Summary

In the Western world racial-ethnic minorities are underrepresented in leadership positions. For instance, in the Netherlands, non-Western minorities are overrepresented in lower level organizational positions, whereas they are underrepresented higher-level, leadership roles (CBS, 2007; Dekker, 2013). This pattern remains even after correcting for some of the objective differences (e.g., education; CBS, 2007). It seems that racial-ethnic minorities—much like women—face a glass ceiling that hinders their career development into higher-level, leadership positions (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990). The main goal of this dissertation was to gain insight into the underlying psychological mechanisms of the glass ceiling for racial-ethnic minorities.

Achieving this is important for several reasons. Minorities in leadership positions help decrease implicit biases that members of majority groups may have towards minorities in general (Plant et al., 2009). Minority leaders also act as role models for others individuals from a similar background. Research shows that salient role models can help increase (cognitive) performance of minorities (e.g., Marx, Ko, & Friedman, 2009). Moreover, in a labor market that is rapidly diversifying, it is crucial to optimally utilize minority talent in order to gain competitive advantage (Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

Given this importance, there has been surprisingly little research on minority leadership. Existing research is conducted mainly in the United States and many questions still remain. In this dissertation, I studied minority leadership in a European context. In doing so, I focused on two broad aspects of this phenomenon. In Part I of this dissertation I focused on perceptions of and reactions to minorities in leadership positions. In Part II the focus was on minorities as active participants in leadership development. Here, I studied how organizational factors affected minorities leadership relevant perceptions and leadership self-selection tendencies.
Chapter 2 zoomed in on the pro-White leadership bias in the European context. Empirical work in the United States shows that when people think of a leader, they tend to have a White-majority group member in mind (Rosette et al., 2008). As a result of these biases in leadership categorization, individuals with a minority background do not fit the “typical image” of a leader as well as majority group members. Consequently, they emerge less often as leaders, and when they do, they are not perceived as effective (Lord & Maher, 1993; Rosette et al., 2008). In Chapter 2, we showed that the pro-White leadership bias is also present in the European context and that it can have an implicit nature. Our reaction time measure showed that both leadership roles and effective leadership traits are more strongly associated with native-Dutch than ethnic-minority stimuli. Both native-Dutch and minority participants showed this automatic bias. In the final study of Chapter 2, we studied whether pro-White leadership bias predicts discriminatory behavior during promotion decisions. Additionally, we investigated whether interventions focusing on suppressing the automatic categorization of individuals as members of ethnic groups would diminish the pro-White leadership bias. Results showed that higher levels of an implicit pro-White leadership bias were associated with an explicit willingness to promote a native-Dutch candidate and not an equally suitable minority candidate to a higher leadership position. Moreover, when situational cues emphasized dual levels of categorization (i.e., making both an ethnic and a superordinate group membership salient), the implicit pro-White leadership bias was—at least to some extent—decreased.

Chapter 3 focused on anticipated interactions between subordinates and leaders with different racial-ethnic backgrounds. Theoretical models describing the subordinate-leader dynamics propose that for leaders to be able to show actual leadership and have real influence, they need to be supported and endorsed by their subordinates (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Subordinates typically endorse prototypical leaders’ leadership more than that of non-
prototypical ones. Given our findings in Chapter 2, that showed that minorities are perceived as less prototypical as leaders than native-Dutch, we expected to find that subordinates would less readily accept minorities’ leadership and that this would be visible in their nonverbal behavior. In this chapter, we focused specifically on interpersonal space. Earlier research showed that people lower in the hierarchy maintain greater interpersonal distances towards others, whereas the higher placed tend to do the opposite (e.g., Hall et al., 2005). Based on this, our prediction was that subordinates would distance themselves more from prototypical, native-Dutch leaders than less prototypical, minority leaders. Additionally, we predicted that increased physical proximity (versus increased physical distance) would indicate a willingness to challenge and take over the leadership position (versus accepting and endorsing it). The results showed that subordinates indeed kept more physical distance from a native-Dutch than from a minority (in this case Moroccan-Dutch) leader. This spatial discrimination effect occurred only when the anticipated task partner had a leadership role and not when he or she had a subordinate role. Increased physical distance was negatively related with participants’ desire to show leadership behavior themselves. The final study of Chapter 3 showed that the observed spatial discrimination effect disappears when leadership emergence is explicitly qualification based.

Earlier research on minorities and leadership focused mainly on minorities as targets of bias. The first two empirical chapters fit this tradition as well. In the third and final empirical chapter, the focus shifted from biased perceptions of and reactions to minority leadership to leadership self-selection by minorities themselves. In this chapter we studied leadership relevant self-perceptions and behavioral tendencies of minorities. Because leadership self-perceptions almost always occur in an organizational setting (Hogue & Lord, 2007), we focused on these perceptions and behavioral tendencies as a function of a diversity-relevant organizational variable: organizational diversity ideology (Wolsko et al., 2000). Our
presumption was that some diversity ideologies are more instrumental for minority employees than others because they create an environment in which (the expression of) differences are accepted. We predicted that minority employees working in these organizations would have more positive leadership self-perceptions and an increased desire to occupy leadership positions. Our results were in line with these predictions. Minorities who imagined to work for organizations endorsing multiculturalism or colorblindness with a focus on inter-individual differences reported higher degrees of leadership self-efficacy, more positive outcome expectations regarding leadership roles and an increased willingness to apply for higher level leadership positions than minorities who imagined to work for an organization that endorsed a colorblind ideology with a mere focus on a superordinate identity. These effects were primarily indirect: via an increase in the perceptions of organizational openness for differences.

Part I of this dissertation showed that biases in leadership categorization can suppress minorities’ emergence into leadership roles. These processes can also affect the leader-subordinate dynamics after minorities emerge into leadership roles. Their leadership is accepted less and challenged more by subordinates than leadership by majority group members. Part II showed that organizational diversity context can have an important effect on how minority employees perceive their own leadership. When organizations communicate openness to differences (e.g., openness for expressing different opinions), minorities will have more positive expectations regarding higher level leadership roles and will be more willing to pursue these roles.

This dissertation contributes to existing literature by widening our knowledge of biases in leadership perceptions and their behavioral consequences in a European context. Additionally, the focus on minorities’ leadership relevant intra-personal processes (e.g., leadership relevant goals and aspirations) as a function of organizational context illuminated
crucial aspects of minority leadership that as yet have not received the deserved research attention. In the empirical chapters, we consistently explored possible interventions to encourage minority leadership. As such, we offer organizations practical tools to encourage minority leadership and to optimally utilize the talent in the diversifying labor market.