

Female first, leader second? Gender bias in the encoding of leadership behavior [☆]

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Abstract

In the current paper we investigate whether gender affects the encoding of leadership behavior. In three studies we found evidence that perceivers had difficulty encoding leadership behaviors into their underlying prototypical leadership traits when the behavior implied an agentic trait and the behavior was enacted by a female. Using a lexical decision making task, in Study 1 we demonstrated that agentic leadership traits were less accessible than communal leadership traits when the leader was female. Additionally, Study 1 also demonstrated that agentic traits were less accessible when the leader was female versus male. In Studies 2a and 2b, we replicated the differences we found for agentic leadership behaviors using perceiver's self-ratings as the dependent variable. Results are discussed both in terms of their implications for future research on gender bias in leadership and their practical implications for eliminating gender bias against females who aspire to leadership positions.

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In recent years, a substantial amount of attention has been paid to the progress of females in the workforce, especially females in leadership positions. As a

whole, this work suggests that a considerable amount of bias exists against females. For example, despite holding 37% of all management positions (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005), women hold only 7.9% of the highest corporate officer titles and make up only 5.2% of the top earners in Fortune 500 companies (Catalyst, 2002). Similarly, Canadian statistics indicate that women are better represented at lower managerial levels (36%) compared to more senior managerial positions (24%; Statistics Canada, 2004). Recent European data, which show that women hold only 30% of managerial positions and make up only 3% of CEOs in the top 50 publicly quoted companies (European Commission, 2005), suggest that gender bias may not be isolated to North America. Supporting these statistics, a series of recent meta-analyses has demonstrated that gender differences do exist, to varying degrees, in leadership emergence, effectiveness, evaluation, and style, most notably when the leadership position is defined to

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be clearly masculine (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly & Karau, 1991; Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995; Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992), and that females are preferred less by decision makers for male sex-typed positions (e.g., leadership roles; Davison & Burke, 2000).

Previous leadership research into gender bias has focused on perceivers' biased memory (e.g., Martell, 1991, 1996), the process of making judgments about females in leadership roles (e.g., Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989), and the incongruity between expected gender-role behavior and the definition of the leadership role (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002). Despite such varied approaches, little is known about whether gender bias may emerge earlier, when leadership behaviors are initially encountered and encoded by observers. Encoding is a basic stage of information processing in which environmental stimuli are translated (or encoded) into mental representations that can be operated upon and utilized by other components of the human cognitive architecture (Von Hippel, Sekaquaptewa, & Vargas, 1995). Hence, how behavior is encoded can significantly impact subsequent judgments, thoughts, and decisions about a target. Although some leadership scholars have proposed that gender information may bias the encoding of leadership behaviors (Lord & Maher, 1991), this possibility has not been empirically tested. In the present paper, we redress this gap and examine whether gender biases arise when leadership behaviors are initially encountered and encoded into their underlying traits by observers. We focus on traits not only because they are central to basic person perception processes, but also because they are the foundation upon which leadership perceptions are formed and decisions regarding managerial potential are made by observers (Lord & Maher, 1991).

To situate our research, we first review previous theoretical work on leadership perceptions, focusing on leadership categorization theory. Second, we review literature on gender bias in leadership, focusing on how gender role expectations and stereotypes may color reactions to female leaders. Third, we discuss how preexisting gender stereotypes can interfere with a perceiver's ability to encode leadership behavior. Finally, we present three studies that examine whether gender stereotypes undermine the extent to which perceivers encode leadership behaviors into their underlying trait concepts.

Leader categorization theory

Categorization theory posits that perceivers rely upon symbolic knowledge structures, called prototypes, to make sense of their environments (Rosch, 1978). Conceptually, prototypes are cognitive schemas that are stored in memory and that consist of the most representative features of a given category. As with other knowledge structures, prototypes assist perceivers to make

sense of their surroundings (Weick, 1995) and generate adaptive behavioral responses (Johnson-Laird, 1989; Newell, Rosenbloom, & Laird, 1989). Although initial investigations focused on the examination of non-social prototypes, subsequent extensions have dealt with the role that prototypes play in categorizing leaders (e.g., Lord, Foti, & DeVader, 1984).

According to Lord and his colleagues, each individual holds within long-term memory a large and well-elaborated belief system, consisting of the features that distinguish leaders from non leaders (Lord, Foti, & Phillips, 1982; Phillips & Lord, 1981). This belief system is often referred to as an implicit leadership theory or leader prototype (Lord et al., 1984). Leadership prototypes allow individuals to both understand and respond to managerial behaviors (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Lord & Maher, 1991). Previous work has demonstrated that the leader prototype is a multidimensional, widely shared, trait-based knowledge structure that is formed very early in life (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Lord & Maher, 1991; Offermann, Kennedy, & Wirtz, 1994). Thus, from the perspective of categorization theory, leadership can be viewed as a social-cognitive category that organizes our memories of leadership, guides how leadership information is processed, and mediates our leadership perceptions (Lord et al., 1984; Lord & Maher, 1991).

Lord and Maher (1991) suggest that one of the ways in which leadership perceptions emerge is through recognition-based processing, which depends both upon exposure to a target's behavior and preexisting knowledge structures regarding the traits that underlie that behavior (i.e., leader prototype). Although recognition-based leadership perception processes can result from either controlled or automatic information processing, automatic recognition-based processing appears to be more typical. That is, during the normal flow of interpersonal activities behavior is automatically encoded, without intent, effort, or awareness, into preexisting knowledge structures (Lord & Maher, 1991). As such, automatic recognition-based leadership processes simplify the processing of incoming leader behavior by allowing perceivers to utilize the leader prototype.

Implicitly, the recognition process outlined by Lord and his colleagues (Lord & Maher, 1991) follows two-stages. Initially, observers process and encode a target's behaviors into their relevant traits and, following this, the traits associated with a target are compared to an observer's preexisting leader prototype (Lord et al., 1984; Rush & Russell, 1998). For example, after observing a manager staying late in the evening to finish a presentation, a perceiver must first encode the behavior into its underlying trait (i.e., dedicated) and subsequently, when a leadership judgment is needed, compare the encoded traits with those contained in his/her leader prototype. Thus, Lord's discussion of recognition based processes suggests that an individual could fail to be

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