Updating the Glass Cliff: Female Characteristics Perceived Essential for Leading Thriving Companies

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The Glass Cliff Phenomenon, in which women appear more likely to be promoted to leadership in times of crisis (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), may be a function of stereotypic views. In this study, we systematically replicated Kottke, and associates (2013), *which had been a replication of the Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) study, to determine whether gender stereotypes relate to people's perceptions of leadership traits under the paradigms "think manager – think male" and "think crisis – think female." After reading a scenario of either a company in crisis or one that was thriving, working students were asked to rate a list of 58 traits on bi-polar scales assessing the need of each characteristic to a leader during times of success and crisis. Although some traits were in fact rated as being needed for a leader of a thriving company, there was very little overlap with the expected gender-typed leadership traits and the paradigm was not supported.*

Introduction

Women have traditionally been underrepresented in positions of top leadership; consequently, when women are appointed to top executive positions, observers tend to take notice. Ryan and Haslam (2005) introduced the notion of the Glass Cliff Phenomenon (GCP) which posits that women are more likely to be promoted to leadership positions when an organization is in decline (e.g., crisis) than when it is thriving. Glass Cliff researchers have identified leadership characteristics perceived to be important in leading companies in crisis and companies that are thriving (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). Results of previous studies (e.g., Rink, Ryan, & Stoker, 2011; Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, & Bongiorno, 2011) have indicated that female gender-typed characteristics appear to be preferred for leadership when a company is in crisis; male gender-typed characteristics are preferred for a leadership of a thriving company.

Building on this stream of research, Kottke, Pelletier, Beckles, Hutabarat, DiPonio, Nguyen, and Gonzalez (2013) replicated systematically, with a larger and more diverse sample than Bruckmüller & Branscombe (2010), the gender-typing of leadership characteristics perceived to be critical in a thriving company versus a company in crisis. Bruckmüller and Branscombe's (2010) student sample was derived from a mid-west university in Kansas; Kottke *et al.*'s (2013) sample was taken from a diverse university population in southern California. Participants in Kottke *et al.* (2013) were given a list of 58 characteristics associated with leadership and asked to rate them on a seven-point bipolar scale. The seven-point bipolar scale was anchored with "nonessential" (1) to "highly essential" (7). Female characteristics with large effect sizes included *emotional sensitivity, empathy*, and *consideration*. Male characteristics with large effect sizes were *authority* and *competition*. The characteristics associated with leading a company in crisis were *ability to encourage others, cope with stress, build confidence,* and *motivate others*; these characteristics were rated as more feminine than masculine, but the effect sizes were small. The characteristics associated with leading a thriving company were *self-confidence* (rated as masculine), *fairness, trustworthiness, honesty,* and *sophisticated* (gender-typed as feminine). Although some traits were rated as being representative of masculine or feminine and characteristics of being needed in times of crisis or success, there was very little overlap with the

expected gender-typed leadership traits. In Kottke *et al.*'s (2013) study, the GCP paradigm was not supported. The characteristics, however, were rated without context; participants rated characteristics without having knowledge of specific company circumstances.

Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, and Bongiorno (2011) found that the selection process for a leader was contingent on the context of whether the company was successful or in crisis. For successful companies, the male attributes were preferred, and the "think manager—think male" concept was evident. When a company was in crisis, the female characteristics were preferred, and the "think crisis—think female" perception was prevalent.

Further, the context of the crisis may also facilitate gender-bias in relation to the condition of the company. For example, if the leader is expected to be the scapegoat, fill a leaderless role, or allay the concerns of employees during the crisis, female characteristics may be more desirable for the position. However, if the leader is expected to improve financial performance or be a representative for the organization, male characteristics are more likely to be perceived as requisites for the position (Rink, Ryan, & Stoker, 2011). Therefore, evidence indicated that the context in which women are appointed to leadership positions of companies in crises may be a pivotal factor when analyzing the presence of the GCP. In addition, the idea that context may dictate whether the glass cliff effect is present when females are appointed to companies in crises coincides with Bruckmüller and Branscombe's (2010) findings that gender-biased characteristics were preferred based on how well the company is performing, as well as the conditions that require a change in leadership.

The purpose of our study was to determine whether characteristics deemed by respondents as essential for leading thriving companies or companies in crisis would differ from Kottke *et al.*'s (2013) findings if participants were made aware of the nature of the company and the context of the crisis. We expected to find the existence of the GCP in the characteristics based on respondents' knowledge of the context of the crisis.

Method

Design

The current experiment featured a between-subjects design and assessed whether company situation had a significant effect on ratings of leadership characteristics. Participants were given a scenario of either a company in financial crisis or a financially thriving company. Two sample t-tests were conducted to assess which leadership traits were deemed essential for leading companies in crisis versus those thriving.

Participants

All of the participants who took part in the study were from a regional state university in Southern California and enrolled in upper division psychology and management courses. A heterogeneous sample of 326 college students participated in the study. The majority were women (67%), Hispanic (51%), and college seniors (55%). The remainder of the sample were as follows: 33% men, 28% White, 6% African American, 6% Asian American, and 41% were juniors. Ages ranged from 19 to 63 years ($M = 24.8$, $SD = 5.9$). Ninety percent of participants had work experience.

Considering that work experience would be important for participants to have had firsthand experience with leadership in the work place, only data from those participants with work experience were used. When this criterion was applied, 291 participants remained for data screening. We employed a four item manipulation check to verify that participants had carefully read the scenario that preceded the rating scales. Only those participants who had answered three or more of the questions correctly were retained, which resulted in the removal of 23 cases (13 participants left one or more manipulation check items blank). The demographics of this reduced sample of 268 participants were 69% women, Hispanic (51%), and college seniors (57%) The remainder of the sample were 31% men, 29% White, 7% African American, 5% Asian American, and 39% were juniors. The mean age of the participants was 24.9 years ($SD = 5.8$). Years of work experience ranged from 2 months to 30 years ($M = 6.4$ years; $SD = 5.1$). Of these working participants, 111 reported some form of supervisory experience, ranging from 3 months to 20 years ($M = 3.0$ years; $SD = 3.3$).

At the discretion of the instructor, participants received extra credit as an incentive for taking part in the study. All participants volunteered willingly to take part in the experiment and were treated ethically in accordance with the APA ethical principles for research (APA, 2010).

Materials

The current study included a fictitious company

in two scenarios: one scenario with the company in financial crisis, and the other scenario with the company thriving financially. Using 58 characteristics (e.g., dynamic, able to cope with stress) taken from the same sources as Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010), we constructed seven-point bipolar scales (e.g., 'nonessential' at one anchor; 'highly essential' at the other pole). Presentation order of the characteristics was counterbalanced, with four manipulation check items placed strategically within the survey.

Procedure

Participants were given one of the two scenarios (thriving or crisis) and were informed that they were assisting a selection committee in identifying important characteristics for a new CEO. Participants indicated the degree to which each of the given 58 characteristics were either "nonessential" or "highly essential" of the incoming CEO. After completing the survey, participants were debriefed.

Results

Data Screening

Each of the 58 characteristics was assessed for univariate normality. Of the 268 participants in the current study, 60 cases were removed for being an outlier on one or more of the 58 characteristics, resulting in a final data set of 208 for the t-test analysis.

Study Analysis

Using an effect size of .20 or greater (Cohen, 1992), 15 characteristics emerged as more essential for the thriving company scenario. Interestingly, no characteristics emerged which were deemed as more "essential" for crisis leadership. Means and effect sizes are displayed in Table 1. See Table 2 for comparison with the Kottke *et al.* (2013) study, which we have reprinted, with appropriate annotations.

Of the 15 characteristics that emerged for thriving companies, eight of these were female gendered (*flexibility, openness, fairness, ability to admit errors, dependability, ability to encourage others, sophisticated,* and *consideration*), and two were male gendered (*courageous, innovation*); the gender typing is based on the prior Kottke *et al.* (2013) study. Five characteristics (*rationality, objectivity, innovative thinking, performance orientation,* and *administrative skills*) did not achieve a gendered status in our 2013 study; *rationality and*

innovative thinking were gender neutral in Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) as well, but both were rated as important in crisis leadership situations. Only four of the characteristics found in the Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) experiment 1, were found in the current study; three were rated as needed in crisis leadership (*rationality, innovative thinking, ability to encourage others*).

Discussion

The findings in the current study appear to confirm Kottke *et al.*'s (2013) assertion that the GCP might not exist in certain conditions. Male gender-typed characteristics were not automatically identified as necessary for leaders of thriving companies. On the contrary, in the present study, over half of the characteristics identified as essential (with effect sizes at or above .25) in a thriving company were rated as feminine. Further, there was no support for the idea that characteristics of female leaders would be seen as particularly appropriate for companies in crisis.

Four characteristics emerged as highly essential for leaders of thriving companies: *flexibility, fairness, rationality,* and *openness*; only *fairness* was shared with Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) as an essential characteristic for leaders of thriving companies. No characteristics emerged as highly essential for the leader of the company in crisis, which was also in contrast with the Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) results. Additionally, in previous research on the glass cliff hypothesis, characteristics perceived to be more typical of female leaders were not generally related to characteristics attributed to leaders of thriving companies. However, of the characteristics perceived to be more typical of female leaders (i.e., Kottke *et al.*, 2013), three appeared in the list of four characteristics attributed to leaders of thriving companies: *fairness, flexibility,* and *openness*.

Our findings suggest that the context in which the situation is framed (i.e., scenario in which a company is suffering financial setbacks or a company that is very profitable) is important to observers' perceptions. That is, providing a scenario contrasts with asking, simply, to rate leader characteristics without a context (e.g., Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Kottke *et al.*, 2013). Further, how participants interpreted the context of thriving versus crisis might also have influenced their choice of characteristics. For example, if a company is in financial decline,

fairness might be seen as an essential leader strength. When a company is thriving, participants might view successful performance as the result of fair leadership. Since fairness is highly related and can be seen as essential to "resurrect" a company in decline or to keep a high performing organization at profitable levels, it is not surprising that these characteristics, and others, would be rated differently across studies.

Of particular importance is the lack of findings for characteristics deemed essential in organizations that are in a financial crisis. Even though the nature of the crisis was explained to the participants, and manipulation checks were added to ensure respondents were aware of the crisis situation, participants did not rate any characteristics as more essential to lead companies in crisis.

Implications

Although research in the GCP is increasing, the implications of this study suggest that there is more to the story than specific characteristics of a leader or the gender of the individual selected to lead a company in crisis. We do not propose that the GCP does not exist. We suggest that much more research in this area is needed to have confidence in the phenomenon. When companies are in crisis, they are more likely to replace top leaders. Consequently, as a result of the increased number of women in the leadership pipeline, perhaps women are more likely to be selected simply because there are more occasions to appoint a leader and there are more women from whom to choose. Interestingly, other research (Ryan *et al*., 2011) has suggested that stereotypic feminine traits may be those that are seen as most useful in helping a company return to financial health. We did not find any characteristics rated as more essential for leading a company out of crisis, and thus we have no data to support that those characteristics, previously noted, are more feminine or masculine typed.

Another area for exploration is how changing demographics influence the gender-typing of characteristics and the traits that are perceived essential in both organizational conditions. Our sample was more diverse than the sample in Bruckmüller & Branscombe's (2010) study. Further, many of the respondents in our study were college-aged students ($M = 24.8$ years); consequently, they may not have evaluated leadership characteristics through the lens of gender in comparison to their older and possibly more experienced counterparts.

Conclusion

The purpose of our study was to determine whether characteristics deemed essential for leading thriving companies or companies in crisis would differ from Kottke *et al.*'s (2013) findings if participants were made aware of the nature of the company and the context of the crisis. Although we expected to find the existence of the GCP in the characteristics based on respondents' knowledge of the context of the crisis, we found stronger support for the leadership characteristics perceived as important for thriving companies, and of these, more were female gendered than male. Although research in the GCP has grown, the implications of our study suggest the context in which the situation is framed (i.e., scenario in which a company is suffering financial setbacks or a company that is very profitable) is important to observers' perceptions.

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Table 1.

Thriving versus Crisis Company Leadership Characteristics from Current Study

Company Leadership	Thrive Mn	Crisis Mn	Effect Size(d)
Rationality [a(GN, crisis)]**	6.11	5.74	.38
Flexibility[b,c]**	5.94	5.55	.37
Openness [c]*	5.93	5.60	.31
Fairness[a (GF, thrive),b,c]*	6.23	5.93	.31
Ability to admit errors [c]*	6.36	6.10	.27
Objectivity†	5.96	5.70	.26
Dependability [c]†	6.55	6.31	.25
Courageous[e]	5.88	5.60	.25
Ability to encourage others[a]*	6.69	6.48	.25
Sophisticated[b,c]	5.37	5.08	.25
Innovative thinking [a(GN, crisis)] †	6.35	6.13	.22
Performance orientation[b]†	6.00	6.21	.22
Administrative skills[b]	6.13	5.91	.21
Consideration[c]	6.08	5.88	.21
Innovation[e]	6.24	6.05	.20

Notes. ** $p < .01$ * $p < .01$ †$p < .10$

Rating scale ranged from 1 to 7

[a]Characteristic found by Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010); code: GN = gender neutral, GF = female gendered, GM = male gendered; crisis = crisis leadership, thrive = leadership needed for thriving company

[b]Characteristics of thriving companies found in Kottke *et al.*, 2013

[c]Characteristic of female leaders found in Kottke *et al.*, 2013

[d]Characteristic of companies in crisis found in Kottke *et al.*, 2013

[e]Characteristic of male leaders found in Kottke *et al.*, 2013

No characteristics emerged which were deemed as more 'essential' for crisis leadership

Table 2 (taken from original Table 2, Kottke et al, 2013)

Thriving and Crisis Company Characteristics

Thriving Company	Mean	Effect Size(d)	Crisis Company	Mean	Eff. Size
Sophisticated[a]	4.66	.48	Able to cope with stress	3.21	.39
Successful Self-Presentation	4.78	.48	Ability to encourage others[a,c] (GF,crisis)	3.56	.24
Independence[(GM, thrive)]	4.64	.40	Ability to build confidence in others[c(GF,crisis)]	3.55	.23
Professionality[(GN, thrive)]	4.59	.35	Ability to motivate others[c(GN,crisis)]	3.55	.23
Career-oriented	4.48	.30			
Competition[(GM, thrive)]	4.56	.29			
Trustworthiness[a]	4.47	.28			
Fairness[a(GF, thrive)]	4.40	.28			
Administrative Skills	4.42	.25			
Honesty[a]	4.36	.23			
Flexibility	4.37	.21			
Performance orientation	4.39	.21			
Self-Confidence[b]	4.37	.20			

Notes. Rating scale ranged from 1 to 7

Thriving company grand M = 4.50, SD = .14, SE = .04. Crisis company grand M = 3.46, SD = .17, SE = .09

[a]Characteristics of female leaders found in Kottke *et al*., 2013

[b]Characteristic of male leaders found in Kottke *et al*., 2013

[c]Traits found by Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010); code: GN = gender neutral, GF = female gendered, GM = male gendered; crisis

= crisis leadership, thrive = leadership of thriving company