

Exploring the nexus between microlevel and contextual influencers on women leaders' paradox mindset

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Abstract

Purpose – Women leaders struggle with the persistent paradoxical expectations. Literature suggests that a paradox mindset helps to leverage these tensions. This study aims to understand the nexus between the microfoundations of individual women leaders' experiences, their responses and the organisational context, which enables or hinders their paradox mindset.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopted a qualitative approach by conducting semistructured interviews with 14 women, all senior leaders in corporate South Africa.

Findings – The results reveal the interaction in the nexus between, firstly, women leaders' authenticity and awareness as key anchors that enable them to adopt a paradox mindset and, secondly, the organisation's role in creating hindrances or opportunities to leverage tensions. Women leaders in our sample applied one of two strategies: they either adapted to the environment or curated a subenvironment. This study shows that, if done authentically, through her own agency, a woman can influence interactions that make it easier to manage tensions within her environment, especially those created by negative performance evaluation because of unconscious institutional gender bias.

Research limitations/implications – The extent to which the findings of this research can be generalised is constrained by the selected research context.

Originality/value – This research contributes to the literature on paradox theory by revealing organisational contextual influencers, such as institutional bias in negative performance evaluation, which hinders a woman leader's opportunity to be hired or promoted. These organisational influences also interact with women leaders' ability to embrace paradox and internally leverage agentic and communal tensions.

Keywords Diversity, Organisational behaviour, Performance appraisal, Women executives, Equality, Paradox, Gender stereotypes

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

We live in an era in which paradox theory, research and practice has grown exponentially (Berti *et al.*, 2021). In this paper, we contribute to this domain by shedding new light on the



absurdities and contradictions embedded in organisational life. Drawing on the original conceptualisation by Lewis (2000) and Smith and Lewis (2011) of paradox as “contradictory, yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (p. 382), we consider the microlevel dynamics (Miron-Spektor *et al.*, 2018) and their interaction with the role of the organisational context in framing paradoxes around women leadership. In response to Waldman *et al.* (2019) call to conduct more studies on the microfoundations of organisational paradoxes, we offer deeper insight into the lived experience and responses of individual women leaders to the tensions in their organisations. Our contribution lies in exploring the nexus between these microlevel individual experiences and the organisational contextual elements which intensify an individual’s experience of tensions and facilitate or hinder the leveraging of these paradoxes. Paradox theory begins, after all, with the premise that employees’ experience of tensions is shaped by both environmental factors and their cognitive and emotional processes (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Pradies *et al.*, 2021).

Scholars have even turned to paradox theory as a metalevel approach to make sense of our recent lived experiences during COVID-19 (Pradies *et al.*, 2021), which illustrates the relevance of the theory to address today’s business challenges. Paradox theory is used as a lens to navigate the crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as it is “a theory that explicitly considers the simultaneous management of competing objectives” (Kober and Thambar, 2021, p. 2). Our study hones in on the paradoxical expectations and subsequently biased performance evaluations of women leaders because of the pervasive incongruity between how society perceives leader identity and the women’s gender identity (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Our paradox theorising provides novel insights into these women leaders’ struggles within the iron cage confinement (Pradies *et al.*, 2020) of persistent paradoxical expectations and evaluations.

The importance of this study is illustrated by the finding of the PWC (2020) (PricewaterhouseCoopers) Executive Directors Report (2020) that only 6% of chief executive officers on Johannesburg Stock Exchange-listed companies are women. This representation increases to 14% with the inclusion of women at an executive level. This is in spite of the fact that women account for 46% of the workforce (Fajardo and Erasmus, 2017), highlighting that men far outnumber their female counterparts in leadership roles. Erkal *et al.* (2021) lament that the proportion of women in leadership positions worldwide remains disappointingly low, referring to the 25.1% of women at executive or senior manager levels. According to Schock *et al.* (2019), gendered stereotypes depict women as predominantly communal, described as kind, sensitive and nurturant, while men are stereotypically depicted as agentic, described as aggressive, dominant and ambitious. Women may either be viewed as incompetent when deemed too highly communal or, paradoxically, face backlash for acting in a manner incongruent with their gender roles when exhibiting highly agentic attributes (Arnold and Loughlin, 2019; Schock *et al.*, 2019; Slesman, 2019).

The agency-communal tensions create anxiety, stress and unhappiness. A paradox mindset, however, could elicit positivity and the mental strength to face conflicts (Cuganesan, 2017; Slesman, 2019). Miron-Spektor *et al.* (2018, p. 26) define a paradox mindset as, “the extent to which one is accepting of and energized by tensions”. Pradies *et al.* (2021) note that a paradox mindset is even more critical during a crisis (such as the current COVID-19 pandemic) than in normal times. Pradies *et al.* (2021) report that leaders who were more effective during the COVID-19 crisis combined, for example, realism with care as well as agency with communion, and implemented short-term interventions with long-term recovery plans. The question therefore remains, how might the individual-level influencers or microfoundations of organisational paradox and the organisational contextual influencers interact to enable or inhibit a paradox mindset in women leaders?

We argue that current research narratives tend to place women at the mercy of societal expectations (Offermann *et al.*, 2019) and warn that this perspective limits the options available to manage tensions (Billing, 2011). On the other hand, by focusing only on the microfoundations, women leaders are blamed for not having the internal capacity and agency to deal with contradictory organisational expectations and evaluation feedback. We therefore propose a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” approach, in which we investigate the interaction between the individual and contextual variables rather than only focus on either macro (organisational) or microlevel (individual) influencers. Our study thus builds on previous conceptual research by Zheng *et al.* (2018a) which established that the paradox mindset could be influenced by elements specific to the individual as well as those within the organisation.

While several quantitative studies have highlighted boundary conditions between paradoxical leadership and various organisational outcomes (Shao *et al.*, 2019; Kearney *et al.*, 2019), this study contributes by deepening our understanding of paradox by offering rich perspectives of the very people who experience them.

Literature review

Role congruity theory

Role congruity theory reveals a disconnect between gender and leadership roles that can foster agentic and communal tensions within female leaders (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Agentic attributes are centred on driven behaviours and goal orientation (Abele and Wojciszke, 2007) and are generally associated with male gender roles. Communal attributes, on the other hand, are centralised on interpersonal relations and being nurturant (Abele and Wojciszke, 2007), which are generally associated with female gender roles. However, Schock *et al.* (2019) state that the two attributes are not necessarily binary; they can both be present within androgynous individuals.

A perceived incongruence between female gender roles and leadership roles can lead to prejudice and a lowered opinion, which may impact women’s chances of attaining leadership (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Meister *et al.*, 2017). According to Gardner *et al.* (2005), if an environment engenders behaviour unaligned with one’s authentic self, it can cause internal conflict. Contextual intelligence can then be applied, through diagnosis and awareness, that enables leaders to behave in ways that make them effective in their roles (Kutz, 2008). Incongruence is, however, context dependent. Ko *et al.* (2015) state that leaders need to be aware of the industry and its gender composition to identify areas of potential development. Thus, the extent to which women receive prejudice is not limited only to tensions from role incongruence.

Paradox mindset towards agency and communal tensions

Originally focused on organisations, paradox theory applies to individuals as well (Miron-Spektor *et al.*, 2018). Zheng *et al.* (2018b) reveal coping strategies that women in leadership can apply to deal with paradoxical tensions. Calabretta *et al.* (2017) state that thinking paradoxically is a considered strategy for managing tensions through the application of cognitive and behavioural mechanisms that leverage the differences of two opposing tensions. When faced with opposing forces, women can benefit from a shift in mindset. A paradox mindset can increase an individual’s levels of optimism when faced with challenging tensions that cause stress and negativity (Sleesman, 2019).

Zheng *et al.* (2018b) identify various strategies women use to transition more fluidly between agentic and communal attributes. Through behaviour and mindset, women can forge synergy between the two attributes, allowing them to coexist in a manner that enables

effective leadership (Zheng *et al.*, 2018b). This notion is supported by Pradies *et al.* (2020) who state that, in embracing paradox tensions, referred to as the virtuous cycle, women are able to create new understandings, leading to an exploratory journey of discovery (Leung *et al.*, 2018; Sleesman, 2019). Hoyt and Murphy (2016) explain that how a woman perceives herself can alleviate the negative effects of gender stereotype threats. A woman with strong self-belief and self-efficacy is likely to be protected from these negative effects (Hoyt and Murphy, 2016). Thus, a woman leader's mindset and capabilities can either enable or hinder her ability to manage conflicting internal tensions.

Organisational institutional cultural bias

The organisational culture can act as both an enabler and barrier to women aspiring to be leaders, as it affects their participation and employment opportunities (Dzubinski *et al.*, 2019; Offermann *et al.*, 2019). Culture shapes the beliefs and expectations individuals have about leaders, influencing implicit theories held about women as leaders (Yukl, 2013). Gender stereotypes are more likely to occur in organisations that are either populated mainly by men or require more male attributes to succeed (Heilman *et al.*, 2019). These environments then create institutional bias, where the stereotype of a leader is masculine, which in turn influences the hiring and promotion opportunities for women. Dzubinski *et al.* (2019) state that such a culture might make female leaders feel compelled to adapt their leadership styles to be accepted as competent through gender self-constraining behaviour.

On the other hand, an enabling organisational culture for women might encompass a focus on work–family balance, inclusivity and relationships, allowing more authenticity (Dzubinski *et al.*, 2019). Women leaders who can embrace authenticity may be able to influence the institutional bias in the culture around them over time (Gardner *et al.*, 2005). Alternatively, subcultures can be created in which there is a shared social identity and connectedness over the same beliefs and behaviour between leader and followers (Shin *et al.*, 2016).

The number of women within a male-dominated organisation can indicate an organisation's support of women, helping to reduce the effect of the stereotype threat (Hoyt and Murphy, 2016; Yukl, 2013). Gloor *et al.* (2020) support this by stating that a strong presence of women can help weaken existing stereotypes and help change leader prototypes skewed towards men.

Organisational leadership performance evaluation and feedback

Women leaders in institutional gender-biased organisations are likely to receive evaluations based on gender biases instead of their leadership potential (Ibarra *et al.*, 2013). This organisational macrolevel influencer might then intensify the tension and experience of the organisational paradox, as it might strike a chord, or resonate, with an individual woman. Inequity in development can impede a woman's hiring opportunities (Erkal *et al.*, 2021) and promotion into leadership (Beeson and Valerio, 2012). This can result in a “sticky floor” as women are unable to break the glass ceiling (Erkal *et al.*, 2021) by ascending into higher managerial level (executive and senior management) leadership roles because of fewer available promotions (Samuelson *et al.*, 2019).

To facilitate increased self-awareness around their performance, women are more likely to actively seek out feedback to address any gaps in their knowledge (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2020). Individual attributes held by women, such as self-awareness, interact with an organisational level evaluation process, thereby impacting their career advancement (Sanders *et al.*, 2017).

If the evaluation process is stereotypically biased, this can heighten agency-communal tensions, as women might feel forced to embody or disregard one over the other to receive favourable reviews (Doldor *et al.*, 2019). Dimotakis *et al.* (2017) state that while external situational factors can have an influence, internal factors concerning the individual recipient matter as well. Motro *et al.* (2020) add that individuals with feedback self-efficacy and high levels of grit as well as perseverance are better able to handle negative performance evaluation feedback.

To understand the enablers and barriers to women applying a paradox mindset, the following research questions (RQs) were formulated:

- RQ1. How do women in leadership experience the paradox of agentic and communal tensions?
- RQ2. How do women in leadership manage agentic and communal tensions?
- RQ3. How does the organisational context influence agentic-communal tensions experienced by women in leadership?

Methodology

Research philosophy

The ontology of the study is relativism, based on the philosophy that reality is relative and constructed in a person's mind and the study has a subjective epistemology as the women leaders impose subjective meaning on the events they experience (Creswell, 2013). The current study is thus positioned within an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm. The nature of the inquiry is interpretive, as a deeper understanding was required about how the situations unfolded naturally and how individuals made sense of the experiences (Yin, 2016).

Sample

The sample for this research consisted of 14 women in senior management positions in South African corporate organisations, with at least two layers of direct reports. To ensure that the women were in leadership positions, they were required to have had at least ten years of total working experience and at least a year in a leadership role. Eight of these had between 10 and 20 years of experience in leadership roles, while five had between 5 and 10 years. Only one of the respondents had leadership experience of less than five years. Half of the sampled women were white, five black and two were of Indian origin. Saturation was reached by the 12th interview; no further new insights were generated to further the study by additional interviews which also ensured the validity of the study (Creswell *et al.*, 2007). Two additional interviews were conducted to confirm data saturation, resulting in a final number of 14 interviews. Table 1 below gives details of the participants, using pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

A purposive snowball non-probability sampling technique was applied, given the restricted access into executive leaders in corporate organisations. Eight respondents worked in the financial services industry. They held divergent roles, however, thus ensuring diversity in the data collected. Two worked in consulting while another two were in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector. The insurance and pharmaceutical industries were represented by one respondent each. All respondents worked for corporations with offices in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Table 1.
Participant profile
demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Total years of leadership	Industry
Audrey	41–50 years	White	10–20 years	Pharmaceutical
Bianca	41–50 years	White	10–20 years	FMCG
Busisiwe	31–40 years	Black	5–10 years	Banking
Claire	41–50 years	White	5–10 years	Banking
Hazel	31–40 Years	White	5–10 years	Banking
Isabel	41–50 years	White	10–20 years	Banking
Kelly	41–50 years	White	10–20 years	FMCG
Lindelani	41–50 years	Black	10–20 years	Insurance
Nobantu	41 – 50 years	Black	10 – 20 years	Insurance
Priya	41–50 years	Indian	10–20 years	Banking
Taylor	31–40 years	White	5–10 years	Consulting
Thandeka	31–40 years	Black	<5 years	Banking
Ulwazi	31–40 years	Black	10–20 years	Consulting
Verusha	31–40 years	Indian	5–10 years	Banking

Procedure

The aim was to study and understand how contextual aspects, both individual and organisational, influence a paradox mindset of women in senior positions faced with the problem of agentic and communal tensions. [Creswell et al. \(2007\)](#) state that respondents' own accounts of their experiences can be used to provide details to understand their personal experiences and feelings. To study and gain in-depth understanding from these accounts, a qualitative methodology was required ([Creswell et al., 2007](#)). One-on-one semistructured interviews were conducted using an interview guide. Interview questions included open-ended and probing questions, for example, "how do you deal with agentic communal tensions at work?" and "how has the organisational environment influenced how you have experienced those tensions?". Prior to the first interview, a pilot test was conducted with two women to test the questions, gain experience and provide reliability ([Creswell, 2013](#); [Yin, 2016](#)). Minor changes were made as a result, and the participants formed part of the sample. The two women selected for the pilot were from different industries to increase the chances of representation within the sample. Given the risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews took place virtually using Zoom video conferencing at the convenience of the respondent ([Whitehead and Halsall, 2017](#)). In addition, [Whitehead and Halsall \(2017\)](#) state that rapport can be more easily established when there is a no direct visual and personal contact.

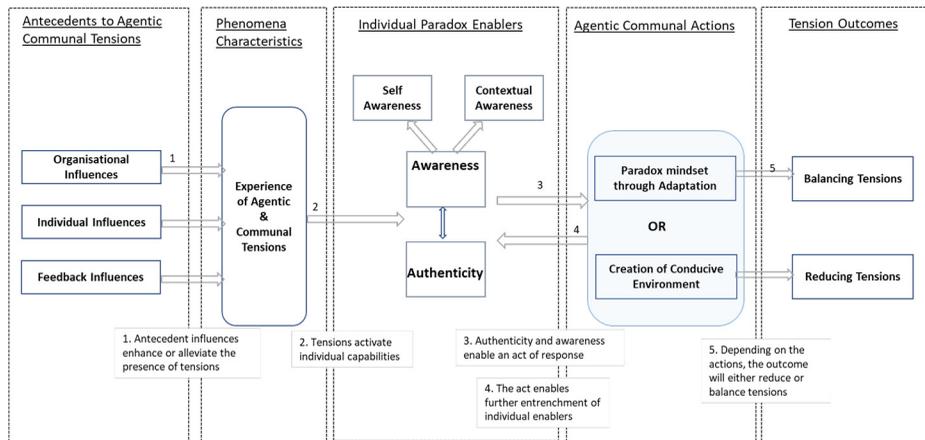
Data was analysed thematically, as described by [Braun et al. \(2016\)](#), by initially familiarising ourselves with the data and then coding and developing themes, followed by refinement. Generating initial codes and identifying patterns in the data were guided by finding meaning in the responses to the research questions ([Braun et al., 2016](#)). The Atlas ti software was used to code, organise and analyse the volume of interview data. Upon completion of coding, categories were created, from which themes emerged ([Creswell, 2013](#)).

Findings generated through analysis and resulting themes were then interpreted and incorporated into a conceptual model ([Figure 1](#)) illustrating how women leaders' paradox mindsets were influenced and enabled by contextual elements.

Findings

Participants were first asked how they experienced the paradox of agentic and communal tensions. [Table 2](#) shows the themes, defines them and lists representative quotes for each.

Figure 1.
Conceptual model of
managing agentic
and communal
tensions



Source: Authors' own (2020)

The terms participants associated with or used to describe, agency attributes were “tough”, “aggressive” and “assertive”, whereas “interpersonal” and “people-oriented” were used to describe communal attributes. Participants viewed the act of applying a paradox mindset as one of “balancing” or reaching a “centre”. Various themes emerged during the interview data analysis, and the following will be discussed in subsequent sections:

- tension manifestations;
- influencers of agentic and communal tensions;
- individual capabilities; and
- tension-managing mechanisms.

Theme 1: tension manifestations

This theme relates to *RQ1* about the experience of agentic and communal tensions. To understand the contextual elements that influence a paradox mindset, with regard to agentic and communal tensions, participants were first asked to describe if and how they had experienced these tensions. To different extents, all but two acknowledged that they had experienced these tensions in their current roles. Twelve explicitly stated that they were naturally inclined towards a more agentic or communal leadership style. One of the women who had not personally experienced any tensions, Busisiwe, described herself as being “very direct and most days [...] very assertive”. Interestingly, Busisiwe added that she believed that women were inherently nurturing, “I think that nurturing is in all of us, and I think women have more of those than men. However, you do need to be assertive as a leader”. The other respondent, Ulwazi, stated that she believed her strength was in her femininity, which she referred to as “soft power”. As a result, she had not felt any conflict nor a need to adopt more aggressive agentic attributes.

A common manner in which half the women experienced tension was during situations of internal conflict that resulted from behaving differently to their natural dispositions in an attempt to meet expectations. Thandeka described her experience as a constant battle:

Theme	Description	Example quotes
Theme 1: tension manifestations	Depiction of the different ways participants experience agentic and communal tensions	"I had that tension for a long time in terms of how can you be authentic; be yourself; and be a good leader"
Theme 2: influencers of agentic and communal tensions	Captures the contextual elements influencing the presence of tensions	
Subtheme 2.1: organisational influences	The influence the organisational environment has on how women experience tensions	"When you've got a particular type of personality and so forth that bring that culture, I think that's where you have either more or less of that tension"
Subtheme 2.2: feedback influences	The influence the feedback given by managers and peers has on how women experience tensions	"I think it was the directness of the feedback, it was very specific and you couldn't be ambivalent about what it required"
Theme 3: individual capabilities	Explores the capabilities that women have enabling them to manage tensions	
Subtheme 3.1: authenticity	In being authentic, women are better able to avoid the pressures of the tensions	"I am learning to also balance that in a way that shows that I am authentic and I am consistent"
Subtheme 3.2: awareness	Being aware of the self and the environment enables women to understand how best to respond to tensions	"I think it is important to be aware, self-awareness for me it is really important because it is the beginning in correcting any behaviour or make an improvement"
Theme 4: tension managing strategies	Reviews two approaches women use to address and deal with tensions	
Subtheme 4.1: paradox adaptation	Women adapt accordingly to tensions depending on the context to balance tensions	"It's around adaptability and needing to be adaptable as a leader to survive. To be successful as a leader you've got to be able to adapt . . . to certain situations"
Subtheme 4.2: creation of conducive environment	Women seek to reduce the tensions by creating an environment that is conducive for them	"Another way I am trying to manage that tension . . . is trying to implement almost a culture of feedback"

Table 2.
Themes, definitions
and quotation
examples

It is something that I actually am battling with, almost on a weekly basis. When I have to make a decision [. . .] I must also think about how I am going to be perceived [. . .] (Thandeka)

Nobantu, who described herself as assertive, had been making concerted efforts to adopt more communal attributes. By doing so, however, she went to the extreme of being so quiet that her colleagues called her out.

In response to the tensions, women often felt compelled to change to fit in. Audrey tried to mimic the behaviour of her former boss but ultimately found she was unable to. As a result, she felt “like a bit of a failure”, which caused unhappiness:

I wanted to become like him because he told me I was weak [. . .] I think I really was looking at him going “That’s how you have to be” to be a successful leader. (Audrey)

Lindelani shared how she had witnessed some of her female colleagues go as far as to change their personal attributes to fit in. She noted that they “cut their hair short like the men” and their “dress code becomes more masculine”. Verusha added that she had witnessed some women display either overtly submissive or aggressive behaviour, which she referred to as “polar ends to getting it wrong”.

However, changing leadership behaviours was not a viable option for all participants. To address the tensions, some women chose to conform to the expected leadership style, while others decided it was best to walk away. The women mentioned that this impacted their ability to be authentic. Taylor noted:

You start to be different to what is natural to you and as soon as you start doing things that don’t come naturally, you’re already seen as you’re not authentic anymore, and then it impacts your leadership style. (Taylor)

Theme 2: influencers of agentic and communal tensions

This theme addresses the organisational context elements that influenced the presence of agentic and communal tensions. It was analysed from an organisational, individual and feedback perspective. The subthemes of Theme 2 relate to *RQ1*, about the experience of the paradox, and *RQ3*, about the organisational context that might influence the experience of the paradox. The effect of each subtheme on tensions was either to alleviate, enhance or moderate them.

The contextual elements occurred on an industry, organisational or business unit level. Thandeka stated that the financial services industry was generally male dominated and lent itself to being a “harsher” environment that could elicit certain behaviours to fit in. However, she added that this could be mitigated to an extent:

I think that gets sort of counteracted by the fact that I personally have very good managers who are more understanding and are more transformational leaders and that lets off the older type of leadership. (Thandeka)

On the other hand, according to Bianca, the consumer market industry tended to be more inclusive of women.

Subtheme 2.1: organisational influences. This subtheme speaks to *RQ3*. At an organisational level, Kelly found that the male dominance tended to be mainly focused on driving results:

You do have to adjust your style a little bit and be a lot more focused on driving results out of people, that is probably where the biggest tension I have had comes from and it is not my natural style. (Kelly)

Audrey echoed similar sentiments regarding the influence of societal stereotypes. When she fell pregnant, a comment was made in a public forum that, “You’re pregnant, now your priorities will change”, causing her to become anxious about her role. On the other hand, an enabling environment fosters the ability to manage agentic and communal tensions at the same time.

Claire noted that different subcultures exist within the same organisation. According to her, the tensions “become even more evident with multiple businesses, because the pendulum is swinging in different ways in different businesses”. At a business unit level, Verusha’s experience was that she was expected to do the “nice warm fluffy stuff” by virtue of holding a human resources role. Verusha thus acknowledged that she has had it “easier”, as the implicit expectations of a softer style of leadership lessened the extent to which she experienced tensions.

The role of organisational leaders in shaping the environment and resulting expectations was mentioned as an influence on the experience of tensions by ten of the women. In certain cases, it created an implicit expectation to change behaviour. Lindelani noted:

Leaders in the organisation set the example of a cut-throat, backstabbing culture. The culture of climbing on the head of someone else. (Lindelani)

Claire stated that her leaders, “who really get the balance and are phenomenal from that [balanced] perspective”, gave her the space that made it “easier” to manage the tensions.

Two participants identified the role of diversity in alleviating tensions. Hazel stated: “What maybe would’ve lessened the tension is having more people like you, and there isn’t that. It’s a lonely place where you are working with a lot of sameness”. Busisiwe attributed the acceptance of her ascension, both as a woman and person of colour, to the journey of transformation in her organisation. “It is just having that basic awareness [of diversity], that makes it [managing tensions] easier”.

Half the participants experienced an increase in tension the higher they ascended into leadership positions. This also had implications for how the participants conducted themselves. Bianca noted that the more senior she became, “the more careful you have to be about what you say”. Seven women highlighted, however, that with time and varied experience, they were able to better manage the tensions and find a balance.

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic, although not related to the research question, illustrated the impact of a crisis situation on how women experienced agentic and communal tensions within their organisations. For Kelly, it enhanced her tensions, as she was working under more pressure for longer hours than usual. Thandeka stated that she struggled to be both empathetic and understanding while having to drive results as “there has been a lot of disruption in people’s personal lives and that sometimes affects people’s performance”. However, for some it provided an opportunity to show up differently, in a more vulnerable way, and connect with their staff. Isabel shared that “the nurturer comes out more” as she now had to take into account that “everybody has experienced loss during this time”.

Subtheme 2.2: performance feedback influence. This subtheme speaks to RQ3, concerning organisational influence on the experience of paradox. The importance of performance feedback in experiencing tensions was also flagged.

Women received performance feedback that related to and highlighted their leadership behavioural traits. Sometimes they experienced this feedback to be at odds with their expectations. Nobantu received the following feedback focused on her agentic attributes:

I was told that I was very assertive when you speak, people like step back, and you are intimidating. (Nobantu)

On the other hand, Kelly received performance feedback focused on communal attributes:

I do get some feedback to say maybe I am being too easy on my team. (Kelly)

Audrey noted that performance feedback caused her to experience anxiety and difficulty with the tensions:

His [her former boss] feedback was kind of leading me to believe that you could not resolve that tension, that you had to be one way; that you had to be strong. (Audrey)

The manner in which performance feedback was given also affected how the women in this sample experienced tensions. Receiving feedback in a “fair” and constructive process reduced the anxiety the women felt. However, Hazel said her feedback processes were a struggle as she received unconstructive feedback. She suggested that this could have been because all her leaders were men who were uncomfortable with how she might react. Claire stated:

[They] gave me regular feedback when they felt that maybe the balance was not there, one way or another. Either I was being too soft or I was being too hard. (Claire)

Although difficult to hear, feedback was appreciated, as it provided opportunities for development and improved behaviour. Nobantu was told to have a view, but that view should be measured so as not to be too harsh towards others.

Theme 3: individual capabilities

This theme addresses *RQ2* which pertains to how women manage agentic and communal tensions. It consists of two subthemes that emanated from the descriptions as key individual contextual elements, authenticity and awareness, with awareness described from the perspectives of both self and context.

Subtheme 3.1: authenticity. Ten of the women spoke about this topic. By remaining true to themselves, women were less likely to feel the pressures of the internal tensions of trying to be someone they were not and this helped to alleviate the experience. For Audrey, it enabled her to attain a healthier balance of the attributes that felt more natural:

When you feel like you can be yourself and you can be authentic [. . .] I think it's easier not to feel it as tension. (Audrey)

Another aspect related to authenticity was the ability to maintain and lean into one's femininity. Some women believed that this was their strength and thus did not feel compelled to adopt more masculine traits. Two views emanated from this perspective. The first spoke to the sufficiency of femininity. Ulwazi described this as “soft power”, which reduced the experience of tensions:

You have to [. . .] deliver yourself gracefully, always maintain your femininity because that is where that assertiveness [lies]. (Ulwazi)

The second view on the power of femininity spoke to there being a time and place to use agentic attributes in conjunction with femininity, depending on the context. This approach considers adaptation to tensions, rather than reduction. Claire stated:

For me that has been the magic source is that you don't have to be masculine in your style; you just have to be yourself and be authentic and be true. (Claire)

Hazel noted that, the value you bring is the fact that you bring emotion and that you are sensitive and that you see a different complexity to what a man does not see.

The women spoke of being driven by core values and beliefs to remain rooted. Taylor said when “faced with personal conflicts of integrity”, recognising her foundational values helped her find her “true North” to maintain her integrity. Hazel added:

You need to be aware of that stuff [values] within yourself to make the right decisions, because otherwise that tension will compromise you and consume you. (Hazel)

Subtheme 3.2: awareness. To address tensions, the women spoke of using their awareness of themselves to determine the most suitable response. Thandeka believed that having a balance did not in itself lead to being an effective leader, but that you could be one “as long as you are self-aware and aware of the potential negative impact of either of them”. They also spoke of an understanding and awareness of their contexts, which provided insights that influenced their responses. Starting with self-awareness, Priya shared how it enabled better management of tensions:

I think when you lack self-knowledge and you struggle through context, you may err on the side of what comes more naturally to you [. . .] But I think if you know that about yourself, you will naturally be able to instinctively assess a situation and know what’s required. (Priya)

Knowing themselves enabled the women to understand their “triggers” and “instinctively” assess situations to identify what was required. Upon gaining an understanding of self, five of the women spoke of how they had acquired new traits as a result. Priya stated: “I’ve sensitised myself to applying a more communal sense”.

Self-reflection was mentioned by seven of the women as a tool to enable self-awareness and analyse how to improve their behaviour. For Taylor, it was an opportunity to refocus on what was important and what she was prepared to do to succeed when faced with tensions. Two of the women spoke of creating mental headspace, which is closely related to reflection, to make decisions clearly. The use of coaches and mentors was also mentioned as a mechanism to increase self-awareness.

The second perspective on awareness, mentioned by nine respondents, related to contextual awareness. The women sought to understand their environment before deciding how best to respond to it. This required being well prepared and doing the “groundwork” beforehand. Hazel described it as the ability to “read the context and the dynamic”, resulting from correctly “reading the room” through observation and experience. Claire noted:

It’s purely through perspective, resilience, headspace and experience where I can now go in, and I can pretty much pick up on a situation pretty quickly and decide which one of those [attributes] I’m going to use. (Claire)

Navigating corporate politics was also seen as important, as it included understanding how to approach and manage key stakeholders.

Theme 4: tension-managing strategies

This theme continues to answer *RQ2* but focuses on the strategies applied to better manage the tensions. Participants spoke predominantly of two strategies, discussed below as subthemes.

Subtheme 4.1: environmental adaptation. This was the more common subtheme, and ten women described how adapting their behaviour depended on their interpretation of the situation. The ten participants viewed a paradox mindset as an approach to balance the two tensions. Additionally, the women acknowledged the value and need for both agentic and communal attributes. Seeing the value in both attributes was closely related to acknowledging and accepting the existence of the tensions. Priya stated:

You will understand a situation and navigate it in the right approach, you'll lean to one or the other depending on the circumstance and you'll judge that quite well. (Priya)

In this instance, responses were determined by the assessment of the situation or context.

Nobantu gave an example of adaptation; she embodied a more formal and forceful demeanour when engaging with her executive team versus being more approachable with her staff. Isabel mentioned applying a “balanced” approach first and then becoming “harder” later on if necessary.

Subtheme 4.2: creation of conducive environment. While the women could not control nor modify their organisational cultures or circumstances on their own, three spoke instead of their own agency in managing their immediate environments by creating subcultures. This subtheme speaks to reducing tensions as an alternative to balancing tensions. For Lindelani, she did not seek to balance agentic and communal attributes, as she was comfortable with maintaining her communal leadership. She stated, “I've made peace with how my preference for people will slow down my progression”.

Women curated their environments to enable them to manage tensions by reducing them, which allowed them to continue leading in their own style. These created subcultures within teams were based on women's values and beliefs to minimise the impact the environment could have on them. Kelly added that she regularly had to “manage upwards” to protect her team from the pressures of management. By doing so, she maintained her separate team culture and could “apply [her] own leadership styles”. Lindelani created “a sub-culture which is inclusive and inspiring” and which she believes can “overtake the assertive culture” in the long run. Creating boundaries, through time management and the separation of work and personal lives, also allowed women to control and manage their environments in a conducive manner.

Three of the women said that, upon understanding the context, they made a conscious choice to select the parts of the organisational culture they could accept. By being selective, women were not oblivious to cultural expectations. Instead, they were cognitively making decisions about what Lindelani referred to as the “minimums” demanded of that culture, while the “rest of that culture is optional”.

Discussion

According to [Pradies et al. \(2020\)](#), women can better manage tensions and internal conflict by adopting a paradox mindset. The primary contribution of this study to the literature is illustration of the interaction between, firstly, the microfoundations of the individual women's authenticity and self-awareness, which are key enablers to embrace a paradox mindset ([Figure 1](#)) and, secondly, organisational institutional bias, which influences the context within which these women are embedded. The role and importance of an individual's disposition and mindset in addressing any conflicts or tensions are also illuminated, supporting the findings of [Hoyt and Murphy \(2016\)](#) as well as [Smith and Lewis \(2011\)](#). However, the findings of this research take this a step further by revealing that authenticity and self-awareness empower women to act to address the tension and not merely accept it. They engaged with the culture around them and took control in areas where they had influence, for example by creating subcultures. Being rooted in their true selves enabled the women to perceive, interpret and then respond more naturally to situations, as they had ownership of their personal values and beliefs ([Gardner et al., 2005](#)). As a result, it was easier to manage tensions, as this was not forced nor imposed. The four key themes that emerged are discussed below and displayed in [Appendix](#), which shows their linkages to the data and literature.

Firstly, while women who identify as either agentic or communal in their leadership styles experienced tensions, the findings reveal that communal women appear to experience them to a greater negative extent. With leadership styles more congruent with the existing dominant leadership style (Arnold and Loughlin, 2019), the findings showed why naturally agentic women might experience less conflict. Women who described themselves as having communal leadership styles spoke of internal conflicts, such as feeling compromised in their values, feeling compelled to adopt new behaviours and unable to be themselves. Although the literature suggests that the leader identity is changing to embrace more communal attributes (Badura *et al.*, 2018; Panayiotou, 2020), existing implicit expectations described by the women reveal that traditional views remain in effect. Our findings confirm that the tensions increase the further participants ascend into leadership (Zheng *et al.*, 2018a). This is a concerning finding, as at higher levels of management the number of women decreases and to achieve equality, this number needs to increase.

Secondly, a woman's individual internal context, namely, her disposition and personal capabilities, helped enable the adoption of a paradox mindset (Smith and Lewis, 2011). By maintaining authenticity, they were empowered to deal with tensions, and they were not "forced" into a behaviour. Authenticity grounded women in their values and beliefs which enabled them to remain firm in the face of external pressures to change (Weiss *et al.*, 2018). Women also felt more confident to maintain their interpersonal and feminine traits in male-dominated environments because they believed in the uniqueness of their femininity and its value. They applied the mechanism of reframing of the emotions and sensitivity to change these into a strength (Zheng *et al.*, 2018b). Thus, instead of being compelled to change behaviour, women with a strong sense of authenticity had a firm anchor (Gardner *et al.*, 2005) and were able to respond naturally by adapting. While a paradox mindset did not necessarily result in increased optimism (Sleesman, 2019), it reduced anxiety and made it easier to manage tensions.

Self-awareness enabled women to understand themselves, and their "triggers", and therefore which responses would work best (Caldwell and Hayes, 2016). This self-knowledge enabled them to decipher which attributes to apply to which situations in a manner most suitable to their personalities. With this self-awareness, women could "assess" the "situation" they were in through the application of contextual intelligence (Kutz, 2008). This response was carried out within the ambit of their understanding and disposition, as opposed to being imposed by external forces.

Thirdly, performance feedback was an organisational mechanism that influenced how women experienced tensions. Participants referenced several organisational aspects that either enhanced or alleviated their experience of tensions. Yet, the findings indicated that management and peer feedback could effect change and engender a paradox mindset. Some of the participants received valuable feedback which helped them to manage tensions. This feedback drew attention to areas that were out of balance and also raised self-awareness (Dimotakis *et al.*, 2017). A few of the women revealed that performance feedback could, however, be destructive and cause them to experience anxiety and apply an "either/or" mindset. Thus, understanding and deciphering the intent and sincerity behind the feedback was identified as a determinant of the perceived value of feedback (London *et al.*, 2019).

Fourthly, the women applied two approaches to manage and deal with tensions. The first strategy was, based on their assessment, to adapt their behaviour and responses to different situations as needed (Kutz, 2008). Adapting is a recommended coping capability for leaders working in gender-incongruent industries (Ko *et al.*, 2015). The approach acknowledges the presence of both agentic and communal tensions, and that there is a time and place for both. It is similar to situational accentuating, the mechanism referred to by Zheng *et al.* (2018b),

and situational appropriateness, noted by [Blake-Beard et al. \(2020\)](#), in which agency and communal attributes are activated based on the needs of the current situation. This is not to reduce possible penalisation ([Wang, 2019](#)), however, but is rather a response to the interpretation of the context to seek a balance of tensions.

The second strategy was to create a conducive environment. This approach recognises that tensions exist but does not accept that they need to coexist ([Smith and Lewis, 2011](#)). It instead seeks to reduce tensions. The women recognised that their circumstances and organisational cultures were different from their leadership styles. Thus, in response, they applied agency to create their own subcultures that accepted and reflected who they were ([Smith, 2014](#)). Research refers to this as a vicious cycle ([Pradies et al., 2020](#)), which is characterised by anxiety and defensiveness ([Smith and Lewis, 2011](#)). However, the women in this study described reduced conflict and felt empowered to be themselves. [Shin et al. \(2016\)](#) state that subcultures are created based on either professional background, functional focus or location. However, these subcultures were instigated by the leaders of their own volition and agency in an attempt to create an authentic environment. This contradicts the findings of [Schock et al. \(2019\)](#) that indicate androgyny is needed to temper agentic-communal tensions; participants in our study used authenticity to temper the tensions. Interestingly, all three women who spoke of this approach identified as having a communal leadership style. Thus, this approach might not be applicable to, nor needed by, women with an agentic leadership style.

[Figure 1](#) shows the conceptual model of how the women leaders in our sample manage agentic and communal tensions and how they apply a paradox mindset. Three types of contextual antecedents were identified: organisational, relational and feedback. All three could either enhance or alleviate the tensions. However, feedback had the greatest effect in the form of a mechanism of change. As a result of these influences, women experienced tensions between agentic and communal attributes to varying degrees. However, this could be mediated by a woman's individual context in the form of her sense of authenticity and level of awareness. Both individual capabilities empowered women to better manage tensions and respond organically. Upon gaining insights into themselves and their environments, women responded using one of two strategies. Both strategies were grounded in maintaining their authenticity in alignment with their understanding of self and environment. These actions similarly influenced authenticity and awareness, representing a two-way connection between the individual and organisational context. In one strategy, they acted by adapting situationally and displaying either agentic or communal attributes, based on their interpretation. This led to the outcome of finding a balance of tensions by adopting a paradox mindset. In the other strategy, the women used individual agency to create a conducive environment in the form of a subculture. This led to the reduction of tensions and does not need the two attributes to coexist.

Limitations and future research

The study was limited to women leaders in corporate organisations, and the findings revealed that communal female leaders experienced tensions from the role incongruity to a greater negative extent than agentic women. [Wang et al. \(2019\)](#) note that to succeed in female-dominated industries, women ought to align contextually by adopting more communal attributes. Furthermore, the literature shows that leadership identity is changing to embrace more communal attributes ([Badura et al., 2018](#)). Thus, future research could focus specifically on female-dominated corporate organisations to explore whether women still rely as heavily on authenticity and self-awareness as capabilities to help navigate their careers.

The demographic requirements of this study were limited to years of experience in corporations not to race. However, two of the black women specifically referenced race when referring to their experience of tensions. [Zheng et al. \(2018b\)](#) similarly found that race did play a role in tensions between agency and communion. Given South Africa's racial history, future research could delve into the influence race has on how women of colour manage tensions and if their coping strategies are different to those of white women.

Practical managerial implications

The study reveals the importance of self-awareness and authenticity as key individual capabilities that women could use to empower themselves when dealing with agentic-communal tensions. While some of the women said they had developed self-awareness and authenticity over time, others mentioned the use of coaches and mentors. This study can therefore inform and support women's leadership and personal development programmes. Human resources departments could make it a policy that anyone promoted as a manager be offered training on unconscious bias to alert them to the potential of being biased when offering performance evaluation feedback. This could be supported by a requirement to publish remuneration earned by executive management to ensure transparency and linkages with the performance evaluation. The findings of this study illustrate the importance of policies on performance management processes. Programmes are required to educate managers on setting effective performance goals, performance evaluation and review, as well as holding an effective performance feedback discussion.

Furthermore, [Sanders et al. \(2017\)](#) advise companies to ensure that their appointment selection or promotion panel is gender balanced, this implies that there are both men and women represented on the promotion panel. Furthermore, learning and development departments could present the conceptual model developed in this study to entry-level women to help develop their ability to develop a paradox mindset to shape and improve the leadership pipeline with women better able to grapple with these tensions in new ways.

Conclusion

This study adheres to calls from [Miron-Spektor et al. \(2018\)](#) microlevel dynamics and [Waldman et al. \(2019\)](#) on microfoundations of organisational paradoxes. Aligned to [Pradies et al. \(2021\)](#) emphasis on paradox mindset, this study offers insights into how women in leadership can manage agentic and communal tensions through a paradox mindset. Ultimately, the findings reveal that a strong sense of authenticity and awareness, both of self and environment, enabled women to better deal with these tensions. The women either adapted by adopting the traits situationally to balance the tensions or curated their own subcultures in which they could maintain their inherent attributes, thereby reducing tensions. The study contributes the perspective of a nexus, by showing the connection between the individual context, in the form of women's agency to take control of their situations or adapt situationally ([Zheng et al., 2018b](#)) and the external context, in the form of the organisation. This nexus influenced the mindset women adopted, which in turn influenced their experience of tensions, which could be reinforced by performance feedback, which might, in turn, be influenced by institutional bias. This study's findings therefore have important implications for leadership development around increased awareness of unconscious bias especially during performance feedback.

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Findings	Research question	Categories	Themes and Sub-themes	References
Communal women experience to a greater negative extent than agentic women	Research question 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Negative consequences -Tension induced resulting experiences -Tension causing actions -Tensions from treatment -Tension caused by presence of others -Personal life influences -Relational alleviating factors 	-Theme 1: tension manifestations	Eagly and Karau (2002); Zheng <i>et al.</i> (2018a); Arnold and Loughlin (2019); Badura <i>et al.</i> (2018)
Individual context, namely, authenticity and awareness, mediate the effects of tensions and make them easier to manage	Research question 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Feminine soft power -Being yourself -Courage -A awareness enables balance -Open and growth mindset -Self-help mechanisms -Understand the context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Subtheme 3.1: authenticity -Subtheme 3.2: awareness 	Gardner <i>et al.</i> (2005); Caldwell and Hayes (2016)
Feedback as an organisational context can be used as a mechanism to effect change in how woman experience tensions	Research question 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Organisational -Organisational tensions -Organisational influences -Organisational alleviating factors -Tension causing feedback -Feedback processes -Feedback alleviating factors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Subtheme 2.1: organisational influences -Subtheme 2.2: feedback influences 	Doldor <i>et al.</i> (2019); Dimotakis <i>et al.</i> (2017); Dzubinski <i>et al.</i> (2019);
Woman can respond to tensions in one of two strategies: adapting to the situation paradoxically or creating their own conducive environment	Research question 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Accept presence of tensions -Attain balance -Create conducive environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Subtheme 4.1: environmental –adaptation -Subtheme 4.2: creation of conducive environment 	Kutz (2008); Shin <i>et al.</i> (2016); Smith and Lewis (2011); Zheng <i>et al.</i> (2018b)

Table A1.
Data and literature linkages to findings