Exploring the influence of contextual elements on women leaders paradox mindset

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Abstract

Women still face challenges in attaining leadership positions. One of these challenges is due to an incongruence between how society perceives the leader identity and the gender identity. This incongruency can cause women to experience internal conflicts in the form of agentic and communal tensions, a paradox. Contextual individual and organisational elements, have been found to influence how women experience agentic-communal tensions. This qualitative study therefore sought to understand how these contextual elements, could help facilitate the application of a paradox mindset which literature has suggested as an option to managing tensions. Findings reveal that authenticity and awareness are key anchors that enable women to adopt a paradox mindset. This was achieved by one of two strategies: either adapting to the environment, or curating a sub environment. The study reveals that, if done authentically, through own agency, a woman could influence interactions that could make it easier to manage tensions within her environment, and in so doing embrace a paradox mindset. This study has implications for women leaders and the coping strategies to apply when faced with these tensions as well as for management and the development they offer female employees.

Keywords Paradox • Agentic • Communal • Women leadership • Authenticity • Awareness

Introduction

With only 7% of women in executive roles, despite accounting for 46% of the workforce (Fajardo & Erasmus, 2017), men in leadership roles far outnumber their female counterparts. One of the challenges women face in attaining leadership positions is the incongruency between how society perceives leader identity and their own gender identity. According to Schock, Gruber, Scherndl and Ortner (2019), gendered stereotypes depict women as being predominantly communal, described as kind, sensitive and nurturant, while men are stereotypically depicted as being agentic, described as aggressive, dominant and ambitious. Women can either be viewed as incompetent when deemed too highly communal, or face

backlash for acting in a manner that is incongruent to their gender roles when exhibiting highly agentic attributes (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019; Schock et al., 2019; Sleesman, 2019). Recent studies suggest that the stereotype of a leader, based on the "think manager-think male" phenomenon which was originally introduced by Schein (1973) still exists (Ryan, Haslam, Morgenroth, Rink, Stoker & Peters, 2016; Arnold & Loughlin, 2019).

As a consequence of this, women can face a conundrum in acceding to expectations of acquiring agentic characteristics to meet the leadership stereotype while expected to have communal characteristics to fit into their societally expected gender roles (Zheng, Kark & Meister, 2018). According to Pradies, Tunarosa, Lewis and Courtois (2020), a paradox mindset can empower and enable women to better manage the difficulties and uncertainties caused by the conflicting agency and communal tensions in order to attain leadership positions. Based on the paradox theory, developed by Smith and Lewis (2011), a paradox is "contradictory, yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time" (p. 382).

In the context of this research, a paradox mindset can determine whether women can identify the interrelatedness of the tensions to view the challenge as an opportunity (Cuganesan, 2017). Thus, how women choose to manage and view agentic and communal tensions could determine the mindset applied. It could lead to acceptance of tensions faced and enable them to identify creative strategies to improve performance (Cuganesan, 2017; Leung, Liou, Miron-Spektor, Koh, Chan, Eisenberg & Schneider, 2018; Sleesman, 2019). These benefits, are affected by the extent to which individuals experience significant tensions, the social context in which they occur, and their personal approaches (Pradies et al., 2020).

In applying a paradox mindset, Sleesman (2019) states that it could illicit positivity and mental strength to face conflicts as opposed to anxiety, stress and unhappiness that agency-communal tensions create (Cuganesan 2017; Sleesman, 2019). This mindset could therefore empower women to have more control over their response and how they could embrace both

opposing forces. This could lead to improved performance, increased creativity, increased leadership effectiveness and improved resilience of women leaders (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith & Lewis, 2018; Zheng et al., 2018).

This qualitative study explored the influence of individual and organisational contextual elements on the paradox mindset of South African women leaders, regarding the agency-communal tensions they face in their work environments. Current research narratives tend to place women at the mercy of societal expectations (Offermann, Thomas, Lanzo & Smith, 2019) which limit the options available in managing tensions (Billing, 2011). The gap this research seeks to address is in understanding how contextual aspects can enable or hinder a woman's ability to internally manage these tensions successfully. The study builds on previous research by Zheng et al. (2018) which established that the paradox mindset could be influenced by elements specific to the individual as well as those within the organisation. In addressing the gap, this article will review current literature including the methodology applied. Thereafter, the findings will be presented. These findings could contribute to literature on managing paradoxical tensions by revealing the nexus between the individual context and the organisational context. It will further provide practical guides in the form of two possible strategies women could apply, anchored on authenticity and awareness, to manage tensions that influence the mindset applied.

Agentic and Communal Tensions

Role Congruity Theory reveals there is a disconnect between the gender and leadership roles that can foster agentic and communal tensions within a female leader (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Agentic attributes are centred on driven behaviours and the self being goal-oriented (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007), generally associated with male gender roles. Whereas communal attributes are centralised on interpersonal relations and being nurturant (Abele & 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 an

androgynous individual. Thus, the presence of both attributes within female leaders can help temper the agentic-communal tension that results from role incongruity.

A perceived incongruence between female gender roles and leadership roles can lead to prejudice and a lowered opinion, which may impact chances females have of attaining leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). According to Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May and Walumbwa (2005), if an environment engenders a behaviour that is not aligned with one's authentic self, it can cause internal conflict. Contextual intelligence can then be applied, through diagnosis and awareness, enabling leaders to behave accordingly to be effective in their role (Kutz, 2008). Incongruence is however context dependent. Ko, Kotrba and Roebuck (2015) state an awareness of industry and its gender composition is needed by leaders to decipher areas to develop to increase their effectiveness. If a role is predominantly communal in nature, women are likely to face role congruence (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019). Thus, the extent to which women receive prejudice is not limited only to tensions from role incongruence.

From an internal perspective, 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 protected from these negative effects (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Furthermore, Caldwell and Hayes (2016) state that self-efficacy is linked to self-awareness as it is enhanced by the individual's ability to assess both themselves and their context. This can enable more effective responses. Thus, the mindset and capabilities a woman holds can either enable or hinder her ability to manage conflicting internal tensions.

Leadership Expectations

Recently there has been some evidence that the leader role perception is changing (Kulich, Lacoviello & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2018), and as a result, the leadership profile is embracing more communal characteristics. However, findings from Badura, Grijalva, Newman, Yan and Jeon (2018) question the validity of this evidence as they found that displaying communal attributes

can reduce the chances of being perceived by others as a leader. Daft (2011) states that leadership has evolved into a relational process as evidenced by the rise in servant and transformational leadership. Monzani, Bark, van Dick and Peiró (2015) add that it creates authentic and ethical leaders who focus on developing their followers. Having the ability to collaborate, build relationships and demonstrate communal attributes, are key attributes to effective leadership and emergence (Kark, Waismel-Manor & Shamir, 2012).

A suggested proposal to deal with the gender identity conundrum is to acquire a blend of both communal and agentic attributes, taking on an androgynous nature (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell & Ristikari, 2011; Schock et al., 2019). This is contradicted however by Wang, Markóczy, Sun and Peng (2019) who propose for women to embrace either attributes depending on the context in which they find themselves and the resulting expectations. Therefore, women ought to adapt their behaviour to match the leadership values of their specific environment to mitigate the fallout from role incongruity (Wang et al., 2019). However, Daft (2011) states that acquiring a balance can increase a women's leadership effectiveness, enabling flexibility and adaptability. Therefore, to manage conflicting tensions or balance attributes, the ability, through a mindset change may be required, to reframe situations faced and adapt accordingly.

Paradox Mindset Towards Agency and Communal Tensions

A paradox refers to tensions that stem from interrelated demands over time that are both necessary and occur simultaneously, both competing for and requiring attention (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith, 2014). Originally focused on organisations, paradox theory applies to individuals as well. In their study, Zheng, Surgevil and Kark (2018) reveal coping strategies women in leadership can apply to deal with paradoxical tensions. Calabretta, Gemser and Wijnberg (2017) state that thinking paradoxically is a considered strategy for managing tensions through the application of cognitive and behavioural mechanisms that leverages the differences of two opposing tensions. When faced with opposing forces, women can benefit

from a shift in mindset. A mindset is a mental frame or lens through which individuals view, make sense of, and interpret experiences (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2018).

Smith and Lewis (2011) state that an individual's emotional makeup, namely emotional equanimity, and openness, can help foster paradoxical responses when faced with uncertainty from opposing tensions. A paradox mindset can increase an individual's levels of optimism when faced with challenging tensions that cause stress and negativity (Sleesman, 2019). According to Weiss, Razinskas, Backmann and Hoegl (2018,) authentic leadership enables leaders to better manage stress and enhances their mental wellbeing. Authentic leaders seek congruence between their actions and values (Weiss et al., 2018) and thus might likely embrace an approach that minimises the need to display false emotions and behaviours. This highlights the importance of the relationship between an individual's mindset and emotional disposition, as both can influence one's ability to manage tensions and difficulties.

In their findings, Zheng, Surgevil et al. (2018) identified 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 to co-exist in a manner that enables effective leadership (Zheng, Surgevil et al., 2018). This notion is supported by Pradies et al. (2020) who state that, in embracing paradox tensions, referred to as the virtuous cycle, women will be enabled to create new understandings, leading to an exploratory journey of discovery (Leung et al., 2018; Sleesman, 2019). This can develop women into more valuable leaders as it engenders the ability to be resilient, explore divergent concepts, and have higher levels of cognitive complexity and creativity (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Organisational Culture

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 (Offermann et al., 2019; Roldan, Soe & Yakura, 2004). It 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 majority populated by men or require more male attributes to succeed (Heilman, Manzi & Caleo, 2019). Such a culture might present female leaders with the difficulty of feeling compelled to adapt their leadership style to be accepted as competent (Jones, 2016).

On the other hand, an enabling organisational culture for women might encompass a focus on work-family balance, inclusivity, and relationships (Jones, 2016). Findings from Monzani et al. (2015) revealed that female leaders struggled more than male leaders to be authentic leaders. However, if the environment is enabling and prototypical, it will foster authenticity. In this instance, authentic leadership can help mediate role incongruity (Monzani et al., 2015). Although the study focused on followers and their influence; it highlights the importance of the external context. Women leaders who can embrace authentic leadership may be able to influence the culture around them overtime (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, Kim, Choi & Lee, 2016). Thus, the culture can predicate which attributes are perceived as valuable to succeed in leadership.

The number of women within a male-dominated organisation can act as a cue that the organisation is supportive of women, helping reduce the effect of the stereotype threat (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016; Yukl, 2013). Furthermore, Gloor, Morf, Paustian-Underdahl and Backes-Gellner (2020) support this by stating that a strong presence of women can help weaken existing stereotypes and help change leader prototypes skewed towards men. With increased exposure to female leaders, traits deemed a requirement for leadership can become more gender-neutral, thereby reducing gender bias (Elsesser & Lever, 2011). In addition, this can reduce the prevalence of the phenomenon of tokenism attributed to minority members in a social group, such as women (Samuelson, Levine, Barth, Wessel & Grand, 2019).

Organisational Leadership Evaluation and Feedback

Inequity in development can impede a woman's promotion into leadership (Beeson & Valerio, 2012). This can result in a "sticky floor" as they are unable to ascend into leadership roles due to fewer available promotions (Samuelson et al., 2019). Whilst developmental feedback can tend to be subjective, it can be tainted further by stereotypical biases and expectations. Women leaders in gender-biased organisations are likely to receive evaluations based on gender biases instead of their leadership potential (Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013). To increase their self-awareness, women are more likely to seek out feedback due to their more interpersonal nature (Sturm, Taylor, Atwater & Braddy, 2014). This is supported by Gardner et al. (2005) who state that leaders with high levels of self-awareness are willing to receive and interpret all feedback as they understand it assists in their growth and development. Thus, attributes held by women can impact their evaluation process, thereby impacting their career advancement.

If the evaluation process is stereotypically biased, it can heighten agency-communal tensions as women might feel forced to embody or disregard one, over the other, to receive favourable reviews (Doldor, Wyatt & Silvester, 2019). However, women leaders, as recipients of feedback also have a role to play in how they respond. Dimotakis, Mitchell and Maurer (2017) share that whilst external situational factors, can have an influence; internal factors focused on the individual recipient matter as well. Motro, Comer and Lenaghan (2020) add that individuals with feedback self-efficacy and high levels of grit and perseverance were better able to handle negative feedback and constructively respond to it. Thus, the mindset and approach that women apply can help counter the negative effects of feedback and the resulting tensions.

To understand the enablers and barriers to women applying a paradox mindset, the following research questions (RQ) 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?

Method

Participants

The sample for this research consisted of 14 women in senior management positions, with at least two layers of direct reports, working in South African corporate organisations. To ensure that the women were in leadership positions, they were required to have had at least 10 years of total working experience and at least a year in a leadership role. Eight of these had between 10 to 20 years of experience in leadership roles while five had between 5 to 10 years. Only one of the respondents had leadership experience of less than 5 years. Half of the sampled women were White, 5 Black and 2 were of Indian origin. Table 1 outlines the details on the participants with the use of pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

A purposive snowball non-probability sampling technique was applied. Eight respondents came from the Financial Services industry, however they held divergent roles, thus enabling diversity in the data collected. The researcher acknowledges possible bias in sampling. Two worked in Consulting while another two were in the Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sector. The Insurance and Pharmaceuticals industries were represented by one respondent each. All respondents worked for corporations with offices in Johannesburg, South Africa. This provided ease of access.

Procedure

In order 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, Hanson, Clark Plano and Morales (2007) state that stories can be used to provide details to understand the personal experiences and feelings they had. Therefore, to study and gain in-depth understanding from these stories, which is a narrative approach, a qualitative methodology was required (Creswell et al., 2007). The study employed a narrative research strategy. Creswell (2013) states this includes the gathering of details on

personal experiences and stories, as told and lived by participants in a collaborative manner with the researcher. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide. A short 4 question profile questionnaire was sent to all participants to capture contextual demographic data. Prior to the first interview, a pilot test was conducted with two women to test the questions based on feedback from the participants, gain experience and provide reliability (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2016). Minor changes were made as a result and the participants formed part of the sample. Given the risks associated with COVID-19 pandemic, interviews took place virtually using the Zoom video conferencing service at the convenience of the respondent (Whitehead & Halsall, 2017). In addition, Whitehead and Halsall (2017) stated that rapport could be more easily established when there is a no direct visual and personal contact.

Pseudonyms were used in the reporting of results to protect the identity of participants for ethical reasons. Data was analysed thematically as described by Braun, Clarke and Weate (2016); familiarisation of data and coding, development of theme followed by refinement, and the write up. Generating initial codes and identifying patterns in the data was guided by finding meaning in responses that answered the research questions (Braun et al., 2016). The Atlas ti software was used to code, organise and analyse the volume of interview data. As patterns emerged and propositions developed, meaningful codes were described and assigned to the data in the appropriate unit (Yin, 2016). Upon completion of coding, categories were created, from which themes emerged (Creswell, 2013).

Data was then interpreted, through an iterative process to ensure congruency throughout the research process, by making sense of the themes and how they were connected to the research topic and any other applicable theories (Creswell, 2013). The researcher reorganised themes and findings to develop a framework story with linkages among different ideas (Braun et al., 2016). Findings generated through analysis and resulting themes were then interpreted

and incorporated into a conceptual model showcasing how women leaders' paradox mindsets were influenced and enabled by contextual elements.

Results

Participants were first asked how they experienced the paradox of agentic and communal tensions. All participants, except two, explicitly acknowledged that they had experienced these tensions, although the manifestation and the degrees to which they experienced them varied. Table 2 summarises the themes, definitions and representative quotes for each theme.

Based on data, terms that participants used to describe and associate with agency attributes were "tough", "aggressive" and "assertive", whereas "interpersonal" and "people oriented" were used to describe communal attributes. In referring to applying a paradox mindset, participants viewed the act as one of "balancing" or reaching a "centre". In analysing the interview data, various themes emerged that addressed the three research questions. The following themes were identified and will be discussed in subsequent sections: (1) Tension manifestations, (2) Influencers of agentic and communal tensions, (3) Individual capabilities and (4) Tension managing mechanisms.

Theme 1: Tension manifestations

This theme relates to Research Question 1. In order to understand the contextual elements that influence a paradox mindset regarding agentic and communal tensions, participants were first asked to describe if and how they experienced the 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, what she referred to as "soft power". As a result, she had not felt a conflict or need to adopt more agentic aggressive attributes.

A common manner in which half the women experienced tension was during situations of internal conflict resulting from behaviour that was divergent from their natural disposition in an attempt to meet expectations. Thandeka described her experience as a present constant battle:

> 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, and I am going to be perceived to be too soft. (Thandeka)

These tensions also occur in situations where women felt they had to stand up to senior leadership. However, Audrey acknowledged that the tensions would always exist: "I don't think that tension ever goes away that you're like, 'I know exactly the balance that I need to apply here'." Nobantu, who described herself as assertive, had been making concerted efforts to adopt more communal attributes. But in doing so, went to the extreme end of being so quiet that her colleagues even called her out. In addition, it was noted that experiencing agentic and communal tensions was not a once off event, but part of a constant journey.

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

> I think I went through a period of real anxiety… 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", their "dress code becomes more masculine" and that their voices "deepen and become gravelly".

Verusha added how she had witnessed some women display either overtly submissive or aggressive behaviour, what she referred to as "polar ends to getting it wrong". In experiencing tensions, two of the women spoke of the consequences and costs they incurred. Priya noted how her assertive nature affected her work by preventing her from building relationships with key stakeholders. She added how this "destructive experience" compelled her to re-evaluate her leadership style and learn to embrace more interpersonal skills.

However, changing leadership behaviours was not a viable option for all participants. In addressing the tensions, some women chose to conform to the expected leadership style whilst others decided it was best to walk away. The women mentioned that it 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)

The inauthenticity stemmed from trying to fit into a "mould" based on expectations. Tensions could also place women in compromising situations, with two viewing it as too high a cost. For Hazel, this led to her being "fundamentally unhappy", and eventually causing her to leave. In their behaviour, some women might "operate at below the radar" to avoid attracting too much attention and to "concede" on their demands in order to avoid any penalties.

Theme 2: Influencers of agentic and communal tensions

The subthemes in this theme relate to Research Question 1 and 3. This theme addresses the organisational context elements that influenced the presence of agentic and communal tensions. It was analysed from organisational, individual and feedback perspectives. Within each subtheme, the effects it had on tensions could either alleviate, enhance, or moderate it.

These contextual elements could be on an industry, organisational and business unit level. Thandeka stated that the financial services industry was generally male dominated and that

this lended itself to being a "harsher" environment that could elicit certain behaviours in order to fit in. However, she added that this could be mitigated to an extent by having supportive transformational management that lessened the dominant influence of the industry:

> I think that gets sort of counter acted 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. However, the experiences in global and local consumer goods organisations could be different. Therefore, whilst industry influences tensions, it could also be affected by local cultures.

Subtheme 2.1: Organisational influences. This subtheme speaks to Research Question 3. 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, and I think that is probably where the biggest tension that 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 anxiety in her role. On the other hand, an enabling environment could foster the ability to manage agentic and communal tensions at the same time. It also engendered authenticity of the women as they felt that they could be themselves.

Claire noted that different sub cultures existed 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 role within the Human Resources field. Women in other fields were expected to conform to the

predominance of the male dominated culture. Thus, she acknowledged that she has had it "easier", that the implicit expectations of a softer style of leadership had 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 accordingly created an implicit expectation to change behaviour. Lindelani noted that:

> Leaders in the organisation set the example of a cut-throat, backstabbing culture. The culture of climbing on the head of someone else. Leaders in the organisation role model that and they chalk that up. (Lindelani)

On the other hand, leaders could create an enabling environment that could reduce tensions. This could be through offering support and creating a family friendly environment. Claire, stated that her leaders, "who really get the balance and are phenomenal from that [balanced] perspective", provided her the space that made it "easier" to manage the tensions.

Two participants identified the presence 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." Diversity could be fostered through transformation efforts. 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". Audrey added that diversity extended beyond demographics and into diversity of thinking.

The position in the organisation was also flagged as another source of tension. Half of the participants experienced an increase in tension the higher up they ascended into leadership positions. This also had implications on how participants conducted themselves. Bianca stated, 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. Hazel's view was that the type of experience was more important than experience in years as it provided several opportunities to learn a variety of skills and "build up a muscle of resilience" to manage tensions.

Lastly, the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic, although not related to the research question, highlighted 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 how she was struggling to be both empathetic and understanding whilst 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". Whilst Priya expressed hope that it would influence a change in her leadership culture, "I think now there will be more of a demand in the [communal] style of leadership that's required."

Subtheme 2.2: Relational level influencers. This subtheme speaks to Research Question 1 on how women experience tensions. Ten of the women described how the treatment they perceived as unfair caused them to experience internal tensions. Priya shared her frustration by alleging that "the system expelled you or ejected you, but it wasn't a consistent experience. Men, in the broad sense of the word, got away with behaviours I think that women didn't get away with". Thandeka added how she had witnessed a greater acceptance of a man's leadership style, whatever it may be, yet for women they had to change and adapt to fit in.

Sometimes women felt undermined and excluded at work due to a lack of inclusivity. As a result, they felt that, to be taken seriously, they ought to assert themselves more. Taylor described how she sometimes felt disapproval from the "stigma" over leaving early to pick up her kids, causing embarrassment and conflict on her part. For Thandeka, she felt her race

similarly played a role: "There are certain situations where I felt like, I don't know if it is because I am new or a black female? This person seems to not listening to me". The women were not only undermined by their leaders and peers but also by their direct reports. Busisiwe said her colleague had to "dial up a lot of assertive leadership because her team is majority men". This highlights how an environment dominated by men could cause tensions across all levels. Kelly mentioned how such an imbalance in her team had resulted in some of the men deferring administrative tasks to her and another female colleague, solely because of their gender.

Relationships with fellow female colleagues was mentioned as another influence. Ulwazi said that she found that "the women in junior positions" were the best to work with. This was supported by Taylor who added she did not receive support from other female leaders as she was not able to relate to their dominant archetype profiles to show her the way:

> You get the two different profiles – the ones without children and who don't get married and then you get the ones that do have children and there is neglect. (Taylor)

In other instances, women adopted a more assertive and masculine personality to succeed. As a result, "They're even harder on the women than they are on the men in their teams" (Lindelani). However, five of the participants spoke of the value and benefit they had received from supportive female peers. Claire found value in "leaning on that female support" and how she had been "very fortunate to have some strong women around me". Isabel added, that male colleagues could also be allies and that it should not be "just a network of women".

Adding onto the role of supportive networks, women similarly spoke of having role models and sponsors to provide support in managing the tensions better. In addition, female role models played a pivotal role in the leadership journey of seven of the participants. For Nobantu, her mentor helped her to "understand how to manoeuvre and how to stay true." This was aided by the fact that she could "relate to [her] both from a gender and a race point of view in the context of corporate". Some women also specifically spoke of role models who gave them the space

to be working mothers. Audrey found comfort in working for a boss who was also a working mother and where she does not have to "pretend you don't have a family."

Subtheme 2.3: Feedback influences. This subtheme speaks to Research Question 3. The importance of feedback in experiencing tensions was also flagged. A common point raised was that the intention behind which feedback was given was important as it could either build or break an individual.

Women received feedback that related to and highlighted their leadership traits. Sometimes they experienced this feedback to be at odds with 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)

Busisiwe validated her assertive nature by stating that she did it for the good of her team to grow because she cared for them. On the other hand, Kelly received feedback focused on communal attributes:

> I do get some feedback to say maybe I am being too easy on my team and maybe I am being too forgiving of people's shortcomings. (Kelly)

Audrey noted the 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. You had to be that guy. There was no room to be weak, so there was no resolution of that tension— it was always there. (Audrey)

The manner in which feedback was given also affected how women experienced tensions. Receiving feedback in a "fair" and constructive process reduced the anxiety the women might have felt. In addition, it allowed one to remain authentic, helping to alleviate the tensions experienced. 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. Women highlighted the need to be discernible in receiving feedback. Depending on how it was given and by whom determined the influence it had on how women experience tensions. Five of the women also spoke of the importance of receiving feedback from junior staff to provide alternative views because "they haven't been tainted by the politics and the need to be diplomatic".

The women spoke of the type of feedback received and how it influenced their performance. Feedback that was helpful and valuable was given to nine of the women. For Claire, she 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 had to be measured so as to not be too harsh with others. However, receiving vague and unhelpful feedback prevented the women from directly addressing their areas of weaknesses, causing a "hindrance" to their development. Feedback can thus be used as a mechanism to influence women in managing tensions.

Theme 3: Individual Capabilities

This theme addresses Research Question 2 pertaining to how women manage agentic and communal tensions. It consists of two subthemes that emanated from the descriptions as key individual contextual elements, that of authenticity and awareness, with awareness described from the perspective of self and context.

Subtheme 3.1: Authenticity. Ten of the women spoke on the topic of authenticity. 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 could help alleviate the experience. For Audrey, it enabled her to attain a healthier balance of the attributes that were 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. It's tension when it's forced on you. (Audrey)

Thandeka noted that authenticity enabled a response to tensions that was more aligned to one's personality and leadership style:

What they [experiences] made me see is that, I think you take your personality, what it

is, you learn and improve on that, but it can work in either way. I don't feel like one

approach is better than the other. (Thandeka)

In addition, being authentic enabled other people to be more willing to accept women leaders as they were, even if they did not necessarily fit in with organisational expectations.

Another aspect related to authenticity was the ability to maintain and lean into one's femininity. The women held the belief that this was where their strength was, and thus did not feel compelled to adopt more masculine traits. There were two views that 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're not a man but you have in you, enough assertiveness and enough power,

however, that power comes with accountability which means 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 a place to use agentic attributes in conjunction with their femininity, depending on the context. This approach considers adaptation to tensions, rather than a 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)

Women's emotion and thinking could provide diversity of thought and approach. Hazel spoke of this contribution by stating: "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 doesn't 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 that:

> 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)

Five other women spoke of an alignment of values, with others likening it to a sense of purpose that grounded and allowed them to maintain their "natural" leadership style. Confidence was also mentioned as a key attribute to have to maintain one's values.

Subtheme 3.2: Awareness. In addressing tensions, the women spoke of having an 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". All participants, with the exception of two, directly addressed the importance of self-awareness. The eight described it as a journey of continued learning, reflection and work to consciously make the effort to be self-aware. They then spoke of an understanding and awareness of their contexts that 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, and this is where the self-knowledge comes in, you will naturally be able to instinctively assess a situation and know what's required. (Priya)

Knowing yourself enabled the women to understand their "triggers" and "instinctively" assess a situation to identify what was required. The relationship between self-awareness and authenticity was highlighted when Audrey mentioned: "Just because I'm nice doesn't mean I'm weak... It doesn't make me a bad leader or a bad manager". Upon gaining an understanding

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of self, five of the women spoke of how they had acquired and learned 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 their 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. Closely related to reflection was the creation of mental headspace, to make decisions clearly, that two of the women spoke of. Claire noted: "One of the most critical tools in order to get that balance is the ability to create headspace and create boundaries around my day and my diary." In addition, feedback was mentioned as key to providing insights to raise awareness on behaviour, to then reflect, and improve. Both Hazel and Nobantu referred to it as an "input" to manage behaviour and become "more aware". The use of coaches and mentors was also mentioned as mechanisms 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. Am I going to call it hard? Am I going to ask for help? Am I going to go the relationship play? (Claire)

Both Nobantu and Bianca mentioned the need to have "EQ" [emotional intelligence] to become intuitive of the situation and "the people in the room". It was added that part of understanding the context required the ability to see the big picture and to look past one's immediate situation. Navigating corporate politics was also seen as important as it included understanding how to approach and manage key stakeholders.

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Theme 4: Tension Managing Strategies

This theme continues to answer Research Question 2 but focuses on the strategies applied to better manage the tensions. Based on the findings, participants spoke predominantly of two strategies which made up the subthemes to be discussed.

Subtheme 4.1: Environmental Adaptation

As the more common subtheme of this theme, ten women described how adapting their behaviour depended on their interpretation of the situation. The ten participants viewed a paradox mindset as an approach of balancing the two tensions, whilst Nobantu likened it to being in "the centre". 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.

A response is determined by the assessment of the situation or context. 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. You'll find the right balance between the two. (Priya)

Deciphering what was required from different stakeholders in different situations enabled the women to decide "how to play", "adapt" or "push or pull" within an environment to produce the "appropriate response". Nine of the women held a similar view. The level of urgency in a situation could also determine the type of response required. Nobantu gave an example of adaptation on how she embodied a more formal and forceful demeanour when engaging with her executive team, versus being more approachable with her staff. Whilst Isabel mentioned applying a "balanced" approach first, then becoming "harder" later on if necessary.

The ability to adapt allowed the women to be authentic and learn new traits to find a balance. Nobantu said: "I learned, to be measured and considerate". This speaks to behaviour being

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moderated, which for Priya lead to better stakeholder engagements and Isabel not being walked over. Whilst learning to adapt was an ongoing journey, three of the women said that it did get easier with time and experience.

Subtheme 4.2: Creation of Conducive Environment

Whilst 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 sub cultures. This subtheme speaks to reducing tensions as an alternative to balancing tensions. For Lindelani, she did not seek out a balance in 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 the management of tensions by reducing it to allow them to continue leading in their own style. Taylor stated:

> You need to create an environment that your teams feel comfortable to talk to you, but you also need to create an environment of respect. (Taylor)

These created "subcultures" within teams were based on women's values and beliefs to minimise the change the environment could have on them. Kelly added that she regularly had to "manage upwards" to protect her team from the pressures of management. In 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" which she believes in the long run can "overtake the assertive culture". On the other hand, Audrey found that "building an environment of trust" within her team made it easier for her to balance, not reduce, tensions and apply both attributes. Creating boundaries within their days, such as in time management and separation between work and personal lives, was another aspect that allowed women to control and manage their environments in a conducive manner.

Upon understanding the context, three of the women said they made a conscious choice to select the parts of the organisational culture they could accept. This helped Lindelani "resolve the conflict" to reduce tensions:

> I've had to understand that culture and I've had to understand which of those aspects
> I'll go with, and which aspects I won't go with. (Lindelani)

However, she added that she and her team do struggle to work with other teams in the wider business on certain occasions due to the differences in culture. In contrast, creating a conducive environment could also be done, not to reduce tensions, but as stated by Hazel, to seek alignment in "purpose" and "values". In being selective, women were not oblivious to cultural expectations. Instead, they were cognitively making decisions on what Lindelani referred to as the "minimums" demanded of that culture, whilst the "rest of that culture is optional". Therefore, a conducive environment, still had to meet basic organisational requirements.

Discussion

According to Pradies et al. (2020), the tensions and internal conflict could be better managed by women through the application of a paradox mindset. The primary contribution of this study to literature is that authenticity and self-awareness are key enablers to embrace a paradox mindset (see Figure 1). The role and importance of an individual's disposition and mindset in addressing any conflicts or tensions is supported by Hoyt and Murphy (2016) as well as Smith and Lewis (2011). However, the findings of this research take it a step further by revealing that authenticity and self-awareness empower women towards action in addressing the tension, not just accepting the tension. Being rooted in their true selves enabled the women to perceive, interpret, then respond more naturally to situations as they had ownership over their personal values and beliefs to act in alignment to their true self (Gardner et al., 2005). As a result, it was easier to manage tensions as this was not forced nor imposed. Four key findings emerged from the study. These are discussed below and displayed in Appendix 1 to showcase linkages to the data and literature.

First, whilst women who identify as either agentic or communal in their leadership styles experienced tensions, the findings revealed that communal women appeared to experience it to a greater negative extent. With leadership styles more congruent to the existing dominant leadership style (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019), the findings supported why naturally agentic women might experience less conflict. Communal women spoke of internal conflicts such as feeling compromised in their values, feeling compelled to adapt new behaviours and unable to be themselves. Although literature suggests that the leader identity was changing to embrace more communal attributes (Badura et al., 2018), existing implicit expectations described by the women, reveal that the traditional view still had effect. There was however an anomaly in the findings in that one woman did not subscribe to the notion of agency and communion. She believed that, as a woman, she had "soft power" that did not necessitate agency as her "soft power" was a strength in itself and as such, she did not experience any tension conflicts. In addition, of the twelve participants that mentioned experiencing conflict with the tensions, only one mentioned that it was still something she "battled" with today, whilst for the others this was to a lesser extent. This participant had the least amount of leadership experience thus, this suggests that the amount of work experience affected how women dealt with the two opposing attributes. Moreover, the findings indicated that the tensions increased the further participants ascended into leadership (Zheng et al., 2018).

Second, a woman's individual internal context, namely their disposition and personal capabilities helped enable the adoption of a paradox mindset (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In maintaining authenticity, they were empowered to deal with tensions as this was aligned to their natural disposition and not "forced" into a behaviour. Authenticity provided the grounding in the values and beliefs that women used 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. In this instance, women applied a mechanism of reframing to

the emotions and sensitivity to change it into a strength (Zheng, Surgevil et al., 2018). 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. Whilst a paradox mindset did not necessarily result in increased optimism (Sleesman, 2019), it reduced anxiety and made the management of tensions easier.

The other capability mentioned often was awareness of self and of the context in which participants operated. Self-awareness enabled women to understand themselves, their "triggers" and as a result which responses would work best (Caldwell & Hayes, 2016). This self-knowledge enabled them to decipher which attributes to apply to which situations in a manner most suitable to their personality. Upon understanding themselves, women spoke of "assessing" 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 an imposition of external forces.

Third, feedback was an organisational mechanism that influenced how women experienced tensions. Participants referenced several organisational aspects in Theme 2 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. Contradictory to Doldor et al. (2019), the majority of participants did not receive gendered feedback, but rather valuable feedback which aided them in their management of tensions as opposed to hindering them. This feedback drew attention to areas that were out of balance and also acted as an input to raise self-awareness (Dimotakis et al., 2017). A few of the women revealed that 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 given by the provider was identified as a determinant to the perceived value of feedback (London et al., 2019).

Fourth, there were two approaches the women applied 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 adapting approach acknowledged the presence of both agentic and communal tensions, and believes that there was a time and place for both. This approach was similar to the mechanism Zheng, Surgevil et al. (2018) refer to as situational accentuating in which agency and communal attributes are activated based on the needs of the current situation. Behaviour was adjusted according to the context. However, this was not to reduce possible penalisation (Wang et al., 2019), but rather a response to the interpretation of the context to seek a balance of tensions.

The second strategy was the creation of a conducive environment. This approach recognised that tension exists but did not accept that they needed to coexist (Smith & Lewis, 2011). It instead sought to reduce tensions. The women recognised that their circumstances and organisational culture were different from their leadership styles. Thus, in response, they applied agency to create their own "sub cultures" 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 & Lewis, 2011). However, from the findings, the women 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, the subculture was instigated by the leaders of their own volition and agency in an attempt to create an authentic environment. This contradicts the findings from Schock et al. (2019), that indicated androgyny was needed to temper agentic-communal tensions, as authenticity was used 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 nor needed by women with an agentic leadership style.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of how women in leadership manage agentic and communal tensions, and how they apply a paradox mindset. To start, three types of contextual antecedents were identified; organisational, relational and feedback. All three could either enhance or alleviate the tensions. However, feedback had a greater effect in the form of being a mechanism of change. As a result of these influences, women could experience tensions between agentic and communal attributes (1) to varying degrees. However, this could be mediated by a woman's individual context in the form of their sense of authenticity and level of awareness (2). Both of these individual capabilities empowered women to better manage tensions and respond organically. Upon gaining insights into the self and environment, women responded in one of two strategies (3). Both strategies were grounded on 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 contexts (4). In one strategy they acted by adapting situationally, in the display of either agentic or communal attributes, based on their interpretation. This leads to the outcome of finding a balance of tensions whereby a paradox mindset is applied (5). In the other strategy they acted by using individual agency to create a conducive environment in the form of a subculture. This led to the reduction of tensions and the need for the two attributes to co-exist.

Limitations and Future Research

The study was restricted 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) noted that to succeed in female dominated industries women ought to align contextually by adopting more communal attributes. Furthermore, literature shows that the leadership identity was changing to embrace more communal attributes (Badura et al., 2018). Thus, a future area of research could be to 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.

Specifically, it would be interesting to explore how agentic women experienced tensions in this context to contribute to strategies women applied in managing these tensions.

The demographic requirements of this study were limited to years of experience in corporate, not race. However, two of the Black women specifically referenced race when referring to their experience of tensions. Zheng, Surgevil et al. (2018) similarly found in their study 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 had on how women of colour manage tensions and if their coping strategies were different to those of White women. Gardner et al. (2005) noted that authenticity relies on the ability to behave in a manner aligned to one's true self. In instances where Black women leaders were a minority in White dominated organisations, their ability to remain authentic might be hindered. This could in turn heighten their experience of tension. With authenticity compromised, this might impact their ability to effectively manage tensions and apply a paradox mindset.

Practice Implications

The findings of the study offer women in leadership strategies to help better manage tensions through a paradox mindset. 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. It highlights that women are not only beholden to their environment but rather can also manage their environment in a manner that was true to their leadership styles. Whilst some of the women spoke of the fact that these were traits they had developed over time; others mentioned the use of coaches and mentors. Thus, this study can inform and support women's leadership and personal programmes. Furthermore, management can ensure that these capabilities are included in the development of entry level women to shape and improve the leadership pipeline of women to be better able to manage tensions.

Conclusion

The present study offers insights into how women in leadership can manage agentic and communal tensions through a paradox mindset. Ultimately, the findings revealed that a strong sense of authenticity and awareness, both of self and environment, enabled women to better deal with the tensions. This is due to the fact that it is done in a natural manner as opposed to being imposed, which tended to be the main source of internal conflicts. The women either adapted by adopting the traits situationally to balance the tensions or they curated their own subcultures in which they could maintain their inherent attributes, thereby reducing tensions. This study therefore shows the connection between the individual context, in the form of women's agency to take control of their situation or adapt situationally, and the external context, in the form of the organisation. The interaction between the two influences the mindset women adopt which in turn influences the experience of tensions.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

I hereby confirm that all participants signed informed consent forms and that this study has received ethical clearance from the Gordon Institute of Business Science Ethics Committee.

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Table 1 Participants 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

Table 2 Themes, definitions and quotation examples

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: Relational influences	The influence resulting from how women leaders are treated and their relationships with others on tensions	"I think there is a level of some people undermining you and maybe they don't take you as seriously... I would say that I have found situations tend to force me to go to the more aggressive side even if that would not be my initial approach."
Subtheme 2.3: 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."

Figure 1 Conceptual Model on Managing Agentic and Communal Tensions
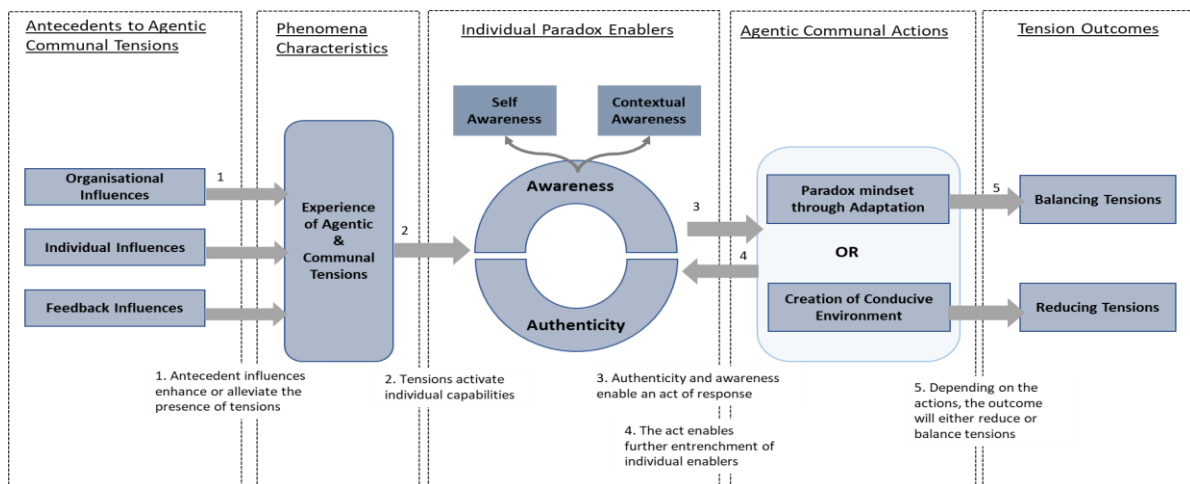
Source: Author's Own, 2020

Appendix 1: Data and Literature Linkages to Findings

Findings	Research Question	Categories	Themes & Subthemes	References
Communal women experience to a greater negative extent than agentic women	Research Question 1	-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 -Subtheme 2.2: Relational level influencers	Eagly & Karau (2002). Zheng, Kark & Meister (2018). Arnold & Loughlin (2019). Badura, Grijalva, Newman, Yan & Jeon (2018).
Individual context, namely authenticity and awareness, mediate the effects of tensions and make them easier to manage	Research Question 2	-Feminine Soft Power -Being yourself -Courage -Awareness Enables Balance -Open and Growth Mindset -Self Help Mechanisms -Understand the Context	-Subtheme 3.1: Authenticity -Subtheme 3.2: Awareness	Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May & Walumbwa (2005). Monzani, Bark, van Dick & Peiró (2015). Caldwell & Hayes (2016).
Feedback as an organisational context can be used as a mechanism to effect change in how woman experience tensions	Research Question 3	-Organisational Environmental Tensions -Organisational Influences -Organisational Alleviating Factors -Tension Causing Feedback -Feedback processes -Feedback Alleviating Factors	-Subtheme 2.1: Organisational influences -Subtheme 2.3: Feedback influences	Doldor, Wyatt & Silvester (2019). Dimotakis, Mitchell and Maurer (2017). Jones (2016).
Woman can respond to tensions in one of two strategies: adapting to the situation paradoxically or creating their own conducive environment	Research Question 2	-Accept presence of tensions -Attaining Balance -Create Conducive Environment	-Subtheme 4.1: Environmental - Adaptation -Subtheme 4.2: Creation of Conducive Environment	Kutz, (2008). Shin, Kim, Choi & Lee (2016). Smith & Lewis (2011). Zheng, Surgevil & Kark (2018).