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Dancing on the Razor's Edge: How Top-Level Women Leaders Manage the Paradoxical Tensions between Agency and Communion

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Abstract

Research documents a heightened need for women leaders to be perceived as both agentic and communal and to deal with the incongruity between communal gender-role expectations and agentic leader-role expectations. However, paradoxical tensions exist between agency and communion because they are associated with distinct, and at times conflictual, cognition, behavior, and motivation. How women leaders manage these tensions remains under-explored. To address this gap in the literature, we conducted an inductive study based on interviews with 64 U.S. women executives from various industries. Drawing from a paradox lens, we first identified four pairs of apparently contradictory agentic and communal tendencies that are interwoven in women leaders' narratives: demanding and caring, authoritative and participative, self-advocating and other-serving, and distant and approachable. We also identified five mechanisms through which women leaders bring together agency and communion: situational accentuating, sequencing, overlapping, complementing, and reframing. Our findings highlight the underlying mechanisms and constructive routes through which women leaders juxtapose agency and communion to cope with role incongruity. They also offer guidance to women leaders and leadership-development practitioners in expanding mental models and behavioral repertoires to deal with the challenges stemming from tensions between agency and communion.

Keywords Agency · Communion · Leadership · Gender roles · Paradox · Double-bind

It's sort of the Hillary Clinton problem, which is on the one hand, you have to demonstrate that you've got experience and you're confident and you're smart and you can get things done, but if you do, you're a bitch. And so I think women operate on a razor's edge of leadership.—Paulina, general manager in an insurance company (a study participant)

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Although egalitarian social norms have allowed women to demonstrate more agency and advance into many previously male-dominated leadership positions, women still face significant gender-related obstacles in their leadership experience (Donnelly and Twenge 2017; Eagly and Carli 2007; Ibarra et al. 2013; Kark 2004). According to role congruity theory and related research, these gender-based obstacles can be attributed to the incongruity between the prevalently held agentic prescriptions of the leader role and the communal prescriptions for the female gender role, which triggers perceptions of misfit and subsequent challenges to women leaders (Eagly and Karau 2002; Koenig et al. 2011).

Role incongruity subjects women in leadership positions to dual standards of agency and communion, which demand that women display both agency and communion in their leadership (Eagly and Karau 2002; Kark et al. 2012). However, inherent tensions exist between agency and communion because they are associated with distinct and sometimes conflictual cognition, behavior, and motivation, which makes juxtaposing them challenging (Cuddy et al. 2008; Frimer et al. 2011). For women leaders, such tensions are particularly problematic because both agency and communion are required in
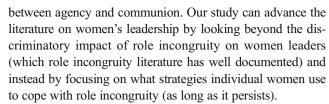
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their gendered leadership roles. How do women leaders bring agency and communion together? How do women contend, cognitively and behaviorally, with the agentic and communal demands that seem to pull in different directions? Although researchers posited some ways through which agency and communion can be blended (e.g., blending influence with a friendly style, more agreements, and warm non-verbals; Carli et al. 1995; Ridgeway 1982), a more in-depth exploration is needed into how the contradictory, and yet complementary, aspects of agency and communion display themselves in women leaders' experience and into what coping mechanisms women leaders use to hold on to both agency and communion in carrying out their leadership tasks.

Our study adopts a paradox perspective to offer an in-depth understanding of how women leaders manage and harness the tensions of agency and communion. The basic premise of a paradox perspective is that tension is ingrained in the system so that success depends on simultaneously attending to contradictory and interrelated demands that persist over time (Smith and Lewis 2011). A paradox lens could allow us to explore both contradictions and interrelations between agency and communion, offering a wider lens to examine women leaders' experience and responses.

Specifically, we pose two research questions: (a) Which contradictory agentic and communal tendencies are commonly enacted and juxtaposed by women leaders? and (b) What mechanisms are used by women leaders to manage the paradoxical tensions between these apparently contradictory agentic and communal tendencies? To answer our research questions, we study the experience of top-level U.S. women leaders. Top-level positions tend to be male-dominated and, correspondingly, stereotypes of top positions are more agentic than are those at lower levels in an organization (Eagly and Karau 2002; Koenig et al. 2011; Martell et al. 1998). This implies that women in top-level positions need to cope with a larger gap between the expectations of a highly masculine leader role and a communal gender role. Indeed, empirical research found that, compared with lower-level women leaders, top-level women leaders were rated higher in agency and comparable in communion (Moor et al. 2015). This deeper gap between agency and communion highlights the relevance of observing top-level women leaders in order to explore how they bridge the gap between agency and communion. Additionally, top-level women leaders tend to be "survivors" of role incongruity (Eagly et al. 2003), affording us a chance to look into workable practices of harnessing the tensions between agency and communion.

The potential contributions of our study are threefold. First, in the context of women's leadership literature where women's experience has been framed as a "double bind" (Jamieson 1995), "Catch-22" (Rudman and Glick 2001), and "backlash" (Heilman et al. 2004), our study provides a constructive look at how women leaders manage the tensions between agency and communion. Our study can advance the literature on women's leadership by looking beyond the discriminatory impact of role incongruity on women leaders (which role incongruity literature has well documented) and instead by focusing on what strategies individual women use to cope with role incongruity (as long as it persists).

Second, in the context of paradox research, our study can contribute insights into individual-level management of paradoxical tensions. Most of the paradox research has studied paradoxical tensions at the organizational level (e.g., Andriopoulos and Lewis 2009; Hahn et al. 2014; Smith 2014), such as the tensions between organizational exploration and exploitation (Andriopoulos and Lewis 2009), between control and autonomy in technology platforms (Wareham et al. 2014), and between competing organizational identities (Ashforth and Reingen 2014). How paradoxical tensions can be dealt with at the individual level has not been adequately explored (Miron-Spektor et al. 2017; Schad et al. 2016); indeed, Schad et al. (2016, p. 25) lamented that paradox studies "have been relatively silent about individual approaches." Our study focuses on individuals' coping strategies and responses to paradoxical tensions, which can extend the paradox literature in uncovering individuals' approaches to managing paradoxical tensions.

Lastly, on a practical note, our findings can provide specific ideas and behavioral guides for women leaders to expand their cognitive and behavioral repertoire to respond to their dual role demands. Organizations and leadership developers also can develop targeted training materials and learning interventions to help enhance women's psychological well-being and leadership effectiveness, as long as women experience inequity in leadership and have to deal with the socially constructed double bind.

Women's Responses to Role Incongruity

Leadership does not take place in a gender vacuum (Yoder 2001). The core idea of role congruity theory is that there is incongruity between the social role expectations of women and those of leaders (Eagly and Karau 2002). Women are expected to display more communal characteristics that center on the welfare of other people, such as being affectionate, helpful, and nurturing (Cross and Madson 1997; Eagly 1987). Men are expected to display more agentic characteristics, such as being aggressive, dominant, and self-confident (Cross and Madson 1997; Eagly 1987). People's stereotypes of leadership are more agentic than communal or neutral (Heilman et al. 1989; Koenig et al. 2011; Schein 2001), and so women have to intentionally display both agency and communion to access and exercise leadership effectively (Kark 2017).

When facing role incongruity, existing literature documents several ways women cope with incongruity. In fields as varied as engineering, technology, entrepreneurship, and construction, the first strategy women adopt to cope with role incongruity is to conform to the predominant agentic role expectations by enacting assertiveness, control, rationality, strength, and toughness, along with weakening their communal associations such as being vulnerable and sensitive (Billing 2011; Denissen 2010; Holmes and Schnurr 2006; Jorgenson 2002; Lewis 2013; Marshall 1995). However, only demonstrating agency incurs backlash, such that agentic women are seen as less warm, likable, or friendly, and they are more likely to be subject to negative feedback than are less agentic women or agentic men (Eagly et al. 1992; Glick et al. 1997; Heilman and Parks-Stamm 2007; Heilman et al. 2004; Rudman 1998). Additionally, perceived lack of communion incurs greater penalty for women than for men (Heilman and Chen 2005; Loughlin et al. 2012; Vinkenburg et al. 2011).

The second, and opposite strategy, is to reject the dominant agentic expectations and accentuate the values communion brings to a role, such as collaboration, openness, mutual respect, and relationship-focus (Denissen 2010; Jorgenson 2002; Lewis 2013; Marshall 1995). However, when demonstrating communion without an intentional display of agency, women's agency is assumed to be lower, even in high-status roles, which makes them less likely to be perceived as leaders—given the same qualifications, they are ascribed less competence and given less recognition as leaders (Heilman et al. 1995; Scott and Brown 2006).

The third strategy, a more promising one, is to blend agency and communion. Research has pointed out that exhibiting both agency and communion in their leadership is advantageous to women (Carli et al. 1995; Eagly and Karau 2002; Kark et al. 2012; Ridgeway 1982). For example, research has found that presenting similarly high levels of agency and communion contributed to leader emergence, leader effectiveness, and follower satisfaction with managers, especially for women (Gershenoff and Foti 2003; Hackman et al. 1992; Hall et al. 1998; Jurma and Powell 1994; Kark 2017; Kark et al. 2012; Kent and Moss 1994). Similarly, research on transformational leadership has found that women were seen as more effective when they demonstrated both inspirational motivation (that is seen as agentic) and individual consideration (that is seen as communal) (Hackman et al. 1992; House and Howell 1992; Kark et al. 2012; Vinkenburg et al. 2011; Yoder 2001).

However, despite the desirability of presenting both agency and communion, agency and communion encompass distinct modes of how people approach the world (Bakan 1966), and they can run counter to each other, posing challenges to women leaders who are under much more pressure to blend them (Kark et al. 2012). Specifically, agency centers on the individual and on independence from others, whereas communion focuses on others and on interpersonal connections with others (Abele and

Wojciszke 2007; Bakan 1966; Schwartz 1992). Also, agency privileges self-advancement and self-reliance, whereas communion privileges consideration of and help to others (Abele and Wojciszke 2007; Bakan 1966). Research has found that although individuals can be seen as both agentic and communal, there could be a perceived tradeoff between perceptions of agency and communion within individuals (Cuddy et al. 2005). Specific to women leaders, demonstrations of agency decreased others' perceptions of their communion (Heilman and Okimoto 2007; Rudman and Glick 1999). Furthermore, recent psychological research demonstrated that when agency was above average, a negative relationship between agency and communion was prominent (versus when below average, agency was positively related to communion) (Imhoff and Koch 2017). Consequently, when women are in leadership roles and are likely to be perceived as above average in agency, they are more likely to face a tradeoff relationship between agency and communion. This pattern highlights the need to understand how women leaders cope with this perceived tradeoff relationship between agency and communion as well as to potentially harness their synergistic power.

Blending Agency and Communion

Although research abounds in how gender influences women in leadership, relatively little effort has been made to systematically study how women leaders blend specific aspects of agency and communion. We draw on and integrate different strands of theories on women's leadership, communication, and paradox to shed light on strategies that can help women leaders respond to the dual demands of agency and communion.

In the stream of research on communication and social influence, it has been found that women were more influential (especially with men) when they used a gender-congruent communication style that conveyed communion and warmth when displaying agency (Carli 1991; Rudman and Glick 2001; Shackelford et al. 1996). Specifically, women exerted more influence when they used a friendly, considerate, and supportive style versus a more emotionally distant and self-confident style (Ridgeway 1982); when they combined verbal cues of competence with nonverbal cues such as smiling and nodding (Carli et al. 1995); when they camouflaged dominant speech acts (Troemel-Ploetz 1994); when they switched between direct and supportive discourse strategies (Holmes and Schnurr 2006); or when they used humor to enact authoritativeness and femininity (Schnurr 2008). Although these findings are helpful to outline different communication styles that affect women's influence, they do not provide answers as to how women blend agency and communion in carrying out specific aspects of leadership, including how they set goals, make decisions, mobilize others, and achieve outcomes. Even more importantly, existing research identified the specific

behaviors in which women engage to meet agentic and communal standards, but it did not discuss underlying principles that can bridge them, that is, how to overcome tensions and oppositions, as well as foster synergies between them.

Another stream of literature that contributes to our inquiry is the research on paradox. Paradox is defined as "contradictory, yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time" (Smith and Lewis 2011, p. 382). For women leaders, they face the paradoxical tensions between agency and communion because agency and communion can be contradictory and yet need to coexist in women leaders' gendered leader roles (Eagly and Karau 2002; Kark and Eagly 2010). Hence, how paradoxical tensions could be managed in general could inform our specific question of how agency-communion tensions can be managed. Literature documents three main types of management strategies for paradoxical tensions. The first type, splitting, splits and shifts between the two poles of a paradox (Tushman and Romanelli 1985). This strategy involves spatially or temporally separating the opposing components of a paradox (Poole and van de Ven 1989). The second type, synergizing, involves finding synergies that accommodate the opposing poles (Bledow et al. 2009; Jarzabkowski and Sillince 2007; Smith and Lewis 2011; Sundaramurthy and Lewis 2003). This involves novel solutions that take into account both of the opposites in a paradox (Schad et al. 2016). The third type, transcending, challenges entrenched assumptions and constructs a more accommodating perceptions of opposites (Kark et al. 2016b; Lewis 2000). This type of strategies involves a fundamental change from viewing a situation as paradoxical to viewing it as complementary and interwoven (Lewis 2000).

These three types of strategies are very broad and have not been applied to women leaders' experience or the paradoxical tensions between agency and communion. However, because we take a paradox perspective on agency and communion, these general paradox management strategies can help us to look beyond the specific demonstrations of agency and communion and focus instead on the underlying mechanisms women leaders use to bring together agency and communion. This shift in perspective in turn may inform how paradoxical tensions can be managed at the individual level (rather than at the organizational level) which has not been adequately explored (Schad et al. 2016).

Taking all relevant literatures together, it is clear that women leaders need to present unambiguous cues of agency and communion together, which can be challenging because paradoxical tensions exist between them. Existing research has pointed out some ways that enable this combination, such as using a communal style to temper agentic contents and using paradox management strategies of splitting, synergizing, and transforming. Building on these insights, we set out to find specific aspects of agency and communion that form direct paradoxical relationships for women leaders and how they can be brought together in their daily leadership practices.

Method

The intent of our study is to explore which contradictory agentic and communal tendencies appear together in women leaders' narratives, and how they are woven together. We adopted an inductive qualitative design because such a design can allow us to explore new ideas and capture how people make subjective interpretations of their experience in context-specific settings (Kempster and Parry 2011; Martin and Turner 1986; Willig 2012).

Sample Selection

Because the tensions between agency and communion may be more evident in higher management positions, as we discussed, we selected top-level women leaders (vice-president level, or equivalent, and above) from various industries and types of organizations from a Midwest metropolitan area in the United States. We first recruited recipients of several women's leadership awards who were top-level leaders (e.g., Women in Business Award) in this area. To enlarge our sample size, we recruited all female leaders at the vice president level and above from larger organizations (with at least 1000 employees) in the same metropolitan area using the Reference USA database. As we started conducting our interviews, we also asked the interviewees for referrals of other women leaders who fit our criteria and who were from an industry or type of organization not yet represented in our sample, as well as racial/ethnic minority women, in order to maximize the variability of viewpoints represented in our sample (Glaser 1978). When recruiting participants and beginning the interviews, we broadly framed our study as aiming to explore top-level women leaders' leadership understandings and practices.

Altogether, we generated 506 names. We identified or created email addresses based on these names and emailed our invitation letters to these addresses. About 51% ($n = 506$) of the email addresses were valid, from which 24.8% ($n = 258$) responded positively, leading to a final sample of 64 participants from 51 organizations. The participants' race/ethnicity was predominantly White (54, 84.4%), followed by Asian (4, 6.2%), African American (2, 3.1%), Latino (2, 3.1%), and other (2, 3.1%). About half of them were in their 50s (51.6%), 25% in their 40s, 15.6% in their 60s, and 7.8% in their 30s. They came from a wide variety of functional areas, including General Management (16, 25%), Human Resources (9, 14.1%), Accounting and Finance (7, 10.9%), Sales and Marketing (6, 9.4%), and the rest (26, 40.6%) from CEO roles, Partners, Operations, Strategy, R&D, IT, Legal, and Community Relations. Their organizations ($n = 51$) were mostly in the for-profit sector (39, 76.5%), followed by non-profits (10, 19.6%), educational (1, 2%), and governmental (1, 2%). In terms of industries, 39.2% were in the service sector

(n = 20), 33.3% from finance and insurance (n = 17), 19.6% from manufacturing (n = 10), and the rest (4, 7.8%) from retail, public administration, and wholesale. (Detailed participant information is available in an online supplement; see Table 1s.)

Data Collection

After confidentiality and informed consent were obtained, we arranged for either face-to-face interviews or phone interviews depending on mutual availabilities. We conducted 13 face-to-face interviews and 51 phone interviews. The interviews lasted between 30 and 75 min, with an average of 58 min; all were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. All the names for participants used in the present paper are pseudonyms.

The interviews were semi-structured. We developed and followed an interview protocol to broadly explore the participants' experience and understanding of leadership, as well as gender's influence on their leadership. During the interviews, we asked follow-up questions for clarifications, illustrations, and examples whenever possible. To test for clarity and understandability of our interview questions, we pilot tested our interview protocol with seven middle and senior managers who did not participate in our study. Questions were modified or removed to ensure clear and unambiguous understandings. For example, the questions directly asking women leaders how they blended agency and communion or how they managed their gender role and leader role were removed due to their abstract nature to the pilot interviewees. Our final interview protocol probed participants' leadership experience, understanding of leadership, leadership characteristics, successes and failures, and gender's influence on their leadership. In particular, the following questions were key to generating relevant data for our research questions: "What does being a leader mean to you?"; "How is leadership demonstrated in your current role?"; "How would you describe yourself as a leader?; "Could you share some examples of how these characteristics are demonstrated in your leadership?"; "How do you present yourself as a leader, through the way you dress and the way you interact with other people?"; "How does gender influence your leadership?"; and "Let's imagine that everything about you is the same except that you were a man, what would be different?" (Our complete interview protocol is available in an online supplement.)

Data Analyses

We followed an inductive approach to analyze our data in four stages. In Stage One, the first two authors openly coded all potentially meaningful chunks of data that reflected beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and stories, along with their associated reasons and expected outcomes, as relevant to leadership or to gender. At this stage, our intent was to explore meaning structures in the participants' world, and so our codes used at this stage were specific to each transcript. For example, we had codes such as "self-presentation-don't wear power suits because I'm personable" and "impact of gender-need to work harder to be taken seriously." Such coding allowed us to preserve processes and sequences, as well as understand the participants' explicit and implicit meanings (Charmaz and Belgrave 2012).

In Stage Two, because we were specifically interested in narratives related to agency and communion, we focused on codes and narratives that were related to agency and/or communion. To establish a common basis for selection, we compiled a list of common descriptions and key words of agency and communion from existing literature. (The key word list is available as an online supplement; see Table 2s.) Guided by this list, the first two authors independently selected open codes and coded narratives that were related to agency and/or communion, and then we sorted them into sub-categories of agency, communion, and blended agency and communion, together with their associated reasons and perceived impact. We had frequent discussions in this process to come up with common categories. From this process emerged sub-categories of agency and communion, such as "agency-self-promote," "agency-show decisiveness," "communion-connect with others on a personal level," and "communion-value others' talents."

In Stage Three, we further narrowed our focus on the codes and related narratives in which agency and communion appeared together. We applied two criteria in identifying a code or narrative as blended agency and communion: (a) the participants mentioned displaying both agentic and communal tendencies in the same incident or description and (b) the agentic and the communal tendencies appeared to be contradictory. After carefully reviewing the codes and narratives containing blended agency and communion, the first two authors independently generated themes before holding several rounds of discussions to come to common themes. From this process emerged four pairs of contradictory agentic and communal tendencies that were interwoven in women leaders' narratives. Following the guidelines of grounded theory, we iterated back-and-forth between the data and the emerging themes (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Suddaby 2006) to examine the fit of the themes with our data. We also experimented with other ways of organizing the themes before arriving at the four pairings.

In Stage Four, we reviewed the themes, codes, and associated narratives from Stage Three for each theme again to extract mechanisms through which the agentic and communal ends of a pair were woven together. The first two authors independently generated themes after reviewing the codes and narratives, and then we held rounds of discussions to come up with agree-upon themes. From this process, five

themes emerged that explained how the pairs were bound together in women leaders' narratives. Again, following the guidelines of grounded theory, we iterated back-and-forth between the data and the emerging themes (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Suddaby 2006) to examine the fit of the themes with our data. We also conceptualized other ways of organizing the data before arriving at the five paradox management mechanisms.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of our findings, we used a collaborative data analysis process, peer debriefing, and member checking to enhance the trustworthiness of our findings (Brewer and Hunter 1989; Miles and Huberman 1994). First, the first two authors independently generated codes, categories, and themes before holding discussions to reach consensus, all the way from open coding to theme generation. This collaborative process allowed for a more rigorous examination of the data, enhanced the richness of the codes and themes, and fostered the exploration and investigation of rival frameworks. Further, we had a research assistant audit our themes and supporting codes to enhance the robustness of our findings. The third author served as a sounding board for critiquing the clarity and distinction of the themes. Lastly, for member checking, we sent a report of our study's findings with the blended agency and communion themes to all participants for feedback and to check whether the findings fit with the experience of the participants (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Patton 2002). Five participants responded and commented that the findings made sense to them and were informative. The first author also presented the findings of the blended agency and communion themes to a group of 80 female middle and senior managers at a healthcare professional association's event. No systematic feedback was made available by the organizer, but those who did contact the authors during and after the presentation commented that the findings were consistent with their experiences.

Results

Our data suggested that paradoxical tensions between agentic and communal demands did not take a uniform shape in women leaders' experience. Rather, they manifested in women leaders' simultaneous concerns with multiple pairs of seemingly opposite tendencies. We identified four prominent pairings of agentic and communal tendencies that appeared to be contradictory and yet commonly juxtaposed by the women leaders: demanding and caring, authoritative and participative, self-advocating and other-serving, and distant and approachable. Underneath these pairings lie various mechanisms that help women leaders manage their tensions through reconciling their contradictions and making productive use of their synergistic potential. We detected five such mechanisms,

which we named: situational accentuating (accentuating either agency or communion depending on the situation), sequencing (following a temporal sequence to enact agency or communion), overlapping (creating a common ground so that agency and communion converge into one course of action), complementing (applying agency and communion to different aspects of a situation in a complementary way), and reframing (crafting positive associations between agency and communion so that they become embedded within each other). We explain each of the agency-communion pairs and each blending mechanism in detail in the following sections.

Pairing Up Agentic and Communal Tendencies

Women leaders used a wide variety of agentic and communal tendencies to describe their thoughts and actions. However, the tendencies were not randomly linked, but rather, some common pairs of agentic and communal traits and behaviors were often evoked together. We identified four apparently contradictory agency-communion pairs that were frequently interlaced in women leaders' narratives. Table 1 presents the themes, focused codes, sample quotations, and frequencies of each pairing.

Pairing 1: Demanding and caring. The first pair of agency and communion women leaders yoked together in their narratives is that of demanding high performance from others and showing care and consideration toward others. An example is Cheryl's (a strategy executive in an insurance company) self-description: "I think there's a lot of sincerity and empathy in my leadership style, but I'm also very demanding." This pair reflects an agentic focus on task achievement and a communal focus on nurturing others. On the one hand, women leaders demonstrated their demandingness through their dissatisfaction with the status quo, conscious effort to push people out of their comfort zones, holding people accountable to those expectations, and calling people out if their performance was not up to par. On the other hand, women leaders highlighted their care and support for others in meeting high expectations, which helped them soften their direct hard-charging goal orientation that could be seen as cold and threatening because "women who are direct are interpreted much more negatively than a man" (Miranda, a partner in an accounting firm). By using this blended approach, women leaders believed that they prevented employee burnout, lowered defensiveness, and boosted their performance. Tracey recalled a colleague's comment about her caring style of demandingness: "Man, she'll deliver that punch to you and you barely even realize you're taking it in."

Pairing 2: Authoritative and participative. The second prominent paring of agency and communion that

Table 1 Paradoxical pairings of agency and communion

Themes Focused codes	Sample quotations	Frequencies*
Pairing 1: Demanding and Caring		
Demand high performance and bring fun to work; deliver tough messages in a caring way	"I'm tough. I'm really tough. So I set high standards. The people that are on this team are here to work and work hard. I'm also, I'd like to think, caring and compassionate. And so I try to make sure we're having equal parts fun in terms of getting the work done."—Norma	40
	"I was having a conversation with somebody who is getting ready to hopefully be promoted and I was going to through the papers he had written up. I think I am caring in the way that I want him to do the best, and I want him to do well, and I want us to celebrate his promotion a little bit. I was proactive and actually asking him to set up the time to make sure that he was on the right track and making that time. I am tough in the sense that I am going to be clear where the bar is, and I am going to deliver tough feedback. So I'm not coddling anybody or lowering the bar, but I am caring and supporting them to get over a pretty high bar."—Kayla	
Pairing 2: Authoritative and Participative		
Be decisive and include others in decision-making; project confidence and value others' talents	"I always make it clear to people, look, I want to hear people's inputs, but at the end of the day, since I'm ultimately responsible for the business, there will be certain decisions I will make. And so I think people do feel like: 'Hey, at least my voice was heard.' You're not going to win them all. We don't bat a thousand, as we say, right? But if people feel someone listened to me, genuinely listened, considered my position, and then said, here's why I decided this, then most people are okay with that."—Melissa	37
	"I present myself as… inquisitive about the business, seeking to understand, while at the same time demonstrating a deep level of competence and confidence about my area of expertise."—Charlotte	
Pairing 3: Self-advocating and Other-Serving		
Promote one's own interests and help others reach theirs; protect one's time and resources and serve others	"For my peers, we're going to have to find a lot of win-win so that they will want to help my business to be successful and then, likewise, there are things that we can do that could help their businesses be more successful."—Lindsay	18
	"It [working with other people] is consensus building in supporting them; it's gaining support for things I need. And it's getting buy-in for things. At times if you want to sponsor a technology initiative or something like that, you need to get other people on board."—Marilyn	
Pairing 4: Distant and Approachable		
Dress formally and interact informally; Be professional and personable	"I try always to dress just ever so slightly more formal than employees, except on Fridays when I dress very informal to show that I'm also not stiff and unapproachable. I think generally we have fun, but I think there is, again, a little bit of distancing that I try to maintain just to keep that objectivity there. I want people to see that I'm fair-minded and not playing favorites."—Dawn	15
	"I can be very social… At the same time I also know that I'm not their friend. What I want is their respect, and I want them to know that I'm doing the right thing for the organization and the patients that we serve."—Monica	

*Frequencies refer to the number of our 64 interviewees who mentioned a theme in the same incident or description

emerged in the women leaders' narratives is that of authoritativeness and participativeness. This pair reflects the agentic orientation toward exercising personal control and asserting one's competence over others with the communal orientation toward admitting one's vulnerability and cooperating with others. This dual focus is reflected in the comment of Samantha, an executive in the newspaper business, about how she established herself in a new workplace: "I wanted to ensure that folks knew that I was a strong journalist. I had lots of good instincts in the news world, and that I was also open to a collaborative form of work." On the one hand, based on their observation that people tended to give them less credibility unless proven otherwise, especially at the beginning of a new business engagement, women leaders had learned to project authoritativeness. They learned to "toughen up," "speaker louder," "play chin music" (a baseball analogy for aggressive talk), and act decisively. On the other hand, to prevent the potential impression of arrogance from projecting their authoritativeness alone, women leaders

were quick to show their participativeness by acknowledging their own vulnerabilities, recognizing others' strengths, including others' input in decisions, and working jointly with others. By casting both authoritativeness and participativeness, women leaders believed that they set directions and motivated people toward the same goals. For example, Claire, a general manager in manufacturing, commented: "I'd learned about myself as a leader, the tendencies of being directive. I'm having to manage and maybe take it down and go slower, go slow to go fast, to bring people longer and to ensure that we have alignment."

Paring 3: Self-advocating and other-serving. Another common manifestation of the mingling of agency and communion involves a simultaneous agentic concern for meeting the needs and goals of oneself with a communal concern for benefiting those of others. Having learned from their experience of losing promotion opportunities or being taken advantage of, women leaders stepped up their efforts to advocate for themselves through advancing their personal development and promotion, as well as achieving personal goals in competitive situations. At the same time, they showed great willingness to consider and advance others' interests, without which they believed that they may be seen as selfish and incur penalty. For example, Meredith, a general manager in health services, who was almost removed from a leadership team because she was seen as too aggressive in negotiating with internal stakeholders, learned her lesson to adopt a dual concern:

Before we go into any negotiations … I'm encouraging our team to say what are the core values of the people that we're negotiating with, and what are they looking for and what are their needs? And what of those needs can we meet and what of those needs aren't we going to be able to, and how do those needs fit with what we're trying to accomplish?

As a result of their dual focus on advocating for themselves and serving others, they believed that they won approval and gained reputation as fair leaders. Phoebe, an accounting executive in real estate, recounted another person's comment on her dual focus on self-advocacy and other-service: "You are one of the hardest negotiators ever, but you still are fair."

Pairing 4: Distant and approachable. The fourth pair juxtaposes an agentic concern with separation and independence from others with a communal concern with establishing close relationships with others. To generate respect and overcome lack of fit perceptions, women leaders kept a distance from others by maintaining an impersonal "leadership presence" that was marked by being "professional," "objective," and "serious." At the same time, they also felt the need to highlight their approachability to earn people's trust and commitment because they observed that being distant may elicit impressions of being "stiff," "ego-centric," and "apathetic" that can alienate people. They explicitly and emphatically conveyed the intimate human side of themselves as "accessible," "warm," "social," "personable," "friendly," "informal," and "easy to connect with." For example, Natalie, CEO of an insurance company, described both sides of herself:

When I interact with folks walking around, I really try to be approachable, really like my employees; but it's always clear that I'm the boss… because employees want both. They want to feel that they are connected to you and that you value them. On the other hand, they also want to feel that your position is and you are someone that should be respected [from a distance].

Managing Agency-Communion Tensions

The four pairs of agency and communion (demanding and caring, authoritative and participative, self-advocating and other-serving, and distant and approachable) appear to reflect opposite focuses and concerns. How do women leaders reconcile the apparent contradictions? What mechanisms do women leaders use to tap into their synergistic potential? We identified five mechanisms through which women leaders wove together the four pairs of agentic and communal tendencies: situational accentuating, sequencing, overlapping, complementing, and reframing. These paradox management mechanisms did not correspond one-to-one with the four agency-communion pairs. Rather, multiple mechanisms were used to blend each pair of agentic and communal tendencies. Table 2 presents the themes, focused codes, sample quotations, and frequencies of each mechanism.

Mechanism 1: Situational accentuating. The first mechanism women leaders used for blending agency and communion, situational accentuating, entails activating either agency or communion based on their assessment of the demands of a particular situation or target audience. Over time, by switching between agentic and communal modes, women leaders meet their dual role demands.

Table 2 Paradox management mechanisms used by women leaders

Themes Focused codes	Sample quotations	Frequencies*
Mechanism 1: Situational Accentuating		
Keep distance or show approachability depending on the situation; demand high performance or show consideration depending on the target individual	"I specifically don't sit at the head of the table at certain times. Depends on the meeting and the environment. And because certain times I want to send the signal I'm just one of the team today, and other times I want to be very clear that I'm here to make a decision, and then I maybe take a slightly different stance."—Melissa	16
	"So for some people, it's very important for you to first validate what they're thinking about before they would be open to sharing new ideas. And so for those individuals, I would listen first and then kind of make 'and' statements, 'yes and.' For other people, they can be more open-minded and for those individuals, I may be more direct and faster in getting to the point that, 'Hey, times have changed, we have two paths forward. Let's determine what is the best cost benefit analysis and then move for on one of those.' ... And then there are other people where they're very, very good at getting to the end goal, where all I have to do is tell them that this is the outcome that we need and they'll figure out the best way to go at it. So, depending on how talented each team member is, I have found that I can deploy different styles to get to some more outcomes."—Lindsay	
Mechanism 2: Sequencing		
Invite others' input first, then show decisiveness; support people first, then ask for their support; show care first, then demand	"I believe it's [leadership is] really about thinking about the greater good and making sure that you're inclusive and driving for better outcomes—taking in several different disparate kinds of information and drawing some conclusions and then testing those conclusions. But doing it in a way that is inclusive and asking for input, but ultimately being comfortable making these decisions."—Sandra	14
	"I think it's the idea that when you have relationships, it's then leveraging those relationships when you need it for something you're trying to advocate for. If you're not supporting people on a daily basis, when you need them, they're likely not going to necessarily be there for you.. . I think it's less about seeking credit for things. I think it's just sort of that day-to-day relationship where people want to help you succeed. And so when you come in and advocate for something, people generally bend over backwards to figure out how to help you get it done."—Marilyn	
Mechanism 3: Overlapping		
Create win-win solutions; create common grounds where self's and others' positions converge	"I might share where there might be a pizza. They'll have to bring me into the table with. It's sharing at the right time. How do you share so that you'd become part of the team [rather than being taken advantage of if you share when there's no reciprocity]?"—Cameron	8
	"It's just a much greater sensitivity to interpersonal relationships and getting to your end result with consensus, and with everybody feeling good rather than with I won."—Natalie	
Mechanism 4: Complementing		
Be tough on tasks and caring on people; assert one's strengths and affirm others' strengths in different domains; convey distance subtly and approachability explicitly	"How I demonstrate my leadership is that I truly care about the people that I work with. And there's always a thought process in my mind of how are we going to do this: recognizing that they might be nervous about this, that thus they might be putting in hours that are hard on a family right now, because we have this thing going on. So, making sure that that's recognized along with the expectation that yes, we do need to get the work done."—Natasha	33
	I know how to identify talent and be willing to make tough people calls and manage people out of the organization if there's a performance issue. But you can do that effectively while treating people with respect and dignity and making them feel good along the way. So, you can be empathic to the individual while still making very difficult talent calls."—Charlotte	

Table 2 (continued)

Themes Focused codes	Sample quotations	Frequencies*
Mechanism 5: Reframing		
Assign agentic attributes to communal tendencies; ascribe communal intentions to agentic behaviors	"When you were wrong, you can admit; when you need to change course without feeling like that's weak. Because it's actually strong to be able to say no, I'm making a mistake, that I'm not thinking about this right, I need to change, as opposed to this traditional idea of they're a strong leader, they have their convictions, they never vary from them. That's not my reality. My reality is more: let's learn from this."—Judith "You are here for a reason and for who you are, whether it's your gender or your perspective on the world. But if you don't exercise who you are, if you don't act on that, you're not helping. So, sometimes you do have to push yourself to say something or do something that might not feel welcome. ..They've invited me into the room for a reason. So, I'm going to give them what they asked for and maybe they won't agree with me and that's fine."—Samantha	8

*Frequencies refer to the number of our 64 interviewees who mentioned a theme in the same incident or description

For example, to contend with the need to keep a distance (agency) and show approachability (communion), women leaders emphasized recognizing the primary needs of a situation and highlighted either their distance or approachability according to their assessments. Brianna's (a legal counsel in a health services organization) comments illustrated this point:

When people are talking to me, it's not good news or money, generally, and I need to make sure that coming in and telling me what's on their mind feels safe, and so I need to remain approachable to them. By the same token, on occasion, I have to be able to tell people that they have made a big mistake, and we have to clean it up, and I expect them to follow my authority in trying to resolve it.

Specifically, women leaders recounted that in formal situations, such as representing their organizations, demanding compliance from people, and making important decisions or allocating resources, they kept their distance. In contrast, in daily informal interactions with others, women leaders conscientiously and explicitly conveyed a friendly and approachable side of themselves in order to balance out the impersonal impressions distance could induce.

Another example in which women leaders used situational accentuating to manage their dual demands was to yoke together demandingness (agency) and care (communion). Several women leaders mentioned taking into consideration factors of others' personalities and needs when communicating hard messages. For example, Andrea, a partner in an accounting firm, explained how she adopted a different approach, depending on the target person, before delivering an unwelcomed message:

I understand that you're going to have trouble hearing it and I try to put it in a way that is flexed to my assessment of your ability to hear it. Do I have to give it to you between the eyes because you're not listening? Or do I have to build you up to the fact that yes, we're going to get there and we're going to provide you support because you've got to make some changes?

Additionally, in choosing between authoritativeness (agency) and participativeness (communion) in making decisions, when the situation indicated urgency of making a decision or the risk of perceived indecision was high, women leaders enacted more authoritativeness. Other times, they felt freer to include others' input more. Similarly, women leaders made more demands and had more confrontations with their in-groups, but when facing out-groups, they showed more care and unity. For example, Monica, a hospital CEO, commented: "we can discuss and debate, but when we walk out the door, we're all together. Similar with my own senior team, as we can debate, we can disagree inside the walls of my office, but when we walk out, we're one voice."

Mechanism 2: Sequencing. When alternating between agency and communion, other than letting the situational needs dictate the accentuation of agency or communion, women leaders also followed a temporal order in enacting agency and communion, usually with communion preceding agency. Although the ordering may be iterative and circular, women leaders generally first used communion to build relationships, establish trust, and engage people, which was then followed by agentic behaviors to challenge the status quo or achieve goals.

One example of sequencing agency and communion is in women leaders' decision-making that calls for both being authoritative (agency) and participative (communion). The most common approach to blending these two was to start with others' participation and building consensus among relevant stakeholders, followed by their own synthesis and decision-making, which was sometimes followed by getting back to relevant stakeholders. Madison, an Human Resources executive in banking, talked about this approach:

> I'm not afraid to make a decision, yet I do gather all the facts. I make sure I've listened to all the points of view. Once I've decided, I circle back to the individuals. Maybe it wasn't what they wanted, but I circle back to them and acknowledge: "OK, I've heard this, this, and this, and here's why I made the decision that I made"… Then I could find people go: "OK, as long as you heard me, and as long as you know that I'm worried about this or I'm worried about that, I can follow. I can go where we need to go."

Another example of sequencing is in enacting demandingness (agency) and care (communion). Some women leaders mentioned showing care and building trustful relationships first, before making demands and voicing disagreements, so that demands and disagreements did not appear to be personal attacks but instead reflected their concerns for the organization. For example, Ruth, a new product development executive in manufacturing, explained it as "really working hard on ensuring the relationships are there and they're strong, so that when you do have big fights, it's not personal. You've already established a relationship beyond that."

Mechanism 3: Overlapping. The third mechanism women leaders used to yoke together agency and communion, overlapping, involves identifying opportunities where agentic and communal tendencies can overlap on a common ground. Although agentic and communal concerns may pull people in different directions, women leaders sought out opportunities or even created conditions where agentic and communal concerns overlap, allowing them to attend to both at the same time. This mechanism is different from the first two, situational accentuating and sequencing, where agency and communion are alternately attended to. In overlapping, agency and communion are still seen as separate but can be attended to at the same time by identifying or creating common ground between agentic goals and communal goals.

One example of this mechanism is in bringing together the agentic concern for self-advocacy and the communal concern for serving others. Women leaders adopted strategies that they called "win-win" or "creating synergy"—identifying intersections of their own interests and those of others that can lead to a common course of action. Dorothy, a general manager in health services, described her mindset this way:

> The most important thing is understanding what are the values, the traits, the goals of that person that you're trying to influence... So, I've always tried to know what it is that I'm trying to achieve, tie that back to something that I know they want to achieve.

Another example for discerning or creating overlaps between agency and communion is in intertwining authoritativeness (agency) and participativeness (communion). Asserting one's own strengths and opinions oftentimes runs counter to acknowledging those of others. To hold on to both, women leaders identified or even created contexts in which agentic and communal goals could converge. For example, Peggy, CEO of an arts organization, recalled an incident when she pushed the board to reach consensus on a political issue on which there were wildly divergent opinions. She cleverly built a common ground by steering the board to craft a general policy on when the organization should take stances on political issues, based on which she led the board to reach a consensus-based decision. She commented about herself:

> I'm extremely impatient. So, if there's a finish line, I want to get through it. And I know what I thought we should do about the [contentious issue]... But the way to get there is to take enough time with where other people are, so they can get there successfully… We didn't change anybody's mind about the issue. But what we did was find a way to let [the organization] to take a position which in my view was the correct position for us to take, for a reason that was institutional and not personal in which the board members didn't have to raise their hands and vote.

Mechanism 4: Complementing. In addition to finding a way where agency and communion can overlap, women leaders placed a simultaneous focus on agency and communion through another mechanism, complementing, where agentic and communal tendencies are simultaneously enacted and applied to different aspects of the context in a complementary way. In this mechanism, women leaders differentiated multiple dimensions of the context, and they activated agency and communion to meet the demands of the different dimensions. By doing so, agency and communion fit together to address the needs of a situation holistically. Different from overlapping where the agentic and communal tendencies

converge into one course of action on a common ground, in the complementing mechanism, agency and communion do not need to converge at some point. Instead, the differences between agency and communion are highlighted and exploited rather than minimized or avoided. Their differences are used to meet the needs of different aspects of the situation, allowing women leaders to provide a more well-rounded response.

One example in which women leaders used complementing is resolving the dual pressure to be demanding (agency) and caring (communal). By differentiating between task needs and relationship needs, women leaders developed a style that involved being demanding toward tasks and being caring toward people. Sally, a state legislator, shared her learning from separating tasks and relationships: "I learned that we could vehemently disagree on an issue, and when we walked out of the room, we were friends. I really came to see, really personally, you can—and the importance of being able to—separate out disagreeing on an issue from your friendship."

Specifically, differentiating between tasks and relationships enabled women leaders to present their directness and demandingness (agency) in a sensitive and caring (communal) way. Examples of such an approach included giving negative feedback, delivering hard messages, or expressing disagreements through conveying their helping intentions, using jokes and humor, creating a constructive context, conveying unity with others, and posing questions, all of which were believed to increase others' receptivity. For example, when a colleague presented Denise, a strategy executive in a financial organization, an unsatisfactory proposal, she used a considerate approach to demand a higher standard:

I wanted to lay enough on the table to say, "Boy, this is very interesting. It's new; it's a great concept. Can we do some more research on this? Can we test this against some other organizations?" And so, that's an example of where you can get an idea across without saying: "Hey listen, I think this is really dumb. And we're not going to do it." . . . I'm much more effective as a leader if I lead with a question.

Another example where the complementing mechanism helped women leaders bring agentic and communal tendencies together is in juxtaposing authoritativeness (agency) and participativeness (communion). Aside from sequencing and finding overlaps between them, women leaders also used the complementing mechanism in which they identified domains where they had expertise and needed to project authoritativeness as well as domains where others had expertise and they thus needed to yield to others' expertise. For example, Maria, an operations executive in a hospital, discussed the complementarities of her strength in facilitating others' expertise:

Being a leader to me means that I have influence over things and people respect my thoughts and opinions…I facilitate a team of people who are way smarter than I am. But that's my value. I'm in healthcare. I'm not a nurse. I'm not a doctor… I just facilitate and help things get better.

Based on such a mindset, women leaders identified ways in which asserting their own strengths and affirming those of others complemented (rather than contradicted) each other, as Judith, an accounting executive in a manufacturing firm, said: "when you're self-confident, you don't worry that someone on your team is smarter than you are; you think it's wonderful."

Mechanism 5: Reframing. The last mechanism used by women leaders to overcome the contradictory nature of agency and communion is reframing in which women leaders crafted positive associations between agency and communion to replace commonly held negative associations. This results in new meaning schemes in which agency and communion become interrelated rather than contradictory, as well as embedded within each other rather than separate.

Specifically, one approach to connecting agency and communion is through assigning agency to communal tendencies that might be associated with weakness. For example, rather than framing vulnerability (communion) as a sign of weakness (lack of agency), women leaders reframed it as a reflection of confidence (agency) in the sense that confidence gave them the willingness and comfort to reveal their own faults and weaknesses. For example, Shannon, a president in a manufacturing company, believed that showing vulnerability meant that "I am very comfortable and I'm very confident in saying I don't know. I don't know the answer but I'm keen to find out, or I don't know the answer but I know I have the ability to find out."

Another approach to interrelating agency and communion is through ascribing communal intentions to the agentic behaviors that others may find threatening. For example, Lorraine, Jordan, and Norma framed giving negative feedback or voicing disagreements (agency) as a gift that reflected the givers' helping intentions (communion) rather than a threat to others. For example, Jordan, an HR executive in manufacturing, shared her perspective: "I tend to speak out a little bit. And I think that's OK because I believe in it so strongly that feedback is a gift in my mind. So, whether it's good, bad, or ugly, it's meant to help." Another area where communal intentions were ascribed to agentic behaviors is in connecting demandingness (agency) and care (communion). For example, Phoebe and Samantha believed that aggressively presenting their views (agency) was an attempt to add value to the

organization (communion); Shannon and Lorraine gave the reason for their directness (agency) as showing care (communion)—because they cared, they would be willing to directly communicate helpful feedback; and Kayla believed that pushing her followers to reach higher performance standards (agency) stemmed from her desire to do the right thing for their clients (communion):

> I am deeply passionate about doing the right thing for our clients and about driving towards impact, and they [my followers] know when I am pushing and problem-solving or I am pushing them, that it's coming from a place where we have to have impact for our client, that's the thing that we are all striving for.

Discussion

Through an inductive study, we identified four pairs of agentic and communal tendencies that seem contradictory but are juxtaposed by women leaders: demanding and caring, authoritative and participative, self-advocating and other-serving, and distant and approachable. The tensions of these contradictory tendencies are managed through five mechanisms: situational accentuating, sequencing, overlapping, complementing, and reframing. As a whole, our findings suggest that despite the apparent contradictions of particular agentic and communal tendencies, women leaders find ways to bring them into coexistence. These juxtapositions are learned responses from their career experiences. By juxtaposing these different tendencies, women leaders were able to drive for high performance, rally people on common directions, align interests, and build leader-follower relationships.

Theoretical Implications

First, our findings suggest that an important way women leaders can cope with agency-communion tensions is through recognizing and crafting ways to weave together agency and communion in their leadership. In the context of role incongruity, our study enriches the literature by looking beyond other people's perceptions and judgments of women leaders based on role expectations (Eagly and Karau 2002; Heilman et al. 1989; Kark et al. 2012; Koenig et al. 2011; Schein 2001) and looking inwardly into women leaders' internal experience and mental construction to cope with the unfair dual role expectations for both agency and communion. By doing so, our findings complement the well-documented negative effect of role incongruity on women, such as a "double-bind" (Jamieson 1995; Kark and Eagly 2010), "Catch-22″ (Rudman and Glick 2001), and "backlash" (Heilman et al. 2004), by highlighting constructive routes that individual

women leaders can take to deal with role incongruity. In the context of the body of research that focuses on the importance of women leaders' demonstrating both agency and communion (Bem and Lewis 1975; Lipińska-Grobelny and Wasiak 2010; Vonk and Ashmore 1993), our study draws attention not just to the possibility of presenting agency and communion, but the various ways of achieving that. Additionally, our findings may help us question the assumed contradictions and enable new ways of interpreting dualities in leadership, which carries consequential implications for how people and organizations can think and act around these dualities and their associated impacts.

Specifically, we extend women's leadership literature on how women cope with the dual demands for agency and communion, not just in behaviors but also in underlying principles. Specifically, we elucidate five mechanisms through which women leaders bring together agency and communion: situational accentuating, sequencing, overlapping, complementing, and reframing. A mix of the mechanisms are used to blend different aspects of agency and communion. These mechanisms go beyond specific strategies and reveal underlying principles that enable coexistence between agency and communion. This is important because understanding the underlying principles can help women not only adopt well-established strategies (such as soft delivery of hard messages) but also use the principles to create new responses that can help interlace agency and communion (such as reframing the relationship between agency and communion). These findings advance existing literature by offering guidance on how women can creatively craft responses to deal with the dual demands for agency and communion.

Moreover, our focus on agency and communion (as personal attributes) sets us apart from other research that approaches women's coping responses to role incongruity from an identity perspective (for example, Karelaia and Guillén 2014; Kyriakidou 2011; Mavin and Grandy 2012). Complementing existing research from an identity perspective, our approach from a trait and behavioral perspective (focusing on agency and communion) unpacks the contents of gender identity into specific traits and behaviors, which allows us greater flexibility and depth in delineating specific challenges and coping behaviors by individual women. For example, Mavin and Grandy (2012, p. 221) proposed the idea of "doing gender well and differently"—"simultaneous, multiple enactments of femininity and masculinity" that can "open up new possibilities for unsettling gender binaries over time." The paradox management mechanisms we identified may denote ways in which women can fluidly transition between different gender expectations by oscillating between agentic and communal, by forging synergies between agency and communion, and by removing the contrast between agency and communion based on different contextual cues. Because agency and communion can be decoupled from gender (Schmader and Block 2015), these findings provide new
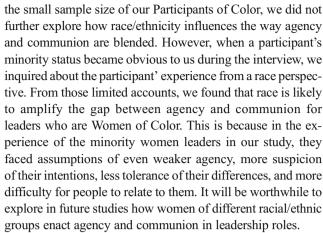
insights into the processes and strategies of "doing gender," which may help women transcend gender boundaries that hinder their effectiveness.

In the context of paradox research, although the five paradox management mechanisms share some similarities with general paradox management strategies, our findings offer further insights and hence closer applicability to the agency and communion paradox. Overall, our mechanisms of situational accentuating and sequencing are consistent with the general paradox management strategy of splitting and shifting between the two poles of a paradox (Tushman et al. 1985). We further articulate different forms of splitting agency and communion, including splitting by situation, person, timing, or sequential ordering. Our overlapping and complementing mechanisms correspond to the broad paradox management strategy of finding synergies that accommodate the opposing poles (Bledow et al. 2009; Jarzabkowski and Sillince 2007; Smith and Lewis 2011; Sundaramurthy and Lewis 2003). Pushing the literature to a deeper level, our findings suggest particular ways to find synergies between agency and communion, such as identifying opportunities to overlap agency and communion, as well as fitting agency and communion to different dimensions of the situation or domains so that they form complementarities. Our reframing mechanism is conceptually consistent with the general paradox management strategy of transcending that challenges entrenched assumptions and constructs more accommodating perceptions of opposites (Lewis 2000). In particular, our findings offer two ways of transcending the oppositional nature of agency and communion: framing communion as a reflection of agency and ascribing communal intentions to agency. Taken together, the mechanisms we identify offer an expanded guide on how individuals could potentially reconcile contradictions and amplify interrelations between two paradoxical elements, answering the call of Schad et al. (2016) to explore paradoxes at the individual level. Specifically, individuals can use the principles of separating, sequencing, finding overlaps, discerning complementarities, and reframing to guide their search for flexible ways to meet contradictory demands. Our five paradox-management mechanisms can help focus future research on deeper examinations of strategies to manage paradoxical tensions by individuals.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are limitations in our study that point to directions for future research. First, literature has documented that race/ethnicity plays a role in how leadership is enacted. Race/ethnicity intersects with other social systems such as gender to influence everyday interactions (Bell et al. 2003; Bell and Nkomo 2001; Livingston et al. 2012; Rosette et al. 2016). Women of Color's way of leading and blending agency and communion may differ from that of White women. Due to

the small sample size of our Participants of Color, we did not further explore how race/ethnicity influences the way agency and communion are blended. However, when a participant's minority status became obvious to us during the interview, we inquired about the participant' experience from a race perspective. From those limited accounts, we found that race is likely to amplify the gap between agency and communion for leaders who are Women of Color. This is because in the experience of the minority women leaders in our study, they faced assumptions of even weaker agency, more suspicion of their intentions, less tolerance of their differences, and more difficulty for people to relate to them. It will be worthwhile to explore in future studies how women of different racial/ethnic groups enact agency and communion in leadership roles.

Second, our sample was limited to the same geographical area, the U.S. Midwest. This may have limited the range of behaviors we found. It is possible that women in different regional and national cultures might use different types of behaviors and mechanisms to handle the paradoxical tensions between agency and communion. Although most of our participants were from multi-location organizations and hence have interactions with a wide range of stakeholders spread out in different geographical areas in the United States, it will be interesting to examine the agency-communion repertoires of women leaders from other geographical areas in the United States and from other national cultures.

Third, although both empirical and theoretical literatures support the idea that the dual demands for both agency and communion are much more prominent for women leaders than for men leaders (Eagly and Karau 2002; Kark et al. 2012; Vinkenburg et al. 2011), men leaders may also experience the paradoxical tensions between agency and communion, which we did not address in our study. Research on paradoxical leadership has documented tensions between agency and communion for all leaders, such as being self-centered versus other-centered (Zhang et al. 2015). Men leaders may also benefit from presenting both agency and communion (Kark et al. 2012). Therefore, the strategies we identify to manage the tensions between agency and communion could be used by men leaders. In particular, the tensions between agency and communion might become more prominent for men leaders in more communal contexts, such as education, social service, childcare, and pastoral roles (Eagly and Karau 2002; Ferguson 2017), where there is more incongruity of the communal leader role demands and the agentic male gender-role demands. Future research can investigate men leaders' usage of paradox management strategies, especially in work contexts that call for more communion.

Lastly, our study is a qualitative exploration. We identified the agency-communion pairs and the mechanisms to juxtapose them, but we did not test their actual effectiveness. The next logical step would be to examine whether the mechanisms we detected could be used to differentiate women

leaders on various psychological and leadership outcomes. For example, following our findings, future research could explore how using different mechanisms to blend agency and communion may be associated with specific psychological outcomes (such as stress, well-being, and identity) and leadership outcomes (such as leadership effectiveness).

Practice Implications

Previous research has demonstrated that a paradox perspective can help with women's leadership development (Kark et al. 2016a, b). Our findings provide specific ideas that can help women develop paradoxical thinking to enhance their leadership. For individual women leaders and leadership-development practitioners, the four pairings of agentic and communal tendencies we identified can serve as a diagnostic tool to capture current behaviors of women leaders, people's perceptions of them, and areas of strengths and opportunities for development in these relevant domains. These pairings can also be incorporated into learning materials (such as in a module on leadership challenges or as part of a developmental roadmap for leadership development) to reveal potential pitfalls and possible coping responses. Further, the five paradox management mechanisms we identified can be included in leadership development materials to help women leaders, as well as mentors and managers of women, expand their mental models and create new emerging strategies to deal with various challenges stemming from the dual agentic and communal demands.

For organizations, our findings reveal the complex "dance" women need to enact to cope with the challenges they face. Such an understanding may help men and women in managerial positions change organizational attitudes, expectations, and stereotypes in ways that help dismantle the structures that force women to participate in such a complex "dance."

Conclusion

Like Riger and Galligan (1980), we believe that it is unfair to pin our hope on individual women to deal with gender inequalities on their own. However, because societal expectations of gender and leadership may be slow to change, women who rise to leadership positions still have to struggle and respond to the dual demands for agency and communion in a constructive way. Our findings explicate the contradictory and yet potentially interrelated aspects of agency and communion, as well as highlight a variety of ways women leaders use to bring them together. These findings help scholars, managers, and practitioners better understand the challenges with which women leaders need to cope. They can also allow women leaders to gain knowledge on the complex adaptations and the mechanisms that other women in top positions use, that is, that enable them to successfully "dance on the razor's edge"—a precarious, yet viable position.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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