Gender, leadership, and the display of empathic anger
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Three experimental studies with different participant pools examined the effects of displays of empathic anger – anger that is caused by witnessing or learning of harm done to another person – on perceptions of men and women in leadership positions. In contrast to prior work, which focused on expressions of anger regarding personal failure and found double standards that favours men, the results in this study show that displays of empathic anger were significantly more beneficial for female leaders. In particular, female leaders who expressed anger about a harm done to a subordinate were perceived as possessing more agentic and communal characteristics, and as being more effective in their position, than their male counterparts. Moreover, the results showed that this effect was driven by observers’ tendency to attribute empathic anger expressed by female compared with male leaders more strongly to internal reasons like the leader’s personality. Consistent with these findings, the different perceptions of male and female leaders were no longer present when attributions for the displays of empathic anger were clearly internal.

Practitioner points
• To be effective leaders, female managers need to show qualities like determination and confidence, but unlike male leaders, they often find it difficult to do so without simultaneously been judged as lacking important attributes like warmth and kindness.
• The results in this study suggest that female leaders can overcome this problem by expressing anger about a harm done to others, which causes observers to judge them even more positively than male leaders who engage in the same behaviour.
• Overall, whereas female leaders should generally avoid expressing anger about a personal harm for which they are judged very negatively, they should not be reluctant to display anger about harm done to other members of organization when they have the opportunity to do so.

Women in leadership positions must navigate a labyrinth of diverse obstacles and challenges (Eagly & Carli, 2007) caused by a perceived incongruence between leadership roles and common gender stereotypes (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Specifically, women are commonly ascribed communal traits such as warmth and kindness but not agentic traits such as confidence and assertiveness (Abele, 2003; Fiske & Stevens, 1993). Prototypical leaders, by contrast, are typically seen as highly agentic (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Moreover, these descriptive beliefs are commonly matched by prescriptive stereotypes about how
women ought to behave (Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Thus, female leaders are in a double bind: Whereas their roles as leaders require them to be agentic, their stereotypical roles as women prohibit agentic behaviour and instead prescribe them to be communal. It is therefore crucial for female leaders to find ways to express agentic and communal qualities simultaneously in order to be perceived as effective without experiencing backlash (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Building on prior research on emotional displays by leaders (Connelly & Gooty, 2015; Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, & Gupta, 2010; Humphrey, 2002) and on the effects of gender stereotypes on how such emotional displays are interpreted (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009; Ragins & Winkel, 2011; Shields, 2002), this study proposes that expressions of empathic anger – anger triggered by witnessing or learning of a harm inflicted on others – can achieve this goal by signalling both agentic and communal qualities in female leaders. Moreover, because observers are generally more likely to make internal causal attributions for emotional displays by female leaders, expressions of empathic anger can be even more effective for female than for male leaders.

This study aims to contribute to the literature on gender stereotypes and emotional displays by leaders, which has mainly focused on the specific challenges that emotional displays (Ragins & Winkel, 2011) and especially expressions of anger might pose for female leaders (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Lewis, 2000), by exploring the conditions in which displays of anger can instead be highly beneficial for female leaders. In addition, the results in this study add to previous findings on anger in organizations (Geddes & Callister, 2007; Gibson & Callister, 2010) by identifying conditions in which expressions of different types of anger will be more or less beneficial. Finally, the present results may have practical implications for female leaders striving to overcome the double bind posed by leader-role expectations and gender stereotypes (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Emotional displays by male and female leaders

A large body of research has demonstrated that expressions of emotions strongly shape how leaders are perceived by their followers, making emotions integral to the leadership process (Gooty et al., 2010; Humphrey, 2002). Whereas the previous literature considered a large number of different emotional displays such as expressions of happiness or sadness, particular attention has been paid to displays of anger (Gaddis, Connelly, & Mumford, 2004; Madera & Smith, 2009; Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002; Tiedens, 2001), which, because of its common occurrence and high impact on relationships, is frequently considered the prime example of ‘negative’ workplace emotions (Lindebaum & Geddes, 2016).

Anger is an active, high-energy emotion that signals assertiveness, status, and confidence (Lewis, 2000; Tiedens, 2001). However, expressions of anger can also imply that the angry person is emotionally unstable (Gibson, Schweitzer, Callister, & Gray, 2009) and cold (Knutson, 1996). Importantly, previous research showed that how a display of anger is perceived by others strongly depends on the actor’s gender. In particular, women who show anger about a situation that causes them personal harm are generally perceived less favourably than women who express no emotion, whereas men do not face such negative consequences from voicing anger (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Lewis, 2000). Similarly, Salerno and Peter-Hagene (2015) found that during group deliberations, expressing anger increases social influence for men but diminishes it for women. Thus, female leaders face a specific emotional double bind (Ragins & Winkel, 2011) that prevents them from engaging in strongly agentic emotions like anger, whereas their role...
as leaders requires them to display emotions associated with confidence and strength. By contrast, gender stereotypes do not seem to have a large influence on the perception of other, less agentic emotions. For example, together with displays of personal anger, Lewis (2000) also explored reactions to displays of sadness and found no effect of leader gender (for similar results, see Salerno & Peter-Hagene, 2015; Zawadzki, Warner, & Shields, 2013).

The effects of empathic anger

Importantly, expressions of anger take different shapes. In particular, whereas earlier research largely focused on the negative, harmful effects that frequently accompany feelings and expressions of anger, more recently scholars have emphasized that, depending on their specific characteristics, expressions of anger can be functional and adaptive (Geddes & Callister, 2007). Thus, anger in the workplace is increasingly recognized as a multifaceted phenomenon that can generally have both positive and negative consequences (Gibson & Callister, 2010). Consistent with this emerging perspective on anger, previous work strongly suggested the need to consider the underlying source of the anger expressed by an individual. In particular, as in most previous research, anger can be triggered by an act that thwarts one’s personal interests—so-called personal anger (Batson et al., 2007)—but might also be triggered by observing or learning of acts causing harm to another individual, deemed empathic anger (Batson et al., 2007; Hoffman, 2000, 2008; Vitaglione & Barnett, 2003), such as when a manager shows anger about a harm inflicted on one of his or her subordinates.

Even though it is studied far less in the literature than personal anger, empathic anger is likely to be a similarly relevant phenomenon for leaders. Because of the often frustrating nature of workplace interaction, employees will frequently experience psychological harm, caused for example by the unfair or inappropriate behaviour of others (Lim & Cortina, 2005). At the same time, displaying empathic concern for followers’ well-being as well as a willingness to actively work towards improving their situation is a fundamental aspect of successful leadership (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2006). Whereas empathic concern could be expressed in other ways, in particular by displaying sadness (Cialdini et al., 1987), sadness also signals weakness and uncertainty (Madera & Smith, 2009) and thus does not indicate the desire to work actively to address the followers’ underlying problem. Empathic anger, by contrast, signals the strength and confidence necessary to address inappropriate behaviour by others as well as empathic concern for the well-being of the follower.

In general, empathic anger is closely related to, but different from, moral anger (Lindebaum & Geddes, 2016), which is described as an emotional state caused by a primary appraisal of a moral-standard violation. This is because even though it clearly can occur in response to a violation of moral standards, empathic anger is primarily focused on acknowledging and addressing harm caused to someone with whom one is affiliated (Batson et al., 2007).

Overall, similar to personal anger, empathic anger is likely to direct action towards retaliation against a transgressor, but importantly also towards the promotion of the interests of the victim of the observed harm (Frijda, 1988). Consistently, several studies found that, in addition to a wish to punish transgressors, feelings of empathic anger were also strongly associated with a desire to help victims (Gummerum, Van Dillen, Van Dijk, & López-Pérez, 2016; van Doorn, Zeelenberg, Breugelmans, Berger, & Okimoto, 2018; Vitaglione & Barnett, 2003). In line with these findings, Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, and
Edmondson (2009) suggested empathic anger as a possible way to overcome fear-based silence when individuals observe mistreatment of others (Kirrane, O’Shea, Buckley, Grazi, & Prout, 2017). Interestingly, despite the considerable attention paid to empathic anger, mainly in the field of social psychology, very little is yet known about the effects of empathic or related forms of anger on leadership effectiveness or other workplace outcomes more generally (Lindebaum & Geddes, 2016).

**Causal attributions for emotional displays**

When trying to understand another person’s actions, individuals typically attempt to attribute this behaviour to an underlying cause (Heider, 1958; Kelley & Michela, 1980). Although causal attributions can be classified along various dimensions, prior research (Heider, 1958; Kelley & Michela, 1980) also strongly suggests that the most central dimension of causal attributions is the distinction between attributions to internal, personal dispositions, such as personality traits or attitudes, and attributions to external, situational causes, such as the particular idiosyncratic characteristics of the situation in which a behaviour occurs. When observers make causal attributions, they typically engage in the so-called correspondence bias (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). Specifically, they assume that an observed behaviour reflects something intrinsic to the target person; that is, they infer an internal cause, even if particular external causes might be an equally likely explanation. However, the strength of this bias is not constant but also depends strongly on the particular characteristics of the actor for whose behaviour observers make attributions (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Trope, 1986).

In particular, as demonstrated in prior research, based on the common belief that women are more emotional than men, observers generally attribute women’s expressions of emotions more to internal reasons, such as personality, and less to the external characteristics of a particular situation, compared with emotional displays by men. For example, Shields (2002) found that observers made mostly external attributions for the expressed anger about a stolen car when the target was male but dispositional attributions when the target was female. In the same vein, Brescoll and Uhlmann (2008) found that observers made more internal attributions for displays of personal anger about a financial loss by women than for the same behaviour by men. Barrett and Bliss-Moreau (2009) extended this finding to the case of other emotions such as sadness, fear, and disgust. Based on this previous research, it is therefore likely that, just like expressions of personal anger (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Shields, 2002), causal attributions for displays of empathic anger by female leaders will be more internal than attributions for empathic anger expressed by male leaders, as stated in Hypothesis 1.

**Hypothesis 1:** Observers will attribute displays of empathic anger by female leaders more to internal reasons compared with the same behaviour by male leaders.

**Causal attributions and the evaluation of male and female leaders**

In the absence of particular information about counterstereotypical behaviour that causes backlash, observers usually rate (middle-level) male and female leaders equally high on leadership effectiveness as well as agentic and communal characteristics (Rosette & Tost, 2010). However, because of the hypothesized difference in causal attributions for
emotional displays, perceptions of female and male leaders are likely to differ when each express empathic anger.

Observers who perceive that a particular behaviour is attributable to internal reasons such as the leader’s personality ascribe traits that are associated with this behaviour to the acting individual. However, if a certain behaviour is perceived to be caused mostly by external reasons, such as situational pressure, observers usually refrain from doing so (Kelley & Michela, 1980). As discussed previously, like personal anger, empathic anger signals the desire to restore justice by punishing the wrongdoer (Batson, Chao, & Givens, 2009; Batson et al., 2007). Therefore, similar to displays of personal anger, empathic anger should signal agentic characteristics such as assertiveness, determination, and confidence. However, because empathic anger is triggered by concern for others, it should also signal communal qualities such as caring and warmth. Thus, stronger internal attributions for displays of empathic anger by female leaders are likely to cause observers to ascribe both more agentic and communal personality traits associated with empathic anger to female leaders. Displays of empathic anger by male leaders, by contrast, should cause observers’ perceptions of male leaders to remain relatively unaffected.

**Hypothesis 2a:** Compared with male leaders, female leaders who express empathic anger will be perceived as more communal.

**Hypothesis 2b:** Compared with male leaders, female leaders who express empathic anger will be perceived as more agentic.

As pointed out in a large body of research, agentic characteristics are strongly associated with perceived leadership effectiveness (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Offermann, Kennedy, & Wirtz, 1994). Moreover, communal characteristics might have a similar effect, for two reasons. First, being perceived as not only agentic but also communal might be particularly crucial for female leaders. For example, as shown in previous work, women can express strongly agentic qualities without experiencing backlash, and thus overcome the challenges of the double bind, when they simultaneously also engage in actions that suggest a relatively high level of communality (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). This is strongly consistent with previous research on androgynous leadership (Appelbaum, Audet, & Miller, 2003), which suggests that incorporating high levels of both stereotypically masculine (agentic) and feminine (communal) characteristics in their leadership style are particularly beneficial for women (Kolb, 1997). Similarly, previous work has pointed out that female leaders can particularly benefit from a transformational leadership style (Bass, 1985) because this style encompasses a number of stereotypically feminine aspects and is otherwise mostly androgynous (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2003).

Importantly, there is increasing evidence that communality is also considered to be a directly beneficial trait that is crucial for both male and female leaders. In particular, departing from the traditional authoritative, stereotypically masculine approach to leadership, typical communal qualities such as building close, consensual, and supportive relationships with peers and subordinates are perceived as increasingly important for effective leadership (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Claes, 1999). In the same vein, research on leader-role schemas showed that individuals typically believe that ideal prototypical leaders possess both agentic traits, such as dedication and boldness, and communal traits, such as sensitivity and warmth (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004;
Offermann et al., 1994). Finally, building on this perspective, Rosette and Tost (2010) directly demonstrated that senior female leaders can in some circumstances be perceived as even more effective than their male peers, and that this effect is partially driven by their perceived higher communality and ability to use more ‘feminine’ management techniques.

This previous discussion strongly suggests that female, more than male, leaders will benefit from expressing empathic anger and thus be judged as more effective than male leaders who engage in the same behaviour. Moreover, this effect is likely to be driven by higher perceptions of both communal and agentic characteristics in female leaders, which are in turn caused by more internal attributions for the display of empathic anger. This is summarized in the following three hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 3a:** Female leaders expressing empathic anger will be perceived as more effective in their position than male leaders who express empathic anger.

**Hypothesis 3b:** Higher perceptions of leadership effectiveness will be mediated by stronger internal attributions.

**Hypothesis 3c:** The effect of internal attributions on leadership effectiveness will be mediated by perceptions of higher agentic and communal traits in female leaders.

Figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized causal effects that link leader gender to perceived leader effectiveness following expressions of empathic anger.

**STUDY 1**

The goal of Study 1 was to conduct a first test of the hypothesized effect of leader gender on leadership effectiveness following displays of empathic anger and to provide evidence for the mediating role of causal attributions. Study 1 employed a 2 (leader gender: male vs. female) × 2 (emotional display: empathic anger vs. neutral) between-subject design.
Participants
All participants were individuals in management positions, who were recruited with the help of the marketing research company ToLuna. Participants were required to have professional prior experience with making hiring and promotion decisions and to have at least 4 years of experience in leadership positions ($M = 12$ years). In total, 119 (81 male, 102 female; $M_{age} = 39$ years) participants took part in the study who worked in a broad variety of industries (most common were IT and manufacturing).

Procedure
Participants connected to the study remotely and were automatically randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. They were then informed that their task was to peruse information about an applicant for the position of director of marketing at a Fortune 500 company. Participants first read some general information about the applicant, such as the applicant’s age (40 years), educational background (MBA degree), and current position (senior project manager with a good record). Gender was manipulated by changing the name of the applicant (Kevin vs. Sarah Smith). To make the manipulation of gender more salient, the materials also included a headshot of either a male or female person in business attire with neutral facial expressions.

The expression of emotion was manipulated in the second part, which consisted of reports written by one of the leader’s subordinates, described as part of a ‘360-degree feedback procedure’. After a number of introductory sentences, in all conditions, the subordinate reported:

Once I went to Sarah [Kevin] to talk about a problem I had. One of our clients had written a very hostile and offensive e-mail to me.

In the empathic anger condition, the report continued:

When I told this to Sarah [Kevin] and showed her [him] the e-mail, she [he] said that that she [he] was very angry about what the client had done to me. She [He] also told me that she [he] would talk to the client.

In the neutral condition, the subordinate simply reported:

Sarah [Kevin] told me that she [he] would talk to the client.

Next, participants answered several questions that assessed the dependent measures described below.

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1 Toluna (www.toluna-group.com) is a French–American survey and market research company. Individuals recruited by ToLuna respond to surveys in exchange for monetary and other nonmonetary rewards provided by ToLuna. Participants provided by ToLuna have, for example, been employed in previous research on reactions to unfair behaviour in the workplace (Bobocel, 2013), employee strain (Jang, Shen, Allen, & Zhang, 2018), or the relationship between goal commitment and religiosity (Landau, Khenfer, Keefer, Swanson, & Kay, 2018).

2 The two photographs were matched and pretested with 38 participants recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk for perceived attractiveness, emotional expression, and age, all $p > .20$.

3 In all three studies, participants’ response time for different items was recorded. None of the participants in studies 1 and 2 and only two participants in Study 3 were below a previously suggested cut-off of item per second (Wood, Harms, Lowman, & DeSimone, 2017). Excluding these participants in Study 3 did not change the significance of any of the results.
Dependent measures

Leadership effectiveness and causal attributions

Three items (‘I would feel very comfortable if Sarah [Kevin] was my boss’; ‘I think Sarah [Kevin] is the right person for a leadership position’; and ‘I think that Sarah [Kevin] is an exceptional leader’) measured perceived leadership effectiveness ($\alpha = .89$). Ratings were made on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale. The scale was originally developed by Rosette and Tost (2010) to capture different aspects of leadership effectiveness proposed in prior literature: satisfaction with the leader, desire to work with the leader, perceived similarity with an ideal leader, and perceived strength. Moreover, participants completed one item adapted from Brescoll and Uhlmann (2008) asking them to rate to what extent the leaders’ feelings about the employee’s problem reflected something about her/his personality compared with the situation that was described. The rating was made on a 7-point scale (1 = definitely the situation, 7 = definitely the personality).

Results and Discussion

The main results across the four conditions are summarized in Table 1. Across all conditions, leadership effectiveness and causal attributions were correlated at $r = .24$, $p < .01$. In the following, both dependent measures were analysed with 2 (target gender) × 2 (emotional display) ANOVAs. In all three studies, the ANOVAs initially also included participant gender. However, this factor did not have a significant main or interaction effect in any of the three studies and is therefore excluded from the following analyses.

Leadership effectiveness

The results showed a significant main effect of emotional display, $F(1, 115) = 6.25$, $p = .01$, no significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 115) = 3.78$, $p = .06$, and a significant interaction between the two variables, $F(1, 115) = 4.80$, $p = .03$. As predicted in Hypothesis 3a, female leaders who expressed empathic anger were rated significantly higher on leadership effectiveness than were male leaders, $F(1, 115) = 8.62$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.81$, but there was no significant difference between the two in the neutral control conditions, $F(1, 115) = 0.03$, $p = .86$. Moreover, female leaders were rated significantly higher on leadership effectiveness than in the neutral condition, $F(1, 115) = 11.09$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.98$, whereas expressions of empathic anger did not have a significant effect for male leaders, $F(1, 115) = 0.05$, $p = .83$.

Table 1. Perceived leadership effectiveness and causal attributions across conditions (Study 1)

|                        | Leadership effectiveness | Internal versus external causal attributions |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
|                        | $M$         | SD        | $M$ | SD        |
| Male target: Empathic anger | 5.02   | 1.33 | 3.43 | 1.41 |
| Female target: Empathic anger | 5.93   | 0.85 | 4.53 | 1.46 |
| Male target: Neutral    | 4.95   | 1.35 | 4.00 | 1.65 |
| Female target: Neutral  | 4.90   | 1.22 | 3.63 | 1.56 |
Causal attributions

The ANOVA revealed no significant main effect of emotional display, $F(1, 115) = 0.36, p = .55$, or target gender, $F(1, 115) = 1.73, p = .19$, but there was a significant interaction, $F(1, 115) = 6.92, p = .01$. Providing confirming evidence for Hypothesis 1, observers made significantly more internal causal attributions for displays of empathic anger by female leaders than they did for the same expressions by male leaders, $F(1, 115) = 7.85, p = .01, d = 0.77$. By contrast, there was no significant difference in causal attributions in the neutral control conditions, $F(1, 142) = 0.86, p = .36$.

Mediation

Figure 2 presents the results of a mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986) designed to test the extent to which internal causal attributions mediated the effect between gender and leadership effectiveness ratings following expressions of empathic anger.

The results of two regressions revealed that female leader gender had a significant positive effect on internal causal attributions (path a) as well as on perceived leadership effectiveness (path c). However, the effects of gender were no longer significant when internal attributions were controlled for in the third regression (path $c'$). Next, a bootstrap procedure (Edwards & Lambert, 2007) with 5,000 iterations was employed to compute the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the mediated effect. The intervals excluded zero (0.10, 0.78), indicating significant mediation via internal attributions, as predicted in Hypothesis 3b.

Discussion

Study 1 provided supportive evidence for the proposed main hypotheses. In particular, the results show that female leaders benefited more from expressions of empathic anger than their male peers and that this effect was mediated by participants’ tendency to make more internal causal attributions for empathic anger displayed by women. One important limitation of Study 1 was that no data for perceived communal and agentic characteristics were collected, and thus, it was not possible to test the full theoretical model proposed.

![Figure 2. Results of analysis for mediation via internal causal attributions. $N = 60$. OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. **$p < .01$.](image-url)
previously. Moreover, the study employed only one item to measure causal attributions, which might potentially limit its validity. Study 2 addresses these limitations.

**STUDY 2**

Study 2 employed a 2 (target gender: male vs. female) × 2 (emotional display: empathic anger vs. neutral) between-subjects design and was conducted online.

**Participants**

A total of 183 participants (92 male, 91 female; \( M_{\text{age}} = 33 \) years) were recruited through a university system. Of these, 41% were current full- and part-time students, 28% were alumni, 8% were university staff, and around 23% were other members of the wider community. As compensation for their participation, all participants had the chance to win one of several $20 Amazon.com vouchers. Participation was restricted to individuals with at least 2 years of full-time work experience. Participants who completed the study on average had 8 years of full-time work experience.

**Procedure**

Participants connected remotely to an online survey and were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. They were presented with information about the target employee, which was identical to Study 1 and subsequently read a report written by one of the leader’s subordinates. In all conditions, the subordinate reported:

Once I went to Sarah [Kevin] to talk about a problem I had. One of my co-workers from a different division had written a very hostile and offensive e-mail to me.

In the empathic-anger condition, the report continued:

When I told this to Sarah [Kevin] and showed her [him] the e-mail, she [he] said that she [he] was very angry about what the co-worker had done to me. She [He] also told me that she [he] would talk to my co-worker.

In the neutral condition, the subordinate simply reported:

Sarah [Kevin] told me that she [he] would talk to the co-worker.

Next, participants answered several questions that assessed the dependent measures described below.

**Dependent measures**

The study employed the same three items as in Study 1 to measure leadership effectiveness (\( \alpha = .82 \)). In addition, in all conditions the study included four items (assertive, self-confident, active, able to stand pressure) to measure perceived agency of the leader (\( \alpha = .81 \)) and four items (warm, helpful, sensitive to the needs of others, supportive) to measure perceived communality (\( \alpha = .89 \)). The items were adapted from Abele (2003). Participants rated to the extent to which each item characterized their impression of the leader on a 1 (not at all) to 7 (perfectly) scale.
Internal causal attributions were measured with three items adapted from Livingston, Rosette, and Washington (2012): (a) ‘Sarah’s [Kevin’s] reaction does not reveal anything about her personality’ (inverse-coded); (b) ‘Sarah’s [Kevin’s] reaction reveals a lot about her [his] character’; and (c) ‘Sarah [Kevin] reacted this way because of her [his] personality’. Ratings were made on a 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree) scale.

Results and Discussion
Table 2 provides an overview of the main measures across conditions, and Table 3 provides the correlations between them. All measures were analysed with 2 (target gender) × 2 (emotional display) ANOVAs.

Leadership effectiveness
The analysis showed a significant main effect of emotional display, \( F(1, 179) = 8.89, p < .01 \), but no main effect of gender, \( F(1, 179) = 0.67, p = .42 \). In addition, the results also revealed a significant interaction, \( F(1, 179) = 5.59, p = .02 \). As in Study 1, female

| Table 2. Overview of results across conditions (Study 2) |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                                | Leadership      | Communal        | Agentic         | Internal versus |
|                                | effectiveness   | characteristics | characteristics | external         |
|                                | M    SD        | M    SD         | M    SD         | attributions     |
| Male target: Empathic anger    | 5.46 1.06     | 5.31 1.04      | 5.48 0.90       | 3.99 1.24        |
| Female target: Empathic anger  | 5.95 0.93     | 5.83 1.08      | 5.88 0.87       | 4.72 1.46        |
| Male target: Neutral           | 5.37 0.96     | 4.93 1.09      | 5.47 0.82       | 4.53 1.29        |
| Female target: Neutral         | 5.13 1.16     | 5.21 1.08      | 5.19 0.92       | 4.21 1.11        |

| Table 3. Correlations between measures (Study 2) |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                                | 1     | 2     | 3     |
| 1. Agentic characteristics      |       | .54   | .58   |
| 2. Communal characteristics     | .29   |       |       |
| 3. Leadership effectiveness     |       |       |       |
| 4. Internal causal attributions  |       | .18   | .33   |

Note. All correlations are significant at \( p < .05 \).

Studies 2 and 3 employed a single-common-method factor procedure (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003) to test for the influence of a common-method bias. The results showed that when the common factor was included, regression weights linking the theoretical constructs and the observed items were reduced (on average by 0.10 in Study 2 and by 0.12 in Study 1), but all weights remained significant at the 1% level.
leaders were rated significantly higher on leadership effectiveness than male leaders when they expressed empathic anger, \( F(1, 179) = 5.09, p = .03, d = 0.49 \), but there was no significant effect of target gender in the neutral condition, \( F(1, 179) = 1.19, p = .28 \). Further analysis also showed that female leaders were perceived as more effective when they expressed empathic anger than in the neutral condition, \( F(1, 179) = 14.22, p < .01, d = 0.78 \), but there was no significant difference between the two conditions for male leaders, \( F(1, 179) = 0.19, p = .66 \).

**Communality and agency**

For communality, the analysis showed a significant effect of empathic anger, \( F(1, 179) = 9.94, p < .01 \), and of gender, \( F(1, 179) = 6.40, p = .01 \), but no significant interaction, \( F(1, 179) = 0.57, p = .45 \). Importantly, consistent with Hypothesis 2a, female leaders who expressed empathic anger were rated as significantly more communal than male leaders who engaged in the same behaviour, \( F(1, 179) = 5.43, p = .02, d = 0.49 \). By contrast, female leaders were not rated significantly differently from male leaders in the neutral condition, \( F(1, 179) = 1.57, p = .21 \). The ANOVA of ratings of agentic characteristics revealed a significant main effect of emotion, \( F(1, 179) = 7.23, p < .01 \), but no significant main effect of gender, \( F(1, 179) = 0.21, p = .65 \). The interaction between the two factors was significant, \( F(1, 179) = 6.79, p < .01 \). There was no significant effect of leader gender in the neutral condition, \( F(1, 179) = 2.30, p = .13 \). However, as predicted in Hypothesis 2b, female leaders who showed empathic anger were rated as significantly more agentic than male leaders, \( F(1, 179) = 4.72, p = .03, d = 0.49 \).

**Causal attributions**

The ANOVA results revealed no significant main effects of target gender, \( F(1, 179) = 1.21, p = .27 \), or emotion type, \( F(1, 179) = 0.01, p = .95 \), but a significant interaction, \( F(1, 179) = 7.82, p = .01 \). Supporting Hypothesis 1, pairwise comparisons showed that participants made significantly more internal attributions for female leaders than they did for male leaders when each expressed empathic anger, \( F(1, 179) = 7.64, p = .01, d = 0.55 \), but not in the neutral control condition, \( F(1, 179) = 1.43, p = .23 \).

**Mediation**

Next, the full mediation model (Figure 1) for the effects of gender on leadership effectiveness via internal attributions (stage 1) and perceived communality and agency (stage 2) was tested following the procedure suggested by Taylor, MacKinnon, and Tein (2008). Specifically, two separate analyses were conducted to estimate the indirect effect of gender on perceived leadership effectiveness through the path of (a) internal attribution + perceived agentic characteristics and (b) internal attribution + communal characteristics, respectively. The results are shown in Table 4.

As the results show, leader gender had a significant positive effect on perceived leadership effectiveness (step 0) as well as on internal attributions (step 1). Furthermore, internal attributions for the displays of empathic anger had a significant positive effect on both perceived communal (step 2a) and agentic characteristics (step 2b), but the direct effects of gender were not significant. When all independent variables of interest were entered simultaneously into the regression in step 3,
Table 4. Results of multiple-path mediation analysis (Study 2)

| Independent variables | Step 0  | Step 1  | Step 2(a) | Step 2(b) | Step 3  |
|-----------------------|--------|---------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| DV = Leadership effectiveness | Constant | 5.45** (.15) | 3.98** (.21) | 4.63** (.29) | 4.02** (.33) | 0.72 (.50) |
| Agentic characteristics | 0.31** (.09) | 0.21** (.07) | 0.24 (.18) | 0.28 (.21) | 0.05 (.15) |
| Internal attributions | 0.49* (.21) | 0.85* (.29) | 0.21** (.07) | 0.32** (.08) | 0.04 (.06) |
| Communal characteristics | F(1, 90) = 5.47* | F(1, 90) = 8.57 | F(2, 89) = 7.97 | F(2, 89) = 12.52 | F(4, 87) = 30.49 |

Notes. $N = 92$. OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$. 
communal and agentic characteristics both independently increased perceived leadership effectiveness, but the effects of gender and internal attributions were not significant. Providing support for Hypothesis 3c, the bias-corrected bootstrapped (based on 5,000 iterations) 95% confidence intervals (Taylor et al., 2008) for the two indirect effects excluded zero for the path via internal attributions and agentic characteristics (0.01, 0.18) as well as for the path via internal attributions and communal characteristics (0.04, 0.31).5

Discussion
The results provided direct support for the suggested theoretical model linking leader gender and perceptions of leadership effectiveness after expressions of empathic anger, via internal causal attributions and perceived agentic and communal characteristics. Moreover, Study 2 shows that the findings of Study 1 are not substantially changed when the target of the empathic anger was another member of the leader’s organization and not a client.

STUDY 3
Study 3 aimed to provide additional evidence for the validity of causal attributions as mediators of the link between leader gender and perceived leadership effectiveness by directly manipulating the mediating process (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). Observers in studies 1 and 2 considered the expression of empathic anger by female compared with male leaders as more revealing of the leader’s personality, and this difference mediated the perception that female leaders were more effective than male leaders. This suggests that the more favourable evaluations of female leaders should disappear when the expression of empathic anger can be unambiguously attributed to the leaders’ personality. Study 3 tested this hypothesis by adding an additional condition in which participants were given an internal explanation for the empathic anger expressed by the leaders.

A second objective was to replicate prior findings for expressions of personal anger and directly compare them with the results for empathic anger. In particular, based on results in previous work (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Lewis, 2000), the findings of studies 1 and 2 should reverse in this case, and expressions of personal anger should be more harmful for women than for men. The study thus had a 2 (target gender: male vs. female) × 4 (emotional display: neutral vs. unexplained empathic anger vs. empathic anger with internal explanation vs. unexplained personal anger) between-subjects design.

Participants
The study included 402 American adults (181 male, 221 female; \(M_{\text{age}} = 32\) years) who were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk and received $0.50 compensation. Participants had 6 years of average full-time work experience in a large variety of sectors. As recommended for research conducted on Amazon Mechanical Turk (Peer, Vosgerau, & Acquisti, 2014), all recruited participants were workers with approval ratings above 95%.

5 Studies 2 and 3 also computed confidence intervals using common-factor-adjusted composite measures. The results only revealed a very small change in the result where both confidence intervals still excluded zero.
**Procedure**

Participants connected to the study remotely and were randomly assigned to one of the eight conditions. The general procedure and the scenarios were very similar to those of Study 1. In the unexplained empathic anger and the neutral conditions, the scenarios used in studies 1 and 3 were identical. In the empathic-anger-with-internal-explanation condition, the employee made the following additional statement at the very end of the report:

> It was a very typical reaction for Sarah [Kevin] to become angry about what had happened to me and really shows what type of person she [he] is.

In the personal-anger condition, the report by the subordinate instead described the following situation:

> I had made some mistakes in a report that I had sent to Sarah [Kevin]. Because of this she (he) had to redo some of her (his) own work. Sarah [Kevin] told me that she was very angry about this.

**Dependent measures**

Participants completed the same measure of leadership effectiveness ($\alpha = .91$), perceived agency ($\alpha = .88$), perceived communality ($\alpha = .88$), and causal attributions ($\alpha = .82$) as in Study 2.

**Results and Discussion**

All variables were analysed with 2 (target gender) $\times$ 4 (emotional display) ANOVAs. Table 5 gives an overview of the results for all dependent measures, and Table 6 shows their correlations.

**Table 5. Overview of main results across conditions (Study 3)**

|                      | Leadership effectiveness | Communal characteristics | Agentic characteristics | Internal versus external causal attributions |
|----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
|                      | $M$  | $SD$ | $M$  | $SD$ | $M$  | $SD$ | $M$  | $SD$ |
| Neutral control      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Male target          | 5.34 | 1.16 | 5.21 | 0.92 | 5.44 | 0.85 | 4.41 | 1.55 |
| Female target        | 5.03 | 1.23 | 5.16 | 1.20 | 5.25 | 1.13 | 4.10 | 1.52 |
| Empathic anger without explanation |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Male target          | 5.26 | 1.26 | 5.28 | 1.01 | 5.40 | 1.06 | 3.92 | 1.43 |
| Female target        | 5.76 | 1.03 | 5.73 | 1.02 | 5.76 | 1.04 | 4.59 | 1.66 |
| Empathic anger with internal explanation |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Male target          | 5.79 | 1.02 | 5.52 | 1.20 | 5.85 | 0.95 | 5.64 | 1.14 |
| Female target        | 5.88 | 1.11 | 5.82 | 1.19 | 5.71 | 1.06 | 5.56 | 1.02 |
| Personal anger       |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Male target          | 4.88 | 1.14 | 3.92 | 1.34 | 4.82 | 1.11 | 3.80 | 1.32 |
| Female target        | 4.19 | 1.24 | 3.40 | 0.98 | 4.73 | 1.13 | 4.41 | 1.25 |
Causal attributions

The analysis revealed no significant main effect of target gender, $F(1, 394) = 2.61, p = .11$, but a significant main effect of emotional display, $F(3, 394) = 26.11, p < .01$, as well as a significant interaction, $F(3, 394) = 3.16, p = .03$. Indicating that the manipulation of internal attributions was successful, pairwise comparisons showed that internal attributions for empathic anger by both male, $F(1, 394) = 37.78, p < .01, d = 1.32$, and female leaders, $F(1, 394) = 12.71, p < .01, d = 0.71$, were significantly higher when there was a clear internal explanation for behaviour of the leader compared with when there was not. Moreover, as predicted by Hypothesis 1, the results showed that observers made significantly more internal attributions for the reactions of female than of male leaders when leaders expressed empathic anger in the absence of a clear internal explanation, $F(1, 394) = 5.70, p = .02, d = 0.42$. However, if there was no display of emotions, $F(1, 394) = 1.24, p = .27$, or a clear internal explanation for the empathic anger, attributions did not differ between female and male leaders, $F(1, 194) = 0.08, p = .78$. Finally, similar to displays of empathic anger, causal attributions for expressions of personal anger were more internal for female than for male leaders, $F(1, 394) = 5.16, p = .02, d = 0.47$.

Leadership effectiveness

The results revealed a significant main effect of emotion type, $F(3, 394) = 23.95, p < .01$, no main effect of gender, $F(1, 394) = 0.84, p = .36$, and a significant interaction, $F(3, 394) = 4.98, p < .01$. As in the previous studies, there was no effect of gender in the neutral control condition, $F(1, 394) = 1.83, p = .18$. However, supporting Hypothesis 3, female leaders were rated significantly higher than male leaders when each expressed empathic anger without a clear internal explanation, $F(1, 394) = 4.54, p = .03, d = 0.43$. Importantly, the significant difference between female and male leaders disappeared when subordinates in the study reported a clear internal explanation for the emotions of the leader, $F(1, 394) = 0.14, p = .71$. Finally, as expected, the results observed for empathic anger reversed when leaders expressed personal anger, and men were now evaluated more favourably than women, $F(1, 394) = 9.42, p < .01, d = 0.58$.

Communality and agency

The ANOVA of agency ratings showed a significant main effect of emotion type, $F(3, 394) = 17.77, p < .01$, but no main effect of leader gender, $F(1, 394) = 0.03, p = .86$, or interaction, $F(3, 394) = 1.43, p = .23$. Pairwise comparisons revealed no significant difference between male and female leaders in the neutral condition, $F(1, 394) = 0.89$.
Mediation

The same procedure was next employed to test for mediation in the empathic anger conditions as in Study 2. The results are shown in Table 7.

In line with the previous results, the initial step (step 0) shows that female target gender had a significantly positive effect on perceived leadership effectiveness after displays of empathic anger. Moreover, female target gender had a significant positive effect on internal attributions (step 1). In addition, there was a significantly positive effect of internal causal attributions on both perceived communal (step 2a) and agentic characteristics (step 2b), whereas target gender did not have a significant direct effect. In step 3, all independent variables of interest were entered simultaneously into the regression. As the results show, both communal and agentic characteristics independently increased perceived leadership effectiveness, whereas target gender was not significant. Unlike in Study 2, the effect of internal attributions was still significant in step 3, suggesting that communal and agentic characteristics only partially mediated the effects of causal attributions on leadership effectiveness. Bootstrapped bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals based on 5,000 iterations for the two mediation paths via internal attributions and agentic characteristics (0.01, 0.18) as well as for the path via internal attributions and communal characteristics (0.01, 0.13) both excluded zero, thus providing supportive evidence for Hypothesis 3c.

Discussion

The results of Study 3 provide further supportive evidence for the main hypotheses. The only exceptions were the results for communal and agentic character traits, which only partially supported Hypothesis 3b, as there was no significant difference in the perception of agentic character traits of male and female leaders after expressions of empathic anger. Notably, corroborating the suggested mediation via causal attributions, the effect of gender on leadership effectiveness after expressions of empathic anger was no longer present when participants were given a clearly internal attribution for this behaviour (Spencer et al., 2005). Moreover, the results from this condition also demonstrate that the present findings are driven not by a general expectation that would proscribe men from displaying empathic anger but by differences in observers’ causal attributions of the
Table 7. Results of multiple-path mediation analysis in unexplained empathic anger condition (Study 3)

| Independent variables | Step 0 DV = Leadership effectiveness | Step 1 DV = Internal attributions | Step 2(a) DV = Agentic characteristics | Step 2(b) DV = Communal characteristics | Step 3 DV = Leadership effectiveness |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Constant              | 5.26*** (.17)                       | 3.92*** (.22)                     | 4.52*** (.29)                          | 4.52*** (.29)                          | 0.55 (.53)                          |
| Agentic characteristics| 0.24*** (.09)                       |                                   |                                        |                                        | 0.24*** (.09)                       |
| Female target         | 0.50* (.23)                         | 0.66* (.31)                       | 0.21 (.21)                             | 0.31 (.20)                             | 0.06 (.17)                          |
| Internal attributions |                                     | 0.23** (.07)                      |                                        | 0.19** (.06)                           | 0.20** (.06)                        |
| Communal characteristics|                                   |                                   |                                        |                                        | 0.50** (.09)                        |
| F(1, 96) = 4.58*      | F(1, 96) = 4.47*                    | F(2, 95) = 7.46***                | F(2, 95) = 6.96**                      | F(4, 93) = 26.31**                   |

Notes. N = 98. OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. **p < .01; *p < .05.
emotional display. Finally, in line with previous findings (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Lewis, 2000), the results obtained for displays of empathic anger reversed, and female leaders were evaluated less favourably than male leaders when they expressed anger about a personal harm caused by a follower.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The results of three studies showed that displays of empathic anger were more beneficial for female than for male leaders. Specifically, expressing empathic anger increased perceptions of both agentic and communal qualities in female leaders, and thus their perceived effectiveness as leaders. Displaying empathic anger, by contrast, had only a relatively small positive effect for men. All three studies also demonstrated that this effect was mediated by observers’ tendency to attribute expressions of empathic anger more to internal factors when it was expressed by a female than by a male leader. Consistent with this observation, the results of Study 3 showed that the difference in evaluations of male and female leaders disappeared when participants were given a clear internal explanation for the expression of empathic anger. Finally, Study 3 also revealed that the results for expressions for empathic anger reversed when leaders expressed anger about a personal harm, and, in line with previous results (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Lewis, 2000), female leaders were now evaluated less favourably than male leaders. Overall, the findings were robust across a number of different participant pools with varying levels of work and management experience. In addition, consistent with most prior findings (see, e.g., Heilman, 2012, for an overview; for exceptions, see, e.g., Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2007; Rudman, 1998), the results were not affected by participant’s gender. Previous research showed that senior female leaders can in some cases benefit from a perception that they must be exceptionally competent to have succeeded in a leadership role (Foschi, 2000; Rosette & Tost, 2010). Suggesting that such a general perception of higher competence of female leaders was not affecting the results, in all three studies there was no significant difference in the perceptions of male and female leaders in the control conditions where leaders did not express a particular emotion.

The present results make several contributions. First, they contribute to the literature on gender stereotypes and leader emotions that has pointed out the specific challenges that emotional displays might pose for female leaders. For example, Fischbach, Lichtenthaler, and Horstmann (2015) showed that observers rated typical emotional displays by women to be less similar to those by successful managers than typical displays by men. Similarly, Ragins and Winkel (2011) argued that the interplay between gender stereotypes and emotional displays frequently prevent women from developing and leveraging power in their work relationships (Brescoll, 2016). In particular, whereas men can signal agency as well as status and power by voicing personal anger (Tiedens, 2001), because of the effect of gender stereotypes women are unable to do so (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Lewis, 2000), putting them at a severe disadvantage when trying to take advantage of emotional displays (Ragins & Winkel, 2011). By contrast, the current results demonstrate that expressions of anger are not necessarily always problematic for female leaders and can instead, under certain circumstances, even be more beneficial than for male leaders. Thus, the general consequences of ‘gendered emotions’ (Ragins & Winkel, 2011) in organizations, while clearly posing large challenges for female leaders, can in some circumstances also be employed to their advantage.
Second, the findings add to prior results on expressions of anger in organizations. Emotional displays, such as displays of happiness, sadness, and, in particular, personal anger (Gaddis et al., 2004; Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002; Tiedens, 2001), are a critical factor in shaping followers’ perceptions of leaders (George, 2000; Humphrey, 2002). Building on prior research that has increasingly recognized anger as a multifaceted phenomenon with a variety of both positive and negative consequences (Geddes & Callister, 2007; Gibson & Callister, 2010), and in particular previous work on empathic anger (Batson et al., 2007, 2009), the present findings show that, compared with personal anger, displays of empathic anger have a generally more positive effect on follower perceptions but also that this positive effect strongly depends on leader-specific characteristics such as gender and the extent to which followers make internal attributions for the leader’s behaviour.

Third, the present results might also have practical implications. To overcome the double bind posed by leader-role expectations and gender stereotypes (Eagly & Karau, 2002), it is crucial for female leaders to find ways to signal agency without facing backlash. Displays of empathic anger could be a way to achieve this goal. In particular, the results of all three studies showed that expressions of empathetic anger led to higher perceptions of both agentic and communal characteristics and thus even created a female-leadership advantage. More generally, expressions of empathic anger can be also be part of a broader androgynous leadership style, which has been shown to be highly effective for female leaders (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Kolb, 1997). Similarly, as pointed out in previous research, female leaders can particularly benefit, and even have an advantage over male leaders, when employing a transformational leadership style (Eagly & Carli, 2003) which is based on the leader’s ability to gain followers’ trust and confidence (Bass, 1985). Displays of empathic anger that signal agency and communality simultaneously should help leaders to do so, suggesting that such emotional displays could be one of the factors that enable female transformational leaders to excel.

Although potentially effective, however, frequent use of such a ‘strategic’ display of emotions might be accompanied by other problems, such as a feeling of inauthenticity by the leader, possibly causing emotional exhaustion or even burnout in the long run (Gardner, Fischer, & Hunt, 2009). Thus, female leaders should likely engage in expressions of empathic anger only when such an emotional display fits their overall leadership style and personality and also find other ways to signal communality and agency simultaneously. For example, Heilman and Okimoto (2007) showed that agentic female leaders were not judged more negatively than men if they were also described as focused on creating a supportive work environment. Moreover, during direct personal interactions, using verbal and nonverbal behaviours that are associated with communality, such as smiling or showing understanding of other perspectives, while actively arguing for a certain position, could have a similar effect (Carli, 2001). Finally, in some situations, leaders could potentially display several emotions such as anger, signalling agency, and sadness, signalling sympathy, simultaneously (Madera & Smith, 2009). In general, despite these generally positive implications for female leaders, the results in this study, especially on the effects of displays of personal anger in Study 3, also clearly indicate that it remains essential for female leaders, and likely more so than for their male peers, to correctly navigate the difficult challenge of which kind of emotion to display in particular situations (Brescoll, 2016; Ragins & Winkel, 2011).

Interpreting the results appropriately also requires noting several limitations. First, in all three studies, leaders always expressed emotional reactions to events that affected their followers. It is likely that empathic anger is particularly effective in such cases...
because care for followers’ well-being is considered essential to the leadership role (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Offermann et al., 1994). However, it remains unclear whether empathic anger caused by harm done to other members of the organization will result in the same consequences. Another important limitation originates from the methodology employed in this study. Experimental vignette studies allow for the clear identification of particular causal effects as well as their underlying psychological mechanisms (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). In practice, however, many followers might already have extensive insights into the character of a leader from previous interactions, and thus, the leader's gender might no longer have a strong effect on how followers interpret and evaluate the behaviour of their leader (Swim, Borgida, Maruyama, & Myers, 1989). Thus, the present findings are likely to mostly apply in situations where followers have not yet formed a strong impression of the leader, for example, because they have only just begun to work together or because leaders and followers rarely interact with each other directly. Moreover, future research should also go beyond the use of purely verbal descriptions and employ audio or video content to increase the level of immersion experienced by participants and thus potentially increase the robustness of the results (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014).

In conclusion, reversing prior findings for displays of personal anger, the results in this study showed that, driven by observers’ causal attributions, displays of empathic anger were more effective for female than for male leaders in positively shaping the impressions of others. These findings have implications for the prior literature on emotional displays in organizations and suggest a possible method that female leaders could use to overcome the double bind posed by the competing expectations arising from gender stereotypes and their role as leaders.

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