Women Leaders as Containers: Systems Psychodynamic Insights into their Unconscious Roles

Claude-Hélène Mayer [1]
Rudolf Oosthuizen; Louise Tonelli [2]
Sabie Surtee [3]

1) Department of Management, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa, b) Institut für Therapeutische Kommunikation, Europa-Universität Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder), Germany
2) Department of Industrial and Organisational Psychology, UNISA, Pretoria, South Africa
3) HERS-SA, Cape Town, South Africa

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Claude-Hélène Mayer
Rhodes University
Sabie Surtee
HERS-SA

Rudolf Oosthuizen
Louise Tonelli
UNISA

Abstract

This article explores the self-defined roles of women leaders working in higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa in the context of systems psychodynamics and thereby increase the understanding of unconscious dynamics in HEIs. This qualitative study is based on the research paradigm of Dilthey's modern hermeneutics. Women leaders are containers of anxieties, while they act out defense mechanisms, such as splitting, projection, projective identification, introjection, idealization, simplification and rationalization. Splitting seems to be important in terms of categories such as mother/professional, mother/daughter, women/men leaders and White/Black women leaders. Women leaders further have introjected the roles of their mothers and female family members from their childhood. They do not embrace the full authority and agency of their leadership, and explore their own difficulties and negative emotions in others through projective identification. The findings create awareness of the roles of women leaders, strengthen women leadership and emphasise the need for leadership training taking the systems psychodynamic perspective into account.

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Mujeres Líderes como Receptoras: Sistemas Psicodinámicos de Percepción de sus Roles Insconscientes

Claude-Hélène Mayer
Rhodes University
Sabie Surtee
HERS-SA

Rudolf Oosthuizen
Louise Tonelli
UNISA

Abstract

Este artículo explora los roles autodefinidos de las mujeres líderes que trabajan en instituciones de educación superior (IES) en Sudáfrica en el contexto de la psicodinámica de sistemas y de ese modo aumenta la comprensión de la dinámica inconsciente en las IES. Este estudio cualitativo se basa en el paradigma de investigación de la hermenéutica moderna de Dilthey. Las mujeres líderes son contenedores de ansiedades, mientras que actúan mecanismos de defensa, como la división, la proyección, la identificación proyectiva, la introyección, la idealización, la simplificación y la racionalización. La división se da en términos de categorías como madre / profesional, madre / hija, mujeres / hombres líderes y mujeres blancas / negras. Las mujeres líderes también han introyectado los roles de sus madres y mujeres miembros de la familia desde su infancia. No abarcan toda la autoridad y la agencia de su liderazgo. Los hallazgos crean conciencia sobre los roles de las mujeres líderes, fortalecen el liderazgo de las mujeres y enfatizan la necesidad de capacitación en liderazgo teniendo en cuenta la perspectiva psicodinámica de los sistemas.

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Throughout history, leadership roles were generally held by men Organizations contain individuals who collectively and unconsciously give rise to psycho-social dynamics in the context of leadership (Bayly, 2015; Eckersley, 2016). The conceptual origins of systems psychodynamics include psychoanalysis, group dynamics and systems theory (Armstrong, 2005). The approach focuses on (un-)conscious phenomena in individuals and systems, and individual and collectivist emotions occurring in individuals within organizations (Bion, 1961; Schruijer and Curseu, 2014). Exploring psychosocial dynamics in the context of leadership provides a new understanding of dynamic change processes within organizations and in terms of individual development and personal growth opportunities within systems (Vikkelso, 2012).

Post-apartheid South Africa and Leadership

The number of women leaders in South African organizations has increased (Mayer, Surtee and May, 2015) and affirmative action (AA) policies and black economic empowerment (BEE) programs have been implemented to strengthen racial, cultural and gender diversity in workplaces. Higher education institutions (HEIs) find themselves in times of complex change and constant socio-cultural and gender restructuring processes (Mayer, Surtee and Barnard, 2015). Diversity markers such as gender, race and age impact on defining organizational roles (Newton, Long and Siever, 2006), which follow unconscious dynamics and need to be explored in depth to understand leadership and organizational effectiveness (Motsoaledi and Cilliers, 2012).

Women leadership in HEIs in South Africa has been researched extensively (Dezso, Ross, and Uribe, 2013; Mayer & Surtee, 2015; Mayer, Surtee and May, 2015; Mayer, 2016). Women leaders are challenged by complex, ever-increasing demands (Bezuidenhout and Cilliers, 2010), such as teaching, research, service delivery and internationalization (Louw and Mayer, 2008), work–life balance (Mayer and Barnard, 2015; Mdlongwa, 2014), and performance (Siddique, Hassan, Khan and Fatima, 2011). The increasing demands, ambiguities and uncertainties in South African organizations create strong unconscious dynamics which need deeper exploration (Motsoaledi and Cilliers, 2012) to give us new insights into

social defense mechanisms (Papadopoulos, 2015), and object relations (Townley, 2008).

Systems Psychodynamics and Group Relations

Systems psychodynamics theory, known as the Tavistock approach (Miller, 1993) or the Group Relations Stance (Brunner, Nutkevitch and Sher, 2006) is influenced by psychoanalysis, which provides patterns of interpretations from the perspective of the unconscious to understand experiences, processes, feelings, behavior and the systemic structure (Cilliers, Greyvenstein, and Africa, 2012; Steyn and Cilliers, 2016) based on underlying anxieties (Armstrong, 2005; Klein, 2005).

The system unconsciously aims at defending itself against feelings of anxiety. If anxiety is not addressed consciously, the system starts to show defense mechanisms which are expressed through certain relationship mechanisms, such as splitting, projection and idealization (Stapley, 2006). Psychoanalysis emphasises that individuals experience the most significant relationship across their life span with their mother (Klein, 1997). This relationship (the mother as the carer and nurturer) might then be projected onto leaders in the organization in an effort to cope with unconsciously experienced anxieties. Fraher (2004) highlights that organizational life is largely a product of previous work and childhood experiences; emotions a result of projective identification (Myburg, 2009) in which parts of the self are projected onto another person. To attribute the behavior to others, one has to identify with the other, thereby recognizing the behavior in itself, claiming that it represents a response to the object (Klein, 1988).

The individual needs an object to identify with to introject and contain projections (Klein, 1997). Through introjection, the individual replicates behaviors, attributes or other fragments of the surrounding world. During this process, experiences from the past are transferred to the present and unconsciously affect present behavior (Stapley, 2006). Based on unconscious anxieties, individuals experience splitting, which leads to the failure of people to see the self and others as a cohesive and realistic whole individual (Klein, 1988), but rather leads to all-or-nothing thinking in which the whole cannot be integrated.

Leaders as Containers in Organizations

Leaders are "containers" for emotions within systems and organizations (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992). If members of a social group are faced with uncertainty and ambiguity, they tend to report feelings of anxiety, helplessness, discomfort, hostility, disappointment and fear of failure (Motsoaledi and Cilliers, 2012). These feelings are usually absorbed unconsciously into the prevailing system. If this is not the case owing to overwhelming feelings, they are projected onto leadership or the leader's role. Anxiety-provoking situations experienced in organizations require containers for that anxiety (Shongwe, 2014).

The individual's reaction to being chosen as a container is to defend against the perceived containment of the group's anxiety. When anxieties run high, individuals communicate their needs through projective identification (Bion, 1961; Tonder, 2012). The relationship between the container and the contained manifests in maternal and psychoanalytic situations, making containment difficult when powerful defenses are mounted (Aram, Baxter and Nutkevitch, 2015; Armstrong and Rustin, 2015). The organization is then the symbolic parent who needs to protect (contain) its employees from the dangers associated with power, authority, termination, loss and the employees' own internal conflict, thereby containing anxiety on behalf of the employees for development to take place (Kaplan and Lipinsky-Kella, 2015).

Women Leaders in South Africa

Women leaders embrace alternative transformational power modes that are not entrenched in patriarchy or in coping strategies typical of women leaders in male-dominated work settings (Kinnear, 2014). Naik (2014) argues that gender parity changes in family and organizational systems lead to new opportunities for organizations. Missing agency and authority of women leaders in academia relate to women leaders' role as "containers" for certain systemic group dynamics and emotion regulations, and are associated with the experience of the "glass ceiling" effects (difficulties to get into senior positions in organizations) (Eagly and Carli, 2007) and "glass cliff"

phenomena (experiences of exclusion and marginalization once having reached senior leadership positions) (Ryan and Haslam, 2005).

Women leaders may experience conflict when individuals exhibit unconscious and unresolved parental discord and relate it to the women leader as they would to a mother (Shongwe, 2014). These projective emotional bonds might reflect the bonds individuals developed with their mothers (Cilliers and Werner, 2013). Counter-transference might occur when the woman leader becomes the symbolic mother who contains the group's anxiety (Cilliers and Werner, 2013). Women leaders, however, could also view their colleagues as children or siblings when the system provokes feelings of dependency, aggression and hope on an unconscious level (Fraher, 2004; Shongwe, 2014).

Role, Authority and Women Leaders

Organizations should create a sense of security and dependency for employees through containment and thought (Greyvenstein and Cilliers, 2012), and (un-)conscious psychological boundaries within/between conflicting subsystems (Kets de Vries, 2007). Formal authority can be delegated to women leaders in their normative role in the organization (Cilliers and Koortzen, 2005), while informal authority is created through recognition, self-authority and the relationship with authority figures in the leader's mind. The attitude of authority figures in the leader's inner world play a crucial role in how and to what degree external institutional roles are taken up (Naik, 2014; Stapley, 2006).

Organizations usually create structures to draw lines of authority on different levels, which might make it difficult for members to recognize and use their authority. The authority may be connected to strong emotions and might lead to misconceptions (Stapley, 2006). Long (2008) notes that the presence of complex human emotions and group dynamics might result in failures, such as broken agreements, misinterpretations of roles, confused boundaries or authority which is used illegitimately as power outside the boundaries of authority. Organizational processes are directed at managing anxiety with "safe structures", to which women leaders may respond by withdrawing from a boundary and psychologically harming their co-workers (Myburg, 2009). Further, these dynamics might lead to role ambiguity

because tasks and structures, objectives, expectations, and the scope and responsibilities of the job are not clear; this might result in lower job satisfaction, high job-related tension and lower self-esteem (Mudzumi, 2013). Other indicators may be depression and life dissatisfaction (Cope, 2003). Cilliers and Terblanche (2010) note the importance of work tasks in containing the anxiety of the system: if they are not adhered to, anxieties can hardly be contained and might be projected or introjected.

Methodology

This study expands previous research on South African women leaders (Mayer & Barnard, 2015) by analyzing unconscious group dynamics in HEIs to provide new insights into the unconscious roles of women leaders from systems psychodynamics viewpoints (Greyvenstein and Cilliers, 2012), thereby contributing to research on women leaders' unconscious roles from an underrepresented theoretical perspective.

Study Design

This study drew on a hermeneutic perspective in which lived experiences are studied to yield substantial descriptions of women leadership roles in South African HEIs (Creswell, 2013; Ramgoolam, 2005). Dilthey's (2002) modern hermeneutics was used to create an in-depth *Verstehen* (understanding), while the researchers applied a self-reflective attitude (Ratner, 2002). Data quality was ensured through voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, rigorous analysis and constant comparison of the data throughout the analysis (Charmaz, 2011). Researcher conducted inter-subjective validation processes throughout the research study (Yin, 2009).

Participants

Women leaders from the HERS-SA (Higher Education Resource Services South Africa), a non-governmental organization which supports the development of women leaders in HEIs, were invited through snowball sampling to participate in the research. About 900 women were invited to

participate and 23 women leaders agreed voluntarily to participate in qualitative interviews.

Measures

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews which took 30 to 60 minutes to conduct either in a face-to-face setting or via Skype. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Observations of one of the researchers in HEIs in South Africa were captured in field notes. Interview data was analysed following the five-step process of content analysis: step 1 – familiarization and immersion; step 2 – inducing themes; step 3 – coding; step 4 – elaboration; and step 5 – interpretation and checking (Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Kelly, 2006).

Procedures

Participants were based at eight different HEIs in South Africa. At the time of the interviews, the women leaders were all active in academic or administrative positions. Their ages ranged between 32 and 58 years, and they represented a diverse group of women from the four race groups defined by the South African Employment Equity Act (55 of 1998). The group consisted of three African (A), five Indian (I), four Coloured (C) and 11 White (W) South African women (self-defined). According to the Act, Africans, Coloureds and Indians are collectively grouped as Black. 13 women worked in academic positions (professors, heads of departments) and ten women worked in administrative (management) positions. They have been in their positions between one and 32 years.

Data Analysis and Ethics

The analysis included the identification of themes, categories and codes. Data gathered through observation at one selected HEI contributed to the deeper understanding, analysis and interpretation of data (Yin, 2009). Research ethics were applied throughout the research process and included informed consent, anonymity, voluntary participation and confidentiality.

Ethical approval was granted by the ethics research committee at Rhodes University in Grahamstown (South Africa) and HERS-SA.

Results

Women leaders refer to eight unconscious roles (themes), including the role of carer (35 statements), which is divided into the role of the carer/nurturer (17 statements), care for students and colleagues (10 statements) and care for the underprivileged (eight statements from Coloured, Indian and African participants only). The last category includes students from specific race groups, low-income and female students, "adult learners" and students from "lower social/class backgrounds".

Table 1
Roles in women leaders

Women leaders	Themes	Interview Numbers	Total
Roles	• Carer/Nurturer	• I9, I17, B12, B21, B29, C13, C23, C28, W5, W7, W14, W15, W16, W17, W6, W10, W11	17
	• Care for Colleagues/ Students		10
	• Care for Under-privileged	• B21, B12, I9, I17, C8, C13, W17, W15, W11, W7	8
		• B21, I9, I17, C8, C13, C23, C29, C19	**35**

Women leaders	Themes	Interview Numbers	Total
	• Interactor/ Collaborator	• B29, I17, C13, C23, C28, C19, W7, W15, W16, W17, W5, W6, W11, W2	14
	• Mother	• W14, W20, W26, I22, B12, B21, B29, C8, C13, C19 I17, C23	12
	• Achiever	• C23, C28, B12, I17, I22, W7, W14, W15, W16, W17, W11, W5	12
	• Professional	• B21, I9, I17, I22, C8, C13, C23, C28, C19, W15, W16	11
	• Mother and Professional	• B12, B21, I22, C8, C19, W7, W14, W16, W5, W20	10
	• Daughter	• B21, B29, C13, C23, C19, W10, W20, W2	8
	• Woman, Not a Man	• B12, B21	2
Total			**104**

In addition, 14 statements refer to the unconscious role of the interactor/collaborator, who interacts, collaborates and/or networks with colleagues, students and research partners on different levels. Women

leaders highlight their role as "mothers" (12 statements) in their organizations, 12 classify themselves as achievers and 11 statements refer to women leaders as professionals (responsible for actions, behavior and work). Ten statements refer balancing the roles of mother and professional, roles as daughters (eight statements) and women acting as women, not as men (two statements) (see Table 1). In the following, selected quotations are presented to provide insight into the experiences.

Theme 1: The Carer/Nurturer

Women leaders (e.g. W11) refer to women leaders as "carers" by describing them as sensitive, conscious carers who are concerned about the feelings of others, apply spiritual care, and foster deep and authentic relationships through caring. Caring is not only defined as a practical act of taking care of someone's physical wellbeing, but also as emotional, psychological and spiritual caring, which seems to be part of women leadership through the qualities of being sensitive, mindful and conscious (B12, W15).

> B 29, an African women leader, highlights:

> It comes from deep-seated issues of just being a woman; of minding or caring or helping others. In your engagement you should be bringing that. The side effects of the given is because of being a woman, a mother. There are women who give tough love. They do care, they do mind, but they also feel strongly that they are not going to mess your thinking around the issue. Men are generally people who would not necessarily apply mindfulness in most engagements. They would call a spade a spade and how you view it, it's your issue. Of course we cannot generalize.

Caring and engagement are viewed as gendered aspects of communication which women leaders should provide at work and which come with the side effect of not only being seen as a professional, but also being seen a mother. This leader sees a difference between how men and women lead, and describes women leaders as more mindful than male leaders.

Altogether eight Indian, Coloured and African leaders emphasise that they take care of "needy individuals" and the underprivileged. One Indian woman leader explains her care for the underprivileged (I18):

> To see them succeeding, especially those who come from very disadvantaged backgrounds.... By just being there for them.. ... I specifically look out for young girls who I know have the potential to do a lot better. ... I think, as a woman I can identify with that. They struggle because they are single women in the city, they have issues with violence, with sexual harassment, their issues are much more than what we experienced in those days. Then it's a question of alienation. As a woman who has come from a rural area to the city and experienced similar things, it does link back on your psyche and you can impact on their psyche.

Theme 2: The Interactor/Collaborator

Women leaders refer to the importance of their roles as interactors and collaborators (14 statements). W16 describes her ability to interact perfectly with her peers by communicating respectfully across hierarchical levels. While being an interactor, W16 explains that female qualities such as "being careful" or abiding by "the rules of the game" help her to interact successfully. W15 describes herself as a successful collaborator who "knows the rules of the game"; she describes her high academic position as challenging and stimulating. However, W16 also mentions the downside of being a successful collaborator, namely that you have to "give up your authenticity". According to W16, women often learn early in life to adjust to the communication and the context, but they forget to stay authentic.

Theme 3: The Mother

12 women see themselves at work in their unconscious role as a mother. An African leader (B12) points out the following:

> You know, as every woman, every mother, you bring children into the world and you have dreams about them. The same applies when you are appointed to a particular position. There are dreams that you have – goals you want to reach, and you want your contribution to be a

> meaningful one because you know that at the end of the day someone somewhere must be able to feel that I'm there and I'm making a difference in their lives, but if I can't do that then I feel less deserving of the position I hold. As a woman, I made an example of kids, there's no mother that wants to see her kid at the same level all the time. You want to see growth, you want to see development, and that adds meaningfulness in your life. You can see the contribution you are making to your child's life as they grow up and you realize that, I'm either on the right track or I'm not, and it makes a big difference in your life.

This woman draws an analogy between being a mother in a family and being a mother in the workplace. The main task is to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of others, which makes her feel deserving of her position at work. This shows that holding a professional position is connected to playing the role of a mother who wants to see growth in "her kids" at work. The professional role is only defined as meaningful when women leadership (in the family and in the workplace) leads to the development of others. For this woman leader, women leadership is all about fostering growth in others through a motherly attitude and care.

Theme 4: The Achiever

Women leaders often refer to themselves as "achievers". W7, for example, describes herself as goal- and task-orientated because she wants to achieve her personal and organizational aims. For C28, achievement relates to her advisory role:

> I tend to churn out reports, give information and do training, whereas I felt I would play much more of a strategic advisory role, so I'm trying to find that balance, by ensuring that the way in which we've configured the staff and my team that I could then be more of what I think I'm good at. So that is a challenge. I need to say, 'This is the advice that I can offer.' And that advice that I offer is credible. But what makes it credible? What are the things I need to put in place that makes it credible?

By fulfilling an administrative role instead of being an advisor, C28 shows her deep-rooted insecurity as a leader. She is not convinced that her work is credible and doubts her own ability to make a meaningful contribution. She says: "Men are should rather fulfil the advisory role, while women seem to be good at other things." Her gendered beliefs limit her as a woman leader and undermine her ability to achieve her goals.

Theme 5: The Professional

Women leaders highlight the importance of their professional role (11 statements). I22, an Indian academic, states the following:

> Visibility counts much, as I'm a woman, I'm a black female academic and I'm young. I've noticed that in terms of how people and students react to me. Students are really much more engaging; they approach me more easily than if I was older. But on the flip side, people don't take me seriously, because I'm a young black female. I basically have to work twice as hard in my workshop to show them that I actually am competent ... But in the nine months, I resigned twice and with the second resignation I said I'm not coming back. My head of department applied different performance criteria to myself and that of another senior White male academic. I was being judged with much harsher performance criteria and the micro-managing style used for me where the other person would have carte blanche. I felt that I didn't know if he would really be speaking to a White older man in the way he was speaking to me. Age, racial belonging and gender seem to be strongly connected to professionalism and professional performance.

This women leader describes her experience that professionalism is judged based on the intersectionalities of age, race and gender. Compared to a White male colleague, she felt micro-managed, underestimated and unfairly judged. She ascribed this to the way her superior classified her based on diversity criteria and not based on her role as a professional academic.

Theme 6: The Mother and the Professional

Ten women leaders refer to the conflictual experiences of being a mother and a professional at the same time. A young Coloured woman leader explains (C8) that she is challenged by her multiple roles as a mother, wife, daughter and leader. What makes her successful is her belief that she has been called by God to fulfil all the roles given to her. W7 emphasizes that she has to integrate work and home, while I22 highlights that she has to deal with her leadership role and being a wife. Also, B29 explains that balancing multiple roles is not easy:

> As women we tend to be given multiple roles, and for every role that we play we have to come out victorious. The expectations are so high that we need a place to kneel and cry and say, 'I'm supposed to be a superwoman and I don't think I can do that.' You are not supported emotionally, because you are expected to come out strong.

Theme 7: The Daughter

Women leaders do not only see themselves as carers, nurturers and mothers, they also sometimes see themselves as daughters. C13, a Black woman leader, indicates that she is patronized and treated like a child by a White male superior who acts as a father figure. She struggles to bring her authority to bear owing to role confusion which puts her in a daughterly position of disempowerment. She feels paralyzed and is unable to take up her authority and agency.

C23 describes how personal organizational experiences interlink with her patriarchal family structures:

> I am very much influenced by my gender, but also how my gender was implicated within the context in which I was raised and what I was exposed to afterwards. I grew up where women were very much seen as complementary and for that reason when I think of the women that I have been able to observe at close quarters growing up, I never knew what they wanted, never knew what was important to them. Their gender was always shaped by people like my father ... the women would just fall into line and buy into it somehow. In terms of how that is shaped, I think repressing the self has been a big part of how I handled conflict. And I've had to do a lot of hard work to get myself out of that mode of being. With varying success, there are

some times when I'm able to assert myself and other times when I'm not. But it is a work in progress always.

Theme 8: A Woman, Not a Man

Two black women (B12, B29) comment on gendered behavior in their role as women leaders. B12 requests women leaders to act decently and to treat others well, which will contribute to a positive output and to the success of women leaders. Here, being a woman includes striving for the best, accepting limitations, making a difference and being successful.

Discussion

This research indicates that women leaders (un-)consciously associate women leadership with gendered characteristics, such as being a "carer", "nurturer", "mother", "daughter" and "woman" (47 statements), while relating to women as "professionals", "achievers" and "collaborators" (37 statements). Ten statements refer to balancing gendered and professional roles. This study supports the idea that organizations use individuals to contain thoughts, emotions and psychosocial dynamics (Bayly, 2015; Eckersley, 2016), which at the same time reconstruct the individual's and the organization's inner life (Long, 2008). Findings show that gender, race and age play an important role in the workplace from women leaders' perspectives (Newton, et al., 2006) and highlight the boundaries between contemporary family roles and professional and work roles become diffused.

Findings show that women leaders strive for balancing their multiple roles to achieve organizational belonging (Cilliers and Koortzen, 2005). In their efforts to accomplish this, they defer to defense mechanisms to allay systemic anxieties. The split between the traditional role of carers, nurturers, mothers, and daughters in the mind of organization woman leadership might hold and the "new" role a woman holds in a leadership position within an organization. The themes and roles are discussed below in the context of the theoretical approaches of splitting, idealization, projection, projective identification, introjection and the viewpoint that women leaders are containers.

Splitting

Women leaders show tendencies of splitting, which means that they fail to see their self and others as a cohesive whole (Klein, 1988); there is therefore a division between their roles as female family members and their professional roles. According to Beck and Visholm (2014), they reproduce their family roles in the workplace, which are either filled with strength, agency and authority (e.g. the caring and nurturing mother) or with more subordinate roles, such as the role of the daughter with reduced authority and agency (Morley, 2014). There seems to be a split between desiring authority (as a carer in their professional roles), while transferring authority by not wholly fulfilling their roles (e.g. giving up strategic tasks; reducing themselves to giving reports).

Further, women leaders describe splits between the self and others in terms of racial, cultural and language group belonging; gender splits are expressed through perceived differences in performance criteria, roles, tasks and authority; generational and age splits (young versus old); and splits between performance and success (expectations to be victorious versus feeling like a looser). Splits are described as the perceived influence at work (wanting to make a difference, but taking on agency and authority not as a professional, but as a mother).

Finally, women leaders describe a split they see in women leaders who behave like males (indicating a split in gender roles among women leaders) and a split in women displaying female (mother) or male (father/manly) attributes. So, the group of women leaders is split in multiple ways: into female and male, into the ones who "pretend they know" and the ones who "do not know", and the ones who "treat others well" and the ones who "do not treat others well". The world is split into good/positive and bad/negative behaviors and attitudes. Women leaders seem to feel torn between their group and divided within themselves through splits in work abilities and differences in behavior (Shemla, et al., 2014).

The description of these splits might indicate role and identity conflicts (as in Cilliers and Koortzen, 2005; Myburg, 2009; Naik, 2014) and are displayed in women leaders in parental roles (as mothers) and male leaders as fathers, while they experience the organization as such as a symbolic parent (Shongwe, 2014). However, female leaders do not seem to experience the organization as a symbolic parent, which might be based on deep

insecurity and unconsciously perceived high anxiety levels in the organization which create the unconscious idea in women leaders that they must take on parental roles to overcome the system's inability to act as a symbolic parent. By becoming mothers, they define (family-related) subgroup boundaries within the organization, which provide them with the ability to contain anxiety in the organization based on well-known roles, splitting the organization into subgroups of family members (Myburg, 2009).

Idealization and simplification

Women leaders idealize the roles of carers, nurturer and mothers who contribute to the development of children, make a difference and so gain meaning. These roles become idealized and might provide them with a feeling of security by being based on their role models. They help them to contain anxiety by providing protection and shelter for "weak others", thereby dividing the world into strong and weak, helpers and helpless, powerful and powerless. The role of the mother becomes the role of the strong, powerful women leaders who seem to idealize themselves and reproduce the idealization of their own mothers (a product of their previous family experiences from early childhood) (Fraher, 2004).

Furthermore, women leaders simplify their roles when it comes to meeting the system's need for women leaders to act as containers for anxieties. The underlying dynamics of the oversimplification of roles, idealizations and splitting in organizations, may influence woman leadership being perceived as lacking in authority. Perceptions are that male leaders' authority "comes naturally"; but women leaders have "weak" role models, are overwhelmed by their multiple roles, are not (emotionally) supported; are not offered the tasks men are offered, face harsher performance criteria; and are mistreated based on their age, race and gender

Women leaders also simplify the notion of their own meaningfulness at work and reduce themselves to being careers, roles in which they do not have to compete with men to contain the system's anxiety about what such competition might represent. They further rationalize their focus on making a difference by mentioning their wish to care for and help the "needy". The oversimplification of their roles then reduces their influence, authority and

impact on the development of "the helpless", thereby rationalizing the need for this focus through the helplessness of the other and rejecting their professional authority and agency as leaders. By refusing to compete with male leaders for professional authority, women leaders contain anxieties of the system as they divide the organizational world into (motherly) carers (and daughters), and male leaders holding the organizational and professional authority agency undisputed and unchallenged. Where women leaders describe themselves as daughters, they do not idealize the fatherly role of the male leaders, but rather describe them critically, splitting the world into "good, obedient daughters" and "strict, strategic and powerful fathers" (male leaders). The organization becomes a safe and secure world with a simple role division which is easy to manage and contain, with unchallenged "traditional" and well-known roles. This is supported by the role of the women leader as interactor/collaborator (networker) where women leaders describe themselves as staying within the well-known hierarchical levels, "being careful not to violate the rules of the game". They see themselves as successful when they "know the rules" they need to obey to "fit in" and "surrender their authenticity".

Women leaders follow unchallenged hierarchical (even archaic) organizational rules, keep to gender boundaries, and stay within (partly self-made) boundaries to contain anxieties which they and the system fear might not be contained by the organization (which would usually become the symbolic parent as a whole). Women leaders might unconsciously fear giving up the role of the carer, nurturer, mother and subordinate collaborator. Firstly, they might need to retain their unchallenged positions/roles in the organization. Secondly, they must contain anxieties which might otherwise not be contained. Thirdly, they do not wish to contribute to increasing anxiety levels in organizations. If women leaders give up the role of the mother/carer, they might be excluded, marginalized and challenged by the different subgroups in the system (Blackman, 2004; Stapley, 2006).

Projection

As long as women leaders present themselves as caring mothers, they serve as the projected surface of a "safe haven", which provides them with unchallenged positions. However, this comes at a price: the boundaries stay

unchallenged; they give up power, authority, authenticity and agency; and as a result they forego participation in the organization as equals (with male leaders) and acting in their professional roles as strategic, task-oriented leaders in organizations.

Additionally, women leaders (partly) project undesirable behavior, feelings and flaws (Cilliers and May, 2010) onto (1) women leaders who behave like men (thereby splitting the reference group of women leaders); (2) male leaders treating them as inferior (thereby rationalising their lack of power, authority and agency within HEIs); (3) female role models in their families of origin; and (4) the group of disadvantaged who are described as helpless, weak, unknowing, disoriented, misused and lost. Self-projections are rather positive in women leaders, highlighting the positively described aspects of the carer, but also of being strong and knowledgeable leaders (being opinionated, knowing the system and how to behave, making a difference, being adjustable in terms of communication, able to configure staff and teams, defining self-credibility, fulfilling multiple roles, being self-reflective, understanding the system, and knowing one's own boundaries and limitations). The often negative projections on "others" and the positive self-projections show a split in women leaders' perceptions, which should ideally be more balanced. However, women leaders do not only mention positive self-ascriptions, but also indirectly describe the problems they see in their own behavior (giving up power, trying to fit in, being unauthentic, etc.).

Projective Identification

Projective identification (Bion, 1961; Klein, 1997; Tonder, 2012) may occur, in the case of the Black women leaders who feel that the organization does not care enough for the underprivileged to defend individual anxieties and the feeling of being unprivileged in comparison to White female and/or male colleagues. The findings do not show how White women leaders connect with unprivileged individuals in HEI. This might possibly be due to anxieties because they are not able to contain this group's emotions and/or their own emotions relating to privilege and/or underprivilege (Armstrong and Rustin, 2014). While the Black women leaders attribute the feeling of being underprivileged to others they classify as underprivileged, they enable themselves to connect to their own experiences and feelings of

privilege/underprivilege. When they deal with "the other" as underprivileged, they can connect with themselves (projective identification). This might help Black women leaders to deal indirectly with their emotions and experienced pain, their disappointments, anxiety, feelings of powerlessness and missing agency.

White women leaders show projective identification when they describe the role of the interactor/collaborator. These roles are described as careful, adaptable, submissive, subordinate, knowing the rules of the game and being inauthentic. This description might be a projective identification in that they interject the system's need to contain its anxiety by requiring women leadership to feel subordinate, to know the rules of the game and not to challenge the system.

Introjection

In terms of introjections, the findings indicate that women leaders seem to replicate in themselves the behaviors and attributes of the environment (Klein, 1997; Fraher, 2004), the behavior of their mothers and transfer them to their present workplaces (Stapley, 2006): they "fall into line" or "repress their selves" to "fit in" as they have learned to do in their family environment. Furthermore, they describe how their mothers were "superwomen" in public, while "crying at home", displaying strength in public (carer, nurturer, mother), but experiencing inner weakness (questioning their credibility in a professional role, staying in the shadow of the male leaders, not challenging existing systems). These aspects seem to be introjected, providing women leaders with a strong loyalty to their mothers/female role models with whom they identify, and contain projections (Klein, 1997; Fraher, 2004). Unconscious emotional dynamics are thus brought back into organizations through the overlapping of role experiences from their upbringing, and are connected to emotional states (Bion, 1961; Schruijer and Curseu, 2014) that are either experienced as positive and strengthening or as negative and limiting. Through their strong self-reflexive abilities, women leaders contribute to an understanding of these individual and collective systems dynamics (Motsoaledi and Cilliers, 2012), while aiming at balancing these roles and overcoming introjections, projections and projective identification to a certain degree.

Women as Containers of Anxiety

The study supports the idea that women leaders in HEIs are "containers" for emotions (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992; Motsoaledi and Cilliers, 2012), particularly for feelings of anxiety, helplessness, discomfort (while linking up with the unprivileged), hostility (judging women leaders who behave like men), disappointment (experiences of splitting) and fear of failure (staying within the traditional boundaries and doubting their own professional abilities). As carers, nurturers and mothers they contain the resourcelessness of the disadvantaged, their struggles and anxieties from the viewpoint of the strong mother, while they experience their weaknesses intra-psychologically and link up with the underprivileged and their experiences as daughters. Women leaders might thereby step into the realms of non-authority and non-agency, containing the weaknesses of the organizational system and the emotions connected to these weaknesses.

Women leaders of all race groups aim at balancing the splits in the different roles (Mudzimu, 2013), such as by balancing the motherly and the professional role. They thereby contain the splits, since the balance between professional and life domains does not seem set (Fraher, 2004; Myburg, 2009; Van Wyk, 2012) because childhood experiences seem to guide them to a strong degree. This recurrence of and constant regression towards familiar family roles might be linked to unconsciously experienced and contained group anxieties: the role of the carer and mother is to provide spaces of hope, confidence, safety and the known in times of change, restructuring processes and uncertainty in HEIs.

Application of Findings, Limitations and Future Studies

Women leaders are containers for anxieties in South African HEIs while acting out defense mechanisms. Splitting seems to be one important defense mechanism in terms of mother/professional, mother/daughter, women/men leaders and White/Black women leaders. Women leaders further seem to have introjected the roles of their mothers and female family members from their childhoods. They do not seem to accept full authority and agency in

their leadership positions, and they explore their own difficulties and negative emotions in others through projective identification.

This study is limited to a qualitative hermeneutical research paradigm, to a relatively small sample set from the HERS-SA network in South Africa and to systems psychodynamic theories. It provides insights into the views of women leaders from different racial groups in South Africa only. It therefore does not make generalizations, but provides an orientation for future research and practice on the (self-)ascribed roles of women leaders.

Future research should focus on the phenomena of unconscious dynamics from a systems perspective and the role it plays in women leaders' effectiveness in different workplaces. On a practical note, leadership training should create awareness of unconscious group dynamics in the context of women leadership in South Africa to improve the understanding of these dynamics in HEIs.

Acknowledgments

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Claude-Hélène Mayer Department of Management, Rhodes University, South Africa

E-mail address: claudemayer@gmx.net