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Exploring Women's Perceptions of Respectful Leadership:

A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This research aims to explore women's perceptions of respectful leadership, and the challenges they may face in embracing this leadership style. Particularly, the study examines the gap between the expectations placed on women in leading respectfully - being empathic, collaborative, socially responsible - and the societal norms and pressures that may hinder the full adoption of these traits. We ground our research on the Stereotyped Content Model, suggesting that women are often perceived as high in warmth but low in competence, contrary to the assertiveness expected of leaders. This may lead women leaders to downplay warmth traits.

Design: The methodology involves semi-structured interviews with 30 women leaders from Italy and the UK across different age groups and career stages. A validation questionnaire is also administered. Leximancer software is used to analyze the qualitative interview data and identify key themes and concepts around respectful leadership and women's perceptions.

Results: Preliminary results indicate women value respectful leadership for organizational success and relationships with employees. However, some hesitancy in expressing the associated behaviors may occur because of the organizational contexts.

Limitations: A possible limitation of the current study is represented by the limited sample size which could have limited the reliability of the group's scores and might have reduced the variation seen in the trends across the different groups.

Implications: By understanding women's perceptions of respectful leadership, organizations can develop more effective strategies for promoting this approach and supporting women's leadership development. This can lead to a more diverse, equitable, and sustainable leadership culture, wherein women can fully express their leadership potential.

Value: The study aims at contributing to develop insights on the complexities women face in leadership, informing strategies to empower female leadership and promote gender equality in organizations.

Keywords: Respectful Leadership, Woman, Qualitative methods

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of organizational behavior often presents challenges for women, instilling fears and doubts about displaying certain personality traits, emotions or behaviors in their leadership style, as they may be perceived by others as personal weakness. In a gender-stereotyped environment, space and opportunities for women in organizations are questioned, focusing less on their capabilities and more on societal pressures and influences shaping their behaviors.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of leadership styles that prioritize ethical and sustainable practices, such as servant leadership, ethical leadership, and respectful leadership. These approaches emphasize empathy, collaboration, and social responsibility, aligning with the values and priorities of today's workforce. Interestingly, women seem to naturally internalize these leadership qualities, often exhibiting large affinity for these styles. Nonetheless, despite this apparent compatibility, women continue to face challenges in fully expressing their leadership potential.

This discrepancy raises questions about the underlying factors that prevent women from fully embracing and embodying these leadership styles in practice. Is it a matter of confidence, societal expectations, or organizational barriers? Understanding these challenges is crucial for creating more inclusive and supportive environments that allow women to thrive as leaders and contribute to the broader goals of social sustainability. Our study delves into the complexities of women's roles in organizations, aiming to understand the barriers they face in fully expressing their identities and asserting their leadership.

The research seeks to address the gap between the expectations placed on women in leadership roles and the societal norms that may hinder their adoption of respectful leadership practices. By exploring how women perceive and navigate the nuances of respectful leadership, this study aims to shed light on the challenges and opportunities for women in leadership positions. In a society where gender norms and biases still prevail, the study aims to unravel the intricacies of women's experiences in leadership roles, particularly in embracing respectful leadership styles. By examining the perceptions of 30 women through qualitative interviews, this research endeavors to uncover the underlying factors that influence women's ability to lead with respect and inclusivity.

Theoretical Background

From a theoretical standpoint, the current research adopts the lenses social cognition, and particularly those of the Stereotyped Content Model (hereafter, SCM; Fiske et al., 2002) as a possible mechanism for explaining the above-mentioned gap between expectations and social norms.

Research in the field has established that people universally discriminate each other by means of two basic judgements, namely, liking – which indicates the level of perceived warmth, trustworthiness etc., - and respect

– which reflects perceived competence and efficiency. Thus, in social context people tend to categorize other people by means of the positive (high) or negative (low) perceptions along these two dimensions of warmth and competence (Fiske, 2018). The importance of such categorization resides in the specific patterns of emotions and behaviors that they elicit. Indeed, people that are perceived as both warm and competent tend to produce consistently positive emotions and behaviors, while those that are perceived as low in both these dimensions are judged overall negatively. On the other hand, those classified as lacking one dimension but high on the other elicit predictable but ambivalent affective and behavioral reactions. Importantly, these dimensions have been shown to be universal and to explain both interpersonal and intergroup social cognition (Fiske, 2018).

The relevance of the SCM in the current research stems from the fact that previous studies have shown that females are traditionally included in the category scoring high in terms of warmth, but low in terms of competence; conversely, males are normally categorized as high in competence and low/moderate in warmth (Durante, 2008). As a consequence, emotionally, females tend to evoke pity and sympathy, which, in turn, elicits behaviors of passive harm, e.g., confining them to a subordinate status and paternalistic positivity; conversely, males may elicit feelings of admiration and pride, which determine behaviors of passive/active facilitation (Durante, 2008; Fiske, 2018).

Based on these premises, we theorized that female leaders may end up showing attitudes and behaviors that may help them to be perceived as more similar to their male counterpart, which would determine a positive reaction of admiration rather than sympathy. For example, female leaders may try to decrease their perceived warmth, by internalizing the belief that showing traits of warmth, e.g., friendliness, may hinder their perception of competence, e.g., assertiveness.

This may explain the inherent paradox of the continuous challenges faced by female leaders in expressing their potential, despite the increasing relevance of leadership models that tend to emphasize empathy, collaboration, and social responsibility (i.e., warmth).

METHODOLOGY

Setting

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of respectful leadership among women and their views on the applicability of this leadership model in their own careers. We elaborate on the selection process and the rationale behind choosing 30 women from two distinct geographical settings, Italy and UK, to evaluate the potential geographical and social influences on their perceptions of respectful leadership. These women hold or have held significant leadership positions within their respective organizations, providing a rich pool of experiences and insights.

The participants were carefully selected to represent a diverse range of leadership backgrounds and experiences. The decision to include women from both Italian and UK settings was intentional, aiming to capture the potential variations in perceptions influenced by cultural and social contexts. By including women aged between 30-45 in the initial phase of interviews, we target a group that may still be navigating challenges and striving to achieve ambitious goals, offering a unique perspective on the intersection of age and leadership experiences.

Furthermore, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by women across different stages of their careers, we also included professionals of older age groups, including retirees, in our cohort. This deliberate inclusion allows for a more nuanced exploration of the evolving dynamics of leadership challenges and experiences over time, offering a holistic view of the obstacles and triumphs encountered by women in leadership roles.

Data collection

The data collection tools for this study mainly include semi-structured interviews designed to delve into the participants' backgrounds, experiences, education, and, where possible, unique aspects of their personal lives. Each interview aims to explore the participants' views on the applicability of the respectful leadership model in guiding their teams, the factors influencing their choice of a gentle approach, and any differences in applicability based on contextual factors such as the gender of their subordinates and peers. The interviews have been conducted in a confidential setting, with participants' consent, to ensure a safe and comfortable environment for sharing their experiences and perceptions.

Prior to the interviews, participants will be administered a validation questionnaire via Qualtrics, explicitly focusing on assessing whether these women exhibit the characteristics of a respectful leaders. The questionnaire is structured in three parts: i. demographic and work-related information, to collect background information from each participant; ii., respectful leadership scale, based on the one developed by Van Quaquebeke, & Eckloff (2010); and iii., a relationship with collaborators, wherein participants are asked to characterize the kind of relationship they have with their collaborators. Overall, this questionnaire aims to provide additional insights into the alignment between the participants' perceptions of respectful leadership and their own leadership behaviors, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how women perceive and embody respectful leadership qualities in their professional roles.

Data Analysis

Given the explanatory nature of the study, we employed Leximancer, a data mining software, following Bayesian reasoning to perform a semantic and relational analysis of the narrative data (Gephart, 2004). Via automated content analysis, Leximancer uses algorithms to detect frequency of co-occurring words and merged them into a visual map concept (i.e. semantic map) that represent thematic concepts within the text (Hewett et al., 2009). The semantic map reveals the key concepts and their relationships, the strength of relationships

between concepts, and similarities in the contextual occurrences (Angus-Leppan et al., 2010). Key concepts represent clusters of words that commonly occur together, ordered within a thesaurus according to their importance and weight. Map illustrates relationships between concepts through gray lines or branches, with clusters of concepts representing themes that indicate contextual similarity. Themes that are color-coded in red are the most important, followed by other themes in descending order of importance based on the color wheel.

We used Leximancer in three different steps. First, after the data cleaning where we removed the names of individuals, repetitive words and stop words, we used Leximancer to generate a file with the initial set of concepts. The research team checked and revised the file in which they combined synonymous words and variations of the same concepts and/or separate terms that referred to different concepts. Second, Leximancer was used to assess the relative significance of the concepts given by their percentage. Third, Leximancer was used to generate the semantic map around the linking concepts for this study, specifically focusing on respectful leadership and women.

RESULTS

The preliminary results of our investigation reveal that women place a high value on the elements that define a respectful leadership model, viewing it as a key factor for organizational success. They also attribute significant importance to these aspects in establishing a high-quality relationship with younger newcomers. Furthermore, the preliminary findings from the questionnaire analysis show excellent adherence to a model of this type. However, when compared to the interview responses, the results indicate that women fear a perception of weakness in fully expressing those traits of respectful leadership that best align with feminine characteristics (e.g., high perception of warmth). This is particularly evident in relationships with peers and with male colleagues. This fear of being perceived as weak may stem from deeply ingrained societal expectations and gender stereotypes that associate certain leadership traits with masculinity and others with femininity. By fully embracing and expressing respectful leadership traits, women may feel that they are deviating from traditional gender norms, and that their perceived competence may be threatened, hence risking of being judged negatively by their peers and male colleagues.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

This study aims to contribute to the existing literature on respectful leadership by exploring women's perceptions of this leadership model and its applicability in their own careers. Specifically, we collected data through semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire administered via Qualtrics to a diverse group of 30 women who hold or have held significant leadership positions in their respective organizations.

Despite women valuing the elements of respectful leadership and recognizing it as crucial for organizational success, they harbor doubts regarding the practical applicability of this model. While they attribute significant importance to these aspects in fostering high-quality relationships with younger, more

sensitive, and engaged new collaborators, there is a hesitancy among women regarding the actual implementation of a respectful leadership model.

Theoretically, this study highlights the complexities surrounding women's leadership behaviors and the societal pressures they face. By recognizing and addressing these challenges, organizations can develop strategies to empower women to lead authentically and effectively, contributing to the ongoing dialogue on gender equality in leadership and organizational behavior.

From a practical standpoint, this study has significant implications for organizations seeking to promote gender equality and diversity in their leadership practices. By understanding women's perceptions of respectful leadership, organizations can develop more effective strategies for promoting this leadership style and supporting women's leadership development. This can lead to a more diverse, equitable, and sustainable leadership culture, where women can fully express their leadership potential without fear of judgment or prejudice.

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