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A TALE OF TWO BOSSES: WHY STRONG FEMALE LEADERS ARE SEEN AS INAUTHENTIC

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GENDER FACTOR

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New analysis of media portrayal reveals the gender bias in leadership perceptions

We love talking about authentic leadership but the idea that it's just about being yourself is dangerously simplistic, particularly for women, the latest research has found.

Authenticity is not something you are but something you do, and it's a very different process for men and women leaders, according to Helena Liu, Leanne Cutcher and [David Grant](#) in [Doing Authenticity: The Gendered Construction of Authentic Leadership](#).

The team's analysis of the media portrayal of two high-profile bank CEOs – Mike Smith at ANZ and Gail Kelly at Westpac – during the global financial crisis (GFC) reveals that authenticity is very much about conforming to gender norms.

For Smith, being seen as authentic was all about alpha male stereotypes – being independent, strong, active and decisive – whereas Kelly needed to conform to female norms and be seen as nurturing, caring and outgoing, no matter what her job required.

The gender element wasn't even part of the original plan for the research, says Liu, a lecturer in organisation studies at Swinburne Business School:

"I was fascinated by the cult of personality and charismatic leaders. When I started my PhD, you couldn't look anywhere without seeing authentic leadership mentioned so I wanted to explore this. It struck me as an oxymoron – how do we be true to ourselves in restrictive organisational norms?"

Detailed analysis of how media coverage portrayed Kelly and Smith convinced Liu there was another set of hurdles for being seen as authentic, even though the effect of gender on leadership is often downplayed.

"I think there's pressure for organisations to present leadership as meritocratic, that regardless of your gender you can make it as a leader, but it became undeniable that gender plays a major part in how leaders are received," Liu says.

RAPID AND DRAMATIC RESPONSE

Until recently, authentic leadership theories have tended to be either gender neutral or, where gender has been considered, it is argued that women as 'outsiders' are less likely to be accepted by their followers as authentic leaders.

But this study found that being seen as authentic was really about performing authenticity in line with the gender norms seen as appropriate for the context.

"Gail Kelly's case demonstrated you just can't win whatever the situation"

– David Grant, UNSW

Using the period of the GFC allowed the researchers to compare media coverage of each leader during the same period and under the same conditions.

"When there's coverage and reporting of something like the GFC you assume it would be neutral and you are reporting on a reality," Liu says.

"But analysing these two leaders and going to the same point in time, we found they had very different contexts. For Mike Smith the GFC [was] a disaster that needed someone strong to rescue us, but for Gail Kelly it was about uncertainty and needed someone with a more gentle touch to manage."

For co-author Grant, a professor and senior deputy dean at UNSW Business School, it became clear there was a gender issue in examining authenticity for both leaders. The research answered some key questions about how the precepts of female leadership were constructed.

"Kelly's case demonstrated you just can't win whatever the situation," Grant says.

"Before the GFC she was flavour of the month and her leadership skill was spoken of and seen as good: it was consultative and participative. Her perceived popularity was, though, founded on a gendered depiction of her leadership style."

This version of Kelly's leadership changed when she took the decision to raise interest rates in December 2009 ahead of the other three major banks, and the media framed her decision as a rapid and dramatic response, the research found.

Kelly's decision, which other banks subsequently followed, was constructed negatively. Rather than being depicted as decisive and exercising leadership from the front, the media portrayed her as "vain and greedy; the very image of a stereotypical banker that she was expected to subvert", and even as flint-hearted and opportunistic.

On the other hand, being portrayed as highly competitive alpha male throughout the GFC worked well for Smith, Grant says.

"Smith was seen as the war commander and an aggressive decision-maker. There were very gendered depictions of what these leaders were. When it came to the GFC what was required was a change in leadership style and Kelly did this but her gender was used against her and she suffered without a doubt. When the context changed she was seen to not be able to cope with the circumstances and that's unfair."

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

Kelly's capacity to construct her leadership as authentic hit a barrier when she failed to conform to the normative gendered concepts of female leadership. This meant that when Smith acted decisively, he was seen as being authentic, but when Kelly did the same, she was portrayed as inauthentic.

The upshot of these findings is that women are in a classic double bind, says Liu.

"They have to be strong to be a leader and have what it takes but they can't be too strong or they won't be liked and that's a constant negotiation. There's pressure on female leaders to present in a certain way."

This was evident in the news reporting, headlines, layouts, photography and cartoons examined in detail for the study.

The images published of each CEO when they were appointed were in stark contrast. Smith's experience in Argentina, where he was a passenger in a car that was shot at during an ambush attempt, coupled with his British nationality and interest in the luxury brand of sports car, Aston Martin, shaped an association between him and James Bond in the media. Photography featured him in the centre of the shot, looking straight at the camera.

For Kelly there were regular media references to her family of four children, her listening skills and her clothing, while photographic portraits showed her sitting down, smiling and often accompanied by another executive.

The research findings help challenge these gendered ideas about what it takes to be a great leader, Liu says, and emphasises the importance for senior leaders, particularly women, of managing media representation.

"This study looks at how much power the role of the media plays, if we hold women up to this standard – where we want them to be powerful and caring – then we are setting them up to face mission impossible," she adds.

"Authentic leadership becomes a slippery concept that we think is good, but elides critique"

– Helena Liu, Swinburne Business School

LEADERSHIP FADS

It is possible for leaders to influence this portrayal and help bust the stereotypes when the media quotes them. Smith, for example, talked about courage and chaos and used metaphors of violence when interviewed about the GFC, Liu says, and it's possible to change language and draw attention to the problem of rigid norms.

According to Grant, there's certainly an upside to challenging some of these gendered expectations.

"The authenticity that's created in Kelly and Smith is around gendered portrayal and it's quite possible we are not getting an accurate picture of what Kelly is. There's a link between consistency in being authentic and conformity with societal norms, and that's where things become messy for Kelly – she started to depart from norms we might have expected of her," he says.

"You need to go back to the classic version of authenticity and know yourself as a leader and the consistency of your behaviour. Putting aside whether it's gendered or not, you would think a complete leader should embody male and female stereotypes.

"The trick is to think about how these attributes are going to be conveyed to those around you. And as you get more senior it requires a great deal of thought and care."

It is possible for the media, organisations and the general public to have more awareness of these issues and how leadership fads come and go, says Liu.

Looking back over the past few decades it's apparent popular leadership styles continue to emerge as each new version becomes outmoded, she adds.

"Charismatic leaders tended to be narcissistic and they did away with that, then there was transformative leaders and then their companies collapsed and leaders put that aside. Authentic leadership becomes a slippery concept that we think is good, but elides critique. We need to be more critical of leadership."