

**AOM PRESENTER SYMPOSIUM
SUBMISSION #12373**

TITLE: Redefining the Prototypical Leader: Exploring Non-Traditional Leaders at Work

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Presentation 4: Tattooed Employees: Does Hierarchical Position Matter for Observer Perceptions and (Mis)treatment?

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Presentation 5: The Consequences of Mental Illness Stigma in the Workplace: Does Organizational Role Matter?

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Potential Sponsor Divisions: Organizational Behaviour, Managerial and Organizational Cognition, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

OVERVIEW OF THE SYMPOSIUM

Leader prototypes and stereotypes benefit white, male, and able-bodied individuals (Adamovic & Leibbrandt, 2023; Emira, Brewster, Duncan, & Clifford, 2018; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, Ristikari, 2011). As a result, occupants of leadership roles tend to be white, male, and able-bodied. Leadership research in the management field often neglects the nuances of leaders' identities. By doing so, much of leadership research has perpetuated leader stereotypes and stalled the advancement of research to understand how those outside the leader stereotypes can emerge as and be effective leaders. However, the empirical research that does exist on non-traditional leader identities suggests that there are detrimental outcomes for these groups. For instance, individuals who have lower socioeconomic status in childhood are less likely to emerge as leaders (Barling, Granger, Weatherhead, Turner, & Pupco, 2023), and women receive more negative leader evaluations than their male counterparts (Brescoll, Okimoto, & Vial, 2018), and leaders that disclose mental health illness are stigmatized and perceived as less competent (Cloutier & Barling, 2023).

Identities and demographics matter when it comes to leadership and evaluating leaders. In this presenter symposium, we will explore several “non-traditional” leader identities and provide insights into how this contributes to leadership research and, in general, our understanding of how individuals perceive others. We have collected five papers from burgeoning and established scholars from across the globe that investigate five distinct “non-traditional” leader identities. We begin the symposium investigating factors that may help or hinder leader emergence, such as socioeconomic status (Presentation 1), gender and residing in non-Western global contexts (Presentation 2). Next, building on these presentations, we explore the perception of leader effectiveness and leaders' relationships with their followers. Presentation

3 examines both follower and leader experiences interacting with neurodivergent leaders and sparks conversation on increasing neuro-inclusivity in workplaces. Finally, we conclude with two experimental vignette studies investigating how tattoos (Presentation 4) and mental illness (Presentation 5) impact perceptions of leaders. Together with our discussant, Dr. Kara Arnold, we will host a forum to discuss how research and workplaces can be more inclusive to leaders with non-traditional identities.

Summary of Paper Presentations

In the first paper, Granger and Turner examine leader emergence, namely how socioeconomic status (SES) throughout early life shapes leader emergence in adulthood. Contributing to social capital theory, they explore how persistent SES adversity or affluence distinctly affects leader emergence, and the roles of nepotism and missed opportunities as mediators. Using archival data from the British Cohort Study (BCS), which is longitudinal, multi-source data, they found that persistent SES adversity was related to lower leader role occupancy, while SES affluence was related to greater leader role occupancy, and this was mediated by nepotism. This study contributes to our understanding of how diverse socioeconomic backgrounds affect young people's access to formal leadership positions in organizations and beyond.

In the second paper, Yessayan focuses on career paths and opportunities for leadership among women in STEM fields in Iraq—a country deeply affected by crises, such as political instability, economic challenges, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Guided by feminist and intersectional perspectives, this study involves interviews with women regarding how they navigate challenges, often through unconventional pathways, in their careers. This research adds

to conversations on diversifying leadership models and redefining career progression in STEM fields, particularly within crisis contexts.

In the third paper, Szulc and Renwick explore neurodivergent leaders' relationships with their followers. With leader-member exchange (LMX) theory as a framework, they explore how neurodivergent leaders navigate these relationships in their daily workplace interactions. They interviewed neurodivergent leaders and facilitated a focus group with neurodiversity change makers, finding that neurodivergent leaders are often more neuro-inclusive due to their lived experience. However, relationships between neurodivergent leaders and neurotypical followers appear to be more complex, with differences in perspectives and communication styles. This research highlights unique attributes of neurodivergent leaders and contributes to understanding neuro-inclusivity in the workplace.

The fourth paper, by Grocutt and Barling, examines perceptions of tattooed colleagues, both coworkers and leaders. Drawing from expectancy violations theory, they propose that the nature of the tattoo content matters for whether tattooed colleagues are perceived negatively or positively. In addition, they explore whether this depends on whether tattooed colleagues are coworkers or leaders. The results from the experimental vignette suggest that tattoo content does matter, namely employees with light (i.e., friendly) tattoos are perceived equivalently to those with no tattoos, while those with dark (i.e., intimidating) tattoos are perceived differently, namely both negatively with being perceived as riskier and positively with being perceived as more artistic. However, most of the relationships did not differ when the employee was presented as a coworker or leader. This research contributes to our understanding of stigma and tattoos in the workplace and suggests that leaders may not be perceived differently than coworkers.

Finally, the fifth paper examines the “bottom-up” mental illness stigma toward leaders. Scanlon and Barling draw from social cognitive theories to propose that leaders can also experience mental illness stigma and may be perceived as less competent by employees, which in turn reduces employees’ own work motivation and performance. Using an experimental vignette design, they find an indirect relationship between mental illness and employee motivation and performance through perceived competence. The results suggest that stigma may be more consequential when directed at a leader in some cases, while in other cases, the effects are not target-dependent. This research offers a first look at how followers’ mental illness stigma toward leaders can backfire by negatively affecting followers’ own motivation and performance.

To conclude the symposium, Dr. Kara Arnold, Professor at the Faculty of Business Administration, Memorial University, will be our discussant. Her research has spanned a wide array of topics in management and leadership but has recently investigated individuals who have non-traditional identities of leaders, specifically women, sex workers, sexual minorities, and those who have mental illness. Dr. Arnold will leverage her expertise to provide synthesizing remarks about the five presentations and facilitate discussion among presenters and audience members.

Taken together, this presenter symposium will leave audience members and researchers with insightful ideas for their own research and encourage them to think differently about leaders and leadership research.

RELEVANCE TO DIVISIONS

Organizational Behavior

This presenter symposium is highly pertinent to the Organizational Behavior (OB) division. The theme of this symposium is centred around leadership and perceptions of leaders.

Leaders and leadership behaviors have long been an interest of organizational behavior researchers; however, the nuances of how identities and demographics (e.g., race, gender, disability) may impact leader emergence and effectiveness are often overlooked (e.g., Pogrebna, Angelopoulos, Motsi-Omoijade, Kharlamov, & Tkachenko, 2024; Villamor & Aguinis, 2024). As a result, organizational behavior research investigating diverse leader identities is typically separated from the “mainstream” leadership research, thus perpetuating the “think leader, think male” biases. By including a variety of diversity-related leadership presentations, we hope to inspire scholars to include diversity-based analyses in their leadership research so that we better understand how to provide all individuals with opportunities to emerge as and be effective leaders.

Managerial and Organizational Cognition

Studying how people perceive leaders and leadership and what “good” leadership is are burgeoning areas in managerial and organizational cognition research. Two of our presentations use experimental methods to investigate how specific attributes (e.g., mental illness, presence of tattoos) may influence the perceptions of leaders and subsequent behavior (e.g., job performance, treatment of leaders). Overall, our symposium investigates the “violation” of leadership norms and stereotypes (i.e., against the typical white, male leader) and invites researchers to continue this avenue of research to understand *why and how* these stereotypes persist through individuals' perceptions and mental models.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

This presenter symposium is directly aligned with the domain statement of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) division. With this collection of papers, we hope to start a conversation about why we, as researchers, need to challenge leader prototypes and stereotypes.

We also intend to provide evidence and discuss why individuals with marginalized identities can thrive in leadership positions and how organizations can better include them. In creating this symposium, we deliberately included researchers from various non-US countries (i.e., Canada, Middle Eastern/North African countries, and Poland) to provide a global overview of leader and diversity initiatives across the globe to create change. Further, we highlight various non-traditional leader identities (e.g., women, low socioeconomic status) to provide an overview for those unfamiliar with the topic to encourage integrating diversity-related analyses (e.g., gender differences) in their research.

PROPOSED FORMAT OF THE SYMPOSIUM

Length: 90 minutes

Minutes 0-3: Welcome and Introduction

- Presenters: Mikaila Ortynsky and Alyssa Grocutt

Minutes 3-63: Paper Presentations (10-12 minutes each)

- From Socioeconomic Adversity to Affluence: Early Life Socioeconomic Status Shapes Leadership Role Emergence in Adulthood *presented by Steve Granger*
- Barriers to Women's Leadership in Iraq's STEM Sector *presented by Patil Yessayan*
- Neurodivergent Leaders: Insights from LMX theory *presented by Joanna Szulc*
- Tattooed Employees: Does Hierarchical Position Matter for Observer Perceptions and (Mis)treatment? *Presented by Alyssa Grocutt*
- The Consequences of Mental Illness Stigma in the Workplace: Does Organizational Role Matter? *presented by Michaela Scanlon*

Minutes 64-90: Conversation and Q&A from Audience

- Discussant: Dr. Kara Arnold
- Moderators: Mikaila Ortynsky and Alyssa Grocutt

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**FROM SOCIOECONOMIC ADVERSITY TO AFFLUENCE: EARLY LIFE
SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS SHAPES LEADERSHIP ROLE EMERGENCE IN
ADULTHOOD**

Steve Granger and Nick Turner

Socioeconomic status (SES) profoundly shapes the opportunities and constraints individuals face throughout their lives, long known to be influencing critical developmental milestones and career trajectories (Elder, Van Nguyen, & Caspi, 1985). The cumulative effects of SES determine access to resources that foster or hinder leadership potential, such as quality education, mentorship, and professional networks (Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007). Drawing on social capital theory, this study investigates the dual pathways through which SES adversity and affluence affect leadership emergence. Social capital theory posits that relationships and networks are valuable resources that facilitate access to opportunities, but this access is often unevenly distributed based on socioeconomic background (Kwon & Adler, 2014). This study addresses a key gap in the literature by distinguishing between the mechanisms of affluence, such as nepotism, and the barriers imposed by adversity, such as missed opportunities. By analyzing data from the British Cohort Study (BCS) collected over 26 years, this research advances our understanding of the relationships among SES, social capital, and leadership development, offering concrete insights for organizations and policymakers aiming to reduce inequality.

This research makes significant contributions to social capital theory by elaborating on the mechanisms through which SES shapes access to leadership opportunities. While prior studies have established the importance of social capital in career advancement, they have often overlooked the ways in which affluence and adversity uniquely condition access to these resources. Nepotism, a hallmark of social capital in affluent contexts, exemplifies how embedded

networks provide disproportionate advantages, facilitating access to prestigious roles and mentorship opportunities. This study extends the theory by demonstrating that these benefits are not merely additive but interact dynamically with broader socioeconomic structures, compounding advantages over time. Conversely, the role of missed opportunities in limiting access to social capital highlights the structural barriers faced by individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. By integrating these nuances, this research provides a more comprehensive understanding of social capital as both a resource and a source of inequality.

METHODS

The BCS (Elliott & Shepherd, 2016) is a comprehensive dataset for investigating the long-term effects of SES on leadership outcomes, with data collected from over 16,500 participants born in the United Kingdom in the same week in 1970. SES was operationalized using parental occupation across four time points (birth, age 5, age 10, and age 16), providing a valid measure of persistent socioeconomic conditions. Leadership role occupancy was assessed at age 26, based on self-reported managerial and supervisory responsibilities. Mediators included nepotism, measured through participants' perceptions of job opportunities facilitated by family and social connections, and missed opportunities, assessed via financial constraints limiting social participation. The study used path analytic logistic regression models to evaluate the direct and indirect effects of SES on leadership outcomes, while controlling for confounding variables such as gender, educational attainment, and early career experiences. We conducted validity checks on key measures, with SES showing strong correlations with family income and leadership measures correlating with weekly earnings and job stability. The longitudinal design of the BCS and the inclusion of multiple mediators enhance the study's methodological rigor, providing insights into the mechanisms linking SES and leadership.

RESULTS

The results illustrate the differential impact of SES adversity and affluence on leadership emergence. Persistent SES adversity was significantly associated with lower leadership role occupancy, highlighting the structural barriers that limit leadership development for individuals from underprivileged backgrounds. These barriers often manifest as restricted access to high-quality education, mentorship opportunities, and professional networks, which are critical for career advancement. In contrast, SES affluence positively predicted leadership emergence, mediated primarily through nepotism. Affluent individuals reported greater access to job opportunities facilitated by social connections, demonstrating how social capital operates as a mechanism for translating affluence into occupational success. The finding that missed opportunities did not significantly mediate the relationship between SES adversity and leadership suggests that other mechanisms, such as psychological resilience or biases in organizational selection practices (e.g., Springle & Bourdage, in press), may play a role in perpetuating inequality. Gender differences further complicate the relationship, with women from affluent backgrounds benefiting less from nepotism than their male counterparts. This finding raises important questions about the intersectionality of gender and SES, pointing to the need for more detailed investigations of how these factors jointly shape leadership trajectories. Although missed opportunities were not found to significantly mediate the link between SES adversity and leadership, this null finding highlights the complexity of adversity's effects, suggesting that other factors, such as systemic biases or psychological barriers, may also be at play.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The implications of these findings extend across multiple domains, including organizational practices, educational initiatives, and public policy. Organizations must confront

the systemic advantages conferred by nepotism to ensure equitable access to leadership roles. This can be achieved through interventions such as blind hiring practices, standardized performance evaluations, and mentorship programs designed to support individuals from underrepresented backgrounds. Educational institutions have a pivotal role to play in mitigating the effects of SES adversity by offering scholarships, leadership development programs, and opportunities to build social capital. Policy interventions should target the root causes of inequality, such as disparities in early childhood education, financial barriers to higher education, and the lack of access to social mobility programs. For example, community-based mentorship initiatives can provide individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds with the networks and resources needed to overcome systemic barriers. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that integrates organizational reforms, educational strategies, and policy innovations to create a more equitable leadership landscape.

Future Research Directions

Building on these findings, future research should explore additional mediators and moderators of the relationship between SES and leadership emergence. For instance, individual difference such as resilience, grit, and generalized self-efficacy may each interact with SES to influence leadership development. Investigating the role of institutional support systems, such as career counseling and evidence-led organizational diversity initiatives, could also shed light on potential pathways for reducing inequality. Longitudinal studies in diverse cultural and geographical contexts are needed to examine the generalizability of this model. For example, how do SES effects on leadership vary in economies with different levels of social mobility? Moreover, the intersectionality of gender and SES warrants further investigation, particularly to understand why women from affluent backgrounds derive fewer benefits from nepotism. Experimental research could assess the efficacy of targeted interventions, such as leadership

training programs or mentorship initiatives, in mitigating SES-based disparities. By addressing these questions, future research can contribute to a more comprehensive and equitable understanding of leadership development.

CONCLUSION

This study illustrates the impact of socioeconomic conditions on leadership emergence, highlighting the distinct roles of affluence and adversity. By identifying the mechanisms of nepotism and missed opportunities, it advances theoretical models of social capital and leadership development. The findings emphasize the need for systemic interventions to address class-based disparities, offering actionable insights for organizations, educators, and policymakers. Through targeted efforts to enhance equity and access, this research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of leadership and its developmental pathways.

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BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN IRAQ'S STEM SECTOR

Patil Yessayan

Despite significant advancements in gender equality over the past decades, women remain underrepresented in many professional fields, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). These disparities are pervasive across the globe, with women continuing to encounter systemic barriers that limit their participation and advancement in these traditionally male-dominated industries (Eagly, 2021). The literature on careers in STEM highlights that, although women have made notable progress in the professional sphere, they continue to be a minority in STEM fields, often marginalized within their professions (Makarem & Young, 2020). Heck and colleagues (2021), emphasize that women continue to encounter significant obstacles that hinder their participation in STEM fields and leadership roles. For instance, research reveals that organizations frequently assume women's roles as mothers and wives take precedence over their professional identities, which reinforces workplace inequities (Orser, Riding, & Stanley, 2012; Schmader, Johns, & Barquissau, 2004). Additionally, women in these fields have highlighted the challenges of managing the dual demands of work and home life, by emphasizing the difficulties of balancing their professional and personal responsibilities (Allen, Armstrong, Riemenschneider, 2006; Kameny, DeRosier, Taylor, McMillen, Knowles, & Pifer, 2014). Previous research on women in STEM has also revealed persistent gendered career patterns that reinforce stereotypes about women engineers, for example, as being less technically capable than their male peers and more suited to traditionally feminine roles (Cardador, 2017).

Within this global context, Iraq presents a particularly challenging environment for women in STEM due to deeply entrenched cultural and systemic barriers. According to the World Bank (2023), women constitute only 13.9% of the total labor force in Iraq, and in 2021,

women represented just 17.5% of those employed in senior and middle management positions (World Bank, 2024). Recent data shows that, young women face even greater barriers, as their unemployment rate is double that of their male counterparts (UNDP, 2022). These figures, combined with Iraq's socio-political instability, economic crises, and the lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, accentuate the structural inequities that hinder women's career advancement into leadership positions (Crisis Response, 2022).

This paper examines the challenges faced by women working in STEM fields in Iraq, by focusing on the systemic, cultural and organizational barriers that hinder their progression into leadership roles. While both men and women face obstacles such as favoritism, nepotism ("wasta"), and a lack of transparency in promotion processes, women often experience additional gender-specific barriers, including discriminatory assumptions about their availability and competence, cultural norms that prioritize men for leadership positions, and limited institutional support for balancing professional and personal responsibilities. These challenges are further intensified by Iraq's ongoing political instability, several economic crises, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have all aggravated the already existing inequities and disrupted career progression opportunities for women, especially in male-dominated industries.

The study is based on qualitative data collected through the Support and Accelerate Women's Inclusion (SAWI) project, an initiative aimed at advancing women's inclusion across sectors in the MENA region. Guided by feminist and intersectional perspectives, this research explores how systemic barriers and crises shape women's career trajectories in STEM fields, with a focus on their access to leadership opportunities. Specifically, this study asks: What systemic barriers and crisis-driven factors hinder women's progression into leadership roles in STEM fields in Iraq?

Promotion and Career Advancement

The interviews revealed that systemic barriers related to promotions and career advancement disproportionately affect women. In general, women reported facing no significant discrimination or additional challenges compared to men during the recruitment stage. However, disparities became apparent at the promotion stage, where women were often excluded from key nomination lists for leadership positions, making it very difficult for them to compete.

Frequent administrative turnover in Iraq's politically unstable environment further undermined continuity in career development. Women explained that when new management takes over – mostly in local and governmental organizations, previous plans for promotions or staff development are often disregarded, and the new administration introduces its own priorities and personnel. One participant shared how promotions in her organization were delayed or canceled entirely following a change in leadership, as the incoming team favored their own affiliates. This constant cycle of disruptions leaves women, who already face systemic barriers, in an even more precarious position when vying for leadership roles.

While favoritism and nepotism hinder advancement for both genders, women reported that promotions were often based on political affiliations or relationships with upper management rather than qualifications or merit. Economic crises, such as the drop in oil prices, further disrupted promotion opportunities by stalling organizational growth and freezing internal career mobility. The COVID-19 pandemic also halted appointments, leaving many women unsure of when—or if—advancement opportunities would resume.

Interestingly, some women reported having refused promotions to leadership positions due to fear of societal backlash, unprofessional work environments, or personal circumstances. For instance, one participant explained that societal rejection and chaos resulting from her potential appointment made her hesitant to accept a leadership role, even though she felt

qualified. Others highlighted life transitions, such as marriage, relocation, or balancing family responsibilities, as reasons for declining promotions.

Workplace Culture and Gender Stereotypes

A pervasive issue in the workplace is the reinforcement of gender stereotypes, which undervalue women's contributions and limit their roles. Women described how workplace cultures often assign them additional tasks compared to male colleagues, who tend to adhere strictly to their job descriptions. Structural restrictions, such as laws in Iraq preventing women from working night shifts, further worsen these disparities. Participants shared how these policies, though intended to protect women, often reinforce stereotypes about their capabilities, and create environments where men are perceived as more competent and reliable, thus restricting the opportunities for women to be promoted into leadership positions.

Parental Status and Work-Life Balance

Parental status emerged as a significant factor influencing women's career progression. Many workplaces lack childcare facilities, forcing mothers to bring their children to the office, which affects their productivity and engagement. Participants reported that women with children are often perceived as less capable of handling leadership roles or training opportunities, especially those requiring international travel. Conversely, women without children reported encountering fewer barriers, as they were seen as more flexible and less burdened by personal responsibilities. Interestingly, in government organizations, parental and marital status sometimes influenced hiring decisions positively, with married applicants or those with children being prioritized over single individuals.

Training and Leadership Opportunities

Access to training opportunities is a major barrier for women in Iraq's STEM fields. Cultural norms and organizational biases often prevent women from attending skill-building

programs, especially those requiring travel. Training opportunities are frequently based on nominations, and women are often overlooked in favor of men due to assumptions about their family responsibilities and mobility. For example, women with children are commonly deemed unable to travel abroad for extended periods, even if they express willingness to do so. These biases limit women's access to critical training opportunities, reducing their chances of meeting promotion criteria and advancing into leadership roles, leaving them at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts.

Leadership positions in administrative and decision-making roles remain largely inaccessible to women, particularly in government organizations. Participants noted that leadership roles, such as branch or unit heads, are almost exclusively held by men. Even when women meet eligibility criteria, systemic biases and favoritism often prevent them from advancing. For example, leadership positions are frequently allocated based on political affiliations or personal relationships, leaving women with limited opportunities to compete on merit alone.

This paper contributes in three ways. First, it fills the gap in research on women in Iraq's labor force, especially in STEM fields. Second, it examines how systemic and cultural barriers, combined with crises, limit women's career advancement. Third, it offers insights for improving gender equity and leadership opportunities in Iraq's STEM sectors.

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NEURODIVERGENT LEADERS: INSIGHTS FROM LMX THEORY

Joanna Szulc and Douglas Renwick

Leadership is a cornerstone of organizational success. Traditionally, the concept of leadership has been closely associated with a narrow archetype—often represented by white males (Bahlieda, 2015). However, the growing emphasis on diversity and inclusion has expanded our understanding of who can be a leader, shedding light on the contributions of women (Vial, Napier, & Brescoll, 2016), ethnic minorities (Zhang, Mooney, & Ozgen, 2024), and other underrepresented groups. Research has shown that such leaders bring unique advantages to organizations, yet they continue to face negative stereotypes, limited access to social networks, and a lack of mentoring opportunities. These barriers not only hinder their ability to attain leadership positions but also contribute to their underrepresentation in leadership roles (e.g., Adamovic & Leibrandt, 2023; Erkal, Gangadharan, & Xiao, 2022).

In recent years, the focus on diversity has extended to neurodiversity—a concept that recognizes and respects neurological differences as part of human diversity. These differences include conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dysgraphia and Tourette’s Syndrome. Organizations and researchers are paying increasing attention to creating neuro-inclusive workplaces (e.g., Ezerins, Simon, Vogus, Gabriel, Calderwood, & Rosen, 2024; Weber, Krieger, Häne, Yarker, & McDowall, 2023). Significant strides have been made in understanding how to design recruitment systems (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2022; Hennekam & Follmer, 2024), communication strategies (Tomczak, Szulc, & Szczerka, 2021), and flexible work arrangements (Szulc, McGregor, & Cakir, 2023) that accommodate neurodivergent employees. Moreover, there has been considerable work on how to lead and manage neurodivergent

individuals effectively (Khan, Grabarski, Ali, & Buckmaster, 2023; Szulc, 2024). These efforts have greatly enhanced our knowledge of neurodiversity in the workplace.

However, despite this progress, one critical perspective has been largely overlooked: the potential of neurodivergent employees to thrive as leaders. The conversation has largely been confined to managing and leading neurodivergent individuals (Richards, Sang, Marks, & Gill, 2019; Szulc, 2024), with little attention given to their capacity to occupy leadership roles. Leadership, after all, is not solely about conforming to established norms but also about leveraging unique strengths to inspire and guide others. The idea that neurodiversity could be a source of strength for leadership is not entirely absent from the literature. Roberson and colleagues (2023), for example, proposed that cognitive characteristics associated with neurodiversity could enhance task-based leadership behaviors. Their conceptual model outlined how these behaviors could positively influence both leader and follower outcomes. While their work introduced a novel perspective by framing neurodivergent individuals as leaders, its exclusive focus on autism and approach to representation may inadvertently reinforce certain stereotypes, leaving room to explore the broader spectrum of neurodiversity and the nuances of neurodivergent leadership.

Recognizing this gap, we designed our study to advance this emerging field of research. Our aim is to challenge traditional assumptions about leadership and explore the unique potential of neurodivergent individuals in leadership roles. Specifically, we examine the relationships neurodivergent leaders have with their followers, addressing a critical gap in understanding the dynamics of neurodivergent leadership.

Using Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory as a framework, we sought to investigate how neurodivergent leaders navigate workplace relationships. To achieve this, we conducted in-

depth interviews with seven neurodivergent leaders (representing AuADHD, ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia, Dysgraphia) to explore how they experience the components of LMX theory in their daily interactions. Building on these insights, we facilitated a focus group with 22 neurodiversity change-makers—certified professionals committed to advancing neurodiversity in the workplace. This group, comprising both leaders and followers, most of whom were neurodivergent, shared their perspectives on neuro-inclusive leadership and neurodivergent leaders specifically.

Preliminary findings indicate that neurodivergent leaders often demonstrate heightened neuro-inclusivity, as their lived experiences enable them to empathize deeply with others facing similar challenges. They frequently mentioned that they “*deal with it too*” (ID7) when referring to various challenges faced by their neurodivergent employees in the workplace context. Neurodivergent leaders, drawing from their own experiences of being misunderstood or underestimated, seemed to be more attuned to recognizing the potential in other neurodivergent individuals. Unlike neurotypical leaders, who might focus primarily on conventional markers of “fit” or “normalcy” in recruitment processes, neurodivergent leaders are often more likely to challenge such biases and advocate for candidates who might otherwise be overlooked. In the following example, the leader demonstrates a willingness to look beyond surface-level impressions, such as being labeled as “weird,” and instead values qualities like intelligence and eagerness to grow:

I was convinced no one would have hired him if I hadn't insisted. They said he was just 'weird.' But he was incredibly intelligent and eager to grow, someone who wouldn't have passed the recruitment process simply because he seemed different.” (ID4)

Neurodivergent leaders often draw upon their personal experiences to foster understanding and empathy within the workplace. For those diagnosed later in life, such as in adulthood, the challenges they faced before receiving a diagnosis can fuel a strong commitment to creating more inclusive environments. These leaders may see sharing their neurodivergence as a mission, openly discussing their experiences to normalize conversations about neurodiversity and encourage others to seek support. By doing so, they not only raise awareness but also empower others to navigate their own neurodivergent identities. This perspective positions neurodivergent leaders as catalysts for change, actively working to reduce stigma and create workplaces where neurodivergent employees feel more comfortable and supported. As one neurodivergent leader explained:

Because I see sharing my neurodivergence as a mission, especially since I was diagnosed late, in my forties. I know what it was like to go through life before forty without a diagnosis. That's why I talk about it openly with everyone. I'm aware that people face challenges when it comes to informing their supervisors or employers. And this is one of the things I want to help change. Sharing my experience has helped many people get diagnosed. Many have reached out to tell me that they learned about it through what I've shared, whether in person, on social media, or at work, where I talk about it openly. (ID3)

The focus group participants demonstrated strong alignment in their views on the characteristics of neuro-inclusive leadership. One respondent succinctly summarized the discussion, emphasizing that neuro-inclusive leaders are, above all, curious about their team members. They highlighted the importance of openness and willingness to listen to employees' individual needs without imposing assumptions. This perspective was reflected in their statement: *"A neuro-inclusive leader—or, in fact, any good leader—is someone who is curious*

about their employees. They are open to what people say about their needs, without assuming they already know how to help or how someone should function in the work environment.

Instead, they ask, "Tell me what you need." This quote encapsulates the shared understanding among participants that neuro-inclusive leadership requires active listening, empathy, and a commitment to supporting individual differences.

These findings align with the double empathy problem, where shared neurodivergent perspectives foster stronger mutual understanding. However, relationships between neurodivergent leaders and neurotypical followers tend to be more complex, with potential misalignments arising due to differences in perspectives and communication styles. This was more broadly discussed in individual interviews rather than a focus group. For example, one leader highlighted:

I probably have more difficulty with neurotypical people, honestly, because I have to explain things that seem obvious to me. There's also another thing: as someone with ADHD and on the spectrum, I have very scattered thoughts. Speaking to a neurotypical person is challenging because I have to construct sentences, which is difficult for me. With a neurodivergent person, I don't need to do that. (ID5)

This research contributes to the broader discourse on fostering effective and inclusive workplace relationships, shedding light on the distinctive attributes of neurodivergent leadership and its implications for the modern workplace. This shift in perspective is not merely about inclusion but about reimagining leadership as a dynamic and multifaceted concept.

Neurodivergent leaders bring unique cognitive strengths, innovative problem-solving abilities, and a deep capacity for empathy—qualities that are increasingly essential in today's complex

and rapidly evolving organizational landscapes. It is time to move beyond managing neurodiversity to fully embracing its potential to redefine leadership.

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TATTOOED EMPLOYEES: DOES HIERARCHICAL POSITION MATTER FOR OBSERVER PERCEPTIONS AND (MIS)TREATMENT?

Alyssa Grocutt and Julian Barling

In North America, tattooed individuals have typically been stigmatized as tattoos have been associated with criminals (Lane, 2020), and those with tattoos are seen as untrustworthy and rebellious (Cortini, Bortune, & Fantinelli, 2019). Nonetheless, there are studies reporting positive perceptions with tattoos seen as art and self-expression (e.g., Armstrong, Roberts, Owen, & Koch, 2004). In our study, we aim to understand both of these perspectives by examining dark tattoo content (e.g., threatening) as eliciting the negative stereotypes and light tattoo content (e.g., friendly) as eliciting the positive stereotypes. Drawing from expectancy violation theory (Burgoon, 2015), we suggest that visible tattoos in the workplace violate what is expected thus attracting observer attention, and triggering a sensemaking process to understand the violation and assign valence to inform subsequent behavior towards the expectancy violator.

Hierarchical Position as Moderator

Stigma towards leaders is still relatively under-studied leaving us with little understanding of how leaders with stigmatized characteristics are perceived. To enhance our understanding of stigma towards leaders, we explore hierarchical position as a moderator of the relationship between tattoo content and observer perceptions. On the one hand, we might expect leaders to be held to a higher standard and thus experience worse outcomes. Based on implicit leadership theory, visible tattoos could violate the expectation of a prototypical leader appearance (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984; Maran, Liegl, Moder, Kraus, & Furtner, 2021). Drawing on attribution theory (Weiner, 1985) and fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977), we

might expect observers to focus on personal factors, such as appearance including tattoos, rather than external or situational factors, such as hierarchical position in an organization, when making judgements about someone that impacts their perceptions and behavior towards that person. This would suggest that tattooed leaders would be perceived more negatively than tattooed coworkers.

On the other hand, the status that comes with higher positions within the organization may serve a protective function. Stigma theory suggests that stigma occurs from a position of influence over those being stigmatized (Link & Phelan, 2001), and expectancy violations theory suggests that violations are perceived more favourably when the violator is of higher status or power (Burgoon, 2015). This would suggest that tattooed leaders would be perceived similarly to, or more favorably than, tattooed coworkers. Taken together, we include the role of hierarchical position as an exploratory research question.

METHODS

We used an experimental vignette design with a written description and accompanying photo in a 3 (tattoo content: no tattoo vs. dark tattoo vs. light tattoo) x 3 (hierarchical position: coworker vs. supervisor vs. supervisor's supervisor) x 2 (gender: woman vs. man) between-subjects design. Participants first viewed the vignette then completed measures on their perceptions of the worker described, namely perceived competence, trustworthiness, riskiness, and artisticness, and expected behavior towards the employee if the participant was assigned to work with them, namely subtle discrimination and interpersonal fairness. The final sample consisted of 455 participants with $M_{age} = 38.18$ ($SD = 11.48$), hours per week = 37.02 ($SD = 10.49$). 54.3% identified as women, 44.2% identified as men, and 1.5% other.

RESULTS

The results show that employees with dark tattoos are perceived as more risky than those with light or no tattoos, and those with dark or light tattoos are perceived as more artistic than those with no tattoos. There were no differences in tattoo content predicting perceptions of competence or trustworthiness.

Mediation effects emerged as well. Perceived riskiness mediated the effects of dark tattoo content on subtle discrimination, and perceived artisticness mediated the effects of dark tattoo on subtle discrimination. No other mediation effects were significant.

In addition, hierarchical position did moderate the indirect effects of dark tattoo content on subtle discrimination through perceived artisticness. Dark tattoo content was related to less subtle discrimination through perceived artisticness when the employee was presented as a coworker or supervisor, but not a supervisor's supervisor. However, this was the only significant moderation effect for hierarchical position, and gender did not significantly moderate the any of the indirect effects.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

Research on tattoos at work typically focuses on negative outcomes; however, only searching for negative effects may expose a personal bias and limit our understanding of the effects of tattoos at work. Our research investigated both negative and positive outcomes and showed that both negative and positive effects emerge for dark tattoo content suggesting that stereotypes elicited in the observer matter for how they perceive and treat tattooed employees.

And there were more significant effects related dark tattoo content than light tattoo content suggesting that dark tattoo content may be more salient than light tattoo content.

Contributing to stigma research, the findings suggest that context-specific stereotypes (i.e., stereotypes associated with the stigmatized characteristic) – in this case, tattoo-specific stereotypes of riskiness and artisticness – may be more important than general stigma stereotypes, such as competence and trustworthiness.

As for hierarchical position, the moderation results are mostly non-significant which may indicate that leaders are perceived in a similar manner to coworkers when it comes to visible tattoos. However, more research is needed to understand this the full range of tattoos at work.

Future Research

First, future research should explore the context-specific versus general stereotypes with other stigmatized characteristics (e.g., being overweight) to see whether these findings generalize to other characteristics. Second, to enhance external validity, tattoo research questions should be conducted in longitudinal field surveys to examine whether our results generalize to pre-existing leader-follower and peer-peer relationships.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that stigma towards tattooed employees is nuanced with the nature of the tattoo being an important consideration. Employees with light tattoos could not be differentiated from those with no tattoos, and employees with dark tattoos were perceived positively in some cases, namely as more artistic. In addition, hierarchical position was significant for only one effect suggesting that leaders with tattoos may be perceived similarly to

coworkers with tattoos. Overall, replicating these findings will be important to determine if the current state of tattoo stigma in the workplace.

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THE CONSEQUENCES OF MENTAL ILLNESS STIGMA IN THE WORKPLACE: DOES ORGANIZATIONAL ROLE MATTER?

Michaela Scanlon and Julian Barling

Despite growing awareness, workplace stigma remains pervasive, leading to pay disparities, limited opportunities, and insufficient policies to support those with mental illness (Baldwin & Marcus, 2007; Hogg et al., 2022). While workplace mental illness stigma has been extensively studied (e.g., Follmer & Jones, 2018), stigma directed at leaders perceived as experiencing mental illness remains understudied. Perhaps this because leaders are expected to embody qualities like resilience and competence (Epitropaki & Martin, 2014), leading to narratives assuming their immunity to mental illness (Barling & Cloutier, 2017). However, leaders do experience mental illness (Ipsos, 2017), and consequently may face stigma.

Mental illness stigma is rooted in negative stereotypes—such as incompetence or unpredictability—which mediate between signals of mental illness (e.g., observable symptoms) and discriminatory responses (Corrigan, 2000). The present research extends existing stigma literature by investigating bottom-up stigma—stigma directed by employees at leaders perceived to have mental illness; this challenges traditional assumptions that stigma flows only from those who hold power or influence (e.g., Link & Phelan, 2001). We further examine how such stigma affects employees themselves, revealing unintended consequences for their motivation and performance. Finally, we look at how these effects differ across different organizational relationships (i.e., leader vs. peer). We focus on two prevalent mental illnesses: major depressive disorder (MDD) and substance use disorder (SUD; Kessler, Berglund, Demler, Jin, Merikangas, & Walters, 2005).

Leaders are inherently perceived as competent and resilient due to leadership prototypes (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004). Conversely, mental illness is often associated with negative

stereotypes (e.g., incompetence and instability), and these negative attributions may dominate impressions of leaders, leading to reduced perceptions of their competence. Two theories help explain this dynamic. Negativity bias suggests that negative information (e.g., mental illness stereotypes) outweighs positive traits (e.g., leadership competence) in shaping perceptions (e.g., Nicolas & Fiske, 2023). Expectancy violation theory posits that leaders perceived as having mental illness violate societal expectations of leadership, often resulting in unfavorable evaluations (e.g., Burgoon, 2015). This is consistent with role congruity theory, which posits that individuals who display characteristics incongruent with their roles are often evaluated negatively (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Hypothesis 1 (Hypothesis 2): Perceived leader MDD (SUD) negatively relates to employee perceptions of leader competence.

Furthermore, perceptions of leader incompetence can diminish employees' trust in their leader's ability to provide support, feedback, and resources, undermining their self-determined work motivation (Deci et al., 2017). Employees may also be less likely to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) if they do not feel their leaders can reciprocate their efforts (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000).

Hypothesis 3 (Hypothesis 4): Perceptions of leader competence mediate the negative relationship between perceived MDD (SUD) and employee a) work motivation and b) performance.

Finally, we anticipate that the indirect effect of perceived MDD and SUD on employee motivation and performance through leaders' perceived competence will be greater when the target of stigma is a leader rather than a peer. More specifically, because our model rests on the assumption that there is a bi-directional influence between leaders and employees, and that

perceived leader competence influences employee's motivation and performance, we suggest that the effects of employee-peer stigma will be weaker.

Hypothesis 5 (Hypothesis 6): The negative indirect effect of perceived MDD (SUD) on employee a) work motivation and b) performance through perceived competence is more negative for leaders than peers.

METHODS

This study recruited 618 full-time North American employees through Prolific – that had never experienced mental illness and had no leadership experience – to participate in an online simulation. Participants were first assigned to one of two conditions where they read about an organizational member portrayed as either a leader or peer (male or female). They then read one of three workplace behavior vignettes: depicting major depressive disorder (MDD), substance use disorder (SUD), or a control scenario. Participants imagined working with the described individual and completed surveys on perceptions of role competence, work motivation, and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs). Demographic information was also collected, and participants were compensated for their time.

Analyses and Results

Analyses were conducted in SPSS (v. 28) using Hayes' PROCESS macro v.4.1 (Hayes, 2022). Supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2 (Table 2), negative direct effects emerged for both leader MDD ($b = -.589$, $se = .154$, 95% CI = [-.892 to -.286]) and leader SUD ($b = -1.147$, $se = .155$, 95% CI = [-1.452 to -.841]) on perceived leader competence. Moreover, the indirect effects of leader MDD on work motivation ($b = -.217$, $se = .066$, 95% CI = [-.351 to -.096]) and OCBs ($b = -.093$, $se = .039$, 95% CI = [-.182 to -.030]), and leader SUD on work motivation ($b = -.422$, $se = .086$, 95% CI = [-.603 to -.264]) and OCBs ($b = -.181$, $se = .063$, 95% CI = [-.316 to -.070]) through perceived leader competence were all significant (Table 2). Thus, Hypotheses 3 and 4

were supported. Finally, there was only support for organizational relationships as a significant second-stage moderator for the indirect effect of perceived MDD on work motivation through perceived competence ($b = -.131$, $se = .069$, 95% CI = $[-.279$ to $-.010]$), but not for MDD on OCBs, or SUD on either outcome (Table 3). Analyses revealed that the negative indirect effect of leaders' MDD on employees' work motivation ($b = -.289$, $se = .066$, 95% CI = $[-.433$ to $-.173]$) was stronger than that for peers' MDD on employees' motivation ($b = -.158$, $se = .052$, 95% CI = $[-.265$ to $-.063]$).

DISCUSSION

Our research provides a novel exploration of "bottom-up" mental illness stigma in the workplace, where employees stigmatize leaders perceived as experiencing mental illness. Through an experimental study, we tested and supported a theoretical model demonstrating how such stigma can inadvertently undermine employees' own motivation and performance. Additionally, we examined these dynamics across different organizational relationships.

These findings have significant theoretical implications. First, they challenge the traditional view of workplace mental illness stigma as solely "top-down," with leaders stigmatizing employees, by demonstrating that stigma can also flow "bottom-up," independent of formal power dynamics. Second, we reveal how employees who stigmatize leaders or peers perceived as having mental illness may unknowingly hinder their own success, illustrating that stigma has repercussions not only for its targets but also for its perpetrators. Third, our results show that the effects of mental illness stigma are pervasive, persisting regardless of whether the target is a leader or a peer. Together, these findings emphasize the need to address mental illness stigma from all angles in workplace interventions, moving beyond a top-down focus to recognize its broader implications for organizational dynamics and employee well-being.

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Table 1*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between Study Variables*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Participant Age	39.27	11.80	618	--										
2. Participant Gender	1.50	.51	618	.141**	--									
3. Leader Gender	1.50	.50	308	-.021	.128*	--								
4. Relationship	1.50	.50	619	.033	.019	--	--							
5. Leader MDD	.53	.50	205	.033	-.003	-.059	--	--						
6. Leader SUD	.52	.50	200	.000	.054	-.159*	--	--	--					
7. Peer MDD	.50	.50	216	.079	-.045	--	--	--	--	--				
8. Peer SUD	.46	.50	203	.015	-.034	--	--	--	--	--	--			
9. Perceived Competence	4.73	1.20	618	.035	-.013	.080	.011	-.254**	-.475**	-.315**	-.506**	(.93)		
10. Work Motivation	4.46	1.15	619	.014	.003	.008	.075	-.157*	-.143*	.014	-.138*	.341**	(.90)	
11. OCBs	4.09	.86	615	.054	.012	.017	-.008	-.073	.028	.103	.035	.168**	.384**	(.93)

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$. Cronbach's alphas are shown on the main diagonal. Both gender and leader gender are coded 1 for male and 2 for female. MDD and SUD are coded for 1 MDD or SUD, respectively, and 0 for control. Relationship is coded as 1 for employee and 2 for leader.

Table 2*Unconditional Indirect Effects of Leader Mental Illness: PROCESS Model 4 (Hypotheses 1-4)*

<i>Direct Effects on Mediator: Perceived Competence (M)</i>								
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI					
			<i>LL</i>	<i>b</i>				
Leader MDD	-.589*	.154	-.892	-.286				
Leader SUD	-1.147*	.155	-1.452	-.841				
<i>Outcome Variables:</i>								
Work Motivation (Y_1)					OCBs (Y_2)			
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI				95% CI	
			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
<i>Direct Effects on Y_x</i>								
Leader MDD	-.145	.153	-.447	.157	-.045	.126	-.294	.203
Leader SUD	.112	.164	-.212	.435	.228	.135	-.037	.494
Perceived Leader Competence	.368*	.056	.258	.478	.158*	.046	.068	.245

<i>Indirect Effects on Y_x through M</i>								
Leader MDD	-.217*	.066	-.351	-.096	-.093*	.039	-.182	-.030
Leader SUD	-.422*	.086	-.603	-.264	-.181*	.063	-.316	.070

Note. * $p < .05$.

Table 3

Conditional Indirect Effects of Mental Illness: PROCESS Model 14 (Hypothesis 5 and 6)

<i>Unconditional Indirect Effects on Y_x Through M</i>								
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI					
			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>				
MDD	-.631*	.107	-.841	-.420				
SUD	-1.204*	.109	-1.419	-.989				
<i>Outcome Variables:</i>								
Work Motivation (Y_1)					OCBs (Y_2)			
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI				95% CI	
			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
<i>Direct Effects on Y_x</i>								
Perceived Competence	.043	.147	-.247	.332	-.007	.123	-.249	.235
Organizational Relationship	-.947*	.473	-1.877	-.018	-.638	.396	-1.416	.140
Competence X Relationship	.208*	.092	.027	.389	.113	.077	-.039	.264
<i>Conditional Indirect Effects on Y_x Through M X Organizational Relationship (W)</i>								
MDD Index of Moderated-Mediation	-.131*	.069	-.279	-.010	-.072	.056	-.190	.028
Peer	-.158*	.052	-.265	-.063	-.067	.038	-.141	.008
Lead	-.289*	.066	-.433	-.173	-.139*	.047	-.241	-.058
SUD Index of Moderated-Mediation	.022	.057	-.087	.138	.001	.042	-.084	.080
Peer	-.216*	.048	-.314	-.125	-.107*	.034	-.174	-.041
Leader	-.194*	.044	-.284	-.112	-.107*	.034	-.176	-.043

Note. * $p < .05$. Organizational relationship was coded 0 (peer) and 1 (leader).