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Gendered and Neoliberal Meanings of Competition in Women Senior Leaders' Identity Work: Discursive Escape and Strategic Agency

Underrepresentation of women in leadership has long been the subject of intensive research in business and management studies (e.g., Leslie et al., 2017; Cardador, 2017; Ryan and Haslam, 2005; Shor et al., 2015). This research agenda remains one of the top priorities of the discipline as the gender gap in leadership persists, despite the fact that women have closed education, work experience and ambition gaps (Davis, 2015; Vinnicombe et al., 2018). A persistent lack of women in top leadership positions urges academic researchers to construct new, or refined theoretical explanations. This paper aims to examine one particular strand of recent theoretical efforts, namely the growing scholarship on gender differences in competition. The recurring finding from attempts to measure competitiveness, using gender as a single explanatory variable (e.g., Lynn, 1993; Gneezy et al., 2003; Ifcher and Zarghamee, 2015), is that women respond less favourably to competition than men and are less prone to take risks. Since the ability to compete and take risks are seen as critical elements for overall leadership effectiveness (Sutter and Glätzle-Rützler, 2015), a lack thereof, means a simple misfit of women for such roles. Niederle and Vesterlund note '[i]f women are more reluctant to compete, then they may be less likely to seek promotions or to enter male-dominated and competitive fields' (2011: 602).

The existing scholarship across social sciences tends to explore gender and competition in terms of looking whether or not women are willing to engage in competition or compare their engagement and attitudes with men's (Apicella and Dreber, 2015; Gneezy et al., 2009; Westbrook et al., 2011). Such exercise more often than not results in portraying women as less competitive, confident and ambitious (Niederle and Vesterlund, 2007; Ifcher and Zarghamee, 2015). This literature therefore sidesteps more profound questions regarding how competition is gendered, how gender norms intersect with the new business rationalities and neoliberal demands, how the contradictions between the two influence people's subjectivities, shape how subjects live, feel and behave at work. Exploring these questions gives us an opportunity to have a fresh look at persisting gender inequalities in organisations and at the same time document how they are flexible and adoptable to the changing structural conditions.

Research Findings

1. Over the past decades there has been growing interest in investigating the differences in how men and women engage in, and perceive competition and activities involving risk. For instance, the last 15 years witnessed a surge in economic and finance literature (100+ articles in recognised internationally and world leading journals) concerned with this exact question (e.g., Schram et al., 2018; Niederle and Vesterlund, 2007, 2011; Healy and Pate, 2011). The recurring finding from economists' surveys and experiments is that women respond less favourably to competition than men and are less prone to take risks. Experimental lotteries (where people are given a choice between \$10 for certain or 50% chance of getting \$20); tasks with a choice between competitive and non-competitive compensation schemes; responses to survey questions and results of field studies (e.g. running and/or educational competition), are used as evidence for this claim. Explicitly, or implicitly this scholarship uses identified gender

gaps in competition and risk taking to explain women's underrepresentation in top management and elite leadership. For example, Sutter and Glätzle-Rützler (2015) claim:

‘A successful career in business, politics, or science does not only depend on an individual's ability and social skills, but also on a readiness to accept the challenge of competition for scarce jobs and rewards. However, recent research has provided ample evidence that women shy away from competition much more than men, a finding that is considered to be an important factor in explaining the persistent gender gap in wages and top-level positions in business, politics, or science’ (2015: 2339).

2. Despite the fact that organisational leaders operate in hyper-competitive environments, our research on women at the top of organisational hierarchies has found them to be deeply ambivalent about the value and meaning of competition as they reflected upon their own experiences and negotiated their individual identities.
3. A number of research participants directly expressed an idea/concern that in organisational contexts competitiveness is unambiguously perceived as a masculine trait. Our participants explained that if a woman engages into competitive behaviours or openly expresses competitive attitudes, this puts her womanhood into question. As a consequence she is likely to face a backlash from others.
4. The majority of the women we interviewed tend to fully or partially distance themselves from interpersonal competition and openly competitive behaviours. Strategies that they used to undertake this distancing can be designated as: 1) Claiming that they only compete only on behalf of organisations; 2) Apologising for competition; 3) Masking and reframing competition; 4) Silencing competition; 5) Denying that competition takes place in their professional lives; 6) Differentiating between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ competitions.

Developing Analytical Approach

Blending the theoretical insights from scholarship on identity work (Hall, 1996; Deetz and Mumby, 1990), research on the persisting nature of gender inequality (Ridgeway, 2011), neoliberal feminism (McRobbie, 2008, 2015; Lewis, 2014; Lewis et al, 2017), and critical organisation studies in the wake of discursive turn (Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004), we aim to shed light on why women elite leaders by definition operating in hyper-competitive contexts discursively distance themselves from competition and/or do not wish to be seen as ‘competitive’. We aim to show that this paradox arises from the conflicting impact of the gendered and neoliberal meanings of competition.

We argue that women elite leaders present an important case for analysis as, they are likely to experience the most pressure from both systems (the gender system and neoliberal organisational regime). On the one hand, they are considered as winners of the current economic regime (and, thus, might be specifically invested in advocating neoliberal ideal of competition), but, on the other, they experience heightened visibility as women, judged

according to double standards (occupational and gender), and, therefore, might be particularly keen to avoid backlash from crossing yet another gender boundary while announcing themselves to be 'competitive'.

We argue that discursive escape from competition should not be mistaken for gender conformity. Quite the opposite we see it as manifestation of women's strategic agency (Denissen, 2010). Tensions and contradictions in organisational gender regimes create opportunities for disruption, resistance and change. Rather than giving straightforward answers on whether or not the research participants see themselves as 'competitive', they negotiate and manipulate the meaning of competition, reflect on different forms it can take and engage in profound reflexions about the reasons behind competitive practices and attitudes. By skilfully distancing themselves from competition without negating it and negotiating their individual identities as both competitive and non-competitive, the research participants overcome the tensions between gendered and neoliberal meanings of competition and construct the likable selves which fit into both the hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and neoliberal ideals in organisational contexts.

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