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Women As Leaders

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WOMEN AS LEADERS: Leadership Style Versus Leaders' Values and Attitudes

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Women as Leaders: Leadership Style Versus Leaders' Values and Attitudes

In the 1980s, when I began addressing issues of gender and leadership, there were many open questions about how women lead. Although the social science research on this issue was sparse, some authors of trade books had provided provocative descriptions of women's leadership styles (e.g., Loden, 1985; Sargent, 1981). These women drew on personal experience in organizations and on informal surveys and interviews of managers. Similar books and articles appeared in the 1990s (Helgesen, 1990; Rosener, 1990). The basic claims in this popular genre were that female leaders, compared with male leaders, are less hierarchical, more cooperative and collaborative, and more oriented to enhancing others' self-worth. In arguing that such behaviors make women excellent leaders, these authors offered a strength-based rhetoric that no doubt provided guidance and encouragement to many ambitious women.

Inevitably social scientists came on the scene to examine such claims, aided by quantitative methods of data analysis and psychometrically appropriate measures of leadership style. As one of these social scientists and an early adopter of meta-analysis, I enthusiastically embarked on the study of women as leaders. The first stage of my initiative involved researching sex differences, a contentious area of science often critiqued by feminists. Yet, this particular niche struck me as providing an attractive opportunity to produce woman-friendly findings. I knew that an unexplored gold mine was out there in the research literature: hundreds of studies on the leadership styles of female and male managers.

In the remainder of this paper, I will describe what I and others who invoke quantitative methods have discovered about the leadership styles of women and men. I will point to modest evidence for female advantage in leadership style. However, I will also explain that such findings do not provide a basis for concluding that women's participation in groups and organizations generally improves their performance. Then I will discuss another way in which female and male leaders differ—their typical values and attitudes. These differences may be more important to organizational and political outcomes than differences in leadership style.

Leadership Style

Hundreds of studies have assessed the leadership styles of male and female managers since the 1950s, and my colleagues and I have meta-analyzed much of this research (for review, see Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2007). We found that sex-related differences are present in leadership style. However, these differences take the form of highly overlapping distributions of women and men—in other words, the differences are small.

One of these differences is that female leaders, on the average, are more democratic and participative than their male counterparts (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; see also van Engen & Willem-

sen, 2004). Men, more than women, adopt a top-down, “command and control” style. Although female managers are not generally more interpersonally- or communally-oriented than male managers, this tendency emerged to some extent in less male-dominated roles, where the tendency for women to be more participative than men strengthened as well. It thus appears that women adopt more culturally feminine leader behaviors when their role is not strongly male-dominated.

Is it advantageous to be a participative leader? Not necessarily. Meta-analyses have shown that its advantages depend on the context (e.g., Foels, Driskell, Mullen, & Salas, 2000; Gastil, 1994). Also, there is some evidence that the middle ground between directive and participative styles is typically more effective (Ames & Flynn, 2007). High levels of directive, assertive behavior tend to damage social relationships, whereas low levels can limit goal achievement.

Another meta-analytic generalization is that women, more than men, combine feminine and masculine leader behaviors. Research has especially scrutinized a highly effective, androgynous style known as *transformational leadership*, which encompasses several interrelated types of behaviors (Avolio, 2010; Bass, 1998). Transformational leaders thus act as inspirational role models, foster good human relationships, develop the skills of followers, and motivate others to go beyond the confines of their job descriptions. Our meta-analysis showed that female managers are somewhat more transformational than male managers (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003). As far as transactional (or incentive-based) leadership is concerned, this meta-analysis also showed that female managers tend to motivate followers with positive, reward-based incentives. Men, in contrast, offer a larger measure of less effective and more negative threat-based incentives. Enhancing confidence in these findings on transformational and transactional leadership are two large studies that have replicated them (Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003; Desvaux & Devillard, 2008).

So, here we have it in research on transformational-transactional leadership: evidence that women do have “better” leadership styles. What are the reasons for these differences? On the one hand, women often face a double standard in attaining leadership roles, so a *selection effect* could account for these findings. On the other hand, cultural gender may be at work because people usually react more favorably to women when they lead with an androgynous style rather than one that is either very feminine or very masculine. Backlash effects against women who adopt masculine behaviors are especially well documented (e.g., Brescoll, 2011; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012). Whatever the causes, women may gain at least some advantage in adopting leader behaviors that experts have shown are effective in most organizational contexts (see meta-analyses by Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011).

Are the trade book authors vindicated by social scientists? Only to some extent. The small differences detected in leadership style are consistent with highly overlapping female and male distributions. In comparison, trade book descriptions of female leadership style are exaggerated. Also, there are some troubling nuances in findings on transformational leadership such as the possibility that men may not accept transformational leadership from women as easily as from men (Ayman, Korabik, & Morris, 2009). Also, women particularly exceed men on the more culturally feminine component of providing support and mentoring in the workplace (Eagly et al., 2003). And normatively people think that women *should* specialize in these culturally feminine behaviors and that men should manifest the more charismatic aspects of transformational leadership, which are associated with higher positions in organizational hierarchies (Vinkenburgh, van Engen, Eagly, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2011). Thus, transformational leadership may not be quite the same when enacted by women versus men nor have the same consequences.

Effects of Increasing Women's Representation in Leader Roles

It is tempting to jump from this relatively good story about women's leadership styles to the idea that groups and companies are more successful with more women in leadership roles. Better leaders equal more success and profit. But research findings have proven to be more complicated. Consider, for example, the relation between the representation of women among corporate executives or directors and corporations' financial performance. Several studies examining *Fortune* 500 and 1000 corporations and broader samples of U. S. and European companies found that the higher the percentage of women in such positions, the better the financial outcomes (e.g., Carter, Simkins, & Simpson, 2003; Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger, & Baumgarten, 2007; Joy, Carter, Wagner, & Narayanan, 2007; Krishnan & Park, 2005).

Correlations between proportions of women in high-level positions and firm performance do not prove a causal relation because they may encompass statistical anomalies such as reverse causation, omitted variables, selection biases, and unreliable measures (Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2010). Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that newer research undertaken by economists who use sophisticated controls for such confounds has not necessarily found that female leadership promotes corporate financial success (for review, see O'Reilly & Main, 2012). For example, in a large sample of U.S. firms, Adams and Ferreira (2009) found an overall negative average effect of the gender diversity of corporate boards when controlling for individual firm characteristics. Two econometric studies of Norwegian companies' compliance with the government-mandated 40% quota for women on boards of listed corporations found a negative effect on corporate profits (Ahern & Dittmar, 2012; Matsa & Miller, 2012a). In contrast, a study of U.S. corporations found a positive effect of gender diversity in top management teams (Dezsò & Ross, 2012). Yet, this favorable effect was present only in firms whose strategies focused on innovation. Perhaps women's leadership styles are more likely to facilitate performance in management teams, rather than boards, and especially when companies face the complex issues involved in innovating new products and services.

All in all, findings on corporate performance are mixed and no doubt contingent on multiple factors, for example, the labor pool of qualified women, the degree of male-dominance of the managerial roles, the particular challenges that corporations face, the diversity beliefs prevalent in corporations, and the prevailing economic conditions. It will require another generation of studies to identify the conditions under which gender diversity of corporate boards and executive teams increases, decreases, or has no effect on companies' bottom lines.

A related claim is that gender-diverse groups perform better than less diverse groups because women possess different informational resources than men and interact in ways that enhance group members' creativity and cooperative relationships. However, the most extensive meta-analysis of the influence of diversity on group performance found that gender diversity has no overall effect on objectively measured performance outcomes and a negative effect on subjectively measured performance (van Dijk, van Engen, & van Knippenberg, 2012). Findings were similar for other types of demographic diversity. This concentration of negative effects of demographic diversity in the subjective ratings suggests prejudicial biases, but the null effects on the objective measures also deserve attention. In contrast, functional diversity, that is, bringing people with different skills and knowledge together, had generally positive effects.

These findings should make some sense. Diversity initiatives that bring in leaders or team members from underrepresented groups can be resisted as well as welcomed. Not everyone is committed to the social justice goals inherent in promoting diversity in groups and organizations. To gain from diversity based on demographic attributes, organizations have to leverage this resource by lessening the conflict, communication barriers, and lack of mutual respect that can develop in identity-diverse groups (Rink & Ellemers, 2009; Thomas & Ely, 1996; van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004).

In sum, although considerable social science evidence shows that women tend to have leadership styles that researchers have established are advantageous, the evidence does not in general support the related claims that women's participation makes groups more creative and productive or corporations more profitable. Future research may identify conditions under which those "business case" claims are valid, but for the present, both social scientists and activists should not use the broad brush to describe such presumed advantages of female leadership or gender diversity. Instead, attention should shift to the many challenges inherent in the gender, ethnic, and racial integration of groups and organizations (e.g., Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ely & Thomas, 2001).

Values and Attitudes of Leaders and the Link to the Public Good

Beyond leadership style, there are other sex-related differences that may be more important. These are differences in leaders' values and attitudes. This aspect of leaders' psychology helps us understand their goals and motivations—what they want to achieve as leaders. Cross-national surveys have shown that, in general, women place more emphasis on the social values of *benevolence* and *universalism* (Schwartz & Rubel, 2005). Benevolence refers to "preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact" and universalism to the "understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature" (Schwartz & Rubel, 2005, pp. 1010-1011). Similarly, other research has found that, compared with men, women endorse social values that promote others' welfare (Beutel & Marini, 1995). In U.S. attitudinal surveys, women endorse socially compassionate social policies and moral practices that uphold marriage, the family, and organized religion (Eagly, Diekmann, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Koenig, 2004). Although generalizability of such findings to leaders and managers is not well established, research on CEOs and board members of Swedish listed companies replicated known sex-related differences in benevolence and universalism values (Adams & Funk, 2012).

Do these value and attitude differences affect leaders? There are numerous indications that they probably do. For example, as members of legislative bodies, women are more likely than their male colleagues to advocate for changes that promote the interests of women, children, and families and that support public welfare in areas such as health care and education (for reviews, see Paxton, Kunovich, & Hughes, 2007; Wängnerud, 2009). Although women are not a monolithic political bloc on these issues, political scientists have shown that these tendencies in general transcend political parties and nations. Similarly, a natural experiment involving Indian women village leaders who gained office through a government mandate revealed that women, more than men, enacted policies that provided for the public good, such as bringing clean water to their villages (Beaman, Chattopadhyay, Duflo, Pande, & Topalova, 2009).

As for corporate boards, the proportion of women on corporate boards in the *Fortune* 500 predicted the companies' philanthropy and charitable giving (Williams, 2003). Likewise, the Norwegian corporations' fulfillment of the 40% quota for women on their boards was followed by smaller workforce reductions with economic contraction, an effect that accounted for the relatively lower profits. Researchers attributed these findings to the women's greater concern with the welfare of employees and their families (Matsa & Miller, 2012a). A related study found that women-owned private firms in the United States were less likely than firms owned by men to lay off workers during a period of financial stresses (Matsa & Miller, 2012b). Female executives may thus take into account a wider range of stakeholders, including employees and their families.

Ethical attitudes are also potentially important for leadership. Meta-analyses of studies on ethical beliefs and decision-making have shown that women are more likely than men to support ethical business practices (Borkowski & Ugras, 1998; Franke, Crown, & Spake, 1997; but see Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010). Consistent with this trend, the representation of women on corporate boards related to more positive social outcomes and greater corporate

responsibility, especially through companies not engaging in negative, unethical business practices (Boulouta, 2012). Likewise, the research on mandated women village council leaders in India found these women less likely to pay bribes than their male counterparts, in other words, they were less corrupt (Beaman et al., 2009). Finally, at the national level, political scientists have associated larger representations of women in parliaments with less political corruption (Dollar, Fisman, & Gatti, 2001; Swamy, Knack, Lee, & Azfar, 2001). Although researchers disagree about how to interpret this finding (see Goetz, 2007), the association between female leadership and restraint of corruption appears to be robust, including in a controlled experimental setting (Rivas, 2012).

In summary, the effects of sex-related values, attitudes, and ethical tendencies deserve more attention. Whether the types of outcomes that I have noted bring female advantage would depend on the larger political context. More benevolence and universalism, for example, would fit better with the agendas of some political parties than others. Companies' commitment to the public good might decrease their profits, at least in some circumstances, and increase them in other circumstances. Moreover, in political and business environments where corruption is endemic, ethical office holders and managers might find it distasteful to wheel and deal to benefit their constituencies or companies. Many questions remain unanswered. Are concern for the public good and ethical commitment necessarily desirable? Would such tendencies advantage women leaders? Will this difference in male and female leaders be maintained over time as women gain more access to leader roles? Research should tackle such issues.

There exist even bolder claims about female leadership. Pinker (2011), in his recent book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, pointed out that most violence has been committed by men leading our nations and tribes to war. Pinker further argued that the ascendance of women is one cause of the worldwide decline of violence that he documented in his book. Even more confidently established is the positive correlation of societal gender equality with economic productivity and national wealth (World Bank, 2012). Gender equality of course increases as women gain access to leadership positions. However, the direction of causation is unclear in these molar societal correlations. Is it broader cultural shifts that enable women to occupy leadership positions? Or do women leaders facilitate the cultural shifts that restrain violence and increase economic productivity and national wealth? These questions deserve attention.

Conclusion

Here we have it, a grand exercise in comparing women and men, mainly as leaders, in the context of groups, organizations, and nations. There is considerable evidence that female leaders have a somewhat more participative, androgynous, and transformational leadership style than their male counterparts. There are also multiple indications that women, compared with men, enact their leader roles with a view to producing outcomes that can be described as more compassionate, benevolent, universalistic, and ethical, thus promoting the public good.

Do these generalizations about sex-related aspects of leadership challenge conventional wisdom? The challenge score is mixed. Our early meta-analytic findings challenged prominent researchers' denial of any sex differences in leadership style (see Eagly & Johnson, 1990), but confirmed, albeit quite mildly, the claims of trade book writers (e.g., Helgesen, 1990; Loden, 1985). More generally, meta-analytic findings on leadership style also confirm the conventional wisdom inherent in gender stereotypes (Vinkenbarg et al., 2011) and thus should not surprise the general public. How about the lack of evidence that gender diversity typically brings greater success to groups and organizations? Organizational researchers have long had doubts about such claims (for review, see O'Reilly & Main, 2012; van Dijk et al., 2012), which activists have disseminated, perhaps so successfully that they may have become a conventional wisdom among progressive people. These claims should now meet the complex challenges inherent in contemporary research findings.

Finally, given the evidence base that social science has produced so far, can I say that women are better leaders than men? My personal answer follows mainly from my belief that women leaders act more on behalf of the public good, but enthusiasm about this generalization would depend on one's political stance. From my perspective, such leaders would improve our world, but there are many unknowns. To find out whether our societies would thrive and prosper if women shared power equally with men, more women would have to hold the reins of power. My best guess is that the gains of moving expeditiously in this direction far outweigh the risks.

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