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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# When agency “fits” regardless of gender: Perceptions of applicant fit when job and organization signal male stereotypes

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**Abstract**

Evaluators' fit assessments are not only influenced by applicants' qualities, but also by stereotypes, especially in recruitment for high-status jobs in male-dominated fields. The unidimensional agentic stereotype of these work contexts signals agentic job and organizational requirements (stereotypically male qualities such as achievement orientation), although the actual requirements usually also include communality (stereotypically female qualities such as interpersonal skills). In five experiments, we investigate the relevance of perceived applicant agency for perceived applicant fit, the influence of recruitment material, contextual differences, and the role of applicant gender. Our findings indicate that perceived applicant agency drives perceived person-job and person-organization fit in strictly male stereotyped work contexts, regardless of gender, and agentic recruitment material enhances this effect. Contrasting different contexts (high- with low-status jobs and a male-dominated with a gender-balanced and female-dominated field) revealed that the relevance of perceived agency increases with perceived job status, and the relevance of perceived communality decreases with the expected share

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of men. Although women were perceived as highly agentic in strictly male stereotyped work contexts, their need to be perceived as agentic also was higher than for men, due to the perceived lack of fit between women and high-status jobs.

**KEYWORDS**

gender/sexual orientation, person-environment fit, recruitment, stereotypes

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Organizations strive to hire the most qualified employees who best fit the specific job and organization (Kristof-Brown, 2000). This is not always an easy or straightforward task because stereotypes can bias evaluators' fit perceptions (Heilman, 1983, 2012), and fit perceptions are often an even more proximate predictor for recruitment decisions than actual fit (Cable & DeRue, 2002; Cable & Judge, 1997; Kristof, 1996). Stereotypes constitute "socially shared beliefs" (Hoyt & Johnson, 2011, p. 207) and can refer to groups of individuals as well as to jobs and organizations (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Glick, 1991). Particularly when jobs and organizations are dominated by one social group (e.g., men), stereotype biases may prevent organizations from selecting employees who are the best fit and disadvantage whole groups of individuals (Eagly & Karau, 2002). We investigate perceptions in and across *gendered work contexts* and focus on strictly male stereotyped work contexts: high-status jobs in male-dominated fields.

High-status jobs in organizations within male-dominated fields are often stereotyped as highly agentic (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Glick, 1991; Koenig et al., 2011). These jobs include for example jobs as professors in male-dominated academic disciplines (e.g., math-intensive discipline) or managing directors in male-dominated industries (e.g., automotive industry). *Agency* refers to stereotypically male qualities such as achievement orientation, assertiveness, competitiveness, and rationality. Agency is typically contrasted with *communality*, which refers to stereotypically female qualities such as cooperativeness, caring, and interpersonal skills (Heilman, 2001, 2012).

Requirements of high-status jobs usually are diverse, including agentic and communal qualities (Cann & Siegfried, 1990; Eagly & Carli, 2003; Rehbock et al., 2021). However, *perceptions* of requirements usually are highly agentic because high-status jobs are associated with men and agency (Koenig et al., 2011). When high-status jobs are occupied in a male-dominated field, this context possesses a *unidimensional* agentic stereotype (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Glick, 1991). Building on theories of stereotyping (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 1983, 2012) and fit perceptions (Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown, 2000; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), we develop and test a model of evaluators' perceptions of applicant fit in such unidimensional male stereotyped work contexts. We suggest that perceived applicant agency is a key driver of perceived applicant person-job (P-J) and person-organization (P-O) fit.

Stereotype-congruent recruitment material can reinforce stereotype-based beliefs. Previous research indicates that stereotype-congruent recruitment material influences potential applicants' perceptions and their self-ascribed fit (Gaucher et al., 2011; Hentschel et al., 2018, 2020). Knowledge on influences on *evaluators'* perceptions, however, is lacking. Evaluators' perspectives are crucial as they are gatekeepers deciding who gets a position (Cole et al., 2004). Evaluators' perceptions likely are different from applicants' because assessing others seems to follow different mental processes (Gales & Hubner, 2020; Hentschel et al., 2019) and often involves a lot of ambiguity and inferences which give way to stereotyping (Nieva & Gutek, 1980). For evaluators, the agentic stereotype of strictly male stereotyped work contexts becomes particularly salient and an explicit assessment criterion when recruitment material reflects the agentic stereotype – which is common in practice (Gaucher et al., 2011). We examine how stereotype-congruent (vs. -incongruent) descriptions of jobs and organizations shape evaluators' perceptions of applicant P-J and P-O fit in the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields.

We propose perceived agency as a key driver of fit perceptions specifically in the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields. We argue that, due to stereotypical perceptions, the relevance of agency for fit perceptions increases with perceived job status, and the relevance of communality is particularly low when the expected share of men in a work context is high. Communality likely becomes more influential for fit perceptions when the expected share of women in the work context increases. Therefore, we suggest that the unidimensional focus on agency is context-specific. Our research examines the interplay of a job's status and the field of the organization, and analyzes the relationship between agency, communality, and fit perceptions across different work contexts.

How evaluators perceive *female* applicants for high-status jobs in male-dominated fields remains a puzzling question. Evaluators could perceive female applicants as low in agency, due to the female gender stereotype (Heilman, 2001). On the contrary, they could perceive female applicants as high in agency, due to their (successful) engagement in a male stereotyped career (Biernat, 2012; Heilman et al., 1989; Kunda & Thagard, 1996). Considering these competing arguments, we analyze evaluators' perceptions of female and male applicants across different work contexts, and specifically in the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields. We compare perceptions of applicants' agency, communality, and fit, and explore attributions of competence, likeability, and "non-desirable" traits to applicants who deviate from prescribed gender norms (Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001).

We test our model on evaluators' fit perceptions in strictly male stereotyped work contexts, the context dependency of its assumptions, and perceptions of applicants across contexts in a series of five experiments. We test in studies 1–4 how stereotype-congruent (vs. -incongruent) job and organization descriptions shape evaluators' fit perceptions in the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields, and analyze in study 5 contextual differences contrasting high- and low-status jobs in a male-dominated, female-dominated, and gender-balanced field.

Our studies contribute to research on stereotyping, recruitment, and fit perceptions in several ways. First, we bridge perspectives from recruitment and stereotype research, and thereby provide a nuanced understanding of evaluators' perceptions of applicant fit in strictly male stereotyped work contexts. In doing so, we present empirical evidence to support Heilman's lack of fit theory (1983, 2012) by showing stereotype biases in fit assessments, and integrate established fit constructs from the recruitment literature. We also show the importance of contextual differences and disentangle influences of perceived job status and expected gender ratios on fit perceptions. Second, we elucidate the influence of stereotype-congruent job and organization descriptions on evaluators' fit perceptions, and thereby highlight the important role of recruitment material design in acquiring diverse talents. We focus on evaluators' perspectives, who are crucial due to their gatekeeper role, but are under-investigated as previous research on recruitment material largely focused on applicants' perspectives. Third, we provide an empirical investigation of evaluators' perceptions of female and male applicants' qualities across contexts and shed light on a previously neglected but crucial stage in women's careers in "gender-atypical" work contexts.

## 2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Our theoretical framework outlines the role of stereotypes, perceived applicant agency, and stereotype-congruent recruitment material for fit perceptions in strictly male stereotyped work contexts (Figure 1). We also detail contextual differences and perceptions of applicants across contexts (Figure 2), along with the role of applicant gender (Figures 1 and 2).

### 2.1 | The role of stereotypes for fit perceptions in strictly male stereotyped work contexts

Fit perceptions are important predictors for decisions and behavior in recruitment processes (Kristof-Brown, 2000; Uggerslev et al., 2012). Empirical evidence suggests that subjective fit perceptions are often an even more

proximate predictor than the objective compatibility between a person's and a work environment's characteristics (Cable & DeRue, 2002). Evaluators' perceptions of applicant fit have been shown to influence their hiring decisions (Cable & Judge, 1997; Kristof-Brown, 2000), and are particularly crucial due to their role as organizational gatekeepers (Cole et al., 2004). However, their fit perceptions can be biased by stereotypes (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 1983, 2012). Stereotypes are "socially shared beliefs" (Hoyt & Johnson, 2011, p. 207). They can refer to groups of individuals as well as to jobs and organizations, such as a particular job someone holds or applies for, or an organization in a particular field in which the job is offered. With stereotyped perceptions, evaluators' hiring decisions may undermine an organization's diversity efforts, notably in highly stereotyped, *gendered* work contexts.

Stereotypes about individuals reflect "group-trait associations" (Greenwald et al., 2009, p. 19). People tend to transfer traits that they ascribe to a specific social group (e.g., women) to individual group members. Stereotypes are "regardless of the actual variation in qualities among the group members" (Hoyt & Johnson, 2011, p. 207) and can bias people's perceptions of others. Gender stereotypes stem from observations of men's and women's behavior in their traditional social roles as "breadwinner" and "homemaker" (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Eagly & Wood, 2012). Men in general are associated with *agency* or *agentic qualities* linked to achievement orientation, inclination to take charge, autonomy, and rationality; women are associated with *communality* or *communal qualities* linked to concern for others, affiliative tendencies, deference, and emotional sensitivity (Heilman, 2012; Hentschel et al., 2019). Gender stereotypes are not only descriptive, but they also prescribe how men and women should or should not be (Eagly, 1987; Heilman, 2001).

Stereotypes also shape perceptions of characteristics and requirements of jobs and organizations. For instance, our society seems to have a stereotyped image that high-status jobs require agency (Koenig et al., 2011). Moreover, organizations in female-dominated fields (e.g., education and care) are stereotyped as more communal than organizations in other fields (male-dominated or gender-balanced fields) such that they are likely perceived to require communality (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Glick, 1991).

According to the *lack of fit theory* (Heilman, 1983, 2012), stereotypes potentially induce a perceived "lack of fit" of applicants with job requirements when evaluators' stereotype-based beliefs about applicants do not match with their stereotype-based beliefs about the job. Evaluators who assess applicants' fit compare their beliefs about applicants with their beliefs of what a job requires. As both sides are subject to stereotypes, stereotypes can bias their fit perceptions. Stereotype biases in fit perceptions are likely to be particularly evident in contexts where jobs, organizations, and/or requirements are highly stereotyped (see also Eagly & Karau, 2002), such as when job *and* organization signal male stereotypes.

In this research, we focus on such strictly male stereotyped work contexts and investigate recruitment for high-status jobs in male-dominated fields. In these contexts, stereotypes of jobs and organizations form a unidimensional male stereotyped, agentic pattern, which can influence perceptions of one's own and others' fit to the work context (Heilman, 2012). The assessment of oneself or others seems to follow different mental processes (Gales & Hubner, 2020; Hentschel et al., 2019), such that fit perceptions from applicants' and evaluators' perspectives likely differ. We focus on evaluators' perceptions who are important due to their roles as gatekeepers and whose assessments usually involve a lot of ambiguity and inferences giving way to stereotype influences (Nieva & Gutek, 1980).

## 2.2 | Perceptions of agency and applicant fit in strictly male stereotyped work contexts

High-status jobs in male-dominated fields are strictly *male stereotyped* work contexts such that job and organizational characteristics most likely signal *agency*. High-status jobs, referring to high-level leadership jobs (e.g., a job as a professor or managing director), have always been and still are mainly filled with men (Catalyst, 2020a, 2020b). Although our understanding of effective leadership is dynamic (see e.g., Eagly & Carli, 2003), since Schein's (1973, 1975) earliest work on the *think-manager-think-male* paradigm, research has repeatedly shown that the male, agentic stereotype of

leadership is quite stable (Koenig et al., 2011; Schein, 2001). Thus, high-status jobs are cognitively linked to the male gender and stereotypically male, agentic requirements.

When a high-status job is occupied in an organization in a *male-dominated* field (e.g., a math-intensive discipline or the automotive industry; Catalyst, 2020d; National Science Foundation, 2018), the field likely furthers the focus on agency. In contrast, when a high-status job is occupied in an organization in a *female-dominated* field, the field likely signals communal, stereotypically female aspects (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Glick, 1991). The work context would then signal agency and communality. Therefore, high-status jobs in male-dominated fields represent work contexts with a unidimensional agentic stereotype pattern.

Previous research suggests that an agentic stereotype of a work context creates beliefs that applicants only fit to jobs when they possess agentic qualities, neglecting communal qualities such as “interpersonal skills and the ability to develop new talent” (Heilman, 2012, p. 116; see also Gaucher et al., 2011). Communality usually is also needed in high-status jobs and male-dominated fields, but evaluators seem to infer that agency is the main requirement. Thus, we consider perceived applicant agency to be a key driver of evaluators’ perceptions of applicants’ fit specifically in the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields.

Integrating conceptualizations of *P-J fit* and *P-O fit*, we suggest that the unidimensional agentic stereotype of these work contexts shapes both perceptions of applicants’ fit to the job and to the organization. Perceived P-J and P-O fit are related, yet distinct fit concepts that “offer unique prediction of hiring recommendations” (Kristof-Brown, 2000, p. 643). Not only is it crucial whether an applicant is considered to fit a job and its requirements, but also whether he or she is considered to fit the organization offering the job. When assessing P-J and P-O fit, evaluators rely on different facets of applicants’ characteristics (Kristof-Brown, 2000).

To assess P-J fit, evaluators estimate whether an applicant’s knowledge, skills, and abilities match a job’s requirements and whether an applicant’s personality fits the job (Edwards, 1991; Kristof-Brown, 2000). A job and presumed job requirements may be subject to stereotypes because of the job’s status. As explained earlier, high-status jobs are stereotyped as highly agentic. Therefore, applicants’ perceived P-J fit, in the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields, is likely to increase with their perceived agency.

To assess P-O fit, evaluators estimate whether applicants’ characteristics match the organization’s, especially whether an applicant’s personality, attitudes, goals, and values match the organization’s “culture, climate, values, goals, and norms” (Kristof, 1996, p. 3; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Tom, 1971). The field of the organization can shape the perception of the organization and its requirements depending on whether one expects the predominant gender to be men or women (Cejka & Eagly, 1999). In an organization in a male-dominated field, an *agentic* stereotype may evoke perceptions of an organizational culture focused on competition, success, and outstanding achievements more than mutual support and cooperativeness (Catanzaro et al., 2010). Applicants may thus be perceived as a particularly good fit to the organization when they have a personality, attitudes, goals, and values that match this organizational culture. Therefore, applicants’ perceived P-O fit, in the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields, is also likely to increase with their perceived agency.

Hypothesis 1: In the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields, evaluators’ perceptions of applicants’ agency positively relate to their perceptions of applicants’ *P-J fit* (1a) and *P-O fit* (1b).

## 2.3 | The influence of recruitment material in strictly male stereotyped work contexts

In job advertisements, organizations describe, and thus signal *explicitly*, what they are like and what jobs they offer (Walker & Hinojosa, 2014). We refer to descriptions of jobs, including tasks and job requirements, as *job profiles*, and to descriptions of the organization, including the organization’s culture, values, goals, and practices, as *organizational profiles*.

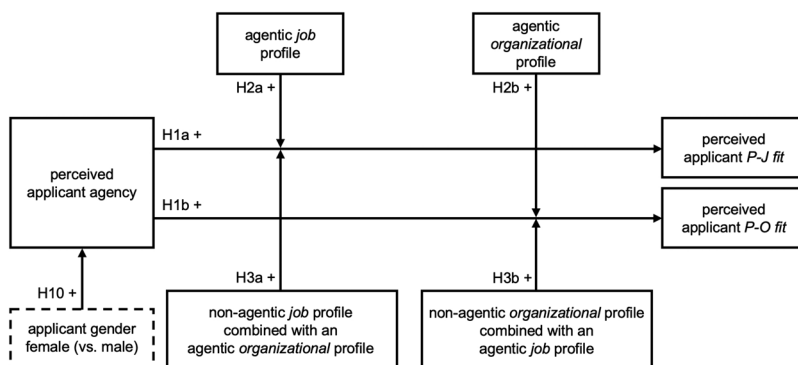
Job and organizational profiles can not only influence how applicants see jobs and organizations (Gaucher et al., 2011; Walker & Hinojosa, 2014) but likely also influence evaluators' perceptions. They explicitly signal criteria that recruiters should consider when evaluating applicants (Hentschel & Horvath, 2015). Thereby, these profiles can influence decision-making heuristics and help justify hiring decisions. In addition, they portray job and organizational characteristics and might subconsciously affect evaluators' perceptions of applicant fit by enhancing the salience of specific assessment criteria (see Kristof-Brown, 2000; Rice & Barth, 2016). Therefore, it is likely that explicitly mentioned criteria and characteristics in job and organizational profiles increase the likelihood of evaluators' processing of information about those criteria and characteristics (above others).

It is problematic, though, that job and organizational profiles tend to reflect stereotypes of work contexts (Gaucher et al., 2011). Stereotype-congruent *job* profiles for high-status jobs in male-dominated fields emphasize agency by using agentic wording in the descriptions of jobs, tasks, and requirements. Stereotype-congruent *organizational* profiles emphasize values, goals, and practices in the organizational culture that reflect agentic qualities and behaviors (Gaucher et al., 2011; Hentschel et al., 2020).

So far, research has mainly been concerned with the influence of male stereotyped recruitment material on *applicants'* perceptions (e.g., Gaucher et al., 2011; Hentschel et al., 2018, 2020). Gaucher et al. (2011) found that, with highly agentic wording in job advertisements, potential applicants expected more men in jobs and organizations, and female potential applicants were less attracted due to reduced perceptions of belongingness. Hentschel et al. (2018) found that a male stereotyped announcement design reduced women's interest and self-ascribed fit to an entrepreneurship program. We investigate whether and how stereotype-congruent job and organizational profiles in job advertisements affect *evaluators'* perceptions of applicants' P-J and P-O fit. To increase diversity, organizations need diverse applicant pools, but also have to reduce stereotyped assessment patterns of evaluators.

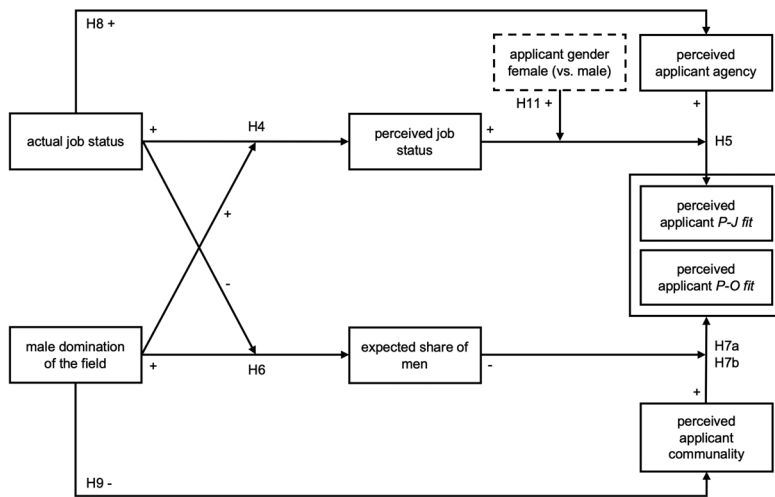
We argue that, in the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields, agentic job and organizational profiles reinforce evaluators' stereotype-based beliefs (Figure 1). As these profiles make agency particularly salient and an explicit assessment criterion, they likely emphasize the perceptions of agentic requirements of jobs and organizations. Hence, an agentic job profile (vs. communal or neutral) may strengthen the relationship between evaluators' perceptions of applicants' agency and applicants' P-J fit. In parallel, an agentic organizational profile (vs. communal or neutral) may strengthen the relationship between evaluators' perceptions of applicants' agency and applicants' P-O fit.

Comparing the same job across different organizations, the *organizational profile* likely also influences expectations of *the job*, inferred from organizational culture perceptions (see Catanzaro et al., 2010). Accordingly, we assume that with a non-agentic job profile, an agentic organizational profile can still strengthen perceptions of agentic job requirements. Conversely, *job profiles* likely influence how *an organization* is perceived as they mirror work processes and practices within the organization (see Gaucher et al., 2011). Hence, we expect that with a non-agentic organizational



**FIGURE 1** Perceptions of applicants' agency and fit and the influence of stereotype-congruent (vs. -incongruent) recruitment material in the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields





**FIGURE 2** Context dependency of fit perceptions, perceptions of applicants across contexts, and the role of applicant gender. (Actual) job status = high-status vs. low-status (i.e., high-level-leadership vs. non-leadership). Male-dominated field vs. female-dominated and gender-balanced for H4 and H6, vs. female-dominated for H9

profile, an agentic job profile can still strengthen perceptions of agentic organizational requirements. When we consider a situation where job and organizational profile signal different requirements (e.g., one is agentic and one is communal), we expect that one of them being agentic is sufficient to create the salience of agency in job and organizational requirements. Therefore, we propose that the relationship between evaluators' perceptions of applicants' agency and P-J fit is stronger when a non-agentic job profile is combined with an agentic rather than a non-agentic organizational profile. Furthermore, we propose that the relationship between evaluators' perceptions of applicants' agency and P-O fit is stronger when a non-agentic organizational profile is combined with an agentic rather than a non-agentic job profile.

**Hypothesis 2:** In the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields, the relationship between evaluators' perceptions of applicants' agency and applicants' fit is strengthened by an *agentic job profile* for P-J fit (2a) and by an *agentic organizational profile* for P-O fit (2b) as compared to non-agentic profiles.

**Hypothesis 3:** In the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields, the relationship between evaluators' perceptions of applicants' agency and applicants' fit is stronger when a non-agentic job profile is combined with an *agentic organizational profile* for P-J fit (3a) and when a non-agentic organizational profile is combined with an *agentic job profile* for P-O fit (3b) as compared to non-agentic profiles of both.

## 2.4 | The context dependency of fit perceptions: The role of status and the gender ratio

Focusing on *high-status* jobs in *male-dominated* fields, we assumed that status and male domination interact in creating a unidimensional focus on agency in fit perceptions. We propose that agency is more relevant for perceived fit when the job is perceived to have high status, and communality to be less relevant when the expected share of men is high (Figure 2).

The *perceived status* of a job is most likely predicted by the actual status of a job. For instance, the perceived status is likely higher for a high-level leadership job as a professor or managing director, compared to a non-leadership job



as an individual contributor to an organization's core activities (e.g., as a mechanical worker or care worker). Additionally, the perceived status of a job may depend on the field. As status and female stereotypes seem incongruent (Eagly & Karau, 2002), evaluators may perceive a high-status job as higher in status when the job is offered in an organization in a male-dominated field than in a gender-balanced (e.g., a business administration faculty or food trading company) or female-dominated field (e.g., a social sciences faculty or care-oriented company). Consequently, we assume that evaluators' perceptions of the status of a particular job increase with the actual job status (high-level-leadership vs. non-leadership), and additionally with the male domination of the field (male-dominated vs. gender-balanced or female-dominated).

The higher the perceived status of a job, the more likely the job will be associated with agentic requirements (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig et al., 2011). Thus, we propose that the relationship between evaluators' perceptions of applicants' agency and applicants' P-J fit increases with the perceived job status.

Hypothesis 4: Evaluators perceive the status of a job as higher for *high-status jobs* than low-status jobs (high-level-leadership vs. non-leadership), and this effect is stronger in *male-dominated fields* (vs. gender-balanced or female-dominated fields).

Hypothesis 5: The relationship between evaluators' perceptions of applicants' agency and applicants' P-J fit increases with the *perceived status* of the job.

While perceived job status may induce perceptions of agentic requirements, the *expected share of men* within a work context may reduce perceptions of communal requirements. Evaluators are likely to expect a higher share of men in fields where, in general, more men than women are working; for instance, more men have jobs in the automotive than in the nursing industry (Catalyst, 2020d; OECD, 2019). Additionally, due to the general male dominance in leadership positions (Catalyst, 2020a, 2020b; DeSilver, 2018), evaluators are likely to expect a higher share of men in high-status than in low-status jobs. Accordingly, we assume that the difference in the expected share of men is most evident when comparing *low-status jobs* across different fields: The expected share of men is high in a male-dominated field (e.g., among mechanical workers), and low in a female-dominated field (e.g., among care workers). When comparing *high-status jobs* across different fields the picture is less clear. In high-status jobs (e.g., among managing directors), in general, more men than women will be expected such that the expected share of men may be only slightly lower in female-dominated than in male-dominated fields. Thus, we propose that evaluators expect a higher share of men in jobs in a male-dominated vs. a gender-balanced or female-dominated field, but this effect is weaker among high-status jobs than among low-status jobs.

A work context is likely to be perceived to entail more stereotypically female, communal requirements when the expected share of women is high, than when the expected share of men is high (Cejka & Eagly, 1999). Therefore, we assume that, when the expected share of men in a work context is high, evaluators' perceptions of applicants' communality are unlikely to relate to their perceptions of applicants' fit. More specifically, a low-status job is more likely to be perceived to require communality in a female-dominated than in a male-dominated field. A high-status job may be perceived to incorporate communality, *in addition to agency*, in a female-dominated field, whereas a high-status job is unlikely to be perceived to require communality in a male-dominated field. Thus, we propose that the relationship between evaluators' perceptions of applicants' communality and applicants' P-J fit decreases with the expected share of men. Furthermore, in work contexts where the expected share of men is high, perceived communality is less likely to be relevant for perceived P-O fit as there is no signal for a communal organizational culture. Accordingly, we propose that also the relationship between evaluators' perceptions of applicants' communality and applicants' P-O fit decreases with the expected share of men.

Hypothesis 6: Evaluators expect a higher share of men in jobs in *male-dominated fields* (vs. gender-balanced or female-dominated), and this effect is weaker for high-status jobs than for low-status jobs.

Hypothesis 7: The relationships between evaluators' perceptions of applicants' communality and applicants' P-J fit (7a) and P-O fit (7b) decrease with the *expected share of men*.

## 2.5 | Perceptions of applicants across contexts and the role of applicant gender

We have proposed that it is relevant for applicants to be perceived as agentic in strictly male stereotyped work contexts. Indeed, we expect that perceived agency plays an important role for male *and* female applicants in these contexts. Still, *female* applicants are, in general, likely to be perceived as lower in agency (and higher in communality) because the male stereotype incorporates agency and the female stereotype does not. Gender stereotyping is still prevalent (Hentschel et al., 2019), and also women's and men's traditional social roles, as the basis of gender stereotyping (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012), are still present in today's modern society (Sczesny et al., 2019). Women continue to be the dominant sex to care for children and perform unpaid household labor (Catalyst, 2020e), and to engage in occupations connected to social skills (Lippa et al., 2014), whereas men are still the dominant sex in holding high-status jobs (Levanon & Grusky, 2016).

However, also the work context may shape perceptions of male and female applicants (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Heilman et al., 1989). Agency is thought to be essential for moving up the career ladder and for being successful in a high-status job. Therefore, when someone applies to a high-status job, and has already climbed the ladder, that person may be associated with agency, whether male or female. For instance, in Heilman et al.'s study (1989) women were perceived as more agentic when described as "women managers" and even more agentic when described as "successful women managers". In addition, Eckes (2002) found similar stereotypical patterns for perceptions of "career men" and "career women" in terms of competence and warmth. Making parallels to the agency-communality framework, his findings would suggest high agency and rather low communality perceptions for "career men" as well as "career women" (Fiske, 2019). Therefore, applicants, whether male or female, may be perceived as more agentic when they apply to high-status jobs than to low-status jobs.

In addition, for perceptions of applicants' communality it may play a role whether they pursue a job in a male-dominated or a female-dominated field. While female-dominated fields are thought to explicitly require communal qualities, as explained earlier, communal requirements are unlikely to be salient in male-dominated fields. Thus, applicants who have experience in and apply to jobs in male-dominated fields, whether high-status or low-status, are less likely to be associated with communality than applicants in female-dominated fields.

Hypothesis 8: Applicants are perceived as more agentic when they pursue *high-status jobs* than when they pursue low-status jobs, regardless of gender.

Hypothesis 9: Applicants are perceived as less communal when they pursue jobs in *male-dominated fields* than when they pursue jobs in female-dominated fields, regardless of gender.

In high-status jobs in male-dominated fields, women are an exception. *Shifting standards* (Biernat, 2012; Biernat et al., 1991) suggest that women who successfully engage in a field where they are by default underrepresented (and considered unsuccessful) may be evaluated in reference to lower expectations on "women in general". Therefore, when women are deemed successful in such contexts, they may be perceived differently as compared to "women in general". The characteristic that is considered essential for their success but as atypical for women (agency) is then likely to be particularly salient (see Heilman et al., 1995; Heilman et al., 1989). Exceptional agency may actually be considered a prerequisite for success of women in such contexts and for overcoming the challenges that only women face in such contexts (Rosette & Tost, 2010). Once women have "proven" they can cope with the requirements of a strictly male stereotyped work context, they might be perceived as exceptionally agentic (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koch et al., 2015; Kunda & Thagard, 1996).

Therefore, we suggest that, due to their career, former achievements, and proven success in the gender-atypical context, evaluators may even perceive female applicants for high-status jobs in male-dominated fields as more agentic than male applicants. Evaluators might assume that female applicants, who made it this far in a work context where men are the default, are extremely agentic because agency might have been a necessity to withstand resistance and outperform male (and female) colleagues. Thus, we propose that female applicants are perceived as more agentic than male applicants in such contexts.

**Hypothesis 10:** In the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields, female applicants are perceived as more agentic than male applicants.

Being perceived as agentic might be one mechanism that helps women to overcome stereotype biases. When women are perceived as agentic, they may be perceived as a good fit for jobs that are perceived as high in status, despite the incongruity between stereotypes of women and status (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and the “think-manager-think-male” findings (Koenig et al., 2011; Schein, 1973, 1975, 2001). That means their perceived agency can compensate for their perceived lack of fit with such jobs. However, being perceived as agentic is only likely for women when there is a clear and unquestionable signal for their success in a male stereotyped work context (other than for men who are more likely to be perceived as agentic per se, due to their gender stereotype) (Heilman, 2012; Heilman et al., 1989). When women are not perceived as agentic, they are unlikely to be perceived as a good fit for jobs that are perceived as high in status. Therefore, specifically when the perceived status of a job is high, women’s perceived fit to a job may be more strongly dependent on their perceived agency than men’s. Thus, we assume that in these contexts perceived agency is more relevant for women than for men to be perceived as a good fit for the job. Taken together, we predict that evaluators’ perceptions of applicants’ agency positively relate to their perceptions of applicants’ P-J fit specifically when the perceived status of the job is high (hypothesis 5), and this effect is stronger for women than for men.

**Hypothesis 11:** The relationship between evaluators’ perceptions of applicants’ agency and applicants’ P-J fit increases with the perceived status of the job, *for women more than for men*.

Thus, we suggest that perceived agency drives male *and* female applicants’ perceived fit with high-status jobs, especially in male-dominated fields, and can help women to overcome a perceived lack of fit with jobs that are perceived as high in status. Still, and importantly, there might be other aspects besides agency perceptions that could positively or negatively relate to predictors of hiring decisions, and which may be different for men and women. Women who are perceived as highly agentic might face social backlash (such as being less liked or being ascribed traits that are considered non-desirable especially for women, e.g., “dominant” and “self-centered”) because agentic women deviate from prescribed gender norms (Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001). We investigate this aspect exploratively in our data, as this could be an additional mechanism depicting influences of agency perceptions on predictors of hiring decisions, especially for female applicants.

### 3 | STUDIES 1–4: PERCEPTIONS OF FIT IN STRICTLY MALE STEREOTYPED WORK CONTEXTS

In studies 1–4, we examined how evaluators’ perceptions of applicants’ agency relate to their perceptions of applicants’ P-J and P-O fit in the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields, and the influence of stereotype-congruent job and organizational profiles in recruitment material. Additionally, we investigated perceptions of applicants’ agency by applicant gender in these contexts. In these studies, we operationalized high-status jobs in male-dominated fields in academia. We investigated the job as a professor in a mathematics faculty. The job as a full professor usually entails high status (Carli et al., 2016; van den Brink & Benschop, 2014), and comes, at least

in Germany (where the studies were conducted), with leadership responsibility for an entire chair (see Braun et al., 2013). STEM research disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), like STEM industries, are mostly male-dominated (with few exceptions such as biology; Catalyst, 2020c; National Science Foundation, 2018). Women account for about one third of doctoral degrees and less than 15% of full professorships in these disciplines in Germany (GWK, 2018).

In Germany, scientists as well as students assess professorial candidates, and students have gained considerable power in appointment committees in recent years (student representatives can speak out against applicants, for instance; Frey et al., 2015). We expect stereotypes to be prevalent in students' and scientists' perceptions (see Carli et al., 2016; Leslie et al., 2015), and to influence their fit perceptions in a similar way. We tested our hypotheses for perceptions in strictly male stereotyped work contexts with students in a laboratory setting in studies 1 and 2, and replicated the test in studies 3 and 4 within online experiments with scientists in math-intensive disciplines (indeed, our studies 1–4 show similar assessment patterns in students and scientists, and students had externally valid assessment criteria in mind, see supplemental material).<sup>1</sup> Study 1 focused on P-J fit and the job profile, study 2 on P-O fit and the organizational profile. In studies 3 and 4 we combined both aspects. In study 4, we additionally examined the influence of job and organizational profiles when they are “crossed” (one is stereotype-congruent and the other stereotype-incongruent).

All four studies were experimental studies with a between-subjects design, reducing influences of confounding variables and demand effects (Charness et al., 2012). Participants answered a web-based questionnaire and were asked to put themselves in the shoes of a member of an appointment committee for a full professor job in a mathematics faculty. They were randomly assigned a job advertisement, which manipulated the job and/or organizational profile, and a male or a female applicant's CV, and assessed the applicant regarding perceived applicant qualities and fit to the job and/or organization. They also completed manipulation checks, provided demographic and context-related information, and finally they were debriefed.<sup>2</sup> In preparation for the studies, we conducted two experimental pre-tests to evaluate our experimental material and manipulations (see supplemental material).

### 3.1 | Method study 1

Study 1 tested the relationship between perceptions of applicants' agency and P-J fit in the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields, whether an agentic job profile strengthened the relationship, and perceptions of male vs. female applicants' agency. We varied applicant gender (male vs. female) and the job profile (agentic vs. communal vs. neutral) in a  $2 \times 3$  between-subjects design. The sample were 261 students at a German technical university (61% male;  $M_{age} = 23.07$ ,  $SD_{age} = 3.47$ ; 75% German nationality), 44% already held a university degree.<sup>3</sup>

#### 3.1.1 | Material and manipulations

To manipulate the **job profile**, we created three versions of a job advertisement representing either an agentic, a communal, or a neutral job profile. We altered the wording in the description of the job and its tasks and requirements, based on the research by Gaucher et al. (2011), Heilman (2012), Hentschel et al. (2020), and Hentschel et al. (2019) (examples in Table 1).<sup>4</sup> The neutral job profile avoided agentic and communal wording. We manipulated **applicant gender** in one-page excerpts of curricula vitae (CVs), which presented either a male (1) or a female (2) applicant, indicating applicant gender by the applicant's name. Both CVs showed the same qualifications and stages in education and professional career. They included information on current affiliation and position, education, and professional background, and showed a list of selected publications.<sup>5</sup>

For **manipulation checks**, participants had to recall applicant gender and indicated their perception of the job requirements.<sup>6</sup> Perceptions of job requirements significantly differed across the experimental conditions,

$F(4, 514) = 23.83, p = .000, \eta^2 = .16$ . Participants who received an agentic job profile perceived the requirements as significantly more agentic than participants with a communal ( $p = .002$ ) or neutral ( $p = .000$ ) job profile. Vice versa, participants who received a communal job profile perceived the requirements as significantly more communal than participants with an agentic ( $p = .000$ ) or a neutral ( $p = .000$ ) job profile.

### 3.1.2 | Measures

In all our studies, items on perceptions of applicants' qualities were answered on 7-point Likert scales ranging from "not at all" (1) to "very much" (7), and items on perceptions of applicants' fit on 7-point Likert scales ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7). To measure **perceptions of applicants' agency**, we asked the participants to assess how they would attribute five agentic traits and behaviors such as "ambitious" and "rational" ( $\alpha = .69$ ; Gaucher et al., 2011; Heilman, 2012; Hentschel et al., 2019) to the applicant, based on their first impression (Horvath & Sczesny, 2016). **Perceptions of applicants' P-J fit** were assessed with three items referring to a skills dimension and two items to a personality dimension of fit which we adapted from Lauver and Kristof-Brown (2001). Sample items were "I think the candidate's abilities fit the demands of this job" and "I think the candidate's personality is a good match for this job" ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

We controlled for participant gender and age because previous research showed that perceptions may differ by participants' gender and age (e.g., Koenig et al., 2011; Rice & Barth, 2016). Analyzing hypotheses 1–3, we also controlled for applicant gender and perceptions of applicants' communality and likeability, in order to assess whether applicants' perceived agency was indeed a key driver of applicants' perceived fit (as compared to communality and likeability).<sup>7</sup> We measured **perceptions of applicants' communality** presenting five communal qualities such as "reliable" and "caring" ( $\alpha = .71$ ; Gaucher et al., 2011; Heilman, 2012; Hentschel et al., 2019), and **perceptions of applicants' likeability** with three items adapted from Heilman et al. (2004; e.g., "likeable";  $\alpha = .63$ ).

## 3.2 | Results study 1

Table 2 presents correlations for study 1. A linear regression analysis to test whether evaluators' perceptions of applicants' agency positively related to their perceptions of applicants' P-J fit revealed a significant positive relationship ( $b = .35, p = .000$ ) between perceived agency and P-J fit (Table 4, Study 1), supporting H1a. Then, we analyzed whether an agentic job profile (vs. non-agentic, i.e., communal or neutral) strengthened the relationship between evaluators' perceptions of applicants' agency and P-J fit. Supporting H2a, as visualized in Figure 3, we found a significant interaction that explained additional variance,  $\Delta R^2 = .02, F(1, 252) = 7.21, b = .36, p = .008$  (Table 4, Study 1), showing that the positive relationship between perceptions of applicants' agency and P-J fit was stronger when the job profile was agentic ( $b = .57, p = .000$ ) vs. non-agentic ( $b = .21, p = .020$ ). Finally, we tested whether the female applicant was perceived as more agentic than the male applicant within a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA). The analysis showed no significant main effect of applicant gender on perceptions of applicants' agency,  $F(1, 257) = 0.35, p = \text{n.s.}$  (means in Table 9), and thus did not provide support for H10.

## 3.3 | Method study 2

Study 2 tested the relationship between perceptions of applicants' agency and P-O fit in the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields, whether an agentic organizational profile strengthened the relationship, and again perceptions of applicants' agency by gender. We varied applicant gender (male vs. female) and the organizational profile (agentic vs. communal vs. two control conditions) in a  $2 \times 4$  between-subjects design. The sample were 366 students at a German technical university (58% male;  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.70, SD_{\text{age}} = 3.53$ ; 81% German nationality; no overlap with study 1's sample). Of the sample, 37% already held a university degree.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.3.1 | Material and manipulations

Job advertisements manipulated the **organizational profile** in terms of the hiring organization's culture, related values, and practices. Job advertisements either represented an agentic organizational profile, a communal organizational profile, or one of two control conditions (examples in Table 1). The agentic organizational profile portrayed a culture in which competition, success, and outstanding achievements are emphasized; the communal organizational profile portrayed a culture in which cooperation, interpersonal relationships, and a sense of community are emphasized (Catanzaro et al., 2010; Gaucher et al., 2011). As control conditions, we included a neutral condition, giving no information on the organization's culture, and added a "green" culture as an additional reference. A "green" culture is not directly linked to agency or communality but likely perceived as rather stereotypically female (Brough et al., 2016), and has become relevant in recent years, as more and more universities are emphasizing their "green" values and sustainability efforts (Times Higher Education, 2015). Inspired by Brough et al. (2016), the green culture portrayed a culture with the core values of ecological awareness and sustainability. To manipulate **applicant gender**, we used the same CVs as in study 1 but added icons to make applicant gender more visible. The icons showed gray outlines of a male or a female face, without revealing what the person looks like (see supplemental material for a pre-test on the icons).

For **manipulation checks**, participants had to recall applicant gender and indicated their perception of the organization's cultural orientation. Perceptions of the cultural orientation significantly differed across the experimental conditions,  $F(9, 876) = 160.95, p = .000, \eta^2 = .55$ , and were higher for the described core values (of a competitive, cooperative, or green culture) as compared to the other conditions at  $p = .000$  for each mean difference.

### 3.3.2 | Measures

**Perceptions of applicants' agency** were assessed analogously to study 1, presenting four agentic qualities such as "assertive" and "achievement-oriented" ( $\alpha = .75$ ), which correspond with a competitive organizational culture (Catanzaro et al., 2010). **Perceptions of applicants' P-O fit** were assessed with four items adapted from Kristof-Brown (2000). Sample items were "I think the candidate fits with the hiring organization" and "I think the candidate is similar to other employees of the hiring organization" ( $\alpha = .90$ ). We used the same controls as in study 1, unless stated otherwise. **Perceptions of applicants' communality** were assessed with five communal qualities such as "cooperative" and "supportive" ( $\alpha = .82$ ), which correspond with a cooperative organizational culture (Catanzaro et al., 2010). To assess **perceptions of applicants' likeability**, we again used the measure adapted from Heilman et al. (2004, see study 1;  $\alpha = .71$ ). We additionally controlled for **perceptions of applicants' green qualities**, as specific values and practices are associated with a green culture. We used four items such as "eco-friendly" and "eco-conscious" ( $\alpha = .88$ ), inspired by Brough et al. (2016).

## 3.4 | Results study 2

Table 3 presents correlations for study 2. A linear regression analysis to test whether evaluators' perceptions of applicants' agency positively related to their perceptions of applicants' P-O fit revealed a significant positive relationship ( $b = .20, p = .002$ ) between applicants' perceived agency and P-O fit (Table 4, Study 2), supporting H1b. A moderation analysis whether an agentic organizational profile (vs. non-agentic, i.e., communal or control conditions) strengthened the relationship showed a significant interaction explaining additional variance,  $\Delta R^2 = .02, F(1, 355) = 9.57, b = .42, p = .002$  (see Table 4, Study 2), supporting H2b (see Figure 4). There was a significant positive relationship between perceptions of applicants' agency and P-O fit with an agentic ( $b = .50, p = .000$ ) but not with a non-agentic ( $b = .08, p = \text{n.s.}$ ) organizational profile. Additionally, in study 2, the ANOVA to test whether the female applicant was perceived as more agentic than the male applicant revealed a significant main effect of applicant gender on perceptions of

TABLE 1 Examples for manipulations in job and organizational profiles

Agentic	Communal	Neutral (Control)	Green (Control)
Job profile: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Leading an international research group</li><li>• Ambitious advancement of the research discipline</li><li>• Goal-orientation in research and teaching</li></ul> Organizational profile: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Competitive and achievement-oriented culture</li><li>• We value outstanding achievements</li><li>• Compete with the best!</li></ul>	Job profile: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Responsible for an international research group</li><li>• Committed to the advancement of the research discipline</li><li>• Reliability in research and teaching</li></ul> Organizational profile: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cooperative and supportive culture</li><li>• We value team spirit</li><li>• Cooperate in thinking!</li></ul>	Job profile: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Professor of an international research group</li><li>• Advancement of the research discipline</li><li>• Research and teaching</li></ul> Organizational profile: – (no information)	Organizational profile: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Eco-friendly and resource-efficient culture</li><li>• We value ecological sustainability</li><li>• Thinking green!</li></ul>

Note. This table shows translations, the original experimental material was in German. The job profile was manipulated in studies 1, 3, and 4; the organizational profile was manipulated in studies 2, 3, and 4. The “green” condition was added as an additional reference condition in study 2.



**TABLE 2** Means, standard deviations, and correlations of variables in study 1

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Applicant gender <sup>a</sup>	1.55	.50	–					
2. Participant gender <sup>b</sup>	1.39	.49	–.02	–				
3. Participant age <sup>c</sup>	23.07	3.47	–.12	–.10	–			
4. Perceived applicant agency <sup>d</sup>	5.59	.70	.04	.10	–.05	–		
5. Perceived applicant communality <sup>d</sup>	4.77	.69	.15 <sup>*</sup>	.09	–.10	.48 <sup>**</sup>	–	
6. Perceived applicant likeability <sup>d</sup>	4.42	.73	.06	.03	–.13 <sup>*</sup>	.26 <sup>**</sup>	.61 <sup>**</sup>	–
7. Perceived applicant P-J fit <sup>d</sup>	5.05	.83	.02	.03	–.18 <sup>**</sup>	.39 <sup>**</sup>	.34 <sup>**</sup>	.34 <sup>**</sup>

Note.  $N = 261$ .

<sup>a</sup>1 = “male applicant”, 2 = “female applicant”.

<sup>b</sup>1 = “male participant”, 2 = “female participant”.

<sup>c</sup>Age in years (1–99).

<sup>d</sup>Measured on 7-point Likert scales (1 = “not at all” or “strongly disagree”, 7 = “very much” or “strongly agree”).

<sup>\*</sup> $p < .05$  (two-tailed).

<sup>\*\*</sup> $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

**TABLE 3** Means, standard deviations, and correlations of variables in study 2

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Applicant gender <sup>a</sup>	1.50	.50	–						
2. Participant gender <sup>b</sup>	1.42	.49	.08	–					
3. Participant age <sup>c</sup>	21.70	3.53	–.02	.01	–				
4. Perceived applicant agency <sup>d</sup>	5.46	.83	.11 <sup>*</sup>	.07	.00	–			
5. Perceived applicant communality <sup>d</sup>	4.88	.78	.10	–.04	.04	.11 <sup>*</sup>	–		
6. Perceived applicant “green” qualities <sup>d</sup>	3.76	.87	.09	–.06	.03	.03	.41 <sup>**</sup>	–	
7. Perceived applicant likeability <sup>d</sup>	4.41	.87	.03	–.02	.05	.04	.51 <sup>**</sup>	.37 <sup>**</sup>	–
8. Perceived applicant P-O fit <sup>d</sup>	5.02	1.04	–.05	.01	.06	.16 <sup>**</sup>	.23 <sup>**</sup>	.29 <sup>**</sup>	.21 <sup>**</sup>

Note.  $N = 366$  (for participant gender 365).

<sup>a</sup>1 = “male applicant”, 2 = “female applicant”.

<sup>b</sup>1 = “male participant”, 2 = “female participant”.

<sup>c</sup>Age in years (1–99).

<sup>d</sup>Measured on 7-point Likert scales (1 = “not at all” or “strongly disagree”, 7 = “very much” or “strongly agree”).

<sup>\*</sup> $p < .05$  (two-tailed).

<sup>\*\*</sup> $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

applicants’ agency when excluding non-significant controls,  $F(1, 364) = 4.12$ ,  $p = .043$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ .<sup>9</sup> The female applicant ( $M = 5.55$ ,  $SD = .86$ ) was perceived as significantly more agentic than the male applicant ( $M = 5.38$ ,  $SD = .78$ ), providing support for H10.

### 3.5 | Method study 3 and study 4

Studies 3 and 4 replicated the tests of studies 1 and 2. Study 4 additionally investigated the effects of stereotype-congruent (vs. -incongruent) job and organizational profiles when the profiles are “crossed” such that the job profile is agentic and the organizational profile non-agentic or vice versa. Study 3 applied a 2 (applicant gender: male vs. female)  $\times$  3 (job advertisement: agentic vs. communal vs. neutral) between-subjects design, manipulating job and

TABLE 4 Summary of linear regression analyses, study 1 and study 2

Variable	Study 1 (DV = Perceived applicant P-J fit)				Study 2 (DV = Perceived applicant P-O fit)			
	Model A (H1a)		Model B (H2a)		Model A (H1b)		Model B (H2b)	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Constant	2.57***	.58	3.43***	.66	1.70**	.58	2.30***	.61
Controls								
Applicant gender	-.06	.09	-.07	.09	-.19	.10	-.18	.10
Participant gender	-.06	.09	-.06	.09	.03	.11	.05	.10
Participant age	-.03*	.01	-.03*	.01	.02	.02	.02	.01
Perceived applicant likeability	.25**	.08	.26**	.08	.09	.07	.06	.07
Perceived applicant communality	.08	.09	.07	.09	.12	.08	.14	.08
Perceived applicant "green" qualities					.27***	.07	.30***	.07
Perceived applicant agency	.35***	.07	.21*	.09	.20**	.06	.08	.07
Agentic profile (dummy)	-.17	.10	-2.15**	.74	.28*	.12	-2.02**	.75
Perceived applicant agency x agentic profile			.36**	.13			.42**	.14
R <sup>2</sup>	.24		.26		.15		.17	
F	11.52***		11.23***		7.95***		8.30***	
ΔR <sup>2</sup>			.02				.02	
ΔF			7.21***				9.57**	

Note. N<sub>Study 1</sub> = 261, N<sub>Study 2</sub> = 365. Main effects of perceived applicant agency in Models A, interactions of perceived applicant agency x agentic profile (job profile in study 1, organizational profile in study 2) in Models B. Participants that did not indicate gender or age were excluded listwise.

\*p < .05.  
\*\*p < .01.  
\*\*\*p < .001.

organizational profile in the same direction in a job advertisement. Study 4 applied a 2 (applicant gender: male vs. female)  $\times$  3 (job profile: agentic vs. communal vs. neutral)  $\times$  3 (organizational profile: agentic vs. communal vs. neutral) between-subjects design, manipulating the two profiles independently in one job advertisement.

Study 3's sample ( $N = 251$ ) consisted of scientific staff in the discipline mathematics at German universities (PhD candidates, assistant professors, and tenured professors; 95% German nationality), recruited via email.<sup>10</sup> Corresponding to the male domination within the discipline, we had 69% male participants. Of the sample, 44% indicated that they intend to pursue (or have already established) a scientific career, 17% were indecisive in this respect. Most of the participants were between 25 and 28 (41%), 29 and 32 (32%), and 33 and 36 (10%) years old. Study 4's sample ( $N = 633$ ) consisted of scientific staff in math-intensive disciplines at German universities (70% male; 89% German nationality; no overlap with study 3's sample), again recruited via email.<sup>11</sup> Of these, 39% indicated that they intend to pursue (or have already established) a scientific career, 24% were indecisive in this respect. Most of the participants were between 25 and 28 (36%), 29 and 32 (37%), and 33 and 36 (13%) years old.

### 3.5.1 | Material and manipulations

Like in studies 1 and 2, we created different versions of a **job advertisement**. In study 3, the wording in the entire job advertisement was either agentic or non-agentic (agentic, communal, or neutral job *and* organizational profile; see studies 1 and 2, and Table 1).<sup>12</sup> In study 4, we used the same materials, but due to additionally "crossing" job and organizational profile in a job advertisement, advertisements could also represent, for instance, an agentic job profile and a communal organizational profile or vice versa, resulting in nine different profile combinations. To manipulate **applicant gender** in studies 3 and 4, we used the same CVs as in study 2, including icons, we only updated the CV dates.

For **manipulation checks**, participants indicated applicant gender, their perception of job requirements (see study 1), and of the organization's cultural orientation (see study 2). In study 3, perceptions of job requirements (agentic vs. communal),  $F(4, 494) = 41.05, p = .000, \eta^2 = .25$ , and of the organization's cultural orientation (competitive vs. cooperative),  $F(4, 494) = 84.67, p = .000, \eta^2 = .41$ , significantly differed across the experimental conditions. This was also the case in study 4, for perceptions of job requirements,  $F(4, 1256) = 14.92, p = .000, \eta^2 = .05$ , and of the organization's cultural orientation,  $F(4, 1256) = 130.44, p = .000, \eta^2 = .29$ .

### 3.5.2 | Measures

To measure **perceptions of applicants' agency**, participants were presented with a combination of the agentic qualities rated in studies 1 and 2 (seven items;  $\alpha = .93$  in study 3 and in study 4). We used the same measures of **perceptions of applicants' P-J fit** ( $\alpha = .89$  in study 3 and in study 4) and **perceptions of applicants' P-O fit** ( $\alpha = .89$  in study 3, .90 in study 4) as in studies 1 and 2. We also used the same controls as in studies 1 and 2, unless stated otherwise. **Perceptions of applicants' communality** were assessed with a combination of the communal qualities rated in studies 1 and 2 (eight items,  $\alpha = .91$  in study 3, .92 in study 4). **Perceptions of applicants' likeability** were assessed with the item "likeable" (Heilman et al., 2004) in study 3, and in study 4 we included an extended measure of perceived likeability, also based on Heilman et al. (2004) and on Moss-Racusin et al. (2010) (four items,  $\alpha = .85$ ).

In study 4, we included additional measures to explore perceptions of applicants and the work context in more detail, beyond the analysis of our hypotheses. We included a measure for **perceptions of applicants' competence**, adapted from Heilman et al. (2004), with the items "competent", "productive", and "effective", rated on 7-point Likert scales ( $\alpha = .87$ ). Additionally, we measured **perceptions of the work context** with 1-item semantic differentials to check whether the investigated work context was perceived as intended (perception as high-status vs. low-status, and male-dominated vs. female-dominated) and validate our assumptions. Indeed, participants perceived the job as a professor as high in status ( $M = 6.06, SD = .94$  on an ascending 7-point Likert scale), and the research discipline mathematics to be male-dominated ( $M = 5.42, SD = 1.01$ ; female-dominated (1), male-dominated (7)).

**TABLE 5** Means, standard deviations, and correlations of variables in study 3

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Applicant gender <sup>a</sup>	1.51	.50	–						
2. Participant gender <sup>b</sup>	1.27	.45	–.03	–					
3. Participant age <sup>c</sup>	3.92	1.40	.09	–.13	–				
4. Perceived applicant agency <sup>d</sup>	4.61	.93	.10	.10	–.20 <sup>**</sup>	–			
5. Perceived applicant communality <sup>d</sup>	4.77	.66	.18 <sup>**</sup>	–.05	–.08	.41 <sup>**</sup>	–		
6. Perceived applicant likeability <sup>d</sup>	4.82	.81	.04	.01	–.10	.27 <sup>**</sup>	.56 <sup>**</sup>	–	
7. Perceived applicant P-J fit <sup>d</sup>	4.47	.95	.04	.01	–.16 <sup>**</sup>	.56 <sup>**</sup>	.29 <sup>**</sup>	.22 <sup>**</sup>	–
8. Perceived applicant P-O fit <sup>d</sup>	4.66	.95	.10	.09	–.18 <sup>**</sup>	.47 <sup>**</sup>	.24 <sup>**</sup>	.25 <sup>**</sup>	.71 <sup>**</sup>

Note. *N* = 251 (for participant gender 240, for participant age 248).

<sup>a</sup>1 = “male applicant”, 2 = “female applicant”.

<sup>b</sup>1 = “male participant”, 2 = “female participant”.

<sup>c</sup>Age categories (1 = “< 21”, 2 = “21–24”, 3 = “25–28”, 4 = “29–32”, 5 = “33–36”, 6 = “37–40”, 7 = “41–44”, 8 = “45–48”, 9 = “> 48”).

<sup>d</sup>Measured on 7-point Likert scales (1 = “not at all” or “strongly disagree”, 7 = “very much” or “strongly agree”).

\**p* < .05 (two-tailed).

\*\**p* < .01 (two-tailed).

### 3.6 | Results study 3

Table 5 shows correlations for study 3. In study 3, we replicated the tests of H1 and H2. Perceptions of applicants' agency again positively related to perceptions of applicants' P-J fit,  $b = .53$ ,  $p = .000$ , and P-O fit,  $b = .44$ ,  $p = .000$ , supporting H1a and H1b (Table 6). Furthermore, we again found significant interactions for the influence of recruitment material that explained additional variance and support H2a and H2b (on P-J fit:  $\Delta R^2 = .02$ ,  $F(1, 229) = 5.49$ ,  $b = .28$ ,  $p = .020$ ; on P-O fit:  $\Delta R^2 = .02$ ,  $F(1, 229) = 5.13$ ,  $b = .28$ ,  $p = .024$ ; Table 6). The positive relationships between perceptions of applicants' agency and P-J fit, respectively P-O fit, were stronger when the job advertisement was agentic (P-J fit:  $b = .73$ ,  $p = .000$ ; P-O fit:  $b = .64$ ,  $p = .000$ ) vs. non-agentic (P-J fit:  $b = .44$ ,  $p = .000$ ; P-O fit:  $b = .36$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Interactions are visualized in Figures 3 (P-J fit) and 4 (P-O fit). Thus, overall, the findings in study 3 confirm study 1 and study 2's findings on hypotheses 1 and 2. The ANOVA to test whether the female applicant was perceived as more agentic than the male applicant in study 3 revealed a marginal, though not significant, difference in evaluators' perceptions of applicants' agency by applicant gender,  $F(1, 234) = 3.18$ ,  $p = .076$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$  (means in Table 9). Thus, study 3 does not provide support for H10.

### 3.7 | Results study 4

Table 7 shows correlations for study 4. In study 4, we also replicated the tests of H1 and H2. Again, perceptions of applicants' agency were significantly positive related to perceptions of applicants' P-J fit,  $b = .52$ ,  $p = .000$ , and P-O fit,  $b = .55$ ,  $p = .000$ , supporting both H1a and H1b (Table 8). Also, replicating the support for H2a and H2b, an agentic (vs. non-agentic, i.e., communal or neutral) job profile strengthened the relationship between perceived agency and P-J fit,  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $F(1, 625) = 4.67$ ,  $b = .16$ ,  $p = .031$ , and an agentic (vs. non-agentic) organizational profile the relationship between perceived agency and P-O fit,  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $F(1, 625) = 7.31$ ,  $b = .20$ ,  $p = .007$  (Table 8, Figures 3 and 4). The positive relationships between perceptions of applicants' agency and P-J fit, respectively P-O fit, were stronger when the job profile, respectively the organizational profile, was agentic (P-J fit:  $b = .62$ ,  $p = .000$ ; P-O fit:  $b = .66$ ,  $p = .000$ ) vs. non-agentic (P-J fit:  $b = .46$ ,  $p = .000$ ; P-O fit:  $b = .46$ ,  $p = .000$ ). In these analyses, we controlled for the effect of the other manipulated profile (the organizational profile or the job profile) but excluded non-significant controls.<sup>13</sup>

TABLE 6 Summary of linear regression analyses, study 3

Variable	Study 3 (DV = Perceived applicant P-J fit)				Study 3 (DV = Perceived applicant P-O fit)			
	Model A (H1a)		Model B (H2a)		Model A (H1b)		Model B (H2b)	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Constant	1.73**	.49	2.30***	.55	2.01***	.51	2.58***	.56
Controls								
Applicant gender	-.06	.11	-.04	.11	.11	.11	.13	.11
Participant gender	-.08	.12	-.14	.12	.07	.12	.01	.12
Participant age	-.02	.04	-.03	.04	-.04	.04	-.05	.04
Perceived applicant likeability	.04	.08	.06	.08	.15	.08	.17*	.08
Perceived applicant communality	.10	.10	.05	.10	-.01	.10	-.06	.11
Perceived applicant agency	.53***	.06	.44***	.07	.44***	.06	.36***	.07
Agentic profiles (dummy)	-.17	.11	-1.49***	.57	-.40***	.11	-1.71***	.59
Perceived applicant agency x agentic profiles			.28*	.12			.28*	.12
R <sup>2</sup>	.32		.34		.29		.30	
F	15.69***		14.68***		13.31***		12.50***	
ΔR <sup>2</sup>			.02				.02	
ΔF			5.49*				5.13*	

Note. N = 238. Main effects of perceived applicant agency in Models A, interactions of perceived applicant agency x agentic profiles (agentic job and organizational profile in study 3) in Models B. Participants that did not indicate gender or age were excluded listwise.  
\*p < .05.  
\*\*p < .01.  
\*\*\*p < .001.

**TABLE 7** Means, standard deviations, and correlations of variables in study 4

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Applicant gender <sup>a</sup>	1.51	.50	–							
2. Participant gender <sup>b</sup>	1.28	.45	.03	–						
3. Participant age <sup>c</sup>	3.94	1.23	.09 <sup>*</sup>	–.04	–					
4. Perceived applicant agency <sup>d</sup>	5.02	.93	.15 <sup>**</sup>	.13 <sup>**</sup>	–.05	–				
5. Perceived applicant communality <sup>d</sup>	4.88	.78	.19 <sup>**</sup>	.06	–.04	.43 <sup>**</sup>	–			
6. Perceived applicant likeability <sup>d</sup>	4.57	.80	.22 <sup>**</sup>	.05	.00	.32 <sup>**</sup>	.64 <sup>**</sup>	–		
7. Perceived applicant competence <sup>d</sup>	5.17	.87	.15 <sup>**</sup>	.07	–.10 <sup>*</sup>	.76 <sup>**</sup>	.50 <sup>**</sup>	.44 <sup>**</sup>	–	
8. Perceived applicant P-J fit <sup>d</sup>	4.77	1.02	.08 <sup>*</sup>	.07	–.09 <sup>*</sup>	.57 <sup>**</sup>	.39 <sup>**</sup>	.32 <sup>**</sup>	.54 <sup>**</sup>	–
9. Perceived applicant P-O fit <sup>d</sup>	4.96	1.06	.05	.04	–.09 <sup>*</sup>	.55 <sup>**</sup>	.33 <sup>**</sup>	.24 <sup>**</sup>	.46 <sup>**</sup>	.74 <sup>**</sup>

Note. *N* = 633 (for participant gender 618, for participant age 631).

<sup>a</sup>1 = "male applicant", 2 = "female applicant".

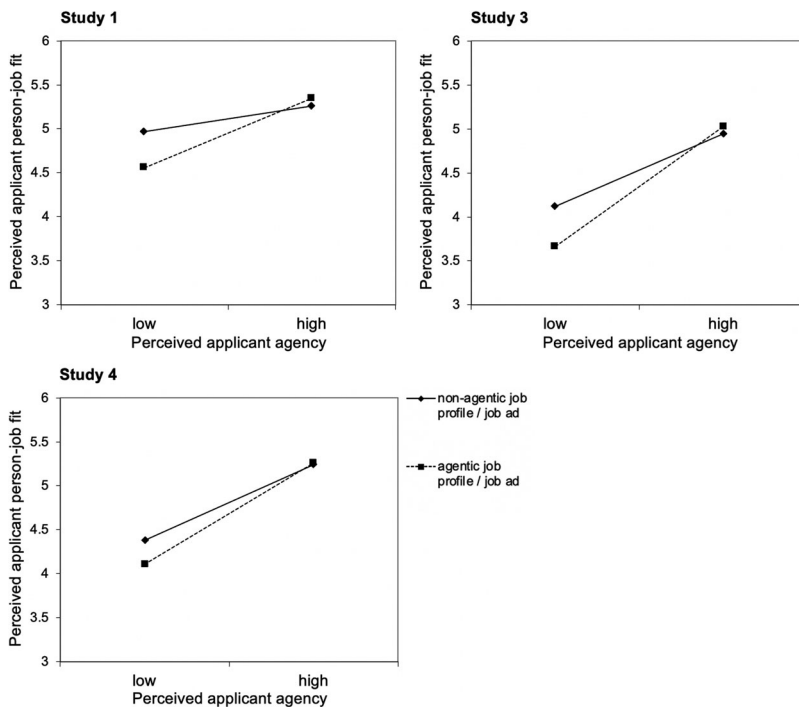
<sup>b</sup>1 = "male participant", 2 = "female participant".

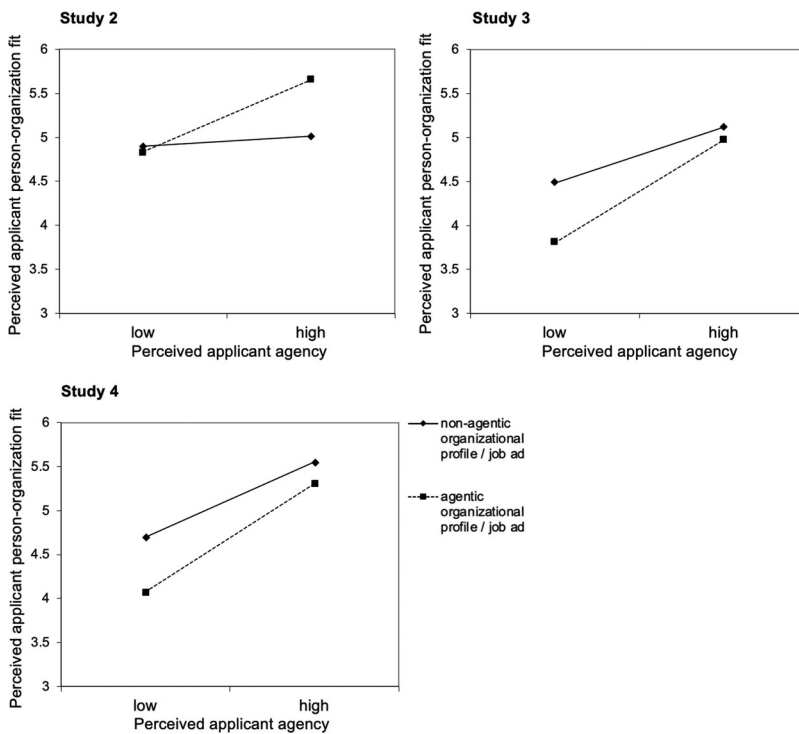
<sup>c</sup>Age categories (1 = "< 21", 2 = "21-24", 3 = "25-28", 4 = "29-32", 5 = "33-36", 6 = "37-40", 7 = "41-44", 8 = "45-48", 9 = "> 48").

<sup>d</sup>Measured on 7-point Likert scales (1 = "not at all" or "strongly disagree", 7 = "very much" or "strongly agree").

\**p* < .05 (two-tailed).

\*\**p* < .01 (two-tailed).

**FIGURE 3** Effects of evaluators' perceptions of applicants' agency (mean  $\pm$  1 SD)  $\times$  the type of profile on perceptions of applicants' P-J fit



**FIGURE 4** Effects of evaluators' perceptions of applicants' agency (mean  $\pm$  1 SD)  $\times$  the type of profile on perceptions of applicants' P-O fit

In study 4, we also tested whether an agentic organizational profile can still strengthen the relationship between perceived agency and P-J fit *when the job profile is non-agentic*, and an agentic job profile the relationship between perceived agency and P-O fit *when the organizational profile is non-agentic*. In the group with a non-agentic job profile, the interaction effect of perceived agency and an agentic organizational profile on perceived P-J fit was significantly positive,  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $F(1, 382) = 7.97$ ,  $b = .25$ ,  $p = .005$ , supporting H3a. In the group with a non-agentic organizational profile, the interaction effect of perceived agency and an agentic job profile on perceived P-O fit was significantly positive,  $\Delta R^2 = .02$ ,  $F(1, 383) = 8.75$ ,  $b = .28$ ,  $p = .003$ , supporting H3b. Additionally, we explored effects of one vs. two agentic profiles in the same job advertisement. The effect size for the relationship between perceived agency and fit with two agentic profiles was higher than with one agentic profile for P-J and P-O fit but did not significantly increase from one to two profiles.

The ANOVA to test whether the female applicant was perceived as more agentic than the male applicant in study 4 revealed a significant main effect of applicant gender on perceived agency,  $F(1, 612) = 15.07$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ . The female applicant ( $M = 5.17$ ,  $SD = .90$ ) was perceived as more agentic than the male applicant ( $M = 4.89$ ,  $SD = .92$ ), supporting H10, like study 2. Interestingly, in study 4, the female applicant was also perceived as a better fit to the job,  $F(1, 612) = 4.56$ ,  $p = .033$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , and this effect was fully mediated by perceived agency ( $index = .09$ , 95%  $CI = [.02, .17]$ ). There was no such an effect on perceptions of applicants' P-O fit, which did not significantly differ by applicant gender.

### 3.8 | Results on perceptions of communality, likeability, and competence across studies 1–4

To investigate whether perceived applicant agency is indeed a key driver of perceived applicant fit in the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields, we also explored influences of perceived communality, likability, and



TABLE 8 Summary of linear regression analyses, study 4

Variable	Study 4 (DV = Perceived applicant P-J fit)				Study 4 (DV = Perceived applicant P-O fit)			
	Model A (H1a)		Model B (H2a)		Model A (H1b)		Model B (H2b)	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Constant	.91***	.24	1.19***	.28	1.55***	.25	1.92***	.29
Controls								
Applicant gender	-.08	.07	-.07	.07	-.11	.07	-.11	.07
Perceived applicant likeability	.11*	.05	.11	.05	.01	.06	.01	.06
Perceived applicant communality	.19***	.06	.19***	.06	.20**	.06	.22***	.06
Perceived applicant agency	.52***	.04	.46***	.05	.55***	.04	.46***	.05
Agentic organizational profile (dummy)	-.17*	.07	-.17*	.07	-.43***	.07	-.144***	.38
Agentic job profile (dummy)	-.13	.07	-.91*	.37	-.18*	.07	-.17*	.07
Perceived applicant agency x agentic job profile			.16*	.07				
Perceived applicant agency x agentic organizational profile							.20**	.07
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.37		.37		.36		.36	
<i>F</i>	59.86***		52.28***		57.77***		51.06***	
$\Delta R^2$			.01				.01	
$\Delta F$			4.67*				7.31**	

Note. *N* = 238. Main effects of perceived applicant agency in Models A, interactions of perceived applicant agency x agentic profile (agentic job and organizational profile manipulated separately in study 4) in Models B. Participants that did not indicate gender or age were excluded listwise.

\**p* < .05.

\*\**p* < .01.

\*\*\**p* < .001.

competence as a comparison, and their differences by applicant gender. In studies 1, 3, and 4, the female applicant was perceived as significantly more communal than the male applicant (in study 2 marginally). Still, both the male and the female applicant were perceived as *more agentic than communal* in studies 1, 2, and 4 (not in study 3, in study 4 only a tendency). In study 4, the female applicant was also perceived as significantly more likeable and competent than the male applicant (next to being perceived as more agentic and a better fit to the job). Perceived applicant likeability or fit (P-J or P-O fit) did not significantly differ by applicant gender in studies 1–3 (means in Table 9).

In study 1, perceived likeability (but not communality) was significantly related to perceived P-J fit ( $b = .25, p = .002$ ) (Table 4). In studies 2 and 3, neither perceived communality nor likeability were significantly related to perceived P-J fit (measured in study 3) or P-O fit (measured in studies 2 and 3) (Table 4 and Table 6). In study 4, perceived communality was significantly positively related to both, perceived P-J fit ( $b = .19, p = .002$ ) and P-O fit ( $b = .20, p = .001$ ), and perceived likeability to perceived P-J fit ( $b = .11, p = .034$ ), but with a smaller beta value than perceived agency (Table 8). In study 4, we also explored the influence of perceived competence on perceived applicant fit. Perceived competence showed a significant influence on perceived P-J fit ( $b = .22, p = .000$ ) but not on perceived P-O fit ( $b = .10, p = \text{n.s.}$ ). Controlling for competence perceptions, the hypothesized effects of agency perceptions on P-J fit perceptions remained stable, although the beta value reduced to .39 (from .52); and for effects of communality perceptions to .17 (from .19). The hypothesized effects of agency perceptions on P-O fit perceptions also remained stable and again the beta value reduced to .49 (from .55); and for communality perceptions to .19 (from .20). In sum, there was a clear pattern of perceived applicant agency influencing perceived applicant P-J and P-O fit, the influence of perceived applicant communality and likability was less clear. Perceived applicant competence had a related but additional effect on perceived applicant fit. We also explored potential interaction effects of applicant gender with perceived agency on perceived fit in studies 1–4, but those effects were non-significant.

## 4 | STUDY 5: THE CONTEXT DEPENDENCY OF FIT PERCEPTIONS

### 4.1 | Method

In study 5, we tested how job status and the field of the organization shaped the perceived job status and the expected share of men in a work context, and how perceived agency and communality related to perceived fit across contexts. Furthermore, we explored perceived requirements across contexts, and investigated perceptions of applicants and how applicant gender related to perceived fit across contexts.

#### 4.1.1 | Study design and participants

Study 5 applied a 2 (applicant gender: male vs. female)  $\times$  2 (job status: high vs. low, i.e., high-level-leadership vs. non-leadership)  $\times$  3 (field: male-dominated vs. female-dominated vs. gender-balanced) between-subjects design. We operationalized the status differences within different fields in the business context, because in business contexts high-status and low-status jobs in the same organization (in a particular field) are likely to be related to the same core business. For instance, in an organization in a male-dominated field (e.g., automotive), a low-status job, as an *individual contributor* to the organization's core business, would be a "blue collar" job in production or maintenance. A high-status job related to the same core business would be the job as a managing director, *managing* the core business. We assume that the field of an organization influences perceptions in a similar way for high-status and low-status jobs in the organization, when they are both related to its core business. This is, however, most often not the case in academia (which was the context of studies 1–4).<sup>14</sup> Therefore, in study 5, high-status jobs in different fields were operationalized as jobs as a managing director in either an automotive (male-dominated), a care-oriented (female-dominated), or a food trading (fairly gender-balanced) company. Low-status jobs in the respective core

TABLE 9 Means and standard deviations by applicant gender, studies 1–4; Perceived applicant agency, communality, likeability, competence, P-J fit, and P-O fit

Variable	Study 1				Study 2				Study 3				Study 4			
	Male applicant (n = 117)		Female applicant (n = 144)		Male applicant (n = 184)		Female applicant (n = 182)		Male applicant (n = 124)		Female applicant (n = 127)		Male applicant (n = 313)		Female applicant (n = 320)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Perceived applicant agency	5.56 <sub>a</sub>	.78	5.61 <sub>a</sub>	.62	5.38 <sub>a</sub>	.78	5.55 <sub>b</sub>	.86	4.52 <sub>a</sub>	.90	4.70 <sub>a</sub>	.94	4.88 <sub>a</sub>	.94	5.16 <sub>b</sub>	.90
Perceived applicant communality	4.66 <sub>a</sub>	.69	4.85 <sub>b</sub>	.68	4.81 <sub>a</sub>	.72	4.96 <sub>a</sub>	.83	4.66 <sub>a</sub>	.57	4.89 <sub>b</sub>	.72	4.73 <sub>a</sub>	.75	5.03 <sub>b</sub>	.79
Perceived applicant likeability	4.37 <sub>a</sub>	.72	4.46 <sub>a</sub>	.73	4.39 <sub>a</sub>	.78	4.43 <sub>a</sub>	.95	4.79 <sub>a</sub>	.75	4.85 <sub>a</sub>	.86	4.40 <sub>a</sub>	.78	4.74 <sub>b</sub>	.77
Perceived applicant competence													5.04 <sub>a</sub>	.86	5.30 <sub>b</sub>	.86
Perceived applicant P-J fit	5.04 <sub>a</sub>	.86	5.07 <sub>a</sub>	.80					4.44 <sub>a</sub>	.93	4.51 <sub>a</sub>	.97	4.68 <sub>a</sub>	1.02	4.85 <sub>b</sub>	1.01
Perceived applicant P-O fit					5.07 <sub>a</sub>	.92	4.96 <sub>a</sub>	1.16	4.57 <sub>a</sub>	.97	4.75 <sub>a</sub>	.92	4.91 <sub>a</sub>	1.05	5.01 <sub>a</sub>	1.07

Note. N<sub>Study 1</sub> = 261, N<sub>Study 2</sub> = 366, N<sub>Study 3</sub> = 251, N<sub>Study 4</sub> = 633. Means with different subscripts (<sub>a</sub>/<sub>b</sub>) are significantly different from one another at  $p < .05$ , comparing perceptions of male vs. female applicants for each variable in each study.

business were jobs as a mechanical, childcare, or retail worker.<sup>15</sup> Prior to the study, we conducted an experimental pre-test to test perception differences across these work contexts (see supplemental material).<sup>16</sup> Similar to the procedure of studies 1–4, in study 5 participants randomly received a job preview and the CV of a male or a female applicant within a web-based questionnaire, and answered questions on their perceptions of the applicant's qualities and fit.

The sample of study 5 were 507 leaders (e.g., CEOs, senior, and middle managers; 59% male; 97% German nationality), who had experience in personnel selection, which was a pre-requisite for their participation. Participants were recruited through a professional survey panel.<sup>17</sup> Most of the participants were between 49 and 60 years old (44%), 11% were more than 60 years old, and the remaining participants were younger than 49. Of the participants, 82% had more than 10 years of work experience, 11% more than 5 years. Further, 50% had more than 10 years of leadership experience, 21% more than 5 years, and 17% more than 2 years. Finally, 50% had “very much” or “much” experience in personnel selection, 40% had “moderate” experience, and 10% “little” experience. The leaders were employed in different industries, for instance in the health and social care (13%), trading and consumer goods (9%), automotive, transport, and logistics (9%), or service industry (9%).

#### 4.1.2 | Material and manipulations

Participants received a **job preview** that indicated the job title, the organization (automotive vs. care-oriented vs. food trading company with >100.000 employees), and that the successful candidate is required to have prior experience in the work context. To manipulate **applicant gender**, we created one-page excerpts of CVs for a male (1) and a female (2) applicant, for each work context. The CVs outlined the applicant's prior work experience and included the icons we used in studies 2–4. All applicants had the same amount of work experience, either in jobs at the same career level (remaining in low-status, non-leadership jobs) or moving up the career ladder (now applying to a high-level leadership job; see supplemental material for more information on how we created the CVs). As in our previous studies, participants recalled the applicant's gender as a **manipulation check**. Furthermore, we measured relevant contextual parameters to investigate perceptions of requirements, the perceived job status, and the expected share of men across work contexts.

#### 4.1.3 | Measures

We measured **perceptions of applicants' P-J fit** ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and **P-O fit** ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and **perceptions of applicants' agency and communality** like in our previous studies. Participants rated the applicant on 12 agentic ( $\alpha = .95$ ) and 15 communal ( $\alpha = .96$ ) qualities, which included those rated in studies 1–4. We assessed **perceptions of applicants' likeability** ( $\alpha = .89$ ) and **competence** ( $\alpha = .86$ ) like in study 4. Additionally, we measured attributions of **women's proscriptive traits** (e.g., dominant, arrogant, and self-centered; six items,  $\alpha = .95$ ) and of **men's proscriptive traits** (e.g., weak, insecure, indecisive; five items,  $\alpha = .96$ ) based on Moss-Racusin et al. (2010). Women's proscriptive traits or “should nots” can give hints on social backlash towards women, whereas men's proscriptive traits or “should nots” can give hints on social backlash towards men. Moreover, we measured the **perceived job status** and the **expected share of men** in a work context (see study 4), and assessed the **perceived requirements** in a work context by asking participants to rate the relevance of 12 agentic ( $\alpha = .95$ ) and 15 communal ( $\alpha = .94$ ) qualities for a particular work context. Finally, we also assessed perceptions of the organization's cultural orientation by presenting core values of a competitive (two items,  $\alpha = .86$ ) vs. cooperative (two items,  $\alpha = .87$ ) organizational culture (see study 2). We used the same controls as in studies 1–4, unless stated otherwise.

**TABLE 10** Means, standard deviations, and correlations of variables in study 5

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Applicant gender <sup>a</sup>	1.49	.50	–							
2. Participant gender <sup>b</sup>	1.39	.49	.01	–						
3. Participant age <sup>c</sup>	8.29	2.73	.07	–.21**	–					
4. Perceived applicant agency <sup>d</sup>	5.36	.86	.02	.09*	.07	–				
5. Perceived applicant communality <sup>d</sup>	5.30	.83	.09*	.07	.04	.61**	–			
6. Perceived applicant likeability <sup>d</sup>	4.93	.88	.09*	.10*	–.08	.44**	.66**	–		
7. Perceived applicant competence <sup>d</sup>	5.55	.81	.06	.11*	.01	.71**	.60**	.54**	–	
8. Perceived applicant P-J fit <sup>d</sup>	5.53	1.00	–.03	.10*	–.03	.42**	.45**	.41**	.52**	–
9. Perceived applicant P-O fit <sup>d</sup>	5.20	1.10	–.01	.10*	–.06	.46**	.49**	.43**	.49**	.74**

Note. *N* = 507 (for participant gender 497, for participant age 506).

<sup>a</sup>1 = "male applicant", 2 = "female applicant".

<sup>b</sup>1 = "male participant", 2 = "female participant".

<sup>c</sup>Age categories (1 = "< 21", 2 = "21–24", 3 = "25–28", 4 = "29–32", 5 = "33–36", 6 = "37–40", 7 = "41–44", 8 = "45–48", 9 = "> 48").

<sup>d</sup>Measured on 7-point Likert scales (1 = "not at all" or "strongly disagree", 7 = "very much" or "strongly agree").

\**p* < .05 (two-tailed).

\*\**p* < .01 (two-tailed).

## 4.2 | Results study 5

Table 10 shows correlations for study 5. Before testing our hypotheses, we investigated perception differences across the work contexts (means in Table 11). Figure 5 depicts the perceived job status and expected share of men across work contexts. In line with our reasoning, the perceived job status was particularly high for a high-status job in a male-dominated field, *M* = 5.49, *SD* = 1.13, and the expected share of men was particularly high for a high-status job in a male-dominated field, *M* = 5.51, *SD* = 1.32, as well as for a low-status job in a male-dominated field, *M* = 5.80, *SD* = 1.08. The perceived requirements in a work context were more agentic for high-status than for low-status jobs,  $F(1, 492) = 285.50$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .37$ , and more communal for jobs in a female-dominated field as compared to in a male-dominated or gender-balanced field at  $p = .000$ ,  $F(2, 491) = 54.97$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .18$  (see also Figure 5). Furthermore, in the male-dominated field, the organization's cultural orientation was perceived as more competitive (stereotypically male),  $b = .50$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $F(4, 491) = 45.31$ ,  $p = .000$ , and as less cooperative (stereotypically female),  $b = -.15$ ,  $p = .034$ ,  $F(4, 491) = 4.92$ ,  $p = .001$ , as compared to the gender-balanced and female-dominated field.

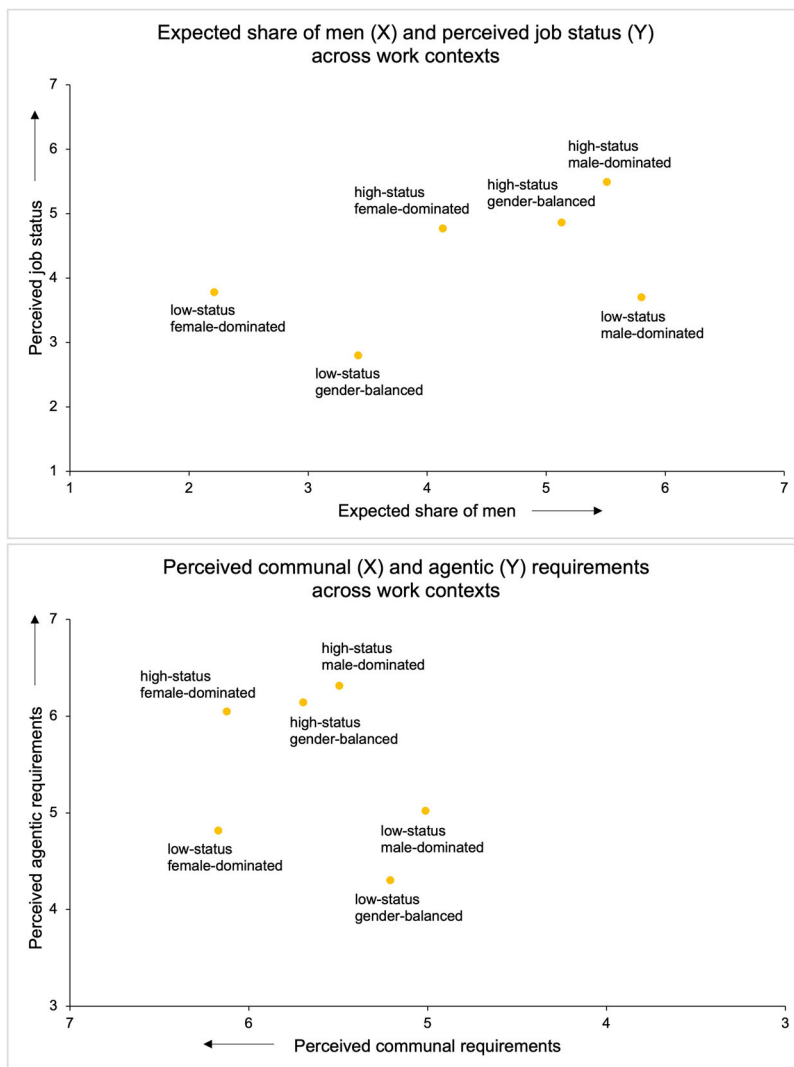
To test H4, we analyzed whether the perceived status of a job was higher for a high-status (1) vs. a low-status job (0), particularly when offered in an organization in a male-dominated (3) vs. a gender-balanced (2) or female-dominated field (1). The analysis revealed a significant main effect for whether the job was high-status or low-status,  $b = 1.60$ ,  $p = .000$ , and a significant interaction effect of job status and field on the perceived job status, explaining additional variance,  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $F(1, 489) = 9.28$ ,  $b = .42$ ,  $p = .002$  (Table 12). Supporting H4, both the actual job status and the field contributed to the perceived job status. Subsequently, we tested whether the perceived job status strengthened the relationship between evaluators' perceptions of applicants' agency and applicants' P-J fit across the different work contexts. Supporting H5, as visualized in Figure 6, the analysis revealed a significant relationship between perceived agency and P-J fit,  $b = .33$ ,  $p = .000$ , strengthened by perceived job status,  $\Delta R^2 = .02$ ,  $F(1, 500) = 11.17$ ,  $b = .09$ ,  $p = .000$  (Table 13).<sup>18</sup>

To test H6, we analyzed whether the expected share of men in a work context was higher for jobs in a male-dominated vs. a gender-balanced or female-dominated field, and whether this effect was weaker for high-status than low-status jobs. Supporting H6, the analysis showed a significant main effect of the field,  $b = 1.24$ ,  $p = .000$ , and a

TABLE 11 Means and standard deviations study 5: Perceptions of the work context and perceptions of applicants across contexts

Variable	Low-status female-dominated (n = 92)		Low-status gender-balanced (n = 86)		Low-status male-dominated (n = 81)		High-status female-dominated (n = 92)		High-status gender-balanced (n = 77)		High-status male-dominated (n = 79)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<i>Perceptions of the context</i>												
Perceived job status	3.78 <sub>a</sub>	1.38	2.8 <sub>b</sub>	1.08	3.70 <sub>a</sub>	1.21	4.77 <sub>c</sub>	1.19	4.86 <sub>c</sub>	1.27	5.49 <sub>d</sub>	1.13
Expected share of men	2.21 <sub>a</sub>	1.27	3.42 <sub>b</sub>	1.23	5.80 <sub>c</sub>	1.08	4.13 <sub>d</sub>	1.29	5.13 <sub>e</sub>	1.21	5.51 <sub>c,e</sub>	1.32
Perceived agentic requirements	4.82 <sub>a</sub>	1.00	4.30 <sub>b</sub>	1.18	5.02 <sub>a</sub>	.98	6.05 <sub>c</sub>	.73	6.14 <sub>c</sub>	.87	6.32 <sub>c</sub>	.67
Perceived communal requirements	6.17 <sub>a</sub>	.77	5.24 <sub>b</sub>	.96	5.01 <sub>b</sub>	.88	6.12 <sub>a</sub>	.73	5.70 <sub>c</sub>	.81	5.50 <sub>c</sub>	.86
<i>Perceptions of applicants</i>												
Perceived applicant agency	5.16 <sub>a</sub>	.87	4.98 <sub>a</sub>	.85	5.03 <sub>a</sub>	.83	5.57 <sub>b</sub>	.69	5.76 <sub>b</sub>	.79	5.70 <sub>b</sub>	.77
Perceived applicant communality	5.65 <sub>a</sub>	.74	5.10 <sub>b</sub>	.81	5.00 <sub>b</sub>	.75	5.64 <sub>a</sub>	.75	5.17 <sub>b</sub>	.96	5.15 <sub>b</sub>	.71
Perceived applicant likeability	5.22 <sub>a,c</sub>	.82	4.80 <sub>b</sub>	.80	4.89 <sub>b,d</sub>	.76	5.06 <sub>c,d</sub>	.75	4.66 <sub>b</sub>	1.10	4.86 <sub>b,d</sub>	.93
Perceived applicant competence	5.50 <sub>a,b</sub>	.83	5.45 <sub>a,b</sub>	.76	5.37 <sub>a</sub>	.80	5.63 <sub>b,c</sub>	.76	5.59 <sub>a,c</sub>	.93	5.76 <sub>c</sub>	.78
Perceived applicant P-J fit	5.70 <sub>a</sub>	.99	5.56 <sub>a</sub>	1.12	5.52 <sub>a,b</sub>	1.00	5.58 <sub>a</sub>	.95	5.54 <sub>a,b</sub>	.93	5.23 <sub>b</sub>	.95
Perceived applicant P-O fit	5.32 <sub>a</sub>	1.07	5.07 <sub>a</sub>	1.19	5.13 <sub>a</sub>	1.10	5.23 <sub>a</sub>	1.12	5.24 <sub>a</sub>	1.03	5.17 <sub>a</sub>	1.06

Note. N = 507. Means with different subscripts (<sub>a-d</sub>) are significantly different from one another at  $p < .05$  (per row). For perceptions of applicants, there were no significant differences by applicant gender in any of the different work contexts.



**FIGURE 5** The expected share of men and perceived job status across work contexts; and the perceived communal vs. agentic requirements across work contexts (high- vs. low-status jobs in a male-dominated vs. female-dominated and gender-balanced field)

significant interaction effect of field and job status on the expected share of men, explaining additional variance,  $\Delta R^2 = .06$ ,  $F(1, 489) = 62.52$ ,  $b = -1.07$ ,  $p = .000$  (Table 12). Subsequently, we tested whether the relationships between evaluators' perceptions of applicants' communality and P-J fit, and applicants' communality and P-O fit, were weaker with a higher expected share of men. Supporting H7a, as visualized in Figure 7, the analysis revealed a significant relationship between perceived communality and P-J fit,  $b = .19$ ,  $p = .012$ , which was negatively moderated by the expected share of men,  $\Delta R^2 = .02$ ,  $F(1, 500) = 10.38$ ,  $b = -.09$ ,  $p = .001$  (Table 13). Supporting H7b, as well visualized in Figure 7, we also found a significant relationship between perceived communality and P-O fit,  $b = .28$ ,  $p = .000$ , which was negatively moderated by the expected share of men when excluding non-significant controls,  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $F(1, 500) = 5.82$ ,  $b = -.07$ ,  $p = .016$  (Table 13).<sup>19</sup>

To determine whether applicants were perceived as more agentic when they pursued high-status vs. low-status jobs and as less communal when they pursued jobs in a male-dominated vs. a female-dominated field, we conducted



**TABLE 12** Summary of linear regression analyses to test H4 and H6 in study 5

Variable	Study 5 (DV = Perceived job status)				Study 5 (DV = Expected share of men)			
	Model A		Model B (H4)		Model A		Model B (H6)	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Constant	3.30 <sup>***</sup>	.34	3.75 <sup>***</sup>	.37	2.17 <sup>***</sup>	.35	1.01 <sup>**</sup>	.36
Controls								
Applicant gender	−.04	.11	−.04	.11	−.41 <sup>**</sup>	.12	−.41 <sup>***</sup>	.11
Participant gender	.06	.12	.04	.12	.07	.12	.11	.12
Participant age	−.02	.02	−.02	.02	−.04	.02	−.03	.02
Job status (high vs. low)	1.60 <sup>***</sup>	.11	.78 <sup>**</sup>	.29	1.18 <sup>***</sup>	.12	3.25 <sup>***</sup>	.28
Field of the organization	.15 <sup>*</sup>	.07	−.06	.10	1.24 <sup>***</sup>	.07	1.77 <sup>***</sup>	.10
Job status x field of the organization			.42 <sup>**</sup>	.14			−1.07 <sup>***</sup>	.14
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.29		.30		.46		.52	
<i>F</i>	40.14 <sup>***</sup>		35.56 <sup>***</sup>		83.35 <sup>***</sup>		88.60 <sup>***</sup>	
$\Delta R^2$			.01				.06	
$\Delta F$			9.28 <sup>**</sup>				62.52 <sup>***</sup>	

Note. *N* = 496. Main effects of actual job status and the field of the organization (male-dominated vs. gender-balanced and female-dominated) in Models A, interactions of job status and the field of the organization in Models B. Participants that did not indicate gender or age were excluded listwise.

\**p* < .05.

\*\**p* < .01.

\*\*\**p* < .001.

ANOVAs. The analysis showed that applicants for high-status jobs were indeed perceived as more agentic than applicants for low-status jobs,  $F(1, 491) = 66.12$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .12$ , supporting H8. Also, the analysis showed a significant main effect of the field on perceived communality,  $F(2, 490) = 26.33$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ , and a significant mean difference for applicants in a female-dominated vs. a male-dominated field ( $p = .000$ ) that supports H9 (see Figure 8 and Table 11). There were no significant differences in perceived applicant agency and communality by applicant gender in any of the work contexts, also not for the high-status job in a male-dominated field in regard to perceived agency ( $N = 77$ ;  $F(1, 73) = 2.23$ ,  $p = \text{n.s.}$ ), thus not supporting H10.

Then, we tested H11, which states that the relationship between perceptions of applicants' agency and P-J fit increases with perceived job status, for women more than for men. To test this hypothesis, we analyzed the three-way interaction of perceived applicant agency, perceived job status, and applicant gender on perceived applicant P-J fit. This interaction effect was significant and explained additional variance when comparing the extremes (high- vs. low-status jobs in a male-dominated vs. a female-dominated field) and excluding non-significant controls,  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $F(1, 334) = 5.12$ ,  $b = .17$ ,  $p = .024$  (Table 14).<sup>20</sup> We visualize the interaction, which supports H11, in Figure 9. Simple slope tests showed significant slope differences in support of H11, for "high perceived job status, female applicant" vs. "high perceived job status, male applicant" (.53,  $p = .001$ ), and "high perceived job status, female applicant" vs. "low perceived job status, female applicant" (.65,  $p = .000$ ).

We additionally measured perceptions of applicants' competence and likeability for the different work contexts in study 5 (means in Table 11). Applicants for high-status jobs were rated as more competent than applicants for low-status jobs, across fields. Applicants in a female-dominated field were rated as more likable than applicants in a male-dominated or gender-balanced field, regardless of the job. There were no significant differences in competence and likeability perceptions by applicant gender in any of the investigated work contexts. Perceived competence correlated with perceived agency and communality, depending on the work context. For the low-status job in a female-dominated

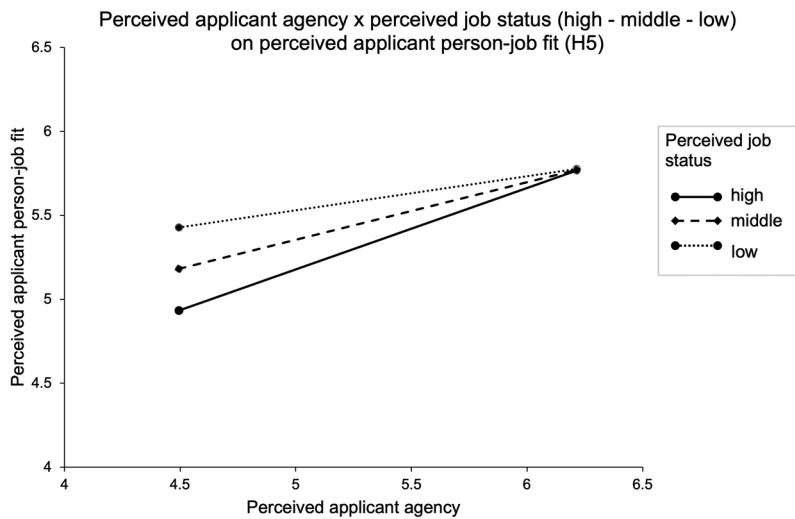
Variable	Study 5 (DV = Perceived applicant P-J fit)			Study 5 (DV = Perceived applicant P-J fit)			Study 5 (DV = Perceived applicant P-O fit)				
	Model A		Model B (H5)	Model A		Model B (H7a)	Model A		Model B (H7b)		
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	
Constant	2.10 <sup>***</sup>	.30	4.10 <sup>***</sup>	.67	2.30 <sup>***</sup>	.32	.15	1.04 <sup>***</sup>	.34	-.69	.79
Controls											
Applicant gender	-.14 <sup>***</sup>	.08	-.14 <sup>***</sup>	.08	-.15 <sup>***</sup>	.08	-.16 <sup>*</sup>	-.12 <sup>***</sup>	.08	-.13 <sup>***</sup>	.08
Perceived applicant likeability	.22 <sup>***</sup>	.06	.21 <sup>***</sup>	.06	.22 <sup>***</sup>	.06	.24 <sup>***</sup>	.24 <sup>***</sup>	.06	.26 <sup>***</sup>	.06
Perceived applicant agency	.33 <sup>***</sup>	.06	-.05 <sup>***</sup>	.13	.30 <sup>***</sup>	.06	.29 <sup>***</sup>	.33 <sup>***</sup>	.06	.32 <sup>***</sup>	.06
Perceived applicant communality	.21 <sup>***</sup>	.07	.22 <sup>***</sup>	.07	.19 <sup>*</sup>	.07	.57 <sup>***</sup>	.28 <sup>***</sup>	.08	.58 <sup>***</sup>	.15
Perceived job status	-.08 <sup>***</sup>	.03	-.59 <sup>***</sup>	.16							
Expected share of men			.09 <sup>***</sup>	.03	-.05 <sup>*</sup>	.02	.43 <sup>***</sup>	-.01 <sup>***</sup>	.03	.38 <sup>*</sup>	.16
Perceived applicant agency x perceived job status							-.09 <sup>***</sup>			-.07 <sup>*</sup>	.03
Perceived applicant communality x expected share of men											
R <sup>2</sup>	.27 <sup>***</sup>		.29 <sup>***</sup>		.27 <sup>***</sup>		.28 <sup>***</sup>	.30 <sup>***</sup>		.31 <sup>***</sup>	
F	37.13 <sup>***</sup>		33.43 <sup>***</sup>		36.21 <sup>***</sup>		32.47 <sup>***</sup>	43.36 <sup>***</sup>		37.45 <sup>***</sup>	
ΔR <sup>2</sup>			.02 <sup>***</sup>				.02 <sup>***</sup>			.01 <sup>*</sup>	
ΔF			11.17 <sup>***</sup>				10.38 <sup>***</sup>			5.82 <sup>*</sup>	

Note.  $N = 507$ . Main effects of perceived applicant agency and communality, and perceived job status and the expected share of men in Models A, interactions of perceived agency x perceived job status, and perceived communality x expected share of men in Models B.

\* $p < .05$ .

 $p < .01$   
\*\*  
 $p < .01$ 
$$p < .01.$$

$$***p < .001.$$

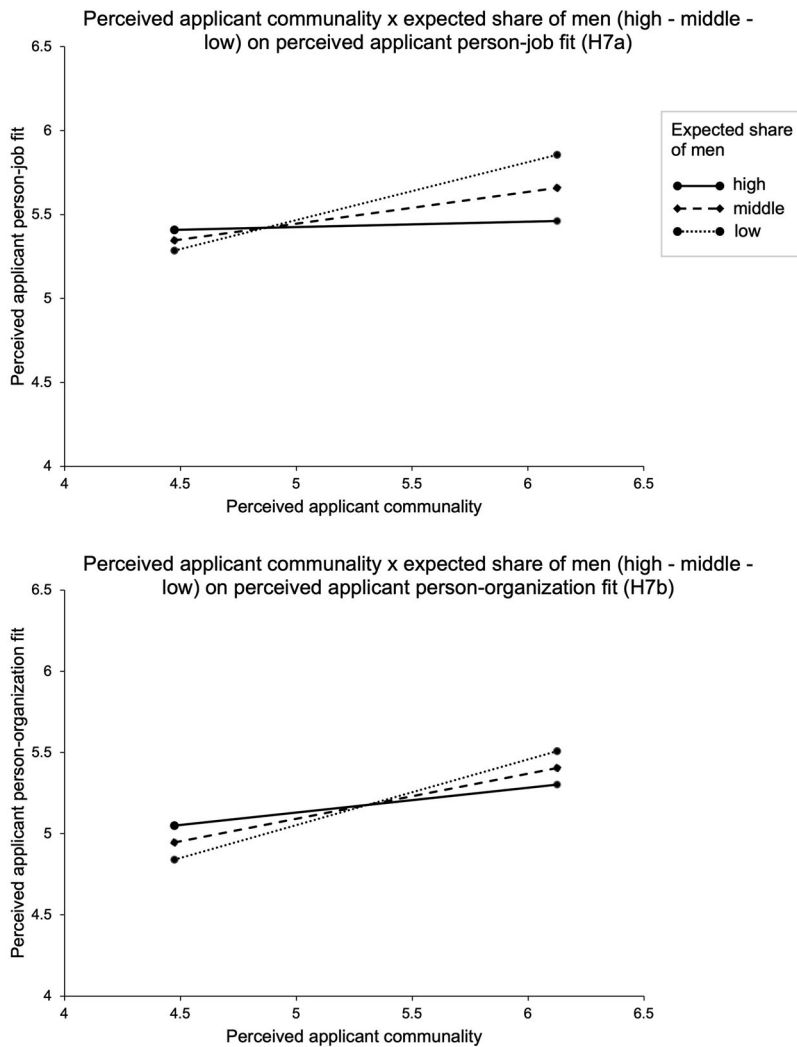


**FIGURE 6** Effects of evaluators' perceptions of applicants' agency x perceived job status on perceptions of applicants' P-J fit. Perceived job status "high", "middle", "low" = mean  $\pm$  1 SD. Perceived applicant agency = mean  $\pm$  1 SD

field, perceived competence showed a particularly high correlation with perceived communality ( $r = .74, p < .01$ ; and also correlated with perceived agency:  $r = .69, p < .01$ ). For the high-status job in a male-dominated field, perceived competence showed a particularly high correlation with perceived agency ( $r = .85, p < .01$ ; correlation of perceived competence and communality:  $r = .56, p < .01$ ). Exploring attributions of proscriptive traits, considered as "should not"s for either women (e.g., "dominant") or men (e.g., "weak"), revealed that applicants for high-status jobs were attributed more of women's proscriptive traits than applicants for low-status jobs (and more when they apply to a high-status job in a male-dominated or gender-balanced field than in a female-dominated field). Conversely, applicants for low-status jobs were ascribed marginally more of men's proscriptive traits. There were no significant differences by applicant gender in attributions of proscriptive traits for any of the investigated work contexts.

## 5 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Stereotype biases in evaluators' fit perceptions may prevent organizations from selecting applicants who are the best fit and present challenges for those who do not fit the stereotype. Due to the unidimensional agentic stereotype of strictly male stereotyped work contexts, we set out to provide a better understanding of evaluators' perceptions of applicant fit in such *gendered* work contexts. Our studies indicate that, in these contexts, perceived agency is a key driver of perceived P-J fit and P-O fit, for both male and female applicants. Moreover, our research elucidates the role of stereotype-congruent recruitment material in strengthening the relationship between applicants' perceived agency and fit. Additionally, our findings illuminate the relevance of contextual differences for perceptions of applicants and applicant fit. Contrasting different contexts revealed that the relevance of agency for fit perceptions increases with perceived job status, and the relevance of communality decreases with the expected share of men. Perceptions of applicants across contexts reflected context stereotypes. In strictly male stereotyped work contexts, not only men but also women were perceived as agentic, despite the incongruity of agency with the female gender stereotype. However, we found that women's perceived fit with jobs that were perceived as high in status also depended on perceived agency more than men's; women may need to compensate for a perceived lack of fit. We can conclude that perceived agency



**FIGURE 7** Effects of evaluators' perceptions of applicants' communality x the expected share of men on perceptions of applicants' P-J fit and P-O fit. Expected share of men "high", "middle", "low" = mean  $\pm$  1 SD. Perceived applicant communality = mean  $\pm$  1 SD

is a key driver of P-J and P-O fit perceptions specifically in recruitment for high-status jobs in male-dominated fields, particularly with agentic recruitment material, and especially for women.

## 5.1 | Theoretical implications

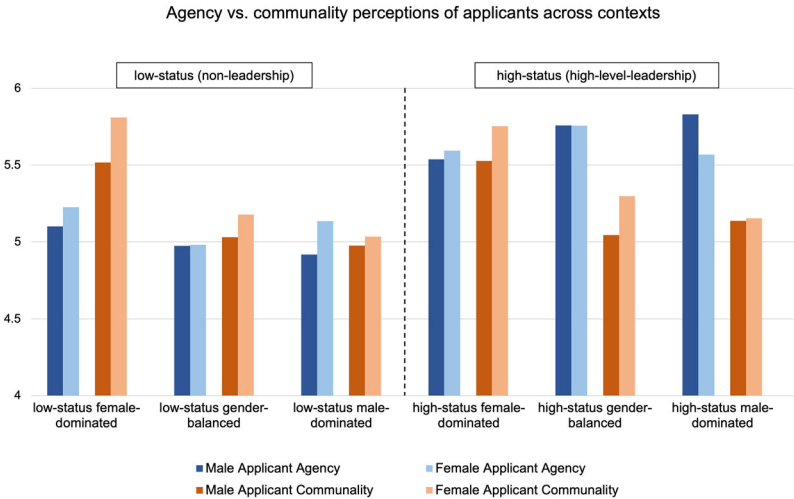
### 5.1.1 | Agency as a driver of fit

In empirically testing Heilman's lack of fit theory (1983, 2012) in a strictly male stereotyped work context, we revealed perceived agency as a key driver of evaluators' fit perceptions for *male and female* applicants. Our findings illuminate evaluators' perspectives as gatekeepers and shed light on a previously neglected but crucial stage in women's careers

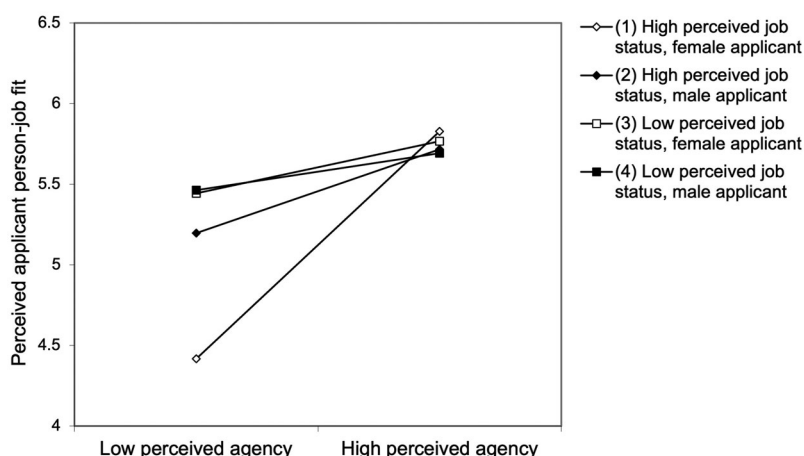
**TABLE 14** Summary of linear regression analyses to test H11 in study 5

Variable	Study 5 (DV = Perceived applicant P-J fit)			
	Model A		Model B (H11)	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Constant	1.88 <sup>***</sup>	.37	.81	2.77
Controls				
Perceived applicant likeability	.26 <sup>**</sup>	.07	.25 <sup>***</sup>	.07
Perceived applicant communality	.23 <sup>**</sup>	.09	.20 <sup>*</sup>	.08
Perceived applicant agency (x)	.31 <sup>***</sup>	.08	.40	.53
Perceived job status (w)	−.10 <sup>**</sup>	.04	.66	.62
Applicant gender (z)	−.07	.09	2.79	1.77
Perceived applicant agency x perceived job status (x*w)			−.11	.11
Perceived applicant agency x applicant gender (x*z)			−.45	.34
Perceived job status x applicant gender (w*z)			−1.02 <sup>*</sup>	.40
Perceived applicant agency x perceived job status x applicant gender (x*w*z)			.17 <sup>*</sup>	.07
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.29		.34	
<i>F</i>	27.85 <sup>***</sup>		19.05 <sup>***</sup>	
Δ <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> (x*w*z)			.01	
Δ <i>F</i>			5.12 <sup>*</sup>	

*Note.* *N* = 344. Main effects of perceived applicant agency, perceived job status, and applicant gender in Model A, three-way interaction in Model B.  
\**p* < .05.  
\*\**p* < .01.  
\*\*\**p* < .001.



**FIGURE 8** Perceptions of applicants across work contexts (H8 and H9)



**FIGURE 9** Three-way interaction perceived applicant agency x perceived job status x applicant gender on perceived applicant P-J fit (H11), across high- vs. low-status jobs in a male-dominated vs. a female-dominated field

in a gender-atypical field: applying to a high-status job. Focusing on gendered work contexts, our findings contribute to a more comprehensive perspective on fit perceptions in recruitment and stereotype research. Future research should consider that in strictly male stereotyped work contexts perceived agency seems to be a driver of perceived fit, regardless of applicants' gender, despite the incongruity between agency and the female gender stereotype (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012).

### 5.1.2 | Stereotyped recruitment material

Our research further shows an influence of stereotyped recruitment material on evaluators' fit perceptions, of both job and organizational profiles that explicitly signal the agentic stereotype of the work context. Uncovering an influence of recruitment material on evaluators' fit perceptions illuminates an additional pathway that contributes to the continuity of stereotyped assessment patterns in strictly male stereotyped work contexts. Evaluators' fit assessments may not only be influenced by their own stereotype-based beliefs but also by stereotypes that are prevalent in the organization due to an effect of recruitment material. One profile signaling the agentic stereotype (the job or the organization description) seems to be enough to strengthen the relevance of agency for perceived P-J as well as P-O fit. These findings extend previous literature, which suggests effects of recruitment material on *applicants'* perceptions (Gaucher et al., 2011; Hentschel et al., 2018, 2020). We demonstrated that the design of recruitment material can also influence *evaluators'* perceptions. Our findings imply that to understand what maintains stereotyped assessment patterns in recruitment it is necessary to consider evaluators' fit perceptions, and how organizations impact their fit perceptions.

### 5.1.3 | Considering P-J and P-O fit

By considering stereotypes related to P-J and P-O fit, our research bridges theories of gender biases in fit assessments (Heilman, 1983, 2012) with research on P-J and P-O fit, as unique fit concepts grounded in the recruitment literature (Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown, 2000). We found that the agentic stereotype is prevalent in both P-J and P-O fit

perceptions, and revealed effects of job as well as organizational profiles in recruitment material. Accordingly, our findings are in line with the argument that stereotype-based beliefs influence the salience of certain characteristics of jobs as well as organizations (e.g., based on Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012; Rice & Barth, 2016). While previous research on stereotypes in recruitment mainly focused on P-J fit or general indicators of belongingness (e.g., Bosak & Sczesny, 2008; Gaucher et al., 2011; Horvath & Sczesny, 2016), our research provides a more comprehensive understanding of effects on perceived fit and suggests that P-O fit may not be neglected. We encourage future research to consider different fit types and emphasize the relevance of P-J as well as P-O fit.

#### 5.1.4 | The relevance of context

Our findings suggest that perceptions are stereotyped, and gendered, depending on the work context. Previous research suggested a perceived connection of status with agency and masculinity, and of female-dominated fields with communality (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Glick, 1991; Koenig et al., 2011). In line with this research, we found perceived agency to be a driver of perceived P-J fit especially for jobs that were perceived as high in status, which were high-level leadership jobs, particularly when in a male-dominated field. The relevance of perceived communality for perceived P-J and P-O fit was particularly low when the expected share of men in a work context was high. Similarly, perceptions of job requirements were more agentic in high-status than low-status jobs and more communal in a female-dominated than a male-dominated or gender-balanced field. Moreover, the perceptions of the organization's cultural orientation were more agentic and less communal when the field was male-dominated. These findings provide a more comprehensive and specific perspective on contextual differences than previously found. Our findings suggest that, while perceived status may account for furthering the influence of agency on fit perceptions, the expected share of men seems to account for reducing the influence of communality. Our research emphasizes the importance of contextual differences and reveals gender-stereotyped patterns in a multi-faceted interplay of a job's status and the field of an organization, which systematically shape perceptions of *fit*, *requirements*, and *applicants*.

#### 5.1.5 | Perceptions of applicants across contexts

We found that, across contexts, male and female applicants were perceived as more agentic when they pursued high-status than low-status jobs, and as more communal when they pursued jobs in a female-dominated than in a male-dominated (or gender-balanced) field. When comparing contexts, perceptions of applicants did not differ by applicant gender in any of the different work contexts, neither for agency nor for communality. These findings indicate that perceptions of agency and communality of (experienced) applicants in different work contexts, whether male or female, are also influenced by stereotypes pertaining to the job's status and the field of the organization. Thus, our findings suggest that the stereotype of the work context could be more influential for perceptions of applicants' agency and communality than their gender.

Exploring perceptions of applicants' competence and likeability revealed a similar pattern. Applicants for high-status (vs. low-status) jobs were rated as more competent, and applicants in a female-dominated field (vs. male-dominated or gender-balanced) as more likeable. Importantly, although perceived competence is related to perceived agency, it has been shown to be a construct of its own (Eagly et al., 2019; Hentschel et al., 2019). In line with this notion, we found perceived agency and competence can influence perceived fit simultaneously, and competence perceptions had a particularly strong relationship with agency perceptions in high-status jobs, and with communality perceptions for a low-status job in a female-dominated field.



We did not find that women or men who were perceived as counter-stereotypical (women in strictly male stereotyped or men in strictly female stereotyped contexts) suffer from reduced fit, competence, or likeability ratings. This is in line with previous research which suggests that clearly identifying a counter-stereotypical trait may lead to extremely high perceptions on this trait, but does not necessarily come with backlash (Koch et al., 2015; Kunda & Thagard, 1996). Nevertheless, we found that applicants for high-status jobs were attributed more traits that are considered as non-desirable for women (e.g., dominant and self-centered), particularly when they apply in a male-dominated or a gender-balanced field. As stereotypes “proscribe” these traits for women in particular, this points to social backlash towards women. In reverse, applicants for low-status jobs were attributed more of men’s “proscriptive” traits (e.g., weak and insecure), but this difference was only marginal. Still, in these contexts social backlash towards men may be more prevalent (Moss-Racusin et al., 2010). Stereotyped perceptions are very complex, and social backlash can manifest in various ways. We call for more research on fit perceptions and gender differences that pays particular attention to contextual differences and influences, specifically in gender effects.

### 5.1.6 | The role of applicants’ gender in the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields

Throughout our studies in the context of high-status jobs in male-dominated fields, female applicants were either perceived as equally or as even more agentic than male applicants, although the female gender stereotype would suggest low agency perceptions for women. These findings indicate that the unidimensional agentic stereotype of the work context strongly influences perceptions of women who engage in this work context, evoking counter-stereotypical perceptions. In previous research, it was not clear whether women who apply to high-status jobs in male-dominated fields are perceived as highly agentic, because of the stereotype of the work context, or not agentic, because of the female gender stereotype. Our findings suggest that women who apply to these jobs are indeed perceived as agentic. These findings are in line with research that suggested that perceptions of women differ when they are presented as “career women” (Eckes, 2002) or “successful managers” (Heilman et al., 1989), and lend support for the notion that evaluators derive perceptions of female applicants rather from their (successful) engagement in the male stereotyped work context than from their gender stereotype (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Therefore, in future research, a more nuanced perspective on women in male stereotyped work contexts is needed.

Our argument that women are perceived as agentic, due to their career and achievements in these contexts, is in line with research on the prevalence of gender stereotyping (Eckes, 2002; Heilman et al., 1989), shifting standards theory (Biernat, 2012; Biernat et al., 1991), and contrast effects (Koch et al., 2015; Kunda & Thagard, 1996). In strictly male stereotyped work contexts, women are an exception. More so, when they are deemed successful, they are likely to be perceived as *exceptional* and *different* than “women in general” (Biernat, 2012; Biernat et al., 1991). The agentic qualities, which are seen as atypical for women but considered as prerequisites for their success and for climbing the ladder to high-status jobs, are then particularly salient (see also Heilman et al., 1989). We found that, *when women are perceived as agentic*, they can be perceived as an equally good or even as a better fit to high-status jobs in male-dominated fields than men. With an increasing agency level, women seem to be able to catch up to men in terms of perceived fit. Nevertheless, we also found that women’s perceived fit with such jobs is more strongly dependent on their perceived agency. Thus, while our findings suggest an impact of agency on fit perceptions for applicants regardless of gender, they also suggest that the *need for being perceived as agentic* is higher for women than for men in strictly male stereotyped work contexts. Importantly, shifting standards theory also implies that “being agentic” is evaluated based on different standards for women and men, such that gender stereotypes could still be influencing perceptions. Therefore, to understand perceptions of female applicants, future research needs to pay attention to the specific context and framing. Specifically, additional research is needed to evaluate which exact signals lead to the high agency perceptions for women.

## 5.2 | Practical implications

Many organizations strive for diversity (Podsiadlowski et al., 2013; Timmers et al., 2010) and extensive research highlights the benefits of diverse teams (e.g., more innovative potential; Peus & Traut-Mattausch, 2007; Welbourne et al., 2007). Due to stereotype biases in fit perceptions, evaluators may counter an organization's diversity efforts. The stereotyped assessment patterns from our studies may lead to hiring decisions according to *perceived* rather than *actual* requirements (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Gaucher et al., 2011; Heilman, 2012). Clearly defined assessment criteria can help to reduce ambiguity, and in turn to counteract stereotype biases in evaluators' fit perceptions (Heilman, 2012).

Our research specifically indicates that organizations need to ensure that evaluators' stereotype-based beliefs are not unconsciously strengthened by gendered recruitment material which manifests stereotypes. Reflecting on the *actual* requirements and deliberately crafting job advertisements can help to reduce stereotype biases in recruitment material. Actual requirements, even in strictly male stereotyped work contexts, usually include communal, stereotypically female qualities (Cann & Siegfried, 1990; Gaucher et al., 2011). If the job requirements and/or organizational culture are stereotyped agentic but, in practice, contain communal aspects, recruiters should consider including these communal aspects in job advertisements to reduce the focus on the stereotype (or describe the job requirements and the organizational culture in a rather neutral way). Importantly, our research indicates that the description of the organization should not be neglected. Agentic job and organizational profiles strengthen the focus on agency in fit perceptions, and one profile is enough to create this effect. Communal and neutral job profiles instead reduce the focus on agency, create a more diverse understanding of requirements, and counter stereotypical perceptions (and can also attain a more diverse applicant pool and specifically attract female applicants; Gaucher et al., 2011; Hentschel et al., 2020).

Concerning implications for women in strictly male stereotyped work contexts, our findings, in conjunction with previous research (Heilman et al., 1995; Heilman et al., 1989; Koch et al., 2015), indicate that female applicants need clear and unquestionable evidence for their success in the work context. When evaluators consider agency as essential for success and assume that men and *successful* women in these contexts are agentic, this mechanism might still harm women who are not perceived as such. Our results suggest that women cannot benefit from being attributed communal, stereotypically female qualities, when applying to high-status jobs in male-dominated fields. To catch up to men in terms of perceived fit, women likely need a strong signal that indicates that they can cope with the (perceived) agentic requirements of the context (Eagly & Karau, 2002). When women can signal that they are already successful in the "gender-atypical" work context, they are likely to be perceived as agentic, and in turn to overcome a perceived lack of fit with these jobs.

Our findings emphasize the importance of stereotype awareness in evaluators who serve as organizational gatekeepers (Cole et al., 2004; van den Brink & Benschop, 2014). Previous research suggests that stereotype biases are indeed less prevalent in more experienced and trained evaluators, and that fostering evaluators' motivation to reflect on stereotype biases in decisions on applicants, and on actual requirements for effective and good leadership behavior, can help to prevent these biases (Heilman, 2012; Koch et al., 2015). Thus, organizations can also raise stereotype awareness by training their evaluators.

## 5.3 | Limitations

We focused on recruitment for high-level leadership jobs in male-dominated fields and show results within an academic context and across different business contexts. However, we did not capture differences by leadership level. More research is needed to illuminate at which level agency becomes particularly salient, in different fields. Perceptions of women's agency are likely to be different at earlier career stages (where many qualified women already drop out; Clark Blickenstaff, 2005) or among more "average" applicants (Ceci & Williams, 2015; Steinpreis et al., 1999).

Which exact signals lead to high agency perceptions for women needs further investigation. Additionally, we contrasted a male-dominated with a female-dominated and gender-balanced field but did not capture within-field differences such as across different male-dominated disciplines or industries, which require further research. Also, we call for future research to provide a better understanding of effects in *strictly female stereotyped work contexts*, most likely *low-status jobs in female-dominated fields*, and their implications for men's careers. Our findings lend initial support that, in these contexts, *men* likely cannot benefit from being ascribed qualities that are congruent with their gender stereotype but need to be ascribed communal, stereotypically female qualities, to be perceived as a good fit. Lastly, although perceptions did not differ for our academia vs. business context (see supplemental material), future research could analyze potential differences. Still, we assume that our findings generalize to other contexts depending on the *perceived job status* and the *expected gender ratio* in a work context.

As we gathered data in Germany, it is questionable whether the findings would be different in other countries. While Germany is considered a rather "masculine" society valuing performance and managers' assertive- and decisiveness, other countries (e.g., Nordic countries) are considered more "feminine" societies valuing consensus and managers' supportiveness (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, n.d.). It remains unclear whether perceived requirements for high-status jobs, especially in male-dominated fields, are also highly agentic in more "feminine" societies. Further research is needed to investigate potential cross-cultural differences in perceptions of applicants and applicant fit, in specific contexts. Although cultures seem to vary in what characteristics are deemed as *important* for leaders (Szesny et al., 2004), male stereotyping patterns in leader *attributions* seem to be widespread across cultures (Koenig et al., 2011; Szesny et al., 2004). Similar leader stereotyping patterns could imply that our findings generalize to other countries, and more "feminine" societies.

To compare effects of agency with effects of other (perceived) applicant qualities, we investigated communality, as the stereotypically female part of the "big two" personality trait dimensions (Abele & Wojciszke, 2019), and explored likeability and competence perceptions. However, future research is needed to dig deeper into effects around perceived competence, and specifically its differential relationships with perceived agency, communality, and fit. Moreover, although our studies showed significant moderation effects, some were rather small, such as the effect of job or organizational profile when controlling for the effect of the other profile in study 4. More research is needed to replicate our findings, and to investigate under which conditions the influence of recruitment material design is stronger or weaker.

All our five studies were between-subjects experiments, which have many strengths but may limit external validity. Whether female applicants for high-status jobs in male-dominated fields are perceived as more agentic than male applicants when directly comparing applicants needs further investigation (Biernat, 2003; Biernat, 2012). Although a meta-analysis of experiments on gender biases in applicant decisions did not find a difference between comparative and individual ratings (Koch et al., 2015), we call for more research on effects that are specific in competitive assessment procedures. Additionally, in our first two studies, we had university students evaluating applicants. As this sample is a potential threat to validity, we replicated the test with practitioners in studies 3 and 4. Nevertheless, we encourage future research to test whether our findings replicate in studies with other methodological approaches such as in field studies or observational studies.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

In light of the findings in our five experimental studies, we conclude that perceived agency plays a crucial role in evaluators' assessments of applicant fit for high-status jobs, particularly in male-dominated fields. Our research revealed that (1) agency perceptions drive fit perceptions for male and female applicants, (2) stereotype-congruent, gendered recruitment material can strengthen the focus on agency, and (3) the particular context shapes perceptions of applicants and applicant fit. Although we find that women must compensate for a perceived lack of fit with jobs that are perceived as high in status, they can be perceived as an equally good or even better fit than men, *when they are perceived*

as *agentic*. However, we must consider that women likely need a strong signal that they can cope with the perceived agentic requirements of the work context for this effect to occur.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> To estimate appropriate sample sizes for the studies, we performed power analyses using G\*Power (Faul et al., 2009).
- <sup>2</sup> Studies 1 and 2, which were the basis for our further studies, were reviewed by the experimental laboratory of the Technical University of Munich, TUM School of Management prior to data collection in the laboratory (e.g., regarding compliance with strict no-deception rules; ref.-nos.: 2017-11, 2017-24). We also consulted the university's data protection office to guarantee full anonymity and ensure compliance to the General Data Protection Regulation of the European Union.
- <sup>3</sup> We invited ca. 2240 members of the laboratory's participant pool for participation. 314 participated (ca. 14%) but we excluded 53 participants, as they either failed the manipulation check on applicant gender or a control question, indicated that they didn't answer the questionnaire genuinely or had language problems, or didn't fit the predefined sample characteristics.
- <sup>4</sup> The agentic profile contained as many agentic expressions as the communal profile contained communal expressions.
- <sup>5</sup> We chose applicants' first names ("Thomas" vs. "Sabine") based on empirical research (Rudolph et al., 2017), to ensure that they do not differ in perceived attractiveness. The CV excerpt was created in collaboration with math scientists. Potentially confounding information (such as university names and locations) were blackened.
- <sup>6</sup> Participants who could not correctly remember the applicant's gender were excluded from the analysis in all our studies.
- <sup>7</sup> For studies 1 and 2, we also performed all analyses controlling for whether the student participants had prior knowledge on appointment committees (60% in study 1, 55% in study 2). This control was non-significant and did not change our results.
- <sup>8</sup> Invitations for participation were sent out to ca. 1980 members of the experimental laboratory's participant pool that had not participated in study 1. 395 (ca. 20%) participated but 29 participants were excluded for the same reasons as in study 1. Based on the data collection from this sample, we published an article in a German national outlet. There is no overlap of variables or results presented in this paper and in the article: Dutz, R., Hubner, S., & Peus, C. (2018). Der Einfluss der Darstellung unterschiedlicher Organisationskulturen in Stellenausschreibungen für MINT-Professuren. *Hochschulmanagement*, 3/2018, 74-80. ISSN: 1860-3025.
- <sup>9</sup> We did not control for participant gender and age in this analysis. The controls were non-significant but reduced our sample size (due to listwise exclusion of missing values).
- <sup>10</sup> From 268 participants in total (response rate ca. 11%), we excluded 17 participants for the same reasons as in study 1.
- <sup>11</sup> From 678 participants in total (response rate ca. 15%), we excluded 45 participants for the same reasons as in study 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Like in study 2, organizational profiles described the hiring organization's culture as either competitive (agentic profile) or cooperative (communal profile), or gave no information on the hiring organization's culture (neutral profile). Study 3 did not include a "green" organizational culture as an additional reference.
- <sup>13</sup> We did not control for participant gender and age in these analyses. The controls were non-significant but reduced our sample size (due to listwise exclusion of missing values). When controlling for participant gender and age, the effects remained stable except for the interaction on perceived P-J fit which became marginally significant.
- <sup>14</sup> Perception differences related to the organization's field are likely more ambiguous in academia. Low-status jobs in universities (e.g., in the administration, secretarial, or janitor services) often involve similar tasks across disciplines, such that whether the faculty is math vs. education is unlikely to matter.
- <sup>15</sup> We did an extensive research on statistics in these fields and compared gender ratios for different jobs in organizations in these fields. For instance, we looked at data from the German and international statistical offices and other web sources (e.g., Catalyst, 2020d, 2020e; De Silver, 2018; OECD, 2019).

- <sup>16</sup> In the pre-test, we also tested perception differences between our former academia context (a job as a professor in a mathematics faculty) and our business context for study 5 (a job as a managing director in an automotive company), which did not significantly differ with regard to the relevant contextual parameters (perceived job status, expected share of men).
- <sup>17</sup> Response rate ca. 35%. Participants were compensated for their participation. From 571 participants in total, 64 participants were excluded as they either failed the manipulation check on applicant gender or control questions, indicated that they did not answer the questionnaire genuinely, or did not fit the predefined sample characteristics.
- <sup>18</sup> We did not control for participant gender and age in this analysis to ensure alignment with other analyses in study 5. Participant gender and age were non-significant controls and did not change the results in regard to H5.
- <sup>19</sup> We did not control for participant gender and age, which were non-significant controls but reduced our sample size (due to listwise exclusion of missing values). When controlling for those variables, the analysis revealed a marginal interaction effect for H7b. For the analysis of H7a, we also show the effects when not controlling for participant gender and age, for better alignment of the hypothesis tests in study 5 (Table 13). These controls did not change the results in regard to H7a.
- <sup>20</sup> We did not control for participant gender and age. The controls were non-significant but reduced our sample size (due to listwise exclusion of missing values). When controlling for both variables, the analysis revealed a marginal interaction effect for H11.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

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