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Solving the crisis: When agency is the preferred leadership for implementing change

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ABSTRACT

Glass-cliff research shows that female leaders are preferentially selected in a crisis to signal change and not for their leadership qualifications. In parallel, the management literature urges for agentic “masculine” leadership to turn around organizations in crisis. We hypothesized that, regardless of their gender, agentic leaders should be preferred to communal leaders if leadership qualifications and actual change potential motivate leader selection. Three experimental studies demonstrated that agentic (vs. communal) candidates were perceived to match poorly-performing (vs. strongly-performing) companies. This effect was accounted for by perceptions of agentic candidates' higher suitability, higher task-orientation (versus person-orientation), and higher change potential. We discuss that women face ambiguity as to why they become leaders in crisis contexts: because they are perceived as signaling change, stereotypically linked to their gender, or for their perceived agentic qualities as leaders. In contrast, men become crisis leaders due to their perceived agentic change potential.

Introduction

Over the past 50 years the leadership landscape has continuously changed, as have theories on leadership (Dansereau, Seitz, Chiu, Shaughnessy, & Yammarino, 2013). Traditionally, a “think manager – think male” (Schein, 2001) association prevailed which was accompanied by a stronger emergence of male leaders (Eagly & Karau, 1991). Since the beginning of the 21st century, leadership-types that more strongly involve followers, such as “distributed”, “shared” (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007), or “transformational” (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Judge & Piccolo, 2004) leaderships, have been celebrated as the most desired leadership styles (see meta-analysis by Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, & Woehr, 2014). In particular, transformational leadership is typically perceived and reported to be enacted by women (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003). Hence, the more positive evaluation of communal or transformational leaders, as compared to the traditional agentic or transactional leaders, has promoted the idea of a “female advantage” in the access to leadership positions (e.g., Eagly & Carli, 2003; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011; Rosette & Tost, 2010; Sargent, 1983). Indeed, although the male-manager stereotype is still alive, it has become less compelling (e.g., Deal & Stevenson, 1998; Hartl, Kirchner, & Muehlbacher, 2013; Sczesny, Bosak, Neff, & Schyns, 2004), and more diverse forms of leadership coexist, holding out a promise of female participation and a real increase of the number of women joining top leadership ranks. While up to the mid-1990s hardly any top managers were women, in the 2010s in Europe and in the US they respectively made up 3% and 5% of CEOs, 18% and 17% of directors on the boards of the largest companies, and 33% and 42.7% of managerial positions in general (European Commission, 2011, 2014; International Labour Organization, 2015). Although the glass ceiling

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prevails (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009), leadership spheres have become more diverse. The greater representation of women has led to a change in how leadership is studied (Sczesny, 2005). For example, it has sparked interest in the types of contexts which facilitate the promotion of atypical leaders or leadership styles (e.g., Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014). The question of who is a “good leader” has evolved into the question of who is *perceived* to be a good leader *in a specific context*.

In the present research, we will focus on a crisis context because previous research has suggested that women are particularly apt to be selected as leaders in unstable or precarious situations, compared to flourishing situations (Furst & Reeves, 2008; Jalalzai, 2008; Ryan et al., 2016). The phenomenon that women but also ethnic minorities seem to be particularly favored as leaders when the risk of failure is high was dubbed the “glass cliff” (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). We will extend this research by looking beyond category membership (i.e., gender) of leaders. We combine gender with information on gendered personality characteristics of leaders, and investigate how these combinations affect decision-makers’ leader choices. In this way, we further elaborate on the boundary conditions of glass cliffs, as well as on the subtle differences in the circumstances that accompany male versus female leader appointments to leadership positions in times of crisis.

Leadership in times of crisis

Since the second part of the 20th century, organizational crises have become an almost routine event in companies (Mishra, 1996), fueling interest in the uncovering of ideal leadership in crisis situations. Crisis management is almost inevitably linked to considerations of changing the management (e.g., Fink, Beak, & Taddeo, 1971). Indeed, moments of crisis have been associated with changes in the leadership concept (Probert & James, 2011). For example, a study in a Japanese context showed that in crisis contexts recruiters were more likely to move away from choosing typical leaders and select outsiders as new leaders (Kaplan & Minton, 1994). As we will outline below, the social psychological literature points towards a non-traditional leadership as an ideal for crisis contexts. In particular, glass-cliff research shows that the social category of women, which is associated with a non-traditional prototype of the leader, is often preferred in times of crisis (Ryan et al., 2016).

The literature on leader selection indicates that atypical individuals, in particular women and members of ethnic minorities, are more likely to be promoted or selected as leaders in precarious situations and to high-risk leadership positions than in more stable, low-risk situations. A number of studies testify to this tendency in various contexts. Archival evidence has shown that women and ethnic minorities are more likely to become directors in the largest US and UK companies following bad performance (e.g., Cook & Glass, 2014; Ryan & Haslam, 2005), following scandals (Brady, Isaacs, Reeves, Burroway, & Reynolds, 2011), and in high-risk organizational situations more generally (Glass & Cook, 2016). Similarly, Black coaches were shown to be more likely to be selected for basketball teams following a history of team losses, compared to White coaches (Cook, 2013). Experimental and archival studies have demonstrated that ethnic minority and female political candidates are more often nominated to run in hard-to-win situations (Kulich, Ryan, & Haslam, 2014; Ryan, Haslam, & Kulich, 2010), and to govern in politically and economically unstable periods (Jalalzai, 2008). In the legal domain, female counsels are more likely to be chosen to handle a difficult high-risk legal case (Ashby, Ryan, & Haslam, 2007).

Implementing change

The search for underlying reasons of glass cliffs has led researchers to investigate if the choice of atypical leaders arises from a motivation to *implement change* in a dysfunctional organizational system. This motivation was already mentioned in early glass-cliff research (Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007). The idea of change as motivator has been supported in an experiment showing that glass cliffs only occur following male management and not following female management (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). Further support comes from a study showing that women are only preferentially chosen as leaders when the crisis is caused by previous bad management, and change is thus controllable by the company (Kulich, Lorenzi-Cioldi, Iacoviello, Faniko, & Ryan, 2015, Study 1). By contrast, when the crisis is a general phenomenon that affects all companies (e.g., a global economic crisis), and is thus not easily controllable, no glass cliff occurs. Although such studies point to a change motivation, the nature of the implied change is not clear.

Indeed, the glass-cliff literature highlights two possible types of change that companies may seek in order to overcome precarious economic situations (Kulich, Iacoviello, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2015). On the one hand, companies may strategically implement a *symbolic* change by hiring an ostensibly non-traditional leader (e.g., Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Ryan et al., 2016). The objective here is to signal and communicate to the outside (e.g., investors, stakeholders, customers) that the organization is aware of the difficult situation and is taking action to overcome the crisis. Hence, the company expects to regain investors’ and clients’ trust, which would bask in a better evaluation of the company on the market. In line with this suggestion, Kulich, Lorenzi-Cioldi et al. (2015, Study 2) found in an experimental study that motivation to signal change accounted for the preference of a female over a male candidate in a crisis context. On the other hand, companies may be willing to implement an *actual* change in the way the company is managed. From this standpoint, women may be considered as particularly suitable because they are deemed to display a non-traditional, communal leadership style, which may help solve the crisis (Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, & Bongiorno, 2011). In sum, are glass cliffs a matter of gender (women signaling change by their visibly different appearance), or (also) of gendered traits (feminine traits as effective leadership style to actually change the situation)?

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