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Can an Agentic Black Woman Get Ahead? The Impact of Race and Interpersonal Dominance on Perceptions of Female Leaders

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Abstract

Prior research has demonstrated that the display of agentic behaviors, such as dominance, can produce backlash against female leaders because of the incongruence between these behaviors and prescribed gender roles. The current study was designed to fill a gap in existing research by investigating whether these well-established findings are moderated by race. Results revealed that dominant Black female leaders did not create the same backlash that dominant White female leaders did. Experimental evidence confirmed that White female (and Black male) leaders were conferred lower status when they expressed dominance rather than communality, whereas Black female (and White male) leaders were not. These findings highlight the importance, and complexity, of considering the intersection of gender and race when examining penalties for and proscriptions against dominant behavior of female leaders.

Keywords

prejudice, racial and ethnic attitudes and relations

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> On my face, you could tell everything in 30 seconds. You could tell exasperation. You could tell fed-up-ness.
>
> —Ursula Burns, CEO of Xerox (quoted in Bryant, 2010)

Prior research has shown that women are underrepresented in top leadership positions and often face biases when they do occupy these roles (for reviews, see Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). One challenge facing female leaders, unlike male leaders, is the inability to express agentic emotion or behavior without sanction. Prior research has found that women often suffer an "agency penalty" for exhibiting actions that appear assertive, angry, competitive, or dominant (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001). For example, Rudman (1998) demonstrated that self-promoting women were evaluated more negatively than self-effacing women—even in a context that demanded competitiveness—whereas no such penalty was imposed on self-promoting males. In addition, Brescoll and Uhlmann (2008) demonstrated that female employees who expressed anger were conferred lower status and salary compared with males who expressed anger or females who did not express anger. This finding held true whether the employee occupied the position of entry-level trainee or CEO. One proposed explanation for these findings is that although agentic behaviors and emotions are congruent with leader roles, they are not congruent with female gender roles, which prescribe warmth and communality; as a result, there is a backlash against women who behave agentically (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 1999).

One limitation of this literature is that it has focused exclusively on White women. To our knowledge, no previous research has investigated whether Black female leaders are subject to the same agency penalty. Anecdotal evidence, such as the statement with which we opened this article, suggests that the expectations or consequences of agency may be quite

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distinct for Black women. By her own account, Ursula Burns, who is the first and only Black female CEO of a Fortune 500 company, is not timid about expressing her feelings. In addition to being knowledgeable, intelligent, and hardworking, she is known as someone who is assertive, outspoken, and even confrontational at times—as reported by her mentors and former superiors at Xerox (see Bryant, 2010). Although it is difficult to make a general argument based on a single case, her ascent to the top level of management despite her ostensibly dominant demeanor might suggest a more general phenomenon at play. Whereas prior research has demonstrated that White female leaders suffer an agency penalty, we examined whether the same is true for Black female leaders.

At least two competing predictions regarding the agency penalty for Black women can be made. The first is that Black female leaders will suffer an agency penalty at least similar to, and likely greater than, the penalty experienced by White female leaders who display agency. If White males represent the prototypical leader (Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008), then one might expect the agency penalty to be higher for Black women given that neither their gender role (Nye & Forsyth, 1991; Scott & Brown, 2006) nor their race (Chung-Herrera & Lankau, 2005) is perceived as congruent with characteristics that are easily associated with the role of a leader. Perceived incongruence between a target's behavior and role is generally punished with negative evaluations (Ensari & Miller, 2002; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Because Black women occupy not only one, but two roles that are incongruent with expectations regarding leadership, the assumption underlying this prediction is that they will be dually penalized when expressing agency. This additive prediction—that Black women will incur the penalty of both White women and Black men—has been referred to elsewhere as the "double-jeopardy" hypothesis (Beale, 1970; Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Settles, 2006).

A second possibility is that the agency penalty is smaller for Black female leaders than for either Black male leaders or White female leaders. The logic of this interactive prediction is that the category "Black female" is not merely the additive combination of race and gender. Rather, their dual subordinate identities assign Black women to a unique space. Because the prototypical Black is male, and the prototypical woman is White, Black women tend to be defined as nonprototypical, marginal members of both their racial and gender groups, and consequently are often rendered "invisible" (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). As an ironic consequence of this invisibility, Black women may be buffered from many of the racial hostilities directed toward Black males (see Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

This idea is consistent with the *subordinate-male-target hypothesis*, according to which intergroup conflict and prejudice are primarily a male-on-male phenomenon that is fueled by a quest for dominance and power; thus, out-group females are perceived as less relevant to these power struggles compared with out-group males (Navarrete, McDonald, Molina, & Sidanius, 2010; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In other words, because White men may see Black men as more of a threat than Black women, Black men should be more likely to be punished for displaying agency, and to be rewarded for showing deference or communality. Prior research has shown that Black male, but not White male, leaders benefit from having a nonthreatening appearance (Livingston & Pearce, 2009). Specifically, having a baby face—a physical trait that is associated with warmth, deference, and weakness—was a benefit to Black male CEOs but was a detriment to White male CEOs.

Another consequence of the unique space occupied by Black women is that the prescriptive stereotypes (i.e., beliefs about how a group *should* behave; conversely, proscriptive stereotypes refer to how a group should not behave) for Black women may be distinct from those for Black men or White women. Indeed, recent research found that dominance is more *pro*scribed for White women and Black men than for Black women (Hall et al., 2012). Given that backlash is generated by prescriptive stereotypes (Rudman & Glick, 2001), we reasoned that White female leaders would experience backlash for exhibiting dominant behavior because, although such behavior is consistent with leader roles, it contradicts prescribed gender stereotypes for communality (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Rudman & Glick, 2001). We predicted similar results for Black males, given the demonstrated advantage of a submissive appearance for Black male leaders (Livingston & Pearce, 2009), as well as the proscription against dominant behavior for Black men in general (Hall et al., 2012). However, we expected that Black female leaders would not experience backlash for exhibiting dominant behavior, because of the weaker proscription against dominance for Black women (Hall et al., 2012).

In the study reported here, we investigated the extent to which identical behavior would produce differential consequences for leaders as a function of race and gender. On the basis of prior research, we predicted that White female and Black male leaders would be evaluated negatively for behaving in a dominant rather than communal manner. However, we predicted that Black female leaders would not suffer backlash for behaving dominantly.

Method

Participants

Eighty-four non-Black participants (64% women, 36% men) from a nationally representative online pool participated in exchange for the chance to win one of four $50 gift cards.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions in a 2 (leader's race: White vs. Black) × 2 (leader's gender: male vs. female) × 2 (leader's behavior: dominant vs. communal) between-subjects design. All participants were

shown a description and photograph of a fictitious senior vice president who worked for a Fortune 500 company. The photographs were matched on perceived age, attractiveness, and "babyfaceness," and the descriptions included identical information about the leader's education, company tenure, and leadership mission. The materials described a meeting between the leader and a subordinate employee who did not meet the company's expectations. Dominant leaders were described as communicating their disappointment by demanding action (i.e., "I demand that you take steps to improve your performance") and expressing assertiveness (i.e., "I am a tough, determined boss and intend to do everything in my power to ensure that your performance improves"). Communal leaders were described as encouraging the subordinate (i.e., "I encourage you to take steps to improve your performance") and communicating compassion (i.e., "I am a caring, committed boss and intend to do everything in my power to ensure that your performance improves").

Participants rated the leader on the following questions: "How well do you think the leader handled the situation with the employee?" "How effective is the leader at maximizing the employee's performance?" "How much do you think the leader is admired by his or her employees?" and "How respected is this leader by the other executives at the company?" (Cronbach's α = .89). We also assessed participants' expectations regarding the leader's salary by asking them to indicate what they thought the leader's annual salary should be, using a scale ranging from 1 ($100,000) to 9 ($500,000). We combined these variables into a single composite score assessing the leader's status in the organization.

Finally, we assessed attributions for the leader's behavior using the following item: "How much does the leader's reaction reflect something about his/her personality versus something about the situation?" (1 = *definitely the personality*, 7 = *definitely the situation*). If dominance is proscribed for Black men and White women, then internal attributions should be higher for Black men and White women who "break the rules" by behaving dominantly than for Black men and White women who behave normatively by adhering to prescribed stereotypes.

Results

A 2 (race) × 2 (gender) × 2 (behavior) between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) on leader-status scores yielded a significant main effect of behavior, $F(1, 76) = 17.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .19$; dominant leaders were evaluated more negatively than communal leaders. This main effect was qualified by a significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 76) = 11.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .13$.[1] We examined the two-way interaction separately for male and female leaders.

For female leaders, the Race × Behavior ANOVA revealed a significant two-way interaction, $F(1, 35) = 4.77$, $p < .04$, $\eta^2 = .12$. As shown in Figure 1, White women were evaluated more negatively when they expressed dominance ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 0.70$) than when they expressed communality ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.24$), $t(17) = 3.55$, $p < .002$. However, Black women did not suffer the same penalty when they expressed dominance (dominance: $M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.80$; communality: $M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.02$), $t < 1$, $p > .53$. There was no difference between evaluations of Black and White women when they expressed communality, $t(18) = 1.05$, $p > .30$. However, White women were evaluated more negatively than Black women when they expressed dominance, $t(17) = 2.38$, $p < .03$.

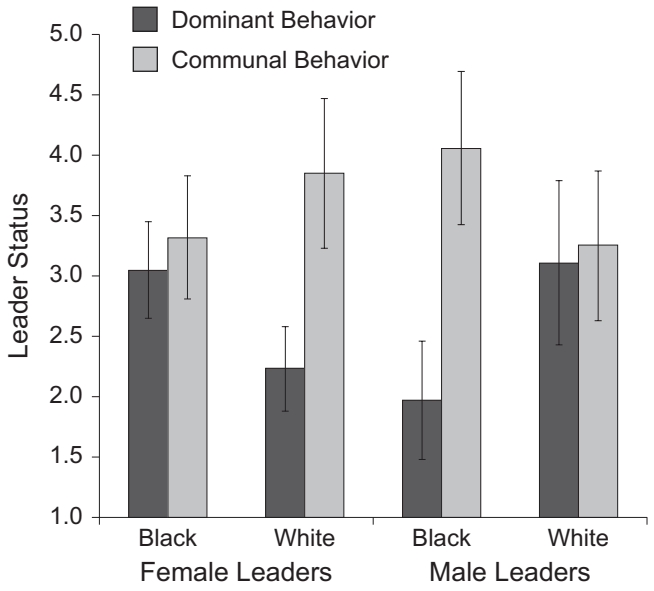

Fig. 1. Mean leader-status score as a function of the leader's race, gender, and behavior. Error bars represent standard deviations.

The two-way interaction for men was also significant, $F(1, 41) = 7.16$, $p < .02$, $\eta^2 = .15$ (see Fig. 1). Black men were penalized for expressing dominance (dominance: $M = 1.97$, $SD = 0.98$; communality: $M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.27$), $t(23) = 4.57$, $p < .001$. However, White men were not penalized (dominance: $M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.36$; communality: $M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.24$), $t < 1$.[2]

The results of a 2 (race) × 2 (gender) × 2 (behavior) ANOVA on attribution yielded a main effect of behavior, $F(1, 75) = 5.25$, $p < .03$, $\eta^2 = .07$; internal attributions were more likely for leaders who communicated dominance than for leaders who communicated communality. However, this main effect was qualified by a significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 75) = 7.87$, $p < .006$, $\eta^2 = .10$. A separate analysis for women revealed a marginally significant two-way interaction, $F(1, 34) = 2.95$, $p < .10$, $\eta^2 = .08$. For White female leaders, expression of dominance was attributed to internal factors ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.73$) more than was expression of communality ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 2.07$), $t(17) = 2.13$, $p < .05$. In contrast, for Black female leaders, expression of dominance was not more likely to be attributed to internal factors ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.64$) than was expression of communality ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 2.37$), $t < 1$. There was a significant effect of race on attributions for male leaders' behavior, such that internal attributions for dominant behavior

were more likely for Blacks ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.60$) than for Whites ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.64$), $t(20) = 2.24$, $p < .04$. Finally, internal attributions for dominant behavior also tended to be more likely for Black male than for Black female leaders, $t(18) = 1.86$, $p < .08$.

To assess whether attribution mediated the interactive effects of race, gender, and behavior on leader-status scores, we utilized bootstrap estimates to generate bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals (CIs). If the confidence interval does not include zero, the indirect effect is deemed significant, and mediation can be said to be present (Hayes, 2009; Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Our model included behavior as a moderator of the path from race to attribution. Thus, we assessed mediated moderation. For female leaders, the indirect effect of race on leader status was significant (CI: [0.003, 1.595]). Specifically, attribution mediated the relationship in the case of dominance (CI: [0.028, 1.084]) but not communality (CI: [−.735, 0.283]). For male leaders, the indirect effect was also significant (CI: [−2.121, −0.167]), and again, this overall effect was driven by behavior expressing dominance (CI: [−1.482, −0.052]) and not behavior expressing communality (CI: [−0.191, 0.966]).

Discussion

This study illustrates the importance of considering both race and gender when examining the impact of agency, and specifically dominance, on leaders' outcomes. Our results are consistent with past research, as we found evidence of an agency penalty against White female leaders (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008). However, the novel contribution of our study is that we did *not* find evidence of an agency penalty against Black female leaders. Rather, responses to Black female leaders showed the same pattern as responses to White male leaders.

To be sure, our results present an enigma. If Black women have the same latitude of behavior as White men, why are there not more Black women in executive positions? We believe that it is important to make a distinction between penalties for dominance and penalties for competence-relevant mistakes. Although a (competent) Black female leader might be permitted to display dominance, it is not clear whether there is leniency for Black female leaders who make mistakes, as their mistakes might be interpreted as evidence of incompetence, given their lack of fit with the leader prototype (i.e., White male).

A recent article suggests that the extent to which a leader loses status after committing a competence-related error is a function of the fit between the person and the role (Brescoll, Dawson, & Uhlmann, 2010). If Black women do not "fit" the role of leader in general, they may be punished more harshly than White men—or even Black men—for making a mistake, because the less-than-perfect performance may highlight the incongruence between their social category and the established leader prototype. This might call into question whether they are fit to lead, and in such cases, Black women may indeed suffer double jeopardy. Future research will examine this possibility.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Notes

1. There were no significant effects of participants' ethnicity or gender.

2. Prior studies have shown an increase in White male leaders' status after they express agency (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Tiedens, 2001). However, the scenarios used in this previous research involved anger expressed toward a past event, rather than interpersonal dominance directed at an individual employee.

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