

“A woman who’s tough, she’s a bitch.”

How labels anchored in unconscious bias shape the institution of gender

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Abstract: This study shows how labels anchored in unconscious bias can contribute to the gender institution. It draws on interviews with women leaders in Canadian for-profit organizations to illustrate how labels relate to unconscious bias towards women leaders, how labels delegitimize or legitimize women leaders, and how women leaders react to labels. Guided by these results, the study theorizes how the micro-level practice of labeling anchored in unconscious bias can uphold or disrupt gender categories and associated gendered social roles, thus shaping the gender institution.

Keywords: Unconscious bias, label, gender, institution, leadership

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INTRODUCTION

Unconscious bias refers to how our beliefs are biased without us being aware of this. Research highlights the role of unconscious bias in gender inequalities: unconscious bias hurts women professionally by slowing down their career advancement, harming their performance evaluation, and limiting opportunities (Wynn and Correll 2018). This research generally does not view gender from the perspective of an institution. Yet, gender can be thought of as an institution: it is defined by, reflects, and shapes beliefs, practices, norms, and rules that endure and are linked to being and acting like a gendered person (Martin 2004). Institutions generate by-products like inequalities (Lorber 1994). The institutional perspective on gender is helpful because it enables us to understand how gender inequalities can be upheld or disrupted (McCarthy and Moon 2018). It emphasizes the multiple phenomena involved in gender (i.e., beliefs, practices, norms, rules) and the various levels where these phenomena occur (i.e., the micro level of the individual, the meso level of organizations, and macro level of society).¹ As McCarthy and Moon (2018) argue, studies on how gender inequalities can be disrupted are rare, especially those spanning the various phenomena and levels of the gender institution.

I consider the implications of unconscious bias for the evolution of gender institution, including its disruption. To do so, I explore how the micro-level phenomenon of labeling anchored in unconscious bias relates to the macro-level phenomenon of gendered social roles (e.g., men leaders). I study this relation in the context of Canadian organizational leadership in the 2010s, which is gender-homogenous: women represent less than 15% of corporate directors in Canada (Canadian Securities Administrators 2019). Drawing on interviews with 31 women directors, I analyze three research questions: How do labels express unconsciously biased beliefs towards women leaders? How do labels affect women leaders in their leader roles? How do women leaders react to labels?

This study contributes to our understanding of unconscious bias, labeling, and the gender institution in three ways. First, it highlights the consequences of unconscious bias expressed via labels. Labeling theory, which conceptualizes labeling, focuses on the micro level where interactions occur (Heckert and Heckert 2002). In contrast, I consider the more extensive, multi-level context surrounding interactions. Doing so helps us understand the broader consequences of unconscious bias that extend beyond labels to involve macro-level social structures like social roles (e.g., leaders) and expectations about who plays what role (e.g., men are leaders). Labels

grounded in unconscious bias can shape these roles and their associated expectations. This happens because labels communicate judgements about roles that individuals enact and about how enactment conforms to expectations. Labels thereby control or attempt to control individuals—they can be thought of as control stories. In the context of women leaders in Canada, I show how labels designate them as deviating from social roles associated with their assigned gender category (i.e., women are caregivers) and their unassigned gender category (i.e., men are leaders). Labels typically delegitimize these women in their leader roles, to which they react in various ways: they accept labels, reject them, or distance themselves from them. As I explain in the discussion section, labels and the reactions they yield can contribute to upholding or disrupting social roles and thereby the gender institution. In sum, unconscious bias has broad implications, not just for labels that express it but also for social roles that draw on gender categories and the gender institution.

Second, the study illustrates the multiple phenomena involved in gender inequalities, the various levels at which these phenomena are situated, and how they are related. I link the micro-level phenomenon of labeling grounded in unconscious bias to the macro-level phenomenon of social roles. I thus emphasize the complexities involved in gender inequalities that draw on multiple phenomena situated at different levels. These complexities need to be accounted for when considering how to disrupt gender inequalities, lest attempts at disruption sidestep critical phenomena involved in inequalities. Such bypassing is all the more likely because these critical phenomena can be mundane and occur daily in various settings. For example, labeling grounded in unconscious bias is a mundane phenomenon that readily escapes attention, remaining under the radar. Yet labels, as control stories, are essential in upholding gender inequalities. This study thereby cautions that the disruption of gender inequalities requires being attentive to not just the complexities of phenomena underlying gender inequalities but also their mundaneness.

Finally, the study further speaks to what is needed for disrupting the gender institution and gender inequalities by combining the distinct ontologies and epistemologies that characterize labeling and unconscious bias (Moon and Blackman 2014). Labeling involves a relativist ontology and supposes that there is not one reality out there; instead, reality is constructed internally in an individual's mind. Its epistemology is subjectivism: reality cannot be discovered separately from the individual who does the discovering in light of their values and goals. Meanings about reality are constructed and ordered via systems of language and symbols,

including labels. In contrast, unconscious bias research, anchored in psychology and social psychology, has a realist ontology whereby one reality exists out there. Its epistemology is objectivism: reality and meaning can be discovered separately from the individual. The realist ontology can direct us to what is needed for disrupting gender inequalities. For example, we need to become aware of how cognitive processes can lead to gender-biased beliefs expressed through labels. We need to find ways to question these beliefs and the resulting labels and overcome them. The objectivist epistemology identifies heuristics underlying biased beliefs, which offers insights for addressing labels reflecting these beliefs. The relativist ontology, in turn, highlights how the gender institution is experienced differently by individuals depending on their setting and how these experiences involve socially constructed categories like gender. It points us to how disrupting gender inequalities can be successful or fail: solutions need to consider how unconscious bias and labeling relate to contexts and practices involved in constructing gender categories, including labeling grounded in unconscious bias. The subjectivist epistemology emphasizes that we become knowledgeable about these contexts and practices and about their broader implications, notably for gender inequalities. Doing so helps us find more effective ways of disrupting the gender institution.

Next, I explain unconscious bias, labeling, and how they relate to the gender institution. Then I present the methodology, data, and results. Finally, I discuss the findings and conclude.

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Beliefs originate in cognitive processes during which we pay attention to, perceive, interpret, store, and retrieve information. Throughout this process, we unconsciously use heuristics, or mental shortcuts, to simplify our experiences, saving on cognitive resources (Shah and Oppenheimer 2008). Heuristics lead us to classify our experiences based on categories, resulting in bias. To illustrate the link between heuristics and bias, I use three powerful heuristics from the foundational study of Tversky and Kahneman (1974): representativeness, availability, and anchoring.²

The representativeness heuristic implies that we process experiences based on the most representative prototype (i.e., example or model for similar experiences). We compare individuals to our prototype based on how we perceive them (e.g., what we see them wear) and assign them to categories. One of the most salient categories is a typically binary gender category (i.e., man, woman); gender categorization is instantaneous and spontaneous, without effort nor

intention (Holtgraves 2010). We acquire and internalize information about gender categories throughout our lives, starting as children (Hollander, Renfrow, and Howard 2011). While there are salient categories other than gender (e.g., race, age), this study is concerned with gender categories, which I will thus focus on in developing the theorization.

Gender categorization sets off cognitive processing about social roles. We have mental prototypes of women's and men's roles in society, including stereotypes (i.e., widely-held oversimplified generalizations of specific groups of people and roles) (Drake, Primeaux, and Thomas 2018, Eagly and Steffen 1984, Eagly and Wood 2016). A woman is expected to act communally, care for others' physical and emotional needs, be nice, display emotion, and enact specific roles (i.e., a caregiver like a mother). A man is expected to behave as an agent, be rational, assertive and controlling, and enact particular roles (i.e., an agent like a leader). When we assign an individual to the woman category, our mental prototypes of gendered social roles imply that we see her in caregiving rather than leader roles. Our beliefs are gender-biased: we attribute different social roles to her than if we had categorized her as a man.

The availability and anchoring heuristics also result in unconscious gender bias. The availability heuristic implies that we process an experience based on how easily we recall similar cases. Consider an individual assigned to the woman category (e.g., due to representativeness). When we know more women who are caregivers than leaders, we view her as more likely to be a caregiver than a leader. Our beliefs are, again, gender-biased.

The anchoring heuristic implies that we process an experience based on a reference point (or anchor) and make adjustments relative to this point until we reach a reasonable inference. Consider again a woman. We adjust our beliefs about how she enacts caregiving roles based on our reference point for a woman engaged in caregiving. Our beliefs are gender-biased: we judge her differently than we would judge a man who does caregiving since we have distinct caregiving reference points for women and men. In caregiving roles, women are often evaluated more harshly than men (Villicana, Garcia, and Biernat 2017).

This discussion illustrates how we use heuristics during cognitive processing, sidestepping information about complexities and details relevant to processing our experiences. Instead, we assign individuals to gender categories, which we associate with specific gendered roles (e.g., men are leaders, women are caregivers). Cognitive processing can thus result in gender-biased beliefs.

LABELING

A labeler uses a label to designate a labelee and their behaviour. Labels are activated while the labeler engages with the labelee when interacting with them (e.g., working, talking) or reflecting on them. They express the labeler's beliefs, which can be gender-biased, and enable them to interpret and organize their experience (Ashforth and Humphrey 1997). The labeler has learned labels over time while engaging with others (Bryant and Higgins 2010).

Conceived initially as a sociological approach for dealing with deviant behaviour and mental illness (Becker 1963, Gove 1970, Davis 1972), labeling theory is concerned with how social groups set rules and how those who break rules are judged deviant.³ It views deviance not as a property of the labelee but as a form of social control: the labelee's behaviour is labeled as deviant relative to what is expected of someone in their category, including their gender category, to get them to align their behaviour with expectations. Labeling theory views categories like gender categories as constructed and reflecting an arbitrary social consensus that does not necessarily describe a correspondence between the label and what is labeled (Ashforth and Humphrey 1997).

Labeling theory originally conceptualized deviance as negative: an individual's behaviour is labeled as not conforming to what is expected of their assigned category and/or conforming to what is expected of an unassigned category. A woman leader, for example, would be labeled as deviant for her gender category: she is viewed as not communal enough given that she is a woman and too agentic given that she is not a man (Eagly and Karau 2002). Scholars have since also considered positive deviance, behaviour that overconforms relative to what is expected (Heckert and Heckert 2002).⁴

Labels differ from words: they evaluate labelees and their behaviour relative to a category like gender (Ashforth and Humphrey 1997, Domenico 2008). Labels can involve well-known expressions loaded with meanings that draw on analogies, historical characters, and mythologies. For example, Acker (2006) explains how "Women enacting power violate conventions of relative subordination to men, risking the label of 'witches' or 'bitches.'" (p. 447)

This discussion illustrates how labeling is a complex process that can combine a desire for control with unconscious bias. Labeling theory points out that we label to control behaviour that deviates from what we expect given the category assigned to a person. Unconscious bias points out how cognitive processes can also shape labels: labels can express unconsciously biased

beliefs about a person's category, including their gender category. Categorization theory has been used to explain that we label because cognitive processes draw on categories (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995, 1997, Bruner 1957). Although categorization theory considers how categories can be invoked unconsciously, it does not link categories to heuristics that we unconsciously use. It was developed before Tversky and Kahneman (1974) did their foundational work on heuristics. Along with the rich scholarship it spawned, it enables us to understand how categories are grounded in heuristics used in cognitive processing. Unconscious bias research illustrates the cognitive roots of categories inherent in labels.

THE GENDER INSTITUTION, LABELING AND UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Unconscious bias and labels that express it can be situated in the gender institution, as illustrated in Figure 1 adapted from McCarthy and Moon (2018b). The gender institution involves phenomena at three different levels. At the highest, macro level, it includes the gender order, which refers to the broad structural context in which specific relations and practices occur, and that involves rules (Connell 2005, McCarthy and Moon 2018).⁵ Next, at the meso level, are gender regimes that determine how gender is patterned and that “feed up into the gender order and down into everyday practices” (Connell 1987, McCarthy and Moon 2018: 1155). Finally, at the micro level are the gender practices, that is, the ways in which individuals do and undo gender (Deutsch 2007, West and Zimmerman 1987).

Unconscious bias, and labels that express it, are part of micro-level gender practices.

Unconscious bias refers to beliefs or ways of perceiving and thinking, thus involving cognitions. When individuals are unconsciously gender-biased, their beliefs about phenomena relating to men and women systematically differ because they consistently assign individuals to different categories based on their perceived gender. Gender categories are part of the macro-level gender order, and they are associated with specific social roles (e.g., women are caregivers, men are leaders). In other words, unconscious bias, as a micro-level practice, draws on another, macro-level, practice. Unconscious gender bias, thus, is a complex phenomenon that involves more than one level of the gender institution. In Figure 1, arrow a captures the link between micro-level unconscious bias and the macro-level gender order.

Unconscious gender bias can be expressed in labels, illustrated by arrow b in Figure 1. Labels then are gendered too: labels applied to women systematically differ from those applied to men; they vary across different, and usually binary, gender categories. In this study, I explore whether

and how unconscious bias is expressed in labels; that is, I explore the relation between these two micro-level gender practices (arrow b in Figure 1) in the specific context of women leaders. Women leaders potentially violate two norms regarding the social roles associated with their assigned gender category: the norm of the caregiver who is a woman and the norm of the leader who is a man. I determine whether women leaders are perceived as violating these norms by analyzing whether labels designate women leaders as negatively or positively deviating from the norm of the social role associated with their gender category. Negative deviation signals violation of the norm, whereas positive deviation signals conformity and over-conformity. Moreover, I am interested in the immediate and larger implications of labeling grounded in unconscious bias. I, therefore, explore two additional questions and ask how labels anchored in unconscious bias affect women leaders in their leader role and how women leaders react to these labels, captured by arrow c in Figure 2.

Labels are unlikely to leave women leaders neutral. Labels reify what they describe as “truth,” defining what is normal; they remove a woman leader’s individuality, reducing them to the label (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995, 1997). They thereby affect their identity. Identity is central for individuals; it answers the questions “Who am I?” and “Who am I not?” (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). It has multiple dimensions: an individual can harbour many selves (e.g., leader, caregiver) that come out in distinct settings.

Crucial for identity is acceptance from others, especially those in the same social group (Tajfel 1981). A label communicates whether the group accepts or rejects a woman leader (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995, 1997). An accepting label confirms the woman leader’s identity, particularly the dimension of their identity related to the group (e.g., other leaders) (Mangen and Brivot 2015). In contrast, a rejecting label can exacerbate social disdain that the woman leader experiences and signal that they are inferior to the labeler and their group (e.g., other leaders). Thus, a rejecting label threatens their identity, specifically its dimension related to the group. Labeleds often try to address this threat and be accepted by the group by engaging in coping behaviour. Labeling thus controls women leaders from the “outside in” (Ely and Padavic 2007). It can also control them from the “inside in” when they label themselves. Self-labels reflect discourses that they have internalized, including self-stereotyping, when they adopt the features of those they identify with. During self-labeling, individuals control themselves to conform to

internalized expectations (Covaleski et al. 1998). Whether they work from the outside in or inside in, labels control a woman leader's identity in a social role.

In my analysis, I explore how women react to labels, particularly how they cope with the difficult, rejecting labels. While this analysis remains firmly situated at the micro level, I discuss my results in the larger setting of the gender institution by linking labels and their reactions to the macro-level gender order. Specifically, I consider what labels and their reactions imply for social roles associated with gender categories and the norms and expectations about who should take on what role, shown by arrow d in Figure 1. My goal is to illustrate how the link between micro-level unconscious bias and macro-level social roles comes full circle within the gender institution, with social roles being mobilized when unconsciously gender-biased beliefs are formed, these beliefs then being expressed in labels, which, together with the reactions they yield, contribute to how social roles evolve. As such, unconscious bias is a crucial micro-level phenomenon that, through its link with other micro-level and macro-level phenomena, may contribute to the gender institution and gender inequalities.

DATA

This study is grounded in interpretivism, whereby meanings are constructed by individuals situated in a particular cultural context. The context involves 31 participants, who are women appointed to their first board of directors of for-profit firms in Canada between 2012 and 2018, bar one exception.⁶ The firms operate in various industries (e.g., consumer products, environment, finance, government, healthcare, information technology, law, media, mining, oil & gas, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, transportation, real estate, retail, utilities). At the time of their appointment, all participants except two already held paid professional roles, primarily in corporate leadership (e.g., senior vice-president, president of their own firm, partner at firm, C-suite officer) and had been in leader roles for about 15 years.⁷ Participants had diverse ages, ranging from the mid-thirties to the mid-sixties, most being in their fifties.⁸ They were racially and ethnically homogenous; most were white and not from ethnic minorities. They were educationally homogenous: most had at least an undergraduate degree, although in different fields (e.g., commerce, engineering, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, sociology, science). Fewer participants had a Master's degree (e.g., MBA; Master of Law, in Public Administration, Sciences), a doctoral degree, or a professional or a director certification (e.g., Certified Public Accountant).

Participants were recruited via snowball sampling and from lists of board appointees obtained from management circulars and governance networks. Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview, which took place face-to-face in English or French in the interviewee's professional setting (e.g., their office), their home, or Concordia University. Interviews lasted on average 95 minutes, were tape-recorded with consent, and subsequently transcribed. Interviewees narrated their life stories before answering questions about women and leadership.⁹ Interviewees were generally happy to share their experiences. My presence (and that of a co-researcher who helped conduct interviews) may have primed them for choosing narratives due to gender similarity.¹⁰

ANALYSIS

The interviews were conducted as part of a more extensive study on women in organizational leadership. Because this larger study does not focus on unconscious bias, no explicit questions about unconscious bias (nor deviance or labels) were asked. Instead, unconscious bias was inferred from transcripts using thematic analysis of what interviewees talked about (Riessman 2005, Feldman et al. 2004). Interviewees' stories (i.e., chronological successions of logically coherent events) are packed with information (i.e., context, history, main events, consequences) (Czarniawska 1997, 2000, Franzosi 1998). Through stories, they reflect on and make sense of transitioning into and experiencing leadership; while doing so, they convey conscious and unconscious views that they and others hold (Jefferson and Hollway 2000, Como et al. 2020). I make use of their stories in understanding how they experience unconscious bias (my broad theme). To do my thematic coding, I used an abductive approach: I worked in four stages, detailed below, circling between understanding my data in light of my broad theme and drawing on the literature to deepen further how I make sense of the theme and what emerges from the data (Feront and Bertels 2021, Deville, Mangen, and Pérès 2017, Mangen and Brivot 2015, Alvesson and Kärreman 2007). My iterative approach enabled me to progressively zero in on my theme while understanding the context in which it occurs, which is crucial for exploring its narrower and broader consequences. The unit of analysis is an interviewee's account.

Stage 1. I read each transcript to familiarize myself with the interviewee and her experience of transitioning into leadership. In addition, I engaged with the literature on gender in organizations to facilitate the detection of gendering patterns in each interviewee's experience.

Stage 2. To prepare this manuscript for the special issue on unconscious bias and organizations, I reread my interviews while attentive to unconscious bias. I paid attention to how interviewees experienced their lives in terms of their own or others' unconsciously biased beliefs. To identify unconscious bias, I looked for gendered features and experiences that were naturalized and reified (e.g., "*women are naturally more emotional than men,*" Interviewee 17) and for individuals and behaviours spontaneously and instantaneously categorized based on gender (e.g., "*We can't consider her for that because now she has a child at home,*" Interviewee 27).¹¹ During this process, I noticed how similar labels were often used by interviewees or individuals they discussed. These labels evoked my curiosity about how labels are related to unconscious bias. To understand this relation, I consulted the literatures on labeling, unconscious bias, and gender in organizations. I realized how labeling was a crucial gendering practice that had not been linked to unconscious bias, despite the cognitive roots inherent in labels and bias. Accordingly, I decided to continue exploring the relation between unconscious bias and labeling in the context of my interviewees' experiences.

Stage 3. Guided by the second stage work, I reread each transcript while paying attention to the themes of labels and unconsciously gendered beliefs and experiences. I broke down transcripts into data units (i.e., a few sentences or a paragraph) representing a line of reasoning or a small story. I examined each data unit to determine whether unconsciously gendered beliefs and experiences related to labels were present. In NVivo, I developed codes for the labels that emerged from this process. In choosing labels, I remained as close as possible to interviewees' accounts. I applied labels in a non-exclusive way, which allows for ambiguity in experienced situations (i.e., one interviewee can have more than one label associated with them). Once the codes for labels were created, I searched for linkages between them (i.e., commonalities and similarities) by comparing and contrasting them. This procedure confirmed my initial codes and ensured that they reflect distinct phenomena connected to labeling and unconscious bias

Stage 4. I referred back to the literatures on labeling and unconscious bias. Guided by them, I reviewed the codes from Stage 3 and reread data units to ensure they relate to unconscious bias and labeling. Throughout this process, I was aware of my biases potentially influencing my interpretation. I strove to interpret as little as possible from these accounts. To assuage concerns that I overinterpret, I show extensive excerpts from these accounts in the results section. This

process resulted in the final codes, each reflecting a label: Caregiver, Bitch, Token, One-of-the-boy, Emotional, Empathic.

RESULTS

I now describe labels that emerge during interviews and how they express unconscious bias towards interviewees and affect interviewees in their leader role, and how interviewees react to them.

CAREGIVER

Interviewee 28 explains: *“I think women are still looked at more as primary caregivers.”*

Interviewee 4 recalls how, at a conference, a man commented on the lack of women in his industry: *“Oh, you know, it’s not really fun to work in areas that we work in, and I’m building this line and operation and northern climate, and it’s cold. It’s far from your families. Who would want to work there?”* Interviewee 27 witnessed women seen as mothers and held back from professional opportunities; she was told about an employee that *“We can’t consider her for that because now she has a child at home. [...] Well, she won’t want to do the travel.”*

Interviewee 20 talks about her job interviews: *“For sure, they cannot ask me, but they are all asking the question: ‘So, will you have a child?’ [...] Well, for a man, when you debrief, you won’t say: ‘Yep, he’s going to have kids.’ It is not a question; if he has kids, his girlfriend will take care of them’.”*

The label reflects an unconscious bias: women leaders are assigned into a gender category and its associated caregiver role whereby they take care of their family’s needs. Caregiving is inconsistent with leading: leaders are seen as agentic and concerned with themselves and their careers. The label signals negative deviance from the leader role.

The label delegitimizes interviewees in their leader role: it highlights the gender dimension of their identity, and the related caregiver role, obscuring its leader dimension. The label also limits them in enacting this dimension. Given the resources (e.g., time, effort) they dedicate to caregiving, they differ from the fully available ideal leader. The onus is on them to prove that they have the resources necessary for leading. Yet, they cannot be sure that their efforts in this regard suffice due to the presumed caregiver role associated with their gender category. The label reminds them of the difficulty of being available in a way that is coherent with the ideal leader and sets a boundary around leadership that they may be unable to cross fully.

Interviewees react to the label by accepting it. Interviewee 16 states: *“We run the house. We have more responsibilities, no matter how good your husband is.”* Over time, they learn to cope with caregiving and arrange their lives to enact their professional roles. Interviewee 17 explains: *“Mommy guilt, you have it forever. [...] you learn how to manage it, and you learn how to prioritize. [...] I realized I don’t need to be at every parent/teacher interview.”*

Interviewees also reject the mom label. They are aware of others’ gender categorizations.

Interviewee 27 questions why a mother cannot be considered for a professional role: *“I said ‘I don’t know how you can; we don’t know that.’ So just being alert for those intended or unintended biases and I would say in some cases intended.”* Interviewee 30, who listens to the man explain that women would not want to work in his industry, pushes back: *“I got really angry [...] So, I said to him, ‘What human would want to work there? Why do you think your men are okay and women aren’t? If you give me an intellectual challenge and compensate me properly, let me worry about my family.’”*

BITCH

Interviewee 19 observes: *“Women are still perceived as the ones that should be softer, caretaking, more everything is just from the heart, and doting and nurturing.”* Women perceived as violating the caregiver role are penalized. Interviewee 19 explains: *“when you don’t fill that role, and people expect you to fill that role going back to expectations, you’re seen as a tough, sorry to say it, bitch.”* Perceptions of violating caregiving roles are grounded in behaviour that is omitted (e.g., not soft enough) or committed (e.g., being assertive). Interviewee 26 explains: *“We get called bitches all the time. [...] Of course, we do. Women who are very strong.”*

Interviewee 17 points out how men are spared the label: *“We all know a guy who’s tough; he’s assertive, he’s confident. A woman who’s tough, she’s a bitch.”*

The label reflects an unconscious bias: women leaders are assigned a gender category with the related emotional caregiver role. They are to be friendly, nice, and concerned with others and abstain from behaviours related to their unassigned gender category (i.e., men), such as assertiveness and control. The label signals negative deviance from the caregiver role: women leaders fail to enact the caregiving behaviour and, instead, behave assertively.

The label delegitimizes women leaders in their leader role: it highlights their identity’s gender dimension, and the related caregiver role, obscuring its leader dimension. The label also limits how they can enact this dimension: it attributes them an inhuman feature (i.e., a bitch is a dog)

that others them from the ideal leader who is presumed to have humanity. The onus is on them to prove that they possess humanity adapted to their gender: they must show that they can be what is seen as nice. Yet, they cannot be sure that their efforts suffice, given the immutability implicit in the label. The label reminds them of the difficulty of meeting the leader ideal and draws a boundary around leadership that they might be unable to cross fully.

Interviewees react by accepting the label. Interviewee 17 states: “*We spend a lot of time as women making sure that we project just enough confidence not to be seen as a bitch. We are much more focused, women, on wanting to be liked, right?*” Interviewees also reject the label. Interviewee 26 tells the labeler: “*‘What did you just say about a woman? Come on. That’s not how you do it.’*” Other interviewees ignore the label. Interviewee 27 argues: “*if you’re true to yourself and you’re being who you are, then let them call you whatever they’re going to call you.*”

TOKEN

Women leaders worry about being seen not as individuals but as tokens representing their gender. Interviewee 1 explains why she opposes gender quotas for boards: “*I think it weakens the skill level, you know? I think it’s important to have goals and to push, but to have a quota for the sake of putting someone on board; I think it becomes ... You’re like a token woman.*”

The label involves an unconscious bias: women leaders are categorized based on their gender, which is not associated with leadership. Instead, leadership is associated with their unassigned gender, men, seen as having the characteristics required for leading. The label signals negative deviance from the leader role: due to their gender, women leaders are viewed as being incompatible with this role.

The label delegitimizes women leaders in their leader role: it highlights their identity’s gender dimension, thus obscuring its leader dimension. It also limits how they can enact the latter dimension. As women, they differ from the ideal leader, which has consequences for them. They are excluded from social events. Interviewee 10 recalls how “*the professionals, the lawyers and the accountants would always invite the guys ... I was the boss, but they would invite the guys fishing.*” Exclusion from social events leads to exclusion from decision-making. Interviewee 30 explains: “*they’re not on the golf course, they’re not in the strip joints [...] But you don’t know where decisions are made. Some of them are made more there.*” The onus is on them to prove that they have the features necessary for leading. Yet, they cannot be sure that their efforts

suffice, given their gender. Interviewee 6 reports how, after she got herself invited to a golf game with her (male) peers during a work trip, she was reminded of her gender: *“And while inviting me, however, it’s interesting because he said: ‘My wife will be joining us for golf that day also,’ which is very good. I think it was his way of saying, ‘You will not be alone as a woman’.”* The label reminds women leaders of the difficulty of attaining the leader ideal and draws a boundary around leadership that they might be unable to cross fully.

Interviewees accept the label. They look for ways to establish and prove their skills. Interviewee 4 explains how, during the board recruitment process, *“having the support from my company gives me credibility, but [...] they will google you and say, ‘Alright, she’s legitimate, right? Not just some chick they put on the board.’”* Interviewees also reject the label and question how leadership is understood. Interviewee 31 argues: *“There’s the opportunity to get promoted, but you’re going to have to step aside into an infrastructure role [...] you have responsibilities for a team and a budget, but it’s not revenue-generating and just doesn’t give you the same street credibility. While these are brilliant, hard-working, accomplished women, it does make you think that there are some cultures that are just not ready for women to step into the C-Suite.”*

Interviewees who reject the label can quit. Interviewee 7 recalls: *“And I quit because in fact I was recruited because they wanted a woman. [...] It was a boys’ club [...] They didn’t want my opinion.”* They propose alternative perspectives on leadership. Interviewee 31 explains: *“there is sometimes, I think, an unconscious bias. That if you haven’t been a CEO, you’re not as qualified. Now, having said that, it is interesting to me because I think diversity of thought and experience leads you to hold conversations differently.”* They are proactive. Interviewee 15 recalls: *“And the CEO-chair who runs the company looked at me and said, ‘Interviewee 15, I am unable to find women for my boards.’ I said: ‘What?’ [...] ‘I will look into this, I will give you a list. There are women who could be on the boards of your different companies. [...]’ So, it is possible, one only has to look for women’.”*

ONE-OF-THE-BOYS

Interviewee 7 recalls: *“I was often told: ‘You’re one of the boys.’”* Interviewee 17 explains how her men peers label her: *“I’m never the object of the joke. When they realize that I’m in the room sometimes, they’re like, ‘Oh dear interviewee, sorry.’ And then eight of them will say, ‘You don’t need to say you’re sorry to interviewee; she’s one of the guys.’”* Although Interviewee 6 is not labeled “one-of-the-boys”, she recalls being included among her men peers once they realized

that she plays golf well: *“They discovered that I can play. And suddenly, their attitude towards me changes. I am ... not lying. It was night and day. [...] Being invited, I was able to mix with these men on an informal basis.”*

The label involves an unconscious bias: women leaders are categorized based on their gender, which is not associated with leadership. Instead, leadership is related to their unassigned gender, men, who are seen as having the characteristics required for leadership. Women leaders are viewed as having at least some of these characteristics since they are in leadership or have a masculine-typed skill (e.g., play golf). The label signals positive deviance from the leader role: they are seen as enacting it better than expected, given that leadership is not associated with their gender.

The label nevertheless delegitimizes women leaders by limiting the scope of how they can enact the leader dimension of their identity. Since leadership is still defined in masculine terms and leader roles are occupied mainly by men, the label reminds women leaders of how their being in leader roles is an exception to the norm. The label is like a badge of honour that labelers bestow on them, and it signals acceptance by their (men) peers. Because labelers can label, they can also unlabel and remove the badge of honour and membership in the group of peers; the threat of unlabeling is implicit in the label. Membership depends on the acceptance of those who have labeling authority, women leaders’ peers. The onus is on women leaders to meet the implicit requirements for remaining a member in good standing. These requirements involve adopting and accepting group behaviour, which limits how they can enact their leader role. The label reminds them that behaviour done by “boys” is expected, drawing a boundary around leadership that women leaders might be able to cross if they accept this behaviour.

Interviewees react to the label by accepting it. Interviewee 6 describes how, once her men peers accepted her into their group, they got to know her better: *“for them, someone who can talk sports is important. [...] We asked questions, we were able to get closer through the sport. [...] I was being asked questions about my prior experience, and so I could better make known what I know.”* Interviewee 17 reports how she deals with her men peers’ jokes: *“inevitably, they start making jokes. Of course, they’re gonna be these sexist kinds of jokes, or whatever it is. [...] They’re guys. [...] So I can either be super offended, get up, and walk out, which will create a crazy dynamic for me next time around the table. Or, I can just ignore them. Because when they’re in a locker room, they talk a certain way. [...] If I can’t take it, then I shouldn’t be*

there.” Interviewees also distance themselves from the label. Interviewee 7 explains: “*it doesn’t affect me because I take it with a smile.*”

EMOTIONAL

Interviewee 26 recalls: “*One of the things that I’ve always been accused of, or given a reprimand for, is being emotional.*” The label reflects an unconscious bias: women leaders are categorized based on their gender: they are women, with the related emotional caregiver role, in which they experience and display emotion (Shields 2013, Schiebinger 1991). Emotional caregiving is inconsistent with leading, which is associated with rationality and control. The label signals negative deviance from the leader role: women leaders fail to enact the self-control and rationality (e.g., ability to separate feelings from ideas, objectivity, logic) necessary for leading. The label delegitimizes women in their leader role: it highlights their identity’s gender dimension, and the related caregiver role, obscuring its leader dimension. It also limits how they can enact this dimension because they are seen as lacking the ideal leader’s self-control and rationality. The onus is on them to prove that they have these features. Yet, they cannot be sure that their efforts will suffice due to their gender identity. The label reminds them of the difficulty of meeting the ideal leader and sets a boundary around leadership that they might not be able to cross fully.

Interviewees react to the label by accepting it. They see themselves as the problem that needs to be solved via specific behaviours. Interviewee 26 explains: “*So again, to be as calm. There’s certainly demeanours that you can have that help you in terms of that.*” Interviewees also distance themselves from the label. Interviewee 7 explains how the view that women are more emotional “*does not age well.*”

EMPATHIC

Interviewees see women as having unique features useful for leadership due to their caregiving roles. Interviewee 30 explains: “*because women can look so holistically at things, they see all these different options, permutations, combinations and know that this person might [...] you look at some of the projects where there’s been great success on the community level, and it’s like Bangladesh, microlending, it’s women ’cause they have to look. We’re still genetically programmed to take care of the kids and feel that community, right?*” Interviewee 29 argues: “*I think women negotiate all the time for themselves, for their families [...] We just grow up*

knowing what trade-offs are worth it and not worth it. [...] I think men expected to have what they wanted. They could actually really hurt the organization to get it. I just think that women are a bit more ... Maybe it's an empathy thing."

The label involves an unconscious bias: women leaders are categorized based on their gender, with the related caregiver role. Because of the caregiving skills associated with this role, they are seen as well-equipped for enacting the leader role. The label signals positive deviance from the leader role: women leaders bring more caregiving to leader roles than expected, given the ideal leader unconcerned with caregiving.

The label legitimizes women leaders in their leader role by combining their identity's gender dimension, and the related caregiver role, with its leader dimension. Caregiving and leading are complements instead of being incompatible. Although the label highlights how women leaders differ from men leaders, who are presented as not having as rich a set of caregiving skills, this othering is not limiting but enabling. The label expands how women leaders can enact their identity's leader dimension by emphasizing how their caregiving roles bring new and valuable skills into leadership. It encourages women leaders to enact leadership in a way that differs from the leader ideal and trespass the boundary around leadership.

Interviewees react to this label by accepting it. Interviewee 17 explains: *"I've always found it as a total advantage to be a woman. [...] I think they always thought that I could bring a very different perspective to the table."*

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study asks three questions. How do labels express unconscious bias towards women leaders? How do labels affect them in their leader role? How do they react to labels? These questions aim to help us understand how labels grounded in unconscious bias shape the gender institution.

Regarding the first question (i.e., how do labels express unconscious bias towards women leaders?), labels express unconscious bias by designating women leaders as deviating from their assigned gender category (i.e., women) and the associated social role (i.e., caregivers) or as deviating from their unassigned gender category (i.e., men) and the related social role (i.e., leaders). Deviance is negative for all labels but two (i.e., emphatic, one-of-the-boys labels). Regarding the second question (i.e., how do labels affect women leaders in their leader role?), labels mostly delegitimize women leaders in their leader roles, but they can also legitimize them

therein. Delegitimizing labels emphasize the gender dimension of a woman leader's identity while obscuring its leader dimension. They also limit a woman leader in how they can enact leader roles, given their assigned gender category. Accordingly, delegitimization draws a boundary around leadership that women leaders may be unable to cross fully. The one legitimizing label (i.e., empathic) combines the gender dimension of a woman leader's identity, and the related caregiver role, with its leader dimension and highlights how enacting the leader role is enriched by their identity's gender dimension.

Regarding the third question (i.e., how do women leaders react to labels?), women leaders react by accepting labels, distancing themselves from them, and rejecting labels. Accepting women leaders agree to a label's implicit gender category and the associated social role, embrace responsibility for being labeled, and control their behaviour to escape the label (in case of negative deviance) or maintain it (in case of positive deviance). Distancing women leaders do not necessarily accept a label's implicit gender categorization and the associated social roles yet do not reject them. Rejecting women leaders resist the label's gender categorization and the related social role; they situate the responsibility for the label not with themselves but with the categorization.

I now circle back to Figure 1 to show how the answers to my three research questions illustrate the link between labeling grounded in unconscious bias and the gender institution across its different levels. The distinct social roles (i.e., leader, caregiver) that are associated with gender categories are situated at the macro level; the unconscious bias that draws on these gender categories (captured by arrow a in Figure 1) and the labels that express it (arrow b in Figure 1) are located at the micro level. Women leaders react to labels via acceptance, distancing, and rejection, shown by arrow c. When they accept labels, women leaders control their behaviour to conform to idealized social roles related to gender categories. As a result, labels, gender categories, and social roles are upheld (arrow d in Figure 1) and are subsequently again activated during cognitive processing involving unconscious bias. Since the gender institution is grounded in gender categories and the related, gendered, social roles, accepting reactions contribute to upholding the gender institution and gender inequalities. In contrast, when women leaders distance themselves from labels, they do not seek to conform to idealized social roles. Women leaders who reject labels go further: they question labels and the implicit gender categories and associated social roles, and they propose practices to undo these roles. These reactions can

contribute to uprooting labels, gender categories, and related social roles, thereby disrupting the gender institution (arrow d in Figure 1) and gender inequalities.

This study makes three contributions to research on unconscious bias, labeling, and gender. First, it emphasizes the consequences of unconscious bias, which extend well beyond the micro-level practice of labeling that labeling theory is concerned with. Instead, consequences also involve macro-level social roles, which can be upheld or disrupted via labels and labelees' reactions to labels. Accordingly, unconscious bias has broad repercussions, notably for gender inequalities inherent in gendered social roles. While I have explored the consequences of unconscious bias for the gender institution through the relation between unconscious bias and two particular phenomena (i.e., labeling, social roles), unconscious bias can involve other phenomena and levels of the gender institution. For example, meso-level gender regimes like organizational performance evaluation systems are implemented by individuals who can have unconsciously biased beliefs about those being evaluated, which affects performance evaluation outcomes and potentially the gender institution. Similarly, macro-level gender orders like laws are enacted by individuals who can be unconsciously biased (e.g., judges who engage in discriminatory victim-blaming), affecting legal outcomes and the gender institution. Future research can explore other phenomena through which unconscious bias relates to the gender institution.

Second, this study highlights the complexities involved in the gender institution, particularly its different phenomena and the various levels where they are situated. I show how, in my case, the institution of gender is shaped by practices located at the micro level (i.e., labeling grounded in unconscious bias) that interact with macro-level social roles. By focusing on the so-far unexplored practice of labeling grounded in unconscious bias, this study extends research on the complexity of gender institution and its evolution. McCarthy and Moon (2018) argue that “empirical studies on all dimensions of the gender institution are rare.” (p. 1154) I do not explore all these dimensions, but instead focus on the micro and macro dimensions, sidestepping the meso dimension. Nevertheless, these two dimensions enable me to highlight how the gender institution is shaped by and shapes a multitude of often mundane phenomena situated at different dimensions. Labelling, in particular, is mundane as people frequently label others, and themselves, on an everyday basis, without second thoughts. My study emphasizes how mundane practices like labeling can pass under the radar and thereby contribute to sustaining the gender institution, especially when they are intertwined with other phenomena (e.g., unconscious bias,

social roles) in a complex web of relations. While other mundane phenomena (e.g., social events) have been explored from the perspective of how they shape the gender institution (Ortlieb and Sieben 2019), in general, mundane phenomena remain under-researched in light of their potential to uphold and disrupt, in a hidden manner, gender inequalities. Organizational research would benefit from more work that explores mundane phenomena and the webs in which they are entangled in shaping the gender institution.

Finally, the study emphasizes the practices needed to disrupt the gender institution by combining two research streams with distinct ontologies and epistemologies: unconscious bias and labeling. Unconscious bias research, grounded in (social) psychology, has a realist ontology and an objectivist epistemology, whereas labeling, has a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology.¹² Realism and objectivism guide us towards what is needed for disrupting the gender institution: becoming aware of unconscious biases, the underlying heuristics, and the ways in which biases influence how we speak and act. Relativism and subjectivism point out how individual experiences differ and how they are constructed, notably through the stories we tell when we label. To disrupt the gender institution, we need to account for the richness in experiences and their construction. Doing so enables us to adapt disrupting practices and deconstruct, notably by unlabeled. Unlabeling can involve, as illustrated by the women leaders in this study, rejecting labels and questioning assumptions about social roles associated with labels. Future research can build on this study to harness the strength of joining multiple ontological and epistemological paradigms.

Doing so is, of course, not without problems. For instance, by combining unconscious bias and labeling, we implicitly adhere to their ontologies and epistemologies. The realist ontology and objectivist epistemology underlying research on (social) psychology have been questioned (Pérez-Álvarez 2018). Can researchers who do positivist studies be removed from their research questions and answers? Their beliefs are enacted in how they work (e.g., how they set up experiments) and shape their conclusions, which may reveal more about them than about the questions they seek to answer. By implicitly adhering to the realist ontology and objectivist epistemology, we abstract away from how researchers' settings affect their conclusions. As a result, we risk relying on conclusions that would be different had these settings been different. We thus need to be careful in using conclusions from this research.

This study has various limitations. First, its interviewees are relatively homogenous (e.g., white, upper class); more diverse individuals were not interviewed. We do not know how they are labeled, what these labels do to their legitimacy, nor how they react to labels. A more comprehensive understanding of how labeling grounded in unconscious bias contributes to gender institution requires broadening the analysis. Second, this study is not concerned with antecedents that act as mediators between labels and reactions to them. Research on settings other than organizational leadership suggests that mediators can play a crucial role in how labelees react (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995). Future research can shed light on these mediators in organizational leadership.

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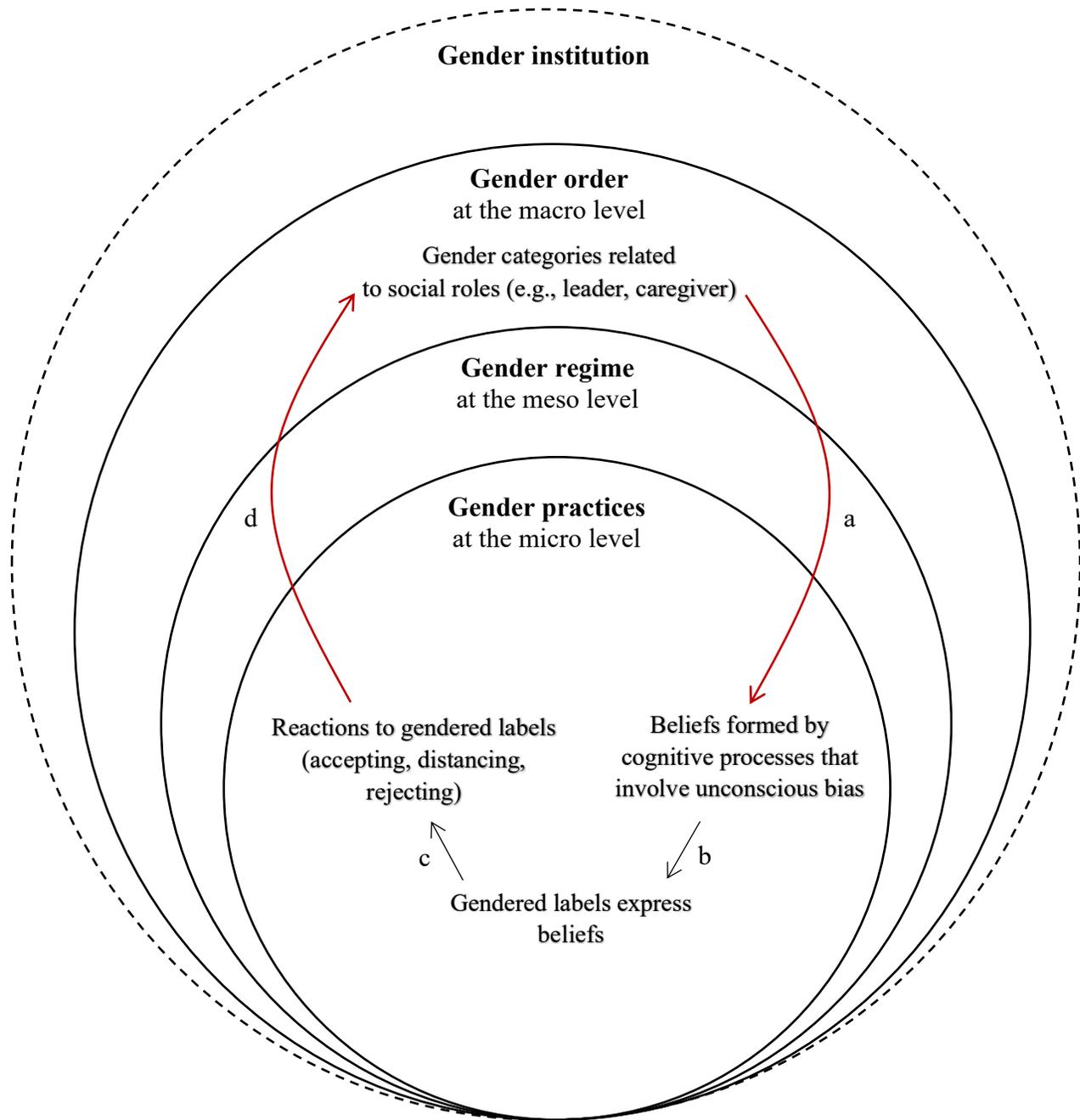
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Figure 1. The gender institution, unconscious bias, and labels adapted from McCarthy and Moon (2018: 1156)



NOTES

- ¹ Beliefs are ways of perceiving and thinking about gender; practices are ways of doing and undoing gender (Deutsch 2007, West and Zimmerman 1987); norms are descriptive or injunctive beliefs about who gendered individuals are and what they do (Kiesling 2003); rules refer to laws, policies, and regulations (Bothello and Mangen 2021).
- ² Other heuristics include affect and inherence (Dale 2015).
- ³ Labeling is a perspective rather than a scientific theory (Ashforth and Humphrey 1997).
- ⁴ The literature distinguishes between how behavior compares to a norm and how it is evaluated relative to the norm (Heckert and Heckert 2002). In this study, labeling concerns the latter; negative (positive) deviance refers to behavior evaluated as deviating negatively (positively) from a norm.
- ⁵ Rules refer to laws, policies, and regulations (Bothello and Mangen 2021).
- ⁶ The interviewee who was not a director had recently accessed executive leadership in a for-profit firm. Due to miscommunication prior to the interview, we found this out at the start of the interview.
- ⁷ Leadership experience is inferred from interviewees' LinkedIn profiles; leadership is defined as roles at the level of director, vice-president, or higher (and equivalent roles).
- ⁸ Interviewees mention their age or I infer it based on their LinkedIn profile. For four interviewees, I was unable to infer age.
- ⁹ The interview guide is available on request.
- ¹⁰ The co-researcher declined to co-author this study.
- ¹¹ Inherent in my approach is the risk that I identify unconscious bias where there is none or that I fail to identify bias. Although I have been careful in inferring bias in interviewees' accounts, I cannot rule out misidentification.
- ¹² Labeling has also been explored via a realist ontology and objectivist epistemology that see the causes of deviance (Lemert 1981). Some scholars in (social) psychology adopt a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology.