

An Analysis of Women's Leadership Styles: How They Shape Subordinate Perceptions of Female Leaders

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Past empirical data has shown that women in leadership positions, who demonstrate leadership styles that diverge from societally prescribed gender roles, tend to be perceived as “unlikable” (Eagly, Makhijani & Klonsky, 1992; Williams & Tiedens, 2016). Although this phenomenon is well documented in the research on women and leadership, studies reported mixed results on which factors, such as leadership style, affect the likability of women in leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Elsesser & Lever, 2011; Kaiser & Wallace, 2016). The current paper will examine which styles of leadership, if any, create a gender bias against female leaders and how much leadership style influences subordinate perceptions, negative and positive, of female leaders.



Patterns emerging in recent research on the relationship between women's leadership styles and judgments of them by subordinates are challenging the assumption that female leaders are perceived as “unlikable” simply because they are in a leadership position. The first pattern emerging in the data is that subordinate perceptions of the likability of female leaders are related to demonstrated leadership style (Cellar, Sidle, Goudy & O'Brien, 2001; Eagly et al., 1992). The second pattern reveals that in the case of subordinates perceiving a female leader as “unlikable,” it is usually found in laboratory settings with

hypothetical bosses (Elsesser & Lever, 2011) or real female bosses who display dominant and forceful leadership styles (Kaiser & Wallace, 2016; Williams & Tiedens, 2016). Many “flare ups” of sexism occur when a woman applies certain leadership styles in the workplace (Eagly et al., 1992). The focus of this paper will be a review of the literature on the role of gender on assumed leadership styles for women, the styles of leadership women actually use, and how these styles affect subordinate perceptions.

ASSUMED LEADERSHIP STYLES ACCORDING TO ROLE CONGRUITY THEORY

Gender is socially constructed and defines the masculine and feminine behaviors that should

be exhibited by men and women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Gender norms are prescriptive, and when

gender roles are violated, there are assumed social consequences (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Eagly and Karau (2002) apply Role Congruity Theory to explain bias against women, and men, who deviate from socially ascribed gender roles. According to Role Congruity Theory, social perceivers (e.g., co-workers, employees, managers) hold various stereotypes about groups of people that are incongruent with the attributes associated with certain social roles. This incongruity between stereotypes and assumed role attributes leads to prejudice (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Role Congruity Theory could also be used to determine which styles of leadership women in the corporate world could use to avoid the gender biases of role incongruity, perhaps by attempting to incorporate ascribed communal characteristics such as nurturance, gentleness, and sensitivity into their leadership style (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Elsesser & Lever, 2011). However, Kaiser and Wallace (2016) argued that in reality, corporate leaders do not, and cannot, fit common popular stereotypes of femininity if they wish to successfully lead. Not only are these ascribed characteristics for women not realistic in the corporate world, but they also may inhibit the social perceiver from favorably evaluating women in leadership roles that are thought to require characteristics such as assertiveness, dominance, ambition, and confidence (Kaiser & Wallace, 2016).

Stereotypes can be heavily impacted by, and manifested through, language. Koch, Luft, and Kruse (2005) longitudinally investigated changes in semantic connotations of 5 gender and leadership related concepts over a 20 year time-span using word clusters (e.g., man, business-woman, manager). Their results showed a progressive deviation from the study's first wave of findings, which suggested that "leadership is male" (Koch et al., 2005, p. 34). In fact, in later waves in the study, they found that a new word cluster had formed: leadership, manager, and business-woman. Female participants contributed

the most to these new, highly correlated words indicative of female leadership. The results from Koch et al. (2005) suggest that attitudes toward gender roles are evolving. Role Congruity Theory can still contribute to one's understanding of the influence of implicit attitudes of ascribed characteristics for each gender, but as gender roles become more interchangeable for men and women, this theory may become less relevant for explaining bias in the future.

Role Congruity Theory may also explain how social perceptions of gender roles influence whether or not women take on leadership roles. Sheryl Sandberg (2013) addressed the "leadership ambition gap" in her book *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*. She noted that women hold far fewer senior leadership positions than men across many domains, including the corporate world, and argued that it is not that women lack ambition in their careers, but that they do not aspire to senior leadership positions as much as men do (Sandberg, 2013). A perceived incongruity between women and senior leadership roles exists, as women are more likely to be mid-level managers. Although only 23 female CEOs are listed on the S&P 500 (Sandberg, 2013), most people have reported exposure to a mid-level female manager (Elsesser & Lever, 2011). Senior leadership positions are thought of by society to require agentic characteristics including directness, dominance, forcefulness and self-sufficiency (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Congruency often exists between men and these characteristics, which may lead them to be encouraged, and aspire, to keep advancing in their careers. Consequently, as predicted by Role Congruity Theory, women may be less likely to self-select into senior leadership tracks based on the perceived incongruence of the agentic characteristics necessary for senior leadership positions and the ascribed communal characteristics associated with women.

SUBORDINATE PERCEPTIONS OF FEMALE LEADERS WITH DOMINANT LEADERSHIP STYLES

Not only is there a gendered distribution of those in senior leadership positions, it is also the case that men and women may use different leadership styles in the workplace and these may be perceived differently. Kaiser and Wallace (2016) examined subordinate ratings of the leadership styles of 857 men and 857 women in upper level management from six different corporations. Results suggested that women were reportedly more likely to demonstrate what they defined as stereotypically masculine styles of leadership. These styles were labeled as “Forceful,” such as taking charge and demonstrating decisiveness, and “Operational,” which included behaviors such as executing initiatives and initiating structure constructs. Notably, men were more likely to use stereotypically feminine styles of leadership that are more people-oriented and less hands-on. These styles were labeled “Strategic,” such as shifting corporate environmental demands and establishing new directions, and “Enabling,” which included empowering and accommodating subordinates.

Kaiser and Wallace (2016) also examined subordinate perceptions of the suitability of leadership styles. They used the Leadership Versatility Index (LVI) for subordinate participants to rate the men and women on whether their leadership approach was “the right amount,” “too much,” or “too little.” Most subordinate participants rated men’s implementation of “Forceful” and “Operational” styles as “too little,” and women’s implementation of the “Forceful” style as “too much” and of the “Operational” style as “the right amount.” While women in upper-level management used amounts of the “Operational” styles of leadership that were judged as effective, their use of the “Forceful,” and explicitly dominant, style was perceived as “too much” (Kaiser & Wallace, 2016). A shift in

management culture has led to an inconsistency between the general perception subordinates have of the skills required for a senior manager to lead, and the actual skills necessary for a senior manager to successfully lead. Corporate upper-level managers cannot depend solely on stereotypically masculine styles of management to successfully lead in many corporate environments that have become more democratic and people oriented (Kaiser & Wallace, 2016).

Male managers have cultivated the skills necessary to be considered for a promotion from utilizing the “Strategic” and “Enabling” styles, which gives them an advantage over their female counterparts. Female managers are less likely to develop strategic and enabling skills because they over-utilize the “Forceful” and “Operational” styles. Kaiser and Wallace (2016) contended that women in middle (and upper) management are viewed by their senior managers as effective “doers,” but are often overlooked as potential candidates for promotions. They are less likely to utilize the “Strategic” and “Enabling” styles of leadership that are viewed as necessary for “moving up the career ladder.” Female leaders may unknowingly focus on accomplishing goals and tasks for corporations, rather than envisioning and setting them, which may lead to them being perceived as having less potential for promotions (Kaiser & Wallace, 2016). Sheryl Sandberg (2013) and Kaiser and Wallace (2016) stressed the importance of women seeking mentorship and support from their superiors to gain the knowledge and to develop the skills necessary to be viewed as a potential candidate for promotions.

However, the picture is likely much more complex and it is not clear to what extent subordinate perceptions of leadership behaviors reflect actual

leadership behaviors. “Forceful” strategies may be effective in certain environments with subordinates whose personalities are more authoritarian, rather than with subordinates whose personalities are more democratic. Nor is it clear whether the level of institutional support is proportional for male and female leaders to enable them to successfully enact the same leadership behaviors with subordinates.

While a bleak picture has been painted of subordinate judgments of women’s leadership styles, the findings of two meta-analyses on gender bias and leadership style demonstrate that the picture is incomplete without considering how “dominance” is defined. Eagly et al. (1992) reported a statistical trend in their meta-analysis that suggested subordinates do, in fact, evaluate female leaders slightly more negatively than their male counterparts. This slight difference was also present in a recent meta-analysis by Williams and Tiedens (2016), who found similar mixed results in their literature review. Some findings from this study suggest that the leadership style of women is more explicitly dominant than men and that gender bias was found only against female leaders who displayed explicitly dominant behavior (e.g., direct demands, assertiveness) in their leadership style (Williams & Tiedens, 2016).

One notable finding from Williams and Tiedens, (2016) was that gender bias did not exist when female leaders utilized subtle and implicit (e.g., eye contact) forms of dominance (Williams & Tiedens, 2016). Explicit forms of dominance led to an overall slight gender bias and prejudice against female leaders, likely because they deviated from ascribed communal and feminine characteristics (Williams & Tiedens, 2016). Since explicit forms of dominance (i.e., assertiveness, decisiveness, making demands) are associated with masculinity, women are more likely to face negative evaluations when they engage in these behaviors (Kaiser & Wallace, 2016; Williams & Tiedens, 2016). Such

findings may suggest that female leaders choose to use implicit forms of dominance to lead in order to still be evaluated favorably by their subordinates, but when explicit forms of dominance are used to lead, a slight gender bias toward these female leaders can be expected.

Women are using dominant leadership styles even when there are negative consequences associated with a dominant leadership style. Research has not yet explained why women leaders choose a dominant leadership style. One hypothesis is that female leaders use dominant leadership styles because they are under disproportionate pressures at work to be efficient and find a balance with demanding home lives. For example, many women in the workforce are looking for flexibility in their jobs and feel they need to find a “work-life balance” because women, more so than men, feel the societal pressure to “have and do it all” (Sandberg, 2013). Self-selection is also occurring, wherein mid-level female managers may be less likely to actively seek a promotion because of the more rigid work schedules of senior-level positions. Much of the research on women’s leadership styles focuses on which styles are being utilized and how they are shaping subordinate perceptions, but more research is needed on the factors that influence women’s leadership style choice. For example, female leaders may be more likely to face challenges from subordinates and use forceful leadership in response. Research should investigate factors influencing women’s leadership style choices, including women leader’s needs (e.g., desire for flexibility), corporate environments (e.g., employees who are less responsive to women leaders), and societal motivators (e.g., “have and do it all”) that cause women to utilize styles of leadership that may be effective in mid-level leadership but may not get them promoted to senior-level positions.

WARMTH-COMPETENCE PERCEPTIONS OF HYPOTHETICAL VERSUS ACTUAL FEMALE LEADERS

The warmth-competence theory may shed light on the reasons female leaders with explicit, dominant styles of leadership are perceived more negatively. The warmth-competence theory is a development of social cognition studies that distinguishes people's impressions of others based on "liking" and "respecting" (Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, 2007). The two dimensions, warmth (i.e., likability, trustworthiness) and competence (i.e., respect, efficiency), are driving forces that influence people's initial judgments of others (Fiske et al., 2007). The evidence from social cognition studies strongly suggests that warmth and competence account for approximately 80% of the variance in perceptions of individuals and groups in everyday social behaviors (Fiske et al., 2007). In other words, the dimensions of warmth and competence are crucial to the impressions people have of others. People do not always like the people they respect, nor do they always respect the people they like. The warmth-competence theory could strongly influence the initial reactions subordinates have toward female managers and leaders, both hypothetical and actual. The warmth dimension is a strong predictor of whether the initial impression of an individual or group is positive or negative; whereas the competence dimension is a predictor of how positive or negative the impression is perceived (Fiske et al., 2007). An individual must display a narrow range of sociable behaviors (e.g., Role Congruity Theory) that lead to a presumption of warmth. Female leaders that display explicit dominant leadership styles are presumed to be competent, but not warm because their behavior is outside of the narrow range of social characteristics that are ascribed to women. Warmth-competence theory may also be used to explain why wealthy people, Asian people, Jewish people, and female professionals are assumed

to possess competence, but are perceived with lower levels of warmth which brings their intentions under suspicion by social perceivers (e.g., colleagues, peer groups) (Fiske et al., 2007).

Research that utilizes lab experiments to simulate situations and hypothetical leader behavior may give an incomplete picture in testing reactions to hypotheticals because these reactions do not solicit direct consequences for harsh subordinate judgments (Camerer & Mobbs, 2016). For example, a negative perception of a hypothetical manager does not affect a subordinate's daily affect or behavior because the hypothetical leader is fictitious. The warmth of a hypothetical manager or boss may be lower, or perceived as lower, than an actual manager or boss that a subordinate interacts with daily and may come to know on a more personal basis. An affective and physical distance between the subordinate and the hypothetical manager is produced in laboratory settings and ignores the difference in neural activity in the brain during decisions in laboratory experiments versus real life situations (Camerer & Mobbs, 2016). Hypothetical and actual managers may not elicit equivalent reactions from subordinates because of the difference in the intensity of neural activity in the brain (Camerer & Mobbs, 2016). For instance, a hypothetical manager's behavior may not elicit negative (or positive) perceptions from a subordinate observing this behavior from an "outside" perspective, but when that subordinate's actual manager demonstrates those same behaviors, neural intensity will increase. Consequently, relying on reactions and perceptions from subordinates "observing" a hypothetical boss may give a misleading picture of what shapes subordinate attitudes because neural activity is different for hypothetical

and actual decisions and reactions (Camerer & Mobbs, 2016).

An excellent hypothetical example of an assertive and ambitious woman being perceived negatively is the famous Heidi/Howard study (McGinn & Tempest, 2009). Students read a case study of real life entrepreneur, Heidi Roizen, but half of the students read about “Heidi” and half about “Howard.” Ratings of Heidi and Howard’s competence were equivalent, but their perceived likability was not. The participants rated Heidi unlikable and “out for herself,” while they rated Howard “a great guy you would want to work for.” Sandberg (2013) argued that negative perception is based on the view that assertive women are overbearing and

“bossy.” Sandberg’s argument is consistent with the warmth-competence theory. Warmth assessments are primary and carry more weight in determining a person’s reaction to an individual’s behavior (Fiske et al., 2007). Consequently, Heidi’s behavior was viewed as suspicious, and possibly threatening. Her behavior was counter-stereotypical and therefore did not elicit trustworthiness from the warmth dimension. Howard was initially perceived as warm (e.g., trustworthy, likable) because his behavior was congruent with the stereotypes of ambitious, assertive and confident male entrepreneurs. Therefore, it was natural for participants to view a warm and successful male entrepreneur as competent as well.

PERCEPTION OF LEADERSHIP STYLE SHAPED BY SUBORDINATE “AGREEABLENESS”

A woman’s leadership style affects the way she is perceived by her subordinates, but there are other factors besides Role Congruity Theory that influence subordinate perceptions of leadership style. Cellar et al. (2001) examined both leaders and subordinates. They examined the personality dimension of “Agreeableness” from the Five Factor Model because they were curious about how a subordinate’s level of “Agreeableness” affected perceptions of men and women who used an autocratic style of leadership versus a democratic style of leadership. Cellar et al. (2001) found that participants who scored high in agreeableness favored democratic leaders, with gender not being an instrumental factor in favorability. Participants who scored low in agreeableness favored autocratic leaders, again, with gender not being an instrumental factor in favorability. The researchers suggested that their findings could be a result of those with authoritarian personality styles valuing authoritarian attributes that are associated with “strong” leaders, regardless of the leader’s sex (Cellar et al., 2001). These findings need to be

empirically supported with future research, but they create a foundation for research that may show the effect of subordinate personalities on perception of leadership styles for men and women. Whether negative subordinate perceptions of dominant female leadership styles are determined based on varying circumstances, fields, or the degree to which female leaders actually utilize dominant leadership styles is unclear (Williams & Tiedens, 2016). Varying leadership styles may be called for in each field to lead subordinates with differentially distributed personalities. Because corporate managers and leaders need to develop certain strategic skills to be successful at envisioning and accomplishing company goals, it may also be necessary for corporate managers and leaders to acquire other sets of skills from different/multiple leadership styles to successfully lead their subordinates under varying conditions.

LIMITATIONS WITHIN THE LITERATURE AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The leadership research literature has made progress in determining whether various factors, in isolation, impact perceptions of female leaders. An important next step is the refinement of existing theories by focusing on the combination of variables that likely play a role in shaping subordinate perceptions of a female leader's chosen leadership style. Although Role Congruity Theory may partly explain the implicit bias female leaders face from subordinates, it is necessary to simultaneously consider leadership style, method for examining leadership (actual or hypothetical), as well as personality characteristics of subordinates, in order to gain a full and accurate understanding of subordinate perceptions of female leaders. Examining any of these variables in isolation may be misleading, or at best, may offer an incomplete picture.

One added complication in attempting to understand the implications of leadership research findings is that among the studies that evaluate female leadership styles and subordinate perceptions there is considerable variation in terms of methods, analytic approaches, and dependent variables (Williams & Tiedens, 2016). The application of different methods to detect and examine gender bias and prejudice contributes to the mixed results researchers report. For instance, when surveys are employed to rate subordinate perceptions of their

actual female managers, little to no gender bias against women is found (Elsesser & Lever, 2011; Kaiser & Wallace, 2016). Elsesser and Lever (2011) proposed an explanation for differing results in leadership gender research through the findings of their study. They surveyed approximately 60,000 participants and found that subordinates are not as harsh on their actual bosses as they may be on hypothetical bosses. They also found that past exposure to female bosses lead to less gender bias with subsequent bosses. Elsesser and Lever (2011) explained this divergence in their results from the previous literature reasoning that it is easier to be critical of hypothetical people with whom an emotional distance is present. Thus, the external validity of studies of hypothetical female leaders in laboratory settings, compared to actual female leaders, comes into question.

One limitation of studies that use unique indexes such as Kaiser and Wallace's (2016) Leadership Versatility Index (LVI) is that it is difficult to compare their results to other findings because the measures and methods being used are not equivalent. If tools such as the LVI were used as part of the foundation for analytic approaches in future leadership gender studies, more consistent and generalizable findings may be reported.

CONCLUSION: HEADING IN THE DIRECTION OF A NEW NARRATIVE

Although much of the research presents mixed results and conclusions on how women's leadership style affects the perceptions of their subordinates, there is hope of moving toward a new narrative. One of the most researched factors that is contributing to the perception of female leaders is leadership

style. A workplace environment that is more oriented toward social and communicative skills has become a new cultural norm for corporations (Koch et al., 2005). Such changes could be advantageous for women in leadership as they are socialized to be more communicative in their relations with others

(Eagly & Karau, 2002). The overall initial perception of their level of warmth may increase to meet the high level of competency that subordinates view in them. The way in which women communicate through their leadership style may affect them positively if they use more democratic and “Strategic”

styles of leadership (Kaiser & Wallace, 2016), but subordinate personalities may moderate or mediate this effect (Cellar et al., 2001). Both women and men will have to adapt their styles of leadership to the rapidly changing corporate environments that have new and challenging demands for leaders.

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