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Gender Differences in Promotions to Top Level Management Positions: An Examination of Glass Cliff in the IT Sector

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Abstract

Extant research shows that female managers face significant hurdles in the attainment of top level positions in IT organizations. Recently there have been some examples to women breaking through the glass ceiling to reach to higher positions. However, there is only a limited knowledge of the obstacles women may face after they break through the glass ceiling to ascend to leadership positions. New studies suggest that women may be more likely to be assigned to riskier, more precarious leadership positions compared to men-a form of bias called the glass cliff. Drawing from role congruity theory, the present study examines whether men and women are differentially selected to leadership positions. Employing a 2 (organization performance: increasing or declining) x 2 (candidate gender: male or female) between subjects design with a sample of 281 Business Administration students did not find support for the glass cliff hypothesis that female leaders are more likely to be assigned to top positions when organizational performance is declining rather than increasing. Hence, this study did not replicate the glass cliff. More research is needed to investigate under what conditions this bias may occur.

Keywords: Leadership, Gender Stereotypes, Benevolent Sexism, Glass Cliff

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1. Introduction

Women face myriad challenges in the attainment of leadership positions (Gutek, 2001; Heilman & Chen, 2005; Rudman & Kilianski, 2000). Barriers such as absence of mentoring, work-family challenges, and overt discrimination are captured by the concept of glass ceiling-the transparent barrier preventing women from rising above a certain level in corporations because of their gender (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Murrell & James, 2001; Sczesny, 2003). More recently, women around the world have been breaking through the glass ceiling (Catalyst, 2011; European Commission, 2011; Turkish State Institute Statistics, 2012). With more women being appointed to leadership positions, scholarly attention shifted towards understanding potential barriers women may face after they break through the glass ceiling (Bowles, 2012; Cook & Glass, 2014; Mulcahy & Linehan, forthcoming). Recently, a group of scholars examined whether types of leadership positions achieved by men and women are different (e.g., Ashby, Ryan, & Haslam, 2007; Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). Specifically, Ryan and colleagues (e.g., Bruckmüller, Ryan, Rink, & Haslam, 2014; Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Ryan &

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Haslam, 2007) suggest that the nature of leadership positions that women attain may be quite different than those that men attain. They argue women may be more likely to be assigned to riskier, more precarious positions compared to men suggesting that they face a “second wave” of gender discrimination after breaking through the glass ceiling to ascend to elite leadership positions (Ryan & Haslam, 2007, p. 550). They call this form of discrimination “glass cliff”. Glass cliff is the phenomenon that women are more likely to be chosen for positions associated with deteriorating rather than increasing performance and that men are more likely to be chosen for leadership positions that are associated with increasing rather than deteriorating performance (Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Bruckmüller, Ryan, Rink, & Haslam, 2014).

However, other scholars were not able to replicate Ryan and colleagues’ findings (e.g., Adams, Gupta, & Leeth, 2009; Cook & Glass, 2014). Therefore, before abandoning glass ceiling as a thing of the past and accepting the glass cliff as the contemporary barrier to gender parity, this study aims to put the glass cliff hypothesis to an additional test to establish its robustness. Ryan and Haslam (2007) argue that glass cliff should be especially evident in male dominated, masculine sectors. They also suggest that the glass cliff should be more apparent in societies that endorse traditional patterns of gender-based division of labor, because gender discrimination and sexism are more institutionalized in such cultures. The current study aims to investigate the glass cliff hypothesis in the IT sector and in a Turkish setting. IT is viewed as a technical area of work and therefore IT jobs are construed as highly masculine (Gutek, 2001). Although more women employees have joined the IT workforce in recent years, IT is still dominated by men who hold the great majority of upper management positions (Surgevil & Özbilgin, 2012). Traditional gender stereotypes still prevail in Turkish society (Aycan, 2004; Öngen, 2007; Sümer, 2006). Glick and colleagues (2000) identified Turkey as high in ambivalent sexism, making it an appropriate setting to investigate glass cliff. The study begins with a literature review of glass cliff and benevolent sexism, then continues with hypotheses development. This is followed by research methodology, results and discussion together with implications and study limitations.

2. Literature Review And Hypotheses

2.1. Glass Cliff

Ryan and associates demonstrated the glass cliff effect across several contexts (e.g., Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Ryan et al., 2007; Ryan, Haslam, & Kulich, 2010). An archival investigation of FTSE 100 companies before the appointment of male and female board members showed that companies which appointed men to their boards had relatively stable performance before the appointment, whereas companies which appointed women to their boards had poor performance before the appointment (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Another archival examination of FTSE 100 companies between years 2001 and 2005 found a negative relationship between women’s presence on company boards and subjective stock-based measures, which mainly reflect investor perceptions and behavior. That is, women were more likely to be found on the boards of companies perceived to be performing poorly (Haslam et al., 2010). An examination of the UK general elections revealed that, in the Conservative Party especially, women were nominated for less winnable seats, demonstrating that glass cliff phenomenon as a unique form of gender-based discrimination was not confined to business organizations and it was also evident in the representation of women in politics (Ryan et al., 2010).

In a series of experiments, Haslam and Ryan (2008) showed that the likelihood of a female candidate being selected ahead of an equally qualified male candidate increased when the organization’s performance was declining rather than increasing. Haslam and Ryan (2008) demonstrated that under conditions of declining performance, the female candidate was perceived to have significantly more ability than the male candidate and was seen as more appropriate for the assignment. Under conditions of increasing performance, the male and female candidates either did not significantly differ in terms of their perceived suitability for the position or the male candidate was seen as more

suitable. It was only when the company's performance was declining; the candidate's gender had a significant impact on leadership choice, with the female candidate being seen as more able and more suitable than the male candidate. In another experimental study that involved undergraduate students from a US university, Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) identified history of leadership as a moderating factor such that glass cliff occurred only when the history of leadership had been male dominated. In case of historically male organizational leadership, participants chose the female candidate when the performance was declining and chose the male candidate if the performance was successful. Glass cliff was not observed when organizational leadership had been female dominated.

Although above-discussed research provided compelling evidence in support of glass cliff, other researchers were not able to replicate it. Adams and colleagues (2009) examined the average stock price performances of US companies preceding the appointment of female and male CEOs over twelve years and found that, counter to the glass cliff hypothesis, women were more likely to be appointed to the CEO position at firms that were in better financial health relative to those that appointed males to the CEO position. In a Canadian sample, Carroll and associates tested whether differences exist in security market performance for companies that announce the appointment of a female versus a male board member and found no significant difference in security return performance preceding the appointment. Finally, Cook and Glass (2014) analyzed all CEO transitions in Fortune 500 companies in the US over a twenty-year period and did not find evidence that women were more likely to be promoted to CEO in firms experiencing decline in their performances.

The conflicting findings of scarce research on glass cliff indicate a need for further research into whether such prejudice against female leaders really exists. The current study investigates glass cliff in the particularly masculine IT industry setting. It should also be noted that the extant research on glass cliff was conducted in Western settings. Ryan and Haslam (2007) argue that glass cliffs should be more apparent and present a more significant obstacle in sectors that are male dominated and more masculine and in more conservative cultures.

2.2. Role Congruity as an Underlying Process

Role congruity theory (Eagly et al., 2000), which explains why women struggle to attain leadership positions in general (Wicker, Breurer, & von Hanau, 2012), may provide a theoretical basis to understand why women may be seen as better fits for leadership roles in certain contexts or conditions, such as glass cliffs (Eagly & Karau 2002). According to role congruity theory, individuals are judged with respect to the congruence between their characteristics as dictated by their gender stereotypes and the requirements of the job roles that they occupy (Eagly et al., 2000). Gender stereotypes identify the attributes that characterize men and women and are consistent across cultures (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012). Gender stereotypes are commonly described along lines of agency and communality (Bakan, 1966). Communality includes traits such as affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturant, and gentle. Agency involves traits such as aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, self-sufficient, self-confident, and prone to act as a leader (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Men and women are assumed to differ in terms of agency and communality such that men are considered to possess agency but lack communality, whereas women are considered to be communal but lack agency (Eagly, 1987; Heilman, 2001; Sczesny, 2003). As a result of gender stereotypes, men are expected to display agency and women are expected to display communality. Job roles are gendered in nature and depending on the gender-type; predominantly masculine or feminine qualities may be seen as necessary to successfully perform a role (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra 2006; Heilman, 1997; Stulmacher & Poitras, 2010). Most IT jobs and especially leadership roles are construed as masculine (Guttek, 2001). Agentic attributes such as competitiveness, self-confidence, objectiveness, aggressiveness, and ambition are seen as prerequisites for success in the IT sector in general and especially for leadership positions in IT organizations. The incongruity between the predominantly communal qualities associated with women and predominantly agentic qualities needed to succeed as a leader leads to negative expectations about performance of female leaders (Eagly & Johnson 1990; Eagly et al., 1992; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 1983, 2001; Powell et al., 2002; Schein 2001). Thus, role congruity theory suggests that because of the incongruity between the feminine stereotype and masculine construal of leadership roles, women's ability for leadership is likely to be evaluated negatively and women are likely to have lesser access to leadership positions compared to men (Eagly & Karau, 2002). While most leadership roles are construed in heavily masculine terms, some leadership roles may be defined in feminine terms and perceived to require feminine qualities (Bosak & Sczesny, 2011; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Lips & Keener, 2007). According to Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) and Ryan and colleagues (2011), leadership roles during declining

organizational performance may be perceived feminine rather than masculine. Both studies suggest that decreasing organizational performance may be associated with more communal description of the leadership role, successful performance of which requires stereotypically feminine attributes such as relationship-orientation, being sympathetic, caring and service-oriented.

2.3. Development of Hypothesis

The present study aims to test the glass cliff hypothesis that women are differentially appointed to top leadership positions when organizational performance is declining rather than increasing. According to glass cliff literature and role congruity theory, due to gender stereotypes, women may be perceived to be better equipped with qualities necessary to deal with poor performance. In the especially masculine IT setting, a female candidate is likely to be perceived as more able under declining organizational performance condition than under successful organizational performance condition, whereas men will be seen as the de facto leader when there are no organizational performance problems. Hence, the following hypothesis is tested:

H: Organizational performance is expected to influence the gender of the leadership candidate appointed to leadership position such that when organizational performance is declining, female candidate will be perceived to have more leadership ability than male candidate and when organizational performance is increasing, male candidate will be perceived to have more leadership ability than female candidate.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Goal

This study aims to test whether women are differentially appointed to top leadership position of IT organizations when organizational performance is declining rather than increasing (so called glass cliff phenomenon). In other words, it aims to investigate whether male or female leaders are seen suitable for different levels of organizational performance.

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

The participants of the study were 281 Business Administration Department students of a major state university located in Ankara, Turkey. 141 of them were male, average was 21.59 (SD=1.46). Student participation was voluntary.

To test the hypothesis, a factorial between-subjects design with independent variables of organizational performance (declining, increasing) and candidate gender (male, female) and dependent variable of perceived leadership ability was used. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. Participants were randomly provided with one of four versions of a five-page questionnaire such that 64 rated a male candidate and 78 rated a female candidate in decreasing company performance condition and that 68 rated a male candidate and 71 rated a female candidate in increasing company performance condition.

The first page consisted of a brief CV of either a male candidate or a female candidate. The CVs comprised identical information about the candidates' qualifications, personal details, educational background, and job experience. Participants then read a job advertisement presenting details of a vacancy for an IT Director position in an international company that provides technology solutions and services, followed by a newspaper article about the performance of the company. The newspaper article described the company either as having outstanding performance illustrated with a graph showing a dramatic increase in company's stock value over the past decade or as experiencing financial difficulties with referring to a graph showing a dramatic decrease in company's stock value. Participants were then asked to rate the perceived ability of the candidate for the position in question and respond to the ASI items.

3.3. Analyses and Results

Perceived leadership ability of the candidate was measured using the four item scale proposed by Haslam and Ryan (2008). Cronbach's alpha value for perceived leadership ability scale was .79. To test the hypothesis a 2 (organization performance: increasing or declining) X 2 (candidate gender: male or female) between-subjects ANOVA was conducted. The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. The results reveal no significant main or interaction effects. There was no differences in candidates' assignment to leadership position based upon gender $F(1, 277) = .531$, ns or organizational performance $F(1, 277) = .477$, ns. The interaction terms was also not significant $F(1, 277) = .007$.

This finding is contrary to the glass cliff hypothesis that a female leader is more likely to be appointed when organizational performance is poor and the male candidate is more likely to be appointed when performance is high. Despite the fact that, the current study took place in an especially masculine industry setting and a cultural context that endorses gender stereotypes, it was not able to find evidence that a female leader candidate was evaluated to have higher leadership ability when the performance of the organization was declining rather than increasing.

Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations

Candidate's gender	Organization's performance	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Male	Decreasing	5.8203	.69788	64
	Increasing	5.8897	.68483	68
	Total	5.8561	.68942	132
Female	Decreasing	5.7628	.72401	78
	Increasing	5.8169	.86288	71
	Total	5.7886	.79096	149
Total	Decreasing	5.7887	.71042	142
	Increasing	5.8525	.77892	139
	Total	5.8203	.74444	281

4. Conclusion

This study examined whether female leaders may face a form of discrimination called glass cliff after they ascend to elite leadership positions. Research on glass cliff argues that due to gender stereotypes, women may be perceived to be better equipped with qualities necessary to deal with poor performance and, hence, gender stereotypes may lead to differential attribution of leadership ability to male and female leaders under varying performance conditions, such that women are more likely to be appointed to top positions when the organization is failing. However, research on glass cliff is inconclusive. According to Ryan and Haslam (2007), glass cliffs should be especially apparent in masculine industries and cultures where traditional gender roles prevail. The results of this study find no evidence of glass cliff in the highly masculine IT setting and among Turkish students. Although participants of the study came from a society that subscribes to traditional gender roles (e.g., Glick et al., 2000), they did not differ in their evaluations of the male and female leaders.

In sum, this study was not able to replicate the glass cliff hypothesis that women leaders were selected to more precarious leadership positions. Thus, the current study adds to the literature that found no evidence in support for glass cliff. Accordingly, looking at the results of the study it is too soon to argue that glass cliffs replaced glass ceiling to describe obstacles women face at work. The findings of this study are limited in a number of ways. First, participants of the study were students, and were younger and less experienced than those who would normally make leadership appointment decisions in real life, such as HR managers, board and executive committee members. Related to this, cohort effects pose a serious threat to the external validity of the findings. Participants of the current study are members of Generation Y, also known as the Millennial Generation, with unique interests, tendencies, expectations, and attitudes toward work. The current decision makers in work organizations, however, are likely to be representatives of their parents' generation. Hence, the findings of this study may not be reflective of the leadership selection process in the contemporary work organizations. Further, rating a hypothetical employee's behavior may not carry the same effects as a similar evaluation in an organizational setting and, the intensity of participants' involvement in the task might have been much less than that for "real" managers. More research is needed to settle the debate on glass cliffs.

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