

Think crisis, think female: A study of women leaders perched on glass cliffs

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Background: About 15 years ago, the term ‘glass cliff’ was coined by management scholars to describe situations in which women are either promoted to executive roles in companies with declining performances or chosen to assume leadership positions in hard-to-win circumstances (Haslam & Ryan, 2005). Since then, empirical evidence has been mounting to support this very idea, namely that women are given the responsibility to lead companies particularly in the aftermath of a downward spiral (Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, & Bongiorno, 2011). The quest remains to better understand the decision-making process responsible for appointing women leaders to these precarious leadership positions. This research therefore attempts to shed light on the following overarching question: what causes glass cliffs in the first place? Some have proposed that women are perceived as having a myriad of socioemotional traits and abilities deemed necessary to handle crises. During times of distress, they contend that people spontaneously create the mental algorithms “think crisis-think-female” (Haslam & Ryan, 2008, p. 543) or “think crisis-think not men” (Ryan et al., 2011, p. 475). Therefore, a commonly held belief is that women are preferred as leaders in crisis situations because they simply ‘have what it takes’ to deal with crises. Although women are said to possess crisis-relevant traits, abilities, skills, and behaviors (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Gartzia, Ryan, Balluerka, & Aritzeta, 2012), researchers have yet to determine specifically what these are. This is problematic for two reasons. First, lacking knowledge about why women find themselves perched on glass cliffs helps to propagate implicit personality theories that may be false and, even worse, to reinforce stereotypes that keep women from progressing. Second, not all crisis situations are the same (Van Vugt & Spisak, 2008), and treating them as such violates a key tenet in management: understanding context that often shapes organizational behavior (Johns, 2006). For example, some crises brew *within* an organization (i.e., intraorganizational crises) as when mistrust develops between different strategic business units in a firm. Other crises originate from the external environment which are then thought to threaten the survival of a firm (i.e., interorganizational crises). One such example includes a hostile takeover of a vulnerable firm by an aggressive competitor. Therefore, if crises differ in some way, either in their type or intensity, it would seem reasonable to question whether women and their male counterparts could differ with respect to which crises they are perceived to be preferentially suited to handle as leaders.

Method: Our objective is to investigate three potential contributors to glass cliff appointments, one of which is strictly biological (applicant’s sex), while the others are psychological (an applicant’s perceived empathy) and situational (crisis of an intra- or interorganizational nature). Using recent best practices in experimental vignette methodology (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014), we present a research study that will ask participants to immerse themselves in scenarios describing a firm that is experiencing a decline and in which the crisis is either internal or external. Participants will then be asked to select a candidate they believe will be best capable of leading the underperforming firm from a list of other equally qualified candidates. Unbeknownst to participants, candidates will possess the same professional leadership qualifications; what will distinguish one candidate from the other is their sex (female, male),

their level of trait empathy (high, middle, low), and the type of crisis they will have to address as leaders (intra- or interorganizational). Using theories from both evolutionary and social psychology, we argue that biology and culture have coevolved to influence people's perception that women are more empathic than men and, consequently, that they are better able to quell certain types of crises. Among the hypotheses we make, we propose that women will be selected to lead whenever a crisis originates from within the organization and involves a high degree of social acumen for its resolution. In contrast, men will be chosen as leaders whenever the crisis is characterized by some external entity that threatens the existence of the firm.

Contribution: Since leadership is a stressful experience, particularly when leaders scale glass cliffs, it becomes critical that we shed light on what contributes to this phenomenon not only because it places women in risky positions with a high probability of failure, but also because it helps spread stereotypes that undermine their true leadership ability. This research also promises to be relevant to today's demographically shifting workplace that includes other minority groups who are becoming increasingly important in top management circles.

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