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# A Tendency to Essentialism? Discourses about Women's Leadership

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**Abstract:** The main objective of this research is to identify the women's leadership model diffused through management literature in order to determine if there is a pre-eminence of essentialist and exclusionary principles in its sense. Through the Appraisal Theory and by analyzing a recent management literature sample, the values associated with the women's leadership model are identified, and a conclusion about their essentialist character is reached. The initial hypothesis is that the women's leadership model, disseminated to professional women through management literature, contains an essentialist character that reproduces gender dichotomies and the rational homo oeconomicus model by hindering gender equality and the development of egalitarian leadership models from being accomplished.

**Keywords:** essentialism; women's leadership; management literature; neoliberalism

## 1. Introduction

Critically approaching the women's leadership phenomenon in companies is an essentially necessary matter, as the business world is witnessing an androcentric bias that reproduces business power masculinization, which makes the leadership models that go beyond the masculine norm the most difficult to develop (Due Billing 2011; Kelan 2010; Selzer et al. 2017; Madsen and Andrade 2018). Hence, the main objective of this research is to identify the women's leadership model demanded by companies in an attempt to discern whether this model has an essentialist character that reproduces gender dichotomies or not.

This identification will be made by analyzing the management literature addressed to women (Collins 2000; Greatbatch and Clark 2003; Fernández Rodríguez 2007), a work dynamics dissemination tool that contains a moralizing character, which determines the "right" ways to manage a company (Jackson 2001; Huczynski 2006). This literature reflects the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2002) that constitutes the neoliberal identity in today's societies. Its success in the management class cannot be denied, nor can that of its subgenre destined specifically for women (Kelan 2008; Medina-Vicent 2018a), which reveals the growing importance of women leaders in the public space.

Our initial hypothesis is that the women's leadership model disseminated through the management literature for women has an essentialist and exclusionary character that reproduces gender dichotomies and the rational homo oeconomicus model (Calvo 2018) by hindering gender equality and the development of egalitarian leadership models from being accomplished. Thus, the originality of this work lies in creating its own glimpse from which to deal with the possibilities of founding a business space that moves towards equality through women's leadership.

This glimpse is created by an interdisciplinary dialogue held with business ethics, the feminist philosophy, sociology, critical management studies (CMS), and leadership studies. The gender perspective is the main driver that helps to establish linkage points among such diverse disciplines (Reverter-Bañón 2003, 2017). It is also an innovative work in critical management studies, as it offers a

feminist vision of a phenomenon that has scarcely been taken into account in this field (Due Billing and Alvesson 2000; Medina-Vicent 2020).

This article is structured in four parts. Firstly, we will address the materials and methodology on which this research is based: Management literature addressed to women and the Appraisal Theory method. The latter offers a standard model for analyzing the evaluation of discourse—contained in the prescriptive–imperative and evaluative languages—and proscription for women of these works. Secondly, there are the results, which are divided into four thematic parts: The language of psychology in management literature; organizational culture and women’s leadership; values related with women’s leadership in management literature; and the essentialist nature of the discourse based on neuroscientific arguments. The first one identifies the triple nature of the management literature for women: Its psychological, aspirational, and depoliticized tone. The second one explores women encountering difficulties in adapting to an organizational culture and having to change some of their values to fit into this space. The third one identifies the main values related with women leaders in the company: Relational thinking, collaboration, inclusive communication, emotion, empathy, and multitasking abilities. In the third one, we look to the neuroscientific arguments used to state the essentialism of the women’s leadership model exposed in these books. We conclude that neuroscientific discourses are used by authors to create an ambivalent and ambiguous discourse about building genders. Finally, we conclude that the values on which the professional women’s leadership model is built in companies in this literature genre are quite conservative, and refer to a traditional and stereotypical female model that contributes very little to the true transformation of women present in companies.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Rather than analyzing the structure of management literature, we center on discerning the discourses and ideology printed in these works. In this analysis, we trace the marks of behavior prescriptions hurled at professional women. We specifically intend to identify the values and behaviors that are associated with women in developing leadership.

We should pay special attention to some of the linguistic aspects contained in the prescriptive–imperative and evaluative languages as well as the proscription for women of these works. We base our work on the Appraisal Theory (Eggins and Slade 1997; Martin 2000; Martin and White 2005), which offers a standard model for analyzing the evaluation of discourse, whose application has been well verified in different academic contexts. According to James R. Martin, the Appraisal Theory refers to “the semantic resources used to negotiate emotions, judgements, and valuations, alongside resources for amplifying and engaging with these evaluations” (Martin 2000, p. 145). This theory explains in what way and which linguistic resources manage to express, negotiate, and naturalize some intersubjective positions and the ideological positions of speakers. In addition, in that sense, it allows us to identify the way in which readers are sought to take a specific position regarding the development of their leadership. We use its methodology because it leads us directly to negotiations about judgements and appraisals.

It should be noted that in previous studies on management literature, other analysis methodologies have been used that may also be appropriate for analyzing other aspects of this literature that go beyond moral values and prescriptions. We find works like those of Norman Fairclough (1992a, 1992b, 2003) and Boltanski and Chiapello (2002), or the former’s work with Chiapello and Fairclough (2002). Of the Spanish national sociological studies, the work of Carlos Jesús Fernández Fernández Rodríguez (2007) and Alonso and Rodríguez (2013, 2018) deserves special mention.

With Martin and White’s indicators (2005), we make our own selection based on our research objectives<sup>1</sup>. Firstly, we center on identifying the mandates and the imperative descriptions and/or

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<sup>1</sup> In order to understand the indicators selected in detail, please see Medina-Vicent (2018b).

prescriptions, which may refer to the behaviors, actions, and/or decisions recommended to professional women. We pay special attention to the modal verbs “have to”, “must”, “ought to”, “should”, “can”, “could”, and “do”, as well as to their negative forms, which are used to express necessity, compulsoriness, and recommendations.

Secondly, we should identify the descriptions that lead to evaluative language; i.e., those fragments that inform us about which actions and decisions are good and which are bad for the future of professional women in the company. As for positive terms, we identify: Good, OK, right, value, nice, convenient, adequate, satisfying, possible, and also the bad ones: Bad, wrong, mistake, error, failure, dissatisfying, impossible, etc.

Thus, when we use the methodological bases that the Appraisal Theory provides us with, we can discern which discourses make up the women’s leadership model. So, if we take the corpus to be “a finite collection of materials, which is determined in advance by the analyst, with some (inevitable) arbitrariness, and on which he/she is going to work” (Barthes 1997, p. 80), we see that the analyst must reproduce the complex system of oppositions and confluences found as a whole in that literature. Moreover, homogeneity must be presented in line with the criteria defined in the research, which we go on to explain in the next paragraphs.

We first find the chronological criterion. Firstly, we focus on studying those works published over the 2010–2015 period to analyze the most recent values associated with women in the company. This is a period of great effervescence and success for this literature directed at women. Secondly, we find the geographical criterion, which is also very important because most of these works tend to have been created by Anglo-Saxon authors, and are normally published in the USA or the UK (Fernández Rodríguez 2007), although they have undeniably been exported to other countries (Fernández Rodríguez 2011; Gantman 2017). In the third place, we look at the criterion that refers to the authors and their popularity. In the management world, their reputation and renown are key to diffusing the ideas presented in such works. Fourth and finally, we pay special attention to the critiques made by the most popular newspapers and by other prestigious authors. Next, we provide a list of selected samples:

1. Mistakes I Made at Work: 5 Influential Women Reflect on What They Got Out of Getting It Wrong, by Jessica Bacal (2014).
2. Work with Me. How Gender Intelligence can Help You Succeed at Work and in Life, by Annis and Gray (2013).
3. How Women Lead: The 8 Essential Strategies Successful Women Know, by Hadary and Henderson (2013).
4. Who Says It’s a Man’s World: The Girls’ Guide to Corporate Domination, by Emily Bennington (2013).
5. Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead, by Sheryl Sandberg (2013).

### 3. Results

The three dimensions of analysis that will be presented in this section represent the key topic issues present in the popular management literature analyzed: The language of psychology in management literature; organizational culture and women’s leadership; values related with women’s leadership in management literature; and the essentialist nature of the discourse based on neuroscientific arguments.

#### 3.1. *The Language of Psychology in Management Literature*

With our analysis, we identify the triple nature of the management literature for women: Its psychological, aspirational, and depoliticized tone. This triple character is identified through the empirical process, and in the following subsections, other parts of the procedure will be indicated. These are premises that operate in an interconnected manner in order to create a conservative discourse about the presence of women leaders in companies, which leads us to a poorly critical conception of the gender inequality problem in this domain.

All of the works use a language that is typical of psychology (Sugarman 2015), which reminds us of the logic of the happiness industry (Cabanas and Illouz 2018). The advice they offer refers to the changes that women must make in their interior—their personality or psychology—to enhance their self-esteem and, consequently, their efficacy at work (Hazleden 2003). So, rather than encouraging women to be critical about their surroundings and move together towards gender equality, they are encouraged to act to solve their individual problems. Such spiritual-type empowerment centers on the individual and not on the group (Redden 2002). Even though it may lead to changes in each person's life, it does not transform structures of social inequality. This means that, through a spiritual empowerment, we can undertake changes in our attitude and take actions that “improve” our individual lives, but this rarely translates into a political demand for collective social improvement. We now provide some examples with exact citations that deal with professional women overcoming problems by listening to their “internal voice”:

Listen to your “internal voice,” that voice inside your head that tells you when you feel tired or thirsty, whether you should leave the party, if you should buy that cool shirt. When you think about the path you're on right now, what does the voice say? A full-throated, passionate yes? A maybe? Or an I-hate-this-but-it's-what-I-have-to-do? You can plug your ears for a while, but eventually, that voice grows louder, more ominous, and harder to ignore. Listen to it now before you get in too deep (Bacal 2014, p. 24).

It's very important to begin with one's own self, for the greatest value you can give to others is when you are whole and at your best (Annis and Gray 2013, p. 237).

Learning to trust your instincts and acknowledge your strengths is the foundation for developing self-confidence (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. 21).

That's why mindfulness should be at the very center of your career (Bennington 2013, p. 36).

I tried to be authentic and shared my truth (Sandberg 2013, p. 139).

As we can see, the predominating terms used in these books include self, internal, mindful, feelings, emotions, etc. These are concepts that focus on each reader seeking their fears and hopes from within him/herself (Forest 1997; Forest et al. 2003; Papalini 2016), and relating them with the obstacles and problems that they have had to face in their working lives. This discourse is fed with the language of psychology and, to a great extent, it takes us to what Eva Illouz (2007, 2010) calls “emotional capitalism”—referring to the commercialization of emotions used to serve the neoliberal system. This allows the reader to center on herself and to be unable to critically establish a multidimensional and structural explanation of her problems.

This mixture of discourse-type operations acts as an incentive for the notion of personally overcoming the barriers that each woman sets herself, which, in turn, releases the state and economic structures of the responsibilities of this inequality. Thus, subjects are depoliticized. This means that any reflective and critical analysis of their problems is far from being developed. On the contrary, it imposes a way of thinking that turns each problem into an individual question, and moves it away from a collective vision of political struggle. We understand the political struggle as the collective demand for a social transformation against different powers, such as the state and even business organizations. The idea of women professionals learning from their mistakes becomes a central one and, in this way, failure is seen like another opportunity to compensate oneself before the neoliberal market (Muñoz-Rodríguez and Santos-Ortega 2017), as the citations below indicate:

Understanding those lessons affirmed my belief that mistakes are nearly always learning opportunities and that you should only call them “failures” if you don't learn (Bacal 2014, p. 111).

How many times have you heard the phrase, “If you think you can, you can; if you think you can't, you can't?” Research and experience prove the truth of this statement (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. 25).

Mary Poppins told the children to believe that the impossible can be possible (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. 182).

When building barriers in women's interiors, patriarchal structures are exonerated, and women are blamed for their own situations as they are pressed to be the main figures of their own destiny. Through this look, professional women must be in charge of their own lives and careers without making any critical interpretation of the structural reasons that prevent them from devising a feasible life plan. Neoliberal meritocracy is thus built as the main discourse to disseminate the women's leadership model, which reproduces the typical unequal and unfair power relations of the neoliberal system (Littler 2013).

Accordingly, the prescriptions launched from this literature genre entail a strong aspirational character; through this character, women are urged to change their attitudes in order to triumph in their respective workplaces. As we can see, this character is inevitably linked to psychological language as it defines the goals that a woman can overcome individually, but not collectively, by making her think that any physical or symbolic barrier can be overcome if someone has the self-esteem needed to do so. Thus, urging readers to action is a central part of these works:

Failing is sometimes the only way forward. You can read thousands of books about public speaking, but until you do it, you are not going to grow (Bacal 2014, p. 128).

Be an initiator of change, not a follower (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. 65).

Question to ask yourself: Am I an idea generator, or do I just look things up? (Bennington 2013, p. 113).

Combination of both components (psychological and aspirational natures) creates a completely acritical and depoliticized discourse about the state of gender equality in companies, and hinders building or really transforming women's leadership models. Therefore, it is not surprising that maternity and conciliation, equal pay, or access to responsible job posts are dealt with as if they were personal self-development matters, and not matters of collective interest. As it forms part of the mainstream self-help discourse (Siurana 2018), management literature pathologizes and demobilizes women's discontent (Ebben 2015), turning structural problems such as gender inequality into individual problems that each woman can solve on her own. However, it is worth emphasizing that the work by Bacal (2014) offers a vision that is more aware of social structures.

Now that we have presented the most important characteristics that we identified in our analysis, we conclude that the feminist struggle in these works becomes a secondary matter, which makes it something that each woman does alone. However, the need to claim what belongs to women in companies comes over in certain areas, like salaries: "You have to realize that at some point you'll struggle" (Bacal 2014, p. 162); this struggle is always an individual affair. In other words, a woman manager may be able to increase her salary, but, from a critical viewpoint, it might not mean a significant change in the gender pay gap between men and women. However, it would rather be a matter of an internal struggle externalized in minor conquests for certain women instead of a collective struggle for well-being and gender equality in society. This matter relates to the new spirit of capitalism.

### 3.2. Organizational Culture and Women's Leadership

As part of our task, we encountered one main difficulty: A situation in which the ambiguity upon which one prescribes or not is overwhelming. Notwithstanding, we were able to identify certain values that appear over and over again in most of these works, which display a given trend towards a leadership model that comes close to essentialism and to the conventional female gender stereotype.

Nearly all of these works start by acknowledging that women tend to feel "out of place" in the company (Ford 2006) and have encountered difficulties adapting to its culture. For this reason, readers are advised to investigate the companies that they wish to work for and to adapt to the demands



that stem from each organizational culture to, thus, reduce the stress caused by integrating into a company's dynamics and to increase their chances of success in it. At the same time, by acknowledging the limits that each company's culture imposes in shaping workers' behavior, most works encourage readers to present their "true self"; that is, to make their personal values merge with those of the company:

There's a set of corporate behaviors—ways of speaking, of addressing people, of responding to things—an entire protocol and vocabulary that I just forced myself to learn (Bacal 2014, p. 9).

As you investigate the company, see what you can learn about the company's management style and the experience of the person to whom you will report (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. 54).

Know yourself, and don't try to be someone you're not. Don't try to shove down your personality if you have too much personality for the corporate environment (Bacal 2014, p. 15).

Now, when I give career advice, it is to identify the goodness of fit between your personal values and the values of your organization (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. 50).

In the sections here, you're going to get super-clear on what matters most so that you can bring your whole, ridiculously positive self to work each day—and teach others to do the same (Bennington 2013, p. 6).

However, what values are women encouraged to present? The first step that these works take to acknowledge that women have their own leadership model is by recognizing that they have had to adapt to the traditional masculine model to be able to triumph in the company by renouncing part of their own personality. This means the reproduction of the values associated with the masculine role stereotype:

As a result, I adopted men's leadership styles, learned how they made decisions and followed suit, and accepted their values at business as my values (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. xvi).

I know a woman who naturally talks softly and forces herself to "shout" in business meetings just to speak at an average volume. Overriding our natural tendencies is very difficult (Sandberg 2013, p. 60).

Although these books talk about the need of many women to adapt to a predominantly male leadership model, women have also been pressed to resist this reality and to lead teams that take different formats. This shows again the ambiguous nature of these works, that at one moment they prescribe a certain type of behavior, and at the other moments they prescribe a different one. Once again, in these formulations, we note a certain psychological feel that leads to looking within, to what is spiritual:

Don't stop being a woman just because you are in a job (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. 14).

It is important to women leaders to stay true to themselves. Don't change your behavior because you think it is too much like a woman, says Judy Robison (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. 15).

This first step that we explored about women encountering difficulties in adapting to an organizational culture and having to change some of their values to fit into this space provides us with a central key to understanding the argument that lies behind these works. This argument is next: Women essentially tend to confront leadership differently from men and, for this reason, they feel out of place in the business world because their values do not match the set values that tend to respond to the male stereotype. However, what are the values and behaviors that are associated with women in the studied works? Let us take a look at them.

### 3.3. Values Related with Women's Leadership in Management Literature

Through these works, certain characteristics, behaviors, and values are associated with women, despite the ambiguity that characterizes their prescriptions. In order to discern if this operation is done in an essentialist or constructivist manner, it would be necessary to identify the main values related with women leaders in the company.

One idea that comes over quite clearly from the start and is shared in almost all of the works is that of "we are not the same" (Annis and Gray 2013, p. 16); i.e., men and women are not equal and do not have to try to be the same. The work that mentions such a defense women's leadership the most is that made by Annis and Gray (2013), although we also found it more subtly in other works. Next, we list the main values related with the women's leadership model in our analyzed sample.

First, relational thinking is related with women as opposed to the task-centered thinking that is typical of men. This trait is identified as the skill that each group naturally has; that is to say, biological trends that urge men and women to process information differently:

A woman's natural ability for interconnected, consequential thinking is a strength that men tend to undervalue and misinterpret as expressions of uncertainty and insecurity. A man's instant ability to scan his environment for reason and logic and take immediate action is a strength that women tend to misinterpret as being dismissive, uncaring, and risk inclined (Annis and Gray 2013, p. 126).

Men tend to be more quantitative. (...) Women tend to be a little more fluid in their goals in terms of saying "I want to be able to do these things and then we have to come back and quantify them" (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. 165).

Secondly, the belief that women are more collaborative than men comes over, and that women naturally enjoy teamwork and make more efforts to establish relationships among the members who make up their team, whereas men prefer to work alone:

Women tend to thrive on collaboration, cooperation communication, and mutual support (Annis and Gray 2013, p. 220).

Women create a different context around leadership. They are more holistic, collaborative, inclusive, and consultative than men (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. 1).

Third, and in close connection to what we have just mentioned, it is held that women make communication much more inclusive, indirect, and reflexive, while men prefer communication to be brief, direct, and unidirectional. This would explain why women ask more questions in meetings with teams than men:

Men tend to be impersonal and direct in their feedback (Annis and Gray 2013, p. 18).

It's the nature of women, however, to ask questions, and they like to have questions asked for them (Annis and Gray 2013, p. 7).

Men are more direct (Bennington 2013, p. 46).

Fourth, we found another quite widespread idea—and one that is far from new—of women being more emotional than men. This means that women are more easily led by their feelings and passions, which can represent something good and new if it is included in team management:

And, yes, women are emotional, tending to express their joys, passions, and frustrations more often than men do. But does it mean that they are too emotional? (Annis and Gray 2013, p. 7).

Women tend to bring emotions to the table no matter what, and can be unfair because of that (Bennington 2013, p. 52).

In the fifth place, this last matter would make women more empathic than men, and would consequently allow them to make closer connections with the members of the teams they lead; women would be capable of understanding certain situations in a different light. Values like care and compassion are also brought up to be offered to the company's service. As previously mentioned, it is worth pointing out that the authors normally consider these matters to be the strong points that women must present.

From birth, males and females tend to show different environmental scanning abilities: Females spend more time scanning the faces around them while males focus on their environment (Annis and Gray 2013, p. 176).

Women have a high degree of empathy, which tends to translate into weakness when it comes to delegation (Bennington 2013, p. 48).

So at the very least, women can enter these negotiations with the knowledge that showing concern for the common good, even as they negotiate for themselves, will strengthen their position (Sandberg 2013, p. 48).

Sixth and finally, there is women's supposed multitasking ability. Holistic thinking and the capacity of performing more than one activity at the same time are stressed in these works as something typical of women, and this emphasis is based on scientific arguments.

Value women's ability to multitask (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. 16).

Discoveries by neuroscientists, biologists, and psychologists have confirmed, without question, that many differences are hardwired into the brain structures of males and females and affect the way each gender processes information, rationalizes situations, communicates, makes decisions, deals with stress, and engages with the world (Annis and Gray 2013, p. 6).

We conclude that the women-related values that women display as they carry out their leadership, as indicated in management literature, are as follows: Relational thinking, collaboration, inclusive communication, emotion, empathy, and multitasking ability. We can state that these values correspond absolutely to the traditional female gender stereotype. The main difference lies in the fact that, now, these values come into play to shape more effective management; i.e., those company matters that were formerly frowned upon are now being revalued. Therefore, values seem to directly correspond to a stereotyped and poorly transforming vision of women leaders.

Therefore, we dare to state an essentialist trend in the women's leadership model spread through management literature. To justify this trend, in the next subsection, we see how neuroscientific arguments are resorted to in order to support this differentiation in leaderships between men and women by conferring to the arguments of the works a more essentialist and conservative nature than that which we have looked at so far.

#### 3.4. An Essentialist Nature: Neuroscientific Arguments

One of the main arguments used by these works, particularly those by Annis and Gray (2013) and by Hadary and Henderson (2013), is to resort to neuroscientific experiments to explain an essential difference in behavior between men's and women's leaderships. So, the values that we previously identified as those that shape the women's leadership model that predominates in these works are based on biological, brain, and even hormone matters. Consequently, we can state that a trend exists in popular management literature for women that supports the neuroscientific thesis of sexual dimorphism (Blum 2012; Fine 2010, 2017). However, the kinds of arguments that tend to be used to base



the previous idea particularly focus on totally acritical out-of-context citations of those experiments done in the neuroscience field.

By mentioning neuroscientific explanations, authors attempt to reinforce the most essential women's leadership vision registered on the minds of this group. Let us look at the neuroscientific arguments used to support relational thinking for women as opposed to the task-centered thinking that men would have:

A man's higher levels of testosterone compel him to seek immediate solutions and take quick action, while a woman's lower levels of this hormone and higher levels of estrogen may contribute to her broader, more contextual, more long-term view of things (Annis and Gray 2013, p. 126).

Women's brains show activity in more areas distributed across the brain than men's brains when engaged in tasks such as problem-solving situations. This helps explain the holistic and integrative view women bring to business and their propensity to multitask (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. 12).

Women have proportionately more white matter, which supports connections across areas of the brain. Men have proportionately more gray matter, which focuses brain activity into a single region of the brain. The result is that women are continuously making connections among facts and relationships as part of problem solving, which accounts for their more holistic perspective when viewing and solving problems (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. 12).

Secondly, we find neuroscientific tests showing that women are more collaborative than men, and how women naturally enjoy working in work teams and make more efforts to establish relationships with team members.

Researchers also report that scans show that women display more neural activity in the parts of the brain supporting the use of language and in the connections in the brain affecting memories, emotions, and sensory clues. As a result, women are more likely than men to consider relationships and values while simultaneously focusing on facts and logic (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. 12).

Differences in brain chemistry also play a role in the difference between how women and men approach leadership. Women's brains secrete higher levels of two chemicals, serotonin and oxytocin. ( . . . ) This is one reason women give high priority to creating a culture of trust with their employees and building relationships (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. 13).

In the third place, and regarding women's inclusive and indirect communication, neurosciences particularly focus on these justifications:

Where men tend to use both hemispheres of their brain sequentially, women tend to engage in right-brain and left-brain activities simultaneously. The corpus callosum, a bundle of nerves connecting the right and left hemispheres of the brain, is larger in women's brains than those of men and contains more white matter—nerve fibers that enable women to transfer data between the right and left hemispheres more efficiently than men. As a result, women tend to take in a broader, more inclusive perspective of a situation; they view the elements of a problem or task as interconnected and interdependent (Annis and Gray 2013, p. 86).

Fourthly, we see the notion that women are more emotional than men, which is also based on neurosciences:

As we explored in chapter three, women, compared to men, typically have a larger, deeper limbic system—the part of the brain that includes the hippocampus and amygdale, and functions as the hub of emotion and motivation (Annis and Gray 2013, p. 155).

Today, oxytocin is often referred to as the social attachment hormone. While this powerful hormone is found in both men and women, it generally plays a more essential role in a woman's life. In addition to stimulating maternal behavior in women, oxytocin has a calming effect on women's emotions ([Annis and Gray 2013](#), p. 96).

In the fifth place, we find the following arguments about women's empathy and values like care and compassion:

Brain scan studies indicate that the female brain generally has larger areas—specifically the insular cortex, the anterior cingulate cortex, and the corpus callosum—that enable them to “read” interpersonal experiences, be more empathetic toward others, and track gut feeling ([Annis and Gray 2013](#), p. 176).

The differences in brain chemistry also affect the way women and men deal with conflict. Women have lower levels of testosterone and vasopressin than men; these are chemicals that encourage aggression and territoriality. The structure in the brain that is associated with aggressive action, fear, and anxiety (the amygdale) is smaller in women. When women get angry or threatened, they are less likely to react with aggressive action and more likely to focus on understanding the emotional and interpersonal aspects of the situation. As a consequence, women's leadership style is more likely than men's to include listening and compromise ([Hadary and Henderson 2013](#), p. 13).

Finally, the idea of women being intuitive by nature is considered:

The insula is, on average, twice as large in the female brain than in the male brain and helps a woman translate physical sensations and thoughts in the subconscious mind into conscious thought flooded with memories and emotions. This ability to draw on past memories and bring them into the present prevents a woman from acting hastily and taking unnecessary risk. In conjunction with the ACC (Anterior Cingulate Cortex) and PFC (Prefrontal Cortex), the insula helps a woman anticipate what something may feel like before it actually happens, making a “woman's intuition” a very real biological difference ([Annis and Gray 2013](#), p. 125).

So, now that we have seen the values and behaviors associated with women leaders in companies, along with the basis for their arguments in research works and neuroscientific experiments, it is hard to conceive that the approach taken by these works to deal with this phenomenon is not essentialist. However, despite using the neuroscientific discourse about sexual dimorphism to support their different leadership models for women, once more, they resort to strategic ambiguity and state that, although experimental neuroscientific results show basic differences between men's and women's behaviors and their brains, they do not mean that this reality cannot be transformed:

The balance of biology and social influence is unique to every individual and situation ([Annis and Gray 2013](#), p. 17).

Of course, this should be back-flip-inducing good news, because when you understand there are biological reasons why you act the way you do, you won't think you're crazy ([Bennington 2013](#), pp. 52–53).

We overcome biology with consciousness in other areas ([Sandberg 2013](#), p. 108).

The research does not imply that the differences between women and men are hard-wired into the brain. In fact, the latest research shows that the brain is remarkably plastic ([Hadary and Henderson 2013](#), p. 13).

Thus, it is considered that, by knowing our intrinsic nature and our unique biology as men and women, we can use it to make our professional future much more beneficial. So, from these authors' perspectives, instead of being a conditioning factor, women's nature would be a way towards empowerment and decision-making based on what women “really” are:

However, this little biological crash course is still something to celebrate because it is further proof that you are not your thoughts—you're the driver of your thoughts (Bennington 2013, p. 54).

First, women must come across as being nice, concerned about others, and “appropriately” female (Sandberg 2013, p. 47).

Apart from the abilities that each woman has by being a woman, certain capacities and tools exist that they must use to improve their leadership capacities; that is, capacities that women can learn to work more efficiently. Women are urged to learn and include certain capacities and skills in their training, as they can help them to do their professional work better, no matter what it entails:

Wherever you go, whatever job you take, you always want to be working in skills you can take with you.

(Bacal 2014, p. 15)

It is a matter of acquiring the knowledge, skills, and experience early in your career. You must make this a top priority (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. 107).

And in order to perform like a manager, I had to build and demonstrate the skills, the capabilities, and experience to move up (Bennington 2013, p. 115).

The ability to learn is the most important quality a leader can have (Sandberg 2013, p. 35).

As we have seen up to this point, although a clear essentialist line of argument apparently exists, there are some clues that allow us to understand that the presented leadership model can be built from learning capacities. The explanation of this matter may lie in the typical strategic ambiguity of neoliberalism. This ambiguity is based on generating contradictory expectations towards women. We mean that contradictory prescriptions are launched in these works, which imply the construction of an ambiguous discourse on the expectations of women's behavior; an ambiguity that responds to the changing interests of neoliberalism. As we see it, the way certain themes are dealt with is superficial and reinforces the idea that this literature depoliticizes women's condition and presence in both companies and society.

Therefore, we conclude that the two lines of argument—the essentialist and the constructivist—are intertwined and contradict one another on these pages. Indeed, the biological determinism that comes through in these works does not appear to clash with the changing responsibilities demanded in neoliberalism (Adamson 2017):

The research does not imply that the differences between women and men are hard-wired into the brain. In fact, the latest research shows that the brain is remarkably plastic. The strength of brain activity can be changed by practicing specific activities. So men can become more adept at the skills that make women effective, and women can become more adept at the skills that make men effective. Many women and men are already broadening their leadership styles to include practices we have traditionally characterized as male or female. The differences in leadership perspectives are not in conflict; they are complementary (Hadary and Henderson 2013, p. 13).

Moreover, even though some arguments from neurosciences repeatedly appear and are resorted to in order to establish a scientific explanation for men's and women's conduct, it is also true that these experiments are dealt with superficially. With this, we mean that no scientific studies and experiments are cited that refer to statements made, nor are they critically dealt with (Reverter-Bañón 2016). The subject is also dealt with ambiguously because, while these works provide us with the scientific keys to understanding these differences between men and women based on a kind of natural

essence, later, we are told that these differences are due to culture. So, neuroscientific discourses are used by authors to create an ambivalent and ambiguous discourse about building genders.

As we see it, the strategic ambiguity that has come over throughout our analysis is not unfounded, but responds to the aim of disseminating the new capitalistic spirit among women through popular management literature. Indeed, these texts act as a thermometer to show the state that forms of management are in among companies' managements. Therefore, it could be inferred that the management discourse about women currently in force in our societies disseminates a twofold presence of this group, and expects contradictory behaviors to generate vital schizophrenia. At the same time, this contradiction demonstrates that the presence of women in companies is still an inconvenient or strange reality because sexist and patriarchal structures persist.

We have seen how the values on which the professional women's leadership model is built in companies in this literature genre is quite conservative and refers to a model of the traditional female stereotype, which contributes very little to the true transformation of women present in companies. To conclude, we state that there is a predominating essentialist trend in the women's leadership model spread through management literature as traditional and sexist gender stereotypes are reproduced.

#### 4. Conclusions

Before we look at conclusions, we must take the difficulties we encountered in conducting this work as a starting point. Firstly, establishing a correct equilibrium in the interdisciplinary dialogue among business ethics, sociology, management studies, and feminist philosophy was difficult. The capacity to manage this dynamic allowed us to establish the moral need to think about not only gender equality in the company, but also the urgency of directly looking at the reality of texts to identify the values that come into play in power discourses. Secondly, we found it hard to choose a suitable sociological methodology for our research objectives. Choosing the Appraisal Theory allowed us to identify the textual elements of texts that refer to the values that shape a woman leader model. Thirdly, although taking a feminist look at the logic of the business world proved a complex task, it enabled us to question the "official" discourse about women's leadership in this domain.

The analysis allows us to conclude that the values related with women who undertake their leadership are: Relational thinking, collaboration, inclusive communication, emotion, empathy, and multitasking ability; these values correspond to the traditional female gender stereotype. In neoliberal terms, these values, traditionally scorned for belonging to the private sphere, now come into play in the public sphere to outline more efficient management. With the rise of neoliberalism, those matters related with the female gender stereotype, which were formerly frowned upon in the company, are being revalued. So, we dare to indicate the existence of an essentialist trend in the management discourse about women's leadership, despite the fact that it occasionally uses constructivist arguments that give way to significant strategic ambiguity.

Thus, those values administered to women leaders in management literature expect from women—from a neoliberal logic—a double schizophrenic-type personality, while also seeking to depoliticize feminist discourse. The final demobilization from which the prescriptions that we found in this literature derive allow the exploitation of women to expand, disguised as their free choice (Ringrose 2007; Snyder-Hall 2010; Swirsky and Angelone 2016). In short, that prescribed in popular management literature for women has more to do with the characteristic self-exploitation of a neoliberal subject than with the assumed intention to accomplish gender equality in a company. This makes sense in a context of post-feminism that "contributes to or hinders organizational change towards gender equality, diversity, and inclusion, and it is to this that we now turn" (Lewis et al. 2017, p. 216).

If we understand neoliberalism as a form of self-government, we believe that the indicated leadership model influences the way feminine subjectivities are outlined as it responds to neoliberal demands (Rottenberg 2013). This feminism refers to how neoliberal discourses emerge when constructing feminist subjects, which strip them of their critical nature. This confluence makes sense in post-feminist times (Gill 2008; McRobbie 2016; Scharff 2016) and refers to the way in which

feminism is selectively defined as being assumed and, in turn, disowned. Both these convenient feminisms are far from social criticism, as they legitimize gender inequalities by placing them in the past and undoing today's feminist struggle. This is the context where we see how management literature for women makes sense and disseminates an essentialist leadership model that contributes to a neoliberal feminism (Gill et al. 2016).

Therefore, it is necessary to leave to one-sided essentialist conceptions of gender models to start making out the possibilities of structuring a leadership model based on the typical social transformation bases of feminism. By doing so, we attempt to emphasize the struggle for equality from which certain values stem, such as: Equality, fairness, integration, respect for human rights, physical integrity, no coercion, free choice, peace, respect for our planet, respect, diversity, difference, democracy, transparency, accountability, and shared power, which allow a business ethos to be built that opposes homo oeconomicus principles and an essentialist gender notion.

Thus, women's leadership must work to undo the networks of hidden powers that operate in companies to perpetuate the subordination of women and other groups. Indeed, women's leadership pursues social change and takes a greater antiracist and antisexist approach (Batliwala 2010; Shea and Renn 2017). So, no matter what domain it appears in, political commitment is made to fight for social justice, unlike what we find with the women's leadership model in management literature. We consider that the reflection made in this work has a potential impact on business management and on leadership models taught to professional women. So, from our point of view, in the confluence of both components lies the key to start rethinking new management models that influence society by transforming gender-inequality-based business structures.

In short, the modest contribution that this work represents in the academic field centers on three main aspects: Thinking of business organizations as moral entities, revealing the neoliberal premises contained in mainstream management discourses, and revitalizing the role of feminism in a highly individualistic society that hinders equality. Finally, we state that possibilities of promoting an ethical type of management in business organizations exist, which include gender equality as a main value and which, in turn, allow feminist leaderships that do away with dichotomies and promote social justice to flourish.

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