

**Paradoxical entanglements:
Leaders navigating (post-)heroic leadership, gender
and power**

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Abstract: Despite over two decades of discussion, leadership's paradoxical entanglement with gender and power prevails. The existing status quo is stabilised and possibilities for transformative change are rendered impossible. Mobilising recent discussions on paradox in organizational research, this paper elaborates on a paradox perspective on transformative change. We analyse 15 group discussions with 101 middle and top managers, both men and women, from five companies in Switzerland actively advocating for gender equality. Our examination focuses on how these leaders navigate tensions arising when discussing (post-)heroic leadership and gender equality. We demonstrate that leaders reinforce the dominant position of heroic leadership through responses to these paradoxes that either ignore, neglect, or accept power. However, through what we term *dissimilation*, they also facilitate the emergence of post-heroic leadership. By exploring leader's perspective on navigating paradox, our study provides insights into the necessity for addressing gender and power while transcending the binary of either/or approaches to paradox. Only by recognizing that heroic leadership still predominates over post-heroic leadership can the latter emerge as a credible alternative.

Keywords: (post-)heroic leadership, power, gender, paradox, change

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the notion of leadership has changed in response to increasingly complex and volatile environments as well as contradictory demands. Leadership has become more team-based (Yammarino et al., 2012), shared (Pearce et al., 2007), relational (Sanfuentes et al., 2021), empowering followers (Collinson, 2005: 1422; Alvesson and Thompson, 2006), more participatory (Yukl, 1999) and less hierarchical (Collinson and Collinson, 2009). Under the umbrella of ‘post-heroic’ leadership this new leadership is associated with femininity and a female leadership style (Khan et al., 2022; Sczesny et al., 2019). Most importantly, post-heroic leadership is envisioned as a “vehicle for transformation, a way to create learning organizations that are able to manage dynamic processes, leverage the learning from diverse perspectives, and accommodate the interests of multiple stakeholders” (Fletcher, 2004, 655).

Offering an alternative to heroic leadership with its focus on highly agentic and charismatic individuals, relying on top-down decision making, a logic of effectiveness and authoritarian systems of control (Collinson, 2005: 1422; Dachler, 2010; Fletcher, 2004), post-heroic leadership has been hailed as a potential driver of gender equality (Kulkarni and Mishra, 2021). However, this promise has not yet materialized. The underrepresentation of women in management and senior organizational positions persists, while the concept of heroic leadership remains closely associated with the characteristics traditionally ascribed to a masculine ‘ideal worker’, such as long hours and prioritizing work over caregiving responsibilities (Brumley, 2014: 800). Informal power dynamics (Ropo, Mäkinen and Seppa, 2020) and the gendered impacts of networking (Mickey, 2022) both highlight the continued existence of gender-based power imbalance. As a result, post-heroic leadership “may not live up to its transformation potential”, as noted by Fletcher (2004: 656) in her seminal essay on the paradoxes of post-heroic leadership already 20 years ago.

First of all, the image of “the leader” predominantly evokes a masculine image (Khan et al., 2022), closely aligned with the heroic portrayal of leadership that reflects the archetypal, gender-neutral, male subject of the enlightenment (Bowring, 2004). As a result, leadership is closely associated with masculinity, and the perception of heroic leadership mirrors the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity (Collinson and Hearn, 1996). Second, the attribution of change agency to the heroic leader is a common occurrence (Kelan and Wratil, 2018). Therefore, the narrative of heroic leadership remains a dominant theme in organizational discourse, overshadowing alternative perspectives and making it challenging to critique, consequently undermining the potential for post-heroic leadership to drive transformational change (Fletcher, 2004). Abandoning the hero (Schweiger et al., 2020) is extremely difficult if not impossible. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the interdependent and paradoxical nature of leadership, gender, and power, which simultaneously reinforce and challenge each other (Smith and

Lewis, 2011). Their paradoxical entanglement serves to uphold the existing status quo and impedes the possibility of transformational change (Collinson, 2005, 2014; Fletcher, 2004; Schweiger et al., 2020).

In this paper we are further examining this paradoxical entanglement of leadership, gender and power from a leader's perspective. From a leader's point of view, both post-heroic and heroic leadership coexist and compete (Ford, 2006), leading to a lack of agency (Collinson, 2014). Through an empirical analysis of 15 group discussions involving 101 middle and top managers, both men and women, who are actively promoting gender equality in their organizations, we aim to understand how leaders approach paradox and navigate the tensions of heroic and post-heroic leadership. Mobilizing recent insights from research on paradox, we show that leaders stabilize heroic leadership's dominant position with responses to paradox that ignore, neglect, or accept power. However, through what we call *dissimilation* they also promote the rise of post-heroic leadership. By examining leader's perspective on navigating paradox, our study provides the insight that leaders striving for transformational change must address gender and power. Only by acknowledging that heroic leadership is still dominating post-heroic leadership can the latter emerge as a viable alternative.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we review the literature on managing paradox and the challenges that arise from situations of power imbalance. This provides the conceptual framework to explore in detail how leaders can address paradox. We then introduce our empirical material, discuss the methods and how we conducted the analysis. Our three sections on findings explore in detail how leaders navigate paradox. Subsequently, we discuss the results, elaborating on the role of leaders in either maintaining or changing the status quo. In conclusion, this analysis contributes to the ongoing discussion on gender, power and paradox in leadership, and leader's agency for promoting gender equality.

2. (Post-)heroic leadership, gender and power: A paradox perspective

Paradox is an inherent aspect of leadership in a managerial perspective (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Leaders have to control and trust, to monitor and to empower (Collinson, 2005), to explore and to exploit (Baskarada et al., 2016), they need to be authentic and political (Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2014), engage in ethical behaviour and play the power game (Rhodes and Badham, 2018) and with regards to gender, be agentic and communal (Zheng, Kark and Meister, 2018). These are all interdependent but contradictory and persistent elements, and hence they are paradoxical (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Coming to terms with the tensions of these opposing yet required terms is a crucial competence for leaders (Miron-Spektor et al. 2018: 12). However, dealing with paradox does not mean that the paradox can be solved. Rather, it is

suggested to make tensions and the resulting paradoxes explicit, so that leaders can tap on their creative potential and become more effective (Jarvis et al., 2013).

table 1 about here

When dealing with paradox, the literature distinguishes between two main groups of responses (Putnam et al., 2016): So-called *either/or* responses mean that leaders choose between one pole or the other. By postponing into the future or moving it to somewhere else, leaders *ignore* to address a paradox for the time being. When leaders sense that they have insufficient agency, they may also accept and become obedient to the dominating element (Berti and Simpson, 2021). Powerful leaders who sense sufficient agency can impose the dominating element. They can also bypass conflict and maintain dominance by building in elements of the other pole, which Hargrave and van de Ven (2016) call assimilation. However, these defensive responses only provide short-term relief (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017). Over time, the tension between the elements will increase because of increasing pulls to the unattended pole (Clegg et al., 2002). By forcing a choice (in the short-term) or by shifting the paradox (in the long-term), defensive responses are seen to risk conflicts, downward spirals of vicious cycles or result in turf wars through which actors and organizations become stuck (Smith et al., 2022).

In contrast, so-called *both/and* responses assume that both poles of the paradox are needed (Smith and Lewis, 2011). These responses include the spatial distinction of the elements and their integration on a higher level, the temporal oscillation between the elements, or aiming for a synergy between them (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Synergies between elements often call for transcendence that involves a change in the organizational self-understanding as well as of the paradoxical elements and their relation (Putnam et al., 2016). Both/and responses are said to be more effective than an either/or ones in complex situations because they adhere to both elements (Smith and Lewis, 2011).

Both/and approaches have been vital also with regards to (post-)heroic leadership. For instance, Collinson and Collinson (2009: 369-370) propose the concept of “blended leadership” which combines leadership styles that are typically seen as incompatible, such as delegation and direction, proximity and distance and internal and external engagement. According to respondents in their study, effective leadership requires a combination of transformational and transactional leadership. Gronn (2008) suggests “hybrid leadership” that comprises both individual and collective dimensions, while Bruch et al. (2022) argue for “multimodal leadership”, which combines vertical and horizontal leadership. Zhang et al. (2015) propose “paradoxical leadership behaviour,” and Fürstenberg et al. (2021) advocate bridging communal and agentic

leadership. They demonstrate that leadership tasks require both goal and work orientation and that “communal leadership is not necessarily laissez-faire and that agentic leadership is not necessarily autocratic” (Fürstenberg et al., 2021: 698).

While emphasizing the synergy of heroic and post-heroic leadership styles in a both/and way is persuasive, this approach neglects how leadership is embedded in gendered organizational structures and processes with the resulting power asymmetries (Collinson, 2005, 2014; Fletcher, 2004). The association of masculinity with heroic leadership and femininity with post-heroic leadership reinforces a dualism that privileges men and marginalises women (Collinson and Collinson, 2009: 377). Failing to recognize the masculine subtext of leadership and the resulting power imbalances in the organizational structures and processes lead to one pole dominating the other. In consequence, a both/and approach becomes unlikely because it assumes that “actors have full agency in responding to paradoxes” (Berti and Simpson, 2021: 252) with symmetric power distribution (Hargrave and Van den Ven, 2016). Failing to recognize the masculine subtext of leadership and the resulting power imbalances leads to one approach dominating the other.

Leaders are experiencing a double bind (Putnam, 1986): they have to address the tensions, but at the same time lack possibility of meta-communicating with those in the powerful position as this is not within the repertoire of heroic leadership. Leaders therefore have to acknowledge that post-heroic leadership is dominated by heroic leadership, and their organisational context is limiting their possible responses (Berti and Simpson, 2021: 256). Aiming for transformation, leaders’ actions might rather lead to stabilizing the status quo. Managing this paradox, Hargrave and van de Ven (2016) describe two trajectories: either conflict or assimilation. *Conflict* means a confrontation between heroic and post-heroic leadership; hence actors build power through political action (Hargrave and van de Ven, 2016: 326). However, the actors find themselves in a situation in which one side – heroic leadership – is more powerful than the other – post-heroic leadership. Merely switching from one to the other, leadership will only foster resistance and conflict escalation. Therefore, conflict does not lead to transformation (Hargrave and van de Ven, 2016), but rather to preserving the status quo while risking “turf wars” (Smith and Lewis, 2011: 391).

Alternatively, power imbalances can lead to *assimilation*, meaning that one element is incorporated in the other. “Proponents of the dominant element use assimilation when they accept aspects of the contradictory element as legitimate and useful, yet also seek to maintain their dominant position. To do so they adopt these aspects by justifying them in the logic of the dominant element.” (Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2016: 331). In the case of heroic and post-heroic leadership, assimilation means that elements of post-heroic leadership are integrated to heroic leadership and thereby help to preserve its dominance. Thus, post-heroic leadership

assimilates to heroic leadership, not the other way round (Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2016). The tensions between heroic and post-heroic leadership become suppressed for the time being inviting cynicism (Berti and Simpson, 2021) while the power asymmetry is sustained.

Managing paradox, leaders' agency is rather limited. While either/or approaches result in a stabilization of the status quo, both/and approaches tend to neglect power asymmetries and therefore either result in conflict or assimilation of post-heroic leadership. Developing agency and contributing to transformational change, leaders have to engage in both/and approaches and address the tensions of heroic leadership. From the backdrop of these conceptual clarifications, we further scrutinize in our empirical analysis how leaders striving for enhancing gender equality navigate the paradoxical entanglements of leadership, gender and power. Scrutinizing how they construct and navigate the paradoxical tensions of leadership, gender and power we further scrutinize how their approaches result in sustaining or transforming the status quo.

3. Method

Tackling heroic and post-heroic leadership as interdependent yet contradictory and in a hierarchical and therefore not power-free relationship, we want to know how leaders engaged in discussing gender equality in their company construct and navigate the paradoxical entanglement of leadership, gender and power. We analysed 15 group discussions with a total of 101 leaders, both female and male, in middle and top management positions in five companies across different industries in Switzerland (see table 1). The group discussions were conducted between October and December 2019. The discussions lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours and participation ranged from 4 to 13 managers, with an average of 6. We conducted gender homogenous groups to allow for the use of shared knowledge, the engagement in bonding among participants and with the facilitator, and to promote openness through a sense of being among themselves. All groups with female leaders were facilitated by the female author of this paper, the male author facilitated six of the groups with male leaders, the remaining four by two other male team members.

table 2 about here

The setup was that of “self-running group discussions” (Przyborski and Riegler, 2010). The facilitators intervened as little as possible after defining the overall topic (“enhancing the share of women in leadership positions”) at the beginning of each meeting. For the analysis, the 15 group discussions were transcribed and initially coded using “Atlas.ti”. This first coding with a descriptive code-scheme based on a first reading of the transcripts. It served to break up the

material and identify passages relevant for in-depth analysis. It was mainly the third author of this paper running this first and also the second in-depth analysis. In a second step, we identified those passages coded with the initial codes of “leadership concepts”, “heroic leadership”, “post-heroic leadership”, “leadership and part-time” and “leadership and work-family balance”. Focusing more closely on these passages explicitly discussing the nexus of leadership and gender equality, we conducted a discourse psychological analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

A discourse psychological analysis allows to investigate talk-in-interaction as a practice and with its context-specificity. It is an analysis of what people ‘do’ when they are using language (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 32). We focused on “interpretative repertoires”, which are the “building blocks” (Wetherell and Potter, 1988: 172) that speakers use to construct different perspectives on leadership and gender in their company. Each repertoire consists of particular terms that are used in a specific style and fashion. A repertoire is a recognisable construct that people can draw on to carry out social action in conversation. Thereby speakers are using macro-discourses in a way that Potter and Wetherell (1987: 138) describe as “a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterise and evaluate actions and events”.

As speakers are engaged in different standpoints and perspectives that can be contradictory, even if unnoticed by the speakers, interpretive repertoires in mundane talk are not assumed to be consistent. Speakers draw on several repertoires that can be contradicting but are part of their lived ideology (Billig et al., 1988: 28). The constant shifting between repertoires in a discussion indicates tensions that the speakers are trying to approach and negotiate. Tensions indicate speaker’s experience of stress, anxiety, discomfort or tightness (Putnam et al. 2016, 4f). If they cannot be resolved, tensions express a paradox; a persistent contradiction of interrelated and simultaneously existing elements (Smith and Lewis, 2011: 382). Identifying the interpretative repertoires and how they are drawn upon, put aside and eventually reconsidered by speakers in the discussion allowed us to further analyse how speakers approach and navigate the paradoxical entanglement of leadership, gender and power.

4. Navigating paradox: Leadership, gender and power from a leader’s perspective

Leaders supporting gender equality struggle with conflicting ideas about leadership, gender and power. We identified three major tensions: First, leaders view leadership as either masculine or gender neutral; second, they prioritize heroic leadership over post-heroic leadership; and third, they see change towards gender equality as either an obvious necessity or as requiring leader’s agency and ownership. Our analysis shows that leaders handle these conflicts in different ways, and this has crucial effects on the potential for transformational change.

4.1. Leadership and gender: Heroic leadership as masculine yet gender neutral

Heroic leadership is a major point of reference in all group discussions. Heroic leadership is depicted as top-down exercising of power in a ‘command-and-control’ manner, the classic leader a jack-of-all-trades, being present 24/7, with a strong and healthy body not allowed to show any vulnerability. An image of leadership that is associated with the army and men-only teams: “we are a troop of men” (7), while women remain “the Other” that are not fitting in. Heroic leadership and post-heroic leadership are perceived along the gender binary: while the former is focusing on numbers, data and facts, the latter is about emotions and social competences.

4.1.1. ‘A law of nature’: Men have everything you need for a top management position

On first sight, leadership in top positions is associated with extraversion, competition, and an elbow culture. On the one hand, this is accepted as an unchangeable fact and on the other hand, it is considered inappropriate for female leaders.

M6: ... As I said, in our company we really have everything; from women who are so quiet, who have to talk to them differently even when you have the conversation and have to get out much more and ask questions, and I also have others who are very resolute. ... So I have enough women with me who have ‘hair on their teeth’, as they say, who really fight back and also get what they deserve, that is, according to their performance.

M2 [interrupts]: But that was exactly not gender-neutral. A woman, if she is the same as a man, has ‘hair on her teeth’.

Facilitator: Yes, exactly. Good point.

M6: No, I mean I also have women who don't have it, I also have men who don't have it, who are relatively soft.

M2 [at the same time as M6]: I say there we have to- no, that's not an accusation. That's what I meant by gender-neutral leadership. So much hidden stereotype messages that we use all the time. (I, men)

Although critiqued by M2 in his reproduction of gender stereotypes, M6 emphasizes his perception of gender differences. Putting forward that women are acting differently and should therefore not be treated the same, he at the same time positions them as women by using a very distinctive German proverb that cannot be used with men. ‘Having hair on their teeth’ is used to depict women who stand up and ask for what they deserve by portraying them as bossy and confrontational. A man who does not correspond to the male ideal or shows more feminine traits is described by M2 as ‘soft’ and a woman as a ‘quiet little mouse’.

M6: Right the tough one, what I said at the beginning, that where you make a career, because you were there the whole time when there was a fire etc., and you didn't say at 4 p.m., ‘I have to go now’, and that is then, only few

women make such a career. ... I don't know if the problem is then solved by saying you do the structures this way and that way. Quite apart from the fact that elbows are needed and that is not always soft and sweet. (4, men)

M6 mentions in his argument that only a small number of women would actually make a career because such jobs are about “toughness” and elbows, for which “softness” is out of place. He also adds the expectation of a culture of presence already mentioned above. This statement could be interpreted as a connection between femininity and “softness” and hence “powerlessness”. The (masculine) elbow culture for a career is accepted here as enduring. This connotation of top positions with characteristically male qualities is also evident in the following quote:

M6: (...) I have a problem in my (...) area. I need a successor. Okay, well, who do we take? Well, the guy always pops up like that, he's the strongest of the bunch. Probably, that it is, I would say, quite deep, perhaps even genetic, that men perhaps stand out more and fight more and the women are actually much more competent or reserved. (3, men)

According to this manager, top positions would tend to be held by those who are extraverted and can identify with a competitive fight. Referencing genetics, he attributes these qualities with men. In summary, gender-specific differences are made relevant among managers. A frequent basis for such differences is a heroic image of leadership against which both women and men are measured. Thereby the traditional leadership image is associated with masculinity, legitimated as “a law of nature” or genetic disposition, and frequently accepted as a given. Although contested, the paradoxical relation of women and men is mainly ignored in these examples. Like this, the relation between heroic and post-heroic leadership is confirmed as hierarchical, with men on the stronger and more powerful side.

4.1.2. ‘Leadership is not about gender, it is about actually living for the job’: Hiding gender in neutral ideas of leadership

Strikingly however, the masculinity ascribed to leadership is at the same time depicted as gender neutral. Becoming a leader and progressing to the top is seen as independent from gender as it is merely about individuals who want to “live for the job”.

M5: I also believe that it's a gender-independent question which career image or person is in top management for the future. If that means that you actually only live for the job. Then it is, then it is just generally, yes. (5, men)

Emphasizing individual personality, motives and competences, the relevance of gender is denied. As a result, a gender-neutral idea of leadership that does not ask for gendered competences, but for leadership competences is installed. While elements of a face-time culture are discussed, they are not interpreted as gendered but as factual requirements that leadership

positions are bringing with them. Like this, heroic masculinity and its affordances are redressed as leadership requirements. In consequence, the masculinity of leadership is hidden in gender neutrality.

These findings suggest that post-heroic and feminine leadership styles are being assimilated to the more traditional heroic and masculine leadership styles by presenting them as gender-neutral requirements of leadership (Khan et al., 2022). This assimilation conceals the inherent power dynamics that promote heroic over post-heroic leadership and perpetuates the dominance of the former over the latter (Berti and Simpson, 2021). Consequently, a both/and approach that aims to incorporate both forms of leadership may inadvertently reinforce the preference of heroic leadership.

4.2. Leadership and power: Heroic leadership as old-fashioned but still powerful

Participants agreed that heroic leadership is outdated and post-heroic leadership the need of the hour. However, they also pointed out that heroic leadership continues to strongly influence their company. The perception of heroism is often tied to being physically present at work, while part-time leadership positions, leaving work on time, or declining to work overtime are often seen as impossible. Consequently, post-heroic leadership is regarded as secondary and in opposition to the prevailing concept of heroic leadership.

4.2.1. ‘Definitely slowly dying out’: Heroic leadership as outdated

Heroic leadership, while still perceived as powerful and a real hurdle for women aiming to get to the top, is depicted as an outdated and false concept that has its fair share of criticism. It is important to note that heroic leadership is mostly found at the top of an organization, rather than at the ground floor or middle management. In fact, discussions surrounding this topic are highly critical, and women are particularly vocal in their criticism.

F5: That's noticeable, that's still very noticeable with us. That it still plays an extremely important role at the very top. ... So sayings like: Then we'll do it like in the MILITARY! There is a clear announcement and then it is carried downwards. So, REALLY! And I said: And how do we do it for those who have never been in the military? (Laughter) ...But they are not used to someone countering ... But there, but then I thought, that generation is definitely slowly dying out. (Discussion 4, women)

Likewise, male discussants also perceive heroic leadership as outdated:

M2: Just as, we have also analysed a little bit that the classic leadership or management education, that is the, the all-rounder, the one who is always available around the clock, um, so to speak like the marathon runner and who has no weaknesses and is always top fit and makes no mistakes and so

on. And that is, we have actually known that for a long time, that is a totally false image, isn't it! So I can still remember. (Discussion 5, men)

Both male and female discussants are perceiving heroic leadership as outdated, something from the past. However, while women are very critical of heroic leadership and clearly in favour of new leadership, male leaders still seem invested in old fashioned heroic leadership. Depicting the heroic leader as belonging to a different generation or to an image of “classic management” it is rendered an approach of the past. While thereby discarding heroic leadership, the power effects of heroic leadership are not taken up and rather neglected. Hence, although leaders are aiming for transcendence, this approach will merely stabilise the status quo.

4.2.2. ‘Are you going home at 6pm?’ A ‘culture of presence’ as a debated necessity

Men discussing leadership often agree that working part-time or even the standard 42-hour work week isn't enough. To be in a leadership position, you must be willing “to go the extra mile” and put in more effort. And that extra effort is measured in the number of hours worked:

M6: (...) I would say below 80 % is nothing, and actually also below 100 %.

M2: Yes, of course. (...)

M1: (...) neither man nor woman, maybe regardless of children, you have to work 80% or more for a management position. (Discussion 4, men)

Furthermore, the company culture values physical presence over actual performance, as shown by this quote emphasizing what is in the managers' heads and minds:

F2: I also believe that what F3 said is a very, very important point, that this is simply not yet in our heads, I would say, in our organisational heads. That flexibility doesn't mean under-performance, under-motivation, all these things, you can say that's a generalisation, but it's really still in our minds. This great tendency towards a culture of presence, showing through presence that one is performing. (Discussion 11, women)

Men are experiencing a pressure to perform within this norm that is mentioned throughout discussions. Obviously, it is difficult to ignore the expectation of working overtime. The male leader in this discussion describes a pressure to go the extra mile beyond face-time and regular working hours and shares his struggle to resist this pressure:

M6: (...)But somehow it is still an expectation.: “What, you're already going home at 6 o'clock? Aha, we have nothing to do today?” (...) you just expect (...) to go the bit extra. And I think, yes, it takes courage to say I work 42 hours or 43 hours. I try to stick to it as much as I can, but often it's just not possible. (Discussion 1, men)

While men highlight the pressure they face due to overtime expectations, women discuss the challenge of balancing work and family responsibilities. Although the discussants are very aware of the negative effects of their excessive face-time norms, they are firmly in place and

perceived as too powerful to challenge or change. Despite attempts to frame heroic and post-heroic leadership in an both/and way, the relation turns out to be an either/or relationship (Collinson, 2014). Facing the dominance of heroic leadership with insufficient agency to change it (Berti and Simpson, 2021), leaders show obedience with what is expected of a leadership role, although feeling disempowered and frustrated. Despite the negative consequences, they accept the power of heroic leadership that dominates attempts to move towards post-heroic leadership.

4.3. Leadership and change: New leadership as a necessity, yet we need to do something about it

A third tension evolved with regards to leadership and change. Assuming that change is on its way and not needing further interventions, leaders are neglecting the dominance of heroic leadership and masculinity. However, others believe that leaders have a responsibility to actively bring about this change and claim ownership. Acknowledging their privileged position and reflecting on how they contribute to the perpetuation of heroic leadership and gender inequality, speakers are directly addressing power. Leaders are experimenting with a response that we call “dissimilation”: They aim at facilitating change by avoiding direct confrontation and striving to counter the assimilation of post-heroic to heroic leadership.

4.3.1. ‘Leadership is changing because times are changing’: Gender equality as inevitable side effect

Highlighting the relevance of a culture of trust, leaders in our discussions emphasized the need for changes in organizational and leadership models. And as flat hierarchies, cooperation, and an emphasis on trust are perceived as appealing to women, the development towards post-heroic leadership is identified as also leading to gender equality.

M4: Leadership itself is changing and leadership itself is not changing because we have womens’ problems, but leadership is changing because times are changing and because we have to become much more flexible and quicker in decision-making and dealing with uncertainty. ... And new leadership guidelines can only be built on team elements such as trust. ... Because we are moving away from this time of rigid hierarchies into other models of cooperation, into other models of leadership, and we would have a great opportunity to design this in such a way that it becomes more attractive for women. (Discussion 7, men)

As gender equality is seen as a natural outcome of the evolving work culture, further efforts of developing gender equality are rendered unnecessary. Through highlighting the importance of trust and distributed leadership for gender equality, the paradox of gender and leadership is

presented as no longer existing. In consequence, power struggles as well as leaders' agency for change are once again neglected.

4.3.2. 'Just do it!': Change will only happen if we as leaders are taking charge

Leaders are convinced that change only happens if they as leaders will recognize a need for change and claim ownership. Although rare, there are moments in the discussions where this lack of agency is challenged. The following quote illustrates a self-call to agency that results from the believe that a changing context alone will not suffice to promote gender equality even without a vision of what a changed leadership can look like:

M2: When I think about it, of course I can blame society and culture and things like that, but in the end it is actually exactly those of us sitting here at the table and our bosses who are responsible for the fact that there are not more women in leadership positions. ... So, that means, actually, I am convinced that if we want to, we can. We can change that tomorrow. We can simply hire more women. And they won't all get pregnant tomorrow and want 60%. (Discussion 3, men)

In comparison, some female leaders have developed an understanding of "nurturing leadership" involving a supportive and encouraging approach towards women. Paradoxically, this requires courage and a willingness to take risks as it may challenge established norms and expectations:

F1: ... what distinguishes such a nurturing boss from another boss? I think they are a bit more willing to take risks. ... Of course, it's a question of courage at that moment, because there is a certain uncertainty. ... And in this respect, it is of course the courage or the basic trust to say: let's go into the situation and then we'll see how it turns out and develops when the time comes. I don't think everyone has this courage to look step by step. (Discussion 3, women)

Being courageous and trying things out, even if success is not guaranteed is seen as a fundamental requirement by another female leader. Women in another discussion are emphasizing the situative aspect of this response: They ask for experimentation, leaders trying out new, but very concrete practices in the relationship with their followers:

F1: There is also a proverb saying: "Everyone said it wouldn't work. Then someone came along, didn't know and just did it." So I think we have to live by that a lot and just do it, try it out. We won't get our heads chopped off. And if they do, then it was a learning. (...) Yes, I think we really must take ourselves by the nose a bit and just stand above it and do it. And also motivate the others to say: "Hey, try it! Just do it!" (...) Yes, I think we simply have a lot of reins in our hands, we as leaders (...) And I think we simply need many, many more bosses like that, who simply stand behind it. (Discussion 1, women)

Leaders like these are claiming ownership. F1 is grateful for having a supervisor who gives her the freedom to find solutions with her team to strike a better work-life balance. She believes

that managers should support and motivate their employees to try new approaches and learn from their mistakes. Only then can they successfully find solutions for part-time work. This quote highlights the necessity of providing leaders with additional support and autonomy in decision making. Similarly, the following group of men is reflecting power dynamics and problematizing privilege. Becoming critical of oneself and its effects is paradoxical, and at the same time a prerequisite for developing both/and approaches (Kahane, 2017).

M7: ...what is actually my contribution to the problem? ... to what extent can I contribute to solutions, now understood quite literally, in the sense of something being solved, how can I contribute and where am I part of the problem. ... I would never think that I am part of the problem because I am so deep in the shadow that I don't see it. (Discussion 2, men)

Summing up, introducing the “nurturing leader” emphasizes leaders’ ownership for change as well as offering support to their female colleagues and employees. Furthermore, male leaders should become reflective towards their own actions and become critical of their privileges. This way, power is directly addressed, leading to a gender-aware approach to leadership that finally also allows for a both/and approach. Both post-heroic and heroic leadership are made relevant by taking the need for the nurturing leader for granted, while at the same time emphasizing the need for agency and being courageous. Nevertheless, the quotes also show how strong particularly the male speakers are involved in heroic leadership. Opening up for both/and thinking is a highly situative attempt of approaching the paradox of gender, power and leadership. Dissimilation points to situative, local actions that counter heroic leadership, such as starting to hire more women, promoting them for higher position, or by experimenting with alternative work requirements.

5. Discussion

Leaders actively navigate the tensions of heroic and post-heroic leadership. They thereby create the stability of the status quo but also seek transformation by managing the paradox of leadership, gender and power in distinctively different ways. First of all, they create and stabilize a masculine image of leadership. Despite their claim that it is gender-neutral, it is not. Our findings underscore research showing that heroic leadership is associated with masculinity and post-heroic leadership with femininity (Khan et al., 2022). The paradox is ignored here through shifting between accounts of gender neutrality and the strong believe in essentialised differences between women and men. Like this the binary opposition between heroic and post-heroic leadership is stabilized, resulting in a hierarchical either/or relationship, where the organizationally produced heroic version of leadership perpetuates masculinity, while post-heroic

leadership and femininity remain marginal. Hence, because of the norm of gender neutrality, the evident power imbalance is maintained and ignored at the same time.

Investigating the paradox relationship of (post-)heroic leadership and power suggests that while heroic leadership is outdated, it nevertheless remains dominant. This is because leadership is closely intertwined with the organizational structures, procedures, and ingrained understandings of successful organizing. The organizational setting serves as a given reference and tends to reproduce heroic leadership. In other words, once a particular understanding of leadership is established, it is difficult to change because it corresponds with the organizational structures and procedures. If a different leadership were to emerge, it would have to be accompanied by a different form of organizing and association with gender. Therefore, we argue that this situatedness of leadership in the context of organizing provides a mechanism of mutual reproduction that perpetuates the dominance of heroic leadership, even though involved actors conceive it as outdated, and gender biased. In consequence, leaders who advocate for post-heroic leadership and challenge heroic leadership are in a weaker position in terms of power and agency. Instead of changing leadership, these actors find post-heroic leadership assimilated, thereby perpetuating the dominating heroic leadership (Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2016). Assimilation thus prevents actors from engaging with the two poles and promoting transformation towards post-heroic leadership. In consequence, post-heroic leadership does not necessarily lead to gender equality.

While the dominance of heroic leadership, its association with masculinity and the acknowledged need for a change in leadership mirrors what we already know, our analysis also sketches a new response to the paradoxical entanglement of leadership, gender and power: dissimilation. Countering assimilation (Hargrave and van de Ven, 2016), dissimilation indicates to adopt seemingly small initiatives “step-by-step” towards changing the dominant element. For instance, “nurturing leadership” means to plant the seeds for post-heroic leadership in the soil of the heroic one, seek to its growth to enable transformation (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2020). As a matter of fact, change is understood as an ongoing process that needs attention, care and continuous experimentation with new practices. Leaders engaging with the paradox in such a way are aware of their own embeddedness in (dominating) heroic leadership. As Kahane (2017) puts it: you need to be part of the problem to be part of the solution. And indeed, recognizing their own contribution to the problem can help working towards changing leadership practices and challenging the status quo.

The actions we have observed however are subtle and very specific responses to situational demands. “Nurturing” leadership might evolve when communicating with their subordinates, when selecting staff for certain position or when promoting staff for leadership position, to name some examples from our empirical findings. Such “situative initiatives” are limited

with the leaders' area of influence but offer seemingly small wins that might bear larger impact over time (Reay et al., 2006). These leaders neither seek direct confrontation (Hargrave and van de Ven, 2016) nor strive for a synergy of a both/and approach (Smith and Lewis, 2011, 2022) which requires meta-communication for developing a shared understanding for a new leadership with those actors that benefit from and promote heroic leadership (Berti and Simpson, 2021). Neither confrontation nor synergy appear promising under conditions of power differences. Dissimilation appears an interesting way of navigating the paradox of leadership, gender and power because of its awareness to the embeddedness of leadership in the organization. Step-by-step, situative initiatives have to adhere to both, changes of organization and leadership, whereas confrontation means bold changes in both, thus accentuating resistance. Aiming for change, leaders need to raise awareness about gender in leadership and organizing. By addressing the effects of power instead of masking them, actors can create potential for change and take responsibility for their actions.

6. Conclusion

Having analysed how the paradoxical entanglement of leadership, gender and power is navigated by leaders we shed light on the stabilising as well as transformational aspects of managing paradox. The paradox perspective allowed us to move beyond simply explaining agency as an effect of heroic leadership, and has highlighted the active management of crucial tensions when dealing with issues of gender equality. Our findings further support that leadership, gender, and power are paradoxically entangled and that the stability of the status quo is maintained through either/or responses to paradox. Additionally, our empirical findings suggest that neither the either/or nor the both/and approaches are adequate answers to our complex problem. Contributing the strategy of dissimilating, our findings point to a third way in approaching paradox: Only by accepting that heroic leadership is still dominant can post-heroic leadership become a viable alternative. Developing change agency through leadership entails creating organizational practices in a way that transforms power differences towards post-heroic leadership. In doing so, leaders may move beyond the double bind of either promoting post-heroic leadership and risking conflict and a loss of legitimacy and position, or losing agency and ownership as leaders.

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	Either/or			Both/and	
Managing Paradox	ignorance	obedience	assimilation	transcendence	conflict
Response	defensive	frustrated	cynical	active	confrontational
Power	ignored	accepted	sustained	neglected	attacked

Table 1: Either/or and both/and approaches for managing paradox

Company	Focus Group	Men	Women	Lower Management	Middle Management	Top Management
Transport	1	7		5	2	
	2	6		1	5	
	3		5	3	2	
Retail	1	8		5	3	
	2		8	6	2	
Medical engineering	1	9			1	8
	2	8			3	3
	3		5		2	3
Insurance	1	6		4	2	
	2	6		4	1	1
	3		5	4	1	
Electrical engineering	1	13		5	5	3
	2	5			4	1
	3	4		1	3	
	4		6	5	1	
Total		72	29	45	37	19

Table 2: Sample of group discussions with male and female leaders

