Competent women, subliminal group hierarchies and executive leadership

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Objective: We analysed the experiences of successful executive women leaders to ascertain how they attained appointments to roles as high as the C-suite and boardroom.

Theoretical focus: Sociologists use 'status characteristics theory' (SCT) to explain the influence of status beliefs based on salient characteristics, such as gender, on the assessment of a person's competency in group task situations (Berger et al. 1980). SCT suggests women can elevate their position from their stereotypically assigned place in the subliminal group hierarchy by shortening the *path of relevance* (Berger et al. 1980) between perceptions of their gender and their competence to perform a leadership role.

Research question: What strategies do successful executive women use to overcome subliminal, gender-influenced assessments of their leadership competency?

Method: In 2016, we interviewed 25 women who held positions within the executive suite and/or on the Board of Australian companies and government departments. A thematic analysis adhering to a 'contextualist' approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to examine the participants' responses.

Major conclusions: The women demonstrated their competence via two overarching strategies: *active demonstrations* with associated *internal dialogues*. Under these two strategies sit four sets of mirror-imaged tactics: balanced career choices; outcome driven; image management; and leveraged relationships. Combined, these inputs reflect physical and mental manoeuvres women have used to achieve shortened *paths of relevance*, suggesting that they reconfigured the cognitive, stereotypical status assessment of being less competent than the men in the group, to being viewed as a person capable of an executive leadership role.

References:

Berger, J, Rosenholtz, S & Zelditch Jr, M (1980) 'Status organizing processes' Annual Review of Sociology, 6(1) pp. 479-508.

Braun, V & Clarke, V (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology' Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2) pp. 77-101.