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The queen bee phenomenon: Why women leaders distance themselves from junior women

Belle Derks [a,*], Colette Van Laar [b], Naomi Ellemers [a]

[a] Utrecht University, the Netherlands
[b] University of Leuven, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

This contribution reviews work on the queen bee phenomenon whereby women leaders assimilate into male-dominated organizations (i.e., organizations in which most executive positions are held by men) by distancing themselves from junior women and legitimizing gender inequality in their organization. We propose that rather than being a source of gender inequality, the queen bee phenomenon is itself a consequence of the gender discrimination that women experience at work. We substantiate this argument with research showing that (1) queen bee behavior is a response to the discrimination and social identity threat that women may experience in male-dominated organizations, and (2) queen bee behavior is not a typically feminine response but part of a general self-group distancing response that is also found in other marginalized groups. We discuss consequences of the queen bee phenomenon for women leaders, junior women, organizations and society more generally, and propose ways to combat this phenomenon.

Even though in the last decades women's participation in the workforce has increased substantially and women have even started to outperform men in higher education, around the world women are still underrepresented at higher organizational levels (European Commission, 2014). In the largest publicly listed companies in Europe, women make up only 21.1% of the boards and hold only 3.6% of chief executive positions (European Commission, 2015). In the United States, these numbers are comparable with 19.2% of corporate board seats and 4.4% of CEO positions held by women in the 500 largest stock listed companies (Catalyst, 2015a, 2015b). In some nations, gender quotas have been put in place to remedy this situation, based on the idea that promoting a small number of women into senior positions in male-dominated organizations — organizations in which most managerial roles are held by men — will automatically improve opportunities for junior women (Duguid, 2011; Mavin, 2008). Assumptions underlying this belief are the idea that gender inequality is perpetuated by men but not women, that senior women will mentor and promote other women and that women leaders will add a "feminine" perspective to leadership and serve as inspirational role models for their junior counterparts.

In the current contribution, we will argue otherwise as we present work on the queen bee phenomenon that reveals that women leaders in organizations in which most executive positions are held by men may reproduce rather than challenge the existing gender hierarchy. Rather than adding diversity, they may assimilate to the male-dominated organizations and adjust their self-presentation and leadership style to fit the masculine organization culture (see also Ellemers, 2014; Ellemers, Rink, Derks, & Ryan, 2012). Moreover, rather than looking out for the opportunities of their women subordinates, they may distance

* Corresponding author at: Department of Social, Health and Organisational Psychology, Utrecht University, Heidelberglaan 1, PO Box 80125, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands.
E-mail address: b.derks@uu.nl (B. Derks).

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themselves from them in order to reduce the association between themselves and the less successful group of women. As a result, organizations with queen bees at the managerial level may offer fewer opportunities to junior women than organizations in which there are no queen bees.

The aim of this contribution is to elucidate the psychological mechanisms underlying the responses typically displayed by queen bees. In our review, we will argue against the common idea that the queen bee phenomenon is a typically female response, and that it is women rather than men who hold each other back. Instead, our reasoning is that the queen bee phenomenon is not as much a *source* of gender bias as it is a *response* to the gender discrimination and identity threat that women leaders experience in some work settings.

The queen bee phenomenon

We start our review with defining what the queen bee phenomenon is. The derogatory "queen bee" label is given to women who pursue individual success in male-dominated work settings (organizations in which men hold most executive positions) by adjusting to the masculine culture and by distancing themselves from other women (Kanter, 1977; Staines, Tavris, & Jayaratne, 1974). Research on this phenomenon has revealed three ways by which women do this: (1) by presenting themselves more like men, (2) by physically and psychologically distancing themselves from other women, and (3) by endorsing and legitimizing the current gender hierarchy.

Masculine self-presentation

The most obvious way in which women aspiring to achieve leader positions may try to fit in male-dominated organizations is by emphasizing what they see as masculine characteristics and leadership styles. Because stereotypes about the characteristics of successful leaders (i.e., agentic qualities) and the gender roles of women (i.e., communal qualities) are incongruent, women are at a disadvantage to achieve leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001; Schein, 2001).

There are several studies that suggest that women try to resolve these contradictory demands by emphasizing characteristics that they see as associated with career success, that is, characteristics stereotypically associated with men. For example, in a study among male and female university faculty in Italy, senior — but not junior — female faculty described themselves as equally or even more masculine (e.g., assertive, competitive, risk-taking) than their male peers (Ellemers, Van Den Heuvel, De Gilder, Maass, & Bonvini, 2004). A recent study among members of boards of directors in the Netherlands found that female board members described themselves as more status oriented — a stereotypically masculine characteristic — than female controls, and even their male counterparts (Lückerath-Rovers, de Bos, & de Vries, 2013). Similar results have been found among senior policewomen (Derks, Van Laar, Ellemers & de Groot, 2011), and women leaders more generally in the Netherlands (Derks, Ellemers, Van Laar & de Groot, 2011), Switzerland, and Albania (Faniko, Ellemers & Derks, under review).

Another study directly compared the self-descriptions of women and men in junior and senior positions and found that women leaders described themselves as more masculine and ambitious than junior women, but as comparably masculine and ambitious as their male peers (Faniko, Ellemers & Derks, in press). Notably, the degree to which women leaders presented themselves with stereotypically masculine characteristics was positively related to the number of subordinates they had. Together, these results suggest that, rather than adding the desired "feminine perspective" to leadership, women may assimilate to masculine definitions of leadership as they move up the organizational ladder.

Underlining dissimilarities and distance from other women

A second way in which women can improve their personal opportunities in male-dominated organizations is by distancing themselves from other women. For example, in our own work, we found that women leaders reported that they were much more ambitious and committed to their career than their female — but not male — subordinates (Derks, Ellemers et al., 2011; Faniko et al., under review). Additionally, women who have achieved success in contexts characterized by gender bias tend to see themselves as very different from other women (Derks, Van Laar et al., 2011; Stroebe, Ellemers, Barreto, & Mummendey, 2009). They not only present themselves as stereotypically masculine but also see themselves as much more masculine compared to other women (Faniko et al., under review).

Research in male-dominated law firms corroborated these findings by showing that junior women indeed perceived women partners as distancing themselves from their gender identity (Ely, 1994). Notably, we recently found that senior women tend to distance themselves from *junior* women, by claiming to be more masculine and career committed than junior women are, but that they do not distance themselves from women at the *same* rank (Faniko et al., in press; under review). This result suggests that senior women are not distancing themselves from women in general but from women who have not been as successful as they have been.

Legitimization of gender hierarchy

Perhaps most harmful is the fact that the behavior and attitudes of queen bees may serve to legitimize the current gender inequality. Queen bees can legitimize the status quo in several ways, for example, by agreeing with negative stereotypes about women, by denying the illegitimacy of lower outcomes for women as a group, and by not supporting (or even opposing) action

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