

Women in Leadership Roles in Japanese Universities: Eliciting Intersectional Identities

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Abstract

This article presents interim findings from a collaborative research project into leadership roles in Japanese universities. Our focal research concept is *intersectional identity*. We synthesize from established models of intersectional identity as a contribution to leadership research and practice in Japanese universities.

Our primary research method is semi-structured interviews, the design of which we are currently piloting. We focus initially on women because one premise for our research is the observation that women who aspire to leadership roles in Japanese universities are frequently overlooked.

We argue that this apparently institutionalized propensity in current employment policies and practices generates a continuing series of missed opportunities for universities in Japan to improve their competitive performance and their respective reputations as equitable and ethical employers.

Keywords: intersectional identity; women; leadership role; university; Japan

I Introduction

The 2022 *Global Gender Gap Report* published by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland, sees Japan ranked at 116th out of the 146 countries surveyed (WEF, 2022). In the top 101 ‘world universities’ as ranked by the *Times Higher Education* newspaper, Switzerland (population: 8,654,622) has four, while Japan (population: 126,476,461) has one (THE, 2023). In the *Financial Times* ranking of business schools worldwide, Switzerland has three schools ranked in the top 100, while Japan has none (FT, 2022b).

The Japanese Government emphasizes the importance of closing gender gap in various sectors, including higher education. According to the Survey of Research and Development conducted by Japan's Statistics Bureau of Japan (2022), women comprise 17.8% of university professors and researchers in Japan, and while fewer of them are offered the opportunity to take on leadership roles, we frequently find these women leaders in women's universities: e. g., President Shinohara at Japan Women's University, President Takeyasu at Kyoto Women's University.

In order to address an apparent lack of opportunities for women to gain access to and act in leadership roles in Japanese universities, The University of Tokyo recently announced a plan of action to hire new women associate professors and professors, with the goal of increasing the proportion of women faculty members, including lecturers and professors, to 25% or more by fiscal year 2027 (Japan Times, 2022).

The research presented in this article explores the extent to which the concept of *intersectional identity* might help explain why there appear to be fewer opportunities for women than for men to play leadership roles in Japanese universities¹. By implication, it seeks to explore the extent to which current policies and practices to promote individuals to leadership roles and responsibilities at universities in Japan appear, by international comparison, un-equitable and gender-biased. In terms of creating opportunities for improving productivity and impact along with other vital measures of organizational performance, we consider that systematically denying women access to leadership roles in Japanese universities represents a repeatedly missed opportunity. We examine the extent to which the concept of intersectional identity might help explain the repeat occurrence of this phenomenon and, thereby, of the repeat of missed opportunities for Japanese universities to – potentially – improve their competitive performance in both domestic and international markets for talented instructors, administrators, researchers and students.

For, as stated in the title chosen for this article, the operational focus for our research is on leadership roles and not on leadership positions. The concept of leadership role derives from theatre and becomes manifest as social actors respond to the expressed and / or inferred expectations of other social actors. Thus, the professional expectations of actors collectively influence each individual actor's choices of behaviour, of role interpretation and, thus, of individual (team member / leader) and collective (team) performance (Jackson, 2022a). Thus, we argue that women in Japanese universities can be encouraged and empowered to act in leadership roles.

Visualizing and promoting women to leadership roles in Japanese universities does not, therefore, assume a restructuring of existing management hierarchies in Japanese universities—a process that might appear currently unimaginable and, even, undesirable to many readers of this article. For, we accept that universities in Japan as elsewhere in the world tend to be institutional and thus hierarchical and, by structure and nature, frequently demonstrate and maintain an arguably embedded male bias. We also posit that existing structures of management and leadership in Japanese universities and in organizations and institutions generally in Japan can appear, by international comparison, sclerotic (by nature) and (ethically) arguably unfair (Jackson, 2020).

Against this background, the research that we illustrate and explain in this article is designed to seek answers to the following questions:

1. What is 'intersectional identity'?
2. To what extent might reference to intersectional identity help explain why there appear to be fewer opportunities for women than for men to play leadership roles in Japanese universities?
3. To what extent might reference to intersectional identity inform policies and practices that are designed to create equitable and gender-neutral processes of assigning individuals to leadership roles in Japanese universities?

II Literature Review

According to Brown (2015), people conceptualize individual 'identities' in order to represent a subjective assessment of 'who they were, are and desire to become'. Brown claims that reference to 'identity' offers a powerful analytical tool towards 'understanding and explaining almost everything that happens in and around organizations' (2015: 22).

The following section of this Literature Review illustrates our attempts to develop a cross-disciplinary context for our research into the concept of intersectional identity. We begin by defining and exemplifying assumptions and observations in relation to an individual person's various senses and expressions of identity. We offer a detailed explanation of intersectional identity generally and specific to the research and real-world contexts we describe as 'universities in Japan'. We then illustrate and explain how we have been using the concept of intersectional identity towards designing and piloting our research.

Consequently, in this Literature Review we specifically address the first of our research

questions; namely: what is 'intersectional identity'? We then locate our research in the context of current international research into intersectional identities linked to research into organizational leadership, offering some examples from research in Japanese universities. We then illustrate how this review of literature has influenced our research design; specifically, the design of a semi-structured interview schedule that should elicit responses from women who are currently acting in or aspiring to leadership roles in Japanese universities.

1 Intersectional identity

The key concept driving our research is 'intersectional identity' – a concept that, as we subsequently explain, has origins in the academic disciplines of social science (psychology, anthropology, sociology) and humanities: e.g., philosophy, education, law and, as highlighted in the Introduction section to this article, ethics.

The concept of 'intersectionality' in social scientific research was first coined by Crenshaw (1989). She devised the concept while designing a framework to explore differences in the individual experiences made by women of colour in the United States of America (USA) as they aspired and strove towards improving their senses of social identity and perceptions of individual career opportunity in the USA. Crenshaw and her subsequent fellow researchers sought to render explicit the multiple dimensions of individual identity of these women and, more generally, how these various dimensions of an individual's intersectionality identity might act as barriers and / or facilitators to the development of an individual's social, political and career ambition.

Although the initial focus of empirical research into intersectionality was on the experiences of black women in the USA, Warner and Shield (2013) propose that the concept can be applied to elicit and explore the social and intersectional identities of all people in society, and not only those perceiving or experiencing the extremes of social and political privilege or oppression.

Consequently, and with the expansion of an 'intersectional identity model' research has shifted to various topics, including race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and other interacting, socially constructed concepts and systems (Mitchell and Sawyer, 2014). An illustration of such a model appears in this article as **Figure 1** (below).

In general, intersectionality, just as its metaphor as *crossroad*, reminds us not to conceive of an individual's multiple identities separately, but rather to imagine a full picture of their mutual constitution and, through the medium of each social actor's individual experience and

expectation in society (i. e., in *any* society, including Japan) and through the course of an individual's life generally and—specific to our research—through the course of an individual's experienced and / or aspired to professional career.

2 Gender as key variable in intersectionality research

In the course of each individual's life experience, and, thus, universally in contexts for social scientific research, gender can be regarded as a core element or dimension of each person's intersectional identity. Indeed, it commonly appears as one of the more reliable and valid independent variables (IVs) in social scientific (including business and management) research generally.

Gender is both an everyday social experience and it is *personal*. To illustrate, each individual's gender is commonly elicited each time we fill out an official form or a marketing survey: e. g., answering in English 'male' or 'female'. Occasionally, we are allowed to withhold this expression of personal identity in official forms and research survey schedules that offer respondents a 'prefer not to say' option.

Against this background of our 'real life' social experience and expectation, it is universally common in contexts for social scientific research to see *gender* appearing as an important component of intersectionality research. Through a review of literature, we can see 'gender' as a key variable appear as a socio-demographic category comprised of 'woman' and 'man'; or, biologically, of 'female' and 'male'. We can observe that gender is typically presented in the form 'gender and' in the titles of intersectionality studies, as in 'gender and resilience', 'gender and health', and 'gender and leadership'. And when a specific gender identity is examined, it is presented in the form 'women or men in,' such as 'women in academia' or 'women in university leadership'. By adopting an intersectionality research approach, we are able to explore how the gender experiences of individuals are shaped by their other social identities, and how their other identities shape their gender identity. Additionally, as presented in the model developed by Jones and McEwen (2000) in **Figure 1**, context is another key element because individuals may experience intersectionality differently depending on the context in which they live.

Parent et al (2013) reviewed gender-related intersectionality studies published in the Journal *Sex Roles* and concluded that there are two major approaches to analysing intersectionality, which are also reflected largely in other academic journals, such as *Gender in Management*, *European Journal of Women's Studies*. And in the recent publication looking at inter-

secting identities of women leaders in higher education: *Voices from women leaders on success in higher education: pipelines, pathways, and promotion*.

The first approach, typically reflected in quantitative studies, is to use identities as additive or multiplicative predictors to explain their relationship with other variables. For example, determining the influence of race and gender on attitudes toward transgender people (Norton and Herek, 2012).

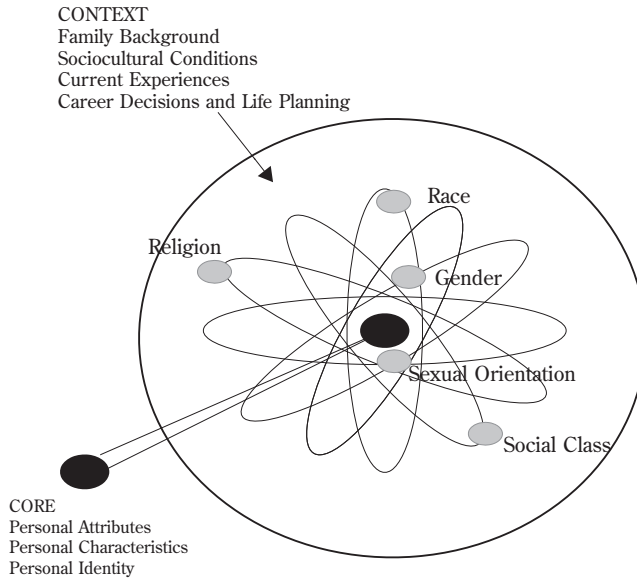
The second approach, typically reflected in qualitative studies, aims to obtain a comprehensive picture of intersectionality by utilizing the phenomenological experience of the specific group. For example, Shaw's (2022) research explores how women leaders in higher education perceive their identities and how this affects their career decision making based on their lived experiences. Owing to the challenges associated with achieving a large sample size in quantitative studies, the second approach is more frequently used to investigate the intersecting identities of a specific group of research participants. The common recommendation of intersectionality research is to adopt a within-group perspective that attends to the phenomenological experiences of the population of focus throughout the research process. As pointed out by Warner and Shields (2013), no approach to intersectionality can account for all manifestations of all identities present in all research participants.

Developing a (geographically-speaking) converse perspective, intersectionality also appears as a powerful analytical framework when assessing the extent to which women from Japan might be marginalized and (commonly) stereotyped because of their gender and their migrant status in European countries such as the UK (Hwang and Beauregard, 2022).

Intersectionality appears as a powerful analytical tool also during the research process itself. To illustrate, Ortvals and Rincker (2009) compare the experiences of researchers engaged in field work outside of their home countries and / or away from their home universities. To illustrate, one observation has been that 'non-native' researchers might be challenged to gather reliable data when conducting field work interviews because of respondent perceptions – and mis-conceptions – of the researcher's gender, marital status, physical appearance, religion, and age.

3 Visualising intersectional identity

The conceptual model depicted in **Figure 1** developed was developed by Jones and McEwen (2000) as they sought to conceptualize and give structure to data they elicited among a diverse group of undergraduate women student at universities in the USA. In their

Figure 1. A model illustrating intersectional dimensions of individual identity

Source: Jones and McEwen (2000)

research and towards the design and development of their model, Jones and McEwen refer to ‘multiple identities’; other researchers refer to ‘multi-layered identities’. Whatever the specific title attached to the concept and thus the model, researchers of intersectionality tend to agree when observing and acknowledging how each individual person expresses different dimensions of their identity in response to a variety of simultaneously ‘intersecting’ social and self-generated expectations and other contextual influences: concepts and expressions of (individual) *identity* and *intersectional identities* appear thus, from a research perspective, as dynamic processes that might be observed, inferred and /or (as in our research) *elicited*.

Models of intersectionality such as that developed by Jones and McEwen have been applied and tested in the majority of studies on multiple dimensions of university student identity, such as lesbian students and black male students in the United States (Abes and Jones, 2004; Howe, 2023).

As argued by Jones and McEwen (2000), culture and social context may influence and shape the identity development of an individual. Given that our research context is described by reference to women in leadership roles in Japanese universities’ we have decided to develop and test an adaptation of the Jones and McEwen (2000) model: this adaptation appears later in this article as **Figure 3**.

Before testing this model with our potential research participants – women who are acting in or aspiring to leadership roles in Japanese universities – we attempt to comprehend and define each identity element to determine, based on our literature review, if the identity elements presented in the model are applicable to our research context. As stated earlier, our research focus is on *gender* as a key element or dimension of intersectional identity.

III Researching gender and intersectional identities

As illustrated in **Figure 1**, *gender* appears as a core dimension of each individual's 'personal identity' and thus of each individual's career experience and aspiration. Olsen, a social psychologist, posits that:

- Personal identity deals with philosophical questions that arise about ourselves by virtue of our being people (or, as lawyers and philosophers like to say, *persons*). This contrasts with questions about ourselves that arise by virtue of our being living things, conscious beings, material objects, or the like (Olsen, 2022: 3).

Olson's reference to each 'person' being a 'living thing' can lead to considering each individual's conceptualization and expression of 'social identity', which Giddens, a sociologist, defines as:

- The distinctive attitudes and behaviours expressing a person's character or the character of a group which relate to who they are and what is meaningful to them. Some of the main sources of social identity include gender, sexual orientation, nationality or ethnicity, education and social class (Giddens, 2006: 164).

This definition of 'social identity' assumes that each individual in society experiences processes of 'socialization', defined by Giddens as:

- A process whereby the helpless infant gradually becomes self-aware, knowledgeable person, skilled in the ways of the culture into which he or she was born (2006 : 163)

In Japan as in other societies worldwide, contexts for each individual person's formative experiences of 'socialization' continues throughout life: for example, from pre-school family life, through formal school education, through social interactions with members of various peer groups, and through experiences of higher and / or vocational education and subsequently through experiences of formal and informal induction into employment. We posit that each consecutive and *interconnected* context for individual socialization / induction

serves to form and develop a series of interconnected identities and thereby influence and shape each social actor's experiences and aspirations of an individual career (Jackson, 2021; Jackson and Kasia, 2022; Jackson and Suzuki, 2022).

Transformational experiences implied in the definition of *social identity* (above) include a sense of vulnerability and of insecurity that, we argue, can continue throughout life and career experiences of women in society (Crenshaw, 1991; Cole, 2009) and thus as they develop and negotiate individual a variety of intersectional identities, including each individual's expressions and expectations of their own and others' personal, social and professional identities²⁾.

Combining and thereby triangulating now the philosophical, psychological and sociological research perspectives we have developed thus far in this Literature Review, we in our role as social scientific researchers assume that expressions of each individual's current personal identities have been influenced by experiences during the formative years of their 'growing up' in society generally and, more immediately, in a family and / or in some other institutionalised form of 'group' such as schools, universities, social circles and fellow employees at the workplace: i. e., contexts for experience of life and within which we each seek to become a (more) 'self-aware, knowledgeable person'.

Consequently, and as we explain subsequently in this article, our research is designed to *elicit* our respondents' individual sense (i. e., *self-awareness* and *knowledge*) of intersectional identity relevant to their current and aspired to future sense of personal, social and professional identities at work and in Japanese society generally.

Specifically, we seek to elicit their individual perceptions, experiences and expectations of intersectional identities at their respective places of work and thus in contexts where they might perceive, receive or create opportunities to enact and express a leadership role.

1 Researching gender and identities in Japan

There are established streams of research published in English, internationally and in Japan, that intersect with and thus are of direct relevance to the research theme developed in this article.

Focusing specifically on the identities of women in Japan, there is social women and their role(s) in institutions and in other social domains such as 'family', the corporation and Japanese society more broadly (cf. Ueno, 2008). Ueno draws on the influential work of developmental psychologist Erik Erikson of 'self-identity' to illustrate how through experiences of

socialisation in Japan. Ueno notes how Japanese women – *differently* than Japanese men – can be commonly observed (and socially expected by men, perhaps) to experience transitions from developmental life stages of ‘adolescence’ to ‘adulthood’ in respect of their various identities. In her ethnographic research as an intern in a Japanese corporation, Kurihara (2006), illustrates how her affected and (for her own research purposes) deliberately provocative ‘childlike’ behaviours served as a defence against what she perceived and then methodically observed as the derogatory attitudes and predatory intentions of other employees: i. e., of both the men and the women with whom she was working and interacting.

Japanese-born sociologists build upon their research positions overseas to develop an emic (i. e., ‘insider’ – overseas – looking in’) perspective to observe and record tensions between gender and the expression of professional identities in Japan. To illustrate, Sugimoto (2021) cites the case of a woman doctor in Japan who appears respected professionally by in society but who senses and, occasionally, experiences as less socially regarded when other people in her nearest social groups discover her ethnic Korean origin.

Accordingly, there is a long-standing stream of research into various and distinctive ‘crises of identity’ among both women and men, including concern for the personal, social, psychological and educational development of members of Japan’s younger generations (Jackson et al, 2023).

Another stream of research adopts an etic (i. e., ‘outsider looking in’) perspective that links gender to nationality, as in Kim et al’s *The Politics of International Marriage in Japan* (2021). The observations discussed here can be seen to intersect with the experiences of non-Japanese women working in universities in Japan: e. g., as instructors in English Language Teaching (ELT) sector (Whitsed and Volet, 2013; Hawley Nagatomo et al, 2020). Applying a similarly qualitative-data-oriented research methodology, the aforementioned Hwang and Beaugard (2022) study develops a markedly intersectional research perspective in their elicitation of the experiences of women migrants from East Asia working in the United Kingdom.

Even when ignoring or, from a research perspective, removing the ‘problems’ of nationality and thus of legal status influencing individual choices of career in Japan, there is evidence of both Japanese and non-Japanese women being denied opportunities for expressing ‘voice’ and for individual career advancement at Japanese universities as employees in the ELT sector, variously considered ‘vital’ to the much-trumpeted ‘internationalisation’ of Japanese universities. Many women actors – and the majority of employees in this sector in Japan

are women – admit to feeling systematically ‘marginalized’ in strategic decision-making processes with direct impact on policies of diversity, inclusion and equal opportunity at their place of employment (Nagashima and Lawrence, 2022).

Studies on women working in Japan’s ELT sector also discuss other streams that link gender to language (native language and foreign language proficiency), gender to ethnicity, and gender to opportunities at work to demonstrate leadership. With an initial focus on gender identity, we observe from the experiences of many women that the intersection of gender identity with other identities might influence their career distinctively, in terms of career barriers and leadership opportunities (Liu, 2022).

Overall, and in direct relevance to the research we report on in this article, women who aspire to leadership roles in Japan appear to be frequently overlooked, and even when their qualifications are equivalent to or even surpass those of the men with whom they might compete for such roles. Overall, it appears, as researchers, credible and valid as researchers to assume and, as researchers, *test* the assumption that women who aspire to leadership roles in Japanese universities face social, cultural and institutional barriers.

2 Gender and social role: *leadership*

In contexts for sociological research, Giddens and Sutton define ‘gender’ as:

- Social expressions about behaviour regarded as appropriate for the members of each sex, conventionally as masculine and feminine (2013: 1058).

Social Role Theory attempts to describe, explain and – important to the future-orientation of our discussion – *predict* how each individual (‘social actor’) expresses a variety of social and cultural identities by expressing or *en-acting* multiple (intersectional) identities when performing (playing, acting) multiple roles: e. g., as a boss, an employee, a parent, a friend, a project team leader, a project team member, and so on. Thus, in performance terms, we can describe leadership as an opportunity to improve organizational performance (Jackson, 2022).

In contexts for international business and management practice and research there are many definitions available of the English language term ‘leadership’, each of which (when we examine closely) displays something of its military origin – a bias that might suggest a predominantly male-oriented conceptual origin. For now, we can draw on research published (2015) by McKinsey, a global business consultancy who define *leadership* as:

- A set of behaviors used to help people align their collective direction, to execute stra-

tegic plans, and to continually renew an organization.

We should note the emphasis given in this definition to demonstrable (and thereby assessable) and observable (and thereby imitable, learnable) *behaviours*. With its reference to ‘people’, we should also note that the definition is gender neutral. We should note the emphasis on purpose and, by extension, on performance. According to experts at McKinsey & Company, the strategic purpose of business leadership is to continually *renew*. When enacted in the context of organizations, we can describe leadership as a *role*. There is research evidence to support this conceptual and, as we illustrate subsequently, practical emphasis of performance opportunity³⁾.

3 Women, leadership and organizational performance

Our invocation above of organizational leadership as a *role* connects with an influential definition of ‘leadership’ posited and promoted by John Kotter, an influential management and leadership scholar and consultant, argues with considerable vigour the conceptual and practical potential for performance by distinguishing clearly between processes of ‘management’ and *leadership*. For Kotter, managers in organizations who can demonstrate leadership offers greater potential for improving organizational performance and / or, as highlighted in the McKinsey definition of ‘leadership’ (above) *renewing* organizational health and effectiveness.

Specifically, Kotter emphasizes how: “Leadership is about vision, about people buying in, about empowerment and, most of all, about *producing useful change*” (2013: 2 – *our emphasis*). Correspondingly, and when enacted in the context of Japanese universities, we can describe the appointment of women to leadership roles – or, less formally, perhaps, encouraging women to *aspire to* such roles – as an opportunity to renew Japanese universities today. We can posit that this opportunity is one that appears to commonly *missed* in contexts for university and higher education management and administration in universities in Japan.

For, as stated in our Introduction, the evidently frequent and (possibly) systematic exclusion of women as social actors for leadership roles appears widespread managerial practice across universities in Japan. And as we further state in our Introduction, one consequence of this bias in Japanese universities in Japan might be discerned in the relatively unconvincing competitive performance of many Japanese universities in the global and domestic rankings. Overcoming such systematic managerial ‘blind spots’ in university and higher education management in Japan and (arguably) at universities elsewhere in the world suggest fur-

thermore a distinct lack of leadership in current management practices.

As highlighted in our Introduction, the concept of ‘social role’ derives from theatre and becomes manifest as social actors respond to the expressed and / or inferred *expectations* of other social actors (Giddens 2006). Thus, the professional expectations of actors collectively influence each individual actor’s choices of behaviour, of role interpretation and, thus, of individual (team member / leader) and collective (team) *performance*.

Professional actors are routinely tasked to rehearse and perform a variety of roles, as are employees of organizations and universities that form contexts for individual employment and professional development. Among the roles that individual employees might be asked to perform – and to which they might or might not harbour personal aspiration towards performing – include *leadership*.

Correspondingly, the predictive power of social role theory can inform the styles of communication and other behaviours that actors seeking to play leadership roles might choose to demonstrate in specific task / project environments and with particular individuals. To illustrate: individuals appointed to positions entitled ‘project team leader’ might ask questions such as:

- Which team members can I / we expect to perform most effectively in a task-specific role when awarded the responsibility that comes with working unsupervised: e. g., the ‘remote working’ experiences that many of us have lived and worked through during the Covid-19 pandemic?

On this basis, we can reiterate our observation that fewer opportunities appear to arise for women to play leadership roles than for men in Japanese universities. Assuming this observation is reliable and based in in measures of veracity, to what extent might this apparent lack of opportunity for women to ‘act as leaders’ in Japanese universities offer a part explanation of why Japanese and business schools continue to underperform by current global and international comparisons?

4 Visualizing women in leadership roles: *the audition*

Echoing Kotter (2013) and Jackson (2019, 2020, 2022a), acting effectively in roles of management requires individuals to demonstrate generic sets of skills, such as planning, organizing and controlling: i. e., the types of skillsets commonly formulated in the learning objectives of programmes and modules of MBA education worldwide.

Managers who aspire to leadership roles are expected to demonstrate – in addition to ge-

neric skills – individual *competencies* that, according to specific organizational and strategic contexts, include: cross-cultural and inter-generational communication; vision; empathy; passion for the work or project in hand; professional integrity; personal courage (Northouse, 2021; Jackson, 2020).

With this distinction in mind, we can begin to appreciate leadership as both a role and as an opportunity to improve organizational performance, including in meso-level contexts for management and leadership such as project teams. We can further develop our theatrical interpretation of leadership as a role by visualizing a group of actors or, as they might be described in the times of William Shakespeare in England, a ‘band of players’.

We can then imagine a woman appearing at a theatre in London to audition for a role in a play that is in the process of being rehearsed. The director of the play is experimenting by trying different actors for different roles. As performance measures, the director is seeking to remain true to playwright’s original script and to prepare for maximum positive impact on future theatre audiences. The playwright (Shakespeare) is in attendance at the rehearsals, amending or rewriting parts of the manuscript according to the director’s – and the theatre owner’s – demands⁴.

We might then hesitate, and recall that in Shakespeare’s time women in England were banned by law from acting in public theatres: such behaviour was considered ‘lewd’ and thus punishable by Royal consent.

Nonetheless, we can continue to imagine a woman with the courage and passion to act in a play arriving for an audition at a theatre where no members of the public of present; only those associated with the play being prepared and rehearsed.

The woman ascends to the stage and begins her performance, her audition. Those judging the quality of her performance (all men) watch and ask themselves questions and initiate critical deliberations such as:

- A woman acting publicly in a role in one of our plays? Is this the future of commercial theatre in England, a precarious enough business at the best of times! [*Vision*].
- The part she is auditioning for (Ophelia, in Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet*) would be a woman in reality. Half the members of our audiences are women. Would casting a woman in the role of Ophelia create a more powerful impact on the audience? Would they identify and empathize with Ophelia’s performance on stage more powerfully? And, in the passion generated by the play, would the audience even notice the part was being played by a woman? (*Buying in*)

- If we accept her for Ophelia, and she impresses our audience in that role, we could play her our next play and in another powerful role : Cordelia, in Master Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Would rehearsing our own roles in that play with a woman playing the role of Cordelia serve to re-invigorate our own individual and collective performances? [*Renewal*]

In Japan today, it is established professional practice for women to play lead roles in Shakespearean dramas: indeed, playing both roles that depict key events in the lives of both men and women, on stage and in the imaginations – and re-imaginings – of audiences, and players (Motoyama et al, 2021).

In London today, the world-renowned *Royal Academy of Dramatic Art* (RADA) offers programmes in leadership development: i. e., training business managers, politicians and diplomats to adopt and play with confidence roles of leadership. Correspondingly, in contexts for business education and leadership development, case studies can serve as storylines comparable to the plots of film and theatre productions⁹.

5 Women in leadership roles: performance

Visualizing leadership as a dramatic role and thus an opportunity for individuals to perform collectively with the potential to generate commercial impact is now established as a theme or, more pragmatically, as a potential 'solution' to an organization's performance 'problem' among leading global business consultancies. To illustrate, McKinsey (2015) identifies the following behaviours with regard to 'what really matters' to organizations with opportunities to promote employees to roles of leadership.

- Being supportive
- Operating with a strong results orientation
- Seeking different perspectives
- Solving problems effectively

As Jackson (2022) argues, the above-listed behaviours should be conceptualized beyond 'skills' expected of managers: e. g., such as the generic skills required by actors such as the 'rote learning of lines', co-ordinated physical movement, and voice control. Rather they represent individual 'competencies' in that they highlight opportunities for managers to (renew) and re-apply their skills in unfolding and perhaps unfamiliar contexts, as highlighted in the above-mentioned McKinsey (2015) article.

As Jackson (2023) further argues, the sum and distinct interaction of and between dimen-

sions of the intersectional identities of individual employees in an organisation should assure that, when given opportunity, individuals who enact leadership roles are likely to express themselves differently: i. e., each ‘Macbeth’ or Ophelia will bring distinct behaviours and interpretations to their role, thereby promoting a diversity of performance and (potentially) of performance impact on audiences.

Furthermore, and as we stated in our Introduction to the article, organizations that appear more open to promoting and nurturing diversity – and thereby demonstrating what Kotter (2013) regards as ‘genuine’ leadership – are more likely out-perform rivals against generic performance measures such as equity and ethics⁶⁾.

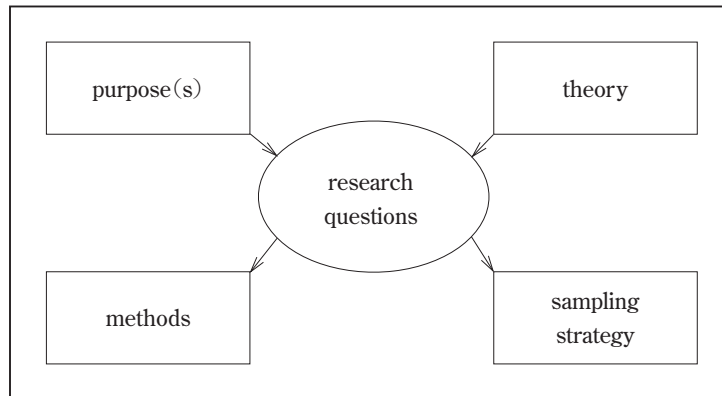
IV Research design

According to Robson (2002: 79), the process of research design “is concerned with turning research questions into projects”. **Figure 2** illustrates how, during processes of research design, the researcher’s choice of research questions influences subsequent methodological and (echoing Robson) project-specific choices and statements of research purpose, theory, sampling strategy and research methods.

Discerning readers might have noticed already how the structure of this article reflects the process of research design we are currently engaged in. Guided by reference to processes of research design process illustrated in **Figure 2**: the iterative and investigative dynamic of this process can be evinced in the ‘arrows’ connecting the ‘concept boxes’ in **Figure 2**.

Accordingly, we used the Introduction section of the article to state our research purpose: i. e., examining and seeking possible solutions to the ‘real-life’ research problem of an apparent under-presentation of women in leadership roles in Japanese universities. By linking (theoretically) this observation to possibilities for these universities to improve their competitive performance in both domestic and international markets for higher education provision we identified and highlighted a research opportunity, and further reinforced the relevance of doing this by drawing on our individual and collective professional experiences and combined research observations. Accordingly, we used the Introduction section to then context to formulate our research ‘purpose’ and present the research questions guiding the design of our research project.

Towards structuring the following sections of our article, we formulated our research pur-

Figure 2. From research questions to research design

Source: Robson (2002: 79)

pose as three research questions (RQs). The first of these questions led us to our first choice of research methods: literature review, a standard approach in social scientific research. Here we defined and presented a variety of perspectives on our focal research concept: *intersectional identity*.

Towards addressing our second and third RQs, we indicated that we would be gathering primary data by means of semi-structured interviews. In this section of the article, and echoing Robson (above), we explain how our choice of RQs continues to influencing and guide the ongoing design of our collaborative research project.

1 Research assumptions

One ontological assumption informing our research design – that is, our choice of research methods – is that each individual can visualize and express, tacitly and / or explicitly, or otherwise articulate a philosophical sense of ‘self’: e. g., when asking questions such as ‘Who am I?’ The modern English word ‘philosophy’ derives from the Ancient Greek term *philosophia* which might be translated as expressing a ‘love of knowledge’ or ‘wisdom’. We therefore assume in our research that the individuals we interview are keen to discover more about ‘who they really are’: i. e., their individual philosophical self.

We highlighted in our Literature Review how the concept of intersectional identity became established in contexts for among groups of researchers and practitioners seeking to understand and (if possible) mitigate the negative impacts of social discrimination and injustice in the USA. The leading researchers of these groups commonly adopted a feminist perspective.

According to Robson (2002: 278–9), research methodologies applied from a feminist perspective tend to emphasise methods designed to generate qualitative data about individual experiences in society. The researcher as ‘scientist’ thus tends to adopt flexible or semi-structured designs and interpret these data taking extreme care to mitigate threats of researcher bias. Common methods used in feminist research include researcher-researchee discussions focusing on real life or fictional (though representative) stories; conversations designed to develop individual life stories and the researchee’s own past and emerging biographies; conversation analysis.

Consequently, in our own research, we are attempting to balance between flexibility and fixed structure in the design of our interview schedule. In respect of each ‘person under study’ (interview), we intend to *triangulate* our interpretation of research findings between the three members of our research team, taking explicitly and by design into account each co-researcher’s individual intersectional identity. Furthermore, the ‘visualization’ method illustrated in this section of our article is designed to open up our own observations and interpretations of each person’s intersectional identity by creating an imaginary situation (the ‘audition’) that each reader might visualize and, if *elicited*, share.

2 Research questions

As we stated in the Introduction to this article, our research design is guided by direct reference to three research questions; namely:

1. What is ‘intersectional identity’?
2. To what extent might reference to intersectional identity help explain why there appear to be fewer opportunities for women than for men to play leadership roles in Japanese universities?
3. To what extent might reference to intersectional identity inform policies and practices that are designed to create equitable and gender-neutral processes of assigning individuals to leadership roles in Japanese universities?

We have begun to address **RQ#1** by means of the review of literature as presented hitherto. As is usual in processes of social scientific research, the more data we gather and analyse, the more we continue to develop and fine-tune our research design.

3 Primary research method: semi-structured interview

Towards addressing the second and third research questions, our choice of research

method for generating primary data is a semi-structured interview schedule. An English and a Japanese language version of this schedule appear in **Appendices A** and **B**.

According to Robson (2002: 270):

- A semi-structured interview has pre-determined questions, but the order can be modified based upon the interviewer's perception of what seems most appropriate. Question wording can be changed and explanations given; particular questions which seem inappropriate can be omitted, or additional ones included.

Our interview schedule is designed in semi-structured format in order to:

- Prepare each interviewee for a structured conversation about a complex and, as we have seen in the Literature Review, personal and potentially subjective research theme: namely, intersectional identity
- Allow justifiable space for the elicitation of various individual experiences and interpretations of intersectional identities, including those we might not expect

And,

- over and above the predicted subjective and personal responses given by interviewees, facilitate reliable (e. g., comparable) degrees of data gathering and analysis that should allow for some valid degree of credible generalization relevant to our research focus and purpose: e. g., as expressed in research question #3.

4 Semi-structured interview: sample population

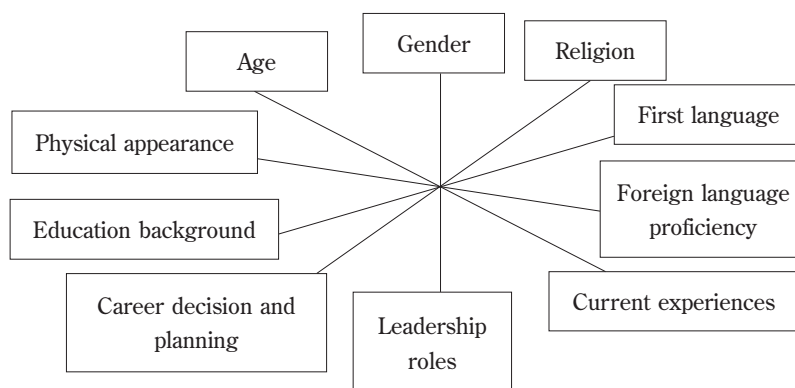
For the specific purposes of our empirical research, we choose as a sample population for our semi-structured interviews with women and men acting in or aspiring to leadership roles in Japanese universities. Thus, the design of our interview schedule allows for the individuals we interview (the *interviewees*) to express a variety of identities: hence, our operational research focus on *eliciting* intersectional identities. In conceptual and, subsequently, of data analytical terms, we expect these various expressed identities to include what we term in the Literature Review presented earlier as *personal*, *social* and *professional* identities, each of which can be located in the 'core' of the Jones and McEwen (2000) model presented in **Figure 1**.

5 Semi-structured interview: design

The items that appear in the interview schedule derive from a synthesis of our review of literature and by our attempts to *locate* our research in the context of existing social scientific

research specific to observing and eliciting intersectional identities in universities in Japan. One research outcome we are currently piloting (i. e., *rehearsing*) is a model of intersectional identity that adapts existing research models of intersectionality such as that presented in **Figure 1** to our specific research context and purpose. Correspondingly, we have synthesized these into the model that appears as **Figure 3** below.

Figure 3. A model for eliciting the intersectional dimensions of identity of women acting in or aspiring to leadership roles in Japanese universities



Source: Researchers' own design

6 Semi-structured interview: research ethics

Specific to our research purpose, and thus beyond the above-cited definition of ‘semi-structured interview’ as a research method offered by Robson (2002), we have designed our interview schedule giving explicit and systematic consideration to *research ethics*. We recognize that our core research theme (intersectional identity) is markedly individual and complex. Simultaneously, we acknowledge that research processes of eliciting reflecting on and discussing a person’s gender as a core element of each individual’s intersectional identity is highly personal. Correspondingly, we further interpret Robson’s definition of our method towards gathering primary research data as follows:

- The interview scheduled is designed around concepts that have emerged from our Literature Review. These appear in the pre-determined questions. We have included space (‘boxes’) within which to record each interviewee’s individual experiences and interpretations of gender and intersectional identity.
- There is no compulsion for interviewees to include reference to all dimensions of the research model in presented to them: they will choose and highlight what they indi-

vidually consider to be 'appropriate'.

- Interviewees can choose which language version of the interview schedule they wish to respond to.

Additionally, each interviewee is not required to give their name, age or current social or employment status. Nor are they required to name their current employer. Each interview is assured that the responses they give us will be managed in strictest confidence.

Each interviewee is offered an opportunity to have a follow-up interview where we share key findings from our research we generate from our research. We offer this to support their future individual career development: e. g., towards identifying opportunities to rehearse and / or enact leadership roles in their place of work and in their individual paths of career development.

7 Piloting

Given the complexity of the research concepts we are working with and, as stated above, the ethical responsibilities we carry as researchers of these concepts among people, we are currently piloting our research design and will make any necessary adjustments to this design after the piloting process is complete. Any readers of this article who would like to participate in our research and / or learn more about our research findings, are cordially invited to contact us.

V Discussion

The concept of intersectional identities is relevant towards guiding our attempts to appreciate how and why gender and related dimensions of each individual's personal, social and professional identities.

As illustrated in **Figures 2 and 3**, we have used our Literature Review to design a new model for researching intersectional identities relevant towards eliciting data among individual employee perceptions, experiences and expectations about the extent to which key dimensions of their individual identity might be facilitating or hindering their efforts and attempts to rehearse, enact and / or aspire to leadership roles in Japanese universities.

As in common in contexts for management and leadership research, researchers and practitioners of management and leadership can refer to such models in order to guide their thinking and decision-making (Jackson, 2011). Models can be similarly used, tested and debated by makers of employment policy and promotion opportunities in universities that are

working towards creating opportunities for more women to gain equity of access to leadership roles in Japanese universities.

Accordingly, and as in common in contexts for management and leadership practice in organizations, the model we have designed and presented in **Figure 3** offers framework within which current policy makers and senior management decision-makers in Japanese universities might gain a critical appreciate of a highly complex concept (*intersectional identity*). On this basis, these senior management practitioners and policy makers in Japanese universities might use the model – or further adaptations of it – as a point of reference and as a framework that can serve simplify, describe, explain and – when applied critically – predict how complex factors influencing the performance of individual employees, work teams and the organizational overall interact and might evolve and / or be managed strategically.

In our own research, we are exploring whether and how the expression – or *suppression* – of intersectional identities among employees might be denying opportunities for talented employees (i. e., women *and* men, younger *and* older employees, Japanese and non-Japanese nationals) to enact and / or aspire to leadership roles and thereby add value to the university’s competitive performance.

Thus, the third research question we are preparing to address asks:

- To what extent might reference to intersectional identity inform policies and practices that are designed to create equitable and gender-neutral processes of assigning individuals to leadership roles in Japanese universities?

As we three researchers gather and analyse more data, the more pointedly and effectively we should be able to address this question.

For now, we can echo McKinsey (2015, 2022, 2023) and suggest a number of practical steps that employers – including universities – in Japan can initiate and invest in towards encouraging and incentivizing talented women aspire to, seek out, and step into leadership roles. Synthesising from such business consultancy sources, and by invoking a theatre metaphor informed by reference to Social Role Theory and to our central research concept of intersectional identity, we propose the following policy and practice opportunities for Japanese universities to promote both women and men along with members of other social groups defined by their intersectional identities to prepare for and enact leadership roles:

Rehearsals. These entail guiding (‘directing’) women and men together through ‘context-specific’ rehearsals for organizational leadership can be assessed as low risk investments in the form of enacting simulations, performing role plays, and shadowing currently successful

women in university leadership roles in Japan and overseas (Jackson, 2022a ; Jackson, 2022c; Jackson and Suzuki, 2022).

Mentoring: The investments can be formalized as sponsorships for further (external) courses in professional development (e. g., MBA programmes), apprenticeships, or (internally) by setting up mentor-mentee arrangements and internships (Jackson, 2022b; Jackson, 2017b; Jackson and Johns, 2017).

Recognizing that bias against the professional aspirations of women exists and might well be (for now) embedded in Japan's higher education system and, indeed, as it appears across Japanese society generally, we suggest the current focus of policy and practice should be entrepreneurial in nature and thus on 'creating opportunity'; or, as a minimum, reducing current levels of *opportunity loss* to organizations in Japan's universities, and to Japanese society generally.

VI Conclusions

Given that the research we report on in this article is on-going, we can only offer interim conclusions at this (the *rehearsal*) stage.

Firstly, we can re-state (briefly) the evidence that opened and give broader strategic context to this discussion. According to the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2022), the share of women acting in leadership roles globally is currently 33%. So, as a reminder we can note that WEF's (2022) *Global Gender Gap Report* sees Japan ranked at 116th out of the 146 countries surveyed. We can further that Japan does not even appear in the 'top 10' Asian Pacific countries, unlike Lao PDR, Thailand, Viet Nam and Indonesia. Comparing across Europe, Iceland, Finland, Sweden and Norway form a (largely) predictable top four, with the Republic of Ireland ranking fifth, Germany sixth, and Switzerland eighth.

Similarly, and acknowledging possible readers of this article, the *Financial Times* ranking of business schools teaching MBA programmes worldwide calculates a 'top 100' that includes three from Switzerland, five from Singapore, three from Hong Kong and Mainland China respectively, one from South Korea, and none from Japan (FT, 2022b). Consequently, as of today no Japanese providers of MBA education appear in this ranking, although there are business schools in Japan that appear indirectly on the strength of their collaborations with high-ranking business schools overseas: e. g., between Kyoto University's strategic alliance with Cornell University in the USA and, in Nagoya, NUBC's strategy of gaining multiple interna-

tionally recognised accreditations for their business and management programmes.

In summary, we can again invoke John Kotter (2013) and his appeal for ‘genuine’ organizational leadership, and for managers to act ‘usefully’ in roles of leadership. In response, we can express our personal and professional belief that universities and business schools in Japan have bountiful opportunities not only for improving their competitive performance in both domestic (Japanese) and international (overseas) markets for higher and professional education. Furthermore, they have a strategic opportunity—and one that might already be residing ‘in house’—to release the leadership potential of all employees, and to do this regardless of individual gender.

As researchers and practitioners in higher and business education, we hope that our current research can contribute towards helping Japanese universities identify opportunities towards shaping our many possible *futures* rather than attempting stubbornly to preserve aspects of our (evidently) less-than-equitable pasts.

Appendices

Appendix A: interview schedule in English

I. Definition

Intersectional identity is a research concept suggests that each individual possesses multiple identities, including but not limited to gender, age, religion, physical appearance, and these identities intersect with one another. These intersectional identities and contextual influences appear to shape the experience of an individual.

In our research, we attempt to focus on the intersectional identities of women in leadership roles in Japanese universities.

II. Diagram (Figure 3)

III. Questionnaire

1. Please select your gender identity

- Woman
- Man
- A gender identity not listed here (please specify)
- Prefer not to state

2. Please select your age group

- Under 30
- 30–39
- 40–49
- 50–59
- 60 and over

3. Your gender identity has a positive impact on your access to leadership roles.

- Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
4. Your age identity has a positive impact on your access to leadership roles.
- Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
5. In your view and experiences, which of the other identity dimensions in the model improve your access to leadership roles? Please list them down in order of most important to least important.
6. In your view and experiences, which of the other identity dimensions in the model hinder your access to leadership roles? Please list them down in order of most important to least important.
7. Imagine yourself as an early career professional, what factors would you consider when pursuing leadership roles?

Appendix B: interview schedule in Japanese

I. 定義

「インターセクショナル・アイデンティティ」とは、研究上の概念であり、個人が性別、年齢、宗教、外見など複数のアイデンティティを持ち、これらが相互に交差していることを示しています。このようなインターセクショナル・アイデンティティや文脈の影響は、個人の経験を形成していると考えられます。

本研究では、日本の大学で指導的役割にある女性のインターセクショナル・アイデンティティに焦点を当てようとしています。

II. 分析モデル

本研究では、日本の大学において指導的役割を積極的に担う、あるいは担うことを希望する女性に対して、以下のインターセクショナル・アイデンティティの分析モデル（図2）の適用を試みます。

III. 質問

1. ご自身の性別をお答えください。
 - 女性
 - 男性
 - いずれでもない（以下に記してください）
 - 答えたくない
2. 年代をお答えください。

- 30歳以下
 - 30-39歳
 - 40-49歳
 - 50-59歳
 - 60歳以上
3. 指導的役割に対してあなたの性別はプラスの影響を与えていると思いますか。
- 全くそう思わない
 - そう思わない
 - どちらでもない
 - そう思う
 - 強くそう思う
4. 指導的役割に対してあなたの年齢はプラスの影響を与えていると思いますか。
- 全くそう思わない
 - そう思わない
 - どちらでもない
 - そう思う
 - 強くそう思う
5. 個人のご見解、ご経験に基づいてお答えください。上記モデルの中で示した要素のうち、性別、年齢以外に指導的役割へのアクセスを向上させるものがあれば、以下に最も重要と思われるものから順にご記載ください。
6. ご自身の個人的な見解や経験に基づいてお答えください。上記モデルの中で、性別、年齢以外に指導的役割へのアクセスを阻害する要素があれば、以下に最も重要と思われるものから順にご記載ください。
7. ご自身が若手研究者だと想定した場合、指導的役割を目指す際にどのような要素を考慮しますか。

Endnotes

- 1) In this article, we consistently refer to 'women' or to 'men' rather than to 'male' or 'female' in reference to gender. By referring consistently to 'women' in relation to leadership and leadership roles we are connecting with research that originally coined our core research concept: *intersectional identity*. Furthermore, we are connecting with current practice in social scientific research worldwide. To illustrate, in English language the descriptor 'female' has until recently been by default contrasted against 'male': the concept of *male* appears twice in this either / or distinction. There have been moves among social researchers working in international English to challenge this by default gender distinction. For example, surveys designed by social scientists and by government agencies still include profile questions about a respondent's 'gender'. However, choices of response have been extended to include answers such as 'other' or 'prefer not to say'. In responding to such surveys, women, men and individuals of diverse genders can participate more on the basis of what they each have to say and otherwise contribute to society rather than in re-

lation to what others pre-define as their ‘gender’ or ‘sex’. Legally, socially, bureaucratically, and by international comparison, such freedom of individual response in Japan appears still uncommon.

- 2) Dear reader, we invite you to close your eyes and imagine ‘a university Professor’. Now imagine a university Professor of Physics. And now one of English Literature. Now imagine an airline pilot. And now a Kindergarten teacher. It is likely that there will be patterns of imagination attributing a specific and, perhaps, predictable gender to the individuals and the professions they occupy. These imagines might appear as ‘stereotypes’ that we each acquire during our individual and collective experiences of socialization.

Language plays a large role during our formative years, and through international experience during our adult years. To illustrate: in German language the term ‘Professor’ is used for men while the term ‘Professorin’ is used for women. Languages such as French and Italian distribute gender-specific indicators of an individual’s professional identity similarly. In cross-cultural comparison, the Japanese term *sensei* offers more potential for gender-neutral identification.

Here, we can recall that the English word ‘Professor’ derives from Latin *professio* meaning to ‘profess’; or, an identification of someone who has something of relevance to say that people in society might choose (or pay) to listen to. This derivation exists today in social interactions: e.g., when someone can be regarded as ‘a professional’ and—as a consequence—be expected to act (behave) *professionally* (Jackson, 2017a).

- 3) In our research we define ‘leadership’ conceptually as a *process*. Doing so helps us more precisely and consistently to distinguish between reference to ‘leader’ and ‘leadership’. The former term is *positional* rather than processual and might describe a situation whereby an individual is appointed to and/or assumes a role and identity as *leader*. Drawing on our review of literature on the theme of organizational and university leadership, and simultaneously drawing on our own professional observations and experiences of organizational and university leadership, we work from the assumption that leadership as a process is an opportunity that is open to all individuals in an organization, regardless of variables of individual identity such as job title, position in an organizational hierarchy, age, or gender.
- 4) The inspiration for this audition’ scene came from the multiple Oscar-awarded film *Shakespeare in Love*.
- 5) The professional training and development programmes offered by RADA in London and, increasingly, internationally can be found under: www.radabusiness.com. A programme with close relevance to our research theme is called *Executive Presence for Women*.

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