

## Impossible Selves: Image Strategies and Identity Threat in Professional Women's Career Transitions

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This chapter extends our understanding of the paucity of women in senior leadership positions by identifying specific identity mechanisms that can hinder junior women's transitions to more senior roles. We introduce the term *impossible selves* to describe these cultural prescriptions for leadership identity and behavior that many junior women found unattainable. In the two male dominated firms we studied the cultural prescriptions for a leader's identity were associated with a traditionally masculine demeanor. We argue that second generation gender bias—cultural beliefs about gender, as well as workplace structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently favor men—inhibited women from engaging in image and identity work that would align them with these cultural prescriptions. This transformed organizational models of success into impossible selves for the women in these demographically skewed contexts. Instead of working towards the organizational model of success we found that women engaged in image and identity work to craft a leader identity that allowed them to feel authentic and avoid disapproval from clients and colleagues. Women's efforts to remain authentic, however, undermined their ability to craft identities that were congruent with the kind of professional they aspired to become.

An important part of assuming a work role is acting and looking the part (Becker & Carper, 1956; Becker & Strauss, 1956; Hochschild, 1983). These role-related expectations, or “display rules” (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989), confer legitimacy upon the role-holder (Goffman, 1956). As people advance to new and unfamiliar work roles, they engage in image work (Roberts, 2005) to convey public images that conform to role expectations, signal competence, and win the deference of members of their role-set (Goffman, 1956; Ibarra, 1999). They also engage in identity work (Snow & Anderson, 1987) to craft an identity congruent with the image they present. When an individual's claims to an identity are granted by significant others, the person is more likely to

internalize the new role identity and thus successfully make the role transition (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

What display-rules become prototypic depends on the demographics of a firm or industry, and in particular the people in senior leadership positions that serve as role models for what it takes to succeed (Baron & Pfeffer, 1994; Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002; Ely, 1995; Kanter, 1977). Women currently constitute only 4.6 percent of S&P 500 CEOs (Catalyst, 2015) and about 19 percent of these companies' board seats (Catalyst, 2014). Organizational hierarchies in which men predominate not only provide few role models for women but also tend to perpetuate implicit beliefs that equate leadership with behaviors believed to be more common or appropriate in men (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). How women respond to the image requirements of prototypically male roles, however, has been underinvestigated empirically.

This chapter analyzes how gender affects what image and identity strategies people use to adapt to the demands of more senior leadership roles, in this case, the transition from project and expert work to client advisory, a context in which image is paramount. Both men and women in our study experienced a gap between what they were doing and what was expected of them; consequently both also experienced threats to their previously successful professional identities. But, the image strategies they used to bridge the gap differed by gender, as did their consequences.

We explain their divergent strategies in terms of second generation bias defined as the powerful yet often invisible barriers to women's advancement that arise from cultural beliefs about gender, as well as workplace structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently favor men (Calás & Smircich, 1991; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Kolb & McGinn, 2009; Sturm, 2001) and accumulate to interfere with a woman's ability to see herself and be seen by others as a leader (Ely et al., 2011).

We advance four conceptual arguments that link second generation bias to image and identity processes. First, we propose in addition to the generic identity threat caused by the image and identity gap during the role transition, second generation bias results in a further identity threat to women in the form of a devaluation or disconfirmation of their gender identities, i.e., stereotype threat (Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998; Petriglieri, 2011). Second, we argue second generation bias reduces the likelihood that women will respond to the perceived identity threat by acquiring a demeanor that conforms to display rules for professional success. Third, we suggest the combination of second-generation bias and stereotype threat can transform organizational models of success into impossible selves for women working in demographically skewed professional contexts. Last, we identify social experiences that mitigate threat by providing resources for alternative image and identity strategies, and suggest ways in which they create virtuous developmental cycles.

The chapter is organized into three major sections. Given the theory generating nature of our work, we begin with the research setting and data collection methods: a pair of qualitative and inductive studies of junior-level management consultants and investment bankers in the midst of career transitions to more senior roles that require them to interact with clients as representatives of their firms. The second section reports the contrast in how men and women used image and identity strategies to gain credibility and elicit deference from their clients. In this section we develop a conceptual framework in which second generation bias moderates the relationship between identity threat and image strategies, which in turn reduce or augment the perceived threat. The third and final section develops the idea of impossible selves, speculating beyond the current findings and suggesting avenues for future research.

## **Context and Methods**

This chapter builds on a prior study (Ibarra, 1999) that was conducted in two professional services firms – an investment bank and a management consulting firm. The investment bank was part of a large securities firm, which employed approximately 1000 professionals. The management consulting firm was a rapidly growing, but relatively small elite firm, which employed approximately 350 professionals. Both investment bankers and management consultants begin their careers performing analytic work and providing support to their team. They progress to a conceptual and managerial role, in which they coordinate projects or “deals” and manage junior colleagues. Over time, they move into client advisory roles in which they are expected to generate “follow-on” or new business and to actively cultivate relationships with clients.

Both firms were male dominated, making them ideal case studies for the theory we develop in this chapter. In the consulting firm, women made up 35 percent of Junior Analysts entering the firm, their numbers fell to 20 percent at the team leader level, and only seven percent of Client Account Managers and Partners were women. In the investment bank, women made up less than 10 percent of Junior Associates entering the bank, at the Vice President level there were 18 percent women, and at the Director and Managing Director levels there were between six and nine percent women depending on the department in the bank.

We investigated the two critical junctures before the Partner or Director level to capture the transition from analytical to client management roles. The transition to client management roles is particularly suited for exploring identity construction processes because image displays are of such central importance in the new role. Generating revenues hinges on the professional’s ability to convey an image of competence and credibility to prospective clients since the value of the services rendered is relatively intangible and difficult to evaluate objectively (Ashforth &

Humphrey, 1993). Uncertainty places a premium on the outward appearance of being “the right sort of person” (Kanter, 1977) and image becomes a proxy for quality. Style and substance are thus intertwined such that career success depends importantly on self-presentation (Ibarra, 1999).

To ensure adequate familiarization with the firms, the research began with five open-ended interviews with three senior professionals and two HR professionals in the investment bank and three interviews with two senior professionals and one HR professional in the consulting firm. These “informants” also facilitated the selection of participants for the full study. In both firms, we sampled people just before the identified career transitions. The participant group over-sampled women to ensure that the transition experiences of men and women could be compared. Thus, the full population of women at the transition points were identified at both firms. We randomly selected an equivalent number of men at the same transition points. The final group included eight women and 11 men from the consulting firm and seven women and eight men from the investment bank.<sup>1</sup>

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with all 34 participants, which typically lasted 90 minutes, ranging from 60 minutes to more than two hours. Data analysis followed an inductive theory development process. Following the methods described by Eisenhardt (1989) and Rafaeli and Sutton (1991), and with the help of two Research Associates, we searched for major themes in the data and compared these themes with concepts from the literature on impression management, identity work, and career socialization. We used an iterative process—moving back and forth between the data and relevant literature (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)—to develop our emerging conceptualization of second generation bias influencing image and identity processes and our concept of impossible selves.

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<sup>1</sup> After participants were selected, three women dropped out of the consulting firm sample; two transitioned to part-time work and one decided to leave the firm. As a result, there were three more men than women in the sample.

## **Identity Threat, Image Work, and Second Generation Bias**

In this section we combine emergent themes from the qualitative data analysis with concepts and findings from social identity theory to develop our conceptual framework. We begin by showing how the transition to a client-facing role reveals a gap between junior professionals' previously successful professional identities and the identities they need to claim to be successful in their new roles. We move on to explore how men and women differ in the image strategies they adopt to respond to this threat and draw on second generation gender bias literature to offer an account for this variance. Finally, we develop the construct of impossible selves, which represent successful identities that could neither be claimed by nor granted to, the majority of the women.

### **Role Transitions as Identity Threatening**

The senior informants stressed that moving into a client contact role requires the junior professional to supplement a tangible skill base with a much more elusive set of success factors. The success factors include the ability to represent the firm, to generate novel ideas, to sell new business, and to develop peer relationships with clients who would come to rely on the professional for counsel on a broad array of business issues. The following comment illustrates a senior informant's view on the range and importance of these factors and the hurdle managing them can present for the junior professional in transition in greater responsibility in managing client relationships.

“Many people reach a plateau as they struggle to become a client account manager. The challenge is to develop productive relationships with clients who are generally older than you. It requires different skills, and it comes as a big shock. You are selling yourself. You are saying, ‘For \$X million, the project will have my guarantee, my judgment, and my credibility.’” [Senior consultant]

All study participants were highly cognizant of these challenges and experienced anxiety about their credibility with clients and struggled to hide their feelings of inexperience and immaturity. As one female consultant noted, “There’s a huge hurdle of transitioning from thinking I have to know all the facts to being a general advisor to the client. It’s like my whole basis for existence is cut away if I can’t rely on my particular expertise.” Following Petriglieri (2011), we interpret this anxiety as symptomatic of identity threat, defined as “experiences appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings or enactment of an identity” (p. 644). Both men and women struggled in this transition<sup>2</sup>, as one male consultant explained, “I had a feeling of being in over my head, sometimes it was really overwhelming, I didn’t know how to ask for the right level of support, I knew I was struggling.” This recognized image and identity gap constituted a threat to previously successful professional identities.

Women participants added to generic worries about bridging the gap between actual and desired identities as senior professionals, concerns about having their identity claims challenged simply by virtue of being women. As one consultant noted,

“Clients are surprised by a woman turning up to advise them. If you say something stupid, it will be remembered. You are more exposed. You are more of a risk to bring on in a marketing situation. I have seen people talk about ‘too many women look weird.’ [Female Consultant]

Our data suggests that, for women, the professional identity threat generated by the transition to a client management role was accompanied and possibly augmented by a gender-based stereotype threat. Of the fifteen women participating in the study, 11 reported experiences that challenged their identity as a professional that they attributed to gender. An investment banker

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<sup>2</sup> Evidence of threat was manifest in the comments of 13 of the 15 women and 13 of the 19 men.



explained with some frustration her inability to measure up to her male peers, “I can’t be 6’3”, handsome, with a firm handshake. But that’s the image people have when they think of power and influence. When people meet me, they don’t immediately think ‘this person’s a star’. I think gender has a lot to do with it.” The stereotype threat experienced by most women seemed to stem from cultural beliefs that are associated with the image of a good client manager to a traditionally masculine demeanor. A form of second-generation bias, these cultural beliefs devalued women’s gender identity and created an additional identity threat to which they had to respond alongside the universally experienced threat stemming from the role transition.

### **Responses to Identity Threat: Gender Differences in Image Strategies**

From day one, provoked by the identity threat they experienced, junior professionals were required to adopt a self-presentation strategy in an attempt to portray an image that befitted their new role. Though both men and women reported similar concerns about conveying a credible image to clients, mirroring our informant’s comments, they differed significantly in their responses to these performance pressures. A striking pattern in our data was that men’s and women’s image strategies divided rather neatly into the acquisitive and protective styles described by (Arkin, 1981). Arkin (1981) proposes two different types of strategies. “Acquisitive” self-presentation entails soliciting approval by ascertaining and signaling those traits that are most likely to result in deference from the pertinent audience. In client interactions, acquisitive strategies consist of active, aggressive attempts to signal credibility. “Protective” self-presentation, by contrast, involves attempts to avoid disapproval, visible in behaviors such as modesty, reluctance to interact with others freely and actively, and a propensity towards neutral, uncertain and qualified expressions of judgment such that the impression conveyed is "unassailable." With clients, protective strategies entailed “laying low” so as to avoid making a negative first impression on a client.

Only three of the women used an acquisitive image strategy, while 13 of the men did. In doing so they responded to image threats by displaying confidence and focusing their energies on increasing the likelihood of attaining the approval of clients. They also made an effort to establish personal relationships with their clients, consistent with their roles as professional client advisors. The following quote is illustrative of acquisitive strategies:

“You need to develop a sense of maturity so that you can win over clients as a peer. This is signaled through the way you act, the way you dress, the subject matter you talk about—more discussion of client’s personal interests, less on analysis....I have learned to go into a client meeting, not talk at all about the analysis, and have it be a VERY successful meeting.” [Male Consultant]

By contrast, most of the women who participated in the study showed evidence of protective image strategies. The most common themes among the women in the sample were their discomfort in client interactions and their reluctance to assert themselves. While the men defined the requirements of client interaction as political and stylistic, the women tended to base their credibility claims on technical competence. Instead of using their image to make a positive first impression, the women participants were more likely to try to reduce the requirement of their image as a necessary signal for their underlying competence. The most commonly reported tactics were over-preparing and seeking assignments with long time horizons, in which technical mastery would become apparent—as it might not be in a brief meeting. The quote below illustrates the contrast:

“I tend not to step out on a limb when I’m not fairly confident about an assertion. If I have an idea, I think to myself ‘oh, that’s stupid,’ and I won’t say it. I end up not being as active in meetings with clients. I think to myself, ‘How can I tell this 55-yr old guy who’s been in the industry his whole life that his last investment was really stupid.’” [Female Consultant]

In the present research context, the choice between acquisitive and protective self-presentation is consequential and problematic for women. The ability to win client confidence facilitates career advancement, while the use of protective self-presentation confirms gender stereotypes that may lead to career stagnation. Failure to convey the expected image not only reduced women's credibility with clients but also lowered expectations that they had the potential to excel if promoted to higher positions, which required greater client contact. All informants stressed that this self-presentation was a significant hurdle for women even though the men and women were comparable in their analytic skills. The following comment by a senior investment banker is exemplary, "A good job is expected. To be on the superstar track you have to be outspoken, brash, self-promoting. The self-promotion factor does women in."

### **Explaining the Gender Difference Between Image Strategies**

Although our data did not allow us to explore how image processes unfold over time, our emerging theory suggests that preventive self-presentation styles are the consequences of repeated exposure to second-generation gender bias and dual professional and gender identity threat. Accordingly, the section below explores the mechanisms and dynamics that may lead women to become stuck in a highly gendered self-protective stance.

**Client interactions.** The large majority of the participants' senior clients were male. We argue that this relational demography (Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989) affects the image strategies by its effect on two factors: (1) expectation of clients' gender bias, and (2) expectations of success with acquisitive and protective strategies. Both of these factors stem from second-generation bias and their effects demonstrate how this bias can interfere with women's ability to see themselves and be seen by others as credible leaders.

Junior women perceived that their clients held gender stereotypes that would place them at a disadvantage. When clients bring to the situation gender-typed expectations and biases, they are more likely to elicit gender-linked behavior from women professionals (Deaux & Major 1987). Expectations states theory (Berger, Fisech, Norman, & Selditch, 1977; Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill, 1985) suggests that gender is a status characteristic that leads both men and women in mixed gender groups to assume greater task competence from men until proven otherwise. The following quote shows that the women tended to believe that being female signaled a lack of authority and competence:

“Being female affects my ability to be impactful. When a man speaks, the message hits home clearer. He will be more persuasive, both internally and with the client. The words are more hard-hitting. I'm more soft-spoken. I think I'm more likely to get challenged on something.” [Female Consultant]

When professional women expect their male clients to hold gender biases, they will look for those biases to reveal themselves in their interactions. Influenced by these beliefs, professional and client may negotiate a stereotypic male-female professional exchange.

Faced with the expectation that the client may hold gender biases, a competent junior woman has two strategic alternatives, which correspond to Arkin's acquisitive and protective categories. Using an acquisitive strategy, she can make a direct bid for the client's respect in the immediate encounter. Alternatively, using a protective strategy, she can attempt to not *lose* credibility so that, over time, she can demonstrate competence. As Arkin (1981) notes, when people believe that the typical, “approval seeking” form of self-presentation will not be successful for them, or that the potential costs of the behavior are greater than its potential benefit, they are more likely to behave protectively.

The second factor that affected their choice of image strategy, therefore, was the women participants' beliefs that they would not succeed with the acquisitive style displayed by the men. These beliefs are supported by a large body of research indicating that women using masculine leadership styles tend to be judged more negatively by both men and women than male professionals using the same leadership style (Eagly & Wood, 1991; Falbo, Hazen, & Linimon, 1982; Nieva & Gutek 1981; Wiley & Eskilson, 1982). As Schein (1973) demonstrated, the characteristics of a "good manager" are similar to those of a "typical man" and incongruous with those of a "typical woman." The following quote illustrates participants' expectations of success with acquisitive and protective strategies:

"This is a hard business for a woman to be accepted in. Clients and people who make decisions are more accepting of a man walking in. They get away with bullying and off-the-cuff reactions. It leads to women over-preparing. You have to know more and appear more responsive." [Female Investment Banker]

Because women are evaluated on their qualities as professionals and as women, they may be sanctioned for either "acting like men," or conforming too closely to norms for female behavior—being "too timid" or "lacking presence with clients." As a result, women in this study gave a great deal of thought to what demeanor would work for them in client interactions. Since they perceived that either "acting like a man" or "acting like a woman" would likely backfire or reduce their credibility, many chose to adopt a neutral or protective stance.

**Organizational context.** The relational demography of client interactions was mirrored in the demographics of the employer firms—particularly few women at the senior level—this resulted in a paucity of role models for the women professionals. Ibarra (1999) found that, compared to those who did not role model, junior professionals who actively role modeled senior professionals more

rapidly adopted their new professional identity which in turn reduced the amount of time they needed to lean on the crutch of an image strategy. Moreover, role modeling was an organizationally legitimate type of identity work likely to elicit social validation, which resulted in a relatively swift reduction in perceived identity threat.

Role modeling involves both cognitive and affective processes (Bandura, 1986; Gibson, 1996). People must not only develop a sophisticated, cognitive understanding of what specific self-presentation behaviors are effective and why they are effective; they must also determine whether those behaviors will likely produce positive consequences for them and whether they are personally appealing (Bandura, 1986). The women who participated in this study were more likely than the men to report that available role models' styles were either not feasible for them or incongruent with their self-concepts. Women were also more likely than the men to believe that they could not develop a style based on modeling someone else and to expect that modeling the behavior they observed to be successful in men would not produce the same positive outcomes for them. The following comment illustrates this point.

“Men are seen as aggressive or thoughtful while women for the same behavior are seen as whiny. I have to watch my words. I'm afraid to seem too whiny and aggressive whereas a man would be seen as fighting the battle. Will I be viewed as too aggressive if I ask for additional resources or kill myself on deals?” [Female Investment Banker]

People may understand tacit behavioral expectations and believe that they will gain approval for conforming to those expectations, yet still be unwilling to do so because of the role's incongruence with central and valued aspects of their identity. Because people use their self-presentations to create, maintain or modify a public self that is congruent with their ideal self (Baumeister, 1982), the attractiveness of role model's behavior and their degree of identification

with role models significantly affects whether they will adopt the behavior (Foote, 1951). Since most of their colleagues were men, the women in this study tended to experience identification and self-congruence as significant hurdles. By contrast to their male peers, they tended to note how they differed from their associates and to state that they found it difficult to envision adopting styles that they felt to be dramatically at odds with their self-concepts.

The lack of female role models combined with women's beliefs about the efficacy of role modeling led to few women using role modeling identity work strategies favored by their male colleagues. Instead women worked towards their new professional identities by attempting to maintain strong congruence between who they felt they were and who they portrayed themselves to be in public. This "personal crafting" (Ibarra, 1999) identity work strategy was at odds with the organizational model of success for role transitions, and was accompanied by a slower progress towards a new professional identity which befitted the organization. The use of illegitimate identity work and the slower progress in making the necessary identity transition, exacerbated and prolonged women's perceived identity threat.

### **Transforming Organizational Models of Success into Impossible Selves**

The organizational model of success for managing the required image and identity transition in both firms was one that coupled "acquisitive" image strategies with "role modeling" identity work. This model constitutes one of organizational success, not because it "works" but rather because it is institutionally acceptable to both the firm and its clients. It therefore involves a lower image and identity threat, a reduced necessity for protection strategies, and a faster accomplishment of the transition. The problem for women is that this model provides the outline of a self that is impossible to attain. Possible selves are future images of one's self, either desirable or undesirable, that serve as filters through which people adjust their behavior within their current

environment, and as motivations for the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986). For the men in the two firms we studied, the organizational model of success provided outlines of possible selves towards which they could strive. On the contrary, for many of the women in the study the same organizational model represented an “impossible self” that could neither be attained, nor granted if claimed.

First hand experiences of second generation biases led the women to expect their clients to hold gender biases. These expectations in turn, led women to believe that they would not successfully bridge the gap between their image and identity by using the “acquisitive” image strategies of their male peers. Further, the stereotype threat stemming from the incongruence between a demeanor that confirms a professional role and a female gender role may make the choice of a protective image strategy appear less costly than an acquisitive image strategy (Wiley & Eskilson, 1982). This might occur for women for two reasons: it reduces the risk of disapproval for “acting like men” and failing, and reduces the potential threat to their self-concept as women. Over time, these processes may lead women to become entrenched in a gender-typed professional identity. Repeated success with “protective” strategies (i.e., not incurring disapproval), therefore, may solidify for women the identity implied by the protective demeanor – e.g., “competent but not bold,” “smart but quiet,” thus reinforcing gender stereotypes about interaction styles. Further, this perpetuates and fuels the categorization between genders. It is also a self-reinforcing dynamic. The hidden and often unconscious second-generation gender biases provoke behaviors among female professionals that inadvertently reinforce the very gender stereotypes they are working to escape. Thus, we suggest that for women working in demographically skewed professional contexts, the combination of second-generation bias and stereotype threat can transform organizational models of success into impossible selves.



## **Creating Virtuous Developmental Cycles for Women**

The model we have presented so far is static; it does not address the question of what are the conditions under which people change their image and negotiate new identities, or, alternatively, become entrenched in those they have negotiated previously (Swann, 1987). Just as people can get locked into a particular demeanor, they can also have experiences that free them to experiment with other possibilities. A positive experience with a different interaction style, when it is visible, can provide a window for negotiating not only a new demeanor but also a different professional identity. As illustrated in the quote below, the positive cycle that ensues from visible success with a client is self-reinforcing because resources and approval garnered in one context serve as currency for approval and resources in the second:

“You hear that women aren't ‘bold’. What turned my career around was that I got two accounts where the CFO was a woman. They demanded that I be there at the meetings. When they called, I was the one they wanted to talk to. That's critical – having a client who loves you, when you're the one who gets the phone calls. If you've got the client relationships, the internal relations are easy. If you're on good terms with the person at your level, they can feed you with information, you can run ideas by them. Often people run an idea by the client first "I'm thinking of proposing this to my boss, what do you think?" Then you can be bold in the meeting with the MDs.” [Female Investment Banker]

Two themes emerged from our data with regard to women's transitions from a protective to a more acquisitive image strategy. The first, as suggested by the quote above, is that women experience the dynamics of interacting with female clients very differently to the dynamics with male clients. Their accounts suggest that the different cues and expectations that are exchanged in

same-gender interactions may provide an opportunity for the junior professional to experiment with a more acquisitive image strategy. Second, a change of organisation or department, independent of its demographic composition, may facilitate a move from protective to acquisitive strategies with clients: two of the women in our sample whom we coded as “acquisitive” were “lateral hires”, brought into their firms after several years with other investment banks. Both reported more protective behavior while with their previous employer. Their accounts are consistent with the argument that professional identities solidify, locking people into behavior they might prefer to change. A move to a different group or organization, therefore, may free the person of an earlier protective reputation, allowing them to experiment with more acquisitive approaches. Theoretically, it is also possible that a significant change in a mentoring or role-modeling relationship may lead to similar changes in demeanor. We did not, however, have any data on such a pattern.

### **Discussion**

At the point of role transition men and women alike experienced a gap between their current professional image and identity and that required in the new role. This generated threat to their previously successful professional selves, which provoked feelings of anxiety. This threat created an impetus for the junior professionals to engage in the processes of image and identity work. Women additionally experienced stereotype threat that highlighted incongruence between their professional role and female gender role. The image strategies and accompanying identity work strategies employed by men and women in response to these threats were very different, as were their consequences: the strategies most used by women were more likely to exacerbate identity threat while those used most by men tended to attenuate it.

Men more aggressively sought to signal credibility by displaying behaviors that conformed to their firm’s norms, even when these behaviors felt unnatural. They engaged in self-promotional

image strategies, presenting themselves as competent and confident even when this was incongruent with their true feelings. In contrast, through self-protective image strategies women modestly asserted more neutral, uncertain, or qualified images, in order to avoid disapproval. For example, women sought to prove their competence by demonstrating technical mastery over the long term; in contrast, men were intent on making a positive first impression. Second-generation gender bias decreased the likelihood that women believed they could successfully use self-promotional image strategies; it also shaped their identity work strategies. Men relied on role modeling identity work, which involved experimenting with traits and behaviors selected from a broad array of mostly male role models, whereas women tended to rely on personal crafting identity work, transferring behaviours from their previous successful professional identity to the new role. Women took pride in their reliance on substance rather than form as a more authentic strategy than their male counterparts, yet they were also frustrated with their inability to win superiors' and clients' recognition. Ironically, women's attempts to remain authentic ultimately undermined their ability to find and internalize identities that were congruent with the kind of professional they aspired to become. The combination of stereotype threat and second generation bias transformed the possible self outlined by the organizational model of success into an impossible self for the women.

The current study contributes to our understanding of the paucity of women in senior leadership positions by identifying specific identity mechanisms that complicate junior women's transitions to more senior roles. While the notion of developing a leader identity as a critical element of leadership development has gained popularity (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005; van Knippenberg et al., 2004), it has not been linked to theory and research on the gender dynamics associated with leader identity development. Becoming a

leader, as our data illustrates, involves a set of relational and social processes through which one comes to see oneself, and is seen by others, as a leader (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Receiving validation for one's self-view as a leader bolsters self-confidence, which increases one's motivation to lead (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Kark & van Dijk, 2007) and to seek new opportunities to practice leadership (Day & Harrison, 2007; Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009). In many contexts validation depends on conformity to cultural prescriptions for leadership behaviors, which remain prototypically male, and are sustained implicitly by the leadership styles of a firm's most senior and most successful members. Failing to receive validation for one's leadership attempts diminishes self-confidence as well as the motivation to seek developmental opportunities, experiment, and take on new leadership roles (Day et al., 2009). This also weakens one's self-identity as a leader (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) at the individual level and the firm's pipeline in the aggregate. By calling attention to the impact of gender on the processes of claiming and granting a leader identity, we extend current theorizing about leadership development as an identity transition (Day et al., 2009; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Ibarra et al., 2010).

Since increasing diversity at the top of organizations depends on breaking the image and identity cycle described here, one potentially fruitful yet underinvestigated area for further research concerns moderators of the relationship between a firm's current representation of women in the upper echelons and junior members' identity work. For example, we expect that a firm's socialization and career development practices, which are the mechanisms by which they inculcate display rules, may be expected to exacerbate or attenuate the dynamics described here. While some firms strongly socialize new employees to internalize and enact their display rules in a standard way, others explicitly encourage newcomers to express their personal identities and incorporate them into their professional identities (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013). By pushing a uniform view of

who a successful professional is, the former are likely to exacerbate the effects of second generation bias, while the latter, by endorsing multiple possible models of who successful professionals are, may serve to attenuate it.

Similarly, task moderators relate to the nature of the job or role, since these vary in the extent to which self-presentation serves as an important signal or proxy for competence. We hypothesize that gender is more likely to serve as a proxy for status and competence in the absence of information based on direct prolonged experience. Thus, the effects we describe here are likely magnified in roles such as those we studied because professional-client relations involve delivery of an intangible service and brief, episodic encounters. Likewise, the importance of demeanor as a signal of competence may be attenuated in jobs that are more specialized, involve longer-term relationships, or have more “objective” performance indicators. Obviously, research in a broader variety of firms, encompassing a greater range of practices and job types, is needed to clarify the boundaries of the perspective developed here.

Exploration of situational factors that affect what strategies are used most prevalently should also prove fertile. Tajfel (1981) argued that strategy choice is contingent upon the extent to which group members view the intergroup power relationship as stable - unchanging over time - and legitimate - based on principles accepted by both groups. This is consistent with Ely’s (1995) finding that women lawyers in skewed demographic contexts were more likely to assume stereotypic gender identities (by either attempting to pass or overvaluing “female” traits), while women in more demographically balanced firms were more likely to resist being pigeon-holed into either category.

The notion that displaying role-appropriate images is an important hurdle for women working in male-dominated occupations is consistent with previous studies. The results of this study

support this claim but also suggest some important new directions for theory and research. Our work extends recent thinking on the notion of identity threat as both the cause and consequence of image work, and sheds additional light on the social processes that motivate distinctiveness or social creativity strategies and, as such, transform organizational models of success into “impossible selves” for professional women.

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