Agentic traits, even when perceived as low value, still hold sway in management

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, SA, upon reasonable request.

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Role congruity theory postulates that traditionally there is a mismatch between the communal qualities associated with women and the masculine or agentic qualities considered necessary in a good leader. Thus, female candidates are presumed to be less suitable for leadership roles. The purpose of this study is to discover the conditions under which this (in)congruity may fluctuate. In a hypothetical manager recruitment process, two profiles (agentic and communal) were associated with female and male candidates to explore variations according to the organizational setting (profit-oriented or civic-minded company) and the value attributed to candidates' qualities (high or low). Results showed congruity between candidates' profile and organizational setting when their trait value was high: agentic candidates were preferred over communal candidates for the profit-oriented company, with the reverse occurring for the civic-minded company. However, candidates' sex apparently played no significant role in participants' decision making; additionally, when the value of candidates' traits was low, congruity was only found for the profit-oriented company. We conclude that, overall, the agentic construal of management, with its good and bad features, still has the upper hand in the current vision of leadership.

Keywords: gender role congruity; social perception process; gender traits; management; company orientation.

Introduction

Women's access to quality employment opportunities is still restricted and, in addition, they are disproportionately affected by the current COVID-19 crisis, which has exacerbated gender inequalities in the labor market (ILO, 2020). High-potential women make slower progress up the career promotion ladder, even when they adopt similar career management strategies to men; few women reach top leadership positions and are, consequently, trapped in low and middle levels of management (Catalyst, 2018). The term 'glass ceiling' was coined to refer to this phenomenon more than 30 years ago and unfortunately is still very much in use. Other metaphors (e.g., passage through the labyrinth, glass cliff, maternal wall, glass escalator, and sticky floor) have been also adopted to illustrate the burden of overcoming obstacles that men do not face in the labor market (see Carli & Eagly, 2016).

Two main explanations have been offered to understand women's underrepresentation in elite leadership roles (Gipson, Pfaff, Mendelsohn, Catenacci, & Burke, 2017). One claims that there might be a shortage of women with the appropriate level of education and work experience to occupy senior leadership positions. There is some support for this position, since women tend to have more career interruptions than men (e.g., greater domestic responsibilities), and this could result in fewer years of job experience and slower career progress (Eagly & Carli, 2007). However, approximately half of all middle managers are women, so a significant proportion are likely to have relevant management experience to be considered for senior leadership positions. A second explanation holds that the systematic barriers which prevent women from accessing the ranks of top leadership are based on gender stereotypes (e.g., Eagly & Sczesny, 2009; Heilman, 2001; Schein, 1973).

Gender stereotypes and the labor market

Gender stereotypes represent the beliefs about the psychological traits deemed to be characteristic of members of each sex and on which there is a great deal of consensus (Powell, 2014). They affect the way people attend to, interpret, and remember information as well as the way men and women behave and the life choices they make (see for a review, Ellemers, 2018). In Western societies, people generally assume that men are more oriented toward agentic goals and women, toward communal goals (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). Agency (also referred to as 'masculinity,' 'instrumentality' or 'competence') and communality (also referred to as 'femininity,' 'expressiveness' or 'warmth') have received a great deal of scholarly attention (see Hentschel, Heilman, & Peus, 2019). Agency involves achievement orientation (e.g., ambition), inclination to take charge (e.g., dominance), autonomy (e.g., independence), and rationality (e.g., analytical ability). Communality implies concern for others (e.g., kindness), affiliative tendencies (e.g., warmth), deference (e.g., obedience), and emotional sensitivity (e.g., intuition) (Heilman, 2012). A recent meta-analysis of changes in gender stereotypes since the mid-20th century showed a clear growth in the ascription of communal traits to women relative to men, but a lack of change in agency, with men retaining their agency advantage. Women have also gained in competence relative to men, and the belief in the competence equality of women and men has also increased (Eagly, Nater, Miller, Kaufmann, & Sczesny, 2019).

Gender stereotypes encompass both descriptive and prescriptive components. Descriptive gender stereotypes are the beliefs about the qualities that women and men typically possess, whereas prescriptive gender stereotypes are the beliefs about the characteristics that women and men should ideally possess. These two dimensions overlap, since the attributes that are highly valued for men and women are also those prescribed for them (Eagly, 1987; Heilman, 2001). Moreover, Prentice and Carranza (2002) propose that prescriptive gender traits differ in their desirability for women and men. They distinguish

four different categories: gender-intensified prescriptions (i.e., socially desirable traits that are more desirable in the target gender than for people in general), gender-relaxed prescriptions (i.e., traits that are less desirable in the target gender than for people in general), gender-relaxed proscriptions (i.e., traits that are low in general social desirability, but higher in desirability in the target gender), and gender-intensified proscriptions (i.e., traits that are low in general desirability and even lower in the gender target). For example, women are prescribed to be communal, and men agentic; by contrast, dominance is proscribed for women but tolerated in men, and weakness is proscribed for men but tolerated in women.

(In)congruity between gender role and management role

Role congruity theory (RCT, Eagly & Karau, 2002) provides a sound conceptual basis, grounded on gender-stereotyped roles, to understand why women struggle to reach the top. It builds on several previous theories, including social role theory (Eagly, 1987), the think manager–think male paradigm (Schein, 1973, 2001), and the lack-of-fit model (Heilman, 1983, 2001). RCT proposes that people in general see an inconsistency between the predominantly communal qualities associated with women, and the predominantly agentic qualities people consider necessary in a good leader. Men are recognized as possessing the congruent agentic traits. This perception of lack of congruity in women results in two forms of prejudice against them: (a) perceiving women less favorably than men as potential occupants of leadership roles, and (b) evaluating the behavior of actual women leaders less favorably than that of male leaders. If women conform to the female gender role, they fail to meet the requirements of the leadership role. However, if women compete with men for leadership positions and conform to the leadership role, they fail to meet the prescribed requirements of the female gender role. Subsequent studies have experimentally confirmed

that women are less easily categorized as leaders (Scott & Brown, 2006), and men are evaluated as more effective than women (Brescoll, Dawson, & Uhlmann, 2010).

The theory also holds that factors such as defining leader positions in terms of gender could moderate negative attitudes toward women. To the extent that the leader's job is defined in a more feminine way because communal attributes are seen necessary, they would be more consistent with the female gender role, and prejudice would be reduced. Women are typically assessed as being more effective than men in positions that encourage participation and open consideration, that is, positions that are defined in communal terms (e.g., education, social service organizations, and crisis settings) (Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, & Woehr 2014; Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, & Bongiorno, 2011). In contrast, they are perceived as less effective in companies with a strong economic performance and numerically male dominated organizations, and in roles requiring the ability to direct and control people; that is, in companies and roles which are defined in agentic terms (e.g., military contexts and the automobile industry) (e.g., Boyce & Herd, 2003; García-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006). Surprisingly, however, the literature shows that quite often evaluations of potential leaders for a real position are based more on the candidates' sex than on the congruity of their actual traits, presumably because of the conventional gender stereotypes associated with each sex (e.g., Funk, 2019; García-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006). In other words, although women are apparently assumed to be more suited to communal leadership roles, and men, to agentic leadership roles (e.g., Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Hentschel et al., 2019), this inference may not even work out in real life settings.

The present research

Another factor that, we contend, could modify the perceived incongruity between desired leader profile and gender role is the value assigned to the stereotypical attributes in a specific context. Highly valued traits ascribed to women (e.g., niceness) or to men (e.g., independence) could be appropriate in some social roles, but be judged incongruent for other requirements (e.g., a female prosecuting attorney may be assessed negatively because her presumed niceness jeopardizes her success as a litigator). Even poorly valued qualities, such as extremely dominant behavior, could be positively appraised if they are perceived as useful in a specific setting, such as a competitive activity (Eagly & Diekman, 2005), and so individuals with such qualities are assessed more positively than those with attributes perceived as incongruent with that role (Glick, 1991). In this line, Judge, Piccolo, and Kosalka (2009) distinguish between socially desirable personality traits ('bright' traits) and socially undesirable ones ('dark' traits), which might have positive or negative effects in leadership; that is, traits have a bright or a dark side, depending on specific contexts or situations. Following Prentice and Carranza's (2002) terminology, prescribed attributes may become proscribed in incongruent settings, while proscribed qualities may be assessed as prescribed, and so relevant in a specific setting. However, RCT and research on gender and leadership in general have mainly focused on the stereotypical good or ideal leader attributes rather than the undesirable ones (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011; Schein, 2001).

In this study we try to bridge this gap by investigating the perception of congruity between potential leaders and job demands in an organization described in gender terms, when both candidates' sex and their gender characteristics are known, and furthermore, when those traits could be given a low or high value. This approach will help to better identify the circumstances under which (in)compatibility between candidate profile and leadership demands occurs. To this end, we presented two groups of college students with a

hypothetical situation in which a managerial position had to be filled. In one case, the position was in a profit-oriented company, and in the other, a civic-minded company. Participants were then presented with four candidate profiles for each of the two companies: agentic male, agentic female, communal male, and communal female. In addition, within each organization condition, the four candidates were described with either high or low value gender traits. This design will further our understanding of the factors underlying perceived congruity in women and men: when the traditional perceived inconsistency between female role and leadership demands may be attenuated or reversed, as well as when the traditional congruity between male role and leadership role may be not preferred. Extending knowledge on these factors will shed light on the extent to which leadership is contextual, will better predict the success or survival as a leader, and will help scholars and practitioners to refine management recruitment and selection processes.

Accordingly, we expect first (Hypothesis 1), in agreement with RCT and other theories (e.g., Schein's (1973) think manager–think male paradigm, Heilman's (1983) lack-of-fit model, and Eagly's (1987) social role theory), that overall participants will assess candidates with an agentic profile as more suitable for the vacant leadership positions than candidates with a communal profile. Indeed, extensive research suggests that the leadership role requires mainly agentic behaviors and traits rather than communal ones (e.g., Eagly et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2011). The agentic characteristics are typically viewed as essential, whereas the communal traits are considered expendable (Vial & Napier, 2018).

Second, also following the RCT rationale, we predict (Hypothesis 2) that agentic applicants will be evaluated as more suitable for the profit-oriented company, whereas candidates with a communal profile will be considered more suited to the civic-minded company. However, we expect that whereas for the profit-oriented company this congruency will apply to candidates with both high and low value traits, for the civic-minded company,

it will only be the case for candidates with high value traits, but not those with low value traits. We justify this supposition on the basis that agentic characteristics, regardless of their value, are usually seen as more congruent or tolerated in contexts where they may be perceived as particularly beneficial (Judge et al., 2009, Prentice & Carranza, 2002), such as a profit-driven company. Non-favorable communal attributes, however, constitute gender-intensified proscriptions for a leader (Prentice & Carranza, 2002), or dark traits that have only a dark side (Judge et al., 2009), with no potential benefit, particularly in the context of a civic-minded company.

Third, we expect that (Hypothesis 3) participants will prefer agentic males over agentic females for the profit-oriented company when their traits are highly valued, and communal females over communal males for the civic-minded company for the same traits (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014). Research has evidenced a clear alignment between sex and gender on both profiles: men are characterized as more agentic than women, and women are characterized as more communal than men (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Hentschel et al., 2019). It is less clear what will happen when the qualities involved in the hiring process are attributed a low value. Based on the rationale for Hypothesis 2, we cautiously hypothesize, on the one hand, that agentic males will also be preferred over agentic females, given their likely potential benefits for a profit-oriented company. Likewise, we predict that no significant sex difference will be found between the communal male and the communal female in the civic-minded company, given the unlikely advantage provided by low value traits in this setting.

Method

Participants

A total of 472 college students (237 men and 235 women, M_{age} = 22.0 years, SD = 4.32) from a public university in eastern Spain were asked to participate in a study designed to investigate leadership in organizations. As in most Spanish public universities, their socioeconomic status was middle class. They participated voluntarily in the study and were randomly assigned to one of four conditions.

Questionnaire and procedure

This research was approved by the Deontological Commission of the university and performed with approved protocol and informed consent process (162196). Confidentiality of personally-identifiable information has been maintained for privacy safeguards. Participants first read a recruitment announcement for a top manager provided by one of two large companies, one civic-minded and the other profit-oriented; they then assessed the suitability of four candidates short-listed for the position. In two conditions, the four candidates were described as exhibiting some highly valued management traits (e.g., dominant; understanding), whereas in the other two conditions they were described as exhibiting some management traits deemed low value (e.g., individualistic; submissive). In all conditions, the company's business was to buy up repossessed housing at a low price; all the applicants had MBAs and were highly experienced in middle management positions.

In the two conditions involving the highly valued management traits, one male and one female candidate were attributed two stereotypically positive masculine or *agentic* traits (dominant; strong personality), while the other male and female applicants were attributed two stereotypically positive feminine or *communal* traits (sensitive to needs of others; understanding). Similarly, in the two conditions involving the low value management traits, one male and one female candidate were attributed two negative agentic traits

(individualistic; egoistic), whereas the other male and female candidates were attributed two negative communal traits (submissive; cries easily).

The selection of these four agentic and four communal traits was based on a previous study conducted with 162 different college students (64 men and 98 women; $M_{age} = 24.19$ years, $SD = 2.70$; age range: 21 to 40 years) attending the same university. Participants answered an adaptation of the short version of the Bem Sex Roles Inventory (BSRI, Bem, 1974) by Cuadrado (2004). This is a Spanish adaptation of the instrument and includes the 14 traits from the BSRI with the most gender-stereotyped traits in the Spanish cultural context and four negative traits traditionally attributed to women and men in this culture (Cuadrado, 2004). Of the 18 traits, nine items were stereotypically masculine, that is, agentic (e.g., strong personality) ($\alpha = .74$), and nine were stereotypically feminine, that is, communal (e.g., affectionate) ($\alpha = .75$). Participants were asked to indicate how valuable each trait would be for a top management position. We applied t tests to determine whether each trait's mean score was significantly above or below 4, the 7-point Likert scale midpoint, and then to establish which traits were perceived as most and least valuable for that position (see Table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The four questionnaire types (see Supplementary Material for more details) were administered in groups of approximately 30–50 students per class. There were four different versions for each of them to counterbalance the order in which the four candidates were presented. Candidates were assessed on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*totally*).

Results

A summary of the main results can be seen in Table 2. Neither participant's sex nor the order of presentation of candidates within each of the four scenarios had any significant effect on the candidates' suitability (all *p*-values > .22, and ≥ .065, respectively). Accordingly, data analyses were collapsed across participant's sex and candidate presentation order.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

We performed a 2 (company type: profit-oriented vs. civic-minded) x 2 (management traits: high value vs. low value) x 4 (candidate profile: agentic male vs. agentic female vs. communal male vs. communal female) ANOVA with repeated measures on the candidate profile factor. This analysis revealed a significant main effect of management traits, $F(1, 468) = 148.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .24$. The candidates with highly valued traits ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 0.81$) were judged more favorable than those with low value traits ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.99$). Candidate profile also had a main effect, $F(3, 468) = 112.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$. In particular, the candidates described with agentic stereotyped traits ($M_{male} = 4.77$, $SD = 1.67$, and $M_{female} = 4.84$, $SD = 1.64$) were assessed as more suitable than the candidates with communal stereotyped traits ($M_{male} = 3.56$, $SD = 1.86$ and $M_{female} = 3.61$, $SD = 1.91$), as expected. No significant effect was found for company type.

In addition, the following interactions were significant: Company Type x Candidate Profile, $F(3, 468) = 225.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .33$; Management Traits x Candidate Profile, $F(3, 468) = 23.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$; and Company Type x Management Traits x Candidate Profile, $F(3, 468) = 4.44$, $p = .036$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$.

Subsequent inspection of the Company Type x Candidate Profile interaction revealed that for the profit-oriented company the two agentic candidates were significantly preferred

over the two communal candidates (agentic male $M = 5.57$ = agentic female $M = 5.56$ > communal female $M = 2.81$ = communal male $M = 2.77$, $ps < .001$). In contrast, for the civic-minded company the communal female ($M = 4.47$) was judged to be significantly more suitable than the two agentic candidates ($M_{male} = 3.91$ = $M_{female} = 4.07$, $ps \leq .03$). Also, the communal male ($M = 4.40$) was perceived as more suitable than the agentic male ($M = 3.91$) ($p < .01$). There was no significant difference between the two candidates defined with communal traits ($p = .71$), nor between the communal male and the agentic female ($p = .091$).

Inspection of the Management Traits x Candidate Profile interaction indicated that when participants assessed the suitability of the candidates endowed either with the low or the high value pool of traits, they significantly preferred the two agentic candidates over the two communal candidates. In addition, the suitability of every candidate profile was considered as significantly superior for the highly valued traits condition than for the low value one (high $M_{agentic\ male} = 4.98$ > low $M_{agentic\ male} = 4.59$, $p = .012$; high $M_{agentic\ female} = 5.10$ > low $M_{agentic\ female} = 4.62$, $p = .002$; high $M_{communal\ male} = 4.39$ > low $M_{communal\ male} = 2.83$, $p < .001$; high $M_{communal\ female} = 4.43$ > low $M_{communal\ female} = 2.89$, $p < .001$). However, the magnitude of the difference between the two agentic and the two communal candidates was larger in the low value condition (1.75 points difference on average) than in the high value one (0.63 points difference in average). To sum up, candidates described with agentic traits were judged as the most suitable, regardless of the trait value, whereas communal profiled candidates were only perceived congruent when the traits were highly favorable. In addition, the difference between the suitability of the two agentic and the two communal candidates was lower in the high value than the low value traits condition.

Finally, subsequent inspection of the triple interaction (Company Type x Management Traits x Candidate Profile) indicated that in the profit-oriented company, the

two agentic candidates were considered significantly more suitable than the two communal candidates, regardless of low or high value trait scenarios ($ps < .001$), as expected. In the civic-minded company, according to expectations, the suitability of the candidates was different for the high and low value management traits (see Figure 1). Namely, when candidates were selected from among candidates with high value traits, the two communal candidates were rated similarly and as more suitable than the two agentic candidates ($M_{communal\ female} = 5.61 = M_{communal\ male} = 5.53 > M_{agentic\ female} = 4.48 = M_{agentic\ male} = 4.24$, $p < .001$). However, when candidates were selected from among candidates with low value traits, no candidate's profile was significantly considered as more congruent than the others ($F(3, 223) = 1.40$, $p = .24$).

In addition, contrary to expectations, Figure 1 shows there are no significant differences in ratings between agentic males and agentic females with high and low value traits in the profit-oriented company, and neither between the communal male and communal female with highly valued traits in the civic-minded company. The expected absence of differences between the communal male and the communal female with low value traits in the civic-minded company was confirmed.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Discussion

Following RCT (Eagly & Karau, 2002), this research examined how the degree of perceived congruity for a vacant managerial position can vary depending on the organizational setting (profit-oriented company vs. civic-minded company), the candidates' sex and gender-stereotyped traits (agentic male vs. agentic female vs. communal male vs. communal female) and the value attributed to the candidates' traits (high value vs. low value). The study

enhances understanding of social judgments about suitability for leadership positions, particularly when both high and low value traits are involved in the decision.

Our first hypothesis was confirmed, namely that overall, agentic traits would be preferred over communal traits across organizational settings. Our findings were in accordance with previous empirical evidence indicating that leadership is predominantly linked to agency (e.g., Eagly et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2011; Vial & Napier, 2018). This reinforces the idea that the agency dimension prevails over communality as a prescription for leadership (Prentice & Carranza, 2002), suggesting that the masculine construal of leadership is still deeply entrenched in society (e.g., Eagly & Sczesny, 2009; Heilman, 2001; Koenig et al., 2011; Schein 1973, 2001).

Secondly, in line with this preference, we predicted a perceived congruity between profit-oriented companies and the agentic candidate profile for both high and low value traits, whereas we expected that only highly valued traits would be perceived as congruent for the civic-minded companies. This hypothesis also was confirmed, revealing the variability of perceived congruity depending on both organizational setting and value attributed to candidates' traits. Interestingly, if we focus on the perceived congruity for applicants with low value traits, participants viewed candidates described as 'individualistic' and 'egoistic'—as opposed to those described as 'crying easily' and 'submissive'—as a better match for a profit-oriented firm. However, participants judged that no applicant with low value traits, either agentic or communal, was a suitable candidate for a civic-minded company. These results support the argument that agentic characteristics, regardless of their social worth, are considered fitting in contexts where they are judged to be particularly beneficial (Eagly & Diekman, 2005; Judge et al., 2009, Prentice & Carranza, 2002), such as a profit-driven company, where achievement orientation, competition, or ambition could be very advantageous. In contrast, an agentic profile is incompatible with the expected duties

in a more socially-driven organization. Conversely, only when communal traits are favorably evaluated and the organizational setting is defined as communal, such as an organization concerned about citizens, are those qualities welcomed. The fact that highly valued communal qualities (e.g., 'sensitive to the needs of others' and 'understanding') were judged as fitting supports previous research showing that the communal dimension is becoming increasingly relevant in leadership effectiveness (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Gartzia & Van Engen, 2012; Rosette & Tost, 2010). However, the fact that low value communal traits were judged as not fitting suggests that non-favorable communal traits emerge as gender-intensified proscriptions (Prentice & Carranza, 2002) or dark traits that have only a dark side (Judge et al., 2009). Traits such as 'crying easily', due to its high emotional content (Brescoll, 2016), or 'submission', which is the opposite of 'dominance', imply a vulnerability and weakness that seem to inhibit the individual's ability to cope with the demands of any business.

Finally, because of the assumed alignment between sex and gender (i.e., female-communal and male-agency) (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Hentschel et al., 2019), we expected to find sex differences within each company orientation. We predicted, on the one hand, that the highly valued male agentic profile would be considered more suitable than the highly valued female agentic profile for the profit-oriented company, and that the highly valued female communal profile would be more suitable than the highly valued male communal profile for the civic-minded company. Contrary to our expectations, we found no such differences. On the other hand, although more cautiously, we expected that the low value male agentic profile would be considered more suitable than the low value female agentic profile for the profit-oriented company, whereas no difference would be found between the low value male and female profiles for the civic-minded company. In this case, only the second part of this prediction was confirmed: communal male and female candidates with

low value traits were evaluated similarly for the civic-minded company position. In sum, no sex differences were found between either the agentic or the communal candidates, regardless of both the organizational setting and the trait value. Therefore, when information about stereotypical gender traits is available, and is not inferred directly from sex category membership, being a woman does not, *a priori*, seem to be a drawback to being assessed positively for a top managerial position. In any case, as Eagly et al. (2019) concluded, we should bear in mind that the composition of the female stereotype has changed in the last decades, making gains in both communality and competence, but not in agency. In addition, the performance of a female leader with a counter-stereotypical profile (i.e., women with agentic traits) may be devalued (see Schock, Gruber, Scherndl, & Ortner, 2019).

For this reason, to avoid this likely negative assessment of women, Schock et al. (2019) recommend they temper their agency with communion. Indeed, the leadership model has become more androgynous (Eagly, Gartzia, & Carli, 2014). A good combination of communal and agentic attributes is regarded as a more decisive variable in dynamic work environments. Transformational leadership, which encompasses idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1997), is a more androgynous way of leading that brings together agency and communality (Gartzia & Van Engen, 2012). It could help organizations to respond quickly to changes (Bass, 1985), and to manage crises such as product failure (see Pillai, 2013), or even the current COVID-19 pandemic. Transformational leaders are assertive, but they are also sufficiently sociable to inspire individuals and mentor them in new approaches to solving problems and attending to their individual needs (Gartzia & Van Engen, 2012). This leadership style is not far from that commonly adopted by women (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

This study extends our understanding of the implications of including information about candidates' sex and their low/high value gender traits in different organizational

settings. In particular, the exclusively profit-driven business model is committed to a clearly agentic definition of leadership. This business model values and prioritizes an agentic definition of leadership, based on highly valued characteristics but also, curiously, on traits that are less appreciated. Accordingly, the classic agentic leadership model continues to hold sway in management. By contrast, only highly appreciated communal traits are esteemed when matched to the organizational setting (i.e., companies oriented to others' welfare), and low value qualities such as 'submission' and 'crying easily' seem to be rejected regardless of the organizational context. While 'crying easily' probably does not imply incompetency, poor managerial performance is apparently inferred from it anyway. In the same vein, 'submission' seems to be associated with weakness—the antithesis of what is expected from an ideal leader—and consequently, participants preferred an 'egoistic' and 'individualistic' leader for a profit-oriented company (but not necessarily for a civic-minded one). However, we wonder whether a manager with these qualities may be just as—or even more— dangerous and risky for a profit-oriented company as one with a communal profile.

Our results shed light on social judgments in organizational contexts when assessing candidates for a management vacancy, but several considerations could be addressed in future research. Firstly, the use of college student participants in the study may limit the generalizability of our findings to other contexts. However, it is important to note that students often have workplace experience (as seasonal or part-time employees), so their opinions may not differ greatly from the perceptions of full-time employees. In addition, similar findings on gender and leadership have been typically replicated in laboratory settings by testing college students (e.g., Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Schein, 1973, 2001). Secondly, the research participants reacted to fictitious scenarios. If they had been asked to assess real managers, their perceptions and opinions may have been different, because of the effect of real social interaction. Future research should therefore be carried out in more

natural settings to refine the impact of aspirants' profiles on the social perception process. Notwithstanding, as Rosette and Tost (2010) argued, "the use of perceivers with only limited information about the leaders they were evaluating may not be viewed as a limitation but may instead be viewed as consistent with the type of perceptions and conclusions made by the general public about prominent leaders in top positions" (p. 233). Another potential limitation is that the participants may have been aware of the study aims, so their responses could have been affected by social desirability bias (i.e., more favorable attitudes toward women and communal traits here than in a natural setting to avoid appearing sexist). However, this does not seem to be the case, since our findings are consistent with previous empirical evidence on leadership alignment to agency (e.g., Eagly et al., 2019; Vial & Napier, 2018), approval for leadership purposes of low value agentic traits (e.g., Judge et al., 2009), and the moderator role of organizational context (e.g., Boyce & Herd, 2003; Funk, 2019; García-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014). Finally, we used only either agentic or communal traits in each candidate's profile; future research could include mixed descriptions of candidates with both agentic and communal traits, which might affect participants' social perception differently.

In conclusion, this research shows that there is no single prototype of a good leader across all situations, because what perceivers look for is congruity between stereotypical attributes and role demands, as proposed in RCT. Three factors therefore seem to affect the congruity process, namely organizational setting, candidates' gender stereotypical traits, and the social value attributed to them. Both low and high value agentic qualities are better regarded for the profit-driven company. However, communal attributes are only welcomed for the civic-minded company when they are highly valued. Apparently, in order to work in a profit-driven, competitive context it is preferable to have low value but congruent agentic traits than high value but incongruent communal traits. Sex did not prove to be a significant

factor for decision making in this study. Overall, the assessment of candidates' suitability seems to be based more on the congruity between organizational setting and gender-stereotyped traits of candidates, and less on the absolute value of traits, so matching agentic traits, even if they are not highly desirable, were preferred. This would support the idea that the agentic construal of leadership, with its good and bad facets, continues to dominate in management recruitment today.

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Table 1. Means, standard deviation, and t-tests for scores on BSRI (N = 162).

| List of traits	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*	Cohen's *d*
Strong personality[A]	5.70	1.05	20.54	161	<.001	3.24
Sensitive to others' needs[C]	5.22	1.21	12.850	161	<.001	2.02
Understanding[C]	5.00	1.16	11.03	161	<.001	1.74
Dominant[A]	4.94	1.46	8.22	161	<.001	1.29
Hard-hearted[A]	4.33	1.38	3.022	161	.003	0.48
Willing to take risks[A]	4.12	1.50	1.05	161	.296	0.16
Warm[C]	3.98	1.30	-.181	161	.857	-0.02
Compassionate[C]	3.87	1.22	-1.28	161	.201	-0.20
Aggressive[A]	3.47	1.69	-4.00	161	<.001	-0.63
Affectionate[C]	3.15	1.17	-9.14	161	<.001	-1.44
Tender[C]	3.07	1.22	-9.71	161	<.001	-1.53
Athletic[A]	3.03	1.57	-7.85	161	<.001	-1.24
Individualistic[A]	2.78	1.62	-9.521	161	<.001	-1.50
Egoistic[A]	2.58	1.57	-11.472	161	<.001	-1.81
Loves children[C]	2.43	1.40	-14.30	161	<.001	-2.25
Submissive[C]	1.75	1.02	-27.952	161	<.001	-4.40
Cries easily[C]	1.65	.98	-30.51	161	<.001	-4.80

Note: Traits perceived as most and least valuable for a management position (A = *agentic* or stereotypically masculine; C = *communal* or stereotypically feminine) by a sample of 162 Spanish college students tested with an adaptation of the short version of the Bem Sex Roles Inventory (BSRI, Bem, 1974) by Cuadrado (2004). Mean scores go from 1 (*not at all valuable*) to 7 (*totally valuable*).

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of the Candidates' Suitability Depending on Company Type and Management Traits (N = 472).

	COMPANY TYPE							
	Profit-oriented (*n* =245)				Civic-minded (*n* = 227)			
	Agentic male	Agentic female	Communal male	Communal female	Agentic male	Agentic female	Communal male	Communal female
High value traits (*n* = 219)	5.71 (1.40)	5.71 (1.42)	3.25 (1.71)	3.26 (1.75)	4.24 (1.46)	4.48 (1.46)	5.53 (1.44)	5.61 (1.46)
Low value traits (*n* = 253)	5.45 (1.31)	5.44 (1.28)	2.38 (1.12)	2.44 (1.28)	3.61 (1.57)	3.69 (1.56)	3.36 (1.60)	3.41 (1.56)

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Candidates' suitability depending on both company type and the available pool of management traits. Mean scores go from 1 (*not at all suitable*) to 7 (*totally suitable*).

CIVIC-MINDED COMPANY

PROFIT-ORIENTED COMPANY
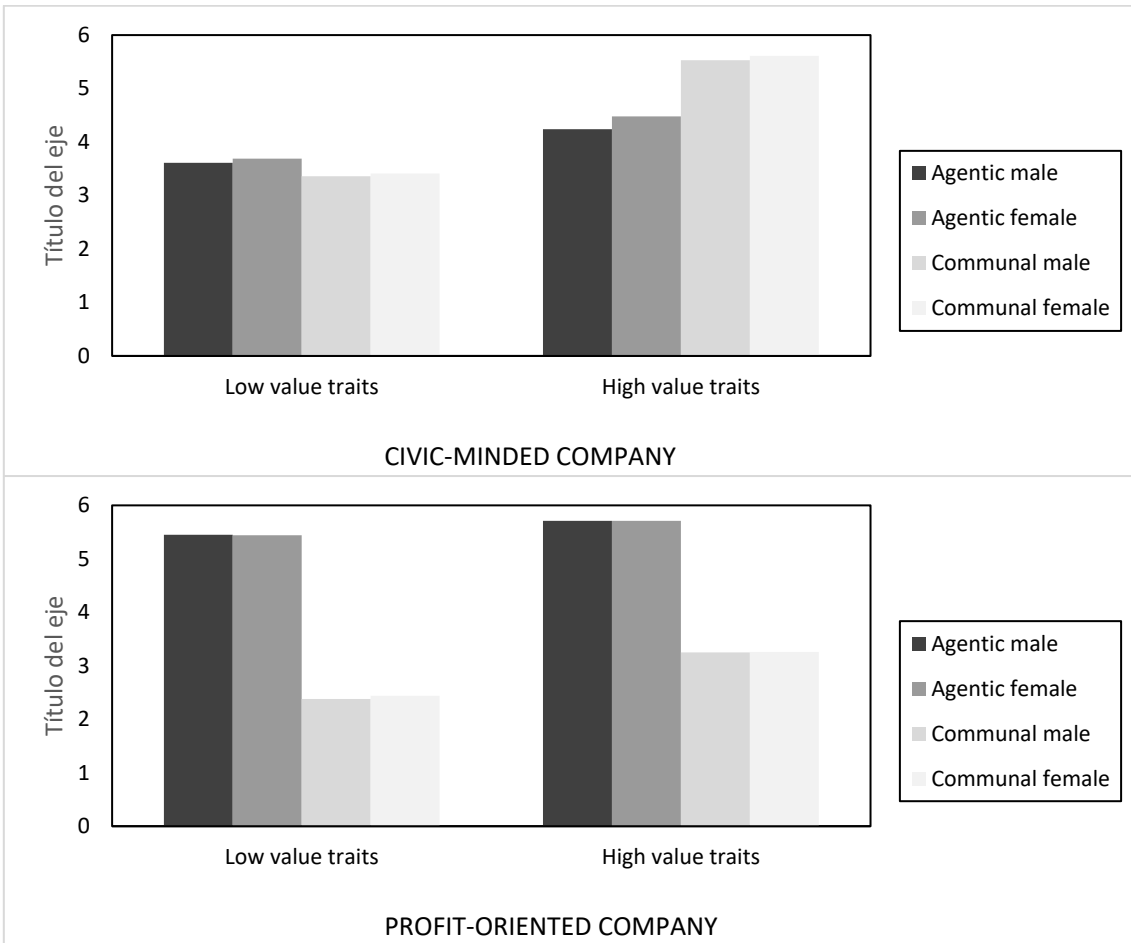
Appendix

Scenarios for Company Type Condition (Translation from Spanish)

Profit-oriented company

CASE

The BIBAX company currently has five offices in Spain located in Bilbao, Sevilla, Zaragoza, Madrid, and Valencia. In recent years, the company's business strategy has centered on buying up repossessed housing at a low price. It then evicts mortgage defaulters and sells homes on the housing market at twice the price. The company has recently enlisted the help of an external consultant to initiate a personnel recruitment and selection process to fill a vacancy on the Board of Directors of the Madrid office. This high-responsibility position will preferably be filled by a person outside the company with extensive experience and training in management tasks. In sum, the company's mission is to move into neighborhoods where cheap housing is available, even though this entails evicting insolvent occupants; in addition, the company's shareholders receive good returns, but the social impact of the business is not taken into account.

Civic-minded company

CASE

The BIBAX company currently has five offices in Spain located in Bilbao, Sevilla, Zaragoza, Madrid, and Valencia. In recent years, the company's business strategy has centered on buying up repossessed housing at a low price. Its aim is to monetize the housing without losing the essence of the neighborhood, benefiting the quality of life of citizens and offering cheap rentals at reasonable prices. Its mission is to be present in every neighborhood and cooperate to improve citizens' quality of life. The company has recently enlisted the help of an external consultant to initiate a personnel recruitment and

selection process to fill a vacancy on the Board of Directors of the Madrid office. This high-responsibility position will preferably be filled by a person outside the company with extensive experience and training in management tasks. In sum, the company seeks shareholders to make money, but cooperates to enhance the well-being of the community in which they do their business.

Candidate Profiles for Management Traits Condition (Translation from Spanish)

High value management traits

Peter M. Degree in Business Administration and Management and Executive MBA. He has ten years of uninterrupted professional experience in middle management positions. Those who know him describe him as a dominant man with a strong personality. [*agentic male*]

Ann C. Degree in Business Administration and Management and Executive MBA. She has ten years of uninterrupted professional experience in middle management positions. Those who know her describe her as a dominant woman with a strong personality. [*agentic female*]

John B. Degree in Business Administration and Management and Executive MBA. He has ten years of uninterrupted professional experience in middle management positions. Those who know him describe him as sensitive to needs of others and understanding. [*communal male*]

Mary H. Degree in Business Administration and Management and Executive MBA. She has ten years of uninterrupted professional experience in middle management positions. Those who know her describe her as sensitive to needs of others and understanding. [*communal female*]

Low value management traits

Peter M. Degree in Business Administration and Management and Executive MBA. He has ten years of uninterrupted professional experience in middle management positions. Those who know him describe him as individualistic and egoistic. [*agentic male*]

Ann C. Degree in Business Administration and Management and Executive MBA. She has ten years of uninterrupted professional experience in middle management positions. Those who know her describe her as individualistic and egoistic. [*agentic female*]

John B. Degree in Business Administration and Management and Executive MBA. He has ten years of uninterrupted professional experience in middle management positions. Those who know him describe him as submissive and he also cries easily. [*communal male*]

Mary H. Degree in Business Administration and Management and Executive MBA. She has ten years of uninterrupted professional experience in middle management positions. Those who know her describe her as submissive and she also cries easily. [*communal female*]