

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Affirmative action policies in job advertisements for leadership positions: How they affect women's and men's inclination to apply

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Abstract

This research investigates how affirmative action policies in job advertisements for leadership positions affect women's and men's inclination to apply. Management students ($N = 389$) received advertisements that differed in the strictness of announced gender policies: no statement, women explicitly invited to apply, preferential treatment of equally qualified women, or quota of 40% women. When women were treated preferentially, female participants reported higher self-ascribed fit, which resulted in higher inclinations to apply compared with the control condition and with men. However, when quota regulations were active, female participants showed neither an increased self-ascribed fit nor higher inclinations to apply. Interestingly, the underlying mechanism was not different when a quota regulation or no statement was announced: participants with higher agency levels reported higher inclinations to apply owing to an increase in self-ascribed fit. This study provides evidence that only some preferential treatment policies may be successful in increasing women's interest in leadership positions.

If one looks at a board meeting of top executives, or even the board of directors, one is likely to see a majority of men rather than a gender-diverse group. In the 28 Member States of the European Union as well as in the U.S. Fortune 500 firms, one in five board members is female (21.2%, European Commission Justice, 2015; 19.2%, The Catalyst Census, 2015). The likelihood of meeting a female chief executive officer (CEO) is small as well: in the European Union, women hold 3.6% of CEO positions in the largest companies (European Commission Justice, 2015), and 4.2% of Fortune 500 firms in the U.S. have female CEOs (The Catalyst Census, 2015). Thus, women are a minority in the highest, most prestigious positions. Importantly, past research indicates no actual gender difference in job performance measures from field studies ($d = -0.11$; Roth, Purvis, & Bobko, 2012).

Affirmative Action Policies and Their Consequences

With the aim of accelerating progress towards a better gender balance on the corporate boards, many societies are developing ways of providing equal opportunities for men and women. The most direct form of ensuring gender parity is a gender quota. Here, maximum weight is given to the demographic criterion of gender, whereas the person's qualification plays a secondary role (Harrison, Kravitz, Mayer, Leslie, & Lev-Arey, 2006). Such measures were outlawed in the United States in

1978, when the Supreme Court banned their use (Crosby, Iyer, Clayton, & Downing, 2003; Spann, 2000). In contrast to the United States, various European countries and organizations are discussing—or have already implemented—plans to prescribe a fixed percentage of women in non-executive board directorships (Gröschl & Takagi, 2012). The European Union recently approved legislation for gender parity in the boardroom with the aim of attaining a 40% objective of the underrepresented gender among non-executive directors in publicly listed companies by the year 2020 (European Commission Justice, 2014).

One of the assumptions of affirmative action policies giving preference to women is that they will encourage women to strive for leadership positions. Past research from the hiring simulation context has indeed shown that gender-specific job advertisements positively affect women's motivation to apply. For instance, women showed higher inclinations to apply for a position when the job description included a female rather than male gender-typed profile; men, in contrast, were not affected by the different gender typicality of the advertisements (Born & Taris, 2010). Women's and men's motivation to enter competitions was also examined in laboratory-based economic experiments (Balafoutas & Sutter, 2012). In this competition paradigm, all policy interventions (e.g., an automatic enhancement of women's performance or a minimum gender quota demanding that at least one female be among the winners regardless of performance) encouraged

women—particularly high-performing women—to enter the competition. Men's willingness to compete did not significantly decrease as a result of women's preferential treatment.

However, negative consequences of affirmative action policies have been observed as well. That is, preferential treatment policies were found to harm those who were meant to benefit (for reviews, see Crosby, Iyer, & Sincharoen, 2006; Kravitz et al., 1997; Leslie, Mayer, & Kravitz, 2014). For instance, women reported less interest in a leadership position when gender alone was the decisive factor for their selection (e.g., Heilman, Lucas, & Kaplow, 1990), an effect that was explained by women's doubts about their own abilities (Kravitz et al., 1997). Along the same lines, survey data from 70 female managers revealed that those who believed gender to play an important role for their being hired reported less organizational commitment as well as greater role ambiguity and conflict (Chacko, 1982).

To sum up, affirmative action programs have been found to have both positive and negative effects on women's interest in becoming a leader. The present study aims to contribute towards a better understanding of the consequences of affirmative action policies supporting the promotion of women by exploring the indirect effect of gender and different types of policies on self-ascribed fit and inclination to apply in the context of personnel selection procedures. Given that so far little is known about the mechanism underlying the effects of affirmative action policies on women's and men's inclination to apply, the present research examines *how* preferential treatment policies that vary in strictness enhance or curb women's and men's behavioral intentions to apply for leadership positions.

Explaining the Consequences of Affirmative Action Policies on Women's and Men's Inclination to Apply

One variable that may mediate the effect of gender on inclination to apply is *self-ascribed fit* with the position. According to the Lack of Fit Model (Heilman, 1983, 2012), there is a perceived lack of fit between female stereotypic attributes and male-typed leadership requirements. When a woman estimates the fit between her own attributes and the workplace-related role of a leadership position to be poor, a negative self-evaluation may emerge, which in turn may result in self-limiting concerning career options and career advancement ambitions. Perceptions of good fit, on the other hand, can raise women's expectations of success. It is reasonable to assume that a "fit analysis" of this kind also impacts women's inclination to apply. Hence, a better fit should result in higher inclinations to apply and a poorer fit in lower inclination.

Past research has shown that affirmative action programs for women can increase women's perceived fit with jobs. Positive effects of (weak) policies were reported within the paradigm of hiring

simulations (McNab & Johnston, 2002). Women's attraction to a fictitious organization was highest when the companies' efforts for equal opportunities were emphasized and when women were actively encouraged to apply. Similarly, women showed more interest in applying for a position when the profile in the advertisements was female gender-typed rather than male only (Born & Taris, 2010). Men, in contrast, were not negatively affected by the different gender typicality of the advertisements. They felt equally attracted and qualified for all profiles, irrespective of whether they were neutral or male or female gender-typed. Men undergo different socialization processes and have different levels of self-confidence about their own performance. Therefore, they "may care less than women about what is actually being expected from them; they want to move up, using any opportunity that occurs to get there" (Born & Taris, 2010, p. 487). Furthermore, research has shown that women's self-ascribed fit with leadership positions was higher when the advertisements depicted both a male person and a female person (i.e., a gender-diverse group), compared with male-only stimulus pictures (Bosak & Sczesny, 2008). Not only women but also men reacted more favorably to gender-diverse job advertisements than to apparently male-typed ones. To conclude, perceived fit can be assumed to influence women's and men's inclinations to apply. Accordingly, we expected advertisements announcing preferential treatment to increase women's perceived fit and, in turn, inclinations to apply; for men, we expected no negative consequences of such measures.

The second variable to consider for the underlying mechanisms is participants' *agentic self-concept*. This personality dimension involves qualities such as ambition, dominance, and independence, and it is associated with self-advancement in social hierarchies (Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012). Generally, men ascribe themselves more agency than women, corresponding to gender role expectations (Bem, 1974; Spence & Buckner, 2000). According to the Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), women experience an incongruity between the agentic behavior required for leadership and the predominantly communal qualities that are associated with the female gender role. As a consequence, women face more difficulties when aiming to acquire leadership positions. The importance of the personality dimension agency for professional advancement has repeatedly been documented in the context of leadership. A large prospective study showed a reciprocal impact of agency and career success, in that agentic traits predicted career success and career success predicted agency (Abele, 2003). Along the same lines, agency fully accounted for the effect of gender on self-ascribed fit with a leadership position (Bosak & Sczesny, 2008). In other words, it was not gender per se in this study that was responsible for differences in women's and men's self-ascribed

fit; instead, agency levels determined differences in self-ascribed fit with a leadership position. Hence, in the present research, the effect of gender on self-ascribed fit in particular was assumed to be mediated by participants' agentic self-concept.

Overview of the Present Research

In general, we assumed that the effects of affirmative action policies would be different for women and men, insofar as women's willingness to apply should increase in the presence of affirmative action policies, whereas for men neither an increase nor decrease in intentions to apply was expected (Hypothesis 1).

Because research on the effects of various affirmative action programs on women's interest to approach leadership has yielded mixed results, we examined how policies that vary in strictness enhance or curb women's behavioral intentions to apply for leadership positions. Because effects of affirmative action policies on women's (and men's) intentions to apply might not be directly observed, we supposed that testing indirect effects would be crucial for understanding the impact of such policies. Based on the theoretical model described earlier, we hypothesized that self-ascribed fit and agency have a mediating role in the effect of gender on inclinations to apply. To test our assumption, we investigated the influence of three different types of affirmative action for promoting women (as well as one control advertisement without any policy) on candidates' intentions to apply. The different treatments ranged from merely inviting women to apply (i.e., the current best practice of many European companies and organizations), to preferential hiring of women in case of equal qualification to women's preferential employment until reaching a quota of 40% women (as in the plan recently approved by the European Union) and were presented in fictitious job advertisements. We assumed the following underlying mechanisms depending on whether affirmative action policies were presented or not:

When no gender policy was mentioned in the job advertisement (control condition), the effect of gender on inclination to apply was expected to be mediated by participants' self-ascribed agency and job fit (Bosak & Sczesny, 2008). That is, we hypothesized that gender would predict agency levels, which in turn would affect perceived fit with the leadership position, resulting in differences in participants' inclinations to apply (Hypothesis 2). Hence, men's higher willingness to apply might not be due to (male) gender per se, but due to men's higher self-ascribed agency, which leads to higher perceived fit and in turn to higher inclinations to apply.

We expected a different pattern when affirmative action policies in favor of women were mentioned (i.e., women explicitly invited to apply, preferential treatment of equally qualified women, or 40% quota for women). We assumed that such gender policies would not only increase the salience of gender but also

emphasize the role of female gender in the context of leadership. Hence, we hypothesized that the following mechanism would boost women's willingness to apply. Affirmative action policies were expected to increase women's inclination to apply indirectly by enhancing their self-ascribed fit with the position, which in turn would enhance their inclination to apply (Hypothesis 3). In other words, in the presence of affirmative action policies, high self-ascribed agency was assumed to be less important for approaching a leadership position. In consequence, women's inclination to apply should increase through an enhanced self-ascribed fit with the leadership position.

Method

Participants and Design

The sample included 389 management students (195 women and 194 men) from three German-speaking countries (Switzerland, Germany, and Austria). Their ages ranged from 19 to 31 years with a mean of 23.38 years ($SD=2.36$). For these future leaders, applying for junior leadership positions in the corporate world was a foreseeable experience. The female students reported significantly more positive attitudes towards affirmative action programs ($M=4.88$, $SD=1.61$) than did male students ($M=3.36$, $SD=1.79$), $t(387)=8.62$, $p<.001$.

The experiment was based on a 2 (participant's gender: male, female) \times 4 (affirmative action policy: control condition, invitation to apply, weak preferential treatment, and strong preferential treatment) between-subjects design with inclination to apply as the dependent variable and agency and self-ascribed fit as mediators.

Materials

Prior to the main study, a pretest was conducted to ensure the gender neutrality of the advertised junior leadership position ($N=46$; 28 of them female; $M_{age}=32.28$ years, $SD=12.71$). Its results confirmed the gender neutrality of the position, as 95.7% of the participants rated the advertisement as gender neutral (i.e., marked the middle category of the 7-point rating scale, which stated that this position was equally suitable for women and men). Moreover, a large majority of participants indicated that the employer would prefer neither men nor women for the advertised position (78.3%), while only some participants expected the employer to prefer men over women (17.4%).

Participant's gender. We asked participants to indicate their gender at the beginning of the questionnaire.

Affirmative action policy. In the present study, we applied four different job advertisements to manipulate the policies. In addition to the control

condition, three alternative types of policies were used (based on descriptions of different types of affirmative action regulations; Harrison et al., 2006; Zehnter, 2012). The policy conditions were as follows:

- (1) Control condition: no statement on preferential treatment.
- (2) Invitation to apply: "Our company seeks to increase the proportion of women. Therefore qualified women are expressly invited to apply."
- (3) Weak preferential treatment: "Our company seeks to increase the proportion of women. Therefore qualified women are expressly invited to apply. Women will be preferentially hired if they are equally qualified."
- (4) Strong preferential treatment (quota): "Our company seeks to increase the proportion of women. Therefore qualified women are expressly invited to apply. Women will be preferentially hired until a quota of 40% is reached."

Agentic self-concept. This mediator variable was assessed with the "Bochumer Inventar zur berufsbezogenen Persönlichkeitsbeschreibung" (Bochum Inventory for the Description of Personality Traits in the Occupational Context, BIP; Hossiep & Paschen, 1998). Eight items had been selected that measured core aspects of agency (e.g., competitiveness, self-confidence, or performance and leadership motivation; Bosak & Sczesny, 2008). Participants indicated their level of agreement with statements (such as "I appear authoritative," "I enjoy competing with others," or "I find it difficult to assert my ideas") on a 7-point rating scale ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (7) *strongly agree*.

Self-ascribed fit with the advertised leadership position. The second mediator variable was derived from the Attraction, Image, and Compatibility Scale (AIC; Perkins, Thomas, & Taylor, 2000; see also Bosak & Sczesny, 2008). Participants were asked to rate four items (e.g., "I fit the profile of the desired applicant" or "This position is likely to meet my skills and abilities"). In addition, we asked participants to estimate the probability of their being invited for a job interview and of being selected for the position. Answers were given on a 7-point rating scale ranging from (1) *complete disagreement/very unlikely* to (7) *complete agreement/very likely*.

A principal component analysis (PCA) with oblique rotation (oblimin) was conducted on the eight items assessing participants' agentic self-concept and the six items measuring their self-ascribed fit with the advertised leadership position. This PCA showed that the two proposed mediators loaded on two different factors. All but one item from the agency scale loaded substantially on the first factor (with factor loadings ranging from .47 to .76). The seven items with substantial loadings were averaged and combined into the scale agentic self-concept ($\alpha = .74$), which ranged from (1) *not at*

all agentic to (7) *very agentic*. All items measuring participants' self-ascribed fit loaded substantially on the second factor (with factor loadings ranging from .66 to .82). Hence, these six items were averaged and combined to form the scale self-ascribed fit ($\alpha = .86$), which ranged from (1) *not at all fitting* to (7) *very high fit*.

Inclination to apply for the position. Participants were asked to indicate the likelihood of applying for the advertised position. They responded on a scale ranging from (1) *very unlikely* to (7) *very likely*.

Attitude towards affirmative action programs. Participants' attitude was assessed with the statement "To achieve gender equality in leadership positions, women should be promoted and treated preferentially." Participants indicated their agreement on a scale ranging from (1) *complete disagreement* to (7) *complete agreement*.

Procedure

The present study was conducted online and the link to the experiment was distributed via email, social media platforms, printed flyers, and short presentations in management classes. Upon entering the survey, participants were welcomed and informed that the study was conducted to evaluate the validity and accuracy of a newly developed technique to evaluate applicants quickly and economically (cover story). The present study was risk free and deception free for the participants, and their anonymity was kept. On the following Web pages, demographic information (e.g., gender, age, nationality, and level of education) was collected, and agency was assessed. In a next step, participants were asked to open the job advertisement for a junior leadership position. The affirmative action policy in the advertisement (i.e., one of the four experimental conditions) was randomly allocated.

The following web pages contained questionnaires assessing (1) participants' self-ascribed fit and (2) their inclination to apply for the leadership position.¹ Finally, participants' attitude towards affirmative action programs was measured. A manipulation check ensured that participants were aware of the type of affirmative action policy in the advertisement. On the final web page, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

¹Initially, we aimed to assess further, more distal concepts (anticipated motivation to pursue the profession, expectations of professional success, and objective performance) with the help of self-constructed items. Because of the unreliability of these scales, they will not be further discussed in the present paper.

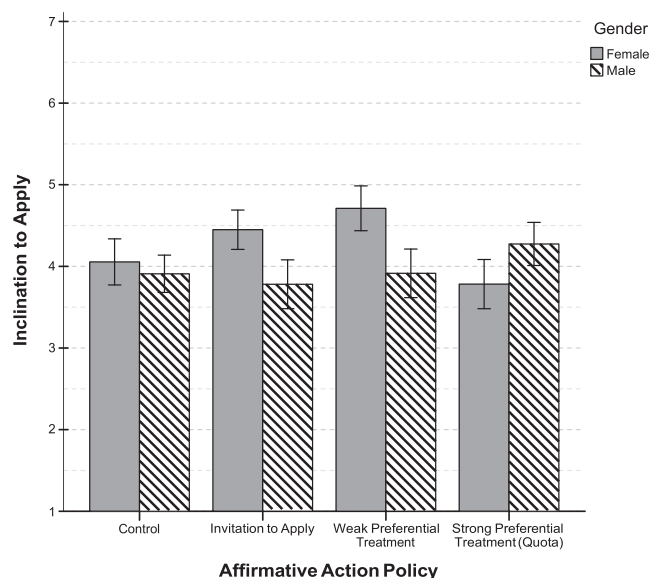


Fig. 1: Mean (+SE) inclination to apply for the leadership position as a function of affirmative action policy (control vs. invitation to apply vs. weak preferential treatment vs. strong preferential treatment) and participant gender (female vs. male)

Results

The Impact of Gender and Affirmative Action Policies on Inclinations to Apply

A 2 (participant's gender) \times 4 (affirmative action policy) analysis of variance was conducted with inclination to apply as the dependent variable to test whether the effect of affirmative action policies on inclinations to apply was different for women and men (Hypothesis 1).² This analysis showed a marginally significant gender \times policy interaction, $F(3, 381) = 2.24$, $p = .083$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$, indicating that the effect of the policies on the inclination to apply was not significantly different for women and men (Figure 1 and Table 1). The main effects of gender, $F(1, 381) = 2.08$, $p = .150$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$, and policy condition, $F(3, 381) = 2.07$, $p = .634$, $\eta^2 = 0.004$, failed to reach significance. Follow-up t -tests (one-sided) revealed that women reported higher inclination to apply than men in both the invitation to apply, $t(88) = 1.76$, $p = .041$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$, and the weak preferential treatment condition, $t(90) = 1.96$, $p = .027$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$. All other t -tests were not significant.

The Underlying Mechanism of Women's and Men's Inclination to Apply

The underlying mechanism of gender on inclinations to apply was analyzed with the help of ordinary least squares path analysis (SPSS macro PROCESS; Hayes, 2013). The indirect effects were tested using 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals based on 10 000 bootstrap samples. A statistical diagram of the serial mediation model for the effect of gender on inclination to apply through agency and self-ascribed fit is depicted in Figure 2. The corresponding regression

coefficients, standard errors, and model summary information can be found in Table 2.

When no reference was made to policies in favor of women (control condition), women's and men's agency levels were assumed to affect their self-ascribed fit, which in turn was expected to affect inclinations to apply. In line with Hypothesis 2, gender had an indirect effect on the inclination to apply through both agency and self-ascribed fit in serial ($a_1d_{21}b_2 = 0.16$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.37]). That is, male participants reported significantly higher agency levels than female participants ($a_1 = -0.31$), and participants with higher agency levels indicated a significantly higher self-ascribed fit with the position ($d_{21} = 0.61$). This, in turn, positively affected participants' inclinations to apply ($b_2 = 0.84$). Further, there was no evidence that participant gender influenced the inclination to apply independent of its effect on agency and self-ascribed fit ($c' = 0.34$, $p = .290$).

The Underlying Mechanisms of Affirmative Action Policies on Women's and Men's Inclination to Apply

The underlying mechanisms of affirmative action policies on women's and men's inclinations to apply were also analyzed with the help of ordinary least squares path analysis (refer to earlier discussion). Statistical details of the mediation models for the effects of affirmative action policies and gender on inclination to apply through agency and self-ascribed fit are also depicted in Figure 2 and Table 2.

Reference to affirmative action policies may make participants' gender more salient; accordingly, we expected the impact of gender to increase. We assumed that policies in favor of women would indirectly boost female participants' inclinations to apply by enhancing their self-ascribed fit with the position (Hypothesis 3).

²Additional analyses with Attitude towards Affirmative Action Programs as a covariate revealed the same pattern of results.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for agentic self-concept, self-ascribed fit, and inclination to apply, by gender and affirmative action policy

			Agentic self-concept		Self-ascribed fit		Inclination to apply		
			<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Women	Control condition	55	3.75	0.76	4.64	1.19	4.05	2.09	
	Invitation to apply	49	3.82	0.65	4.92	1.02	4.45	1.68	
	Weak preferential treatment	45	3.93	0.95	5.27	0.82	4.71	1.84	
	Strong preferential treatment (quota)	46	3.93	0.65	4.97	1.28	3.78	2.04	
	Total	195	3.85	0.76	4.93	1.11	4.24	1.94	
Men	Control condition	55	4.06	0.71	4.80	1.06	3.91	1.69	
	Invitation to apply	41	4.22	0.76	4.54	1.47	3.78	1.92	
	Weak preferential treatment	47	4.18	0.70	4.47	1.32	3.91	2.04	
	Strong preferential treatment (quota)	51	4.33	0.63	4.86	1.08	4.27	1.89	
	Total	194	4.20	0.70	4.68	1.23	3.98	1.87	

Note: The scale "agentic self-concept" ranged from (1) *not at all agentic* to (7) *very agentic*, the scale "self-ascribed fit" from (1) *not at all fitting* to (7) *very high fit*, and the scale "inclination to apply" from (1) *very unlikely* to (7) *very likely*.

In the following, we describe the effects separately for the three affirmative action policy conditions. First, we provide results for the indirect effect of gender on the inclination to apply through both agency and self-ascribed fit in serial. Second, to test the effects of the three affirmative action policies on the mediators and the dependent variable, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis (Hayes, 2015) for each affirmative action policy. We created three dummy variables comparing each of the affirmative action conditions with the control. Then, we computed interaction terms between the dummy variables and gender; these variables served as moderator variables in the following serial multiple mediation analyses.

Invitation to apply. Supporting Hypothesis 3, when women were expressly invited to apply, gender indirectly affected inclinations to apply via self-ascribed fit ($a_2b_2=0.35$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.82]). In other words, women reported significantly higher degrees of self-ascribed fit ($a_2=0.61$), and participants with higher self-ascribed fit showed significantly higher inclinations to apply ($b_2=0.57$). Unexpectedly, gender still had an indirect effect on inclination to apply through both agency and self-ascribed fit in serial ($a_1d_{21}b_2=-0.13$, 95% CI [-0.34, -0.03]). Again, participant's gender did not directly influence inclinations to apply for the leadership position ($c'=0.49$, $p=0.194$). The additional moderation analysis comparing the invitation to apply with the control condition revealed that the effect of gender on the self-ascribed fit was only marginally different in the two conditions ($B=0.59$, $SD=0.31$, 95% CI [-0.03, 1.21]).

Weak preferential treatment. In line with Hypothesis 3, when women were treated preferentially given equal qualification, gender affected inclinations to apply indirectly, since women indicated significantly higher self-ascribed fit than men ($a_2=0.89$) and those with higher fit reported a significantly higher inclination to apply ($b_2=0.92$). The bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect of gender on the inclination to apply

through self-ascribed fit ($a_2b_2=0.82$) was entirely above zero (0.41 to 1.35). Participants' gender again had no direct effect on inclinations to apply ($c'=0.06$, $p=.867$). The moderation analysis comparing the weak preferential treatment with the control condition showed that the effect of gender on self-ascribed fit was significantly different in the two conditions ($B=0.93$, $SD=0.30$, 95% CI [0.34, 1.51]).

Strong preferential treatment (quota). When women were given preference until a quota of 40% women was established, the indirect effect revealed a pattern that was against our assumption and markedly different from the mechanisms found for the two other affirmative action policy conditions. In the case of a quota, gender did not affect the inclination to apply through self-ascribed fit ($a_2b_2=0.29$, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.75]; Hypothesis 3). That is, women did not report a higher degree of self-ascribed fit ($a_2=0.38$, $p=.122$). Nevertheless, participants with higher self-ascribed fit reported significantly higher inclinations to apply ($b_2=0.78$). Unexpectedly, gender affected inclination to apply through both participants' agency levels and their self-ascribed fit in serial ($a_1d_{21}b_2=-0.21$, 95% CI [-0.50, -0.06]). The respective moderation analysis comparing this condition with the control revealed that the effect of gender on self-ascribed fit was not different in the quota condition ($B=0.32$, $SD=0.30$, 95% CI [-0.26, 0.91]). As in the control condition, when a quota policy was announced, men showed significantly higher self-ascribed agency levels than female participants ($a_1=-0.39$), and individuals with higher agency levels indicated significantly higher self-ascribed fit with the position ($d_{21}=0.67$); and those participants with higher self-ascribed fit reported significantly higher inclinations to apply ($b_2=0.78$). Again, gender did not exert a direct effect on the inclination to apply ($c'=-0.53$, $p=.158$).

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate how different types of affirmative action policies in job

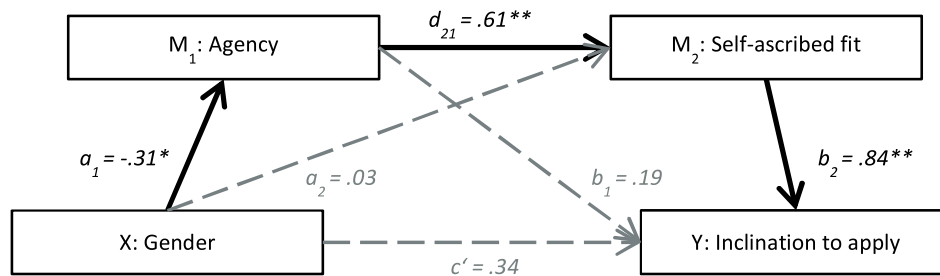
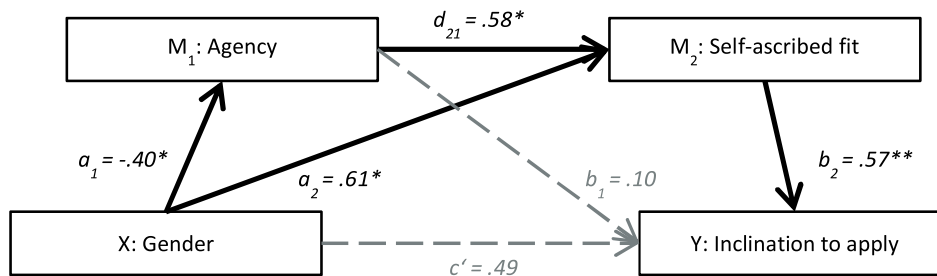
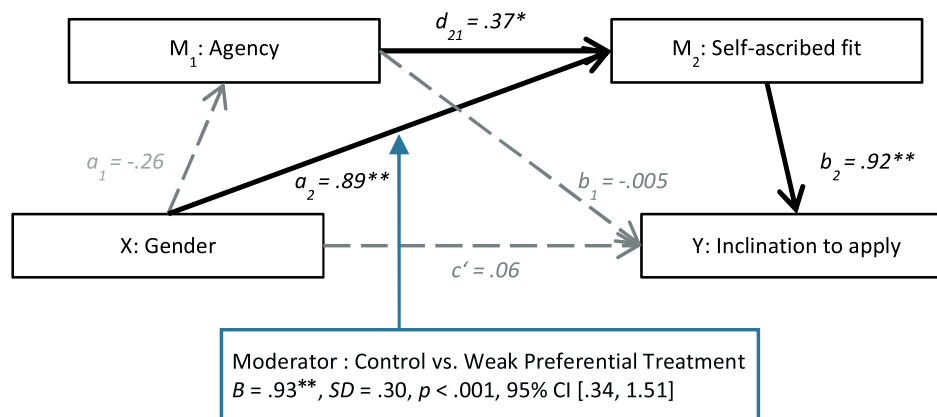
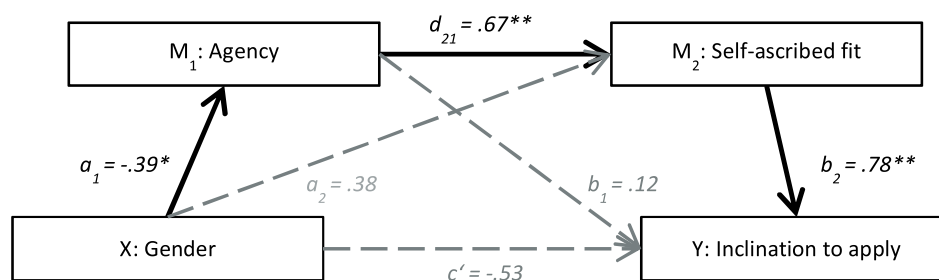
Control Condition**Invitation to Apply****Weak Preferential Treatment****Strong Preferential Treatment (Quota)**

Fig. 2: Serial multiple mediation models for effects of participant gender on inclination to apply in the four affirmative action conditions, that is, control ($N = 110$), invitation to apply ($N = 90$), weak preferential treatment ($N = 92$), and strong preferential treatment ($N = 97$). Unstandardized regression coefficients are shown. Only significant moderations are displayed. Participant gender was coded male = 0, female = 1. $*p < .05$, $**p < .001$

Table 2. Regression coefficients, standard errors, and model summary information for the serial multiple mediator models depicted in Figure 2

Antecedent	Consequent											
	M_1 (agency)			M_2 (self-ascribed fit)			Y (inclination to apply)					
	Coefficient	SE	p	Coefficient	SE	p	Coefficient	SE	p			
<i>Control condition</i>												
X (gender)	a_1	−0.31	0.14	.027	a_2	0.03	0.20	.879	c'	0.34	0.32	.290
M_1 (agency)		—	—	—	d_{21}	0.61	0.14	<.001	b_1	0.19	0.23	.427
M_2 (self-ascribed fit)		—	—	—		—	—	—	b_2	0.84	0.15	<.001
Constant	i_{M1}	4.06	0.10	<.001	i_{M2}	2.33	0.57	<.001	i_Y	−0.88	0.96	.361
		$R^2 = 0.04$				$R^2 = 0.16$				$R^2 = 0.28$		
		$F(1, 108) = 5.00$				$F(2, 107) = 10.33$				$F(3, 106) = 13.92$		
		$p = .027$				$p < .001$				$p < .001$		
<i>Invitation to apply</i>												
X (gender)	a_1	−0.40	0.15	.008	a_2	0.61	0.26	.021	c'	0.49	0.38	.194
M_1 (agency)		—	—	—	d_{21}	0.58	0.18	.002	b_1	0.10	0.27	.699
M_2 (self-ascribed fit)		—	—	—		—	—	—	b_2	0.57	0.15	<.001
Constant	i_{M1}	4.22	0.11	<.001	i_{M2}	2.10	0.78	.009	i_Y	0.77	1.14	.502
		$R^2 = 0.08$				$R^2 = 0.13$				$R^2 = 0.19$		
		$F(1, 88) = 7.30$				$F(2, 87) = 6.35$				$F(3, 86) = 6.94$		
		$p = .008$				$p = .003$				$p < .001$		
<i>Weak preferential treatment</i>												
X (gender)	a_1	−0.26	0.17	.144	a_2	0.89	0.22	<.001	c'	0.06	0.38	.867
M_1 (agency)		—	—	—	d_{21}	0.37	0.13	.007	b_1	−0.004	0.22	.983
M_2 (self-ascribed fit)		—	—	—		—	—	—	b_2	0.92	0.17	<.001
Constant	i_{M1}	4.18	0.12	<.001	i_{M2}	2.93	0.59	<.001	i_Y	−0.18	1.04	.865
		$R^2 = 0.02$				$R^2 = 0.19$				$R^2 = 0.30$		
		$F(1, 90) = 2.17$				$F(2, 89) = 10.15$				$F(3, 88) = 12.62$		
		$p = .144$				$p < .001$				$p < .001$		
<i>Strong preferential treatment (quota)</i>												
X (gender)	a_1	−0.39	0.13	.003	a_2	0.38	0.23	.112	c'	−0.53	0.37	.158
M_1 (agency)		—	—	—	d_{21}	0.67	0.18	<.001	b_1	0.12	0.30	.695
M_2 (self-ascribed fit)		—	—	—		—	—	—	b_2	0.78	0.16	<.001
Constant	i_{M1}	4.33	0.09	<.001	i_{M2}	1.94	0.78	.014	i_Y	−0.02	1.26	.985
		$R^2 = 0.09$				$R^2 = 0.14$				$R^2 = 0.25$		
		$F(1, 95) = 9.02$				$F(2, 94) = 7.51$				$F(3, 93) = 10.15$		
		$p = .003$				$p < .001$				$p < .001$		

advertisements for leadership positions affect women's and men's inclination to apply. More specifically, the present research examined the underlying mechanisms to determine the role of the personality dimension agency and women's and men's self-ascribed job fit.

First, we examined whether gender and affirmative action policies directly affected inclinations to apply. In the present sample, the effect of affirmative action policies was only marginally different for women and men (Hypothesis 1). That is, the various policies did not differ in their effects on women's and men's willingness to apply for the advertised leadership position. One possible explanation for this lack of effect on inclination to apply may be participants' reactions to the announced quota of 40% women. Unexpectedly, women reported the lowest inclination to apply under this strictest affirmative action policy in favor of their social group, whereas men's willingness to apply was higher than in all the other conditions. This finding contradicts past results from laboratory-based economic experiments, where women's willingness to enter competitions increased when strong policy interventions were active and men's willingness did not differ across the policy treatments (Balafoutas & Sutter, 2012). In any case, the purpose of the competition may have an impact on women's

and men's reactions. It can be seen that it matters whether participants compete in solving mind calculations or, as in the present study, for a leadership position. Hence, special attention should be paid to the goal of the competition/selection in future research. Moreover, the unexpected reactions of women and men to quota-based selection for leadership positions may have been influenced by attitudes towards gender arrangements (e.g., Jost & Kay, 2005) or people's belief in support of the traditional social organization in the employment context in regard to gender roles (e.g., Hoyt, 2012). A comprehensive understanding of when and how quota policies have an effect on women and men may be achieved by taking system justification as an underlying mechanism into account in future research.

Regarding how different types of affirmative action policies enhance or curb women's behavioral intentions to apply for leadership positions, the underlying mechanisms were determined to gain better insight into the impact of such policies. When no affirmative action policies were referred to (control condition), high agency was relevant for both women and men to act proactively, to feel suitable, and, in turn, to be motivated to apply for the leadership position (Hypothesis 2). In other words, the agentic self-concept played a key role

for self-ascribed fit, with gender influencing self-ascribed fit only indirectly via its effect on agency. This finding replicated and extended results of prior research, which also documents that agency fully mediates the effect of gender on the applicant's perceived suitability for a job (Bosak & Sczesny, 2008). This finding shows that the lack of fit between female gender and the role of a leader seems to erode; therefore, membership in a gender category may be less relevant for self-descriptions, whereas the impact of professional socialization and education increases. Young professionals, for example, were found to no longer differ in self-descriptions of their perceived fit (Sczesny, 2003a, 2003b). Female and male business students and executives from Australia, Germany, and India reported actual and desired agentic traits to a similar extent. This leveling may also originate in changes in women's self-image concerning agentic personality traits (Twenge, 2001). However, other studies have found that women perceived themselves as less suitable for an advertised leadership position (Bosak & Sczesny, 2008) and were less likely to strive for promotion into such positions than men (Lips, 2000; Van Vianen & Fischer, 2002). Hence, the presence today of such differences may depend on the sample and the context.

Our findings are promising in regard to equality between women and men. However, they raise questions about the appropriateness and justification of policies implying a preferential treatment of women. If women and men are equally attracted to and interested in leadership positions, why should women be treated preferentially in the future? The fact remains that women are still considerably underrepresented in top management positions, even if their inclination to apply nowadays seems to equal that of men. Taken together, these two facts give the impression that women are vying for leadership, but are still bumping against the "glass ceiling" while the "old boys' network" is busy making personnel selection decisions. Therefore, (temporary) use of policies supporting the promotion of women may still be legitimate to help establish an equal representation of women and men.

In two of the three affirmative action policy conditions, namely, when women were expressly invited to apply or when preferential treatment given equal qualification was announced, participant's gender had a stronger impact and directly contributed to self-ascribed fit, which then affected the inclination to apply for the position (Hypothesis 3). As noted earlier, women reported higher self-ascribed fit, and participants with higher fit showed higher inclinations to apply. However, the effect of gender on self-ascribed fit significantly differed only between the weak preferential treatment condition and the control condition. Hence, only the weak preferential treatment policy achieved the goal of encouraging women to approach leadership positions through its positive effect on women's self-reported fit with typically male-dominated leadership positions. Interestingly, however, when women were merely

invited to apply and not granted preferential treatment, the agentic self-concept remained crucial for their self-ascribed fit. Hence, high agency levels remained relevant for women (and men) to act proactively, to feel suitable, and, in turn, to be motivated to apply for the leadership position. Moreover, in the condition of the weakest affirmative action policy the effect of gender on self-ascribed fit was only marginally different from that in the no policy statement condition. To conclude, weak preferential treatment (and inviting women to apply marginally) enhanced women's self-ascribed fit, which in turn boosted their willingness to apply for leadership positions.

A different picture emerged under the strictest quota policy condition. When the advertisement stated that women would be given preference until a quota of 40% women was reached, the salience of gender no longer increased women's self-ascribed fit with the position. Instead, the pattern found did not differ from that under the control condition (where no affirmative action policy was announced). That is, the effect of gender on the inclination to apply was indirect and proceeded through its effect on both agency and self-ascribed fit in serial. In other words, high agency levels remained crucial for women (and men) to feel suitable and, in turn, to be motivated to apply for the leadership position. The fact that women's inclination to apply did not increase under the quota condition may be explained by considering analogous findings from laboratory research in which women were either selected according to merit or owing to an insufficient number of representatives of their gender (e.g., Heilman & Alcott, 2001; Heilman, Battle, Keller, & Andrew, 1998; Heilman, Simon, & Repper, 1987; Leslie et al., 2014). These studies found that when women were selected because of their gender (e.g., because allegedly the number of women in the experiment was otherwise insufficient), their motivation for the task was seriously impaired. In order to avoid such negative consequences, evidence of a woman's qualification needs to be clearly communicated in selection procedures (Kravitz et al., 1997; Turner & Pratkanis, 1994). Such communication need to be as follows: (1) *unambiguous*, because any lack of information points to a woman's deficient qualifications; (2) *explicit*, as only subtle indication leads to impaired self-evaluations; and (3) *focused*, because task-irrelevant feedback has shown to not buffer the negative effect of gender-based selection procedures. For instance, when women who were selected because of their gender learned or believed that they were chosen both because of their gender and their merits, there were no negative consequences (Heilman et al., 1990; Major, Feinstein, & Crocker, 1994; Turner, Pratkanis, & Hardaway, 1991). In the present experiment, mention of the quota may have lacked unambiguous, explicit, and focused reference to the woman's qualification. Probably, any type of confirmation concerning qualifications was missing. If so, the lack of positive effects on women's self-ascribed fit for the position may be due to a mechanism similar to that found

previously in laboratory-based group tasks. It will be essential to learn whether the missing acknowledgement of women's capabilities was the reason for the absence of the hypothesized positive effect. A comprehensive understanding of how exactly quota statements in job advertisements influence women's self-ascribed fit and inclinations to apply for leadership positions is still needed.

The present study is restricted to the specific mediator variables examined. In future research, further potentially relevant variables should be included, for example, perceived stereotyping (i.e., extent to which participants expect to be evaluated as incompetent by others), perceived self-competence (i.e., ability-based and agency-based competence), and state affect (i.e., self-rating of general affect). These variables served as a mechanism through which different affirmative action plans negatively affected women and minorities' self-evaluated and objective performance (Leslie et al., 2014).

Further, the sample used in the present research may differ from other samples regarding their self-concepts. Management students are socialized in line with their future professional role and with social expectations that are relevant in the leadership context (Sczesny, Bosak, Diekmann, & Twenge, 2007; Sczesny, Bosak, Neff, & Schyns, 2004). These socialization processes may have promoted a more agentic self-concept among the participants of our sample. Thus, it remains an open question whether the impact of affirmative action policies on the willingness to apply may be different for applicants in other professional areas. For example, a communal self-concept may play a role in connection with policies for men in caring professions, where they are underrepresented. Further research is needed to answer this question.

Taken together, the present research documents that female and male management students did not differ in their inclination to apply for a leadership position when no affirmative action policy was active. However, given women's wide underrepresentation in decision-making bodies, preferential treatment policies may impact women's interest in becoming a leader. We found that female participants reported a higher self-ascribed fit when they were treated preferentially given equal qualification, which in turn enhanced their inclinations to apply compared with no affirmative action policy statement and with men. In contrast, when a quota of 40% women was to be established, the underlying mechanism was not different from when no policy was mentioned: participants with higher agency levels reported higher inclinations to apply due to an increase in self-ascribed fit. That is, advertisements mentioning strict gender quota regulations did not differ in their impact from advertisements without information about a company's efforts for gender equality. Yet, only certain preferential treatment announcements in job advertisements can be successful in increasing women's intentions to apply for leadership positions.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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