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

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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.

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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

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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

to address gender inequality. For instance, by being very critical of junior women and endorsing stereotypes of junior women as less ambitious and less committed than junior men, queen bees legitimize current gender differences in important outcomes that put women at a disadvantage compared to men (Derks, Ellemers et al., 2011; Derks, Van Laar et al., 2011; Ellemers et al., 2004; Faniko et al., under review). It has been found that women who achieved personal success in male-dominated organizations perceived selection procedures as legitimate, even when there were clear signs of gender bias (Stroebe et al., 2009). In our work among policewomen, we found that senior policewomen denied that gender discrimination was still an issue in their organization and reported low willingness to mentor junior women (Derks, Van Laar et al., 2011).

Related to the denial of structural disadvantage, queen bees have been found to oppose gender equality policies for junior women (Derks, Van Laar et al., 2011). For example, one study found that while women at the nonmanagerial level were much more in favor of gender equality policies than men (e.g., flexi-time, quota policies, additional training for women), women at the managerial level were just as unsupportive of these measures as men were (Ng & Chiu, 2001). Similarly, in a sample of senior management women in Australia, 58% opposed quota policies designed to promote more women in top positions (Rindfleish & Sheridan, 2003). Nuancing these findings, a recent study showed that senior women opposed quota policies that would benefit the career of *junior* women or that would benefit *themselves*. However, these women did support policies designed to support *senior* women at their own organizational rank (Faniko et al., under review). This finding again suggests that queen bee responses target junior women but do not indicate a more general reluctance to support women.

State vs. trait

It is important to note that while the queen bee label suggests that some women are queen bees and others are not, we see the queen bee phenomenon as a more gradual response. That is, while some women show more queen bee responses than others, the same woman may show more queen bee responses in one situation than in another. Moreover, while the separate aspects of the queen bee phenomenon may not be harmful or even be seen as queen bee responses in themselves (e.g., many ambitious women emphasize that they have masculine qualities like being competitive and assertive, and many women feel different from other women), it is the combination of these aspects (i.e., distancing oneself from other women, presenting oneself as very masculine and legitimizing the existence of gender inequality) as well as the goal of this behavior (i.e., achieving individual success at the expense of other women) that we refer to as the queen bee phenomenon.

Explaining the queen bee phenomenon

In this contribution, we will review a number of mechanisms that can explain the responses typically displayed by queen bees. Our analysis clarifies that senior women show this response pattern as a way to assimilate into male-dominated organizations in which men are valued over women, and that their reluctance to help other women to achieve similar career success is a consequence of this assimilation strategy. In fact, the expectation that women at work should be nice to each other and promote each other rather than compete for promotions (as men do) is itself based on prescriptive gender stereotypes of female communality and male agency (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Others have argued that the queen bee concept itself is sexist (Mavin, 2006, 2008; Sheppard & Aquino, 2013). We agree that the queen bee label is problematic, but rather than disregarding this phenomenon altogether, in our investigations we go beyond gender-focused explanations of the queen bee phenomenon.

For example, previous work has assumed that women's hostility toward other women indicates a generalized attitude that characterizes women's relations and serves to limit collective action. Accordingly, this work has related the queen bee phenomenon to the degree to which women were unsatisfied with themselves and dependent on men (Cowan, Neighbors, DeLaMoreaux, & Behnke, 1998). Instead we review results from our research showing that rather than being the main *cause* of gender inequality at work, the queen bee phenomenon is itself a *consequence* of gender discrimination, and that the phenomenon is triggered by negative stereotypes that women encounter in male-dominated work settings.

With the research we review in this contribution, we make two important points. First, we present evidence showing that queen bee responses are elicited when women experience social identity threat at work. Here we put forward that the queen bee phenomenon is found especially in contexts in which women come to see their gender as a liability to career success, so that distancing themselves from women becomes a way of improving their personal outcomes. Second, we argue that the strategies women use to overcome negative group-based stereotypes and enhance their professional success are found not only among women. We provide evidence for this position by reviewing research that reveals similar "self-group distancing responses" among other marginalized groups in the workplace.

The queen bee phenomenon is a response to social identity threat

A primary goal in examining the queen bee phenomenon is to demonstrate that this response is not a typical consequence of women's personalities or inherent competitiveness toward other women but is triggered in work settings in which women are devalued and negatively stereotyped. This argument is based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals base their identity partly on their gender. When members of disadvantaged groups are in a minority position they are likely to perceive that their group's typical characteristics are not valued or considered important (Derks, Van Laar, & Ellemers, 2006). Thus, when women at work are confronted with the low number of women in management, or with stereotypes of women as unsuitable leaders or inequalities in pay, their identity is threatened. However, rather than passively experiencing

this social identity threat, people are often quite resilient in managing a threatened identity (Ellemers, 1993; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002).

The social identity perspective details different strategies that people may use to this end and distinguishes between coping strategies at the collective and the individual level. Collective-level strategies reduce identity threat by improving the position of the group as a whole. Perceptions of the position of the group can be improved by re-evaluating existing group characteristics ("social creativity"), or by working to improve group-level outcomes ("social change").

As a social creativity strategy, women may focus on positive gender-stereotypic qualities (e.g., empathy, interpersonal skills) and emphasize how these may fulfill important job requirements, for instance, in participative leadership. The danger of doing so, however, is that emphasizing their positive gender-stereotypical qualities may limit their career opportunities to leadership in gender role congruent domains such as human resources or family law. Moreover, experimental research on the "Glass Cliff phenomenon" (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010) has suggested that emphasizing stereotypically feminine attributes may increase women's chances of being selected for highly risky leadership positions in businesses that are in crisis. Women in glass cliff positions are often not provided with necessary resources to perform well, as they are expected to capitalize on their allegedly superior people skills (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007; see also Ellemers et al., 2012).

As a social change strategy, women may, for instance, protest when promotion requirements or career decisions illegitimately disadvantage women (Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 2001). However, modern expressions of sexism are often subtle and implicit, discouraging women from engaging in collective action attempts (Ellemers & Barreto, 2009). Additionally, research has revealed that those who do challenge existing business practices in this way may be disliked and devalued as troublemakers, even if their complaints are perfectly legitimate (Barreto & Ellemers, 2015).

By contrast, individual-level strategies aim to benefit individual outcomes by distancing the self from the disadvantaged group and seeking acceptance into a group with higher status ("individual mobility"; Ellemers & Haslam, 2011). Women who distance themselves from other women and try to resemble men to achieve career progress engage in individual mobility attempts. These behaviors are the queen bee response. Although they may help to achieve individual mobility, they may harm other women, who seem less suitable for similar leadership positions (Ellemers et al., 2012). Thus, each of these strategies of coping with identity threat has its own costs and benefits. Based on the social identity perspective, we view queen bee responses as an individual coping mechanism by which women aim to improve their personal opportunities in work settings in which career options for women are restricted.

Women who experience threats to gender identity at work face a dilemma of promoting their personal opportunities or those of women more generally. An important factor determining how women solve this dilemma is whether they perceive the boundaries to higher echelons of the organization as permeable (Ellemers, Van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1990; Wright, 2001). The fact that in many organizations men on average hold higher status than women is not evidence for gender discrimination per se, as differences in outcomes between men and women are also due to other factors (e.g., differential career progress as a result of women leaving the workplace or working less to take on family responsibilities). The degree to which status differentials between men and women are due to illegitimate differences in opportunities is very difficult to determine as most of the barriers that women may encounter are invisible (Ellemers et al., 2012). As a result, diverging career outcomes of men and women are most times attributed to individual differences in abilities, ambitions, or life choices they make. Thus, highly competent women aim for individual mobility, instead of social change (Wright & Taylor, 1999). We argue that in work settings that are characterized by gender inequality, women come to see their gender as a liability to success. Rather than "rocking the boat" and incurring personal costs by challenging male hegemony with collective coping strategies, some women will respond to this situation by distancing themselves from the unfavorable image of women's career potential and pursuing individual mobility by assimilating into the masculine organizational culture.

Queen bee responses in male-dominated organizations

Initial evidence for the link between work settings that threaten social identity and queen bee responses came from studies showing stronger queen bee responses among women in male-dominated settings. For instance, one of the first studies on this topic examined this link by measuring queen bee responses among two generations of female university faculty in Italy (Ellemers et al., 2004). The reasoning was that because women of the older generation (born between 1921 and 1949) pursued an academic career at a time when this was exceptional for women, it is likely that they adopted a masculine self-description and distanced themselves from other women to achieve a career. Indeed, results revealed stronger queen bee responses among women of the older compared to the younger generation: Female faculty of the older generation presented themselves in a more masculine way than women of the younger generation, and reported stronger stereotypical perceptions of lower career commitment among their female compared to male doctoral students.

Taking the perspective of the junior women who are affected by queen bees, research in American law firms discovered that relationships between junior and senior women were more negative in firms where the representation of women at the higher levels of the firm was lower (Ely, 1994). Compared to sex-integrated firms (with at least 15% women partners), junior women in male-dominated firms evaluated their female supervisors as acting more masculine, being poorer role models and feeling less connected to them based on shared experiences as a woman.

Work by Sealy (2010) speaks to the role of perceived permeability of the status hierarchy in development of queen bee responses: Successful female directors in investment banks reported that they had taken on masculine behaviors at the start of their career in order to achieve individual mobility, but that they had abandoned this strategy over time because they became

aware of the lack of permeability and meritocracy in the promotion system, rendering this individual mobility strategy unproductive.

Self-group distancing to address social identity threat

There is also research that more directly measured the role of identity-related threats in the reluctance of senior women to help other women get ahead. For example, experimental research has shed light on the detrimental effect of token status on solidarity between women (Duguid, 2011). This work revealed that female team members were least likely to select a female candidate when they were the only woman in a highly prestigious team dominated by men (compared to a female-dominated team). Moreover, this reluctance was due to two types of threat. First, when female tokens had to choose between two *highly* qualified male and female candidates, they decided against choosing the female candidate because of the competition she would pose ("competition threat"). Second, when the choice was between a *moderately* qualified male and female candidate, female tokens decided against selecting a woman to the degree that they worried that her performance might reflect negatively on them ("collective threat").

The studies reviewed so far underline the role of threats to gender identity in queen bee responses among women. However, to substantiate the role of social identity in the queen bee phenomenon, one additional requirement needs to be met. That is, based on a social identity analysis of the queen bee phenomenon, not *all* women should respond to a devaluation of women at work by distancing themselves from this group. Individual mobility responses to social identity threat have been found particularly among group members who are not strongly identified with their group (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997; Ellemers et al., 2002). Even though these "low identifiers" do not care much about how the group is perceived by others (in contrast to group members who are highly group identified), the fact that they are categorized by others as members of this negatively evaluated group causes them to experience "categorization threat" (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 1999). The fact that others treat them as representatives of their gender group does not match internal self-views (Barreto & Ellemers, 2003). These women may distance themselves from the negatively evaluated group to cope with the threat the gender categorization poses to their social identity, as in the queen bee phenomenon. Based on this analysis, we predicted to find queen bee responses particularly (1) in settings that threatened the social identity of women and (2) among women who did not indicate being strongly identified with other women at work.

In two studies, we found evidence for the role of social identity in the queen bee phenomenon. The first was a correlational study among 94 successful senior women in a number of private, public, and semi-public organizations in the Netherlands (Derks, Ellemers et al., 2011). We asked them to report on the degree to which they identified with other women at work, and the degree to which they believed they had experienced and perceived gender bias and discrimination during their career. Then we measured several indicators of the queen bee phenomenon. As predicted, senior women presented themselves as more masculine, reported stronger gender-stereotypical perceptions of the career commitment of their female compared to male subordinates, and claimed to be more different from other women in terms of career commitment to the degree that they believed they had experienced more gender discrimination in their career (i.e., had suffered more social identity threat). However, this pattern was found only among women who were relatively weakly identified with other women at work. By contrast, among women who strongly identified with other women at work, queen bee responses were less pronounced and unrelated to the degree to which they had experienced gender discrimination in their career.

In a second study, we established evidence for the causal link between gender discrimination and queen bee responses in a male-dominated organization (Derks, Van Laar et al., 2011) by performing a field experiment among 63 senior policewomen in the Netherlands. We asked them to report on their current gender identification at work, after which we manipulated gender discrimination by asking half of the participants to describe in detail an experience with gender bias at work (i.e., high social identity threat). Participants in the low threat control condition described a situation in which their gender had not been an issue and their personal qualifications had been acknowledged.

Results revealed that being reminded of gender bias triggered queen bee responses, but only among policewomen who identified weakly with other women at work. In the high threat condition, they showed more masculine self-presentation and more distancing from other policewomen. These women also denied more strongly that gender discrimination still occurred in the police force, and they were less in favor of equal opportunity programs and more reluctant to mentor other women compared to women who identified more strongly with their gender. However, in the control condition, no such difference between low and high identifiers arose. Importantly, this study also revealed that not all women respond to gender discrimination with queen bee responses. In fact, women who indicated being strongly identified with their gender group responded to threats to gender identity with collective coping, that is, by becoming even more motivated to mentor other women and expressing support for affirmative action policies.

Together, the studies reviewed above reveal that the queen bee phenomenon is not an inevitable or standard response of women in high places. Instead, it is triggered specifically in work settings in which women experience social identity threat due to gender discrimination and negative stereotypes. Whereas such settings may motivate some women to support gender equality programs and stimulate the career of junior women (i.e., women who identify strongly with their gender at work), such settings make less strongly identified women promote their individual opportunities through queen bee behavior.

Importantly, these studies also suggest that the queen bee phenomenon can be combated by reducing threats to women's social identity, for example, through interventions that reduce negative gender stereotypes in the organization, or interventions that allow weakly gender-identified women to cope with identity threat in an alternative way (for example, with self-affirmation, Derks, Scheepers, Van Laar & Ellemers, 2011).

Personal sacrifices and perceived requirements

Finally, apart from the direct effects of social identity threat on queen bee responses, in a recent line of work we also found an indirect route through which negative career experiences of senior women lead them to become dissociated from other women (Faniko et al., in press; under review). There is a large body of work showing that conditions under which women are expected to perform are less favorable than those of men (see, for example, Ellemers et al., 2012). Women are expected to take primary responsibility for their family, but achieving career success requires that they prioritize their work over other life domains. For instance, women in leadership positions are more likely than men in such positions to be single or childless (Ellemers et al., 2012). As a result, senior women may feel that they have made substantial sacrifices in their personal life, such as in relationships with their partner and friends and in their decision to have children.

Illustrating the importance of perceived sacrifice, two studies among senior and junior women in Switzerland and Albania examined whether the sacrifices women make when they pursue upward mobility explain why senior women perceive themselves as more committed to their career than junior women and are less willing to help junior women who have not been through similar hardships (Faniko et al., under review). As anticipated, we found that, compared to junior women, senior women reported having made larger sacrifices for their career success. Senior women also showed stronger queen bee responses than junior women (i.e., more masculine self-presentations, stronger distancing from junior women in terms of career commitment and masculinity, and more opposition toward gender equality policies targeting junior women). Mediation analyses revealed that the larger personal sacrifices senior women had made for their career relative to junior women could statistically account for why they perceived themselves as more career committed and more masculine than junior women and why they more strongly opposed policies that would benefit the career of junior women.

However, these data also refuted interpretations of the queen bee phenomenon as stemming from general hostility and competitiveness among professional women. That is, results also revealed that senior women did not distance themselves from other *senior* women in terms of career commitment, and that they did support equality programs targeting these more senior women, possibly because they had made sacrifices similar to their own. Together, these results provide an important qualification to the queen bee phenomenon by showing that queen bees distance themselves not from women in general, but more specifically from women who have not (yet) made the sacrifices necessary to survive in male-dominated organizations (see also Faniko et al., in press).

The queen bee phenomenon is not specific to women

Second, we review evidence to show that the queen bee phenomenon is not a response found only among women. Instead, queen bee-type behavior occurs not only among women under threatening circumstances, but also among members of other negatively stereotyped groups when they are subjected to group-based devaluation at work. As do women, when members of negatively stereotyped groups pursue upward mobility in fields traditionally dominated by members of the higher status outgroup, attempts to promote the self may require them to renounce claims to equal treatment by other members of their group (Ellemers & Van Laar, 2010; Van Laar, Bleeker, Ellemers, & Meijer, 2014). We refer to such distancing behavior that is found in a broader variety of devalued groups as *self-group distancing* (Derks, Van Laar, Ellemers, & Raghoe, 2015).

Self-group distancing can be a strategic activity in which individuals deliberately dissociate themselves from the negative aspects of their group's stereotype. This strategy may involve downplaying aspects of the devalued identity in their communications to others, but such responses can also be internalized into how that person sees him or herself (Ellemers, Barreto, & Spears, 1999). As is the case with women displaying a queen bee response, we expect that self-group distancing occurs in particular when members of stigmatized groups find themselves in threatening outgroup settings, in which they feel that their identity as a member of a negatively stereotyped group is valued less than that of the majority or high status group, but in which they perceive some opportunity for individual mobility.

Also, in parallel to the queen bee phenomenon, we expect that self-group distancing is more likely to occur among those who are less identified with the negatively stereotyped group. Those who are more strongly identified with their group are likely to be more loyal to the group and will promote group-level claims to equality rather than showing self-group distancing (Ellemers et al., 1997; Ouwerkerk, de Gilder, & de Vries, 2000; Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997; Tropp & Wright, 2001; Van Laar et al., 2014).

Evidence for self-group distancing under social identity threat has been observed among other groups than women. A classic example is a study by Snyder and colleagues, who showed that individuals tend to disassociate from losing teams (avoiding picking up and wearing team badges, and not wanting to publicly associate themselves with their group) as a means of decreasing their association with unsuccessful others (Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1986). Work among gay men has also found that they distance themselves from the stereotype of gays as effeminate. Gay men do so by emphasizing hyper masculinity and by expressing negative views about effeminate acting gays (Bishop, Kiss, Morrison, Specht, & Rushe, 2014; Clarkson, 2006; Eguchi, 2009; Fields et al., 2015; Han, 2009). Consistent with this distancing motive, "acting straight" or "straight acting" has become a common term to describe gay men who are not considered effeminate (Alderson, 2014; Clarkson, 2006). Additionally, it has been found that

whereas gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants most times stress the essentialist nature of their sexual identity, they move away from this essentialist description of their identity when it is devalued by others (Morton & Postmes, 2009).

Work in the area of aging and identity has found that, under threat of negative age stereotypes, older adults distance themselves from their age-group, especially when they experience low age identification. They distance themselves from the group through associating with the group of middle-aged, for instance, by rating their own age as closer to that of the middle-aged and by looking longer at photographs of middle-aged adults (Weiss & Freund, 2012; Weiss & Lang, 2012). Moreover, older individuals may distance themselves from their own age-group by perceiving the self as less similar to pictures of same-age adults, by directing their gaze away from older adults and by reporting a more expanded future time perspective relative to same-age counterparts. For example, one study found that older adults characterized the problems of other-older adults as more serious than their own in areas in which they themselves experienced problems, with this tendency especially pronounced under high threat (Heckhausen & Brim, 1997). Additionally, research on identity and aging provided evidence for the psychological benefits of this self-group distancing, with self-group distancing increasing levels of esteem, and this effect being especially strong among those who prior to the experiment had the least positive implicit attitudes toward their group (Weiss, Sassenberg, & Freund, 2013).

Research on "acting white" also provides some evidence for assimilation into a higher status group and distancing from one's negatively evaluated ethnic group. First suggested by Fordham and Ogbu following anthropological research, the concept describes a phenomenon in which members of negatively stereotyped groups are perceived to distance themselves from others of their negatively stereotyped group in order to be upwardly mobile (Fordham, 2008; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). They came up with the concept following their work with African American children in difficult inner city school circumstances where the intergroup conflict was so large that African American children faced with academically successful members of their group would accuse them of "acting white." Evidence for self-group distancing was found, for example, through African American students adopting White students' way of talking and acting. Similarly, a recent study found that African American students underlined dissimilarities and social distance from other members of their racial group and avoided what was perceived as more stereotypical African American speech and behaviors (e.g., avoiding what were perceived as ghetto masculine characteristics), unless they were alone or with someone whom they felt very comfortable (Fordham, 2008). Others too have written more broadly about phenomena in which upwardly mobile individuals are perceived to be psychologically distancing the self from the group (Jetten, Summerville, Hornsey, & Mewse, 2005; Neal-Barnett, Stadulis, Singer, Murray, & Demmings, 2010), and in various cultures, distancing is reflected in negative labeling (e.g., "Lost Black Soul" among African Americans; see also Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Early research on stereotype threat also provides examples of self-group distancing by showing that African Americans tend to move away from self-descriptions that evoke their negatively stereotyped racial identity when exposed to negative stereotypes about African Americans. For example, Steele and Aronson (1995) showed that African American participants under threat (vs. control) more strongly denied interest in a variety of activities and rated as less self-descriptive various personality traits that had been pretested as being associated with images of African Americans and African American life (e.g., playing sports, enjoying being a "couch potato," listening to rap music and playing basketball; being lazy and aggressive/belligerent). Similarly, research showed that African American participants under threat responded by characterizing themselves less stereotypically, by actively inhibiting stereotype-relevant words in a word-fragment completion exercise, and by sitting further away from a low-performing African American individual (Cohen & Garcia, 2005). Significantly, these self-group distancing responses were found only among African Americans with relatively low racial identification. Finally, successful African American students have been found to avoid contact with other African American students and affiliate primarily with students from other ethnic groups (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992).

In our own recent work, we also examined whether upwardly mobile members of ethnic minority groups under threat will assimilate into higher status groups and underline their dissimilarities and social distance from other members of their negatively stereotyped ethnic group (Derks et al., 2015). As expected, we indeed find that self-group distancing occurs most under threatening circumstances, and is more likely among those less identified with the group.

Specifically, we examined Hindustani employees in the Netherlands, an ethnic minority group facing disadvantage in the labor market, with higher rates of unemployment, lower likelihood of obtaining permanent contracts at work, and high rates of reported ethnic discrimination (Nievers & Andriessen, 2010). In parallel with our research among policewomen (Derks, Van Laar et al., 2011), we asked half of the respondents to recall experiences with discrimination due to their Hindustani ethnicity (versus a control group in which respondents recalled an experience in which their personal qualifications had been acknowledged and ethnic bias had not been an issue), and examined self-group distancing behavior. The Hindustani individuals under threat indeed showed assimilation tendencies by presenting themselves more strongly in stereotypically Dutch terms (e.g., down to earth, direct). Moreover, they showed self-distancing tendencies away from other members of their negatively stereotyped group, reducing their positive affect toward the ingroup under threat. As expected, we found that these effects occurred especially among weakly identified (but not among high identified) Hindustanis. Thus, among Hindustani individuals, high threat and low identification trigger self-group distancing responses that strikingly resemble how women respond to gender identity threat.

Further establishing the more general role of social identity threat in self-group distancing among different devalued groups in society, we examined whether self-group distancing responses among young Muslim women of Moroccan and Turkish origin in the Netherlands could be reduced by offering ways to cope with threat (Gul, Van Laar, Derks & Ellemers, in preparation). Muslim women in the Netherlands (and much of Western Europe) face strong pressures from both the majority outgroup to conform, as well as from their minority ingroup to fit with traditions, and continue to be strongly underrepresented in higher education and work positions (Van Laar, Derks, & Ellemers, 2013). We examined whether identity safety through identity affirmation would

lower self-group distancing responses (Derks, Scheepers et al., 2011; Derks et al., 2006, Derks, Van Laar, & Ellemers, 2007a, Derks, Van Laar, & Ellemers, 2007b, Derks, Van Laar, & Ellemers, 2009; Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, & Crosby, 2008; Van Laar et al., 2013; Van Laar, Derks, Ellemers, & Bleeker, 2010; Walton, Spencer, & Erman, 2013). We indeed found that affirmation lowered self-group distancing, with identity affirmed Muslim women being less likely to deny ties with other Muslim women, experiencing less threat and anxiety and more positive challenge, and reporting a stronger sense of belonging.

Evidence for self-group distancing through the legitimatization of the current status hierarchy, albeit limited, also comes from work with other groups than women. Self-group distancing can take the form of agreeing with negative stereotypes of one's own group, denying the illegitimacy of lower outcomes for the ingroup, and by not supporting (or opposing) action to address social inequality facing one's group. Several studies have found that members of low status groups subscribe to negative stereotypes of their group by showing outgroup favoritism or ingroup derogation especially when they see opportunities for individual mobility. For instance, Verkuyten and Reijerse (2008) found that when Turkish Dutch students perceived opportunities to be individually successful in Dutch society, they subscribed to the stereotype of Turks as being less successful and persevering than the Dutch. Similar self-group distancing responses have been found among disabled students who, after receiving positive feedback about their individual abilities, reported enhanced identification with regular students and evaluated disabled students more negatively (Guimond, Dif, & Aupy, 2002). In a minimal group paradigm, Seta and Seta (1996) found that high performing low status group members favored the outgroup over the ingroup in order to disidentify from this group (for similar results see Ellemers, Van Knippenberg, De Vries, & Wilke, 1988; Ellemers et al., 1990).

To our knowledge, less research has been done to test the hypothesis that persons from disadvantaged groups may deny the illegitimacy of their group's lower outcomes or oppose action to address social inequality in order to distance themselves from their group. Of course, the work on system justification is rife with examples of members of disadvantaged groups who legitimize rather than challenge a system that deprives them of equal opportunities. They do so by agreeing with negative stereotypes about their group, perceiving the system as just and fair, and opposing policies that would reduce inequality in opportunities (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003).

However, there is only limited evidence that minorities also legitimize the system in order to distance themselves from their negatively evaluated group and achieve individual mobility. Some evidence is provided by work showing that African Americans and Latinos with relatively weak ethnic identification are least likely to support affirmative action policies (Elizondo & Crosby, 2004; Schmermund, Sellers, Mueller, & Crosby, 2001). Moreover, token systems in which minorities have a very small chance of gaining access into higher status positions can motivate individually successful tokens to limit opportunities for other members of the disadvantaged group (Wright & Taylor, 1999). That is, in an experimental paradigm, students who had achieved access to a high status group under very strict token conditions (only 2% of students from their college were allowed access) were just as unwilling supportive of collective actions by other students of their college as students who had achieved individual mobility in an open meritocratic system.

Consequences of the queen bee phenomenon

The queen bee phenomenon is a pervasive but relatively unknown dynamic in which gender inequality is perpetuated and legitimized. When women assimilate to masculine organizational cultures, agree with negative aspects of stereotypes about women, and deny that gender discrimination may still exist, this response is a powerful force that keeps the current gender hierarchy in its place. Despite the anticipated benefits for the careers of individual women, there are also important costs associated with this strategy to escape group-based devaluation. We will now consider the negative consequences that the queen bee dynamic has for women leaders themselves, their subordinates, the organization, and the societal position of women more broadly.

Consequences for women leaders

Concerning the effects queen bee behavior has for women leaders themselves, it is possible that, in the short run, queen bee behavior improves women's opportunities for being selected into powerful positions. Especially in organizations in which most managers are men, the suggestion that the higher status of men relative to women may change in the future may lead men to experience social identity threat (Scheepers, 2009). Selecting a queen bee into an influential position may alleviate this threat to men's status because it serves to protect the status quo in two ways. First, promoting one woman into a powerful position helps to suggest that the organizational hierarchy is permeable, which will alleviate internal or external pressures to improve opportunities for women (Wright, 2001; Wright & Taylor, 1998). Second, selecting a woman who explicitly legitimizes the current gender hierarchy (e.g., by denying that gender discrimination exists) over a woman who seeks to improve opportunities for other women further serves to protect the status quo in which most positions of power are held by men.

Nevertheless, in the long run, queen bee responses are likely to come with substantial costs for the support women leaders receive. The main source of support for queen bees seem to be other senior women (Faniko et al., in press; under review). However, in companies where queen bees are most likely found (i.e., organizations dominated by men), other senior women are not always present. Moreover, the large body of work on the backlash that women leaders experience when they show behavior that is incongruent with their gender role (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Rudman & Phelan, 2008) strongly suggests that women leaders more generally (i.e., regardless of whether they show queen bee behavior or not) elicit stronger resistance than men in leadership positions.

However, whereas senior women who did not distance themselves from other women in order to be successful are likely to receive support from their female subordinates, queen bees are not (Ely, 1994). This is because low status group members will only support individual mobility from talented group members to the degree that they perceive these group members are affectively involved with the low status group (Van Laar et al., 2014), which is obviously not the case for women leaders who have distanced themselves from other women. So even if queen bee behavior would be beneficial for women in achieving career success in the short term, in the long term, it may come with substantial costs that result in suboptimal work conditions for women leaders compared to their male peers.

Finally, because queen bees distance themselves from other women, they do not benefit from the supportive psychological effects that identification with other women may provide. The work we reviewed suggests that queen bee behavior most likely develops in male-dominated organizations in which women experience gender discrimination and have to combat negative expectations about women and leadership. We know from work on rejection–identification processes that these are exactly the circumstance under which women's psychological well-being can benefit from identifying with other women, as identification provides a buffer against the negative effects of perceiving gender discrimination (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Eccleston & Major, 2006; Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, & Owen, 2002). Queen bees have disidentified from junior women at work and only identify with the limited group of women who have achieved similar career success. Therefore, they may be less able to draw upon their gender identity to cope with the stress of gender bias and will have less opportunities to share their experiences and benefit from the support of other women compared to women who identify with other women at work more broadly (Haslam, O'Brien, Jetten, Vormedal, & Penna, 2005; Outten, Schmitt, Garcia, & Branscombe, 2009).

Consequences for junior women

For junior women, the queen bee phenomenon is detrimental as their career ambitions and perceived opportunities for success may suffer when their female supervisor and potential role model has distanced herself from junior women. First, senior women who express gender stereotypes about their female subordinates can be quite influential in the career of junior women because their stereotypical evaluations are more credible and damaging to women's career, and less likely seen as sexist than when men express similar opinions (Baron, Burgess, & Kao, 1991; Sutton, Elder, & Douglas, 2006). Therefore, their negative evaluations of other women compared to men subordinates may limit junior women's actual opportunities. However, queen bees may also damage junior women's self-confidence because when junior women expect that senior women will act in their best interest (Ely, 1994), they may attribute negative feedback coming from them even more internally than they would had it come from a male boss.

Second, particularly in male-dominated organizations, junior women are in need of female role models (Gibson, Cordova, Murrell, Crosby, & Ely, 1999; Gilbert, Gallessich, & Evans, 1983; Lockwood, 2006; Sealy, 2010; Sealy & Singh, 2010). However, junior women in male-dominated (vs. sex-integrated) companies have been found to rate senior women as poorer role models who behave in ways that reflect negatively on women as a group and who are difficult to work with (Ely, 1994). Moreover, comparison with successful senior women can threaten the self-esteem of junior women (Parks-Stamm, Heilman, & Hearns, 2008) unless junior women are able to identify with them and see their success as attainable (Gibson, 2003; Hoyt & Simon, 2011). When potential female role models are unwilling to relate to junior women and emphasize that they are very different from them, junior women are more likely to be demoralized rather than inspired by them as they may perceive upward mobility as unattainable and even undesirable.

Consequences for organizations

The queen bee phenomenon can diminish outcomes for organizations by limiting opportunities to benefit from the diversity that women have to offer (Ellemers et al., 2012). One reason to improve gender diversity in organizations at all levels is to capitalize on the diverse perspectives and work styles that men and women bring to the organization (Post & Byron, 2015). The queen bee phenomenon limits companies' ability to actually reap the benefits of gender diversity because when women feel that they need to adjust themselves to the masculine organizational culture in order to be accepted, they are unlikely to add a diverse perspective. Moreover, queen bees affect the diversity climate negatively as they signal to junior women that in order to be accepted they need to deemphasize their gender, possibly leading to even higher turnover rates among women in companies with queen bees in management than companies with no women leaders.

The queen bee phenomenon can even lead companies to discontinue gender equality policies as in the case of the Dutch telecom firm KPN that recently abandoned its quota policy. Here the diversity officer claimed that while they were looking for "senior women who, based on their femininity would bring other values, insights and qualities to the company" the women who were promoted "were in their behavior and competencies very similar to the men who were already there, including their shortcomings" (De Jong, 2014). Therefore, in order to improve gender diversity, companies need to do more than simply parachute a couple of token women into positions of power. These token women leaders are unlikely to add their "feminine approach" to the company and be role models for their juniors if they think this will harm their personal opportunities. Instead, companies should scrutinize their organizational culture and examine whether gender diversity would indeed be welcomed.

Consequences for the gender hierarchy

On a societal level, the queen bee phenomenon is a powerful source that legitimizes current gender inequality because it allows people to conclude that women are themselves to blame for their lower outcomes. Especially in the popular media, the queen bee phenomenon is presented as evidence that it is not the system that is unjust, but that rivalry between women causes senior women to limit career opportunities of their junior counterparts (see Mavin, 2008, for an overview). This perception stems from the stereotypical expectation that women should be cooperative and care for each other at work, while men are allowed to compete (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Indeed, it has been found that people tend to problematize work conflict between two women to a larger degree than work conflict between a woman and a man, or between two men (Sheppard & Aquino, 2013). The queen bee phenomenon fits this gender stereotype of women as hostile toward each other, and distracts from the real problem, which is the reduced opportunities and difficult circumstances under which women turn to queen bee behavior in the first place.

Additionally, the research on the hierarchy-stabilizing force of token systems suggests that queen bees can send a powerful message to society as their presence and declarations about their own career path give credence to the perception of a just system in which gender discrimination no longer exists (Wright, 2001; Wright & Taylor, 1998). And when top women themselves confirm that gender discrimination no longer exists and that women who do not succeed in breaking through the glass cliff are simply not trying hard enough, social and political pressure to tackle gender inequality at work will quickly dissolve.

Furthermore, token systems in which a limited number of women enjoy power erode motivation of other women to collectively combat gender inequality because they are unlikely to see the illegitimacy of this system (Ellemers, 2001; Wright, 2001). Consequently women — especially those with high talent — will try to improve individual rather than collective outcomes, and the critical mass needed to instigate collective protest will not come together. In conclusion, because of the many levels on which the queen bee phenomenon operates and affects women, as well as the inconspicuous nature of these effects, this phenomenon is an extremely powerful force that limits opportunities for women and preserves gender inequality in society.

How to combat the queen bee phenomenon

Given the far-reaching impact of queen bee behaviors on opportunities for women at work, we propose that future research should focus on discovering ways to eliminate this dynamic. The analysis we put forth here of the causes of queen bee responses offer insight into how to combat this phenomenon. From our social identity account of self-group distancing responses among women, two avenues for reducing queen bee responses emerge.

Reducing social identity threat

Queen bee behavior emerges as an individual mobility response to social identity threat among women who are not that strongly identified with other women at work. Put differently, the queen bee response is just one of multiple ways in which weakly gender-identified women can cope with threats to their gender identity. We propose that women would not turn to self-group distancing responses if they either would not experience this threat (e.g., in companies in which a substantial amount of women hold executive positions), or could reduce social identity threat in an alternative (less detrimental) way.

We have argued that queen bee responses follow from a specific kind of threat that women experience, namely, the threat of being categorized by others as a woman rather than an individual (categorization threat; Branscombe, Ellemers et al., 1999). Others have similarly proposed that women and racial minorities with low group identification worry that low performance of other group members might negatively reflect on them (Duguid, 2011; Shapiro & Neuberg, 2007; Wout, Danso, Jackson, & Spencer, 2008). In our previous work, we have found that this form of threat can be combated by offering women affirmations of their personal identity (Derks, Scheepers et al., 2011; Derks et al., 2009). When women focus on their personal values and accomplishments, they affirm their self-concept (Aronson, Cohen, & Nail, 1999; Steele, 1988), which should reduce threat and the need to cope by distancing themselves from other women. In-class self-affirmation exercises have been found highly successful in combating the negative effects of stereotype threat on the academic performance of African American students in the US (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006). Moreover, among women, self-affirmation has been found to protect their performance under stereotype threat (Martens, Johns, Greenberg, & Schimel, 2006).

In our own work, we found that self-affirmation can also come in the form of positive feedback from others (e.g., the experimenter, supervisors), offering scope for practical interventions to reduce gender identity threat in work settings (Derks, Scheepers et al., 2011; Derks et al., 2009; Gul et al., 2015). For example, apart from teaching women at work to perform self-affirmation exercises to deal with job stress, positive personal feedback from supervisors may reduce concerns among women that they are seen through the lens of a negative gender stereotype. Some preliminary evidence for this hypothesis can be found in our examination of self-group distancing among senior policewomen (Derks, Van Laar et al., 2011) and ethnic minority employees (Derks et al., 2015), where weakly identified women or Hindustanis showed similarly low self-group distancing responses to high identifiers when they had been instructed to think about times when their personal qualities had been acknowledged.

However, although self-affirmation may be a good way to mitigate queen bee responses among weakly gender-identified women, we do need to add that distracting highly gender-identified women from their social identity with self-affirmation can undermine their motivation to pursue social change (Derks et al., 2009). Hence, although we see self-affirmation as a suitable intervention to limit queen bee responses among women leaders, strategies that reduce women's belief in system legitimacy and individual opportunities may be more effective in motivating women leaders to use their power to instigate social change.

Reducing belief in system legitimacy

A second way in which the queen bee phenomenon may be reduced is by making women more aware of how implicit gender bias and collective disadvantage affect the outcomes of women as a group, and how they may personally be affected by gender discrimination. Obviously, promotion systems are not by definition illegitimate or discriminatory toward women. Differences in outcomes for men and women at work are due in part to actual differences in life choices (e.g., women spending less time at work than men). However, to the degree that promotion systems are discriminatory toward women (e.g., due to gender stereotypes or sexism), queen bees are unlikely to notice this. In order for women leaders to become involved in improving opportunities for junior women, they need to be persuaded that the lower outcomes of women compared to men may not only be due to women working shorter hours in order to care for their children, or having lower ability, but are also limited by gender stereotypes (Ellemers, 2002; Van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004).

One reason why perceptions of discrimination are generally low is that modern expressions of sexism tend to be subtle and implicit; they emphasize that differences in outcomes for men and women are not due to systematic disadvantage and implicitly convey that existing inequality must be due to differences in deservingness (Ellemers & Barreto, 2015; Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995). Moreover, research on the personal/group discrimination discrepancy shows that even when women are aware of gender discrimination at an aggregate level, they are less likely to notice it when gender inequality impacts upon their own life (Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990). Women with low gender identification are especially likely to report that they experience discrimination less than other women, supposedly as a way of distancing themselves from other women (Hodson & Esses, 2002).

Focusing on queen bees specifically, it is very likely that they not only perceive less discrimination when it is present, but that they are in fact less likely to be the target of gender discrimination compared to women leaders who are more strongly gender identified: Previous work has revealed that low identifiers are not only less likely to detect group-based discrimination (Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003; Operario & Fiske, 2001) but also experience less personal discrimination because prejudice and discrimination is targeted particularly against strongly identified minorities (Kaiser & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009). We think that ambitious women might be less inclined to pursue individual mobility through the queen bee phenomenon if they would be more aware of the structural disadvantage that women face and if they perceive their personal opportunities to move up in the status hierarchy as limited by discrimination (see also Sealy, 2010). It has been found that being aware of personal discrimination elicits higher identification with one's group (Branscombe, Schmitt and Harvey, 1999), further promoting collective rather than individual coping strategies.

This analysis suggests that queen bee responses may be a temporary strategy by which women face the demands of organizations in which gender bias hampers opportunities for women, but only when they still believe in individual opportunities for promotion. An intriguing possibility that warrants further investigation is that women leaders in organizations with promotion structures that favor men for illegitimate reasons may stop using the queen bee strategy when they have come across sufficient evidence to overturn their belief in the legitimacy of this promotion system. Not only does this idea offer opportunities for interventions that reduce the queen bee phenomenon – by increasing awareness of personal and group-based disadvantage when it is present – it also holds promise for the positive part that powerful women leaders who were formerly queen bees may play later in their career when they become motivated to use their power to improve equal opportunities for women and men in their company.

Conclusion

In this contribution, we provided an overview of research on the queen bee phenomenon and offered an explanation for why some women turn into queen bees on their way up the organizational ladder. By uncovering the organizational dynamics in which queen bee responses are most likely triggered, and the underlying social identity processes that explain this response, not only among women but also among group members more generally, we aimed to contest the common conception that the queen bee phenomenon is a typically female response. One image the reader could take away from this review is one of gender-biased organizational cultures in which ambitious women make large personal sacrifices and have to distance themselves from other women in order to achieve their personal career aspirations. However, the research we review also points to women who do choose collective responses when confronted with organizational gender bias, and to organizations in which women do not have to choose between their gender and professional identity in order to get ahead. The next step in this research field is to develop interventions that help combat self-group distancing, allowing members of socially devalued groups to easily combine their work and group identities.

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