction, comparisons were made within leader gender and within speech style, controlling for communality. These supported predictions, with means shown in Figure 1. Comparing within leader gender, participants were significantly more influenced by assertive than tentative female leaders,  $F(1, 77) = 6.66, p = .012, \eta_p^2 = .01$ , but there was no significant difference in influence between assertive and tentative male leaders,  $F(1, 84) = .49, p = .486$ . Comparing within speech style, participants were significantly more influenced by tentative male than tentative female leaders,  $F(1, 74) = 7.66, p = .007, \eta_p^2 = .10$ , while assertive male and assertive female leaders did not significantly differ in influence,  $F(1, 87) = .39, p = .534$ .

## **Discussion**

Study 1 found clear support for the prediction that prejudice is now directed toward women who fail to behave agentially in leader roles. Social penalties were directed at tentative female leaders, who were shown to be less likeable and less influential than assertive female leaders and tentative male leaders. Assertive female leaders were as likeable and influential as assertive male leaders, and the likeability and influence of male leaders was unaffected by the assertiveness of their speech.

This subtle form of prejudice toward women who fail to behave agentially in leader roles presents a considerable barrier to gender equality. In a political context, the findings indicate that female politicians will only be as effective as male politicians where they consistently demonstrate confidence, strength and decisiveness. Where their behavior diverges from these male-stereotypic agentic ideals, they risk becoming ineffective and alienated from their constituents in a way that will not be experienced by male politicians, who were afforded greater leeway in the leadership style they adopted.

These findings make a clear case that both women and men now react negatively to non-agentic behavior from women in leader roles. However, given the novelty of this finding, we conducted a replication study using a different issue, leaders who were more proximal to the target to allow for a broader measure of likeability, and using audio rather than written presentations to manipulate leader agency.

## **Study 2**

Study 2 changed the issue from climate change to the topic of increasing university tuition fees, which were being proposed in universities in the region at the time of the study and had led to student protests. Whilst Study 1 was based on Carli's (1990, Study 2) general approach, this study matched Carli's methodology even more closely on targets (students), message (unpopular), and mode of presentation (audio recordings). Hence participants

listened to audio recordings of male or female student advocates presenting an unpopular proposal to increase tuition fees, using either assertive or tentative speech.

The study had a 2 (speech style: assertive, tentative) x 2 (leader gender: male, female) x 2 (participant gender: male, female) between-participants design. It was again predicted that there would be a speech style x leader gender interaction, with tentative female leaders regarded as less likeable and influential than assertive female leaders and tentative male leaders. Assertive female leaders were predicted to be as likeable and influential as assertive male leaders and the likeability and influence of male leaders was not expected to vary based on the assertiveness of their speech.

## **Method**

**Participants.** Sixty-six participants from an Australian University (56% female:  $M_{age} = 20.4$  years,  $SD = 3.3$ ) completed the study. The majority of participants were recruited from first year psychology and received course credit. The remaining participants were approached on campus.

**Materials and procedure.** An identical procedure to Study 1 was followed, except that participants were informed that they would hear the opinion of a student advocate over whether they supported a 25 per cent rise in tuition fees. To minimize self-interest influencing responses, participants were informed that the rise in fees, if implemented, would only apply to new students and not those currently enrolled at university. The student advocate's speech included statements about the need to reduce student-staff ratios, attract high-quality teachers, upgrade and enhance access to information technology, and improve parking facilities.

**Agency manipulation.** Participants listened to the speech using individual audio players and headsets. Audiotapes were made by two male and two female actors reading the speech in an assertive or tentative manner. In the assertive version, the speech was read in a

confident, forthright manner, while in the tentative version, the student advocate sounded more hesitant and uncertain, with the script adding numerous hedges, qualifiers and hesitations (e.g., “[I’m no expert of course, but it seems to me that] The revenue raised from this fee increase will [you know] allow the university to maintain its reputation as [um] an institution of excellence...”).

**Measures.** This study used an expanded set of items relative to Study 1. In addition to general demographic questions, the questionnaire contained the following key measures.

*Likeability.* In this study, interaction with the leader was more plausible than in Study 1, so we included extra items relating to attitudes to social interactions with the leader, using an expanded 7-item scale (e.g., “I could see myself going to lunch with this student advocate”, “I could see myself enjoying meeting this student advocate in person”;  $\alpha = .82$ ).

*Influence.* A multi-item scale of influence was adapted from Blankenship and Holtgraves (2005), including 3 items (I think raising fees by 25% would be, 1 = *bad/foolish/undesirable*, 9 = *good/wise/desirable*;  $\alpha = .88$ ).

*Agency and communality.* A 4-item scale was used to assess leader agency (dominant, forceful, assertive, acts as a leader;  $\alpha = .92$ ) and a 4-item scale assessed leader communality (friendly, sensitive, sympathetic, generous;  $\alpha = .76$ ).

*Comprehension checks.* To assess basic attention to the materials, participants ticked boxes indicating whether the student advocate was for or against an increase in fees, and at the end of the questionnaire they were asked to indicate whether the speech had been delivered by a woman or a man.

## Results

**Preliminary analyses.** All participants correctly identified the student advocate’s gender and position on the fee increase. A 4 (individual speaker) x 2 (speech style) analysis of



variance for agency and communality revealed no effects involving individual speakers (all  $p$ s > .28), so this variable was not included in subsequent analyses.

Ratings of agency and communality were examined using a 2 (speech style) x 2 (leader gender) x 2 (participant gender) analysis of variance. The agency manipulation was highly effective, with assertive leaders attributed significantly more agency ( $M = 6.29$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) than tentative leaders ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ),  $F(1, 58) = 67.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .54$ . No other effects for agency were significant.

For communality, there was no significant difference between assertive ( $M = 5.36$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ) and tentative ( $M = 5.68$ ,  $SD = .97$ ) leaders' communality ratings,  $F(1, 58) = 1.56$   $p = .217$ . Although no communality effects were significant, for the focal analyses we continued to control for communality as a covariate to match Study 1 (for correlations, see Appendix).

**Tests of hypotheses.** To test hypotheses, likeability and influence were examined using a 2 (speech style) x 2 (leader gender) x 2 (participant gender)<sup>4</sup> analyses of covariance, with communality entered as a covariate.

**Likeability.** The predicted interaction between speech style and leader gender was identified<sup>5</sup>,  $F(1, 57) = 10.37$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .15$ , qualifying a significant main effect for speech style,  $F(1, 57) = 11.47$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .17$ . Means are shown in Figure 2. The three-way interaction was not significant ( $p = .468$ ) indicating that participant gender did not moderate the expected two-way interaction. No other effects were significant.

The speech style by leader gender interaction was examined by separate comparisons within leader gender and within speech style, controlling for communality. Comparing within each leader gender, as predicted, tentative female leaders were less likeable than assertive female leaders,  $F(1, 30) = 17.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .37$ , but there was no significant difference in the likeability of assertive and tentative male leaders,  $F(1, 30) = .001$ ,  $p = .972$ . Comparing within each speech style, tentative female leaders were less likeable than tentative male

leaders,  $F(1, 28) = 4.60, p = .041, \eta_p^2 = .14$ , while assertive female leaders in this case were rated higher on likeability than assertive male leaders,  $F(1, 32) = 5.07, p = .031, \eta_p^2 = .14$ .

**Influence.** The predicted interaction between speech style and leader gender was significant<sup>6</sup>,  $F(1, 57) = 4.07, p = .048, \eta_p^2 = .07$ . No other effects were significant, including the three-way interaction ( $p = .813$ ). To interpret the two-way interaction, comparisons were made within leader gender and within speech style, controlling for communality.

Comparisons within each leader gender showed the predicted differences, with tentative female leaders significantly less influential than assertive female leaders,  $F(1, 30) = 6.27, p = .018, \eta_p^2 = .17$ , but no difference between tentative and assertive male leaders,  $F(1, 30) = .01, p = .911$ . Comparing within each speech style also showed the predicted differences, with tentative female leaders significantly less influential than tentative male leaders,  $F(1, 28) = 8.64, p = .007, \eta_p^2 = .24$ , but no significant difference in influence between assertive male and assertive female leaders,  $F(1, 32) = .07, p = .788$ .

## **Discussion**

Study 2 replicated and extended the findings from Study 1 using a different target, topic, and mode of presentation, providing even greater evidence of prejudice toward women who fail to behave agentially in leader roles. Tentative female leaders were found to be less likeable and less influential than both assertive female leaders and tentative male leaders. Consistent with predictions, assertive female leaders achieved a similar level of influence to assertive male leaders, and were rated even more favorably than assertive male leaders in terms of their likeability. This finding further emphasizes that women's agentic behavior is no longer a source of prejudice (see Diekmann, 2007; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007, for similar findings showing no prejudice based on women's agentic behavior). The assertiveness of men's speech was not found to impact on their likeability or influence.

## **General Discussion**

The results of the current studies demonstrate a subtle form of prejudice toward women who fail to show agency in leader roles. Consistent with predictions, tentative women were less likeable and achieved less influence compared to both assertive women and tentative men. Prejudice toward tentative women was shown by both male and female participants, and occurred regardless of whether leaders were public figures or peers, whether they expressed popular or unpopular views, and for both written and audio presentations, suggesting the effect is pervasive. Prejudice toward women's agentic behavior, as predicted by role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), was not observed. Thus, women who spoke assertively were at least as likeable and influential as assertive men. As further evidence of men's greater scope of behavior in leader roles, the assertiveness of men's speech did not affect their likeability or influence.

Comparing the present findings with Carli's (1990, Study 2) findings suggest a shift in prescriptive stereotypes of women's agentic behavior — agentic behavior from women in leadership was not a source of prejudice, instead it was women's non-agentic behavior that was penalized. These findings signal a turnaround from times when endorsement of traditional gender roles was greater and non-agentic behavior from women was rewarded, consistent with their lower-status and subordinate position to men. Nonetheless, this subtle prejudice toward women's non-agentic behavior presents another barrier to equality that may prove more difficult to overcome. Unlike traditional prejudice toward women's agentic behavior in leadership, prejudice toward their non-agentic behavior is likely to appear fair and legitimate, as non-agentic behavior is inconsistent with expectations of how a leader should act. In this way, our findings share similarities with the aversive racism literature (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000), which posits that because contemporary sensibilities and laws have made discrimination immoral and illegal, it is now mostly expressed in ambiguous situations, where it is easier to rationalize.

In highlighting this subtle prejudice toward female leaders, our findings also expose the continuing bias toward male leaders, who escaped similar social penalties for equivalent non-agentic behavior. These findings reflect past research showing men are given greater leeway in leadership (Carli, 1990, Study 2; for a meta-analysis, see Eagly, et al., 1992), and are equally important to explaining men and women's differential leadership outcomes. This bias toward men is likely to result from the stronger association between being a male and being a leader (for a meta-analysis, see Koenig, et al., 2011), which may heighten trust in men's leadership ability. While these findings should not be taken as evidence that men will *never* be evaluated negatively in leadership, the "benefit of the doubt" they are given in circumstances where their leader behavior diverges from the ideal is likely to give them a critical upper hand, including the opportunity to progress in the role with support and experience. By contrast, the marked negativity toward female leaders from even a brief exposure to their non-agentic behavior suggests women are met with the unrealistic expectation that they should *always* meet the behavioral ideals associated with that role, placing them in a more precarious position as leaders.

To overcome this subtle prejudice toward women it is critical to understand its underlying motivations. It is noteworthy that female *and* male participants displayed prejudice toward non-agentic female leaders, whereas in the past it was displayed only by female participants (e.g., Carli, 1990, Study 2). This alignment in reactions corresponds with the narrowing gap in gender differences in liberal/feminist attitudes, which were greatest in the mid-1980's — since that time, men have become substantially more similar to women in their liberal attitudes (Twenge, 1997). Although prejudice toward women's agentic behavior in leadership may persist for those who continue to explicitly endorse traditional gender roles (cf. Eagly and Karau, 2002), evidence of more liberal attitudes toward women prompts a search for alternative explanations of the finding that it is now *non-agentic* female leaders

who are penalized. We propose two distinct motivational processes for this subtle form of prejudice.

For people who genuinely support progress toward gender equality in society, prejudice toward non-agentic women may be motivated by a desire for women to behave in ways that prove their equivalence to men in terms of agency and leadership suitability (see Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Morton, et al., 2011, for findings showing women's agency is projected to increase further in the future). Evidence of non-agentic behavior from women may be seen as a threat to progress toward this goal, leading to negative evaluations because it could be used as an example of why women are *not* suited to leadership.

For people who endorse modern forms of sexism (see Glick & Fiske, 1996; Swim, et al., 1995), prejudice toward non-agentic women may be driven by a desire to find more legitimate ways of limiting women's time as leaders. That is, in light of greater normative acceptance of women in leadership, penalizing non-agentic women may be preferred, because it can be portrayed as consistent with a meritocracy, but remains disadvantageous to women because men avoid similar penalties.

While prejudice toward non-agentic women may therefore be motivated by both a desire for continued social change or finding new ways to maintain gender inequality, another possible explanation is that it reflects attentional processes. As women are counter-stereotypical leaders, perceivers may pay closer attention to their leadership behavior, making stronger inferences from their non-agentic behavior about their level of agency. However, our findings suggest such attentional processes are unlikely to provide an explanation, as attributions of agency (and communality) were similar for male and female leaders across studies. Thus, evaluation processes provide a more plausible explanation. That is, despite similar judgements about the level of agency of female and male leaders, non-agentic behavior was only evaluated more negatively in women.

While only agency was manipulated in these studies, attributions of communality were also measured and revealed a marginally significant finding for agentic leaders to be seen as more communal (Study 1), or no different in communality (Study 2) than non-agentic leaders. Hence, although there is a propensity in the gender literature to align women's agentic behavior with non-communality (for a discussion, see Heilman & Okimoto, 2007), these findings reveal that women's agentic behavior in leader roles does not necessarily lead to the perception that they are non-communal. Study 1 suggests that in some cases, agentic female (and male) leaders experience a "halo" effect where agency is aligned with communality, an association observed in similar circumstances by Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt and Kashima (2005, Study 4). Such findings underscore the importance of conceptualizing agency and communality as distinct dimensions, whose relationship can be positive, negative or neutral (see Judd, et al., 2005, for an exploration of the factors governing this relationship). Through doing so, it is possible to grasp the precise basis for (and changing nature of) prejudice toward women in leadership.

In light of the findings for leader communality, the lack of prejudice toward agentic female leaders should not be interpreted acceptance of women's non-communal behavior in leader roles. It is clear from other research that women continue to experience prejudice based on anticipated (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Heilman, et al., 2004) or actual (Bowles, et al., 2007; Heilman & Chen, 2005; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010) violations of the prescriptive stereotype that they should be communal. Accordingly, where agentic behavior is also non-communal, such as being aggressive, ruthless or domineering (cf. Rudman & Glick, 1999; Rudman & Glick, 2001), prejudiced reactions toward women are likely to persist.

Moreover, because our findings for agentic female leaders are based on independent evaluations of male and female leaders, it is not anticipated that they will translate into non-

prejudiced reactions toward women presented as *comparatively* superior to men in male domains. Examples include where a woman outperforms a man in a test about football knowledge, or the most effective way to punch an opponent (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). Such demonstrations are still likely to lead men to feel emasculated or humiliated, eliciting greater disapproval when enacted by a woman than a man. Further, men's greater leeway to be non-agentic in leadership roles is unlikely to extend to contexts where evidence of their masculinity can be more easily questioned, such as where they are advocating for a feminist cause (Anderson, 2009), or where they excel in "feminized" roles not traditionally associated with male success (Heilman & Wallen, 2010).

While this research used language to manipulate agency (an assertive versus tentative speech style), it is possible that people's reactions to language differ from other behaviors that indicate agency. Therefore, different behavioral indicators of agency versus non-agency should be used in future research, such as describing a leader's decisiveness or indecisiveness in making business decisions. Although language and communication are critical aspects of leadership behavior, using non-linguistic indicators of agency would enable further assessment of the generalizability of the findings.

It would also be beneficial for future research to replicate these studies with different samples. Interview data from corporate leaders consistent with pressure on women to behave agentially in order to be accepted (Davies-Netzley, 1998), suggests prejudice toward non-agentic women would be found in business settings. While the use of student samples are common in experiments relating to reactions toward women's agentic behavior (e.g., Diekmann, 2007; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Rudman & Glick, 1999), and enabled us to increase the validity of comparisons with Carli's (1990) research, replicating these findings using corporate and other workplace populations would provide a valuable extension.

In sum, while some people will continue to deny women's right to be in leadership and other roles requiring agency, this view has become increasingly untenable, and most people in contemporary western societies now explicitly endorse women's right to be leaders. This support is reflected in perceiving strong, assertive women as equally likeable and influential as equivalent men. While accepting agency in women is a step in the right direction, this research exposes that women who fail to show agency in leadership are swiftly singled out for disapproval, whereas this does not occur for men. Based on men's continued dominance in positions of power, expectations of women to show unwavering signs of confidence and strength will provide a considerable challenge. While a few women will be able to meet this expectation, the majority who cannot remain disadvantaged, with men avoiding similar penalties for equivalent non-agentic behaviors. Therefore, this subtle form of prejudice toward women demands our attention and effort if gender equality is to be achieved.



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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Equivalent results were not shown for female participants, who disliked the agentic (self-promoting) female. However as Eagly and Karau (2002, p. 584) highlight, these results are anomalous, as the typical tendency is for men, not women, to respond more negatively to women's agentic behavior.

<sup>2</sup> The interaction remained significant,  $p = .018$  after the communality covariate was omitted.

<sup>3</sup> The interaction remained significant,  $p = .007$  after the communality covariate was omitted.

<sup>4</sup> Participant gender was included as a factor to match the analytic approach used in Study 1. However, due to relatively smaller cell sizes, we replicated the main analyses without this factor. The predicted interaction for likeability remained significant,  $p = .003$ , and the interaction for influence became marginal  $p = .067$ .

<sup>5</sup> The interaction remained significant,  $p = .043$  after the communality covariate was omitted.

<sup>6</sup> The interaction became marginal,  $p = .079$  after the communality covariate was omitted, however, comparisons continued to show predicted differences ( $ps < .027$ ).

## Appendix

*Correlations between Likeability, Influence, Agency, and Communality for Female (upper) and Male (lower) Leaders for Study 1 and Study 2*

Study 1	1.	2.	3.	4.
1.Likeability	—	.55**	.50**	.66**
2.Influence	.22*	—	.34**	.30**
3.Agency	.31**	.10	—	.24*
4.Communality	.66**	.05	.30**	—
Study 2	1	2	3	4
1.Likeability	—	.46**	.32†	.38*
2.Influence	.43*	—	.32†	.06
3.Agency	.18	.12	—	-.43*
4.Communality	.51*	.26	-.22	—

†<.10 \* $p$  <.05. \*\*  $p$  <.01.



## Figure captions

*Figure 1.* Mean scores (+*SE*) for Study 1 for likeability and influence as a function of leader gender and speech style.

*Figure 2.* Mean scores (+*SE*) for Study 2 for likeability and influence as a function of leader gender and speech style.



