

Revisiting Leadership Characteristics of the Glass Cliff Phenomenon: Gender Typed?

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The glass cliff phenomenon, where women tend to be more likely to be promoted to leadership roles in times of crisis (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), has been hypothesized to be caused by a number of possible factors, including stereotypic views. Further, the glass cliff phenomenon poses detrimental consequences for women. In this study, we aimed to replicate the Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) study to determine whether gender stereotypes relate to people's perceptions of desirable leadership traits under the paradigms "think manager – think male" and "think crisis – think female." Students with work experience were asked to rate a list of 58 traits on two bi-polar scales related to gender and leadership in organizations during times of success and crisis. Although some traits were in fact rated as being representatively male or female and characteristic of being needed in times of crisis or success, there was very little overlap with the desirable gender-typed leadership traits and the paradigm was not supported.

Unlike the glass ceiling, where women fail to reach the upper echelon due to perceptual biases, stereotypes, and organizational barriers (e.g., lack of mentoring, dead-end assignments), the glass cliff phenomenon, identified by Ryan and Haslam (2005), posits that women are more likely to be appointed to leadership roles when an organization is in crisis. Consequently, women find themselves in precarious positions with the likelihood of their success diminished given the risk associated with organizational decline and the attributions made about female leaders who are at the helm when an organization "dies."

One area of interest regarding the glass cliff is people's perception of personality traits. Specifically, it is of interest to see how stereotypic views of gender relate to leadership characteristics needed in organizations that are thriving or in crisis. Many stereotypic views in relation to gender may be attributed to either communal or agentic traits (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Communal traits, or characteristics that describe a focus on interpersonal relations and the welfare of others, have commonly been associated with women. On the other hand, agentic traits, or characteristics that emphasize self-promotion and the ability to take control, have been more commonly associated with men. This stark difference in trait attribution has often been shown to lead to different perceptions of leadership ability based on gender.

People may stereotype others based on descriptive norms and prescriptive norms. Most of the research on

gender stereotypes has been focused on descriptive norms, or views of how people are perceived. Another form of stereotyping that also exists is attributed to prescriptive norms, or views of how people should act (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Sczesny, Bosak, Neff & Schyns, 2004). Descriptive norms may lead to discrimination as male and females are perceived differently simply as a function of their gender. When choosing a leader, different prescriptive norms attributed to leaders may play a role in the selection process. This process is especially apparent depending on the situation of the company when selecting a leader. For instance, traits seen as desirable for leaders can change depending on whether the company they lead is thriving or in crisis. Glass cliff researchers have identified different leadership characteristics perceived to be important in leading companies in crisis and companies that are thriving (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010); these characteristics have been gender-typed. For companies that are thriving, "Think manager – think male" has been found to be a prevalent assumption (Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, & Bongiorno, 2011). Many of the agentic traits that men are perceived to have are also seen as corporately desirable for managers and leaders. Conversely, there is growing evidence showing another thought process, namely "Think crisis – think female". Research suggests that characteristics perceived to be critical to saving a company in crisis are those commonly associated with stereotypes of female leaders. (Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, & Bongiorno, 2011).

The purpose of our study was to replicate Bruckmüller and Branscombe's (2010) study with a larger and more heterogeneous sample. The survey we constructed asked respondents to rate the gender-typing of leadership characteristics in general, as well as the 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 the mid-West (e.g., majority white); the sample from the current study was taken from a diverse student population in California (e.g., majority Hispanic, female). We predicted there would be differences between adjectives attributed to female leaders and male leaders. Furthermore, we predicted there would be a difference between traits perceived to be needed of leaders in a thriving company and leaders of a company in crisis.

Method

Participants

A heterogeneous sample of 238 students with more females ($N = 158$) than males ($N = 74$) participated in the survey. Participants were enrolled in upper division business and psychology courses at California State University, San Bernardino. The participants' ($N = 232$) ages ranged from 19 to 70 ($M = 24.10$ years; $SD = 6.27$ years). Participants with work experience ($N = 197$) ranged from .08 to 40 years ($M = 5.68$ years; $SD = 5.13$ years). Because we felt that some work experience would be important for participants to have formed opinions of leadership in the work place, only data from those participants with work experience were used. The participants' years of work experience as a manager ($N = 79$) ranged from .05 to 32 years ($M = 4.05$ years; $SD = 5.29$ years). At the discretion of the instructor, students received extra credit for completing the survey. Participants were treated in accordance with the APA ethical principles for research.

Materials and Procedure

Our study procedure mirrored the one employed by Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010). We constructed two measures, starting with 58 characteristics (e.g., dynamic, innovative) based on Bruckmüller and Branscombe's (2010) previous findings. We examined two other studies in which gender-typed traits were identified to augment the characteristics noted in Bruckmüller and Branscombe. Six traits (able to cope with stress, career oriented, hardworking, courageous, persuasive, and visionary) were included from Schein, Mueller and Jacobson (1989), and two traits (helpful and sophisticated) from Sczesny et al. (2004) that were also potentially gender-typed. Seven-point bipolar scales (company in crisis at one anchor; thriving company at the other anchor) were used. One measure contrasted the "typical male leader" with the "typical female leader", asking respondents to indicate the degree to which a given characteristic was typical of a female or male leader. The other measure asked respondents to rate characteristics needed in a leader of a company in crisis or

of a thriving company. Presentation order of the two measures was counterbalanced.

Results

Data screening. The minimum and maximum ranges were consistent with possible scores (i.e., rating scales ranged from 1 to 7). Across all items, 35 case of missing data were found. For any single item, the maximum number of missing cases was 6 (3%). Analysis using SPSS's MVAR procedure indicated that data were missing at random.

To measure the traits with respect to leadership ability in companies of crisis versus thriving and gender-typing, one sample *t*-tests were conducted to compare the sample means to the expected population mean ($\mu = 4$). We found 13 traits associated with male leaders and 24 traits associated with female leaders (see Table 1 for means and effect sizes). Though similarities were found, our results differed from Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) on several counts. For Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010), six traits emerged as needed for thriving company leadership: Independence, competition, dynamic, striving for power (typical male leader traits), fairness (typical female trait), and professionalism (neutral gender). When analyzing the traits seen as being desirable to lead a company that was thriving or in crisis, we found four traits attributed to leaders of a company in crisis and 13 traits attributed to leaders of a thriving company (see Table 2). In contrast, there were 11 traits from the Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) study with three being identical to the current study of a company in crisis (ability to build confidence in others, ability to encourage others, and ability to motivate others).

One trait, self-confidence, was perceived to be characteristic of both male leaders and thriving companies. There were four traits (honesty, sophisticated, fairness, and trustworthiness) found that were seen to be characteristic of female leaders and considered important for leaders of thriving companies. The trait, ability to encourage others, was perceived to be both characteristic of female leaders as well as important for leaders of companies in crisis.

Discussion

The findings of the current study are in contrast to Bruckmüller and Branscombe's (2010) assertion that male leaders would necessarily be identified as leaders of thriving companies. The greatest contrast, however, came in comparing our sample's ratings of male and female stereotypic leadership with the characteristics perceived as needed for leaders of companies that are thriving or are in crisis. There was, nevertheless, some support for the idea that characteristics of female leaders would be seen as appropriate for companies in crisis.

In this study, contradicting some prior results about the glass cliff, we found that thriving company leader traits were also identified as female gender-typed traits. Differing from the "Think manager – think male" paradigm, this finding may suggest changing attitudes towards women in

the workplace. Perhaps as more women enter the workplace, attitudes have begun to shift (Duehr & Bono, 2006), and the leadership role is becoming associated with women.

The differences in our results relative to Bruckmüller and Branscombe's (2010) may be due to the differing demographics associated with our geographical location (Southern California in contrast to the Midwest). These differences may indicate that attending a diverse university has an impact on students' perceptions of leadership. In contrast to Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010), not only did the current study find differences possibly based on geographic and cultural variations, the current study analyzed responses specifically from people who had working experience. Having work experience in addition to education can cause changes in people's stereotypical views. While having more work experience and education may not eliminate stereotypes and sexism, some people may develop a more complex point of view about women as leaders. As many people who are in a hiring position tend to be older and more established in the workplace, the complexities of their stereotypes or worldviews may still affect their hiring decisions. For example, the specific stereotypes they associate with women or other groups of people may differ when selecting candidates (Glick & Fisk, 1996).

With regard to improving the applicability of the study, other methods of gathering data should be considered. Although the current study asked people to rate traits directly given to them, traits in external settings are generally inferred. A possible follow-up study could ask participants to generate traits they would ascribe to leaders after reviewing a scenario that presented men or women in leadership roles; from those responses, researchers could develop a survey based on the selected traits and replicate our study's approach to determine if the same traits as we found emerge. In addition, asking participants to elaborate on what and why they inferred particular traits from the scenario could be qualitatively analyzed.

Future research should continue to tease out the possible variables related to the glass cliff. As stated earlier, there are certain traits that are attributed on the basis of both gender and leadership ability in times of success or crisis. A topic for a future study would be to compare the effects of gender and sex and the interaction between the two. People who display traits commonly associated with the opposite gender are often stigmatized (Eagly & Karau, 2002). For instance, while the findings indicated that certain traits were shared between female leaders and what was desirable for leaders of a thriving company, a male leader with similar traits may be seen as less favorable during the selection process for a company in crisis. Within the context of the glass cliff, however, the outcomes may be different. While the "think crisis – think female" mindset may be applicable (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), under some circumstances, biases favoring men may result in a man with female-associated traits to be hired as opposed to a woman.

Based on the current study, there is support that certain views of leaders exist. As expected, there were different traits associated with men and women, just as there were different traits associated with leaders in companies in crisis or thriving companies. Contrasting from previous studies on the glass cliff phenomenon, the current findings suggest a somewhat different picture of attitudes towards men and women in terms of leadership ability in terms of success or crisis. Although the findings on the glass cliff and the views of male and female leaders are diverse and contrasting at times, there is still much research to be done to fully understand the way in which traits are attributed and why some women are met with perilous futures when selected into leadership positions under the presumptions of the glass cliff towards men and women in terms of leadership ability in times of success or crisis.

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Table 1.

Male and Female Characteristics

Female	Mean	Effect Size (<i>d</i>)	Male	Mean	Effect Size(<i>d</i>)		
Emotional Sensitivity	5.64	1.35	Large	Authority	2.65	1.05	Large
Empathy	5.43	1.16	Large	Competitive	2.73	.87	Large
Considerate	5.07	.84	Large	Takes Risks	2.92	.80	Medium
Helpful	5.05	.79	Medium	Strives for Power	2.82	.71	Medium
Ability to admit own errors	5.01	.73	Medium	Assertive	3.23	.54	Medium
Openness	5.02	.69	Medium	Courageous	3.49	.42	Small
Creativity	4.96	.69	Medium	Independent	3.54	.32	Small
Interpersonal Skills	4.87	.67	Medium	Ambition	3.65	.30	Small
Flexibility	4.83	.65	Medium	Diplomatic	3.59	.30	Small
Fairness ^a	4.75	.63	Medium	Self-Confidence ^c	3.61	.27	Small
Tolerance	4.92	.60	Medium	Decisive	3.64	.27	Small
Intuition	4.78	.59	Medium	Effective Bargainer	3.66	.23	Small
Trustworthiness ^a	4.70	.57	Medium	Innovative	3.74	.22	Small
Sophisticated ^a	4.63	.54	Medium				
Honesty ^a	4.63	.53	Medium				
Cooperation	4.70	.52	Medium				
Ability to plan ahead	4.67	.48	Small				
Dependability	4.56	.42	Small				
Communication Skills	4.57	.41	Small				
Inspiration	4.59	.41	Small				
Ability to work in teams	4.47	.37	Small				
Ability to encourage others ^b	4.52	.34	Small				
Sense of Responsibility	4.40	.32	Small				
Task Orientation	4.38	.30	Small				

Note. Female traits $M = 4.80$, $SD = .31$, $SE = .06$. Male traits $M = 3.33$, $SD = .40$, $SE = .11$. ^aCharacteristics of female leaders and thriving companies. ^bCharacteristic of female leaders and companies in crisis. ^cCharacteristic of male leaders and thriving companies.

Table 2.

Thriving and Crisis Company Characteristics

Thriving Company	Mean	Effect Size(<i>d</i>)	Crisis Company	Mean	Eff. Size (<i>d</i>)
Sophisticated ^a	4.66	.48	Small	Able to cope with stress	3.21 .39 Small
Successful Self-Presentation	4.78	.48	Small	Ability to encourage others ^{cd}	3.56 .24 Small
Independence	4.64	.40	Small	Ability to build confidence in others ^c	3.55 .23 Small
Professionalism	4.59	.35	Small	Ability to motivate others ^c	3.55 .23 Small
Career-oriented	4.48	.30	Small		
Competition	4.56	.29	Small		
Trustworthiness ^a	4.47	.28	Small		
Fairness ^a	4.40	.28	Small		
Administrative Skills	4.42	.25	Small		
Honesty ^a	4.36	.23	Small		
Flexibility	4.37	.21	Small		
Performance orientation	4.39	.21	Small		
Self-Confidence ^b	4.37	.20	Small		

Note. Thriving company $M = 4.50$, $SD = .14$, $SE = .04$. Crisis company $M = 3.46$, $SD = .17$, $SE = .09$. ^aCharacteristics of female leaders and thriving companies ^bCharacteristic of male leaders and thriving companies. ^cIdentical traits to Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010). ^d Characteristic of female leaders and companies in crisis.