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## Identity challenges of women leaders: Antecedents and consequences of identity interference

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# ESMT Working Paper

# IDENTITY CHALLENGES OF WOMEN LEADERS

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ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF IDENTITY INTERFERENCE

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# Abstract

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## Identity challenges of women leaders: Antecedents and consequences of identity interference

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We explore the antecedents and consequences of women leaders' identity interference related to the perceived conflict between their roles as both women and leaders. Drawing on identity development and organizational demography research, we propose that leadership experience reduces women leaders' identity interference, whereas women's numerical underrepresentation in organizations exacerbates it. Moreover, we hypothesize that identity processes related to collective self-esteem—personal regard for one's collective identity and the perception of others' views of it—mediate these effects. A sample of 722 women leaders representing a diverse range of countries and industries supported our hypotheses. We also demonstrate that identity interference reduces the psychological well-being of women leaders and undermines their affective motivation to lead. In contrast, perceived conflict between leader and female identities enhances women's sense of duty to assume leadership roles. Importantly, women leaders' personal regard for their female identity buffers the detrimental effect of identity interference on life satisfaction. We discuss the implications of our results for women's advancement in organizations and the development of their identity as leaders.

**Keywords:** women leaders, identity interference, collective self-esteem, well-being, motivation to lead, leader development, organizational demography

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“Having more women at the top will simply help us operate better,” said René Obermann, chief executive at Deutsche Telekom (Moore, 2010). Companies are enthusiastically embracing the idea of increasing the number of women in corporate management, citing fairness and economic reasons. One assumption behind the statement is that women’s skills in the workplace are complementary to men’s. Indeed, women have traditionally been (and still are) seen as warm, empathetic, and good team players, whereas men are perceived to be more aggressive, assertive, and results-oriented (Bem, 1974; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). One can then argue that balancing feminine and masculine skills constitutes a potential advantage for organizations. Why, then, does the number of women leaders<sup>1</sup> in top management continue to lag? Despite the fact that this number has increased over the last decades, men continue to occupy most positions of power and decision-making authority in organizations (Smith, 2002). For example, in the United States, women occupy 47% of the U.S. workforce (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011) but only 5.2% of the CEOs (Catalyst, 2011a) and 16% of the companies’ board seats (Catalyst, 2011b). In Europe, the numbers are no more encouraging, with women holding approximately 12% of companies’ board seats (Catalyst, 2011c).

Research has shown that in male-dominated professions, despite the rhetoric, people are judged by their agentic behaviors (such as speaking assertively, being aggressive, and influencing others) (Madera, Hebl, & Martin, 2009), and female managers still denounce subtle means of discrimination in the workplace (Ely & Rhode, 2010). One might then wonder whether the positive attributes that women offer to a company can become a personal liability when these women must lead. Does balancing the tradeoff between socially accepted

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we use the terms *leader* and *manager* interchangeably, although we are aware that distinguishing them can be useful (Bennis, 1989).

attributes of both women and leaders contribute to female leaders' distress? If so, what organizational and individual characteristics may strengthen this ambivalence?

To advance in modern organizational hierarchies, women must cope with the “second generation” of gender bias—subtle obstacles rather than overt discrimination—by overcoming both structural and attitudinal barriers to leadership roles (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Ely & Rhode, 2010). Structural barriers include, for example, the underrepresentation of women in traditional structures of organizational power (Ely, 1995; Kanter, 1977; Ridgeway, 1993), the resulting limitation of access to informational networks (Ibarra, 1992), and the incompatibility of childcare and domestic tasks—still mostly assumed by women (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006)—with inflexible work hours that advancement has traditionally required (Ely & Rhode, 2010; Stone & Lovejoy, 2004).

In addition to these structural barriers, individual attitudes toward women leaders and the way in which women leaders perceive themselves also contribute to the gender gap in leadership positions (Ely & Rhode, 2010). These perceptions are deeply rooted in traditional gender expectations and practices. Displaying leadership behaviors is accepted and desirable for men, but not for women (Prentice & Carranza, 2002), which results in incongruity between behaviors typically associated with women and descriptive and prescriptive behaviors of leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). As a consequence, women leaders face a competence/likeability tradeoff between being assertive and authoritative when exercising authority—and thus being judged as effective but “too masculine” and “not nice”—and conforming to traditional female stereotypes—and being seen as likeable but ineffective and unambitious (Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). The landmark case of Ann Hopkins, a highly effective manager at Price Waterhouse who was refused partnership on the grounds of being “too aggressive” and was told to “dress more femininely, wear more makeup” and go to “a

charm school” (Fiske, Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux, & Heilman, 1991: 1050), illustrates the cultural ambivalence that women leaders face. A more recent example of Carly Fiorina, who as a CEO of Hewlett-Packard was systematically described as a “bimbo” or a “bitch” (Eagly & Karau, 2007: 102), further corroborates the barriers women leaders face.

Importantly, these biases emerge not only at the interpersonal level but also as intrapersonal processes that affect how women leaders see themselves, what they believe they must do to be effective, and whether they should assume and maintain leadership roles (Hogue & Lord, 2007). In this paper, we examine the intrapersonal attitudinal obstacles to women’s advancement to leadership positions. We focus on women leaders’ self-perception and, more specifically, on whether they believe that a conflict exists between their personal and professional identities. We define identity interference as a perceived incongruity between the roles of “woman” and “leader” and seek to understand the antecedents and consequences of women leaders’ identity interference.

Aiming to identify factors that strengthen identity interference, we first draw on the literature on the development of professional and leader identities (e.g., Dutton, Robert, & Bednar, 2010; Ely et al., 2011; Hall, 2002); we propose that leadership experience attenuates women leaders’ identity interference. Second, based on findings in the organizational demography literature (e.g., Elvira & Cohen, 2001; Ely, 1994; Kanter, 1977; Tolbert, Simons, Andrews, & Rhee, 1995), we expect that women leaders’ identity interference is especially pronounced in organizations in which women are a numerical minority. We thus propose that there is a direct link between structural and attitudinal barriers that women leaders face (Ely & Rhode, 2010). Importantly, we also build on the literature on collective self-esteem (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990) and study how women’s view of their collective identities (Tajfel, 1982) as women and leaders is linked to identity interference. Specifically, we hypothesize that

women leaders' collective self-esteem mediates the effect of leadership experience and organizational demography on identity interference.

As for the consequences of identity interference, we consider its effect on women leaders' well-being and their motivation to assume and maintain leadership roles. First, we build on identity research that links the perceived complementarity of multiple self-identities and psychological outcomes (e.g., Brook, Garcia, & Fleming, 2008; Coverman, 1989; Dutton et al., 2010; Settles, 2004) and hypothesize that identity interference negatively affects women leaders' well-being. Moreover, drawing on the literature on personal self-esteem (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Corning, 2002; Greenberg et al., 1992), we propose that women's collective self-esteem mitigates the detrimental effect of identity interference on well-being. Second, based on identity research (e.g., Thoits, 1991), we hypothesize that the perceived conflict between leader and female identities reduces the "pleasure" component of women's motivation to lead. We further refer to the literature on self-construal (e.g., Singelis, 1994) and regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) and propose that paradoxically, identity interference enhances women's sense of duty to take on leadership roles.

The data from 722 women leaders with varying degrees of managerial experience and who represent a diverse range of industries and countries supported our hypotheses. Our research provides novel results that integrate the ideas of leadership identity development and gender dynamics, thereby filling a critical gap in the leadership literature (Ely et al., 2011). We make important contributions to the literatures on leadership and identity by documenting the antecedents and consequences of identity interference for women leaders and linking structural and attitudinal barriers that women face while pursuing leadership positions. We also emphasize the importance of cultivating and maintaining collective self-esteem to diminish identity interference and its negative effects. Our research suggests that in order to retain female talent, organizations should consider women's self-perceptions as leaders,

understand how current organizational practices may harm the collective self-esteem of women leaders, and identify new practices to cultivate women leaders' collective self-esteem.

### **WOMEN LEADERS' IDENTITY INTERFERENCE AND ITS MODERATORS**

The goal of this paper is to explore the antecedents and effects of women leaders' conflicting multiple identities. Identity has been defined as self-schemas or the meanings that individuals attach to themselves (Gecas, 1982). As social identity theory postulates (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1982), these self-schemas contain a personal component—derived from the individual's personality traits as well as a social component—that is related to the individual's common identification with a collectivity or social category. A person's self-concept includes multiple social identities (Deaux, 1993; Thoits, 1983; Turner, 1985, 1987). For example, one might possess the multiple identities of a woman, mother, friend, leader, political activist, and a European. In this paper, we focus on the interaction of gender and leader identities of women. Women's gender identity refers to the meaning that women attach to their membership in the social category of "female" (Ely, 1994). Similarly, women's identity as a leader refers to women's interpretation of their belonging to the social category of "leaders."

As mentioned above, the characteristics and behaviors typically expected from women and leaders dramatically differ. In particular, gender role stereotypes prescribe more communal behavior to women, that is, more subordinate, "warm," nurturing, caring, cooperative, selfless, and supportive (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). Simultaneously, successful leaders are often described as possessing and requiring agentic characteristics such as assertiveness, self-confidence, direction, competitiveness, and problem-solving (Arkkelin & Simmons, 1985; Martell, Parker, Emrich, & Crawford, 1998; Powell & Butterfield, 1989; Schein, 2001). These characteristics are more strongly ascribed to men than women (Eagly et



al., 2000), thereby revealing the “think leader—think male” stereotype (Schein, 2001; Sczesny, 2003).

The incongruity between the mostly communal qualities that people associate with women and the mostly agentic characteristics they associate with successful leaders is at the center of the role incongruity model (Eagly & Karau, 2002). According to this model, as well as a more general lack-of-fit model (Heilman, 1983, 2001), gender stereotypes imply that women are less likely to be judged as qualified for leadership positions. In addition, once in the leadership positions, they are perceived less favorably (as “less effective”) because prescribed leadership behaviors are incongruent with expected “female” behaviors. Women leaders thus may feel pressure to accommodate their behavior to the conflicting demands arising from prescriptive beliefs about how women and leaders ought to behave (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). To be perceived as effective when exercising their authority, women may opt to display more agentic and less communal behaviors—a strategy that can, however, backfire, leading to social disapproval (Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Fiske et al., 2002; Rudman & Glick, 1999). In sum, the existing literature on gender roles and leadership suggests that for women leaders, competing demands and values associated with the two facets of their identity can generate identity interference (Goode, 1960; Van Sell, Brief, & Schuler, 1981).

### **The role of organizational demography**

Identity is influenced by interactions with others (Gecas, 1982; Gergen & Gergen, 1988). In such interactions, individuals verify their self-views and seek social validation (Higgins, 1989; Stets & Burke, 2000). Consistent with this idea, the literature on leadership development suggests that interactions with peers, subordinates, and superiors contribute to the development of the leader’s identity (Ibarra, 1999). Social acceptance is a necessary

element in producing meaningful shifts in one's self-view as a leader; and novice leaders are sensitive to social feedback and seek social validations of their self-views as leaders (Lord & Hall, 2005; Gibson, 2003).

DeRue and Ashford (2010) also emphasize the relational component of identity construction and propose that a leader's identity is co-constructed with his/her followers through the process of claiming and granting leader and follower identities in their social interactions. Thus, whether other members of the organization see a woman as a leader is essential for her to internalize her leader identity. Research suggests that because others may see women's leadership attempts as less legitimate and thus accept them less, women may find it more difficult to develop self-concepts as leaders (Ridgeway, 2003). We propose that the demographic composition of organizations modifies the extent to which women leaders perceive social acceptance in organizations. Consequently, it affects women leaders' ability to integrate leadership identity into their overall self-concept.

Specifically, organizational demography is likely to affect the interference between the gender and professional identities of women leaders for several reasons. First, gender identity becomes more salient when women are a minority in their organizations (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999; Stets & Burke, 2000); being seen as a legitimate leader may be especially challenging for women in such circumstances. A recent meta-analysis (Koenig et al., 2011) suggested that while both women and men construe leadership in masculine terms, men do so to a greater extent (see also Duehr & Bono, 2006), possibly because of men's less frequent exposure to female leaders (Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2009). As a result, it will be especially challenging for women to validate their leadership in male-dominated organizations.

Second, the members of minorities in organizations face more pressures than "numerical dominants," as minority members are scrutinized more closely, their achievements

tends to be diminished, and cultural stereotypes are often used when making sense of their behavior (Blau, 1977; Kanter, 1977). It implies that male-dominated organizations provide a less favorable work environment for women. Empirical findings support this view. For example, Spangler, Gordon, and Pipkin (1978) compare law schools with different gender ratios and report that social influences such as performance pressure, social isolation, and role entrapment impede women's performance when they are in a small minority. Izraeli (1983) documents that women on labor union committees with relatively few women feel less influential than women on committees with a more equal gender ratio. Similarly, studies of voluntary turnover in organizations suggested that women are less likely to leave their jobs when their organizations employ proportionally more women (Elvira & Cohen, 2001; Tolbert et al., 1995; Zimmer, 1988). Experimental and quasi-experimental evidence on women's behavior in contests corroborates the idea that women are less at ease when competing with men as compared to women (Gneezy, Niederle, & Rustichini, 2003; Hogarth, Karelaia, & Trujillo, 2011).

Finally, woman might find it more difficult to identify with appropriate role models in male-dominated organizations (Ely, 1994; Warihay, 1980). Previous research has highlighted the positive motivational effects of role models who provide guidance and psychological support (Noe, 1988), allow the individual to self-affirm (Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007), and boost self-efficacy perceptions (Gibson, 2003). The inability to identify female role models within an organization may signal to women that they are in the "wrong place" and thereby strengthen their identity interference.

We thus propose that in organizations where women are a numerical minority, the controversies related to social acceptance make it more difficult for women leaders to reconcile their social identities as women and leaders. Consequently, we predict that

woman/leader identity interference is stronger among women working in male-dominated organizations. The following hypothesis summarizes our prediction:

*Hypothesis 1. Woman/leader identity interference is more pronounced in male-dominated organizations.*

### **The role of leadership experience**

We adopt the view that leaders develop their professional identities through experience (Day, 2000; Day & Harrison, 2007; Ely et al., 2011; Hall, 2002; Ibarra, Snook, & Guillén Ramo, 2010; McCall, 2004). Literature that defends this view explicitly links leadership development and identity processes and assumes that work-related identities change over time as individuals progress through distinct career stages (Hall, 2002).

From this perspective, building a leader identity entails a process of adaptation to the leadership role requirements and integration of the leadership role with the individual's value structure (e.g., Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2001; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). When the adaptation process is successful and the individual progresses within the organization, his/her leader identity solidifies and properly integrates into the individual's broader sense of self (Dutton et al., 2010; Ibarra et al., 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005). This adaptation does not imply merely adhering to prescribed behaviors but rather refining what the role means to the individual and transcending role boundaries (Kelman, 2006). Thus, if successful, women might develop a view of leadership that reflects their own style and frees them from standards they do not appreciate. We predict that women leaders who manage to rise to the top of organizational hierarchies learn to incorporate their leader identities into their broader sense of self. In doing so, they minimize the cognitive dissonance resulting from holding multiple opposing identities (Festinger, 1957; Higgins, 1989). Thus, the identity interference they report will be lower.

Research also suggests that women who succeed in achieving high-status organizational roles may be perceived as highly effective because they had to be extraordinarily competent to have met the stricter requirements applied to women (so-called “double standards,” Foschi, 1996, 2000; Lyness & Heilman, 2006; Rosette & Tost, 2010; see also Heilman, Martell, & Simon, 1988). In addition, perceptions of one’s competence are correlated with social status (Fiske et al., 2002), suggesting that top leadership positions confer a “competence premium” to their holders. As a consequence, followers may afford women in upper management greater acceptance than women in lower positions. Moreover, competence perceptions are related to optimism and positive focus (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Pfeffer & Fong, 2005; Sosik, 2001). Greater acceptance and enhanced optimism, in turn, will also lower identity interference. Thus, the literature on both identity-based leadership development and status-competence perceptions leads to the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2. Women with more experience in leadership tasks perceive less interference between their identities of women and leaders.*

## **CONSEQUENCES OF IDENTITY INTERFERENCE**

### **Well-being**

Holding multiple identities does not come without benefits. For example, self-complexity provides more guidance to one’s life and results in a stronger sense of “existential security” (Thoits, 1983, 1991), enhances creativity (Cheng, Sanchez-Burks, & Lee, 2008), increases one’s opportunities to self-affirm (Niedenthal, Setterlund, & Wherry, 1992), and helps one to effectively cope with daily failures (Dixon & Baumeister, 1991). However, the positive effect of holding multiple identities depends on the perceived complementarity of the multiple selves (Berry, 2005; Dutton et al., 2010). The perceived dissonance between the meanings of different identities that one holds can lead to negative psychological outcomes,

such as stress and diminished well-being (Coverman, 1989; Downie, Koestner, ElGeledi, & Cree, 2004; Simon, 1995). For example, identity research demonstrates that interferences between personal and professional identities lead to lower well-being among women scientists (Settles, 2004). Similarly, in a study by Brook et al. (2008), university students who were asked to consider conflicts between their multiple social identities (related to gender, race/ethnicity, politics, nationality, sports teams, work, social/academic clubs and social roles such as student, sibling, parent, employee, friend, and others) also reported lower well-being.

Well-being has been described as a multi-faceted construct that includes emotional responses to daily circumstances (e.g., stress) and global judgments of life satisfaction (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). We predict that women leaders who perceive greater interference between their personal and professional identities experience more stress and lower levels of life satisfaction. First, for women leaders, the greater the perceived interference, the more they will feel that the act of leading constitutes a threat to their deeply rooted gender identity (Thoits, 1991). Second, identity interference can harm self-efficacy perceptions, further reducing women's well-being. Role-accumulation theory has demonstrated that integrating professional and personal roles not only enhances self-acceptance, self-esteem, and life-satisfaction but also serves to enrich one's repertoire of leadership skills (Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, & King, 2002). The following hypothesis summarizes our prediction:

*Hypothesis 3. Women leaders who experience greater identity interference will report more stress and lower life satisfaction.*

### **Motivation to lead**

Motivation to lead has been defined (Chan & Drasgow, 2001: 482) as an "individual-differences construct that affects a leader's or leader-to-be's decisions to assume leadership

training, roles, and responsibilities and that affects his or her intensity of effort at leading and persistence as a leader.” Leadership literature suggests that the motivation to lead is a complex construct that includes multiple components. Chan and Drasgow (2001) distinguish between non-calculative, affective and social-normative components of the motivation of lead. Individuals who score high on the non-calculative component would lead only if the benefits of leading outweigh the costs. The affective component refers to the positive affect associated with the act of leading. Individuals who score high on this measure would lead for the pleasure of doing so. The social-normative component refers to the social norms related to the act of leading. Individuals who score high on this component would lead for reasons such as a sense of duty or responsibility. Previous research has suggested that the affective and social-normative components are empirically more linked to cognitive processes such as, for instance, those related to self-efficacy perception (Chan & Drasgow, 2001) and self-regulation processes (Kark & Van Dijk, 2007). Given our interest in identity interference as perceived by women (i.e., perceived incongruity), we thus focus only on the affective and the social-normative components.

When the perceived identity interference between the roles of woman and leader is high, assuming a leadership role is likely to result in an incoherent self-concept and thus threaten one’s sense of self (Thoits, 1991). Individuals are motivated to maintain coherent self-representations and to reduce the dissonance between different cognitions and behaviors (Festinger, 1957; Higgins, 1989). People who experience dissonance between their identities are thus motivated to reduce the conflict, and they employ various coping strategies to do so (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). Possible coping strategies include integrating multiple identities at one extreme or devaluing or exiting the conflicting identities at the other (Steele, 1997; Dutton et al., 2010).

Arguably, downplaying one's leader identity may be the most feasible strategy to cope with the perceived incompatibility of the roles of leader and woman. First, integration of multiple identities requires both individual effort and favorable external conditions, and it occurs over a substantial period of time (Ibarra et al., 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005). Second, quitting the *acquired* social identity of leader is conceivably simpler than exiting the *ascribed* gender identity. Thus, excluding leadership roles from the sense of self may be the simplest way to resolve the perceived contradiction between the two roles. Identity theory supports this view by suggesting that in order to hierarchically organize their multiple identities, individuals more firmly commit to the identities that are "socioculturally appropriate in view of the individual characteristics" than to the identities that are less normatively appropriate (Thoits, 1991: 105). Moreover, social attitudes may be condescending toward women who display "female attributes" in their behavior (Prentice & Carranza, 2002), thereby reinforcing women leaders' strategy of excluding leadership (i.e., "masculine") traits to manage their identity interference. In our context, this phenomenon implies that if women construe leadership behaviors as "inappropriate" for women, i.e., as behaviors that result in social disapproval and internal conflict, they will be less willing to commit to their leader identities. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that identity interference will reduce the positive affect that women associate with the act of leading.

The effect of identity interference on women's social-normative motivation to lead is less evident. On the one hand, identity interference may reduce not only the perception of pleasure associated with leading but also the sense of duty, as a part of the same self-protecting strategy. On the other hand, there are several reasons to believe that women will persist in leadership roles even if they do not find them particularly pleasant. First, research finds that women leaders assume a prevention-oriented approach whereby they seek to avoid others' disapproval, while men adopt a more promotion-oriented approach by focusing on



how to achieve success (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2007). Regulatory focus theory suggests that prevention strategies emphasize what one ought to do rather than what one likes to do (Higgins, 1997). The social-normative component of motivation to lead (e.g., “I feel that I have the duty to lead others if I am asked”) has in fact been suggested to relate to the prevention focus (Kark & Van Dijk, 2007).

Second, drawing upon the literature on self-construal, we suggest that women may consider not only personal motives—and thereby reduce negative affect by withdrawing from leadership roles—but also integrate the motives related to others, e.g., future generations of women, and thus persist in leadership roles even when it is personally unpleasant. In particular, research suggests that unlike men, women have a more prominent interdependent than independent component of self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and thus view themselves more in terms of connectedness to others than separateness from others (Cross & Madson, 1997). While an independent self places a greater importance on individual goals, individuals with a more prominent interdependent component strive to fulfill their social roles (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000; Singelis, 1994). They are not only more committed in furthering the interests of their social group (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) but also feel more capable of effecting a noticeable change through their actions (Cornelissen, Cojuharenco, & Karelaia, 2011). Literature on negotiation corroborates this idea by suggesting that women dislike negotiating for themselves (Babcock & Laschever, 2003) but are more willing to engage in negotiations on behalf of others (Bowless & McGinn, 2008). We thus suggest that women leaders who are aware of gender-related barriers may feel that they must persist in leadership positions precisely because of the difficulties associated with it. That is, they feel the duty to challenge the current *status quo* that is unfavorable to their social group to “pave the way” for future generations of women.

Our predictions are summarized in the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 4. Women leaders who experience more identity interference will report lower affective motivation to lead and higher social-normative motivation to lead.*

## **COLLECTIVE SELF-ESTEEM**

### **Channeling effect of collective self-esteem**

An important attribute of social identification is collective self-esteem, or evaluations of one's social identities (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Collective self-esteem refers to the perceived worthiness of one's social groups and is conceptually different from personal self-esteem, which refers to a global feeling of self-worth and self-acceptance (Rosenberg, 1965; Crocker & Major, 1989). Importantly, collective self-esteem includes not only how positively one evaluates the goodness of one's social group ("private regard"), but also how positively one believes that others evaluate the social group ("public regard," Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). We are interested in how women leaders' evaluations of the social groups of "women" and "leaders" are linked to their identity interference. We draw on theories of efficacious actions and social approval as sources of self-esteem (Franks & Marolla, 1976) and propose that leadership experience increases women's private regard for leaders, which ultimately channels the effect of experience on women leaders' identity interference. On the other hand, women's proportional representation in the organization is likely to affect their perception of public regard for women, ultimately also modifying perceived identity interference. We next develop the mediation hypotheses in more detail.

Identity literature suggests that self-identity develops through efficacious interactions with the environment (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983). Leadership experience and advancement in organizational hierarchies provide greater autonomy, control, and availability of resources and thereby increases the opportunity to experience the sense of agency. Thus, leadership experience relates to higher self-efficacy perceptions (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). We propose

that through this process, women leaders develop not only efficacy-based personal self-esteem (Franks & Marolla, 1976; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983) but also a more positive view of the “leaders” social group.

Indeed, the attractiveness of belonging to a social group may increase with one’s positive contact with this social group (Amir, 1976; Stephan, 1987). Moreover, the experience does not need to be positive to increase one’s affiliation with the social group. Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) predicts that people who invested a considerable amount of time in a particular task learn to value it because they need to believe that their time was well used. Given that pursuing a managerial career requires a significant time investment (Stone & Lovejoy, 2004), this reasoning also suggests that with time and experience, women leaders increasingly value their leader identity. Self-enhancement motives, whereby individuals assign a greater importance to domains in which they are successful (Taylor & Brown, 1988; Tesser & Campbell, 1980), further suggest that women’s positive view of the “leaders” social category is coextensive with their leadership experience. We thus formulate the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 5A. Women leaders’ private regard for their leader identity mediates the effect of leadership experience on woman/leader identity interference.*

As for organizational demography, we have argued that it relates to women’s perceptions of social acceptance. We further propose that the numerical underrepresentation of women in an organization will make it more difficult for them to maintain a positive meaning of their membership in the category “female.” First, as we have argued above, when women are numerically unrepresented in their organizations, they are more likely to be stereotyped and scrutinized by other members of the organizations (Kanter, 1977). Second, they are less likely to be evaluated by their male colleagues as effective leaders (Koenig et al.,

2011). Third, the underrepresentation of women may communicate that the women's gender identity is incompatible with the values of the organization (Ely, 1994). Building on these arguments, we propose that in organizations in which women are a numerical minority, women will believe that others hold less favorable views of them as a social group. Because leading includes the basic task of influencing and mobilizing others, suspecting that others see women less positively can heighten women leaders' perception that being a leader is incompatible with being a woman.

Importantly, although one's self-concept reflects how one believes others evaluate him/her (Cooley, 1956; Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979), literature on self-perception of stigmatized group members suggests that they do not necessarily internalize the negative perceptions that others hold for their group (cf. Jost & Banaji, 1994). In particular, Crocker and Major (1989) proposed that although negative public regard predicts psychological distress among, for example, women and African Americans, it does not translate into lower personal self-esteem because the awareness of prejudice helps stigmatized individuals to cope with their experiences of discrimination. Similarly, the private component of collective self-esteem has been shown to only moderately correlate with the public component (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Thus, we do not expect to find any significant spillover effect from the public component of women's collective self-esteem to its private component, and hypothesize only the mediating effect of women's perception of others' regard for their female collective identity (i.e., the public component).

The following hypothesis summarizes our predictions:

*Hypothesis 5B. Women leaders' perceptions of how positively others evaluate women (i.e., public regard for women) mediate the effect of the proportional representation of women on woman/leader identity interference.*

**Protective function of collective self-esteem**

A large body of evidence in psychology indicates that personal self-esteem is negatively correlated with psychological distress (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1992, Kernis, Grannemann, & Mathis, 1991). In addition, both correlational and experimental evidence suggests that personal self-esteem serves an anxiety-buffering function, whereby it moderates the relationship between various stressors and psychological distress (see Greenberg et al., 1992 for a review).

Similarly, research on collective self-esteem related to ascribed characteristics, such as gender and race, has supported the moderating effect of collective self-esteem on psychological well-being. First, significant direct relationships were documented between stigmatized group members' positive identification with their groups and their psychological health. For example, African Americans with a more positive group identity exhibit lower rates of depression and anxiety (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995). Similarly, among women, a greater sense of pride in their female identity is related to a less anxious and depressed mood (Lee & Robbins, 1998) and a more positive well-being (Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, & Owen, 2002). In fact, the mere presence of similarly stigmatized others reduces depression and anxiety (Frable, Platt, & Hoey, 1998).

Second, positive social identity alleviates the negative consequence of psychological stressors. Research on racial discrimination has found that group identification buffers the negative consequences of perceiving oneself as a victim of racial prejudice (Branscombe et al., 1999). Similarly, women's collective self-esteem has been shown to moderate the relationship between perceived gender discrimination and the resulting psychological distress, as measured by anxiety, depression, and somatization (Corning, 2002). Correspondingly, we hypothesize that women leaders' private regard for their female identity—which in the workplace, unlike their leader identity, carries a stigma and associated risks of discrimination

and negative stereotyping (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Major & O'Brien, 2005)—will buffer the negative effect of identity interference on women's well-being (i.e., life satisfaction and perceived stress).

*Hypothesis 6. Women leaders' private regard for their female identity serves as a shield against the negative effect of identity interference on well-being.*

## **METHOD**

### **Procedure and Sample**

The invitations to participate in an on-line survey on “women and leadership” were sent to about 5900 women alumni of two major business schools. Within two weeks, we received complete responses from 722 women (response rate of approximately 12%), and this was our sample for the analysis. These women were between 26 and 68 years old ( $M = 40$ ); 49% had children; 68% were married or lived with a partner. The sample represents 68 different countries of origin and approximately 60 countries of current residence (69% reside in Europe and Russia, with 9% in France, 17% in Germany, and 16% in the UK; 12% are in the USA and Canada; 8% live in Asia; and 11% are distributed between Mexico, Central and South America, Australia and New Zealand, the Middle East and Africa, with no more than 5% in each region. In terms of education, 13% of our sample had only attained a bachelor's degree, 73% had also completed at least one master's program, and 6% had a PhD. The vast majority of the sample (91%) was employed at the time of the survey. Respondents who were unemployed were asked, for the purposes of the survey, to consider the last organization in which they had worked. The women had an average of 16.1 years of working experience ( $SD = 7.9$ ) and 8.9 years of managerial experience ( $SD = 7.4$ ).

These women represent a variety of sectors and industries: manufacturing (13%), professional services (e.g., accounting, consulting, law; 23%), services (e.g., travel, banking,

food; 19%), technology and communications (10%), consumer goods (8%), government, educational, and non-profit organizations (6%), media and entertainment (3%), and other industries (e.g., energy; 18%). The number of participants was nearly equally distributed between large (more than 25,000 employees), medium (between 501 and 25,000 employees), and smaller companies (up to 500 employees)—30%, 38%, and 32%, respectively.

The majority of our participants (76%) are employed by male-dominated organizations (i.e., where men represent more than 50% of employees across all levels of the organization). For 184 respondents (26%), the proportion of women in their organizations does not surpass 25%; 59 respondents (8%) report working at organizations that employ at least 75% women. As for their role within their organizations, 78 women (11%) are either CEOs or managing partners, 192 (27%) are in senior executive management positions, 247 (34%) are middle managers, 121 (17%) are first-level managers, 52 (7%) work in non-managerial positions, and the remaining 32 respondents (4%) report occupying other positions (e.g., independent consultants and free-lancers). Finally, our participants reported having an average of 6 direct reports ( $SD = 15$ ).

## Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, all items used a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored at 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. Measures (except for demographics) were counterbalanced to control for possible order effects.

***Identity interference.*** To measure the degree to which being a women and being a leader were perceived to interfere with one another, participants completed a three-item scale adapted from Settles (2004; see also Tompson & Werner, 1997). The items included “I feel that other managers do not take me seriously because I am a woman,” “Being a manager makes me less feminine,” and “I think that I am not influential enough because I am a

woman.” The scale was anchored at 1 = not at all true of me, and 7 = extremely true of me. The scale’s internal consistency was acceptable ( $\alpha = .67$ ) and comparable to the levels reported in previous studies that used shorter scales to measure identity interference (e.g., Brook et al., 2008).

***Subjective well-being.*** Participants completed the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) and 4 items from the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). Sample items include “In most ways, my life is close to my ideal” (life satisfaction,  $\alpha = .89$ ) and “In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?” (stress,  $\alpha = .79$ ). The Stress Scale was anchored at 0 = never and 4 = very often. Cohen and Williamson (1988) showed that PSS correlates with Stress Measures as well as Self-Reported Health and Health Services Measures, among others.

***Motivation to lead.*** To measure participants’ willingness to engage in leadership tasks, we used the 9-item Affective-Identity Motivation to Lead Scale and the 9-item Social-Normative Motivation to Lead Scale (Chan & Drasgow, 2001) to assess affect-based and duty-based components of the motivation to lead. Sample items include “I am the type of person who likes to be in charge of others,” “I usually want to be the leader in the groups that I work in” (affective), “I feel that I have the duty to lead others if I am asked,” and “I agree to lead whenever I am asked or nominated by the other members” (social-normative). The two subscales were internally consistent ( $\alpha$ s of .85 and .72, respectively).

***Collective self-esteem.*** The Collective Self-Esteem Scale (CSES; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) was used to measure the positivity of one’s social identity. The scale operationalizes social identity as stable individual differences. In this study, participants were asked first to respond in terms of their gender identity and then in terms of their leader identity. The questions were adapted accordingly. We used *Private collective self-esteem* and



*Public collective self-esteem* subscales of the original CSES (both with 4 items) to measure women's regard for their social identities (e.g., "In general, I'm glad to be a woman" and "Overall, I often feel that being a woman is not worthwhile") and to assess their perceptions of others' regard for women (e.g., "Overall, being a woman is considered good by others" and "In general, others respect women"). For leader and women identities, internal reliabilities of responses to each of the two subscales were acceptable ( $\alpha$ s between .66 and .69, respectively), corresponding to levels reported in previous studies (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999).

***Control variables and demographics.*** Previous research found that leadership self-efficacy directly affects one's motivation to lead (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). We thus included 8 items from the Leadership Self-Efficacy Perceptions Scale (Murphy, 2001), which measures an individual's perceptions of his or her own general capabilities to lead and includes items such as "In general, I am very good at leading a group of my peers" and "I am confident of my ability to influence a work group that I lead" ( $\alpha = .90$ ). Finally, we also included 6 items from the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960) to control for possible social desirability bias in answers ( $\alpha = .60$ ).

Previous research suggests that the importance of one's social group memberships to one's self-concept may moderate the effect of stressors on psychological well-being (Burke, 1991). In particular, conflicting expectations of multiple roles or identities could be especially distressing only for those who place high importance to their multiple identities (Ross, Mirowsky, & Huber, 1983; Thoits, 1991). To control for identity centrality, we included *Importance to Identity* subscale (4 items) of the original CSES (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) to measure the importance of belonging to the social groups of women and leaders. Sample items include "Overall, being a woman has very little to do with how I feel about myself" and "Being a woman is an important reflection of who I am." The scales for gender and leader identity centrality were internally consistent ( $\alpha$ s of .73 and .82, respectively).

At the beginning of the questionnaire, respondents indicated their age, marital status, number of children, education, employment status, countries of origin and current residence, years of working and managerial experience, and several characteristics of their organization (industry, number of employees, and proportion of women in the organization). In addition, participants were asked to indicate their role within their organization and their number of direct reports. Finally, previous research found that role models play an important role in identity learning, as they serve to validate one's professional identity (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006). We thus asked participants to indicate the overall number of role models they have had in their career and the number of female role models. They reported having had three role models on average (range between 0 and 30; 10% had none), and an average of .8 female role models (range between 0 and 8; 49% had none).

## RESULTS

*Descriptive analyses.* Means, standard deviations, and correlations for our focal variables appear in Table 1. Our measures of collective self-esteem—private and public regard for women and leaders, as well as the centrality of these identities—have low to moderate correlations, suggesting that they should be analyzed separately (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). We looked for further evidence by conducting a confirmatory factor analysis using maximum likelihood estimation procedures implemented in LISREL (Bentler & Dudgeon, 1996). For both leader and female identities, we compared the goodness of fit of a structure with three factors (private regard, public regard, and centrality) and a structure with only one factor. The model with three factors ( $\chi^2(51) = 337.49$ , RMSEA = .08, CFI = .91, SRMR = .07 for female identity and  $\chi^2(51) = 376.18$ , RMSEA = .09, CFI = .92, SRMR = .06 for leader identity) yielded a significantly better fit with the data than the model with one

factor ( $\chi^2(54) = 1669.38$ , RMSEA = .20, CFI = .60, SRMR = .16 for female identity and  $\chi^2(54) = 1670.11$ , RMSEA = .20, CFI = .73, SRMR = .13 for leader identity).

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 Insert Table 1 about here  
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We tested our hypotheses using multiple regression analysis. To do so, we first standardized our focal variables and then multiplied them to create interaction terms (Aiken & West, 1991). In the regression analysis, we controlled for demographic variables such as age, marital status, number of children, education, number of employees in the organization, social desirability, and identity centrality for both gender and leader identities. Additional controls (e.g., number of role models and leadership self-efficacy) were specific to each regression model; these are indicated in the regression analyses below.

*Antecedents of identity interference and the channeling effect of collective self-esteem.* To examine the impact of organizational demography and managerial experience on women leaders' identity interference and to assess mediation by the appropriate indicators of collective self-esteem, we conducted analyses using hierarchical ordinary least-square (OLS) regressions. In Step 1, in addition to our standard set of control variables, we added additional controls (role models and female role models) and the variables measuring managerial experience and the proportion of men in the organization. In Step 2, we first added the private and public components of collective self-esteem related to female identity. We then run a regression where these components were replaced by analogous measures of leader identity. Table 2 displays the results of this analysis. As specified in Hypotheses 1 and 2, the proportion of men in the organization has a significant positive effect on identity interference; managerial experience, on the other hand, reduces women leaders' identity interference (Step 1). The magnitude and the significance of the effect of the proportion of men diminish after controlling for women's private and public regard for their female identity (Step 2a).

Similarly, the effect of managerial experience on identity interference loses its magnitude after controlling for women's private and public regard for their leader identity (Step 2b).

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Next, we assessed the significance of our suggested mediation models using the bootstrapping procedure developed by Preacher and Hayes (2008) by constructing 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals around the indirect effects of organizational demography and managerial experience. The results indicated that, as predicted in Hypothesis 5A, managerial experience had a positive effect on women's private regard for leaders,  $b = .02$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $\beta = .15$ ,  $p = .001$ , and the latter partially mediated the effect of managerial experience on identity interference. The confidence interval for the indirect effect excluded zero (-.010, -.001), and the proportion of the total effect mediated was 26%.

As for the indirect effect of organizational demography, analogous analysis indicated that as expected (Hypothesis 5B), women's perception of how positively others evaluate women (i.e., public regard) partially mediated the effect of the numerical dominance of men on women's identity interference. In particular, the proportion of men had a significantly negative effect on women's opinion about others' regard for women,  $b = -.15$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $\beta = -.13$ ,  $p = .001$ . Moreover, the confidence interval for the indirect effect of organization demography on identity interference through the perceived public regard for women excluded zero (.02, .07), and the proportion of the total effect mediated was 29%. Although women's private regard for their female identity had a significant effect on identity interference (Step 2a), additional mediation analyses indicated that the effect of the proportion of men on women's private regard was not significant,  $b = -.03$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $\beta = -.03$ ,  $p = .46$ . In addition, the confidence interval for the indirect effect passing through the private regard included zero (-.01, .02).

*The effect of identity interference on well-being and the protective role of collective self-esteem.* We next examined the effect of identity interference on life satisfaction and perceived stress, and tested for moderation by women's regard for their female identity. We followed the procedure recommended by Aiken and West (1991) and conducted analyses using hierarchical OLS regressions. For both life satisfaction and stress, we entered our standard set of control variables, additional controls (such as role models and female role models, managerial experience, and the proportion of men in the organization), identity interference, and the variables measuring collective self-esteem of women leaders in Step 1. In Step 2, we added the interactions of identity interference with the private and public components of women leaders' collective self-esteem. At this step, we additionally controlled for the interaction between identity interference and identity centrality for both leader and female identities. The results, which are displayed in Table 3, indicated a statistically significant negative effect for life satisfaction and a positive effect for stress, as we expected (Hypothesis 3). In addition, the interaction between identity interference and women's private regard for their gender identity was significant in predicting life satisfaction (Hypothesis 6). In contrast, collective self-esteem did not appear to have a buffering effect on stress. Thus, Hypothesis 6, regarding the protective effect of collective self-esteem on well-being, was supported for life-satisfaction but not for stress.

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 Insert Table 3 about here  
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To interpret the interactive effect of identity interference and women's regard for their gender identity on life satisfaction, we analyzed the simple slopes at one standard deviation above and below the mean of women's regard for their gender identity (Aiken & West, 1991). As Figure 1 shows, the detrimental effect of identity interference on life satisfaction is stronger for women who hold less positive opinions regarding their gender identity. To further

test the interaction, we compared each of the simple slopes to zero. The analyses revealed that the negative relationship between identity interference and life satisfaction was stronger when women's regard for their female identity was low ( $b = -.31, p < .001$ ) than when it was high ( $b = -.13, p < .05$ ). These results indicate that women's regard for their female identity shields their life satisfaction from the detrimental effect of identity interference, although stress appears to be independent of women's regard for their gender identity. One possible reason for the divergent results regarding life satisfaction and stress with respect to women's collective self-esteem is that stress is strongly associated with concrete punishing stimuli such as daily hassles, while life satisfaction is a global cognitive evaluation that tends to be consistent across time and relatively independent of particular life events (Diener et al., 1999). Thus, our results suggest that although women's regard for their gender identity does not protect them from concrete stressors, it shields their global experience of well-being from the pernicious effects of identity interference.

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 Insert Figure 1 about here  
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Unexpectedly, the regression results predicting life satisfaction (Table 3) also showed a significant interaction effect between identity interference and women's perceptions of the value that others place on the social category of "leaders." Figure 2 depicts the simple slopes for the relationship between identity interference and life satisfaction at one standard deviation above and below the mean of women's perceptions of public regard for leaders. The simple slopes indicated that the negative relationship between identity interference and life satisfaction was stronger for women with a more positive opinion regarding others' view of leaders ( $b = -.32, p < .001$ ) than for women with a less positive opinion of the public image of leaders ( $b = -.12, p < .05$ ). These results may indicate that women who believe that others hold leaders in high regard have the additional pressure to perform in accordance with these

high standards. If they believe that being a leader is incompatible with being a woman, this additional pressure may indeed magnify the negative effect of identity interference on their psychological well-being.

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Insert Figure 2 about here  
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*The effect of identity interference on the motivation to lead.* Finally, we conducted OLS regression analyses to examine the effect of identity interference on the motivation to lead. We built separate models for the affective and the social-normative components of motivation to lead with identity interference as the main predictor. In addition to our standard set of control variables, we also entered the variables measuring leadership self-efficacy, the private and public components of women leaders' collective self-esteem, role models and female role models, managerial experience, and the proportion of men in the organization. Table 4 presents the results. As expected (Hypothesis 4), identity interference had a significant negative effect on women's affective motivation to lead and a significant positive effect on their social-normative motivation to lead.

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Insert Table 4 about here  
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Consistent with past research (e.g., Chan & Drasgow, 2001), leadership self-efficacy had a positive relationship with both components of motivation to lead. Perhaps unsurprisingly, positive personal regard for leaders also had a significant positive effect on women's willingness to assume and persist in a leadership role. Interestingly, the number of female role models that women leaders reported had a significant positive effect on their sense of duty regarding leadership, but it did not influence their affective motivation to lead. This result suggests that women may derive a sense of leadership duty from their past experiences, such that having encountered female role models in one's own career increases

one's perceived responsibility to become a role model for younger women—though without necessarily increasing one's joy in leading. While future research should further investigate this issue, the result is consistent with women's high interdependency and motivation to fulfill their social roles (Cross & Madson, 1997; Cross et al., 2000) as well as women leaders' high prevention focus (Higgins, 1997; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2007).

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

How does perceived conflict between professional and personal identities affect women leaders? What personal and organizational characteristics attenuate the effect of identity interference? What is the role of the value that women leaders place on their collective identities? We presented novel empirical results on identity challenges that women leaders face. We demonstrated that identity interference has important consequences for women's psychological well-being—increasing stress and reducing life satisfaction—as well as for their motivation to lead—reducing the pleasure of leading and increasing the sense of duty to persist in leadership roles. By linking organizational demography and leadership experience with collective self-esteem, and by considering their effects on women leaders' identity interference, we highlighted important factors for the development of a leader identity.

### **Theoretical contributions**

This research contributes to the growing literature on identity in organizational studies by advancing knowledge about the challenges that women leaders face when developing their leader identities. As such, this research takes a step toward addressing recent calls to better understand the interplay of leadership identity development and gender processes (Ely et al., 2011). Although attitudinal barriers to women's advancement to leadership positions (Ely &



Rhode, 2010) have attracted scholars' attention, little empirical research has examined how women leaders conceive of themselves as women and leaders. Our research is among the first empirical efforts to document women leaders' identity interference and to examine its effect on women's psychological well-being and professional motivation. Our results reveal that women leaders' identity interference increases their stress and lowers their life satisfaction. As one of the women in our sample indicated,

“It seems to me that to stand out in a man's world, women have to compensate for their gender with outstanding performance every single time. It is good in the sense that women get better and better [in] what they do, but, on the other hand, it is extremely tiring...”

Another respondent suggested that in her attempts to enter “male power circles,” she “stretches herself to find a way to speak the men's language” and finds that her authenticity is being endangered by such attempts. Another woman indicated the difficulty of “being masculine at work to gain respect” and “feminine at home.” Yet another woman suggested that professional image was an issue for her since “wearing neutral things not to attract specific remarks” made her feel “old and sober” and “increased the gap between her professional and personal image.”

The link found between women's identity interference and their well-being also extends current knowledge regarding the interplay of multiple self-identities and psychological outcomes that has attracted scholars' attention in both the organizational and psychological literature (e.g., Brook et al., 2008; Dutton et al., 2010; Settles, 2004). Moreover, the negative relationship between identity interference and women leaders' well-being is consistent with research on conformity to gender-typed norms. This research documents the ways in which norm-congruent behaviors (e.g., agency for men and communion for women) generate positive feelings as they align the actual self-concept with the ideal and ought self (Wood, Christensen, Hebl, & Rothgerber, 1997; Higgins, 1987).

Our results also demonstrate that when women advance in their companies and acquire more leadership expertise, they begin to place a more positive value on their leader identity. This development in turn contributes to the healthy integration of their multiple identities. This result contributes to the literature on the development of professional identities (e.g., Day & Harrison, 2007; Ibarra, 1999; Lord & Hall, 2005; Pratt et al., 2010) and specifically to the emerging stream of literature on the ways in which individuals conduct identity work by reaching an optimal balance between their personal and professional identities (e.g., Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006).

Moreover, this research represents a step toward theoretically integrating structural and attitudinal factors that together constitute second-generation gender bias (Ely et al., 2011). In particular, we show that a direct link exists between women's proportional (under)representation in organizations and the identity interference they experience. Participants' frank comments echo this quantitative finding. For example, one woman wrote,

“Working in a heavily male-dominated industry, I struggle to strike a balance—to be one of “them” and to be myself. Sometimes I feel it affects my spontaneity.... I constantly feel the need to be on guard.”

By documenting the effect of organizational demography on women's identity interference, we provide further evidence that interactions with others play a significant role in the development of the leader's identity (Ibarra, 1999). Our finding that women leaders experience more identity interference in organizations that are numerically dominated by men is consistent with the literature on stereotype threat. Specifically, women are less likely to express an interest in assuming a leadership role after being reminded of general female stereotypes (Daviers, Spencer, & Steele, 2005). Given that the reliance on stereotypes to interpret the behavior of out-groups increases when out-group members represent a numerical minority (Kanter, 1977), our finding suggests that women leaders may more often be “reminded” of the incongruity between their professional and gender roles in male-dominated

organizations. Consistent with this idea, one participant wrote that "...being the only woman in a senior management team is not pleasant [because other managers] keep on making their macho statements." Hoyt, Johnson, Murphy, and Skinnell (2010) showed that even though stereotype activation can lead to stereotype reactance, whereby women perform better as a leader, stereotype threat combined with solo status in male groups results in a stereotype vulnerability response.

Importantly, our research identifies a mechanism underlying the effects of organizational demography and leadership experience. This mechanism focuses on how women evaluate their gender identity and their leader identity—i.e., women leaders' collective self-esteem (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990). As discussed previously, leadership experience increases one's regard for leaders, which in turn reduces the perceived incongruity between the roles of leader and woman. As for the proportional representation of women, we demonstrated that being a minority contributes to a less positive view of others' regard for women, thereby enhancing women leaders' identity interference. By documenting these effects, our research makes an important step toward understanding the process of identity work by linking it to the construct of collective self-esteem. Finally, our results reveal that women's private regard for their gender identity buffers the negative effect of identity interference on their life satisfaction. It is possible that a high regard for their gender identity allows women to self-affirm and thus protect their self-views from stressors (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele & Berkowitz, 1988). While this finding is consistent with previous research on the protective effect of positive social identities against, for example, perceived discrimination (Branscombe et al., 1999; Corning, 2002), to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to document the shielding effect of women's collective self-esteem against the perceived incongruity between their roles as women and leaders.

Our research also contributes to the body of knowledge regarding the antecedents of the motivation to lead. Leadership literature linked the motivation to lead to individual characteristics, including personality characteristics (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Hendricks & Payne, 2007; Kark & Van Dijk, 2007; Kessler, Radosevich, Cho, & Kim, 2008). Our research provides a fresh perspective on the antecedents of the motivation to lead by documenting that identity interference has an important effect on women's motivation to assume and persist in leadership roles. Our results reveal that identity interference is associated with the lower affective motivation of women managers to assume leadership roles. As such, this result may be evidence of a *disidentification* strategy that women employ to address the stereotype threat (Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998) that the awareness of incongruity between the roles of leader and woman implies.

Perhaps more surprisingly, we hypothesized and found evidence that identity interference increases women's social-normative motivation to lead, that is, their feeling of duty to attain and persist in leadership positions. This finding suggests that women who are aware of gender-related barriers may be motivated to alter the status quo to facilitate career advancement for future generations of women. One participant commented that changes in the general perception of women's competencies and commitment needed to be carefully managed "in order not to impair the progress of the next generations." While further research will enable a deeper understanding of specific duty-related motives of women to lead, this finding is consistent with women leading in a more transformational style (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Transformational leaders—as opposed to transactional leaders—strive to become a role model for their followers (Bass, 1998). Our data further corroborate this idea by finding that the number of female role models that our participants reported was positively related to their social-normative motivation to lead. This empirical evidence opens new directions for future research regarding the sense of duty and connectedness—with both

past and future generations—that seems to play an important role in women’s motivation to lead.

Importantly, future longitudinal studies should address the question of whether duty-related motivation to lead is sufficient to guarantee one’s long-term persistence in a leadership role. Our conjecture is that leaders who do not enjoy the act of leading are more likely to vacate their positions, even if they feel the responsibility to persist. Thus, we would not interpret our result—that women leaders’ identity interference is positively related to their social-normative motivation to lead—as a call to maintain the perceived incongruity between the roles of woman and leader to increase the number of women in leadership positions.

### **Limitations and future directions**

This study is subject to limitations that point toward directions for future research. First, the correlational nature of this research limits our ability to unambiguously identify cause-effect chains. For example, while we conceptualized collective self-esteem as an antecedent of identity interference, Thoits (1991: 105) suggested that “failing to meet normative expectations in identity performance should decrease self-esteem.” This assertion implies that women leaders who adapt their behavior to what is socially construed as appropriate leader behavior (e.g., assertiveness and dominance)—thus failing to meet normative expectations regarding women—may face a negative consequence of decreased self-esteem. Further research should examine whether the perceived incongruity between own behavior as a leader and the behavior prescribed by gender stereotypes affects not only personal self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965; Wood et al., 1997) but also women’s collective self-esteem related to their gender identity—i.e., their perception of the “women” social group’s worth (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990).

Second, the response rate to the survey was somewhat low, potentially limiting the generalizability of our results. It is possible that women experiencing more gender-related challenges at the workplace were more responsive to our invitation to participate in a study on “female leadership challenges.” However, the scores of woman/leader identity interference that 90% of our participants reported were distributed in the lower two-thirds of the identity interference scale, thereby indicating that the sample is not skewed by participants with extreme perceptions of the incongruity between their gender and professional identities.

Third, this study focused on women only and examined the antecedents and consequences of the interference between their gender and professional identities. It is not clear whether our results would generalize to men and their identity processes. It would be interesting to examine whether men in occupations traditionally considered “feminine,” such as nursing, elementary school teaching, and social work, also experience interference between their gender and professional identities, and to understand its causes and consequences. The few studies that have addressed men’s experience in gender-atypical occupations suggest that most often, men do not face gender-based prejudice in such jobs (Zimmer, 1988) and may even enjoy hidden advantages—such as rapid advancement to higher-status positions—through positive reactions that their gender-atypical profession generates in peers and supervisors. Williams (1992) calls this phenomenon “a glass escalator.” Nevertheless, some evidence exists that men in typically female professions may face a negative reaction from the general public and especially from other men (Zimmer, 1988). Future research should address how men in predominantly female occupations experience their multiple identities, how they integrate their professional identity into their general self-concept, and what role their gender-related self-esteem plays in these processes.

Fourth, while we focused on leadership experience and organizational demography as antecedents of identity interference, future research should examine other characteristics—

both individual and organizational—that may exacerbate or mitigate women leaders' identity interference. For example, the extent to which women hold traditional gender role beliefs can be explored as a potential contributor to women leaders' identity interference. Furthermore, while we operationalized organizational demography as the proportion of women across all levels of the organization, the representation of women who specifically hold senior positions is likely to play an important role in defining women leaders' identity interference. It signals the potential for women's career advancement and provides female role models that are crucial for the development of women's identity as leaders (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2007). Future research thus should address the effect of women's underrepresentation in senior position on women leaders' and potential leaders' identity interference.

Finally, while we have focused on the collective self-esteem of women leaders, future research should address the role that personal self-esteem may play in the development of women's identity as leaders. Moreover, other outcome variables, such as women's performance as evaluated by their peers and/or supervisors, should be investigated to better understand the effect of women leaders' identity interference.

### **Practical implications**

Our research offers valuable practical insights for women's advancement in organizations. It suggests that organizations that commit to developing and retaining female talent should consider not only interpersonal attitudes toward female leaders, but also intrapersonal processes related to women leaders' self-perception. Understanding how current organizational practices may affect collective self-esteem of women leaders is particularly important. For example, the link that our results demonstrated between identity interference and the public component of women's collective self-esteem (i.e., beliefs regarding how others view women) supports the importance of mentoring practices for developing and

retaining female talent. We believe that establishing formal mentoring programs will not only provide psychological support to women leaders and leaders-to-be (Noe, 1988) but also convey the value that the organizations place on their female contributors. Our results further suggest that such interventions will be especially effective in organizations where women are a numerical minority. In such working environments, women are especially prone to believe that others do not hold women in high regard. This belief, as we have demonstrated, can have important consequences for women's motivation to lead as well as well-being.

This research also has important implications for a job design. In particular, it suggests that structuring positions such that women have more direct contact with other women, both within and outside of their organization, may enhance women's well-being and their motivation to assume leadership tasks. Such interventions will be particularly effective at earlier stages of women's careers, when validation processes through reference groups are critical to the development of professional identities (Ibarra, 1999). Our research thus supports the importance of positions' social characteristics and in particular of relational job design that scholars have recently emphasized (e.g., Grant & Parker, 2009).

Moreover, our findings have valuable implications for the design of leadership development executive education programs. Our results suggest that a combined approach—with both single-sex and co-educational sessions—may work best to catalyze women leaders' identity work. Several scholars have argued in favor of women-only sessions. For example, Debebe (2011) suggested that such sessions confer a sense of belonging, provide social validation, and are conducive to transformational learning for women by creating an atmosphere of psychological safety. Ely et al. (2011: 486) further argue that women-only programs “go beyond teaching women what they need to know and do; they also support women in understanding and shaping who they are and can become.” Our results regarding the link between identity interference and women's personal regard for their gender identity



support the idea that women-only sessions are instrumental for women leaders' identity work. However, our finding that women leaders experience more identity interference when they believe that others do not hold women in high regard further suggests that cultivating the feeling of acceptance by others—not only by women but also by men—may also be important. Thus, co-educational sessions should complement women-only sessions to allow for a more comprehensive development of women's leader identity.

This study also extends current knowledge regarding the productive management of multiple identities by suggesting that women leaders' motivation may be enhanced if organizations emphasize the valuable characteristics of leaders that are compatible with women's self-schemas. Identity research has suggested that significant benefits—at both the individual and organizational levels—can be achieved when individuals structure their multiple identities in ways that emphasize their complementarity and connections (Bell, 1990; Downie et al., 2004; Dutton et al., 2010; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). For example, Ely and Thomas (2001) demonstrated that creativity and group learning are enhanced in groups in which minority members are encouraged to share their cultural values that differ from the values of the organization, rather than groups in which they must address their identity conflict by compartmentalizing their cultural and organizational identities. Moreover, recent theories on leadership note the importance of such “female” interpersonal qualities as collaboration, care, inspiration, and interpersonal sensitivity (Ely & Rhode, 2010). The ideas behind transformational and authentic leadership suggest that effective leaders provide individualized support to their followers and encourage their personal and professional development (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Such behaviors concord with commonly held gender stereotypes (Eagly et al., 2000; Vinkenbunrg, van Engen, Eagly, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2011), and women leaders are in fact effective when engaged in such behaviors (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003). Previous

research on the double bind that gender and leader stereotypes impose on women suggests there are no simple recipes for women to advance in organizational hierarchies (Ely & Rhode, 2010). However, our results imply that authenticity and an appreciation for belonging to the social group of women are fundamental to the developmental task of integrating leadership roles into women's core selves. As expressed by this study's participants, it is important "to be yourself and enjoy your work," "to keep your own personality," and not to conform to "the image of what a manager should be like."

This study also has important implications for counseling and coaching practices. Our results emphasize the importance of cultivating and maintaining collective self-esteem to diminish the negative effects of identity interference. Thus, successful coaching interventions should not only address specific leadership skills but also explore clients' perceptions of their gender identity. Our findings suggest that any action that aims to increase women leaders' professional effectiveness but potentially reduces the perceived attractiveness of their gender identity may have undesirable effects on their psychological well-being.

Finally, our research findings have general implications for managing diversity in the workplace. They suggest that to encourage employees' motivation and to enhance their well-being, organizations should acknowledge the employees' social groups as determined by gender, race, nationality, age, etc. Organizations should enhance employees' collective self-esteem by, for example, facilitating interactions with other members of the same social groups—whether colleagues, clients, customers or suppliers. Our findings imply that restricting the employees' collective identities in an attempt to create a homogenous "melting pot" may be counterproductive.

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**TABLE 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics**

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Correlations													
					1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
Identity variables:																		
1 Identity interference	8.84	3.87	3	21	(.67)													
2 Self-esteem: Woman, private	23.05	3.69	7	28	-.28*	(.67)												
3 Self-esteem: Woman, public	18.02	3.99	4	28	-.36*	.35*	(.69)											
4 Self-esteem: Leader, private	21.79	3.42	4	28	-.23*	.30*	.18*	(.69)										
5 Self-esteem: Leader, public	21.40	3.16	10	28	-.16*	.25*	.19*	.54*	(.66)									
6 Identity centrality: Woman	19.52	4.93	4	28	.06	.21*	-.03	.06	.07*	(.73)								
7 Identity centrality: Leader	17.65	4.90	4	28	.08*	-.05	-.12*	.34*	.19*	.28*	(.82)							
Dependent and control variables:																		
8 Life satisfaction	25.06	5.89	5	35	-.30*	.26*	.16*	.20*	.10*	-.01	.01	(.89)						
9 Stress	13.66	3.24	8	23	.34*	-.20*	-.14*	-.26*	-.06	.06	.02	-.52*	(.79)					
10 Motivation to lead: Affective	46.92	8.17	12	63	-.18*	.16*	.04	.44*	.21*	.08*	.31*	.17*	-.16*	(.85)				
11 Motivation to lead: Social-normative	41.64	7.06	15	63	.06	.03	-.01	.23*	.16*	.07*	.23*	.11*	-.01	.33*	(.72)			
12 Leadership self-efficacy	43.81	6.20	14	56	-.18*	.23*	.06	.35*	.19*	.14*	.16*	.18*	-.29*	.50*	.20*	(.90)		
13 Social desirability	12.64	2.83	6	18	-.11*	.11*	.09*	.11*	.06	-.09*	-.09*	.01	-.10*	-.02	.01	.15*	(.60)	

Notes: \* significant at  $p < .05$  or lower, coefficient alphas appear across the diagonal in parentheses.

**TABLE 2**  
**Regression Analyses Predicting Identity Interference**

	Step 1	Step 2	
		Model a	Model b
Managerial experience	-.16** (.01)	-.12* (.01)	-.10 (.01)
Prop. of men in the organization	.15*** (.05)	.09* (.04)	.14*** (.05)
Self-esteem: Woman, private		-.17*** (.04)	
Self-esteem: Woman, public		-.29*** (.04)	
Self-esteem: Leader, private			-.24*** (.05)
Self-esteem: Leader, public			-.04 (.04)
adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.05	.18	.10
F	F( 17, 704) = 3.03	F( 19, 702) = 9.36	F( 19, 702) = 5.25
Comparison to Step 1: $\Delta R^2$		.13***	.05***

Notes: N=722. Entries are standardized regression coefficients. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Results are after controlling for education level, children (0/1), marital status, age, number of role models, number of female role models, number of employees in the organization, social desirability, and identity centralities. \*\*\* p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05.

**TABLE 3**  
**Regression Analyses Predicting Well-Being**

	DV: Life Satisfaction		DV: Stress	
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2
Identity interference	-.23*** (.04)	-.22*** (.04)	.26*** (.04)	.27*** (.04)
Self-esteem: Woman, private	.16*** (.04)	.13** (.04)	-.08 (.04)	-.08 (.04)
Self-esteem: Woman, public	.03 (.04)	.03 (.04)	.00 (.04)	.00 (.04)
Self-esteem: Leader, private	.11* (.04)	.10* (.04)	-.24*** (.04)	-.24*** (.05)
Self-esteem: Leader, public	-.07 (.04)	-.06 (.04)	.13** (.04)	.13** (.04)
Identity interference*Self-esteem: Woman, private		.09* (.04)		.03 (.04)
Identity interference*Self-esteem: Woman, public		-.03 (.03)		.02 (.04)
Identity interference*Self-esteem: Leader, private		.03 (.04)		-.04 (.04)
Identity interference*Self-esteem: Leader, public		-.10* (.04)		-.07 (.04)
adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.20	.21	.18	.18
F	F( 22, 699) = 9.43	F( 28, 693) = 7.87	F( 22, 699) = 8.15	F( 28, 693) = 6.61
Comparison to Step 1: Δ R <sup>2</sup>		.01 <sup>a</sup>		.00

Notes: N=722. Entries are standardized regression coefficients. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Results are after controlling for education level, children (0/1), marital status, age, number of role models, number of female role models, managerial experience, number of employees in the organization, proportion of men in the organization, social desirability, identity centralities, and interactions of identity centrality and identity interference. \*\*\* p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05. a: p = .08.



**TABLE 4**  
**Regression Analyses Predicting Motivation to Lead**

	DV: Affective Motivation to Lead	DV: Social- Normative Motivation to Lead
Leadership self-efficacy	.40*** (.03)	.18*** (.04)
Role models	.01 (.01)	-.08 (.02)
Female role models	-.01 (.04)	.14** (.04)
Self-esteem: Woman, private	.02 (.04)	-.02 (.04)
Self-esteem: Woman, public	-.04 (.03)	-.00 (.04)
Self-esteem: Leader, private	.25*** (.04)	.12** (.05)
Self-esteem: Leader, public	-.04 (.04)	.06 (.04)
Identity interference	-.09** (.03)	.10* (.04)
adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.36	.10
F	F( 23, 698) = 18.75	F( 23, 698) = 4.58

Notes: N=722. Entries are standardized regression coefficients. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Results are after controlling for education level, children (0/1), marital status, age, managerial experience, number of employees in the organization, proportion of men in the organization, social desirability, and identity centralities. \*\*\* p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05.

**FIGURE 1**

**Simple Slopes for Life Satisfaction, moderation effect of Self-esteem: Woman, private**

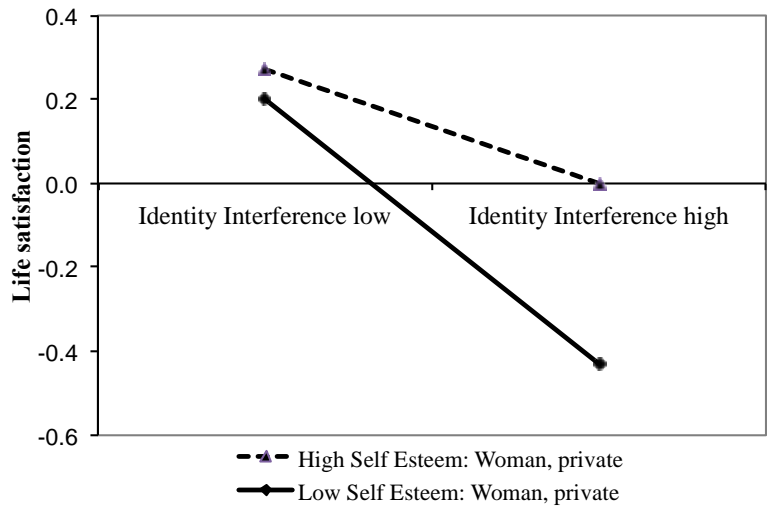
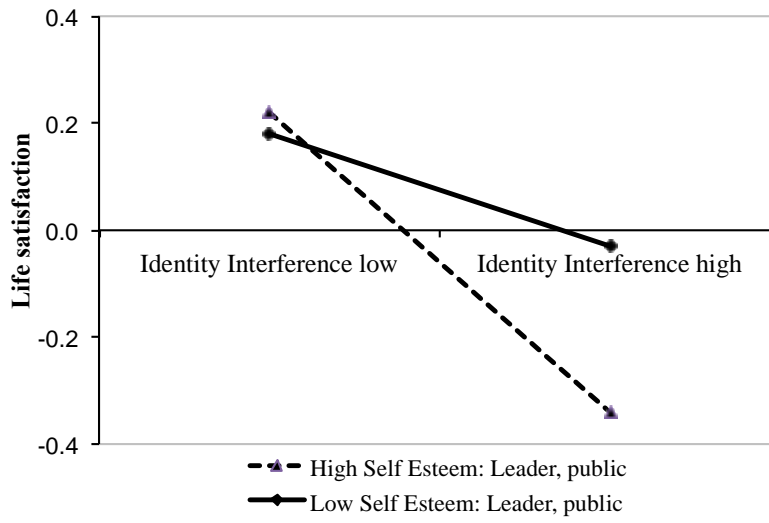


FIGURE 2

Simple Slopes for Life Satisfaction, moderation effect of Self-esteem: Leader, public



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