Swinging Between Perceptions

Gender Awareness and Gender Blindness in Women-to-Women Working Relationships

A qualitative case study

Masters Thesis by

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Abstract

Title	Swinging Between Perceptions: Gender Awareness and Gender Blindness in Women-to-Women Working Relationships
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Supervisor	Roland Paulsen
Course	BUSN49 Degree Project in Managing People, Knowledge & Change
Key words	Gender, gender awareness, gender blindness, women, careers, career development, gender equality
Purpose	This study aims to contribute to the understanding of how junior women and senior women supervisors experience women-to-women working relationships and its impact on junior women's careers, thus adding insights into improving women's career development and representation in organizational leadership.
Theoretical framework	Gender ideologies or strategies for approaching gender differences serve as frameworks, whether towards embracing (gender awareness) or downplaying them (gender blindness).
Methodology	This qualitative study is done in the interpretivist tradition with an abductive approach. Empirical data consists of 15 semi-structured interviews and 3 observations of women from a case organization, who have experienced supervisory relationships with fellow women.
Findings	Junior and senior women apply both gender awareness and gender blindness, thereby performing pendulum-swinging between gender ideologies depending on the relationship context. This pendulum-swinging was found in how women build mentoring relations outside supervision–a significant capability that enables junior women's confidence in pursuing career development. Analyzing how women approach gender differences also uncovers a more nuanced understanding of the working relationship beyond the contrast of positive and negative women-to-women behaviors.
Contributions	This research contributes to the literature on gender differences and gender ideologies–in the understanding that together, gender awareness and gender blindness can be useful strategies in women-to-women working relationships. This study also contributes to how junior women's agency in building their mentorship network contributes to their confidence toward career progression. Lastly, through the application of gender ideologies, this study develops the understanding of women-to-women working relationships beyond the dichotomy of solidarity and Queen Bee behaviors.

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To our readers, we hope this thesis will at least make you ponder about what gender equality really means–how it evolves and takes shape within every woman's experience, and the

journey and hard work it necessitates. And if you are a woman, we hope we have shed light on what is important for the next generation of women. We hope you enjoy reading this thesis!

Authors:

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Angeline Tria

1. Introduction

"I love them. I respect them, but there is just a certain line that I don't want to cross." - Daphne

1.1. Background

Despite progress in advancing gender equality, much work remains to be done to improve workplace outcomes for women. In celebrating International Women's Day 2024, the Council of Europe passed a new gender equality strategy, where countries commit the next six years to resolving challenges such as combating stereotypes and sexism and ensuring justice and equal participation for women (Council of Europe, 2024). Although many European countries are listed as top countries for working women, the gender wage gap remains the same, with men continuing to occupy a higher proportion of the labor force despite women having a larger share of the university-educated population (The Economist Group, n.d.). Further, women remain underrepresented in business leadership. As of April 2019, women compose only 27.8% of the board membership of the largest publicly listed EU companies (European Commission, n.d.). These exemplify only a few of the pressing concerns that continue to plague women at work and deserve attention and action, especially with how the World Bank (n.d.) emphasizes that gender equality is an essential element in resolving deteriorating economic growth and that women's leadership contributes positively to the world's long-term environmental and societal outcomes. The EU's drive towards a gender-equal Europe, therefore, including achieving gender balance in decision-making and organizational leadership, underscores the much-needed understanding and improved practices toward these worthy goals (European Commission, n.d.).

Younger generations are reported to be more conservative when it comes to gender equality issues, perceiving that increasing the standing of women results in discrimination against men (Ipsos, 2024). In a recent survey conducted by Ipsos (2024), while it is acknowledged that gender equality requires the participation of men, the majority perceive that too much is expected from men in terms of efforts to promote equality. This connects to how men are

put forward to be allies in the pursuit of gender equality, especially in the workplace where such inequality persists heavily (Hideg & Krstic, 2021). Studies on gender equality in the 21st century proposed to broaden the conceptualization of gender equality to include men's experiences, hoping that such perspectives will assist women (Hideg & Krstic, 2021). Moreover, practitioners are partly held accountable for focusing on women-centered initiatives that exclude men and, as such, the suggestion that gender equality will improve should men be more actively involved in these issues (Hideg & Krstic, 2021:110).

Despite these seemingly worthwhile intentions of including men in the efforts and conversation surrounding gender equality, this redirection towards men's experiences may present a problem when women's voices and experiences are still articulated insufficiently and thus deserve primary attention. There already exists a relative abundance of studies that delve into the workplace experience of men, comparing women and men in organizational dimensions (e.g. Dodd-McCue & Wright, 1996, Eagly & Chin, 2010, Cha & Weeden, 2014). On the contrary, there remains a limited body of research focusing on women-to-women relationships in organizations, and those that exist tend to focus on the dichotomy between the opposing sides of either positive or negative women-to-women behaviors (O'Neil et al., 2018:329).

With this, it is overdue for research attention to be diverted solely to the experience of women in the workplace, especially with how the understanding of women-to-women supervisory relationships remains understudied. Various barriers persist against women's career advancement, such as age, under-representation, motherhood, and lack of support from other women (Roth, 2024). This lack of support from fellow women as a barrier to career development motivates the need to funnel the focus on further understanding women-to-women working relationships (Sheppard & Aquino, 2013), specifically on supervisory relationships wherein women typically experience and expect support (Hurst et al., 2017). Women-to-women supervisory relationships are complex and have an impact on women's career progression and, more broadly, on gender equality. Diverting attention from and comparison with men will allow a sharper focus on women's experiences, specifically the complexities of women-to-women working relationships that are yet to be uncovered, and thus may facilitate women's career development.

1.2. Purpose of the study

The aim of this study is to contribute to the understanding of how junior women and senior women supervisors experience women-to-women working relationships and how this impacts junior women's careers, thus adding insights into improving women's career development and representation in organizational leadership. While past studies have often been conducted in the United States, there has not been much research that examines the experiences of Scandinavian women where relatively higher degrees of gender equality are observed albeit room for improvement and progress persists (Hebl & King, 2019). We aim to fill this gap with our collaboration with a Denmark-based manufacturing company. The Danish organizational culture and the global presence of the case organization provide us with a highly relevant context to pursue this research aim. Worthy to note as well that gender balance and the advancement of women are important objectives of the case organization, making them ideal partners in achieving our research purpose.

To achieve our purpose, our study poses the research question: *How do junior women and senior women supervisors understand women-to-women working relationships in terms of gender awareness or gender blindness?*

Gender awareness and gender blindness are gender ideologies or prescriptive strategies for approaching gender differences, whether embracing (gender awareness) or downplaying them (gender blindness). Arguments have been made for and against each gender ideology and its helpfulness in women's workplace development.

According to Martin (2003), gender as a practice implies viewing it as a system of action–it is a choice that can be invoked or disregarded during social interactions. Therefore, the question arises of how gender can be practiced between women in the workplace, to which women can be perceived to apply gender awareness–wherein they embrace or highlight differences as women–, or gender blindness–wherein they downplay differences as women, and how this affects career progression. Often done effortlessly, in the spur of the moment, therefore non-reflexively, studies claim that people act out and describe gender practices in various places where social behavior is practiced, including relationships, families, and

workplaces (Martin, 2003, Hurst et al., 2017). It is interesting to note that considering the audience and the orator's gender, the reasons and motivations for practicing gender may differ (Martin, 2003). As such, we believe that these gendered perspectives impact how junior and senior women understand their working relationship, and that these conversations about gender and gender differences will surface as they are prompted to consider gender awareness or gender blindness.

By unveiling how junior and senior women perceive gender awareness or gender blindness in women-to-women supervisory relationships, we seek to uncover how such understanding impacts the working relationship, with specific attention on how it helps or hinders junior women's career progression. Advocates for either gender ideology present differing benefits from the application of each prescriptive strategy, such as enhancing junior women's confidence and performance or recognizing the value of women-specific attributes and needs in the workplace. Therefore, through our study, we seek to contribute towards the facilitation of women's career development and the creation of more nuanced practical strategies that promote gender equality in organizations.

1.3. Thesis outline

The thesis is structured into six sections–1) Introduction, 2) Literature Review, 3) Methodology, 4) Findings, 5) Discussion, and 6) Conclusion.

This current chapter of the *Introduction* highlights the background, relevance, and purpose of our research while articulating the research question. Chapter Two, *Literature Review*, touches upon the theoretical background of working relationships, work-life conflicts, and their importance and impact on women's career advancement. We also examine talent and performance management, narrowing it down to their impact on women. Afterwards, we elaborate on gender differences including gender stereotypes, and discuss the application of two gender ideologies or strategies to address gender differences–gender awareness and gender blindness. We refer to this conceptual framework and the relevant existing literature in gathering and evaluating our empirical findings.

In Chapter Three, *Methodology*, we provide our detailed research approach, describing and assessing our process and justification for collecting empirical data for our research. We discuss our methodology's philosophical grounding, data collection process encompassing the interview and observation processes, data analysis process, as well as our reflexivity on our study's limitations. The reader is guided through the steps we have taken in our methods, encouraging in-depth comprehension of the sensitivity and value of the research topic.

Chapters Four and Five constitute the core of our study. In Chapter Four, *Findings*, we present our key themes and empirical findings, constituting management and mentorship as working relationships and how women navigate gendered norms and justify their fit at work. We highlight specific quotes from our gathered data, supporting our presentation with analytic commentary. In this immediate linking of our empirical data with analytic commentary, we aim to prepare and lead the reader to the *Discussion* chapter with ease. In Chapter Five, *Discussion*, we present the links between our empirical data and theoretical foundation. Lastly, Chapter Six, *Conclusion*, completes our paper with a discussion of our key findings, theoretical contributions, practical implications, and research limitations with a presentation of potential avenues for future research.

2. Literature review

In this chapter, we utilize the inverted pyramid structure to present existing literature that provides background and theoretical framework for our study. Guided by this aim, we discuss relevant research and findings on working relationships and topics on talent and performance management, focused on the impact on women in the workplace and on women-to-women supervisory relationships. Further, we present literature on gender differences and gender ideologies from which we draw the conceptual framework of our study.

2.1. Working relationships, work-life conflicts, and career impact

Relationships are integral in the workplace, with work mostly considered a relational act (Blustein, 2011). Drawn from broader societal and cultural contexts, gender-based relationship expectations in the workplace exist and often go unspoken (Ladkin, 2010), wherein expectations from junior women towards senior women include emotional understanding, accommodation of life-complexity needs, and leniency (Hurst et al., 2017). The possibility of conflict surfaces from such unspoken expectations, especially in hierarchical or supervisory relationships. Hurst et al. (2017) uncovered how these expectations by women employees from their women managers can lead to strained relationships, which can then influence women toward major career decisions that inhibit their career progression (p.501).

The quality of women-to-women hierarchical working relationships is also seen to affect not only individual perspectives but also organizational and societal aspects (Hurst et al., 2017:502). For instance, a critical mass of women in senior management levels contribute positively to organizational performance (Joecks et al., 2013) and can lead to improved gender equality, i.e. reduction in the gender pay gap (Cohen & Huffman, 2007). Therefore, the loss of women progressing in their careers negatively impacts the succession pipeline, organizational performance, and gender equality (Hurst et al., 2017:502). To add, Sheppard

& Aquino (2013) posit that the quality of women-to-women working relationships may have a bearing on gender equality in the workplace, i.e. women's organizational commitment is questioned due to strained women-to-women relationships, negatively impacting career progression. For these reasons and with the relative abundance of studies comparing women and men in organizational dimensions (e.g. Dodd-McCue & Wright, 1996, Eagly & Chin, 2010, Cha & Weeden, 2014), it is overdue that research is diverted into and purely focused on the understanding of women-to-women working relationships (Sheppard & Aquino, 2013).

Studies reveal two contrasting streams in women's working relationships–a positive relationship based on solidarity and a negative perception built on "Queen Bee" behavior (O'Neil et al., 2018). Solidarity or sisterhood assumes that women support each other due to gender identification or seeing each other as fellow women (Mavin, 2006), thus senior women will encourage the career ascent of junior women (O'Neil et al., 2018). Queen Bee behavior, on the other hand, suggests senior women separate themselves from other women to the point of competing with each other and hence are not inclined to support junior women's careers (O'Neil et al., 2018). Queen Bee behavior is seen to be an outcome of social identity threat, wherein women in male-dominated environments find their gender group devalued, consider this a threat to their social identity, and hence are motivated to separate instead of cooperate with fellow women (Derks, et al., 2011). These opposing views reveal how women-to-women supervisory relationships can exhibit behaviors where senior women are predisposed to either assist or not assist junior women in their careers (O'Neil et al., 2018). These contrasting perspectives influencing women-to-women working relationships reinforce our strong motivations to have a deeper understanding of relationships between junior women and senior women supervisors, especially with how these relationships impact a junior woman's career progression and gender equality in the workplace.

Other than relationships in the workplace, another important aspect impacts women in their career choices and hence their career progression. Research on work-life conflict discusses how the demands of work are incompatible to the demands of one's personal life (Greenhouse & Powell, 2003). This tension is rooted in the scarcity theory on human energy, which posits the finite nature of one's time, energy, and attention (Van Steenbergen et al.,

2007), necessitating choices and therefore, opportunity cost. Expending energy in one role requires diverting energy from another, i.e. more time and energy spent on work siphons time and energy away from one's personal life (Greenhouse & Powell, 2003). The individual, therefore, has to make choices and faces a dilemma in balancing work and personal life roles. This dilemma is seen to be prevalent in working women, with how traditional gender roles and expectations assign a larger portion of household and caretaker responsibilities to women, implying stronger pressures on women who desire a career while balancing expectations at home (Van Steenbergen et al., 2007). This leads women to make decisions that stall or hinder their careers, such as leaving or limiting their participation in the workforce (The European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.). This can manifest in actions that widen the gender pay gap, such as choosing lower-paying part-time positions and essentially jobs with poorer career progression (The European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.), so women can focus on personal roles and family responsibilities such as motherhood and rearing children.

Research, however, has also pointed to how the facilitation of these different roles can yield benefits, especially in the ways women perceive how work and personal–specifically family–roles can complement each other (Van Steenbergen et al., 2007). Therefore, it is possible for women to participate in both work and family roles in ways that benefit them and improve their lives. These findings provide optimism about how women may be able to pursue career development and progression without divesting themselves of family roles, from which they may also find fulfillment.

2.2. Talent and performance management of women

Talent management encompasses activities that develop talent, including career management wherein the skills and potential of employees are developed towards career progression. This relates to succession planning activities wherein candidates are chosen and prepared for the leadership pipeline (Beardwell & Thompson, 2017:169). In talent management, the supervisor is heavily responsible for talent engagement and retention efforts (Zhang & Stewart, 2017), and is also in charge of employees' performance evaluation based on the organization's goals (Gallacher, 1997). A repeatedly surfacing concern,

however, is how supervised employees report a lack of guidance from their supervisors in the pursuit of career development–a critical aspect that may benefit from mentorship.

Mentorship has been defined in literature broadly as either an informal relationship outside of supervision (Gallacher, 1997) or as a "work relationship", hence, within supervision (Parker & Kram, 1993). Mentoring encompasses strategies towards professional development, such as onboarding new employees, clarifying organizational policies and goals, or performing activities that help develop an employee's competencies and knowledge (Gallacher, 1997)–aspects that can be seen to develop an employee's career towards progression.

Parker & Kram (1993) acknowledge successful mentoring relationships as the main contribution towards men's career advancement and suggest women to practice the same, thereby harnessing similar advantages. Good mentorship of women involves higher sensitivity towards the mentee's needs and carries no judgment (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016), which thus benefits the mentee's individual progress beyond the organization's objectives. On the one hand, mentoring has also been described as challenging for women, considering factors such as differences in expectations and perceptions between junior and senior women (Parker & Kram, 1993). Mentorship within the supervisory relationship, however, poses a challenge in satisfying junior women's needs, as the rigid nature of supervision may hinder women from sharing aspects of themselves that could strengthen the relationship (Parker & Kram, 1993). Thus, junior women may benefit from building relationships with multiple senior women (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016). At the same time, senior women should be "sending the elevator back down to pick other women up"–making efforts to reach down organizational levels towards junior women to aid their careers (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016). This implies that mentorship is possible and more advantageous due to efforts from both sides–junior women (mentees) seeking mentors and senior women (mentors) reaching down to mentees. Additionally, Parker & Kram (1993) point out the advantage of junior women establishing career-oriented relationships with men to complement the relationships with women that appear limited to friendship-like connections. Therefore, it would be interesting to examine how mentorship is practiced by junior women and senior women supervisors. Is mentorship understood to be an integral

part of the supervisory relationship and if so, to what degree, and how is mentorship approached and achieved? Are senior women truly unable to cater to junior women's complex needs?

Networking involves developmental aspects and as such has been described as similar to mentoring relationships (Forret & Dougherty, 2004). Contrary to mentorship, however, networking has no links to supervision. Likewise, it places the onus of building such relationships solely onto individuals, with the degree of agency being reported higher on some individuals according to their gender, attitudes, and self-esteem (Forret & Dougherty, 2004). Networking can be carried out within an organization by an individual who aims for greater work recognition, leading to career advancement. As pointed out by Perriton's (2006) research on women and networking, networking can backfire in perpetuating gendered norms wherein men hold the networking advantages and undesirable attitudes related to building instrumental career ties that do not necessarily flourish, wasting women's invested time and energy (pg.112). Past research exhibits a lack of evidence to show that networking is as effective for women as it is for men, partly due to women's struggle to access relationships within the organization that can assist or support their careers (Forret & Dougherty, 2004:420).

Studies claim that a person may have the tendency to choose a role model based on similarities (Allen & Collisson, 2020). With the male-dominated nature of industries such as manufacturing, the lack of women role models is a barrier for junior women who wish to pursue career advancement in non-traditional, traditionally male-typed work (Quimby & DeSantis, 2006). The lack of women role models contributes to the perception of limitations of women in climbing the organizational ladder and also influences women to behave more like men, who are considered the "default" leaders (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016). In addition, in order for senior women to be able to help junior women, there needs to be a conscious effort from senior women to be role models and to perform mentoring (Jandeska & Kraimer, 2005:474). Such conditions present an even more challenging situation in junior women's career advancement. In understanding women-to-women working relationships, especially in male-dominated workplaces, we can uncover greater nuance on how these dynamics manifest and reveal the consequences on junior women's career progression.

2.3. Gender differences, gender awareness, gender blindness, and women's careers

From social role theory, gender differences are rooted in historical divisions of labor (Eagly, 1997). The social role of men took on agentic tasks, leading to associations with assertiveness and competitiveness. The social role of women, on the other hand, was communal, thus women were expected to have traits such as warmth and kindness. Such historical roles and traits continue to pervade as stereotypes (Heilman, 2001), wherein the agentic traits of men are considered desirable and therefore privileged in leaders in the workplace.

Gender stereotypes are "generalizations about the attributes of men and women", simply by virtue of belongingness to either group (Heilman, 2012:114). Heilman discusses two forms– descriptive gender stereotypes, which assign how women and men *are like*, and prescriptive gender stereotypes, which provide how women and men *should be like* (Heilman, 2012:114). This research emphasizes how both forms of stereotypes are hindering women's careers. Descriptive gender stereotypes contribute to a "lack of fit" for women in the workplace (Heilman & Eagly, 2008), connected to how women are not considered agentic and aggressive as is expected in traditional male roles and organizational leadership (Heilman, 2012). Prescriptive gender stereotypes, on the other hand, establish norms for both "shoulds" and "should nots" in terms of behavior (Heilman, 2012). For women, this manifests in how they "should" be nurturing and caring, and "should not" be assertive in the workplace (Heilman, 2012). This can also be seen as contributing to the perception of lack of fit, with how agentic traits such as assertion are privileged in leadership roles.

Further research has demonstrated the impact of gender stereotypes on women. In their study, Hentschel et al. (2019) reveal how women rate themselves lower on leadership capabilities, such as self-characterizations of being less agentic than men, which demonstrate women's subscription to gender stereotypes. Compared to men, women perceive themselves as stereotypically "less assertive and less competent in leadership" (Hentschel et al., 2019). These troubling findings add to the concern about how stereotypes

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affect women's perceptions and can lead to biases that can impede women's career progression.

Apart from stereotypes, gender identification also contributes to concerns that can limit women's career progression. Kaiser & Spalding's (2015) research tested the expectation that the first senior women who advanced in a male-dominated environment will promote junior women, finding that gender identification has an impact on whether senior women will or will not promote junior women. Senior women with weak gender identification–women for whom their belongingness to their gender group is not central to their identity, hence distance themselves from their gender group–may display more masculinity than men, prefer to work with men, and hinder junior women's career progression (Kaiser & Spalding, 2015).

Despite what is seen about women's subscription to harmful gender stereotypes and the impact of women's weak gender identification, studies have also pointed to what is called the feminine advantage of leadership. Eagly & Carli's (2003) findings emphasize that women have advantages in leading in ways that benefit contemporary organizations. The changing context of leadership encourages greater collaboration and teamwork, for which the traditionally feminine traits of communal behaviors prove valuable (Eagly & Carli, 2003). In this sense, the argument of women's lack of fit in leadership roles no longer hold true, as women's innate abilities are seen as critical and useful in how leadership is contextualized today.

However, the negative effects of gender stereotypes remain–women are disadvantaged in how their competence as leaders is questioned and perceived in negatively biased ways (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Especially true in male-dominated environments and male-typed roles, women are challenged by the incongruity of the female gender role and leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Based on Eagly's social role theory (1997), the role incongruity theory highlights how gender-related cues lead to individual women being perceived as less agentic, producing discrimination in how women are evaluated in leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Apart from women being considered less qualified than men for leadership positions, women are also perceived negatively when they enact the agentic, male-typed

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behaviors prescribed for leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These stereotypical inferences and prejudice can effectively offset any advantage from the feminine style of leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2003).

To address this, women are seen to invoke a combination of communal behavior with agentic behavior. Since men are not required to exert the same efforts–rather are rewarded for exhibiting both warmth and assertiveness–, women may then have comparatively less access to a suite of leadership behaviors in exercising their leadership competence (Eagly & Carli, 2003). The double standard of heightened competence required of women understandably creates undue pressures and can hinder women in their career advancement.

With the above discussion on how gender differences and gender stereotypes impact women in the workplace, there are two opposing camps that prescribe strategies on how best to address gender differences. Gender ideologies are prescriptive strategies for handling gender differences (Martin & Phillips, 2017), and the debate on gender ideologies and their expected impact on women in the workplace has been concentrated between gender awareness and gender blindness.

Gender blindness refers to downplaying gender differences, highlighting group similarities or individual features instead (Martin & Phillips, 2017). Research suggests its effectiveness when applied to women in leadership positions especially in male-dominated environments, as it boosts confidence and action. The argument, therefore, is that gender blindness downplays the perceived "lack of fit" of women as leaders (Martin & Phillips, 2017). Focusing on women's individual capabilities instead of gender-specific traits may give them a better chance in leadership roles and positively impact their career progression. A possible limitation, however, is how gender blindness downplays the significance of life stages, factors that influence women's performance, and other women-specific experiences (Martin & Phillips, 2017:30).

Gender awareness, on the other hand, advocates the recognition of respective gender-specific attributes to be advantageous toward organizational success. Work-life practices such as parental leave and flexible schedules are marketed more towards women than men, implying the need for conditions to be met for women to perform at work and thus increasing

their opportunities to compete in managerial positions (Kalysh et al., 2016). As mentioned above, conceptions of leadership on a broader scale have been shifting toward valuing communal behaviors such as building relationships and developing others' skills (Heilman, 2012). With gender awareness, women can draw from their uniquely female capabilities and authentically hone in on these traits to progress their careers (Martin & Phillips, 2017:29). Although this "feminine leadership advantage" (Eagly & Carli, 2003) is seen mostly at the highest management levels (Heilman, 2012), such shifts provide grounds for how gender awareness can benefit women as their careers progress.

These divergent approaches to gender differences deepen our interest in exploring how junior women and senior women supervisors understand their working relationship. Do junior women perceive the relationship through gender awareness or gender blindness? How about senior women? From the contrasting natures and the research on how one gender ideology is applied rather than the other due to their respective benefits, we are motivated to uncover if junior and senior women apply either gender awareness or gender blindness. We suspect that they may have a different gender ideology from each other, consistent with how there are differing perspectives and expectations in women's working relationships (O'Neil et al. 2018:336).

Hence, our research question: *How do junior women and senior women supervisors understand women-to-women working relationships in terms of gender awareness or gender blindness?*

3. Methodology

To provide an overview of our study's methodology, the following section outlines our research approach including philosophical grounding and details into our data collection process and analysis. Invoking reflexivity, we challenge our own research, considering and discussing possible limitations of the study.

3.1. Philosophical grounding and research approach

Our goal is to uncover how junior women and senior women supervisors understand women-to-women working relationships in terms of gender awareness or gender blindness. To achieve this objective, we draw from interpretivist research traditions to focus on the subjective experience of people in organizations and the ways they make meaning of everyday life experiences (Prasad, 2017). The tradition's assumption on how reality is constructed by individuals and their social contexts enables us to understand and reveal the perceptions of junior and senior women in supervisory relationships.

The importance of these social contexts as co-constructed and perceived by junior and senior women in their relationships leads to our use of the qualitative approach, which enables the understanding of social interactions and social phenomena within their respective contexts (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018:11). We utilized the abductive approach, leveraging on both the deductive approach–creating a premise based on the existing theoretical field and testing through empirical data–and the inductive approach–finding patterns and drawing conclusions from empirical data (Alvehus, 2019:18). The use of the abductive or mystery approach enabled our focus on patterns (Alvehus, 2019:18) as well as a deeper understanding of the research material (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018).

3.2. Data collection

Our study has two sources of empirical data. The main source of empirical data is 15 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with female employees from a case organization. Our

secondary source is observations of work interactions between junior and senior women employees, specifically three different kinds of meetings wherein each meeting involves at least one junior woman and one senior woman.

The case organization is a large Denmark-based manufacturing company with a wide global presence and has employees globally. Understanding the male-dominated nature of a manufacturing company, we targeted such an organization given how the effects of gender differences are strongest in these environments (Martin & Phillips, 2017:32). Thus, our research findings will hopefully provide more impactful insights and contributions towards gender equality.

The following sections describe the sampling process and the two data collection approaches in more detail.

3.2.1. Sampling

We aimed to study a case organization that is considered male-dominated, with how research has pointed to the strongest impact of gender differences in such environments (Martin & Phillips, 2017:32). Upon securing access, we prepared a call for respondents that briefly described our research interest, our qualifications for respondents, the time required for interviews, as well as an option to allow us to make observations. In the call for respondents, we asked for women who are: 1) currently being supervised or have been supervised by a fellow woman, or 2) currently supervising or have previously supervised a fellow woman. The respondents who answered YES to Question 1 are considered junior women, while respondents who answered YES to Question 2 are considered senior women. For respondents who answered YES to both questions, we reviewed the information provided about their role in the organization and their LinkedIn profiles to determine if we were to interview them as junior or senior women. Women who have had greater experience in supervisory roles are considered and interviewed as senior women.

This call for respondents was published by our contact in the organization's community board, from which the respondents voluntarily signed up. The voluntary sign-ups demonstrated the respondents' interest and willingness to share their insights on our

research topic, which strengthened their eligibility and value as samples. Our process aligns with the purposive sampling by Bell et al. (2019), wherein we gathered samples that fit the research requirement. While doing the interviews, we were conscious of obtaining overlapping answers and themes from our interviewees–what the literature refers to as theoretical saturation–which allowed us to address the complexity of determining the sufficient sample size (Bell et al., 2019).

With all these considerations, we had a final sample size of 15 respondents consisting of nine junior women and six senior women. Six out of the 15 interviewed are based in Denmark, one is based in another part of Northern Europe, four are in Central Europe, and four are outside of Europe. Despite varying geographical locations and nationalities, all employees worked closely with the Danish head office through the organization's matrix structure. Likewise, all respondents expressed familiarity with and knowledge of the Danish roots of the organization and the organizational culture.

Ten out of 15 respondents are in HR roles which are considered female-typed occupations. These respondents have consistently expressed that their HR units are female-dominated, while also expressing the experience of their broader context of being in a male-dominated organization. The remaining five respondents were in front-line sales and support (female-dominated), IT project management (male-dominated), and communications (gender-balanced). The names and departments are duly anonymized.

3.2.2. Semi-structured interviews

Conducting interviews as a data collection method allowed us to probe into how junior and senior women make sense of their supervisory relationships (Prasad, 2018:26), furthering our goal of unveiling how they understand these. The interviews followed a main guide of questioning, allowing for flexibility in our questions as the interviews progressed. Conducting the interviews in this semi-structured approach allowed us opportunities to adapt through follow-up questions, probing further into specific topics brought up in the respondents' narratives (Kvale, 1983).

To ensure our respondents felt comfortable and relaxed enough to provide open and honest answers, we started our interviews with small talk to break the ice. We briefly introduced ourselves, reiterated our research interests and goals, emphasized that their anonymity as respondents and confidentiality of all data is guaranteed, and invited them to ask questions before we proceeded. Throughout the interviews, we reiterated that we are primarily interested in their individual subjective experience, especially when the respondent expressed concerns about only being able to speak about her own perceptions and experiences.

Interviews took one hour, on average, from the opening to the closing questions and comments. All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, due to the varied geographical locations, hybrid work set-up, and scheduling demands of the respondents. Limitations of this means of interviewing are discussed in *3.6 Reflexivity and limitations*. However, we see this remote conduct as an opportunity to gain insights from the experiences of women sitting in offices in various parts of the world. After finishing our interviews with the 15 respondents, we performed an initial analysis of our data and determined three respondents for follow-up interviews. The follow-up interviews took 15 to 30 minutes and were intended to probe further about interesting quotes by the selected respondents.

To allow us to provide deeper context into the topics discussed in the interviews, we observed some of the respondents in their work interactions. The process is explained further in the next section.

3.2.3. Observations

As Prasad notes from Geertz (2018:88), "culture is not to be found within individuals' minds but in the public spheres of social life." Observations of social interactions as an empirical data source, therefore, are important to allow probing and development of connections within topics being studied (Prasad, 2018:88), particularly to contextualize and validate our findings from the respondents' interviews. We utilized direct non-participatory observations to enable us to have a deeper understanding of the research material while maintaining an outsider perspective (Kostera, 2007). This approach allowed us to observe without

intervening or participating directly in the field. While not a full expression of ethnography, rather witnessing and analyzing a short snippet of the respondents' complex contexts and reality, we find our observations helpful in enriching and confirming our interview material. Through our observations, we gathered information such as interpersonal dynamics, tensions, and nonverbal cues, that we could not otherwise perceive from the respondent's interviews. Thus, we considered observations as a valuable data collection approach as it enabled us to have access to the respondent's larger social setting and uncover dynamics that the respondents may not have been aware of and therefore would not have been able to articulate in the interviews.

We observed two of our respondents in three different kinds of meetings. For Lily, a junior woman respondent, we observed a one-on-one development check-in with her senior woman supervisor and a weekly stand-up meeting involving the whole team. For Ingrid, a senior woman respondent, we observed a one-on-one meeting with her junior woman direct report wherein they focused on operational matters and plans.

We understood how our presence in the meetings may influence the participants' behavior (Ciesielska et al., 2017). To counter this, we strived to reassure the participants of the meetings and help them feel at ease, firstly by introducing ourselves, briefly discussing our research interests and aims, and answering any queries they may have. Given the geographically dispersed nature of collaboration in the case organization, the three observed meetings were done online. After our introduction, we requested that the participants proceed with and end their meetings as usual, then we turned off our cameras and muted our microphones, taking extensive notes of the meetings. We discuss the limitations of observing online versus in-person meetings in *3.4. Reflexivity and limitations*.

3.3. Data analysis

In this section, we provide the methods we have used to analyze the collected data. To ensure as much accuracy as possible in the collected data from the interviews, we recorded via Microsoft Teams. The recorded material consists of video files and real-time transcription document files. Acknowledging the limitations of the accuracy of the real-time transcriptions,

we re-read these carefully and cleaned up the material, guided by the video files of the interviews. To complement these, we also made extensive notes of the interviews. For the observations, we did not record the meetings via Microsoft Teams given possible confidentiality concerns. Instead, we made extensive notes of what we have observed. We compared our notes and had lengthy discussions to validate and document our observations. Through this process, we made efforts to ensure that we did not miss details, enabling us to proceed with an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the collected material (Bell et al., 2019).

We started with reading the material and proceeded with analytical bracketing as advocated by Gubrium and Holstein (1997), moving between *what is being talked about* to *how it is being talked about* to guide the initial coding (Charmaz, 2002). We also re-watched the video files, which was very useful, especially in determining and coding *how it is being talked about*. Re-watching the videos allowed us to spot and highlight how certain statements are said, the sounds that are used instead of words, the pauses between statements, the body language, and the facial expressions of our respondents. This initial or open coding is mediated by our knowledge of and focus on the literature and guided by our research question (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). We performed the initial coding immediately after the interview (given we did not have another interview right after) and discussed with each other until we agreed on the codes.

This is followed by re-reading the material and our initial code to perform the focused coding. In the focused or selective coding, we mentally stepped back for a broader, more general view and hence, more general labels to illustrate what we have uncovered in the data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This process is likewise grounded by our theoretical framework and related literature, in our efforts to surface overarching and interesting themes (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). We used Microsoft Excel in our focused coding to allow for color-coding, pivot tables, and easier filtering of the surfaced themes and the corresponding quotes that support these. Using Excel also allowed us to leave remarks on the codes and quotes, which guided us in identifying the knowledge gaps that our findings may be able to contribute toward.

Similarly, we read, re-read, and discussed our observation notes, moving between *what is being talked about* to *how it is being talked about.* We analyzed and coded these observation notes in line with the interview material of the respective respondents, as a validation and confirmation step which helped us identify underlying cues (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Part of this process is reducing the empirical material and funneling our focus, as we are unable to include all the uncovered common themes in our final analysis (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Recognizing the possibility of several categorizations, we focused broadly on one main theme and two main sub-themes from the junior and senior women's perspectives and how these relate to gender awareness or gender blindness. We achieved this through the final step of analysis which Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018) refer to as having "the dialogue with our data" (p.189), wherein we related our discussion of different quotes from the interviews to findings in the related literature, hence making the connection between our empirical data and existing theoretical concepts and research. This step helped us not only in finalizing the themes but also in preparing for the *Findings* and *Discussion* sections of our thesis.

We utilized Emerson's excerpt-commentary units to unfold our arguments, a method that provides the structured presentation of empirical material into four sections: the analytical point, the orientation, the empirical excerpt, and the analytical comment (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This method allowed us to link empirical data to interpretations and analysis as guided by theoretical background (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). We decided to integrate existing literature in the presentation of our analysis of empirical findings, as we found this contextualized our findings with theoretical background and presented where our findings either added or contrasted to the existing research. We believe this method makes it easier for the reader as this prevents having to go back and forth between the *Literature review* and *Findings* sections of the thesis. With all of these, we remain subscribed to Styhre's (2013) advice to allow room for the reader's interpretations of the findings to a degree, aiming merely to guide rather than fully shape the reader's understanding of our presentations.

3.4. Reflexivity and limitations

In this section, we discuss our critical reflection on our study and possible limitations. Alvesson & Sköldberg (2018) speak of reflection in empirical research as "interpretation of interpretation" and the importance of critically uncovering one's interpretations of the material (pg.11). Such reflective awareness adds a layer of care and deeper understanding for researchers during the research process, invoking a sense of consciousness of how the research process is shaped by personal experiences and biases (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2018). We argue that in our back-and-forth discussions about our findings and analysis, wherein we pose questions and challenge each other's arguments and assumptions, we practice reflexivity in our research process. Despite these efforts, we are aware of possible biases and limitations of our methods.

Firstly, the nature of a qualitative study such as ours inherently comes with a high degree of subjectivity from us, the researchers, and our respondents (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2018). Our findings are linked to our and our respondents' individual contexts and thus are not replicable, which is often considered a limitation of qualitative research or case studies compared to quantitative methods. However, as discussed by Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018), qualitative research does not seek to measure, but rather to understand meanings and qualities (pg.11-12). Hence, the value of qualitative research can be based on the motive behind it, such as in our case, "to illustrate and specify how people…perceive each other" (Rennstam & Wästerfors 2018:19). Furthermore, Flyvberg (2006) argues how qualitative case studies provide valuable understanding of certain social constructs, and that the produced context-dependent knowledge is as important as context-independent knowledge, in the ways it enables an enhanced understanding of complex scenarios and relationships.

Related to the above, another concern is the highly subjective nature of interviews and observations, especially in how people tend to highlight socially desirable traits and downplay socially undesirable ones. Also known as social desirability, this tendency raises concerns of bias and invalidity in survey studies such as interview data (Phillips & Clancy, 1972). We note this particularly given the potential sensitivity of our topic wherein we asked women to reflect on gender perceptions in their working relationships with fellow women.

Our efforts to address and minimize such tendencies involved guaranteeing complete confidentiality and anonymity of our respondents, which thus contributes to the validity of our research (Bell et al., 2019). We noticed how all our respondents were very open during the interviews, sharing their personal experiences and critical musings. From this, we perceived the respondents trusted us enough to be open and honest with their opinions and experiences. We also reflect that our being women established a certain level of comfort and a sense of camaraderie, which some respondents verbalized in their responses. Some respondents also expressed how us being women of color makes them perceive that we can empathize with their reflections and opinions about diversity and inclusion.

Recording the interviews through video files and transcript files helps ensure the accuracy of our data collection thereby enhancing the reliability of our study. Such reliability is reinforced by our conversations and discussions that invoke our individual perspectives and perceptions of the empirical material and its links to the literature. We consider this access to dialogue with each other's arguments as an invaluable advantage over research by a single researcher. Despite such, Bell et al. (2019) posit how authenticity, rather than traditional research criteria such as reliability, should be prioritized as a guiding principle for qualitative research in the business context.

As mentioned in our *3.2. Data collection* section, all of our interviews and observations were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, therefore posing limitations of lack of personal presence and thus constraining our ability to interpret in-person visual cues (Carter et al., 2021). However, all except one interview was performed with the respondents having their cameras turned on. This allowed us to still have access to and pick up non-verbal cues. We also argue that the hybrid work set-up and global, cross-border collaboration that is the norm in our case organization contributed to how the respondents are familiar and comfortable with virtual meetings. Apart from this, we ensured to keep our cameras on during interviews, which we believe helped maintain a sense of person-to-person connection and thus minimized the disadvantages of online meetings. Deakin & Wakefield (2014) also conclude that online interviews can serve not only as a useful supplement but also as a replacement for in-person interviews. This is especially true for our case organization wherein we received respondents from all over the world. Even if we had respondents only

from Denmark, in-person interviews would have been limited due to the respondents' hybrid work set-up.

In the follow-up interviews, we exercised due care and extra caution in probing and clarifying the respondents' statements. We began our follow-up interviews with small talk and brief updates on our research to reacquaint and refresh the familiarity and openness we previously established with the respondents. We made sure to start our follow-up questions with the specific quotes we wanted to follow up on, allowing the respondents to recall their statements, especially since their initial interviews were conducted several weeks prior. We perceive these efforts have also minimized if not removed the possibility of the confrontational impact of the follow-up interviews on the respondents–our focus was on simply quoting back their statements, asking if they recall that statement and if yes, to elaborate, which are taken as a request for clarification instead of challenge or confrontation. For our observations, we ensured to turn off our cameras after a brief introduction, which allowed us to, in effect, disappear and hopefully be forgotten by the meeting attendees. We argue that this practice likewise contributed to minimizing any adverse or limiting effects of observing online meetings.

Lastly, we reflect on the cultural differences with how we have respondents from various nationalities, sitting in offices in different countries. We understand how women from different cultural backgrounds may perceive gender differences in varying ways, with research pointing to how gender and cultural dynamics affect important leadership aspects (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). As mentioned in *3.2.1. Sampling* section, however, all women who were interviewed worked closely with the Danish head office through the organization's matrix structure, which enabled a strong sense of belonging and familiarity with the organization's Danish roots and Danish organizational culture. In our analysis of the empirical data, we also found that cultural differences due to nationality were not strong themes that arose. In that sense, we argue that the respondents exhibit an orientation wherein the strong organizational culture shapes their behaviors and perceptions (Alvesson et al., 2017:68), downplaying the effects of the broader societal context.

4. Findings

In our data analysis, we uncovered an overarching theme of **oscillation between gender ideologies, hence, pendulum-swinging between gender awareness and gender blindness** in how junior and senior women understood their supervisory relationships. Instead of the prevalence of application of only one specific gender ideology and harnessing the benefits of such strategies, we see junior and senior women utilize both gender awareness and gender blindness, according to the context of the relationship.

This main theme is further elaborated and expanded upon with the following *two sub-themes* of how junior and senior women understood their supervisory relationships in terms of gender awareness and gender blindness: *1) Management and mentorship,* and *2) Navigating gendered norms - justification of fit.*

4.1. Management and mentorship - Building one's ant house

The first sub-theme is the understanding that supervisor and mentor are two separate roles often found in separate relationships with different senior women, not necessarily with the junior woman's supervisor. We found this sub-theme consistent throughout our interviews. In this first sub-theme, we discuss women-to-women understanding and expectations within supervisory or *management* relationships. Likewise, the first theme highlights how *mentorships* are established outside the supervisory relationship and the effects of this agentic process on women.

Not relying solely on the supervisory relationship with their senior woman, junior women take responsibility for choosing one or more senior women mentors *outside the supervisory relationship*, shaping and building their networks according to their desired career progression–a process that we likened to **building one's ant house**.

4.1.1. Management - formal supervision

When asked about the ways they reach out to senior women, junior women describe their supervisors as someone they reach out to for feedback and guidance on completing tasks. Lily elaborates,

> "...We have been working on a bunch of stuff together. So of course I needed her to make certain decisions. And I am actually encouraged to propose new things to improve things, which I like. I value brainstorming in general."

Lily highlights the collaborative nature of her working relationship with her senior woman supervisor and how apart from having the support of her senior woman to "make certain decisions," Lily is encouraged to propose improvements and brainstorm–aspects that Lily values. Apart from these work role-specific interactions, Lily benefits from another aspect of the working relationship.

We had the opportunity to observe a one-to-one virtual meeting between Lily and her senior woman supervisor. Operational matters were discussed in the first half of their 30-minute meeting. Towards the end of their meeting, after confirming that the junior woman had no further concerns, Lily's supervisor brought up the personal development dialogue (PDD), asking Lily what she was "most interested in right now". PDD is a recurring topic in our interviews with junior women when discussing their working relationship with their supervisors. In this PDD, Lily mostly led the conversation while her supervisor listened attentively and provided constructive input. Lily's supervisor was observed validating Lily's understanding of the recent team meeting and giving assurance on her way of working. We observed Lily's comfort and confidence in speaking her mind, sharing her thought process between "listening to my heart" and "practicality" to give the supervisor context of her career aspirations. Lily expresses that these values of honesty, transparency, and openness are expectations she has from her senior woman supervisor, affirming her application of gender awareness in the working relationship. Her gender awareness is heightened by how she expects the senior woman supervisor to, at the same time, understand her needs as a married

woman with children. We expand on this analytical point further in this section when we discuss family roles.

Senior women also express joy and satisfaction in receiving positive confirmation from junior women. Ingrid recalled a conversation with the junior woman she was directly supervising, claiming "how lucky" she was to have the junior on her team, and expressing how she perceived the sentiment to be returned. Ingrid shares,

> "I think she is very happy working with me, that is the impression that I have gotten from the leadership training that I did. I asked her to come up with three words and she said 'fun, flexible, and everything is possible'. So I was very proud of that."

In observing their one-to-one virtual meeting, we validated this positive, friendly, working relationship between Ingrid and the junior woman she was supervising. The junior woman openly and enthusiastically expressed her ideas to Ingrid, which demonstrates both the junior's confidence in her capabilities and her positive relationship with her supervisor. In response to their discussion of upcoming projects, Ingrid's junior said cheerfully "Don't worry about it, easy peasy." This supports Ingrid's mention of "fun, flexible, and everything is possible", substantiating how her junior woman perceived their relationship. We observed how Ingrid would listen and evaluate the junior woman's ideas, expressing delight in some instances and recalibrating the work direction in others, eventually providing the junior woman instruction to proceed with, halt, or refine the tasks. This interaction is noted as sparring–a recurring term among our women respondents that refers to healthy, productive discussions that comprise a prominent feature within women-to-women working relationships. Ingrid explains how she values sparring with junior women, applying gender awareness in how she knows how it feels to be "alone also as a woman with a lot of guys and not really have somebody to discuss with or being part of a group with," which influences how she supports her junior woman in their supervisory relationship. "I am part of your group now," she empathically declares.

The above examples of routine supervisory conversations show that the managerial form of organizing is dominant in the relationship between junior and senior women. Likewise, it is apparent how apart from the supportive, open, and productive qualities of supervisory

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interactions, the career development of junior women is an important conversation within the supervisory relationship through the PDDs. Junior women also validate how this is an *expected* part of the supervisory relationship. Amanda says,

> "I think that's part of the role of a leader. You have to support the development of your people regardless of whether they want career growth in terms of a promotion. Not everybody wants that, but that doesn't mean you can't develop. And so I see that as part of the role of a leader. And if we're not developing our people, then we're missing a piece of what we're there for."

Amanda emphasizes a junior woman's understanding and expectations of the supervisory relationship with a senior woman, highlighting how career progression in terms of promotion should not be the only aspect a supervisor should support. Stated another way, this statement reveals how a junior woman would feel supported in their career progression–not only in terms of conversations toward promotion but also in terms of general development, whichever case the junior woman prefers. This can be seen as an application of gender blindness–a focus on the individual's capabilities, career plans, and preferences–that contributes to a junior woman's confidence and agency in shaping her career.

Daphne echoes this belief and expectations of aid in career development in the form of mentorship within the supervisory relationship. She speaks of an instance wherein she had a career opportunity and sought advice from present and previous supervisors on her development.

> "I just talked to them and they did not give me any decision to make. They didn't say, 'oh, you should or you should not.' They are super great in telling and asking me questions for me to reflect, in order for me to make that decision myself."

Daphne highlights how she appreciates mentorship performed by her supervisors, acknowledging the value of her senior women supervisors and how they are "super great in telling and asking questions for me to reflect," empowering her to make her own career decisions. When probed if these are interactions that she would perceive as unique to women,

Daphne applies gender blindness as well, downplaying possible contributions of gender-specific attributes and explaining that these are expectations she would have in any mentorship or coaching relationship.

Gender awareness, however, can be seen in how the respondents related to and identified with each other as women based on family roles, impacting the supervisory relationship. Our observation from a team meeting conducted between one senior woman, six junior women including Lily, and one junior man shows how, when asked about their weekend, the majority of women took turns talking about time well spent with family. Although it was small talk or an icebreaker to start the meeting, the immediate mention of family and sharing experiences within the family role contributes to how women relate to and connect in supervisory relationships.

In our interviews, 14 out of 15 respondents spoke of their relationships with their supervisors in terms of such family role relations. Motherhood is a family role often brought up in how it affects not only how junior and senior women understand each other but especially how this impacts their career decisions. To continue with our junior woman Lily, she says,

> "...even at the interview, I mentioned that I have a small boy and yeah, they understand. But yes, this is also like going back to set expectations at the very beginning of the relationship. And that I'm also transparent."

Junior women are seen to bring their family role as mothers into the workplace and see this as integral to setting expectations in the working relationship. With work being a relational act (Blustein, 2011) and how as Lily said "going back to set expectations at the very beginning of the relationship" or expectation-setting is important in ensuring the quality of working relationships, this presentation and transparency of motherhood are critical in nurturing women-to-women supervisory relationships. Likewise, identifying with their senior woman as fellow mothers impacts the junior woman's confidence and perception of her career outlook. For Lily, it affects the very beginning of the working relationship. As early as the interview, she is transparent about her child and how she expects to be understood if she

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accepts the job. Apart from this, connections with senior women based on family roles have a larger impact on junior woman's career outlook.

Maya states about her senior woman supervisor:

> "She has kids and she's a leader, so all those qualities from her made me believe more about myself."

It is evidenced by Maya's take that her senior woman's ability to have kids and be a leader at the same time contributed to her confidence in how it made her "believe more about myself." With how important it is for junior women to have women role models, especially in traditionally male-typed environments (Quimby & DeSantis, 2006), this family role connection as a basis for role-modeling can be seen as beneficial to junior women's career progression–at the very least, to their career confidence. This positive impact of gender awareness in the supervisory relationship is an important contrast to Martin & Phillips' (2017) findings that gender blindness is more likely to support junior women's confidence in the workplace.

Analyzing this connection as mothers from a senior woman's perspective provides a different nuance to the context. Senior woman Jennifer invokes the motherhood family role connection in motivating her junior women to work hard for their career progression. She shares,

> "If I can work on that and I know already there are some things like, 'you know what? I'm setting the example for my child. I want them to see their mom can do this on her own.' And these are the single moms that are speaking out. So those are the ones that we want to target and say, well, 'I might have to use that child against you now because you wanna grow, develop, you want your child to see what you're worth and you are worth so much more'."

Jennifer reflects that this way of motivating her junior women wherein she "might have to use that child against you" to encourage the juniors to strive "sounds a little bit nasty". However, she recognizes the importance of utilizing such strong encouragement for her juniors to explore other parts of the business where they could be good at, therefore the ways

they could develop their career progression. With this application of gender awareness, she draws from her understanding of the motherhood role and how it can serve to fuel junior women's career determination. As she highlights, "you want your child to see what you're worth and you are worth so much more."

Apart from relating as mothers, we uncovered a different angle on how junior and senior women apply family roles in perceiving women-to-women supervisory relationships. Senior woman Christine sees and nurtures potential and ambition in her junior women, relating to how some are the same age as her children. She reflects,

> "To my private situation, well I have two kids of my own. [...] very similar to the ages of the people I am working with, so I can of course relate very, very well to what private lives look like. In what phase of their life are they? [...] Of course, it is completely OK to have a phase of your lifetime to focus on your family and maybe step back in your professional life. [...] I think it would go too far to say I see my children in them and would not be OK, I think. I have of course a more distant relation(ship). [...] I think I am able to see potential in people. I also believe that I am able to see talents."

Christine applies gender awareness in how her supervisory relationships draw from her "private situation" as a mother. This awareness allows her to understand the junior women's life phases as they can impact their professional lives. Despite this connection, Christine emphasizes professional distance, saying "It would go too far to say I see my children in them and would not be OK, I think." In this statement, Christine takes the position of a supervisor, ending her argument by stating her ability to recognize 'potential' in her junior women, a crucial task done in career management (Beardwell & Thompson, 2017).

Junior woman Daphne also expresses maintaining distance and performing conscious filtering out of respect towards her supervisor, similar to how a child might behave with her mother. Daphne elaborates,

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"I think it is like a relationship with your mother, right? Because you do not want to cross the line of disrespecting her and disrespecting your mom. At the same time, you can share anything with her. So I think that is sort of like a metaphor."

Daphne's application of gender awareness, therefore, allows her to cultivate strong connections with senior women in ways that improve the quality of their supervisory relationships, saying "You can share anything with her". However, she places critical importance on setting boundaries, as she does "not want to cross the line of disrespecting her and disrespecting your mom."

These present nuanced applications of gender awareness, such that the women are seen to be moving across the line of professional and personal life in ways that both strengthen and categorize woman-to-woman supervisory relationships.

4.1.2. Mentorship - more than an informal bond

While we established how junior women perceive their supervisory relationships with senior women and how this impacts their career progression, we also saw the consistency in how junior women take full ownership of their career progression *outside of the supervisory relationship* and how mentorship is an important aspect of this drive. Ownership is declared in the way junior women express their responsibility in initiating mentoring relationships and in their act of choosing senior women mentors according to how they want to shape their careers, building networks as if **building one's ant house**. This finding contributes complexities to how mentorship is usually defined as an informal bond or process existing outside of supervision (Gallacher, 1997:192).

Despite the consistent mention of how junior women expect their senior women supervisors to be involved in their career progression through the PDDs, junior women are also proud to be in charge of their careers. Maya says,

"I have access to a lot of information…. So I do not need to go and ask *(my senior woman supervisor)* for this information….I have a small notebook with the names and the roles of many women I would like to talk to or get to know eventually."

Maya expresses confidence in how she has "access to a lot of information" and independence in how she does "not need to go and ask" her supervisor in matters relating to her career progression. Thus, she displays strong agency and ownership in her career, due to her ability to connect to "many women" with whom she would reach out in her own time. This expression of access to resources, i.e. information and small notebook with names and roles of many women, validates Maya's confidence in taking the lead in her career.

The same notion is heard from Sofia, who believes that her career is not for her leader to "carve out" the right direction but is something she "builds" herself. With this, she expresses pride in taking full ownership of her career. Senior woman Ingrid agrees and contributes to this notion by expressing that young women, hence, junior women in her work context, are extremely ambitious "and that is fine". These statements show that the responsibility for junior women's career progression falls heavily on themselves and their actions, and this responsibility and drive are important aspects of their careers that they take pride in.

Senior women having a similar perception of junior women–as Ingrid expresses–further cultivate senior's expectation of juniors' independence and motivation, which justifies and validates the strong agency junior women have on their career progression. In these findings, both junior and senior women apply gender blindness. Their focus is diverted from gender differences junior women may have and instead redirected to the determination of junior women to shape their careers. Thus capabilities as individual features and motivation are highlighted instead.

How else do senior women perceive this specific working relationship? When asked about her involvement in junior women's career progression, senior woman Bridgette does not acknowledge it as her formal task, rather as something she is passionate about. She says,

> "It is not something I have on my work agenda, […] that's not on my plate at all. Where I work is in the capacity of mentoring. Umm, so that is something I do out of... I don't know. I love it, right? Helping people grow and that is in that capacity where I do it."

Bridgette shows her genuine interest in mentoring junior women. Her saying that her mentorship of juniors is not part of her job description translates to mentorship as an effort

she performs purely out of goodwill, especially with her strong statement of "I love it". Bridgette's self-initiative backed by her seeming good intentions and passion for mentoring coincides with how junior women take charge of their own career advancement. This implies that since senior women voluntarily step up and raise their hand to be mentors outside of their official work duties, the onus and responsibility are on junior women to reach out to establish the mentoring relationship.

On the other hand, gender awareness was seen to be applied when junior women spoke specifically of mentorship in women-to-women relationships. When asked whether they see a mentor in their supervisor, seven out of nine junior women explicitly shared they find a mentor outside the supervisory relationship. Their application of gender awareness is evident in how junior women feel motivated to choose senior women as their mentors. Apart from gender, however, position and level in the hierarchy and relatability are also deemed important aspects in choosing a mentor. Olivia says,

> "I would look up in the higher levels of the company and see who I could relate to and if there is anyone I found inspirational. I mostly found role models in other women because I can…see where I wanna go and what they have achieved. And that's actually biased. I can hear that because if I'm just looking up to women, then it's not the people, right? Then it's the gender that I'm looking at?"

Olivia speaks of mentors as role models, and in this context, she looks for women as it helps her "see where I wanna go and what they have achieved," consistent with how employees have the tendency to choose a role model based on similarity-gender, in this case (Allen & Collisson, 2020). She acknowledges how this reflection of "looking up to women" surfaces her application of gender awareness in her mentorship requirements.

When probed more about the benefits of having a senior woman mentor, junior woman Sofia spoke about how she appreciates the women-specific experiences that senior men do not experience and may not fully understand. Speaking about an experience with a male leader who assumed Christmas meant relaxation when for her "Christmas is a heavy, heavy duty for us female and it's not the easiest time of the year", Sofia reflects,

"Maybe this is a very bad example, but maybe this is the reason why I would look for a female mentor because I wouldn't need to explain the intricacies that male leaders sometimes don't experience in their own lives. And those challenges are because it's so easy just to pretend that we are all equal. But we're not."

Similar to what we found in supervisory relationships, Sofia's statement shows how women-specific experiences in family roles influence her needs in a mentorship, hence gender awareness. In choosing a senior woman mentor, she expects to feel understood without necessitating much explanation, especially in how there is no pretense "that we are all equal," and it improves the quality of the working relationship.

As mentors, senior women align with these gender-aware expectations by sharing how their women-specific experiences help them connect and advise junior women. Cecilia, for instance, sees herself as a mentor, coach, and even protector. Her mentorship capabilities and motivation are also rooted on her own good experiences with a senior woman. She talks about "protecting" a junior woman who had to present often to senior leaders:

"It can be really tough and what you need is that you need someone to say to you, 'I can take it for you all. We can go through it many times until you feel comfortable, and if there's anything you're exposed to, I'm just there and I will waste my voice and take the heat.' And *(my senior woman)* did that so well with me that I repeated that towards my own female employees."

Hers is a strong statement in her resolve to help junior women, due to her having gone through similar experiences in the past, and having received similar protection and mentorship from a senior woman. This has given her the capabilities and the drive to share valuable insights with her junior women.

Another perspective that connects senior women's actions with their motivation in mentorship comes from senior woman Bridgette. She expresses a part of mentorship that she likes, which is to see juniors realizing their "moment of truth", an occasion wherein junior women finally achieve their goals after previously underestimating their capabilities to do so. Bridgette recalls,

"When you mentor someone or coach someone, [...] sometimes there are these moments of truth where people themselves realize that they are capable of more than what they thought they were capable of. Those are the moments of truth that I love. And then of course, when (it) is a woman, then I'm like "You go, girl", because I wasn't there. I didn't have anyone at that time in my career."

She later makes a comparison,

"So women to women, that is where we really have those moments of truth where men are more like give me a checklist and "I'll go do". [...] Those moments of truth give–empowers, I would say, gives (women) their confidence in actually speaking up and sharing what they want instead of having it internally."

Unlike Cecilia, Bridgette recalls that she did not have "anyone at that time in my career"–no mentor to support her during her early career in the way she now supports her juniors. This further amplifies her motivation in mentoring junior women, as indicated in her cheering "you go, girl", and how she acknowledges that mentoring junior women boosts their "confidence in actually speaking up and sharing what they want instead of having it internally". Bridgette also compares how mentoring relationships with junior women evoke a deeper sense of meaning, compared to her mentoring relationship with junior men who perceive her guidance as a mere "checklist and 'I'll go do'". All these points support how Bridgette applies gender awareness in her understanding of mentorship–perceiving the different ways junior women and men find value from it and drawing from her own experience as a woman who would have appreciated a female mentor. Bridgette acknowledges at a latter point, however, that her moment of truth experience in mentorship is possible with men as well, swinging to gender blindness.

Digging deeper into how they understand mentorship with senior women, six out of nine junior women express their satisfaction with having mentors outside the supervisory relationship. When asked about the division of these roles, Sarah explains the key difference lies in the underlying motives and interests. She says,

"My supervisor could relate to the organization and the way it operates. Her advice was always in the best interest of the organization, of course, whereas my mentor, which was via an external program, I'm her best interest. (It) was always me."

Sarah articulates how her supervisory relationship and mentorship are grounded on different interests, with the supervisor's motives anchored on the organization's interests, while the mentor's motives are focused on her. This makes sense with how mentorship is "often an informal process" (Gallacher, 1997:192), while supervision often entails performance evaluation which mentorship does not adhere to (Gallacher, 1997:192). In this sense, junior women derive different benefits and enjoy different contexts from each relationship. Supervision develops the junior woman within the context of the organization, while mentorship develops the junior woman as an individual beyond the organizational context–"I'm her best interest. (It) was always me."

Although Sarah's experience is finding mentorship outside of the organization, her sentiments are echoed by other junior women who established their mentors within the organization. Amanda, for instance, mentions how her mentor is a sounding board for confidential conversations she cannot have with her supervisor.

"I think it's crucial for anybody and having a mentor, having a safe space, if you will, to have a sounding board where it may be a very confidential situation. It may be something that you don't wanna talk to your supervisor about."

This adds another layer to the benefits of having a mentor outside of the supervisory relationship. It is a "safe space…a sounding board," which may be attributed to the informal nature of mentorship and how it does not have performance evaluation as a critical part of the relationship dynamics (Gallacher, 1997:192). Since mentors are not evaluating the performance of junior women and such performance does not affect the mentors' performance either, the mentorship relationship can flourish without the usual bounds and restrictions of formal supervision.

Our overarching finding from these themes, however, lies in the interplay of these motives, interests, and benefits that junior and senior women perceive from mentorship–and from here we see how junior women *build their mentorship connections as if building an ant house*.

Despite being clear in their supervisory experiences and how we ask questions tailored to either junior women or senior women, our respondents position themselves as both mentor and mentee in reflecting on women-to-women working relationships. Three out of nine junior women share that they are mentors to other women in the organization who are *their* juniors and who perceive their careers as aspirational. Junior woman Dorothy shares how a junior woman who is new to the organization reached out to her, seeking advice to pivot careers:

> "…I actually mentor a female employee in Denmark who reached out to me because they were looking at ways they needed advice on how to get into HR. And they are younger in their career. So it was more from a pure, early in career development standpoint."

This shows that regardless of their level in the organization, women are seeking mentors. In the case of Dorothy, despite her position as a junior woman in the organization, she was sought as a mentor and she is willing to participate in a mentoring relationship with another junior woman. This also demonstrates the relevance of a mentor's job position to a junior woman's intended career. In this case, the junior woman wants to pursue a career in Human Resources, where Dorothy currently works. Dorothy can therefore provide advice to a woman "early in career development". This aspect of the job position is also noted in how Dorothy recalls her experience with her own mentor. She shares,

> "I have a mentor that is a female in the organization. […] because they had been involved in operations a lot in different parts of *(the organization)*. So I reached out to them and just kind of like, hey, can I have a resource to navigate? How does some of this work here?"

Dorothy sees her mentor as someone with knowledge; an expert in her subject matter and therefore can provide a "resource" to Dorothy. This is the same reason Dorothy's mentee

reached out to her due to needing "advice to get into HR". These similar experiences of building mentoring relationships are seen to play a part in Dorothy's motivation to mentor women more junior than her.

Senior women also recalled positive experiences with senior women mentors. Senior woman Cecilia credited her senior woman mentor with shaping her attitude towards work. She says,

> "We learned the phrase from my female leaders […] One female leader always said to me 'Do we need to think about everything we're doing? What would men do right now?' And she has a very concrete thing. Like she was a VP, right? […] So it's like small little things like allowing ourselves to actually do things, and it sounds stupid, but that little phrase was just always like what?! And I've always coached them (junior women) to do the same."

From her mentor, senior woman Cecilia learns the phrase "what would men do right now?"– a phrase she found constructive and helpful in "allowing ourselves to actually do things," thus enabling confidence and action in women. Thus she always teaches her junior women mentees to practice the same phrase. Despite the potential stereotypes this phrase carries and Cecilia's acknowledgment that "it sounds stupid", Cecilia demonstrates how a senior woman has a long-lasting impact not just on her but on her subsequent mentoring relationships, replicating methods similar to how ants build their house.

Therefore, with each respondent–junior or senior woman–we perceive independent and driven efforts to build a network of mentors aligned with how they want to navigate and shape their careers. It is critical to note that mentorship relationships are facilitated by the organization through mentorship programs that allow and encourage access to seniors across departments and functions. This platform enables women to network with more experienced women who have voluntarily signed up as mentors. The nature of this platform further highlights the required independence for junior women to utilize and take advantage of the platform to map out their careers, and how the results are highly a product of the junior women's initiative and drive toward their career progression. Hence, we see junior women's efforts as a self-organized system encompassing several layers and directions, branching out under the surface similar to an ant house.

Often used as a reference in architecture studies, ants build their house in a vertical and a horizontal direction, which contributes to the strong foundation of the house. We perceive the horizontal aspect in how both senior and junior women are motivated to perform mentorship. The more women sign up as mentors, the wider the house is, and the more women mentees can have access to mentors. This links to the vertical aspect, which is in how junior women reach out to be mentees to their senior women mentors. At the same time, junior women also become mentors to women more junior than them. Ant house, or in this case, mentorship, is an independent, self-organized structure that is expanding and flourishing within its own environment.

Senior women Cecilia, Ingrid, and Bridgette, for instance, credited their former mentors for shaping their experiences in the organization and with how they mentor their juniors. Junior women Dorothy, Daphne, and Sarah, on the other hand, consider themselves as mentors to more junior women, while having senior women as mentors at the same time.

In this ant house-like network of a wider mentoring relationship, women apply gender awareness in choosing a senior woman mentor based on perceived relatability and connection based on women-specific experiences. Gender blindness, on the other hand, is applied in women's self-perception of taking responsibility for their careers and desired focus on their individual capabilities, which heightens their sense of agency and confidence.

4.2. Navigating gendered norms - Justification of "fit"

The second sub-theme focuses on how junior women apply gender awareness and gender blindness in approaching gendered norms and justifying themselves in their current roles and careers.

4.2.1. Re-writing ways to success

Kaiser & Spalding (2015) questions the snow-ball effect whereby the first woman who advanced in a male-dominated environment will promote other junior women, increasing the overall number of women in the organization. Their research proves that this is not entirely true; women's identification with their gender–either strong or weak–holds

significance and such identification is influenced by gender stereotypes (Kaiser & Spalding, 2015). For this reason, we present two contrasting opinions from senior women Cecilia and Christine who expose ways of assisting junior women in navigating gender differences and gendered norms in male-dominated environments.

In her follow-up interview, we revisit Cecilia's remark on junior women being "little, pretty and beautiful girls"–a description that can be perceived as perpetuating stereotypes. In recalling her own statement, Cecilia further reflects on her choice of words, yet her answer remains the same. Cecilia takes a rather practical approach, categorizing junior women as either "one of the guys" or "a girly girl" and later uses these categories to create a benchmark and expectations on junior women. This is aligned with how gender awareness highlights differences. In the case of Cecilia, she shows preference toward traits that are traditionally male. She elaborates,

> "I will just say it, but that's the role that I can see girls fall into. Either they have to be very tough-skinned and then be one of the guys or be a girly girl and my daughter will hate me for saying it... I know that I'm just trying to put it up very black and white and both of the type of girls that I always have when I coach. I did it yesterday when I was coaching one girl. I just asked her. 'Just be aware when you fall into these two groups because we constantly do it'."

From Cecilia's perceptions, women fall into these categories, and part of her role as a senior woman is to help junior women in identifying in which category they fall. From there, she talks about seeking to help them avoid taking on non-promotional or low-promotability tasks (Babcock et al., 2017) and coaches junior women to "boost their confidence" that they are knowledgeable in their work. Low-promotability tasks do not hold significance towards career advancement as they are less likely to be evaluated, while non-promotional tasks are not at all evaluated in one''s work performance, e.g. writing minutes of the meeting or organizing an event (Babcock et al., 2017). In this sense, Cecilia starts with gender awareness by highlighting how junior women are different from men, with her perception of the "one of the guys" and "girly girl" categories. We then perceive her shift to gender blindness in her efforts to develop these junior women, by focusing on downplaying gender differences.

Notably, these efforts lean towards the junior women acting more according to masculine traits. Cecilia herself identifies as one of the boys–something that she mentions has backfired on her as well, as she sometimes "need(s) to joke about things that I actually don't think its funny." She also articulates discomfort, saying "my daughter will hate me for saying this," referring to how she categorizes women, then holds steadfast in her beliefs and ways of coaching junior women–"I'm just trying to put it up very black and white". She justifies this replication of gendered norms with her belief that such categorizations are helpful in developing junior women in their careers.

In contrast, senior woman Christine points out how junior women do not need to adapt to male-typed behavior and change who they are to be successful.

> "This is I think holding back a lot of women not to develop in that direction because they don't see themselves in there. And this is I think we are really (lacking) examples that you can be very, very, very different. You don't need to adapt to male behavior to be successful and you can be yourself. To be successful. You don't need to change your personality, to be successful. Like you are, you are completely OK. You don't need to fit in a pattern."

In her application of gender awareness, Christine can be perceived to not only highlight but embrace the way women are different from men. "You can be very, very, very different. You don't need to adapt to male behavior to be successful and you can be yourself." In saying this, she advocates for junior women to not subscribe to the need to adapt to male-typed traits. She also connects the importance for junior women to see themselves in senior women– specifically senior women who are leading like women and in a sense, applying gender awareness in their leadership. Such role models is seen to enable junior women in their career progression, in seeing senior women who they can look up to and aspire to be (Quimby & DeSantis, 2006).

Hence, Cecilia and Christine illustrate different possibilities of the snow-ball effect , in how senior women who advanced in a male-dominated environment can impact junior women and understand their working relationships (Kaiser & Spalding, 2015). Cecilia, despite seeming to have a weak gender identification as "one of the guys" is motivated to promote

junior women. Christine, who has a stronger gender identification in her belief that junior women do not "need to adapt to male behavior to be successful," also endeavors to promote junior women's careers. Therefore, despite their contrasting opinions and ways of navigating gendered norms, both senior women's intentions and actions are toward guiding junior women to progress in their careers. This is a valuable contrast to Kaiser & Spalding's (2015) conclusion that women with weak gender identification tend to not be supportive of fellow women's career progression.

On the other hand, junior women are also observed to be navigating gendered norms, taking on what seems to be harmless gendered practices when describing their preference in a working relationship. Junior woman Sofia says she feels challenged by men and that the relationship provides value to her professional life. Sofia then describes women-to-women relationships using non-work-related terms. She shares,

> "I love working with women and I love working with men for different reasons. Men (are) usually like, no-nonsense people. They tell things as they are and I love that… but sometimes it is good to exchange recipes, hear nice (feedback) for a new haircut, which is more that you get from female colleagues. Generally speaking, I do not know."

When probed to explain further during a follow-up interview, Sofia expands on her argument by describing her working relationship with men to be that of an "adult-adult relationship", while with women it can be more flexible, allowing to "play around more roles" such as "critical parent to a child." She also adds that "as female leaders, we tend to show up as the school teachers" with "that kind of parental criticism". In this sense, she practices gender awareness, highlighting how senior women are different from men, and the differing value she derives from working relationships with women versus men. Similar to Cecilia, Sofia also expresses discomfort in her views, saying, "as you started to raise the question, I started to feel a knot in my belly," adding that while she had good experiences with senior women, she also had previous experiences wherein senior women "could hinder you way more than male."

Here we see her gender awareness also evident in how she expresses concern about senior women not showing up the same way male leaders do for juniors' career needs and can have

hindering effects, despite the helpful emotional support given in day-to-day work. Speaking of past experience outside of the case organization, Sofia shares,

> "In my experience from the past is that it is so much harder to progress in your career if you have a female leader compared to a male leader and though they are emotionally supportive at, you know, like the day-to-day work, they might not really show up the same way for your career needs."

Sofia's application of gender awareness allows her to highlight how senior women are "emotionally supportive" in the daily, relational context of the women-to-women working relationship, but are not so reliable when it comes to career progression. She also speaks about how "being more objective and less subjective and not filtering through everything your emotions" is more difficult for a woman, contributing to her "critical parent to a child" perception of senior women. Sofia can then be perceived to prefer that senior women apply gender blindness–focus more on objective, individual capabilities of juniors rather than leaning into emotions–in considering their junior women's careers.

Adding to the relational context, senior woman Jennifer reveals how her junior women expected her to be empathetic and made a critical feedback when Jennifer missed to greet them one morning. She mentions,

> "Because I am a person that likes to be fair, that is one of my focuses. […] It must be across the board and not biased like oh, I have to speak to you this way because you are a woman. […] I do not get joy out of that, so for me, I think it should be fair across the board."

Jennifer feels the relational expectation of a woman being happy and chirpy regardless of the situation, hence she experiences an application of gender awareness, in how feminine-typed traits are expected of her in day-to-day work interactions. In saying that she does not "get joy out of" speaking differently to a woman based on gendered expectations, i.e. a specific way of greeting fellow women "good morning", she points out the fairness dilemma she faces and how it links to the leadership image she wants to project. "For me, I think it should be fair across the board."

Another instance of navigating gendered norms is how junior women perceive senior women to succeed in the organization. Maya perceives senior women as having a "strong voice and very firm character like that, which is considered like a masculine".

This shows her application of gender awareness, highlighting how senior women differ in their tone of voice and their efforts to minimize these differences. Hence, senior women are perceived to be employing gender blindness–by having a strong tone of voice. From her follow-up interview, it is clarified that the voice in Maya's statement means volume, which fits her perception that a strong voice helps ensure that senior women "won't be interrupted."

Maya perceives gender blindness in her current role, saying

> "I don't really feel that because I'm a woman, my career has been affected in one or in another way."

Thus, she believes that her gender has no bearing on her current role, presenting agency and confidence in her current circumstances. She then reconciles this with her application of gender awareness to senior women by seeing how when she wishes to pursue leadership positions, she will need to adjust her voice as well. Maya therefore understands, much like senior woman Cecilia does, how traits traditionally considered female are not endorsed in the pursuit of career advancement and leadership, hence they perceive a lack of fit of women in leadership roles (Heilman & Eagly, 2008).

4.2.2. Fitting in and standing out

Building on what we noted from Maya above, we observed a contrast when asking our respondents if being a woman makes a difference at work. Eight out of 15 respondents were seen to instinctively perceive gender blindness when asked if being a woman makes a difference at work, followed by the respondents applying gender awareness by highlighting women-specific attributes.

For example, Olivia expresses that all the jobs she had in HR could be "done by both males and females". Upon further reflection, however, she cites a specific example of a woman going into negotiations:

"She wanted to get some sort of a deal through. And she said just in her small little nice voice. 'So do we have an agreement on this?' and 'Can you do it and deliver it on Thursday?' And she was just being herself and not pushing it. But being so nice that they got overwhelmed a bit by her niceness because they were usually banging heads together and being really hard at each other. So her nice approach got the deal through because they were so surprised at her approach being so different from what they were used to."

From the immediacy in the way she answered, we noted how Olivia's instinctive understanding is that her effectiveness in her role is not affected by her being a woman. In that sense, she applies gender blindness and perceives gender differences play no part in her work roles. Through specific examples, however, she demonstrates how being a woman, i.e. with a "small little nice voice" can be an asset in delivering work outcomes, which can be seen as an application of gender awareness. Contrastingly, she ends this musing by saying that one only needs to "know your own strength and can take them into play," which can be interpreted as again swinging back to gender blindness. This sentiment is echoed by junior woman Dorothy who dislikes how people consider women achieving something due to their gender rather than their own merit and Freya who credited her motivation and drive as factors in establishing her relationship with her supervisor. When asked if her senior woman treat her differently than junior man, Freya says,

"I think in the group, our relationship was more dynamic and faster than the relationship with my team members. But again, it is because of the sort of motivation and drive difference between the two of us."

Freya acknowledges the difference in her work relationship with her senior woman as compared to those of junior men, hinting gender awareness. The relationship is portrayed rather positively by the choice of words such as "dynamic" and "fast". However, she diverts the argument, saying "but again", and ends her argument by focusing on motivation and drive, aspects one can have regardless of gender. Freya's concluded lens and strategy, therefore, is gender blindness.

This oscillation that leans more into gender blindness or downplaying gender differences can be linked to the "lack of fit" concern that women have in the workplace, with how men rather than women are perceived to have the more valued agentic traits of leaders (Heilman & Eagly, 2008). To resolve this lack of fit or justify the "fit", junior women then prefer to speak of their roles in terms of gender blindness–downplaying their differences from men and instead highlighting their individual capabilities, i.e. motivation and drive, or focusing on gender similarities, i.e. jobs that can be "done by both males and females". This justification can be argued to contribute to women's sense of agency, confidence, and subsequently, performance (Martin & Phillips, 2017).

We also find a connection in the discussion of "fit" with how our women respondents bring up the organization's recruitment process. Daphne reveals the effort the organization puts in adjusting the wording in job postings to be gender-fair in order to attract more women, while Amanda highlights the importance of hiring the best-qualified candidate in the final hiring process. What Daphne mentions translates to gender awareness, as careful selection of wording reduces the perception of women's "lack of fit" with leadership positions (Horvath & Sczesny, 2015) while Amanda's statement affirms gender blindness as the final strategy.

The pendulum-swinging between gender awareness and gender blindness is also seen in junior women's expectations and perceptions of senior women. Sofia expresses the following:

> "You certainly need to have that female leader to have a high emotional intelligence and a high knowledge of themselves and not being forced from the inside to showcase that they are better than you are."

Further on, she reflects:

> "It's not being a woman or a man, but those traits that I just explained are mostly labeled for the female gender… Like it is not about the gender. It's about how you see the full person. How you accept that."

Sofia is aware that she describes feminine traits in her expectations of senior women, hence applying gender awareness. Then upon further reflection, she veers away from a gender

focus towards how "you see the full person," thus, gender blindness. This oscillation between awareness and blindness is further applied in her perception of senior women, sharing a meeting wherein a senior woman expressed the following:

> "I only see people and I have always treated myself as a person and I have never been treated as a woman. I have always expected people to treat me as a professional so they did treat me as a professional."

This gender blindness of a senior woman leads Sofia to perceive such senior women leaders as "trying to look professional," which can be linked to the dissociation of female leaders from fellow females (Derks, et al., 2011) in efforts to justify their fit and validate their career journey. Sofia expressed feelings of dissatisfaction from this manner of senior women, saying: "I didn't feel supported by that high-ranking leadership stating something like this." This can be seen as Sofia's displeasure of the senior woman's preference to highlight individual competencies and professional capacities over women-specific traits and experiences, which Sofia expects to be acknowledged instead.

Senior woman Emma swings between gender awareness and gender blindness in her understanding of how her junior women perceive her. In an instance wherein she had her subordinates visit her house, she shares:

> "I cooked dinner for them. I allowed them to meet my children because I think it's important to show your authentic self and your full self to and then reach out to also try to understand others on that in terms of is there a difference with let's say female and do I connect to their personal side? I'm trying to reflect, but I think most of the more junior female side I lead, they don't have children, so they at this point they do not, you know, necessarily relate to that aspect of of being a mom. I just wanna kind of prepare them that it's OK. You don't need to be afraid of both having children, and that's not removing your career opportunities."

Musing on her efforts to connect to her juniors, both men and women, she adds:

> "I think that this is not gender specific. I think it depends a lot on how people see that professional relationship versus personal."

By cooking dinner and allowing her juniors to meet her children, Emma reflects on how junior women may be able to relate to her despite them not being in similar life stages. Emma's application of gender awareness allows her to think of how junior women can see her as an example, stating: "You don't need to be afraid of both having children, and that's not removing your career opportunities." Stepping back to how she attempts to connect to all her subordinates at a personal level, she then swings to gender blindness, considering this as "not gender specific," rather rooted in the junior's openness to connect professional and personal relationships. This movement between gender awareness and gender blindness in Emma's understanding of how her juniors perceive her can also be seen as her attempts to justify her fit as leader, in how she can show up "authentically"–having the sensitivity towards gender differences but also being able to downplay these as necessary.

5. Discussion

In this section, we present the links between our empirical data and the theoretical foundation, weaving them together to answer our research question: *How do junior women and senior women supervisors understand women-to-women working relationships in terms of gender awareness or gender blindness?* In the previous section, we have shown how junior and senior women supervisors, through what they say and how they say it, understand their working relationships through gender awareness and gender blindness. We found one overarching theme and two sub-themes, and in the following, we elaborate on our key results from these themes, making further associations between our findings and the literature review.

Oscillation between ideologies - the pendulum of awareness and blindness

Studies have focused on advocating for either gender awareness or gender blindness, making a case for one or the other as a more productive strategy in approaching gender differences and positively influencing women's agentic behavior and confidence (Martin & Phillips, 2017). However, our findings uncover how junior and senior women **oscillate between ideologies and, hence, perform pendulum-swinging between gender awareness and gender blindness**. This reveals an "and" rather than the expected "either/or" paradigm, depending on the relationship context. We found that differing perspectives and expectations between junior and senior women (O'Neil et al. 2018) do not translate to opposing gender ideologies applied by each party, breaking our initial suspicion. Leveraging the lens of gender awareness and gender blindness enabled us to consider and highlight each party's perspective–junior women and senior women–and the pendulum-swinging between ideologies that both parties apply. This led to findings that were focused not on whether junior or senior women apply one specific gender ideology, but rather on the relational context wherein the women applied gender awareness or gender blindness. In our

findings, junior women categorized their relationship needs as either day-to-day relational, i.e. daily working harmony, and career-oriented, validating Parker & Kram's (1993) statements. However, we uncover that in addressing these needs, both junior and senior women can be seen swinging the pendulum of gender awareness and gender blindness. In doing so, junior women connect with senior women for both needs, instead of the previously found limiting dynamics wherein senior women are sought out for relational connections and support but not for career development (Parker & Kram, 1993).

In our analysis through the lens of gender awareness and gender blindness, our findings also reveal a more nuanced story beyond solidarity or Queen Bee behaviors, which has been the focus of existing research on women-to-women working relationships (O'Neil et al., 2018). Solidarity, while exhibited in how junior and senior women relate to each other and establish day-to-day working harmony, does not necessarily imply the dependence of junior women's career progression on senior women's solidarity behaviors. Although junior women experience gender identification or being seen as fellow women by their seniors (Mavin, 2006), junior women do not rely on this connection for their career progression, preferring to be acknowledged for their individual abilities.

On the other hand, we do not see Queen-Bee behaviors in terms of senior women being disinclined to support junior women in career progression (O'Neil et al., 2018). Our findings show that even when a senior woman dissociates from fellow women and considers herself one of the guys, hence, more masculine, she is still driven to help junior women's careers. Thus, we demonstrate how examining solely through a solidarity-Queen Bee dichotomy can be limiting in the understanding of women-to-women working relationships and enabling women's career advancement. We uncover other contributions–firstly, a perpetuation of gender stereotypes stemming from awareness and highlighting of gender differences which does not hinder but rather supports senior women's drive and motivation to enable junior women's careers. Further to this finding, we see how senior women enable junior women's careers through both embracing and downplaying gender differences in building mentorship relationships.

We contribute to the literature on gender ideologies with these key findings: Junior and senior women apply gender awareness to embrace women-specific experiences which proves helpful in connecting and establishing day-to-day harmonious working relations. Meanwhile, women apply gender blindness to highlight women's individual capabilities which justifies their fit in their current roles and enables career progression. Gender awareness is also apparent in how women highlight gender differences in ways that perpetuate gender stereotypes.

We discuss this oscillating application and further elaborate its impact according to the two sub-themes below.

5.1. Management and mentorship

5.1.1. Separation of supervisor and mentor

Our findings reveal a deeper understanding of the types of relationships between junior and senior women and their ways of navigating them. Junior and senior women describe and highlight two contexts of their working relationships: *management (supervision) and mentorship*. This contributes to previous research on how multiple relationships can benefit employees, as their needs can then be accommodated by different people with senior positions in the working relationship (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016).

Within supervision, junior and senior women expressed enjoyment of a collaborative, open, and transparent working relationship. This counters existing research wherein junior women feel unable to be vulnerable and raise concerns with their senior women (Hurst et al., 2017). Rather, we observed both sides of the supervisory relationship to have friendly and productive discussions. This includes sharing ideas and discussing without fear of judgment, which the women refer to as sparring. We perceive gender awareness in the communal traits and family role connections that junior women expect from their senior women (Eagly, 1997; Heilman, 2001). Likewise, we observe gender awareness in how a senior woman reflects on instances of feeling alone in a male-dominated context and the influence of this experience on how she connects with and supports the junior woman she

supervises. On the other hand, we see gender blindness applied in junior women's expectation that senior women engage in the junior's career development, whether towards a promotion or not. One of the ways in which senior women assist in junior's careers is through personal development dialogue or PDD, which is noted to be included in the supervisory meeting agenda, hence a formal aspect of the senior woman's implementation of talent management. We do not perceive a disconnect in the expectations junior and senior women have in the supervisory relationship, as uncovered in previous research (O'Neil et al., 2018). Rather, we see how junior women can feel confident and establish their agency in shaping their careers, with how they expect senior women's career development support whether juniors want to progress into leadership roles or otherwise.

Contrary to how mentorship is illustrated as a work relationship (Parker & Kram, 1993) and therefore within the bounds of supervision, our findings add to how the role of the mentor is enjoyed in its separation from the role of the supervisor. Specifically, our findings provide a new understanding of how mentorship is often an informal relationship with no formal performance evaluation linked to organizational goals (Gallacher, 1997:192).

This definition is driven by the perceived benefits of junior women seeking mentorship outside their supervisory relationships, such as having a safe space for confidential concerns and having their individual interests privileged over organizational goals. Since mentorship, as we uncovered, is largely outside of the formal working relationship, junior and senior women are more able and willing to share personal experiences that they have in common in the workplace. Contrary to previous research, we found both junior and senior women speaking satisfactorily about their mentoring relationships, expressing a sense of purpose and drive, rather than feeling overburdened as mentors or disconnected as mentees (Parker & Kram, 1993). Therefore, the connection and alliance between women are strengthened, rather than limited as previously posited by Parker & Kram (1993). Our findings contribute empirical evidence to Block & Tietjen-Smith's case for women mentoring women, that good women-to-women mentoring relationships involve sensitivity and understanding of mentees' needs, and that it is critical to women's future career success (2016).

Such quality of working relationships boosts the confidence of junior women in shaping their careers. We see this increased confidence in how junior women exhibit a strong sense of agency in searching for suitable mentors based on their aspired careers and, in turn, their ideal role models. For instance, junior women create and maintain a list of senior women to connect to and contact these senior women for advice when faced with concerns at work including major career decisions. Women express positive attitudes and outcomes from these networking efforts, countering previous research that questions the benefits of women-to-women networking (Perriton, 2006; Forret & Dougherty, 2004). Although reaching out and networking with senior women are not considered certain means for career progression, the important point we uncovered is that junior women consider it helpful and confidence-boosting in how they perceive their career development. Due to the junior women's drive and initiative to further their careers through networking and building mentor relationships, there is also less effort needed and thus less pressure on senior women to send "the elevator back down to pick other women up" (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016). It becomes sufficient for senior women to be present and accessible, and once the mentorship is established through the junior women's efforts, to contribute to the relationship with their relevant insights and experiences.

The case organization's mentoring platform enables access to building mentorship networks, which contributes empirical evidence to previous conclusions that the institutional culture is critical (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016). Apart from fostering an organizational climate where senior women are committed to helping junior women (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016), we found the significance of junior women's motivation and action in the mentoring relationship. Our critical finding, therefore, is how junior women take full ownership of the process. We uncovered a self-organized mentoring network, deeper than we initially expected and branching out under the surface similar to an ant-house. Senior women, despite already having leadership positions, continue to maintain or make reference to mentoring relations with more senior women, while also mentoring junior women. Junior women, despite not having formal supervisory and leadership roles, also act as mentors to women more junior than them. In this wide mentorship network, we see how gender awareness is applied when searching for mentors, seeing senior women as a career

benchmark and as role models due to the expected commonality of women-specific experiences that impact work, thus serving as a foundation for their relational connection. This finding validates the literature on the tendency to search for role models based on similarities (Allen & Collisson, 2020). Once in the mentoring relationship, junior and senior women apply gender blindness, preferring interactions that downplay gender differences and instead focus on junior women's individual capabilities and determination to shape their careers.

Our findings therefore show that senior women can be sought for both relational and career development contexts by applying different gender ideologies and are proven beneficial to women's confidence and agency in their careers. This is a development on Parker & Kram's (1993) research which suggests that women build multiple development relationships from different identity groups, which may lead to junior women seeking senior women for personal relational connections and senior men for career opportunities. Instead, we found that in women-to-women mentoring relationships, the application of gender awareness and gender blindness allows juniors to seek and enjoy both relational and career guidance advantages from their seniors.

This separation of the supervisory and mentor relationships can also be seen as a solution for strained relationships due to the gap between expectations in women-to-women supervisory relationships pointed out by Hurst et al. (2017). Since access and ability to choose mentors and build mentorship relationships outside the supervisory relationships allow women to gain different benefits from each relationship, it can lessen the strain of expectations from supervisory relationships. As junior women share positive experiences and outcomes from their mentoring relationships and liken their mentors to role models, our research also contributes to how such networking efforts as mentorship can be beneficial for women, contrary to previous findings that these are not as effective for women (Forret & Dougherty, 2004:433).

Further, women's ability and agency to shape and build their mentoring network outside of the supervisory relationships are seen to counter Queen-Bee tendencies of women to compete instead of help each other (O'Neil et al., 2018). Access to mentors and the ability

and independence to choose mentors contribute to how both senior and junior women facilitate the career development and growth of women more junior than them. Since Queen-Bee behavior may occur as a response to women being devalued in a male-dominated environment (Derks, et al., 2011), women's ability to self-organize and build their mentoring relationships allows them to seek and gain help and support from each other, instead of distancing themselves from fellow women.

5.1.2. Family role connections

We see gender awareness applied as junior and senior women relate to each other in their women-specific family role as mothers and its influence in daily work arrangements such as taking leave to care for a sick child. Having a senior women supervisor who understands the complexity of motherhood is therefore deemed positive by junior women as it lowers the tension between work and family obligations (Warren & Johnson, 1995; Greenhouse & Powell, 2003). Women also expressed the significance of seeing senior women nurture a family while pursuing a leadership career, as it helps them believe in themselves, increasing their confidence. This provides more context as to why women tend to choose a role model based on similarity (Allen & Collisson, 2020), in our findings of how junior and senior women's ability to relate to each other based on family roles impact the quality of working relationships. Looking through the perspective of senior women, we also observe how family role connections can be utilized in how seniors motivate junior women, which supports how supervisors can perform talent management and retention initiatives (Zhang & Stewart, 2017). Beyond consideration of one's family role and its impact on day-to-day work policies and women's confidence, it is also interesting to uncover how both senior and junior women can perceive one another through a mother-daughter lens. This way of family referencing is seen to cause possible confusion in supervisory relationships, as the 'motherly' type of relationship may place over-emphasis on such personal connections in working relationships, and therefore may not be healthy or desirable in a professional context (Parker & Kram, 1993)–aspects that are revealed by our findings in how senior and junior women hold strict boundaries to prevent such negative effects.

5.2. Navigating gendered norms and justification of fit

5.2.1. Perpetuation of gender stereotypes

Gender awareness and gender blindness as applied by junior and senior women illustrate how they navigate gendered norms at work. Albeit conscious and able to justify their intentions and methods, junior and senior women are seen to perpetuate and replicate gender stereotypes they themselves detest. We confirmed this in the follow-up interviews wherein we quoted what we deemed gender-stereotypical statements to our respondents, allowing the women to reflect without our provocation. The follow-up empirical results reveal no difference in the women's responses, substantiating how they adhere to their gender-stereotypical dispositions. However, our respondents were able to share more about their thinking process, justifying why they gave such answers, such as the need for a black-and-white method to enable coaching junior women and personal experiences that support such gender stereotyping. Despite this confirmation of their stand, we observed how the respondents felt uneasy with their justifications, which they likewise articulated, thus expressing their dislike or at the very least, discomfort with their replication of gendered norms in how they interact with fellow women.

This perpetuation of gender stereotypes is also imbued in how junior women apply gender awareness in their perceptions of senior women in daily relations and career conversations. Junior women expect senior women to act a certain way, e.g. expectations of empathy and a specific way of greeting fellow women "good morning", and penalize them with critical feedback when these expectations are not met. Junior women also expressed the perception that senior women tend to be emotionally supportive in daily relations but not necessarily supportive and can even hinder career progression, thereby resulting in junior women's bias and preference for male leaders over female leaders. These findings demonstrate instances when a junior woman perceives her senior woman as not friendly enough, and when a junior woman demands more than emotional support from the senior woman. These perceptions add to Eagly & Karau's (2002) statement on how senior women are challenged regardless of the behaviors they show.

Junior and senior women, therefore, are seen to perpetuate both forms of gender stereotypes–descriptive gender stereotypes, which assign how women and men *are like*, and prescriptive gender stereotypes, which assign how women and men *should be like* (Heilman, 2012:114). Both forms of stereotypes, as reaffirmed by the junior and senior women's behaviors, contribute to the perceived lack of fit of women in leadership roles (Heilman & Eagly, 2008) due to the privileging of masculine over feminine traits to succeed (Eagly, 1997) and the demands and expectations imposed on women to prove themselves and act according to perceived gendered standards.

Previous research has linked this perceived lack of fit to hindering women's careers (Heilman, 2012). Despite the perpetuation of stereotypes, we observe that senior women remain motivated to assist junior women with their career progression. In their navigation of stereotypes, we see how a senior woman can use gender stereotypes as a means of supporting a junior woman in her career by coaching the junior to exhibit more agentic traits and, in so doing, minimizing perceptions of lack of fit. We can perceive the senior woman's efforts to improve the junior woman's self-characterization towards agency and competence, which adds nuance to Hentschel et al.'s (2019) findings on how stereotypes affect women's perceptions and can lead to biases that can impede women's career progression. We also note how senior women remain motivated in supporting junior women's careers regardless of their strong or weak gender identification. This is contrary to Kaiser & Spalding's (2015) findings, wherein we see that although a senior woman may consider herself one of the guys–thus more masculine and weakly gender identified–she continues to be devoted to helping junior women's career progression. Therefore, our findings contradict the understanding that the perpetuation of stereotypes can only lead to hindering women's careers, rather we contribute a more nuanced picture. Although senior women may sometimes reinforce gender stereotypes, they remain committed to supporting the career advancement of junior women. We reflect on the limitations of these findings, aware that we can only perceive the *motivation and efforts* of senior women to assist junior women's careers despite perpetuating stereotypes, and not the outcomes or effects of these efforts on the junior women.

5.2.2. Portrayal of an ideal woman leader

In discussing their job and career fit, junior women prefer to downplay the significance of their gender, thus applying gender blindness. When asked whether gender has an impact on their career, we described in our findings that women's responses were instinctive, meaning their resounding "no" was blurted out within seconds. We challenged this through the repetition of such questions in different contexts and rephrasing throughout the interviews. Respondents were asked if being a woman influences their career achievement, if it is important to be a man or a woman in performing their roles, and if their senior women supervisors treat them differently than junior men. Their answers are a resounding no. This pendulum-swinging that leans more into gender blindness or downplaying gender differences can be seen as efforts of women to resolve the perception of lack of fit in the workplace since women are traditionally perceived to have more communal rather than agentic leadership traits (Heilman & Eagly, 2008). Women prefer to highlight their individual capabilities or their similarities to men in efforts to justify their fit in their work roles, especially in a leadership context, which is argued to contribute to women's sense of agency, confidence, and performance (Martin & Phillips, 2017).

In some instances, women were observed to apply gender awareness when perceived feminine traits are proven useful at work, thereby embracing gender differences that provide value in the woman's work role. This validates how through gender awareness, women can authentically draw on their female capabilities to progress in their careers (Martin & Phillips, 2017:29). Nonetheless, the majority of women respondents prefer not to make a distinction between men's and women's potential in leadership roles and work roles in general, with women pointing out that their male counterparts can perform equally well. The distinction, however, remains in the characteristics of women leaders that junior women wish to see.

The portrait of an ideal woman leader is split between someone who leans into feminine traits (Eagly & Carli, 2003), and someone similar to men, both portraits acknowledging gender differences, thus an application of gender awareness. Junior women expect their senior women to possess traits such as high emotional intelligence and humility–traits

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consistent with warmth and communal behavior expected of women (Heilman, 2012; Carli, 2001), or to be objective, strong, and firm–traits that are more agentic and aggressive, hence more masculine (Heilman, 2012; Carli, 2001). At first glance, there is acceptance of various portraits of ideal woman leaders to which all are held in esteem, whether these senior women are adhering to or deviating from traditional female gender conceptions. This application of gender awareness that highlights differing expectations, however, presents double standards and undue pressure when imposed on senior women who do not identify with the gendered leadership traits expected by junior women. This contributes to Eagly & Carli's (2003) research on how the double standard of heightened competence required of women creates unwarranted strain. From our findings on junior women's perceptions, senior women may feel pressure to invoke a combination of communal behavior with agentic behavior to meet varying expectations.

Also in our findings, however, senior women are seen to counter such expectations by applying gender blindness in their self-perception, preferring to be treated as individuals according to their professional capacities. In this way, a senior woman can be perceived not according to gender but as a full person fulfilling professional roles, thus releasing themselves from the burden of behaving in a certain way. Gender blindness, therefore, allows senior women to stay true and authentic to themselves. In addition, it was also expressed how a senior woman welcomes junior women to see her either in a professional (leader, senior) or personal (mother, i.e. family role) way, insinuating that junior women have the freedom to exercise either gender awareness or gender blindness depending on the context through which juniors can best relate. The pendulum swing between gender awareness and gender blindness allows senior women to justify their fit as leaders–in their ability to embrace and connect through gender differences while also being able to downplay these differences as necessary. By applying these gender ideologies to suit their motivations, we observe how women are able to have self-perceptions of leadership competence, contrary to the lower self-rating observed in existing research (Hentschel et al., 2019).

6. Conclusion

The goal of our qualitative research is to answer the research question: *How do junior women and senior women supervisors understand women-to-women working relationships in terms of gender awareness or gender blindness?* Guided by the interpretative tradition, our analysis of interviews and observations enabled us to have deeper insights into perceptions within these women-to-women supervisory relationships in the context of a male-dominated organization. This led us to our findings as discussed in detail in the previous sections.

In this section, we briefly summarize our key findings, discuss our theoretical and practical contributions, ending with our reflections on our research limitations and avenues for future research.

6.1. Key findings

Our findings contribute to the literature on women-to-women working relationships by, **firstly**, showcasing how gender awareness and gender blindness can be complementary instead of competing ideologies, and therefore should be embraced as a bundle; therefore, an "and" rather than the previously advocated "either/or" paradigm. The application of either ideology is beneficial in harnessing their respective positive effects, with careful consideration of the working relationship's context.

Secondly, we contribute to how mentoring outside the formal supervisory relationships can benefit women in various ways. It allows women to derive specific benefits from each relationship context, lessen the strain on supervisory relationships, and strengthen connections with fellow women. The ability to build their mentoring networks on their own terms and according to their own career needs and preferences contributes to junior women's confidence in shaping their individual paths to career progression.

Lastly, while research has focused on either solidarity or Queen Bee behaviors (O'Neil et al., 2018), we found that delving into how junior and senior women approach gender differences provides a more nuanced story. Solidarity, while exhibited, does not necessarily imply that junior women's career progression is dependent on senior women's solidarity behaviors. Although Queen-Bee behaviors are not apparent in terms of senior women being disinclined to support junior women in career progression, we see two things–senior women can dissociate themselves from fellow women and perpetuate gender stereotypes while still being motivated to support junior women's careers, and we see an enabling of women's careers through both embracing and downplaying gender differences in building mentorship relationships. Women's ability and agency to shape and build their mentoring network outside of the supervisory relationships were seen to counter Queen Bee tendencies, as it allows them to seek help and support from each other, instead of distancing themselves from fellow women. Thus, seeing only a solidarity-Queen Bee dichotomy can be limiting to efforts toward understanding women-to-women working relationships and enabling women's career advancement.

Therefore, our findings reveal how gender awareness and gender blindness co-exist in women-to-women supervisory relationships, and the ways these are both applied to affect different contexts of the working relationship. Looking through these gender ideologies provides a nuanced understanding of what occurs between junior and senior women, enabling the development of practical tools to support junior women towards leadership, hence, improving gender equality.

6.2. Theoretical contribution

Our qualitative case study adds to the literature on *gender awareness and gender blindness* as strategies that, when consciously applied, will help women progress in their careers. Existing literature is divided into two camps–one wherein gender awareness is perceived to be more beneficial for women, and the other that considers gender blindness to be more enabling of women's confidence and, hence, their career trajectories (Martin & Phillips, 2017). Our findings contribute to how it does not have to be only gender awareness OR

gender blindness. Rather, each ideology can be beneficial to women depending on the context of the supervisory relationship.

Our research also contributes to the literature on *mentorship and supervision*. We add to the conversation how mentorship is an informal relationship without pressures of performance evaluation, as opposed to supervision (Gallacher, 1997). Most importantly, we contribute to how junior women's ability to choose their mentors and create a network of women mentors to aspire towards in their careers, as well as to become mentors themselves, enhance their confidence in pursuing their individually and uniquely shaped career progression.

Continuing the 40 years of research on this expanding mentorship subject, we contribute by providing further empirical analysis and insights into women mentoring women in a male-dominated environment. Allen et al. (2008) pointed out how past mentoring research used only a single data source, typically from the mentees–in our study, we probed both junior and senior women's perspectives to gain more comprehensive insights into the relationship. As suggested by Haggard et al. (2011), we focused our study on a specific gender (women), considering the initiator of the mentoring relationship, their relative career stage (junior), and their relation in shaping the definition of mentorship. Considering previous research on the two camps that favors either supervisory mentorship or non-supervisory mentorship as more desirable (Haggard et al., 2011), we show how junior women's agency relate to their understanding and benefits gained from mentorship. Therefore, we demonstrate how mentorship can be defined as separate to supervisory relationships and beneficial in that regard–complementing Haggard et al.'s (2011) conclusion. We contribute the understanding of a self-organized mentoring network we liken to an ant-house, wherein senior women maintain mentoring relations with other senior women while mentoring junior women, and junior women seek mentors while also acting as mentors to more junior women, despite not having formal supervisory responsibilities. We highlight how gender awareness is helpful when seeking senior women mentors as a career benchmark and role model, and gender blindness within the mentoring relationship to focus on the junior women's individual career capabilities. We contribute how in women-to-women mentoring relationships, the application of gender awareness and gender blindness allows juniors to benefit from both the relational and career guidance advantages from their seniors, displacing the previously

found need to seek only relational connections with women and then career opportunities from men (Parker & Kram, 1993).

We provide additional contexts into how *family roles* are applied in women-to-women working relationships, considering how traditional gender expectations and differences lead to how work is considered optional, hence self-chosen, for women as compared to men, and how being active in one role results in a positive impact on another role, i.e. positive experience in work life can deflect from stressful family life (Van Steenbergen et al., 2007). Our findings reveal that women are likely to relate their roles as mothers and professionals, therefore insinuating that there are ways for these multiple roles to bring specific benefits for women. Junior women expect senior women to understand the complexities of balancing motherhood and career and appreciate how such a connection improves the quality of the day-to-day working relationship. Junior women expressed pride in treading the balance of work and life, while senior women expressed the need and motivation to support junior women in achieving success in both, referencing their own experiences. We also found how senior and junior women can perceive each other through a mother-daughter perspective, and their efforts to prevent the undesirable effects of over-emphasis on this connection by maintaining strict boundaries.

We contribute to the conversation of how women in male-dominated environments navigate the *perceived lack of fit* given the historical roles and traits of women that continue to pervade as stereotypes (Heilman, 2001). We show a more nuanced picture of how the perpetuation of stereotypes can occur between senior and junior women. Senior women can perpetuate gender stereotypes while actively elevating fellow women toward career progression regardless of weak gender identification, contrary to Kaiser & Spalding (2015), and exert efforts to improve the junior woman's self-characterization towards agency and competence, therefore minimizing the perception of lack of fit and providing an additional dimension to Hentschel et al.'s findings (2019). Our findings also demonstrate how junior and senior women lean towards gender blindness, preferring to focus on their individual capabilities and professional capacities to minimize the perceived lack of fit, and in doing so have confident self-perceptions of leadership capabilities–a development from Hentschel et al.'s findings (2019).

6.3. Practical implication

Firstly, by exploring the views of senior women and junior women who are motivated to shape their careers towards being senior women themselves, we share valuable insights of successful and motivated women in a male-dominated organization. This can fuel aspiration and inspiration in women who may want to pursue careers in such organizations. Research has supported the importance of role models especially for women in male-dominated environments (Jandeska & Kraimer, 2005), thus, our findings contribute to this important aspect that can inspire more women towards careers in male-dominated contexts and towards leadership.

Secondly, we contribute to the discussion on the value for junior women and senior women to practice self-reflexivity. Reflexivity in leadership calls for awareness and scrutiny of one's assumptions in a way that critically challenges these and considers new ways of thinking and is considered beneficial for leaders (Alvesson et al., 2017:14-15). We perceive our respondents to be highly reflexive women in their ability to articulate broader gender equality conditions and the experience of women at work. Despite this, we found the surprise of the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and biases. The replication of these gendered norms, despite good intentions, may not produce beneficial effects on junior women as they navigate their careers in male-dominated environments. These unhelpful effects serve as strong motivations for further self-reflection of both junior and senior women. We also advocate for calling out language and behaviors that perpetuate gender stereotypes and biases. As illustrated in our analysis, we found instances of categorizing women into stereotypical boxes that can be argued to contribute to harmful, traditional biases that may limit women. We find it important for women to speak against such generalizing categorizations, instead of being unwitting perpetrators of gender-biased behaviors.

Thirdly, we add to the practical value of mentorship outside of supervision. Insights from our respondents show how valuable it is for organizations to enable mentor networks, specifically in ways wherein mentees have the onus to build their own mentor relationships. This allows women to find and select role models, feel confident in the way they have agency to shape their career, and at the same time, volunteer to be mentors themselves. We have

expressed how this mentorship setup and process empowers women and enhances their confidence.

Lastly, we demonstrate the significance of women's ability to balance work and life in both their career advancement and personal fulfillment. Women have expressed the need to be understood and supported as working mothers, and although senior women are inclined to be supportive of their juniors in this manner, senior women's capacity to do so may be limited or enhanced by the organization's relevant policies. We emphasize the importance, therefore, for organizations to continue to ensure and possibly enhance policies that allow working mothers to thrive in their careers, e.g. flexible working hours, relevant leaves, and other forms of structural support.

6.4. Research limitation and further research

In this section, we reflect on the limitations of our research while connecting these to possible opportunities for future research.

First, we duly note the complexities and sensitivities of the subject of gender-related concerns and perceive how gender topics such as ours would benefit from more robust empirical data, in the number of interview respondents and observation opportunities, and role type. While we believe we uncovered valuable insights from our data within the limitations of our time frame, we also acknowledge that a greater number of interview respondents–with possibly an equal sample size of junior women and senior women supervisors–will greatly benefit the analysis. We also perceive the research benefits of more observation opportunities, especially physical ones, from longer meetings to being able to spend time following junior and senior women in their work environment. We consider this full ethnographic approach to our research topic as a possibility for future research. Likewise, we acknowledge how our respondents skew towards women in HR roles, thus they are in female-typed roles within a male-dominated organization. Although this has allowed for valuable insights, future research may want to focus on women in male-typed roles or a more equal distribution of types of roles within a male-dominated environment.

Secondly, although our findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how women in supervisory relationships relate in terms of family roles, we are likewise limited by our gathered data and time frame. For future research, empirical data collection could have had a sharper focus on personal circumstances, specifically finding out if the respondents are married, married with children, single, or otherwise. Although such personal contexts were revealed by our respondents in the interviews, thus allowing us valuable insights, future research may choose to focus on targeting respondents based on these personal circumstances. As it was, it is insufficient for us to conclude if there is indeed confusion from family referencing in professional life (Warren & Johnson, 1995), and if so, if this leads to hindering effects on junior women's career progression. Delving into cases wherein women respondents convey a strong identification with family roles and project them into women-to-women working relationships are open paths for future research.

Thirdly, cultural differences in terms of the broader social culture are themes we chose not to focus on in this study, especially with how the strong corporate culture was seen to have a larger impact on the perception of our respondents. However, we find it interesting how the intersectionality of gender, national culture, and ethnicity can influence the understanding within women-to-women supervisory relationships, and how this shapes junior women's careers. We believe this would be a valuable topic for future research, especially with a case organization that has global teams and effectively performs global collaboration.

Lastly, when asked to describe their roles, a few of our junior women respondents reflected on how they were not considered leaders despite having what they perceive as leadership roles because they are not supervising people. We noted these as curious statements, however, considered this beyond the scope of our study. We believe it may be useful for future research to delve into how junior women self-identify as leaders in the context of how the organization defines leadership, and how this gap impacts the women's careers, hence, the path towards gender equality.

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Appendix

The following table summarizes our 15 respondents, including their anonymized names and departments and categorization as junior or senior women.

Name	Department	Category
Maya	Logistics	Junior
Olivia	HR	Junior
Sofia	HR	Junior
Lily	HR	Junior
Freya	HR	Junior
Daphne	HR	Junior
Dorothy	HR	Junior
Amanda	HR	Junior
Sarah	HR	Junior
Ingrid	HR	Senior
Cecilia	IT	Senior
Jennifer	Logistics	Senior
Bridgette	HR	Senior
Emma	Sales & Support	Senior
Christine	Communication	Senior