

ABSTRACT

There is increasing interest globally in understanding the subjective experiences of “unexpected leaders”, such as women. Despite the many advances that women leaders have made in breaking down barriers to achieve leadership positions, there is still a lack of critical mass of women following in their footsteps. Furthermore, female leaders face different outcomes to male leaders when occupying leadership positions with many of them opting out of leader roles or being forced out. Most of the academic research is primarily focused on leaders emerging from majority groups resulting in a limited understanding of the subjective experiences of female leaders. Hence, the studies in this thesis were aimed at understanding the subjective representations of female leader social identities in an intergroup context. Specifically, this thesis used the Social Identity Theory framework to examine the intergroup dynamics in social identity construction and contestation amongst male leaders and female leaders. Several Q methodological studies were conducted with participants across several countries including South Africa, United Kingdom, United States, Finland and India. The findings reveal that there is no single representation of a female leader social identity. Rather, a female leader’s social identity is a complex phenomenon of group-based cognitions and group-based emotions integrally intertwined with issues of gender, status and legitimacy in the intergroup context. Furthermore, the findings of this thesis illustrate the asymmetrical representations of social identities of male leaders and female leaders in the intergroup context which has implications for women leaders progressing into positions of leadership and also for their tenure in such positions. Finally, the results of the studies in this thesis illuminates the barriers to and possibilities for social change for women as a collective.

Key Words: social identity; group-based cognitions; group-based emotions; Q methodology, gender; status; legitimacy; female leaders, male leaders, group dynamics