How is the Embodiment of Women Leadership to Alter the Stereotypically Masculine Schema for Leadership?
A case of Vietnam

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Abstract: Nowadays, the perception on leadership has been different from traditional ones that used to align to agentic characteristics. However, for the top of mind, people normally think about masculine characteristics when referring to leadership concept. It could be so disadvantageous for female leaders that they can be trapped in the line between two perspectives: one for their nature characteristics, one for their changes to be suitable for stereotypical definitions of leadership characteristics. By in-depth interview with nine women in top management positions in Vietnam, the study aims to investigate how is the embodiment of female leadership to change the stereotypically masculine schema for leadership. An emerging finding is that women would not try to illustrate their appearance, competency as recommended in theory. Instead, they embody their leadership by bringing happiness for others, helping others to achieve high results, making others satisfied in their life and work. More importantly, they build up their followership with their sincere hearts, which is relevant to female instincts as caring, nurturing with their nature skills and warm heart. Accordingly, it turns to be a recommendation that women in their leadership should not blur their nature characteristics; instead, they should consider as their distinction strengths for their further development.

Keywords: Embodiment, women leadership, stereotype, masculine.

1. Introduction

There is a view that in any Western or Eastern country all over the world, females normally are underrepresented than males, especially in male-dominated sectors like in science, technology, engineering, manufacturing (STEM) (Nash et al., 2017). Fortunately, this trend seems to be outdated when the more the society develops, the more gender imbalance is addressed by issuing policies, regulations as well as some legal organizations established to protect female rights (Schein, 2001). However, gender imbalance improvement is somehow a hinder.
On the one hand, a community still announces slogans to protect women; on the other hand, somewhere in a society, gender discrimination toward females is existing as a norm. Being a leader, females have to face a lot of barriers for enjoying the freedom of career development. Stereotypical gender perception could be the first foremost barrier for this statement (Lammers and Gast, 2017, Lemoine et al., 2016). Women are often thought to be inappropriate for leadership and management positions due to communal characteristics. Whereas, men are perceived to possess more agentic traits being often associated with successful management and leadership (Eagly, 2007, Eagly and Carli, 2007, Daldrup-Link, 2017, Taylor, 2010). These gender stereotypes as assumption that women don’t have enough attributes associated with management have become impediments for women’s career advancement. In the same vein, when referring to leader concepts, “think leader, think male” regarded as “glass ceiling” phenomena (Powell and Butterfield, 1994, Maume Jr, 1999, Barreto et al., 2009, Schein, 1973, Festing et al., 2015), “think trouble, think female” as “glass-cliff” phenomena (Haslam and Ryan, 2008, Bruckmüller et al., 2014), “think professor, think male” (Tharenou, 1994) and “think vice chancellor, think male” (Tilbrook, 1998) make women likely more disapproval than men when occupying leadership positions (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014, Eagly and Karau, 2002). Moreover, this situation seems to be more severe when not only a high proportion of male leaders increasing in male-dominated sectors but only gradually rising in female dominated sectors, which is call the phenomenon “glass escalator” (Maume Jr, 1999). Additionally, female leaders also manage some contradictions in organizational contexts as well as balancing their responsibilities as a wife, a mother in the family context (Singh and SDurgaPrasad, 2014).

In order to addressing those obstacles, female leaders have been struggled to find effectives ways to illustrate their leadership styles. Some females choose body image as the symbol to illustrate their leadership styles and competencies (Strathern and Stewart, 2008, Re and Perrett, 2014), Facial attractive (Re and Perrett, 2014), characteristics autobiography (Kapasi et al., 2016), narrative and story telling (Barbulescu and Ibarra, 2008, Watson, 2009, Bell and Sinclair, 2016), media representation, personal value and personal journey to leadership, a model of women leaders or family stories (Kapasi et al., 2016) and the like are all effective ways to illustrate their leadership properly. Unfortunately, even though with many efforts, female leaders are still trapped in a labyrinth to confirm their leadership effectiveness. When women leaders perform as their gender identity, they belong to the types of servant or victim leaders, and subsequently they are labelled as narcissism (Pullen and Rhodes, 2008). By contrast, if their behaviors are as masculine, they can be labelled with negative images like “dragon lady”, “battle axe”, “honorary men” or “flawed women” (Etzkowitz et al., 2000). Accordingly, women are considered less effective when they are in male-dominated settings or leadership roles that are defined as more masculine (Eagly et al., 1995).

So, what is the right way for female leaders? It could be understood that the importance is not to define which identity of female leaders is relevant to confirm their leadership effectiveness. By contrast, the key role here is to justify how women leaders should do to change stereotypical perception and definition on leadership. This paper is designed with the aim to explore how the embodiment of female leadership is to alter the stereotypically masculine schema for leadership.

2. Literature

2.1. Female leadership and some barriers due to stereotypically masculine schema in leadership

Some scholars have proved main differences in the perspectives of male and female leadership styles. And most researches revealed that female leaders tend to follow people orientation, meanwhile, male leaders almost follow task orientation.
According to Eagly et al. (2003), transformational leadership constructs are recorded with higher score by women leaders than male leaders, especially individualized consideration, and transactional and laissez-faire leadership are with men leaders. In another research of Young (2009), the study also concluded that females adopt transformational leadership styles more often than men, especially with high score of individualized consideration. In addition, in the publications of “Ways women lead” in the Harvard Business Review by Rosener (1990), the researcher argued that women often were limited to have equal access to formal power, therefore they tend to generate their personal power, influence, and teamwork in leading other people. And some later researches also contended that women in their leadership tend to apply a transformational style more than men and democratic behaviors with social skills. In addition, women also emphasize on maintaining effective working relationships, value cooperation, and responsibilities to others while dedicating to achieve outcomes that address the concerns of all parties involved. Besides, in 1991, the International Women’s Forum conducted a survey and discovered that male supervisors tend to adopt a transactional leadership style. Female supervisors, on the other hand, tend to use a transformational leadership style with many efforts to interact with subordinates, involve employees in decision making, share authority, exchange information, respect employees’ self-value, and encourage employees to love their jobs (Chao and Tian, 2011).

When comparing leadership effectiveness, some researches showed the contribution of feminine traits in leadership. Bass and Avolio (1997) indicated that using transformational leadership makes a positive effect on the performance of an individual, group, and organization. Morgan (2006) also remarked that organizations shaped by male value systems emphasize logical, linear modes of thought and action, and drive for productivity at the cost of network and community building. In contrary, organizations that are shaped by female value systems tend to “balance and integrate the rational-analytic mode with values that emphasize more empathic, intuitive, organic forms of behavior”. According to Arnold et al. (2015), transformational leadership style significantly and positively facilitated the relevancy between employees’ internal emotions and their feelings in a given situation. Thus, if women have some advantages to become transformational, she can have a good contribution to create belief of employees that is a vital characteristics in increasing competitive labor market nowadays to retain talents. Recently, the topic of authentic leadership has called dramatic attention of scholars in organizational and business ethics literature. Avolio et al. (2004) defined authentic leaders as “those who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others’ values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character”. In some aspects, authentic leadership can be considered as more advanced definition of transformational, servant, spiritual leadership. However, the key distinction is that authentic leaders deeply have a sense of the self and know how they should behave in specific situations. This perception could be incorporated meanings between transformational and ethical leadership (Avolio et al., 2004). Recent research of Liu et al. (2015) asserts that authenticity construction is aligned to gender norms perceived by leaders. This attribution of authenticity is an iterative constitution between embodied gendered leadership and its context. The above arguments could be interpreted that transformational and authentic leadership styles are congruent with females’ gendered traits as well as perceived norms in community.

With some kinds of typical leadership styles as mentioned above, female leaders are considered as emotional in their leading. It could be a potential reason leading to the case
that females face to such challenges as in recruitment, training and development opportunities, and career advancement (Benhabib and Cornell, 1987, Eagly and Karau, 1991, Eagly et al., 1995, Korabik and Ayman, 2007, Krishnan and Parsons, 2008, Wood, 2008, Mihalčová et al., 2015). In term of career development, women still have changes in middle levels of management, and continue to be underrepresented in top executive positions (Nell, 2015, Eagly and Carli, 2007, Ely et al., 2011, Haslam and Ryan, 2008, Eagly, 2007). Although women increasingly participate in the work force, they are mainly found in lower organizational ranks or work in flat careers as health care or teaching professionals (Ellemers et al., 2012). If they want to develop further, they may address such main obstacles as family obligations, working time constraints, gender stereotypes and attitudes in the society (Gender, female and family study – Science and Society Publication). Obstacles for women career development have been conceptualized by some glass metaphors. Initially, when referring to leader concepts, “think leader, think male” is concerned immediately, which is called “glass ceiling” phenomena (Powell and Butterfield, 1994, Maume Jr. 1999, Barreto et al., 2009, Schein, 1973, Festing et al., 2015). However, in some struggling situations, females are normally referred as “think trouble, think female”. Indeed, women leaders are also suffered from “glass-cliff” phenomena, in which they are granted as leaders when their organizations are during declining life-cycle period, in a crisis or merely bankrupt (Haslam and Ryan, 2008, Bruckmüller et al., 2014). Besides, when occupying leadership positions, women likely encounter more disapproval than men due to perceived gender role violation (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014, Eagly and Karau, 2002).

2.2. Embodiment of female leadership

According to the Social Identity Theory of leadership, prototypicality becomes an increasingly powerful determinant of effective social influence and of effective leadership as people more strongly define themselves (self-categorize) in terms of group membership (social identity), rather than in terms of individuality, idiosyncrasy, or interpersonal relationships (personal identity) (Hogg and van Knippenberg, 2003). Accordingly, leader schema should be congruent to organizational prototypicality, which could result in leadership influence. Regarding to female leadership effectiveness, Yoder (2001) stated two basic principles for female leadership effectiveness. Firstly, female should not adopt a command-and-control style that relies on having and using higher status. Instead, each woman should talk and listen extensively with subordinates, avoid dominant speech acts, use humor to lighten tense exchanges, and be respectful of others. In the same vein, the research of Liu et al. (2015) contends that female leaders managing in male-dominated sectors want to be considered as effective and authentic leaders, they should perform as norms for female like nurturing, caring, outgoing and communal. Conversely, another research asserts when women leaders perform as their gender identity, they belong to the types of servant or victim leaders, and subsequently they are labelled as narcissism (Pullen and Rhodes, 2008). Secondly, female leaders should adjust their behaviors according to group orientation rather than applying their own ones. To take the case of female leadership in traditional sectors for male with masculine-oriented behaviors as an example, female leaders also need to change their behaviors to align to sector characteristics. However, if their behaviors are as masculine, they can be labelled with negative images like “dragon lady”, “battle axe”, “honorary men” or “flawed women” (Etzkowitz et al., 2000). Accordingly, women are considered less effective when they are in male-dominated settings or leadership roles that are defined as more masculine (Eagly et al., 1995). As a result, female leaders are trapped in many perspectives on their relevant behaviors, which could be one of main reasons why females frequently lack confidence in doing their granted responsibilities (Gender, female
In order to addressing those obstacles, female leaders have been struggled to find effective ways to illustrate their leadership styles. Some females choose body image as the symbol to illustrate their leadership styles and competencies (Strathern and Stewart, 2008, Re and Perrett, 2014). Facial attractive (Re and Perrett, 2014), characteristics autobiography (Kapasi et al., 2016), narrative and story telling (Barbulescu and Ibarra, 2008, Watson, 2009, Bell and Sinclair, 2016), media representation, personal value and personal journey to leadership, a model of women leaders or family stories (Kapasi et al., 2016) and the like are all effective ways to illustrate their leadership properly. Women have to develop other tools to display their virtue and trustworthiness, such as unrelenting hard work and self-sacrifice to promote the wellbeing of others. Tuyen (1999) contended that men did business through “relationship”; however, women cannot do that, they need to cultivate their prestige and trust just because they are women.

This situation is also strict in Eastern countries, like Vietnam, with much effects of Confucianism, gender discrimination, especially in leadership and management opportunities. Confucianism drove females with 3 main obligations “Three principles”, “Three obediences”, and “Four Virtues” (Li, 2000). Those principles align females to many family obligations, look down on their ability, and make them impossible to join any social activities or freely develop their strengths and career further. By contrast, it’s obvious that females can do what males do, can achieve what males can achieve. Like the case of Vietnam, females invaluably contributed a lot to the success of Vietnam in the war time when they were called as “Long hair army”, encouraged by President Ho Chi Minh in “eight golden Vietnamese words” and published in March 1965: ‘Heroic, Indomitable, Faithful and Responsible’, and acknowledged by a number of prestigious awards, of which the highest is the ‘Heroic Vietnamese Mother’ (Huong, 2008). However, when wars have gone, everything has became stable, many females refused to go on their development tracks and come back to their traditional family roles. When they become leaders, they could not do something as male leaders can do due to some principles for females in (post) Confucianism context. For example, if women were to wine and dine their prospective business partners, they would lose rather than gain “prestige”. They cannot as easily call on family metaphors to meld their corporate leadership with the moral authority of the patriarch.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

In-depth interviews with nine female leaders in various industries were conducted to collect information. All of them are top leaders with the highest power in decision-making in their organizations. Interview location was determined by participants. Five interviews were conducted in the office, two in their private family, and one in a cafeteria. It could be understood that 9 interviews were sufficient for the exploratory purposes of the present study. The age range for respondents was 35 to 60 with a median age of 40. One women leader is from Financing and Banking sector, three from manufacturing, one from education, two from retailing, one from advertising and promoting, and one from social enterprise.

3.2. Data collection

As per guidelines delineating three sections of the interview protocol: introductory questions, main topic questions, and reflection questions (Hill, 2012), a semi-structured interview schedule consisted of three main parts too. The first part of questions was to make a demographic introduction. The second part was to investigate their working experience, let them talk about their career advancement as well as their troubles or contradictions they facing. The last one was to investigate their
most interested memories that would check their perception in term of which biggest contradictions were and how they overcame contradictions. Probing questions were used during the interview to encourage participants to share their opinions more sufficiently and clarify their perception. Throughout the interview, individuals are required to participate in tape-recorded interview. The length of time for all interviews from 45 minutes to 2 hours, and the average duration is one hour and 20 minutes. All female leaders were ready to show their names and their experiences in my research. Interviews were tape-recorded to allow uninterrupted data gathering and to facilitate accurate information.

3.3. Data analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is used in this research to illuminate the experiences of female leaders. This method allows to gathering in-depth information and perceptions via interviews, discussions, and participant observation. This method is also suitable for this research because the topic under investigation is under-researched with complex issues of female leaders’ psychology and challenges in their leadership. In addition, the sample of the research in small with nine female leaders which is relevant to the principle of IPA that the method is for a small sample from six to fifteen participants (Smith and Osborn, 2004). By this method, the paper attempts to make sense of the subjective meanings of experiences of female leaders. From that, the research can conclude challenges women leaders facing and methods used to manage those barriers.

Based on the suggested process of IPA, the paper presents four main steps of data analysis as follow. The first stage is that the transcript is read a number of times to let the author become as familiar as possible with the account. In other words, in the first stage, the author involves in a free textual analysis. In the second stage, combing similar ideas to document emerging theme titles is done. The third stage involves a more analytical or theoretical ordering, the author tries to make sense of the connections between themes which are emerging. Some of the themes will cluster together, and some may emerge as superordinate concepts. The next stage is to produce a table of the themes, ordered coherently. Thus, the above process will have identified some clusters of themes which capture most strongly the respondent’s concerns on this particular topic. The clusters are themselves given a name and represent the superordinate themes.

4. Findings

4.1. Identity paradox

The first emerging issue is the contradiction between female’s appearance and their competencies. Ms. Tra My shared that most of people think “long legs” as “short mindset”. Previously, she was misunderstood as a secretary, meanwhile she was a CEO. That was due to her beauty.

I see that Miss Universal also has some interesting. She is so currently beautiful thanks to her contribution in her previous life. Also, some of Miss Universal are intelligent as well as active. However, somebody are so unethical to talk about the beauty.

Ms. Huong contended that male partners don’t directly tell their opinions; however, she can recognize through their attitudes and reactions. Yes, sometimes, males don’t tell their opinions directly, via their attitudes, eye contacts, I can recognize somethings. It’s also typical with the person who I meet for the first time. I was assigned with a difficult task, for example, he saw me, and I knew it could be a trouble and actually I could not finish the deal for the first time. He might think females like me cannot solve this problem which could be solved by males only, females should have not joined and females obviously cannot do.

Ms. Hien also shared more ideas that in any cases, females should be very intelligent and
outstanding to raise their voice. The main reason is that females usually are aligned to such specific characteristics as beautiful, young, happy, talkative, which make female leaders so difficult to develop their business. Otherwise, it’s so hard for females to join the conversation among males. Ms. Huong said that females are as symbols of weakness, emotion. Hence, females are considered to have some limitations. Ms. Hien told that sometimes, male partners illustrated their attitude toward genders unconsciously, and she knew they had constructive feedbacks; however, their constructive statement still illustrate their imbalance points of view on genders.

We (the company) are going to celebrate the 1st anniversary. Many partners have sent us congratulations. And the first thing in their mind is that my company name is a wife, is a beauty. Our partners also agree that they would support new enterprises with female leaders; however, they hardly mention specific plans, every of their supports are so general that we cannot know how to proceed.

The next paradox is the conflict between self-identification and career development offered. Participants argued that females cannot share family responsibilities equally to their husbands, but she can find many other kinds of support. Ms. Hien affirmed that:

It’s impossible that wives required husbands to share 50/50 house works. If they want to be free from house works and dedicate to their professional tasks, they should be active to find other backup plans

Ms. Huong asserted that she’s still not ready to take CEO position of banks even though she has received some proposals. The main reason is that she saw some troubles, some potential possibilities that could affect her current safety and force her to trade off her family. Ms. Huong shows that:

When females are trapped in troublesome situations, they usually think about their children as their instinct. That’s why they never take risks and never trade-off their family to their promotion chances. It can be seen that almost issues in finance and banking sectors normally were resulted from male, not female leaders. For me, I’m not ready to take over high and risky positions because I can estimate very negative possibilities.

4.2. Getting motivation from creating happiness and development for other people

The first way is to make your life and work imbalanced with right choice in a short-term and balanced in a long-term. All in 9 female leaders said that there was no balance in their life and work; however, they didn’t mind, they thought it was obvious. For them, it would be a choice, an arrangement and a goal setting in one specific time. Once they set objectives, they would try to finish. They agreed that in some period of time, they ignored their families and dedicated to their works. And in some periods, they came back to their families, took care of their children before promoting in their careers. Obviously, after that time, females need to try more many times to recover their positions or their pace of work.

The second way is to train the next subordinate generation. Updated Maslow’s Needs Hierarchy in 2010 argued that the highest level is transcendence. Accordingly, the leader wants to gain influence, it’s vital to build up in-group subordinates by supporting to make their work and life benefits improved. In addition, the leader can sharpen the personal relation by concerning subordinates’ families, children, and wife/husbands. As a result, subordinates can feel committed and engages to organizations and the leader.

The third way is to bring benefits and fun to other people. Female leaders feel successful when they bring about benefits for their companies and other stakeholders. Interviewees really were eager to tell stories when they used to make their stakeholders happy. Participants affirmed that they were so interested in what make other related people satisfied. In addition, they also feel sad when their stakeholders suffer from troubles. This could be considered as social impacts of leadership
The forth way is to build up trust by doing everything with result orientation. According to female leaders’ opinions, the trust could help them gain influence on other people. However, there is a significant difference between male and female leaders in raising trust up. Male leaders can use their strong and assertive attitude. However, it seems to be impossible for women leaders. Participants claimed that if they want to gain other’s trust, they need to create somehow achievements. In other words, their working style should be result-oriented.

The fifth way is to maintain their resilience in any situation. Participants contended that in order to overcome all challenges as mentioned above, they should sharpen their resilience, try to do again and again and ignore every potential attitude that damages their motivation. Ms. Huong said that in some cases, male partners refused to work with her sensitively; however, she did not give up, she used to propose until male partners accepted to cooperate with her. Obviously, her proposals should be relevant and acceptable. Ms. Giang repeated many times that female leaders need to overcome their inferiority to illustrate their intelligence and raise their voice. In addition, Ms. Diep told that female leaders should not stick to the way to do business like the man does, such as having beer, eating dinner out and the like. Female leaders should clarify exact demands of customers and find the way to satisfy them, rather than pay more attention on where for dinner or beer with partners. In order to do that, female leaders need to enhance their resilience, Ms. Diep stated.

5. Discussion

Normally, females are considered as the symbol of the beauty, of love, of happiness. Some people said that females were born in order to make life happier and more beautiful. Accordingly, female leaders usually are required to be neat and tidy. Besides, there are still some thoughts that beautiful women are for a look, not for a work due to their limited competencies. Accordingly, they can promote their career path thanks to their relatives or having sex with the person who can make final decisions. In some cases, female leaders in general and beautiful ones in specific are considered as less effective compared to males, especially in such special aspects as laws, finance and banking which are stereotypically considered as sectors for male leaders. Meanwhile, based on some theories about the embodiment of female leadership, appearance and competencies are good ways to illustrate female leadership competencies (Strathern and Stewart, 2008, Re and Perrett, 2014). However, in the context of Vietnam, as a post Confucianism country, they seem not to be so sufficient due to some principles of Feudalism and Confucianism. Hence, female leaders in those contexts would not try to illustrate their appearance, competency as recommended. Instead, they embody their leadership by bringing happiness for others, helping others to achieve high results, making others satisfied in their life and work. More importantly, they build up their followership with their sincere hearts, which is relevant to female instincts as caring, nurturing with their nature skills and warm heart. Accordingly, it turns to be obvious that female leaders should not blur their nature characteristics; instead, they should consider as their distinction strengths for further developments.

Many scholars proved that nowadays, females less suffer from high family responsibilities than in the past. They are not bounded to the view that they themselves take care their family. Instead, they can choose other kinds of service support. As a result, females experience more career opportunities. However, there are still some female who cannot overcome their own thoughts and want to come back to their social roles as mother, wife in their families. In some cases, they gain experiences and achieve some achievements in their career. And they think that’s enough and it’s also the time to come back to their family after refusing to gain higher professional positions. In addition, with characteristics of carefulness, risk avoidance, in case female leaders cannot be
sure about the possibility of new positions, they normally refuse to take over. It could be seen that these circumstances are explanation for newly potential approaches to the concept of glass ceiling. The “glass ceiling” was coined to describe the often subtle, but very real, barriers that women face as they try to climb the organizational hierarchy (Bruckmüller et al., 2014). The main reasons to argue for the glass ceiling are that many females face to gender discrimination in recruitment, promotion and other career opportunity development. Contrary to glass ceiling concepts, based on the data collected as mentioned above, female leaders contended that some females refused newly higher positions because (1) they cannot overcome their own thoughts biding them to traditional social responsibilities, and (2) they don’t accept risky opportunities owing to their nature female characteristics. In other words, they voluntarily withdraw without any requirements. In order to overcome this contradiction, female leaders choose to be imbalance in a short-term resulting in balance in a long-term. In other words, they can more highly focus on work/family in short-term and this scheme can be automatically rebalanced in a long-term. In those periods, there is no risks for positions of women leaders in family as well as organizational contexts because their solution is to build up trust by result orientation, not by small actions in a short-term. In the same vein, female leaders can still maintain their power and influence in both contexts.

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