

**Exploring Social Perceptions of Women Leaders at Work: How does the  
Double Bind of Appearance and Personality Impact Women's  
Opportunities to make it to the Top?**

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Date

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Supervisor Name:

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University Logo

**Faculty Name**

*JKEssay*  
*VX: ProWriter-1*

## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation offers a new contribution to the Double Bind Theory, emphasising the impact of appearance and personality in obtaining executive level positions. Double Bind Theory explores how women are expected to perform femininities associated with women (appearance) whilst also demonstrating masculinities that are expected of those who occupy executive positions (personality.) To identify the issues concerning the 'double bind', operating against women in organisations, qualitative techniques were employed to gather rich sources of information to understand women's experiences. Particularly, semi-structured interviews were utilized to compare and contrast the perceptions of two distinct groups: women leaders and women at the bottom of organisations. An adaptation of Smith's Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (1996) was utilized to investigate the social meanings of the organisational world. Through this analysis, findings illustrate that the 'double bind' is prevalent within organisations, particularly the private sector. Accounts from both groups highlight issues concerning 'masculine' leadership styles of women leaders and the prevalence of sexism in organisations. Barriers beyond the 'double bind' are also addressed to discuss how motherhood and a lack of 'real models' in organisations impacts women's opportunities to make it to the top. Despite this, findings indicate that the discovery of 'authentic leadership' may favour women and allow them to prosper in the future. Findings are then advanced to call for future research to explore how the 'double bind' may vary depending on the industry in which the organisation operates.

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years society has witnessed a surge in the empowerment of women on a global scale. The likes of International Women's Day and the 100<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of women's right to vote, all commemorated in 2018, have celebrated women.

Particularly, women are increasingly campaigning for equality in the workplace.

Organisations now acknowledge that women's representation positively contributes to the general profitability and diversity of organisations (Beaufort and Summer, 2014).

This is because women possess a unique range of skills and leadership styles.

Despite this, women are significantly outnumbered by men in executive positions, with only 26 out of the top 500 companies, being led by a woman (Catalyst 2018). This has influenced the gender pay gap as men are paid significantly more than women. Some of the largest organisations in the UK still uphold an insufficient gender pay gap (Office for National Statistics, 2017). To change this, we must gain a better understanding of the underlying causes of the gender pay gap: the lack of women's representation in organisations, specifically executive positions.

The aim of this study is to generate a deeper understanding of the 'double bind', and how this impacts women's opportunities to make it to the top. Additionally, the research project also intends to explore the social perceptions of women leaders. It is intended that these findings will yield rich information which can be applied to the existing literature.

The above aims raise the following research objectives:

- To identify the aspects of women leader's personalities that has enabled them to make it to the top.
- To compare and contrast the views of women leaders from opposite ends of the organisation, via interviews.

- To establish other factors, beyond the 'double bind', that hinders women's career progression.

To achieve the research aims and objectives, existing literature will first be discussed before outlining the methodology utilized for this research. The main findings will then be presented, before a critical discussion of findings in comparison with existing theory. This will conclude to generate an understanding of how the 'double bind' of appearance and personality impact women's opportunities to make it to the top.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Background & History*

Exploration of the roles of women occupying leadership positions has been a prominent area of research since the 1970's. Initial works of Kanter (1977) explored the roles of women in organisations, introducing a debate concerning gender issues. Previously, theorists focused to address the lack of workplace opportunities for women. Today, research conducted into gender and the workplace increasingly concentrates on women's failure to obtain executive positions (Kirsch, 2017).

Since the introduction of the Lord Davies Report (2011) it has been suggested that there have been substantial improvements in the numbers of women occupying executive positions. Prior to this, only 12.5% of board positions were occupied by women in the UK's largest FTSE 350 companies. This is in stark contrast to the milestone achieved in 2015, as female representation on boards doubled, initiating substantial progress (Catalyst, 2016). The report was launched to encourage organisations to voluntarily enhance the number of women on boards. Furthermore, whilst female representation grew, the number of all male boards dramatically declined. Research conducted by CIPD (2016) discovered that in 2011, UK FTSE 350 companies comprised of 152 all male boards, today, only 15 remain. Thus, implementation of voluntary quotas has achieved a degree of improvement, influencing the UK's international ranking of 6<sup>th</sup> for its improvement on gender diversity (Lord Davies Review, 2015).

On the contrary, independent review findings contradict the above notion that gender equality in the UK is improving. Research initiated by Catalyst (2017) discovered that only 16.9% of organisations were performing to achieve 50% board parity. This suggests that despite urges for women to join boards, there is still a strong dominance

for a male presence (Grosvold 2011). Thus, lack of women's representation has had a profound impact on gender statistics, as the Office for National Statistics (2017) indicates that the gender pay gap has fallen by a mere 0.3%. This underrepresentation may be an indicator for the consistent gender pay gap (Mihaila 2016). Therefore, although parity is an aim for organisations, the improvement is not substantial, at the current rate it would take decades for women to achieve equality. Accordingly, this supports the rationale for the Hampton-Alexander Review (2016), which calls for further improvements, recommending 33% of women on FTSE 350 boards by 2020.

As discussed, although efforts are being made to enhance women's position in the workplace, and research suggests that women are more positively perceived, statistics suggest that huge inequalities remain (Latu et al, 2011). Progress has been described as "sluggish", despite positive changes being put into place (Deloitte, 2017, p.4). Therefore, it is important to examine the appearance and personalities of women within organisations, and how these perceptions are impacting women's opportunities to make it to the top.

### **Key Theories & Concepts**

The concept of the 'glass ceiling' is one of the most renowned theories in examining women in organisations. The glass ceiling metaphor is used by Stainback et al (2015) to describe the invisible processes that restricts women's access to executive positions. Arguably, the 'glass ceiling' prevents women's ascension to top jobs by hindering their progression. Similarly, Williams (2013, p.622) coins the term of a "trap door" that women tend to fall through, completely disappearing from the workplace. Despite sufficient research suggesting that women boards are generally more profitable than all male boards, women still fail to break through this 'glass ceiling.' The glass ceiling theory strengthens the concept that when women occupy lower level



roles they reinforce the gender order, whilst women who occupy executive level positions disrupt this order (Martin 2003). Subsequently, women who fail to break through the 'glass ceiling' do so due to stereotyping.

Issues surrounding stereotyping women in the workplace dates back to Kanter's (1997) research in the development of archetypal female characters. Kanter proposed that women are subject to 'tokenism' in organizations, which takes place in four different roles. Firstly, the 'Pet', adopted by male colleagues as a "cute, amusing little thing and symbolically taken along on groups events as a mascot" (Kanter, 1997, p.235). Secondly, the 'Seductress', serving the sexual role of a woman, utilizing her attractiveness to succeed. The role of the 'Mother' is of great significance, and emphasises feminine traits of behaviour, such as caring and nurturing. Finally, the role of the 'Iron Maiden' is attributed to strong and powerful women, who are very different to the 'Mother' and display stereotypically masculine traits. This description is often utilized to characterise women leaders.

Issues concerning stereotyping also exist in contemporary literature. Stoker et al (2012) define Social Role Theory as disadvantaging women based on prejudice in regard to their management style, influenced by stereotypes. Female management style is stereotypically regarded as encompassing care and sensitivity. In a male dominated business environment, these characteristics are undesirable in leaders. As proposed by Ljungholm (2016, p.270) "organisations are gender-blind, being intrinsically and culturally masculine." This statement is linked to explanations of the Gender Diagnosticity Approach formulated by Lippa (2001), who argues that masculinity is a characteristic preferred in organisations. Thus, it appears that stereotypes surrounding women and their capacity to perform in an organisational setting are not changing over time, as society maintains a preference for male leaders.

Social Role Theory serves a function in developing and understanding Double Bind Theory. Double Bind Theory is defined by Mavin et al (2014 p.441) as being “expected to perform femininities associated with being a woman whilst also demonstrating masculinities expected of those elite positions.” This theory involves stereotyping as the basis for explaining why women fail to progress to executive positions. This notion is supported by Mavin and Grandy (2016, p.380) whom discuss “contemporary respectable femininity” as women experience difficulty of being evaluated as both leaders and women, the two are not interchangeable. Essentially, if women’s leadership style is ‘too masculine’ they are not perceived as a ‘real woman’, in contrast, if their style is ‘too feminine’ they are unable to fulfil the ideal of a successful leader (Kelan, 2013).

### ***Personality & Leadership Style***

One aspect of the ‘double bind’ is the significance that personality and leadership styles play in explaining why women are unable to access executive positions. This concept involves an explanation that the role of stereotyping women serves in a male dominated environment. Previous literature has led to the belief that women who adopt a more masculine leadership style, characterised by aggression and assertiveness, are likely to perform better in a top position. Mavin and Grandy (2016) have referred to this as women taking care and men taking charge, emphasising the nurturing role of women’s personalities. However, there are significant issues in the rationale of the existing literature. Scholars assume that personalities of women are homogeneous, they fail to recognise that different groups of women have distinct personalities.

Furthermore, the approaches fail to state whether leadership styles of women will differ from those who may have rejected traditional female roles, such as homosexual women. Therefore, there is a problem in regarding women as all the same.

Sufficient evidence supports the contention of Beaufort and Summers (2014) whom suggest that of the small percentage of women who occupy executive positions, most adopt 'male style' behaviours. This is further supported by Cook and Glass (2014) whom extend the theory to include the adoption of particular hobbies that allow women to navigate male dominated networks, often linked with promotion. However, a recent contribution by Short (2017, p.15) suggests that the association with women adopting male style behaviours or hobbies is a "myth", and claims that leadership styles between men and women are essentially the same. There is a possibility that existing literature accommodates an outdated view of the personalities and roles of the modern woman.

On the contrary, Sandberg (2013, p.15) takes a different approach and argues that "career progression often depends upon taking risks and advocating for oneself- traits that girls are discouraged from exhibiting." Sandberg asserts that women are socially penalised for showing ambition. She urges more women to take control of their careers, and develop the ambition, specifically, to lead. Her belief is that women lack leadership ambition and are labelled as bossy if they do so. Evidently, existing literature indicates a theme that those women who display behaviours such as ambition, that are not typically associated with femininity, are those who make it to the top.

### **Appearance**

The second aspect of the 'double bind' impacting women's ability to progress to the top, concerns appearance. Appearance is regarded by Ross-Smith and Huppatz (2011, p.555) as a "powerful social signifier." This serves a role with the capacity to shape both the power and identity of women, referred to as "bodies" (Haraway, 1990,

p.222). This notion suggests that women are evaluated as two separate “bodies,” either as a woman, or a leader, the two cannot coincide.

Emerging literature contests that appearance may help rather than hinder women to break through the ‘glass ceiling.’ Mavin and Grandy (2016, p.385) have referred to this as possessing a “beauty premium.” Research conducted by Rafaeli and Dutton (1997) found that women occupying positions at an executive level tend to place a greater value on their attire, linked with the opportunity for promotion. This notion has been supported by Peluchette et al (2006, p.50), conducting research into “appearance labour.” Their study discovered that women believed the more resources they devoted to their work wardrobe, the more likely they thought of it as playing a critical role in their career success. The above research, however poses some problems as the topic has not been examined deeply enough to provide a coherent answer that establishes links between appearance and promotion. The use of surveys to gather this information leads to a superficial answer that fails to explore reasoning behind beliefs.

The ideas previously outlined in the literature, suggesting that appearance may help women in occupying executive level positions, undermines women’s ability. Suggesting that attractive women are more likely to be promoted ignores reasoning that a woman has been promoted based on her ability to perform well in the workplace. These naïve suggestions have potentially occurred because of the form of methods employed to study such a complex topic area. For example, a study conducted by Glick et al (2005) discovered that the role of appearance is of greater importance in high status jobs, but their research method did not allow the researchers to understand why. Likewise, Peluchette et al (2006) also neglected why participants had formed their opinions on appearance. Consequently, Kirsch (2017) has called for

more researchers to employ qualitative methods for studying perceptions of this topic, as this would enable researchers to find justification in participant responses.

### ***Gaps in Previous Research***

As previously discussed, the impact of appearance and personality have played a pivotal role in understanding why women occupy fewer executive positions than men. Despite this, the two topics have not been examined together to indicate if personality and appearance impact one another. As Mavin and Grandy (2016) have proposed that research into women's experiences at an organisational level is underdeveloped. Examining appearance and personality together should allow for a deeper understanding surrounding the social perceptions of women at an organisational level.

An extensive review of previous literature has solely focused on comparing and contrasting social perceptions between two groups: men and women. Previous theorists have failed to compare and contrast perceptions between different groups of women. To contribute valuable research into this topic it is essential to examine how views between women at the bottom of the organisation and women leaders may differ. Interviewing women at the bottom layer will help generate insight into their short-term experience of working within an organisation and how they view women leaders. Likewise, interviewing women leaders should allow for a greater understanding of the reality of their personalities, how greatly they value appearance, and whether these two aspects have impacted their promotion.

As a result, this dissertation poses to answer the following question: 'Exploring the Social Perceptions of Women Leaders at Work: How does the Double Bind of Appearance and Personality Impact Women's Opportunities to make it to the Top?'

## **METHODOLOGY**

This section is devoted to discussing the methodology implemented to investigate social perceptions of women at work. Employment of qualitative techniques has grown in popularity for assessing the social world, in particular, investigating organisations (Sandberg, 2005). Qualitative techniques are an attractive tool for understanding the rich descriptions of women's experiences. In particular, this section will focus on the use of semi-structured interviews, derived from the phenomenological approach to investigate the topic area.

The following part of this paper will illustrate how the chosen research design is substantial for interrelating both theory and method. Furthermore, a detailed description of sampling, data gathering and analysis will also be explored. The potential limitations of research design will also be discussed along with the adherence to ethical guidelines.

### ***An Ideal v Realistic Approach***

In absence of time and financial constraints, a Longitudinal Ethnographic Study would be ideal for exploring perceptions of women in work. Projection into a workplace environment would successfully decipher the difference of how women truly present themselves and how other women view them. An Ethnographic study as proposed by Bryman (2008) would give insight into the experience of everyday organisational life.

In reality, as time and financial resources were restricted, employment of semi-structured interviews was the most feasible option. As suggested by Holdaway (2000) semi-structured interviews facilitated the ability to compare and contrast women's experiences to interpret rich description. Furthermore, qualitative design gave data meaning, which previous quantitative techniques had failed to address.

### **Research Design**

Phenomenology is a branch of Interpretivist methodology, employing semi-structured interviews to generate qualitative data. Phenomenological approaches look for culturally derived interpretations of the social world (Crotty, 1998). This concerned analysing the lived experiences of individuals to explore how the social world constructed meanings and perceptions in women (Sandberg, 2005). Respectively, an ideographic approach correlates to the research question, as this concerns the actions of women as individuals (Gill, 2014).

The form of Phenomenology that was undertaken in this research had been built on Smith's Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (1996). This branch of Phenomenology was useful for investigating organisational settings. Interpretative Analysis focused on how participants made sense of the meanings that derived from their personal and social world (Smith and Osborn 2003). This method was successfully employed by Murtagh et al (2011) to explore the emotional drivers of women undertaking voluntary work. Likewise, the topic investigated in this research also focused on discovering the underlying emotions of women, effecting the rationale of their response, effectively explored via open-ended questioning.

To generate new insights and develop new meanings it was essential to establish 'Verstehen', an interpretivist term coined for researchers to sympathise with the research subject (Engelsrub 2005). As a woman pursuing a managerial career, this is a topic that the researcher already empathised with. Thus, establishment of empathy along with the conversational style of the approach, granted the researcher to develop an interpersonal relationship with participants, essential for developing rapport.

### **Sampling**

The sampling method applied to undertake this research was 'purposive sampling' (Gray, 2017). This involved selecting participants whose main credential to the study was their experiential relevance. As claimed by Kirsch (2017) recent investigations into this area had neglected women at the lower end of the organisation. Thus, it was essential to include their views in this study. Consequently, 10 women leaders and 10 women at the lower end of the organisation were selected. Although Phenomenological research usually comprises of a smaller sample, the researcher found this sample size was necessary to understand a variety of experiences. Furthermore, the selection of women from both private and public-sectors and from different locations throughout England, yielded unique responses.

Access to women at the lower end of organisation proved to be less troublesome than accessing women leaders. The former, were accessed by the researcher via acquaintances and colleagues. Contrastingly, the latter proved more difficult. A key gatekeeper provided introductions to a variety of women occupying Director, Chief Officer and Managing Director roles of prestigious companies. To gain trust of participants, the researcher sent an entry letter, in form of an email to give clear information about the study, and why participants had been selected (See Appendix 1). As these women had busy schedules, interviews were mostly conducted in their offices, as this enhanced their accessibility. In contrast, interviews with women at the lower end of the organisation were conducted in coffee shops, to provide a neutral ground.

### **Data Collection**

As previously discussed, the data collection instrument employed in this research was semi-structured interviews. As illustrated by Agapiou's (2010) research of women in the construction industry, interviews provided a reliable gateway into the experiences



of women to identify how the 'double bind' may exist in the workplace. This approach enabled the researcher to focus on two topic areas: appearance and personality. This also allowed participants to discuss other topics of importance, initiated by probing to discover unanticipated information.

In addition to utilizing semi-structured interviews, the researcher also employed a variation of the Thematic Appreciation Test. This method was adopted after reviewing research by Kelan (2013) on the role of appearance. However, the Thematic Appreciation Test was adapted for this study to explore appearance and personality. Images containing 5 different leadership styles, as well as workplace attire were shown to participants in hope that they would position themselves by either rejecting or incorporating the image (See Appendix 2 and 3). Incorporation of the Thematic Appreciation Test enabled the researcher to gain some quantifiable data to compare and contrast results, as well as providing a mental break for participants from questioning.

Distinct interview guide sheets were produced, slightly amended for either group, to focus on the perception of women leaders (See Appendix 4 and 5). Additionally, an audio recorder was used during interviews, as advised by Heritage (1984) to replay the interview to accurately transcribe information (See Appendix 6). Accompanying this, was field notes, this enabled the researcher to note down keywords as well as non-verbal aspects of the interview, such as participant's body language. Furthermore, a research diary utilized key time frames and the development of interpretation of the research topic.

### **Data Analysis**

As recommended by Bryman (2008) the researcher spent approximately 6 hours of analysis for every hour of speech recorded. Although this was a labour-intensive

process, the researcher transcribed interviews as soon as they had been conducted. Interviews were then replayed before meeting participants to pick up on specific areas to explore, enabling the researcher to immerse in the transcripts to construct meanings.

Exemplary records of data collection allowed the researcher to conduct a second order analysis, consistently reviewing findings. Thematic Analysis involved a creative process by the researcher to utilize codes to create a diagram of naturally emerging themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Analysis of themes captured the quality of information presented as a thematic map (Gill, 2014). These themes are further illustrated in the findings section (See Appendix 7 and 8).

#### ***Quality of Data Analysis & Limitations***

When assessing the quality of data analysis Prasad & Prasad (2002) contend that Positivist notions of reliability and generalizability become redundant. Instead, researchers employing qualitative techniques should refer to the Interpretivist Criteriology (Seale, 1999). This was formulated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) in which the concept of 'trustworthiness' of data is applicable for a Phenomenological approach. These criteria consist of: credibility (internal validity), dependability (reliability), confirmability (objectivity) and transferability (external validity), and will be discussed in turn.

To achieve credibility, the researcher must demonstrate a fit between "constructed realities of participants and the reconstructions attributed to them" (Symon and Cassell, 2012, p.206) This can be achieved via prolonged engagement with participants. On average, interviews lasted for 30 minutes, which should have been longer, but time was a constraint. To achieve a greater level of prolonged engagement, interviews would have last for an hour. However, this was rectified by

peer debriefing with participants, to run through findings at the end of the interview to ensure what they had contributed was accurate. Furthermore, awareness of the researcher's role is vital for affecting the outcome, known as 'reflexivity' (Symon and Cassell, 2012). 'Reflexivity' is a prime way of achieving credibility, emphasising the need to self-scrutinise (Berger, 2015). Thus, the researcher made an attempt to withdraw any underlying assumptions during the research process, especially as most of these values were influenced by gender.

Dependability, was enhanced by a research diary, which detailed the emergent findings of research throughout the process. As recommended by Moustakas (1994 p34) the perception of phenomenon was recorded as "freshly, as if for the first time." Thus, access to the researcher's diary would allow other researchers to understand how findings were achieved.

Achievement of confirmability in qualitative research can be somewhat troublesome. As the researcher is an instrument in the process, there must be an attempt to maintain subjectivity, so that data is not disrupted by bias (Marshall, 2016). To reduce the bias, the researcher conducted a pilot study with three women, and discovered, upon reflection that the interview guide had to be amended to abandon leading questions. Henceforth, the researcher provided detailed accounts of the data collection and analysis process via transcripts, audio recordings and field notes, that could be used by other researchers to investigate the topic.

Likewise, transferability also tends to be difficult to achieve. An emphasis on 'thick description' by the researcher is required to accept that the results obtained cannot be generalized to all organisational contexts in terms of women's experiences (Geertz 1973). However, providing detailed description of the research may allow transferability to other settings. For example, the interview guide may be adapted by

other researchers wishing to interview a larger sample of the population. Furthermore, triangulation of multiple sources confirmed findings, via company surveys and data, as well as attending two conferences on women in leadership.

### ***Ethics***

Ethical considerations proposed by the University of Leeds Ethics Committee were adhered to throughout the research process. This required a full consultation of the University of Leeds Research Ethics Policy, as well as the completion of an Internal Research Ethics Application and Risk Assessment prior to carrying out research (See Appendix 9 and 10). A full ethical review was not necessary due to the low risk nature of the study.

Issues of informed consent as proposed by (Miller et al, 2012) were addressed during the study. Participants were assured that their identification would remain anonymous and confidentiality of findings was agreed. This was obtained and recorded with a written consent form, frequently establishing participants right to withdraw from the study at any time (See Appendix 11). This also involved following the University's Code of Practice on Data Protection and the University's Information Protection Policy. To ensure participants anonymity there are no direct or indirect identifiers in the dissertation. Furthermore, to reduce impact of harm and invasion of privacy, no personal questions were asked unless the participant felt it was relevant to introduce this information themselves (Diener and Crandall, 1978). Finally, data was stored securely on a personal laptop, and participants consented to these recordings on the basis that they were destroyed after the research had been completed.

## **FINDINGS**

The following section will focus on addressing the main themes obtained from the interviews, indicating how they answer the research question. In particular, quotations from participants will be utilized to demonstrate findings. These findings relate to the similarities and contrasts of perceptions and experiences amongst the women interviewed. The discussion section will further explore these findings, addressing the themes below.

### ***'Masculine' Women Leaders Make it to the Top***

Findings from groups illustrated the prominence of women in executive positions displaying stereotypically masculine traits.

#### *Evidence:*

*"I have noticed women having a lack of empathy, and that seems to be the type of person who gets on."*

and,

*"Current management is assertive and aware of the negative aspects, they are not good at encouraging or giving positive reinforcement. They are strong, but in a very negative way which can be intimidating and bullying."*

and,

*"I realised in the private sector, how you had to have the golf chat and be able to talk about the football, just to be in the conversation."*

***Authentic Leadership Considered by Both Groups as Vital to Making it to The Top***

Despite differences in opinions between the two groups in regard to perceptions of female leadership styles, both groups claimed that authentic leadership is vital for the ideal leader.

Evidence:

*"I think the ideal leader needs to be authentic. Authenticity is important because you need to see somebody as being truthful."*

and,

*"The most prosperous leaders are those who care from behind, that give the workforce the ability to achieve."*

***Appearance: The Prevalence of Sexism***

A large number of women reported that they felt sexism was prevalent in the workplace, particularly in regard to appearance.

Evidence:

*"I had a long blonde-haired girl who worked for me, she was very well dressed and bright. Her former manager told her that she didn't dress like somebody who wanted to be promoted. Because she was attractive she had to dumb down her looks just to get on."*

and,

*“You are seen as more of an object and a bimbo if you wear something short. People who care more about their appearance in my work are seen as not as good as what they do.”*

### **Barrier of Motherhood**

The majority of women, in particular leaders, reported that a woman wishing to have a family is one of the main reasons why women fail to progress to an executive level.

#### Evidence:

*“I went back to work 5 months after having twins. I didn’t want to go back part-time because I would never have been able to climb up the career ladder.”*

and,

*“I know some female partners who have gone into labour sat at their desks.”*

### **Lack of ‘Real Models’ Inspiring Women to Progress**

Some women, surprisingly women leaders, reported that a lack of female role models is not fundamentally represented throughout organisations.

#### Evidence:

*“You can’t be what you can’t see.”*

and,

*“I like to refer to it as a real model instead of a role model. A real model is somebody who is in reaching distance. This is needed as a stepping stone to drag you through. But there are still not enough women at a senior level to influence other women.”*

## DISCUSSION

The aim of this discussion is to consider the findings of the research in comparison with theory, some of which has been explored in the literature review. This section will argue that the 'double bind' of personality and appearance was confirmed in these findings, particularly confirming masculine leadership styles. Despite this, a section is devoted to the style that was considered by both groups as vital to successful leadership: authenticity. The following chapter will also explore barriers beyond the 'double bind' that both groups felt important to address: the role of motherhood and a lack of 'real models' in organisations. Finally, unanticipated findings will be addressed, in particular the variation of responses given by women depending on their industry of work and how this influences future research.

### **'Masculine' Women Leaders make it to the top**

#### Women leaders possess stereotypical 'masculine' characteristics

Findings indicated a contrast of how leaders believed they presented themselves, and how women at the lower end of the organization viewed them. Women leaders accepted that a number of leaders had embodied 'masculine' traits of behaviour to make it to the top:

*"I feel that sometimes women in leadership feel that they have to become manly, and I think that is the wrong attitude to have."*

Existing theory by Mavin and Grandy (2016), that the elite role is inherently masculine has been confirmed by the research. Both groups reported that they had experienced leaders who adhered to traditional masculine traits of behaviour (See Appendix 12). Half of women at the lower end of the organisation selected 'Assertiveness' as the



most likely trait to characterise their leader, the negative connotation of this was stressed:

*“She was a train wreck. She was bossy, she was assertive, but not in a good way.”*

This interpretation confirms Cook and Glass’s (2014) argument that on an individual level women who occupy top positions are characteristically assertive. Although women leaders held negative views of the ‘masculine’ approach embodied by some leaders, they appeared to unconsciously embody characteristics associated with masculine leadership. This finding was reported by both groups. As indicated, 8 out of 10 women at the lower end of the organisation reported that they would least likely characterise their experience with women leaders as ‘Caring’:

*“I think she is very cold, stand-offish, has very little empathy. She’s like a man.”*

The above findings confirm Kanter’s (1977) theory of women embodying the ‘Iron Maiden’ role type. Interestingly, the same participants also selected ‘Caring’, a typically feminine trait, as their ideal leadership preference. In contrast, only 1 out of 10 leaders described their style as ‘Caring.’ Their answers also reiterated the importance of ‘Confidence’ and ‘Assertiveness’ in a leader, and completely rejected ‘Logical’, a stereotypical feminine trait. Although women leaders reported in other aspects of the interview that a ‘Caring’ attitude is important, many failed to embody this in their leadership style. Thus, the findings from the study supports the notion, illustrated by Williams (2013), that characteristics associated with masculinity are more valued in an organisational setting. As illustrated, this causes resentment between women and inadequately reinforces the ‘double bind’ of a masculine approach to leadership.

Engaging with hobbies typically associated with men

Likewise, the adoption of masculine traits of behaviour also involves engaging with hobbies associated with men. Both groups reported that they had witnessed or engaged with male hobbies to infiltrate networks, especially in the private sector:

*“I know people by right of the golf course who are in the position they are in now because of who they know.”*

and,

*“She only ever talks about football. She came into work and asked the only man on our team if he liked football, and completely ignored the rest of us women.”*

As the private sector has typically been dominated by white, middle-class men it is not surprising that some women felt they had to engage in these activities to make it to the top. Further supporting Davis-Nettley's (1998) assertion that women leaders adopt these hobbies to gain greater chances of promotion. However, it is important to note that these findings were specific only to the private sector. Women working within the public sector found this uncommon, and women in creative industries rejected this completely.

Conformity to masculine ideals

During interviews, many women claimed that they had recognised other women adopting behaviours and hobbies that were not authentic. A key issue was to understand why this occurred. An interview with a leader who had transitioned from a private to public sector role stated women are like “chameleons”, who adapt to their

surroundings. Therefore, a possible explanation for this is that women adopt these behaviours as a coping mechanism:

*“By the time you got to the top there wasn’t much caring left in you.”*

The issue of conformity was also mentioned by a younger participant speaking about what she had witnessed during her placement year at a private company:

*“Women who were further up in the organisation were much stricter and harsher, they were a bit power mad, but I found out from other colleagues that they had not always been like this.”*

Perhaps this is supporting evidence that as a woman becomes more powerful her likability decreases (Beaufort and Summers, 2014). This was further supported by a leader who argued that when she was first promoted to a managerial role she had a high turnover of previous colleagues leave. However, the notion from Maume (2011), that by the time women reach the top they identify more with other men, can be testified against, as many women leaders appeared to be passionate about leading initiatives to empower other women.

#### Displays of ‘Bitchy’ and ‘Jealous’ behaviour negatively associated with women

On the contrary, numerous participants reported that some leaders behaved in ways that are negatively stereotyped with women. This being displays of jealous and intimidating behaviours. These reports came only from women who had worked in the private sector. Findings indicated that women at the lower end of the organisation had been directly inflicted by this behaviour, whilst women leaders had witnessed this. One participant illustrated an example of bullying culture in her workplace, in which leaders

would make employees wear dunce hats if they did not meet their monthly targets. This example of poor behaviour contradicts the argument proposed by Martin (2003), that women occupying leadership positions disrupt the gender order. It appears these behaviours create resentment between women and reinforce the gender order.

***Authentic leadership considered by both groups as vital to making it to the top***

Despite contradictions made by the two groups concerning characteristics of women leaders, both groups illustrated the importance of authentic leadership. They claimed that an authentic leader is somebody who should make it to the top, contrasting with who actually makes it to the top:

*“There is no reason to behave in a way other than who you are.”*

*and,*

*“To be a good leader you have to be real.”*

Authentic leadership was a new finding that emerged from data analysis and had not been anticipated during the literature review. Investigation into this topic found that George et al (2007) discussed authentic leadership as the ability to listen and empower others. Typically, these are traits that women naturally possess, which gives women an advantage to dismiss stereotypes reinforced in organisational culture.

Doing so would help to disrupt the ‘double bind’ that operates against women.

However, authentic leadership may not be an ideal. As proposed by Ladkin and Taylor (2010), authentic leadership can result in those who follow the approach to be vulnerable as they reflect their true self in the workplace. As women tend to be a group prone to vulnerability, this form of leadership could also lead to the demise of women, putting them at greater risk.

### ***Appearance: The prevalence of sexism***

#### *Women suffering sexism in the workplace*

Sexism towards women has a covert presence in organisations. It became apparent that this was a huge contributor to the impact of the 'double bind.' Issues surrounding sexism in the workplace were rife amongst women at the lower end of the organisation. In particular, sexism towards younger women led to their objectification.

*"We went to the Christmas party and my dress was quite short, one of the men told me that I should start wearing short dresses to work more often."*

and,

*"Sometimes I'll hear comments like, nice short skirt love."*

#### *Women as their own enemy*

Findings indicated that women interpersonally sanctioned one another. Both groups agreed that they were likely to judge one another more than men. However, this appeared to be deeply rooted in women's unconscious, discovered via the Thematic Appreciation test, employing 5 different images of workplace attire. The most popular choice of outfit amongst both groups was the choice of Image B, a trouser suit. When asked why women preferred the suit as opposed to Image A, a dress, a common response was that the dress looked 'too feminine', with respondents also emphasising the preference of wearing dark colours, arguing they were more suited to the workplace. This finding confirms the argument by Longhurst (2001), that a trouser suit serves as a 'cloak of uniformity' in organisations.

Another significant aspect of appearance was finding that being a woman and overweight in executive management is deemed unacceptable (Merilainen et al, 2015). This topic was only conversed with some female leaders, and the issue was brought to attention out of their own accord, indicating that this was a point of importance. A minority of leaders discussed the issue of wearing a short skirt to work if they were overweight, but if they had a slim figure, they argued that this would not be a concern.

### The 'Beauty Premium'

As discussed in the literature review, Mavin and Grandy (2016) noted that women in elite roles place an emphasis on being immaculately dressed. However, half of women leaders rejected this. The women that agreed with this statement argued that their appearance had a considerable impact on their confidence in the workplace. This confirms Bandura's (1995) theory of 'self-efficacy' that both groups felt more competent when they were dressed well. Further supporting Glick et al (2005), that to uphold a level of competence amongst colleague's women must present themselves in a certain manner. However, this can also be contested as some leaders argued that there was no need to care about their appearance because they no longer needed to impress:

*"I don't give a shit about what people think about what I'm wearing anymore. I don't need to."*

The women that did not endorse the view of an immaculate appearance should be commended, as they have rejected the view regarding the previously discussed 'bodies.' Instead there is a focus on the innate individual rather than appearance.

## ***Barriers beyond the 'Double Bind'***

### ***Barrier of Motherhood***

Motherhood was identified by both groups as a significant barrier for women during career progression. The stagnation of women's ascension in organisations may explain Williams (2013) 'trap door' theory, that after 10 years women disappear from the workplace. However, this may not necessarily be true for today, as more women are reporting to reduce their working hours as opposed to disappearing from the workplace completely. This may also explain why women are failing to occupy levels at an executive level, as executive positions require full commitment. This further reinforces the notion that women who progress to an executive level either choose not to have children or continue to work regardless. Such rejection of maternal instincts further adheres to masculine stereotypes.

Traditionally, motherhood is associated with the stay at home role, which is still a continued expectation for women. This further confirms Sandberg's (2003) view that such belief results in women becoming less ambitious than men. This was further reinforced by a participant:

*"I think women are less ambitious, because traditionally they have had a stay at home role."*

The majority of women leaders interviewed discussed how motherhood can pose problems for career progression, but emphasised that this a woman's personal choice. In particular, leaders placed an importance on the support of their partners for their progression:

*"I think for women, the most key decision they make is who they decide to marry."*

Many reported that their partners had decreased their working hours to help with childcare or working from home to support the woman's career. Thus, the barrier that motherhood brings, can appear to be broken when childcare is distributed evenly.

### Lack of 'Real Models' Inspiring Women to Progress

Issues concerning a lack of role models in organisations, was particularly a concern illustrated by leaders. Stating that few female role models are situated at the top of organisations (Singh et al, 2006). Women at the lower end of the organisation placed an emphasis on the importance of female role models, illustrating a greater degree of emotional support (Lockwood, 2006). However, Hoyt and Simon (2011) discovered that role models may have deflating effects, further disadvantaging women. Despite this, women at the lower end of the organisation reported that female role models were beneficial, as they demonstrated the possibility of attainment:

*"When you are in a male dominated industry, it is so important to have women as leaders because there is still a bias towards men. She was an advocate for having women as leaders. If you have a female leader I get the feeling that because men will listen to her, they will also listen to you."*

Likewise, women leaders also argued that role models, who are realistic and achievable, are essential for women's career progression. One participant illustrated an account that confirms existing theory purported by Lockwood and Kunda (1997) that one must be able to identify one's future self with a role model to be inspired by that role model. This participant stated that a reason for her failure to progress to partnership was because she looked at other women partners and they did not have a life that she wished to live: many outsourced their childcare and had been divorced. Thus, organisations that disperse achievable role models throughout the hierarchy would help to hinder the 'double bind.'



### ***Future Implications and Research***

Difficulties encountered in this research involved identifying what was personality specific rather than gender specific traits. Evidently, personality extends beyond gender to influence other demographical factors such as religion, culture, class and age. Contrasts in perceptions between the groups may have been due to age differences.

This study highlighted differences in perceptions of women depending on the industry or sector that they worked in. Future research could incorporate a large-scale comparative analysis to explore how perceptions of the 'double bind' may differ between industries. Findings discovered that women in the private sector were more likely to succumb to the 'double bind': embodying typical masculine traits whilst emphasising a feminine appearance. This would be beneficial for further explanation when comparing and contrasting perceptions of women dependent on industry.

Examples Provided by JK Essay

## CONCLUSION

The methods employed to facilitate this research have generated a deeper understanding of how the 'double bind' impacts women's opportunities to make it to the top. Not only this, but enabled an exploration of the social perceptions of women leaders. Findings have indicated that authentic leadership, which is growing in popularity amongst organisations, may help women's career progression.

The first aspect of the 'double bind', personality, was confirmed as women who adopted 'masculine' leadership styles such as: assertiveness and confidence were valued in executive positions. This supported existing theory that feminine styles of leadership are undesirable in organisations. However, this may change as women leaders reported the growing popularity of 'authentic leadership.' It appears that authentic leadership may improve women's representation in executive positions, as organisations become more educated about its benefits.

The objective of comparing and contrasting viewpoints of women was also established during interviews. Both groups indicated a desire for authentic leadership. Despite this, massive contrasts between the two emerged, as many women at the lower end of the organisation held negative opinions on women leaders. This was due to leaders adhering to stereotypical forms of masculine leadership, which caused resentment. However, women leaders who adhered to stereotypical feminine forms of leadership were positively perceived by other women.

Establishment of barriers beyond the 'double bind' were also discussed. Motherhood and a lack of 'real models' in organisations contributed as barriers. Without the 'double bind', the above barriers would still hinder women's progression, thus equality for parental rights and rewarding more working mothers would be an adequate response to this problem.

The research has mainly proven existing theory that the 'double bind' exists in organisations. However, this statement is extremely difficult to generalise to all organisations, in particular industries. Although this research has contributed in identifying existing barriers to career progression, as well as a more covert form of the 'double bind', industries and sectors must be analysed separately to understand whether the perceptions of the 'double bind' are equally applicable to all industries.

Examples Provided by JK Essay

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## **Appendix 2: Thematic Appreciation Test: Leadership Styles**

The below leadership styles were shown to participants during the interview to help answer questions.



**Assertive**



**Caring**



**Confident**



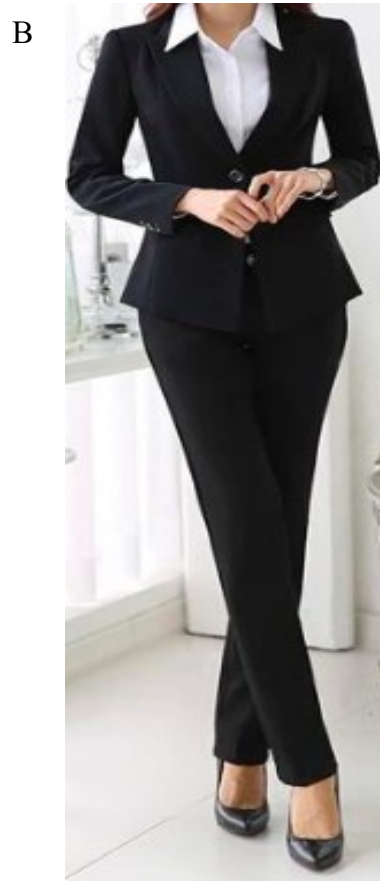
**Logical**



**Strong**

### Appendix 3: Thematic Appreciation Test: Work Attire

The below workplace outfits were shown to participants during the interview to help answer questions.



**Appendix 4: Interview Guide Sheet for Women at the lower end of the organization**

<b><u>Topic</u></b>	<b><u>What I want to ask</u></b>	<b><u>What to say</u></b>
Background	Their involvement in the organisation and the type of organisation that they work for.	<p>“Can you tell me a bit about yourself? Including your role in the organisation and the organisation that you work for?”</p> <p>“Have you noticed anything specific about the gender composition of the organisation? What is the representation of women like in the organisation?”</p>
Work Environment	The social activities of the organisation that extend beyond work life. This topic also introduced the barrier of motherhood from participants.	<p>“What kind of socialising takes place with colleagues outside of work?”</p> <p>“What about the leaders? Are they involved in these activities? Do they socialise amongst themselves?”</p> <p>“Do employees that the lower end of the organisation socialise with the leaders?”</p>
Personality & Leadership Styles	The personalities of their experiences with women leaders and their opinions on them.	<p>“What has your experience been like with women leaders in the organisation? Tell me a little bit about them.”</p> <p>“What about the men. What are they like?”</p> <p>“Can you identify any similarities in the leadership styles of women in your organisation? Would you</p>



		<p>say they are any different to the way that men lead?”</p> <p>VISUAL AID ROUND:</p> <p>“Out of these words which one would you be most and least likely to describe your experience with women leaders and why?”</p> <p>“Out of these words which would your ideal leader possess?”</p> <p>“For you, if you could have any leader in the world explain to me what they would be like.”</p> <p>“What impact have these women had on you?”</p> <p>“Do you believe there are any benefits of having women leaders?”</p>
Appearance	<p>What is the value that they place on appearance and how they think that influences themselves in the workplace.</p>	<p>“What is the dress code of the organisation you work for?”</p> <p>‘Describe for me your everyday workplace attire.’</p> <p>VISUAL AID ROUND:</p> <p>“Which of these would you be most/least likely to wear and why?”</p> <p>“Have you ever had comments on your appearance in the workplace whether these or positive or negative.”</p> <p>“What do the women leaders dress like in the organisation? What would you describe as their</p>

		<p>workplace attire?”</p> <p>“What are your thoughts on appearance and how this impacts the perception of your ability to perform a job?”</p> <p>“Do you feel that you would judge a woman more about what she was wearing than you would a man?”</p>
Double Bind: Personality & Appearance together	Wanting to know what women in the lower end of the organization believe about the double bind	<p>“What do you think of the following statement: The more senior a woman becomes in an organisation the more likely she is to adopt masculine forms of behaviour i.e. assertiveness.”</p> <p>“What do you think about the following statement: The more feminine a woman presents herself in the workplace the less likely she is going to be taken seriously by men in her ability to perform a job.”</p> <p>“What do you think of these two statements together? Do you think they influence on another at all?”</p>
Closing Question	Allow the participant to add their own thoughts on this.	“Summarizing all of what we have spoken about, do you think there is anything more you would like to add to this topic area that you feel is important?”

## Appendix 5: Interview Guide Sheet for Women Leaders

Topic	What I want to ask	What I might say
Background	Their involvement in the organisation and the type of organisation that they work for.	<p>“Can you tell me a bit about yourself? Including your role in the organisation and the organisation that you work for?”</p> <p>“How long have you been in the organisation and how did you progress?”</p> <p>“Have you noticed anything specific about the gender composition of the organisation? What is the representation of women like in the organisation?”</p> <p>“Do you feel you have seen a change in the perception of women since you first started work?”</p>
Work Environment	The social activities of the organisation that extend beyond work life. This topic also introduced the barrier of motherhood from participants.	<p>“What kind of socialising takes place with colleagues outside of work?”</p> <p>“What about the leaders? Are they involved in these activities? Do they socialise amongst themselves?”</p> <p>“Do you think there are less barriers for women entering the workplace today?”</p>

<p>Personality &amp; Leadership Style</p>	<p>The personalities and leadership styles of themselves as well as their opinions of other women leaders. The issue of lack of role models arose here.</p>	<p>“How would you best describe your leadership style?”</p> <p>“Have you noticed any similarities between the leadership styles of women in the organisation?”</p> <p>“From your experience do you believe that there are differences in the leadership styles between men and women?”</p> <p>VISUAL AID ROUND: “Which word would you be most/least likely to choose to characterise your leadership style?”</p> <p>“Have you ever had to change your presence around men?”</p> <p>“How do male colleagues react to female authority?”</p> <p>“Do you believe there are any benefits of having women leaders?”</p>
<p>Appearance</p>	<p>What is the value that they place on appearance and how they think that influences themselves in the workplace.</p>	<p>“What is the dress code of the organisation you work for?”</p> <p>‘Describe for me your everyday workplace attire.’</p> <p>VISUAL AID ROUND: “Which of these would you be most/least likely to wear and why?”</p> <p>“Out of these outfits, if you had a woman interviewing for a job,</p>

		<p>which outfit would you most want to see her in?”</p> <p>“Have you ever had comments on your appearance in the workplace whether these or positive or negative.”</p> <p>“What are your thoughts on appearance and how this impacts the perception of your ability to perform a job?”</p> <p>“Do you feel that you would judge a woman more about what she was wearing than you would a man?”</p>
<p>Double Bind: Personality &amp; Appearance Together</p>	<p>Wanting to know what women leaders believe about the double bind.</p>	<p>“What do you think of the following statement: The more senior a woman becomes in an organisation the more likely she is to adopt masculine forms of behaviour i.e. assertiveness.”</p> <p>“What do you think about the following statement: The more feminine a woman presents herself in the workplace the less likely she is going to be taken seriously by men in her ability to perform a job.”</p> <p>“What do you think of these two statements together? Do you think they influence on another at all?”</p>

Closing Question	Allow the participant to add their own thoughts on this.	“Summarizing all of what we have spoken about, do you think there is anything more you would like to add to this topic area that you feel is important?”
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## **Appendix 6: Interview Transcribed**

The text in **bold** shows the researcher's questions and responses, whilst the text in [brackets] indicated the topic of conversation.

### **[Background & Work Environment]**

**1:05** I joined 18 years ago as a mid-entry manager and was promoted on an annual basis...

**How do you feel about the gender ratio of men to women in your organisation?**

**2:42** Up until 2 years ago I used to sit around an all-male board... Now it we have more woman, and probably a decade younger... Much more listening and contribution.

**3:49** You have to earn the respect... I used to torment them a little bit...

### **[Talking about women leaders]**

**4:41** I feel that sometimes women in leadership feel that they have to become manly, and I think that is the wrong attitude to have. It is about having a level of self-confidence.

**5:37** They try to be like one of the boys...

**So, in contrast with these women how would you describe your leadership style?**

**6:55** I particularly go with the need to be an authentic leader... Listening... People can see through the act.

### **[Talks about personal life]**

**9:40** Growing up my father was the gender challenger... I was brought up like that.

**How do the men who work for you respond to female authority?**

**10:55** (Laughs) They all vary. Some struggle with my style of leadership... They struggle with the existence of feelings in the workplace... Women who often reach leadership positions are ones who can manage their feelings.

**[Visual Aid-Leadership Style]**

**14:56** All of them. (Laughs). If I had to pick one, probably confident... I occasionally self challenge.. Least attracted to Strong.

**16:30** I think people show confidence differently rather than it being gender specific.

**[Talking about their ideal leader]**

**18:32** They need to be a people person, treat you as an equal, there will be times where I'm sure I'm right and they're sure they're right but they need to give an explanation and then stick with it. Can't be doing with leaders who avoid conflict. They do need to be assertive and strong but need to be able to listen.

**Do you think there has been a change in the expectation of how women should dress?**

**22:57** I think women have a broader range of what they can wear. Every day you must look like you are appropriately dressed.

**[Visual Aid Round: Workplace Attire]**

**24:05** A to D pretty well, neat and tidy. Not E, I think if a woman came in dressed like that for a leadership position I would think that she has been missing the mark.

**[How Appearance impacts perceptions of women's ability to perform in the workplace]**

**24:48** It's not even just the way that they dress, it's the whole blonde thing... People would assume that she was silly, but she would play the role that this would true to some extent until she wanted to take control of the meeting and then she would let them know that she knew exactly what she was doing.

**Why would she play the role?**

**25:48** Because she found it amusing to stun them into silence later. For me that's not the way that you do it. You will find with a lot of women who work with money or buildings, that they will do that and they do that very well.

**[Masculine leadership styles]**



**26:56** Yes you definitely get people who mistake aggression for being assertive, it is like an over compensation that unless you top trump the men in the room that they will assume you are less than them, and I think women create the problem for themselves as often as men create it for them...

**Do you think they do this with other women too?**

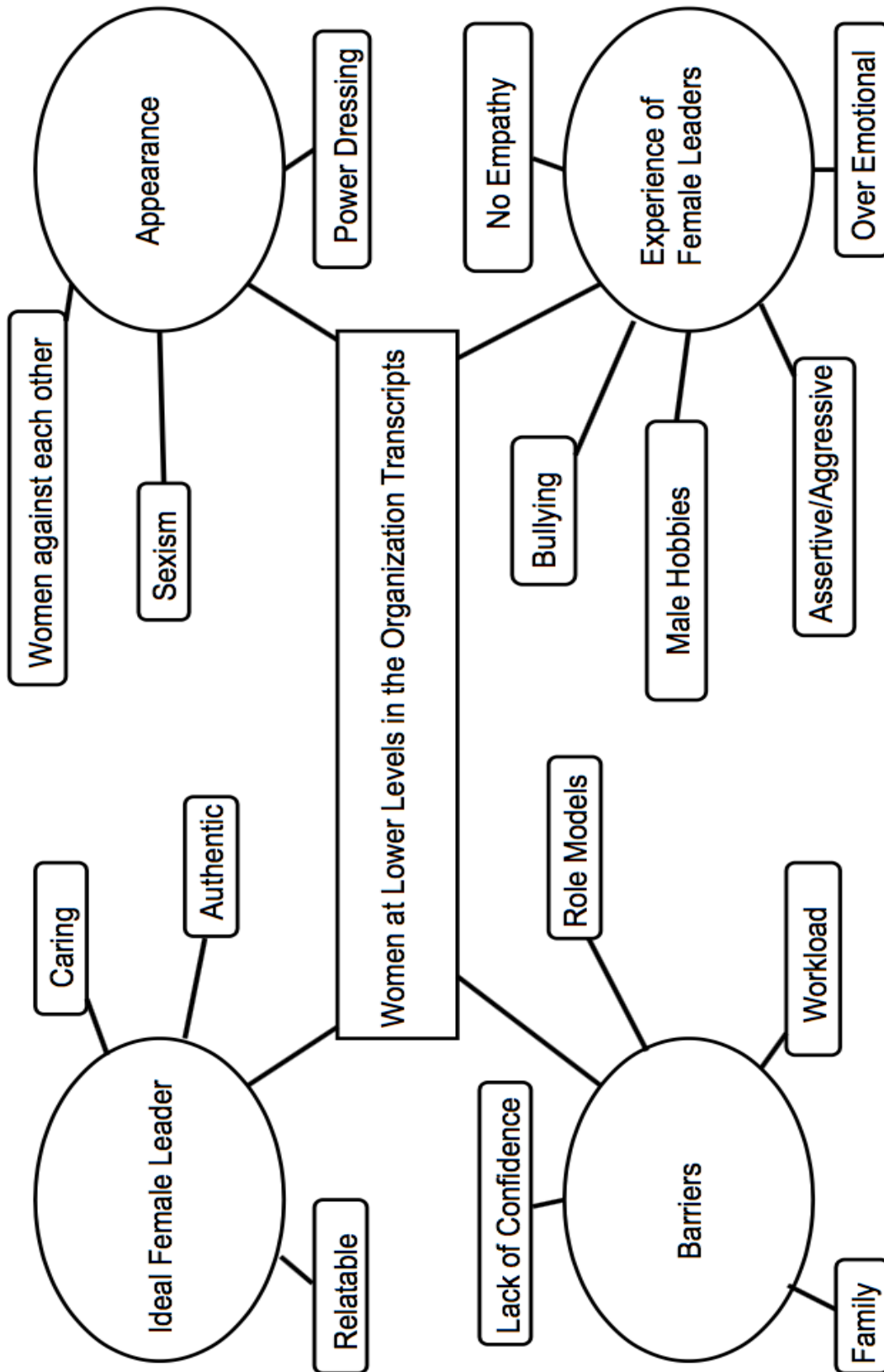
**28:08** Yes, they do and in fact it goes down like a lead balloon (Laughs)... Not very slim or an attractive figure, they would sit with their legs apart and I used to look and think on no level is this helping me or the men, it was almost a manly way of sitting. I hope I never come across like that.

**[Talking about why these women get promoted]**

**30:27** Assertiveness can move into aggression which can move into bullying, and if you are with people who see this and think that gets stuff done that's not getting it done in the right way or this right reason. Sometimes it's about a clique.

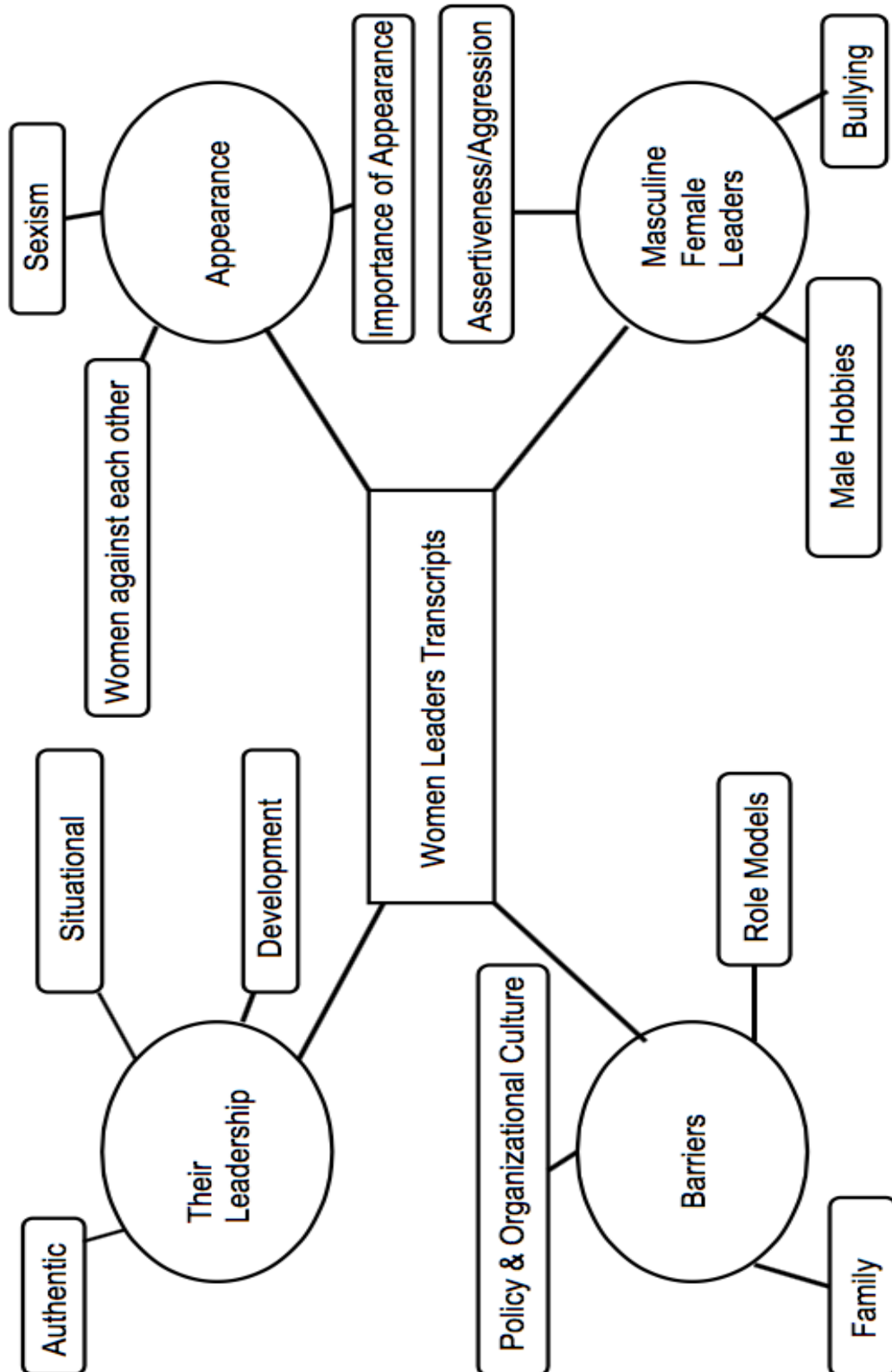
**Appendix 7: Thematic Map: Women at the lower end of the organization**

Below is the thematic analysis generated from the data analysis process.



## Appendix 8: Thematic Map: Women Leaders

Below is the thematic analysis generated from the data analysis process.



## Appendix 11: Written Consent Form

### Consent Form

This research and interview are both subject to the ethical guidelines established by the Research Ethics Committee. The following guidelines include various principles such as obtaining your informed consent prior to the research begins, notifying you of your opportunity to withdraw from the research, and protecting your anonymity.

Have you had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study/research to your satisfaction? Please circle one.

YES/NO

Are you aware that you are free to end the interview at any time or withdraw from the research without having to give reasoning why? Please circle one.

YES/NO

Do you grant permission for extracts from the interview, and any other information produced during the interview to be used in the dissertations for this research on the understanding that your anonymity will still be maintained? Please circle one.

YES/NO

Do you agree to take part in this study? Please circle one.

YES/NO

SIGNED.....

NAME (IN CAPITAL LETTERS)

.....

DATE .....

## Appendix 12: Results Tables

Below are the results obtained from the leadership styles test completed by participants during the interviews.

<b>How Women were Most Likely to Describe Their Female Leader</b>	<b>Number of Votes</b>
Assertive	5
Caring	0
Confident	0
Logical	3
Strong	2

<b>How Women were Least Likely to Describe Their Female Leader</b>	<b>Number of Votes</b>
Assertive	1
Caring	8
Confident	1
Logical	0
Strong	0

<b>Women at the Lower End of the Organisation- Their Ideal Leader</b>	<b>Number of Votes</b>
Assertive	0
Caring	8
Confident	0
Logical	1
Strong	1

<b>How Female Leaders were Most Likely to Describe Themselves</b>	<b>Number of Votes</b>
Assertive	1
Caring	2
Confident	5
Logical	1
Strong	1

<b>How Female Leaders were Least Likely to Describe Themselves</b>	<b>Number of Votes</b>
Assertive	1
Caring	1
Confident	0
Logical	6
Strong	2