Striving for the top: How ambition is perceived in men and women

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University, 2014
Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education at any tertiary education institution.

…………………………………

Lauren Hall

2014
Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to Shego. She was there for me during the majority of my university years, and while she won’t be alive to see me graduate, I was thinking of her a lot while I finished my thesis. Miss you, little girl.
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I would most of all like to extend my unending gratitude to my supervisor, Associate Professor Ngaire Donaghue. She has been a constant source of support for me, both academically and emotionally. I suppose supervisors have to provide some form of emotional support to all of their students, considering the rollercoaster that is the PhD experience, but I think Ngaire went above and beyond in helping me through some tough lows. On top of that, her perspective on research leaves me constantly in awe of her knowledge, and I always leave meetings with her feeling inspired and motivated, no matter what state I was in when I entered the meeting. Thank you so much Ngaire, I will always be grateful for everything you have done for me.

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Abstract

The gender leadership gap has received much attention in the literature in recent years, where around the world, men are much more likely than women to hold powerful positions. Although the explanations given for this phenomenon can often revolve around biological sex-differences, or the choices that women make, the focus of this thesis is on social explanations, and the social roles expected of women that make it more difficult to enact the expected qualities of a leader without incurring negative social judgments. While past research has focused on how leadership qualities influence social judgments of women and men, this thesis addresses the step before leadership, looking specifically at how men and women are perceived when they desire leadership positions: in other words, how men and women are perceived when they are ambitious.

Ambition is a trait that is often seen negatively, in both men and women, as something that is selfish, ruthless and individualistic. However, negative traits that are part of the masculine stereotype are more accepted in men than they are in women. In this thesis, I examine how ambition is perceived in women and men, and whether negative perceptions of ambitious people can be ameliorated using particular strategies. Thus the questions that this thesis attempts to answer are: can negative perceptions of ambition be ameliorated by the simultaneous presentation of other characteristics, and do these ameliorating factors operate differently for perception of ambitious men and women. I use a combination of qualitative and quantitative research to address these questions.

A series of studies was conducted to examine when ambition is perceived negatively, and how these negative perceptions can be ameliorated. In study 1, experimental manipulations indicated that although ambition was perceived more negatively than contentment with one’s position, it was viewed as more likely to lead to positive
outcomes in the future. In study 2, a discursive analysis of newspaper constructions of Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s elevation to leadership suggests that perceptions of ambition may be more complicated. This study shows that ambition can have multiple expressions, and multiple meanings, and can be perceived in a variety of different ways. Gillard’s ambition was presented as coming at a cost to her femininity, but was ameliorated when presented in conjunction with communal behaviours or collective goals. In order to untangle the multiple ways that ambition can be expressed and understood, three experimental studies were designed to formally test the combinations of communality and ambition, and collective goals and ambition, and whether these combinations would be perceived differently in men and women. Findings suggest that ambition is viewed positively when combined with communal traits and behaviours, while the strategy of collective goals also reduces some of the negative perceptions of ambition. Studies 3, 4 and 5 provided no evidence that perceptions of ambition in combination with other traits was moderated by the gender of the ambitious target. Although the findings across the five studies do not provide a clear picture of how gender affects perceptions of ambition, the consistent finding of ambition as perceived as negative, but able to be ameliorated, has far reaching implications. As past research suggests that women are often more penalised than men for perceptions of a lack of warmth, it may be that communal strategies that bolster perceptions of warmth (in addition to the competence that is more readily attributed to ambitious women) are most important for ambitious women, in order to further reduce the gender gap in leadership.
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