Think crisis – think female?
An evaluation of psychological and structural processes behind the glass cliff effect.

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Ⅰ. Introduction

The lack of women in leadership positions is often explained by the glass ceiling; an invisible barrier which prevents women from obtaining management positions (Arfken, Bellar, & Helms, 2004; Singh &Vinnicombe, 2004). While gender inequality in the workplace continues, more and more women are breaking through the glass ceiling into management positions (Catalyst, 2009). However, as noted by Ryan and Haslam (2007, p550), once through the glass ceiling, women are faced
with a ‘second wave of discrimination’ in the form of the glass cliff. This describes the tendency to preferentially place female managers in positions that have an elevated likelihood of failure. The glass cliff is so named due to the subtlety of the phenomenon and the precarious nature of the position.

There has been some suggestion that women may choose to place themselves in risky management positions (Woods, 2004) or even cause the decrease in company performance themselves (Judge, 2003). Judge conducted a study of FTSE 100 companies and concluded that boards with a large number of female members underperformed whereas boards with fewer female members performed well. Yet, Judge failed to take into account the performance of the company prior to appointing female members. Ryan and Haslam (2005) point out that performance of the companies studied by Judge didn’t begin to decline after the appointment of a female board member, rather it was in decline before their appointment. Numerous laboratory studies which have replicated the glass cliff effect also challenge the ideas that women select glass cliff positions or are the cause of poor company performance, suggesting that there is a selection bias at work (Schein, 2001; Ryan, Haslam & Kulich, 2010). Ryan and Haslam (2009) emphasize the need to focus not on the performance of the company, but on the social and psychological processes that may underlie the glass cliff.

A number of alternative underlying psychological processes have been proposed to explain the phenomenon of the glass cliff. The underlying processes which will be examined in this essay include implicit gender and leadership theories, the opinion that women are more expendable than men, the belief that the position is the best opportunity available, and a desire to signal change. These shall be evaluated using the existing literature, as well as an interview with a female academic from the University of Exeter
who was placed in a glass cliff position. This academic was encouraged to take a management post during a period when the university’s student satisfaction scores were declining and the departmental culture was in need of serious redirection.

II. Think Manager–Think Male

One such processes which may underlie the glass cliff is the impact of implicit gender and leadership theories on hiring practices. There appears to be a perceived incompatibility between the definition of a good leader and the definition of a female (Agars, 2004). Even when male and female leaders behave in the same way, they are perceived differently. For example, a male leader’s actions may be seen as appropriate whereas the same action taken by a female leader may be seen as too aggressive. There is the belief that if a woman does not conform to her gender stereotype she is not a proper woman. Yet, if she does display stereotypically feminine traits she is not considered to be appropriate managerial material. This creates a catch-22 for female leaders.

Characteristics rated as key for successful managers, such as leadership ability and analytical thinking, tend to be associated with males rather than females (Schein, 2001). BerthoinAntal and Izraeli (1993) describe this stereotype of managers as males as the main barrier to women’s advancement in the workplace, as this makes men appear more qualified for management positions. Schein (1973) was the first to investigate whether the perceived characteristics of successful leaders were associated more with one gender than another. In order to achieve this she created a Descriptive Index which consisted of a list of 92 descriptive terms. She presented this index to male middle managers and asked them
to indicate how characteristic each term was of either a) women in
general, b) men in general, or c) successful middle managers in general. Results revealed that participants considered men more likely to possess the characteristics associated with successful middle managers. Follow-up studies using female middle manager participants (Schein, 1975) and participants of both genders from the USA, UK, Germany, China and Japan (Schein, 2001) revealed the same association. To describe the perceived incompatibility of the definition of a woman and the definition of a leader, Schein (2001, p.675) coined the phrase ‘think manager—think male’.

Ⅲ. Think Crisis—Think Female

However, Scheins research focused on traits associated with leaders of successful companies, not glass cliff positions. Leadership categorization theory (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984) states that different types of leaders are most effective in certain situations but not others. For example, leadership traits that are considered desirable in a crisis may be quite different from those that are sought after in a time of smooth sailing. One possible explanation for the glass cliff phenomenon is that women are put in precarious management roles because they are considered to have the necessary characteristics to cope with the situation. Indeed, Eleanor Roosevelt is credited with saying ‘A woman is like a tea bag: You never know how strong she is until she gets into hot water’ (Ayres, 1996, p. 199). Archival studies such as that conducted by Ryan and Haslam (2005) demonstrate that women tend to be hired for management positions in times of crisis. When Ryan and Haslam (2005) examined the performance of FTSE 100 companies, they found that companies who had hired women to sit on their boards had experienced consistently poor performance in the
five months leading up to the appointment than companies who had hired men. This challenges Judge’s (2003) intimation that women are the cause of poor company performance and instead suggests that in times of crisis, women are more likely to be selected for leadership positions. Such evidence led Ryan and Haslam (2005) to conclude that in situations where the company is successful people ‘think manager—think male’ but under different circumstance they ‘think crisis—think female’. Haslam and Ryan (2008) also found some evidence to support this hypothesis. When they presented participants with an equally qualified male and female candidate, the female candidate was more likely to be appointed to the post when the company’s performance was declining than when it was improving. Indeed, our interviewee was competing against a male candidate with a similar level of experience for her current position. She believes that gender stereotypes may have played a role in her appointment, as in a crisis ‘women are often seen as better at dealing with the emotional fall out’.

Bruckmuller & Branscombe (2010) found further experimental evidence to support the underlying process of ‘think crisis—think female’. Participants were provided with a description of a male and female candidate for a CEO position and rated each candidate on a number of stereotypically male (e.g. decisive) and stereotypically female (e.g. able to encourage others) leadership traits. They then evaluated the candidates on a number of scales and finally selected the best candidate for the position. The female candidate was rated as equally suitable for the position regardless of the success of the company, while the male candidate was rated as more suitable for the position when the company was successful rather than unsuccessful. As perceptions of the male but not the female candidates suitability for the role was dependent upon company success, the authors suggest that it is not be so much that women are seen as having what it takes for leadership in a time of crisis, but that men are seen as lacking
the necessary characteristics to lead under these circumstances.

Ryan, Haslam, and Hersby (2011) extended this research through a number of studies. In the first of three studies, participants received Schein’s Descriptive Index and indicated to what extent each trait was characteristic of managers of a successful company or managers of an unsuccessful company. There was a significant negative relationship between stereotypically masculine traits and managers of unsuccessful companies. Results also revealed a significant positive association between stereotypically feminine traits and managers of unsuccessful companies, but this was only significant for female participants. In order to ensure that participants did not simply associate masculinity with successful leaders because most leaders are in fact male, and to investigate the prescriptive nature of stereotypes, a second study was conducted which focused on ideal characteristics of leaders for successful or unsuccessful companies. While a number of negative traits such as ‘fearful’ were associated both with managers of unsuccessful companies and females, it is unlikely that such traits will be associated with an ideal leader for an unsuccessful company. Therefore, it is important to investigate the prescriptive nature of leader stereotypes by asking participants to indicate traits for an ideal leader of a poorly performing company. When this alteration was made to the task, the ‘think manager—think male’ association was not found. The ideal manager of a successful company was described as possessing an equal number of masculine and feminine traits. Interestingly, when participants described ideal leaders, more traits were the same for both successful and unsuccessful leaders than when participants simply described each type of manager. This indicates that certain characteristics are desirable for leaders across various situations. However, evidence was uncovered with regards to the ‘think crisis—think female’ association, with more positive feminine traits (e.g. ‘intuitive’ and ‘understanding’) than
positive masculine traits (e.g. ‘assertive’ and ‘decisive’) seen as ideal for the post in the unsuccessful company.

Yet, this study does not offer an understanding of why such traits are seen to be ideal in a crisis. In order to answer this question the authors conducted a third study which provided participants with a description of the role which a new manager would play in an unsuccessful company. They were then given a list of six stereotypically feminine and six stereotypically masculine traits, and asked to rate the importance of each trait for a new manager adopting the described role. If the managers role was described as ‘managing people’, or ‘staying in the background and enduring the crisis’, feminine traits were rated as most desirable for the new manager. While masculine traits were rated as most desirable for roles which involved ‘improving performance’ and ‘being the company spokesperson’. This suggests that female managers are not considered to be the most able leaders in a time of crisis per se, but the most able for certain passive and interpersonal based roles associated with times of crisis. Our interviewee agrees that within universities, there is a tendency for women in management roles to be pushed towards positions which are considered to be ‘touchy feely’ and require less of a directive approach.

IV. Women Considered to be More Expendable than Men

Alternatively these results could be interpreted as evidence for a different process which may underlie the glass cliff. Women may be selected for roles which are risky because female leaders are considered to be more expendable than male leaders. Failing companies are more likely to attract negative public attention, which can lead to the blame being placed on the individual leader rather than on situational factors.
Such negative publicity may affect the likelihood of a manager of a failing company being hired for another management position in the future (Ferris, Jagannathan, & Pritchard, 2003). Therefore, placing women in such risky positions could in part be due to the belief that they are more expendable than men.

In particular, women are more likely to be selected for management positions which have less authority, fewer tangible rewards, and poor promotional opportunities (Lyness & Thompson, 1997). These issues were demonstrated by Frankforter (1996), whose analysis of women in senior management found that women were more likely to be placed in personnel based management positions rather than management positions which are production centred. Such roles are usually not valued as highly as production related roles (Powell, 1980), and are often more precarious in nature due to the high level of stress that is involved when dealing with interpersonal conflict. Our interviewee notes that in her experience this can also apply to educational institutions, where ‘women tend to be pigeonholed into education roles which are less valued than research roles’. This may be partly explained by leadership categorization theory, which states that perceptions of a good leader are largely based on prototypes. Therefore, being viewed as an appropriate leader is about meeting the expectations of followers. This may explain why there are more women leaders in ‘feminine’ sectors such as health care and education. A similar explanation comes from social identity theory which suggests that a leader must epitomize what it means to be part of the group. This means that if a group is masculine in nature it would be difficult for a female leader to be viewed as representative of the group, whereas a group which is feminine in nature will view a female leader as representative. However, Ryan and Haslam (2007) note that the identity of the group may be unrelated to gender, in which case these theories fail to explain the
dominance of female leaders in feminine industries.

Ryan, Haslam, and Hersby (2007) identify a number of economic factors associated with glass cliff positions which increase stress for the post holder. These include, being excluded from informal social networks which offer support (as such networks are often centred around ‘male’ activities), not given sufficient information about the role, and a lack of acknowledgement of difficulties associated with the role (Cartwright & Cooper, 1997). Higher levels of stress are linked to ‘burn out’, poorer performance, and reduced commitment to the organization (Kompier, Cooper, & Geurts, 2000). This process, which summarises the effect of the glass cliff upon women, is encapsulated by the Gender-stress-disidentification model (Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, Kulich, & Wilson-Kovacs, 2009). The above research seems to indicate that senior management are more willing to place a female manager in a stressful positions than a male manager, suggesting that the discussed negative effects are perceived to be of less importance or less of a concern when undergone by a woman.

Further support for this underlying process of the glass cliff was provided by Haslam and Ryan (2008). Their study asked participants to evaluate a male and female candidate for a successful or failing company and indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statement ‘This would be a stressful position to be in’. A female candidate’s selection for a leadership role in a failing company was found to be associated with the belief that the position was stressful. This suggests that women are chosen ahead of men for such a position precisely because the position is stressful. Interestingly, this result could be interpreted to support quite different underlying processes. While this could be construed as evidence that women are selected for precarious positions because they are considered to be more expendable, it could also be argued that these results further the implicit gender theories explanation of the glass
Indeed, as judgements of a candidates suitability was correlated with their perceived ability, the results offer support for the hypothesis that the main underlying psychological process of the glass cliff is the belief that traits typically associated with female leaders are seen as being desirable in a crisis situation, and perhaps more suited to stress management. Our interviewee supports this interpretation of the results and does not believe that the perception that women are expendable played any part in her appointment to her current management role. With declining student satisfaction scores, her position was necessary to improve the universities reputation within her subject and ensure that the department remained able to attract students and academics of the highest quality. Therefore, it was important to select a candidate who could turn things around, and it would not have been advisable to treat the person holding the post as expendable.

V. Lack of Opportunities

Haslam and Ryan (2008) also found that participants’ selection of a female candidate in a time of crisis was associated with a belief that the position would provide a better opportunity for a female rather than male leader. Perhaps this occurs due to the fact that there are fewer positions available to women and so a female candidate is less likely to turn down a risky position than a male candidate, believing that there are fewer other options available to her. This lends support for another underlying process of the glass cliff; that a women is more likely than a man to be appointed to a precarious leadership position as it is seen as a ‘golden opportunity’ for her(Ryan &Haslam, 2009, pp. 30).

Ashby, Ryan &Haslam (2006) conducted work on the level of risk and quality of opportunity that different positions were perceived to offer male
and female candidates. For male candidates, undertaking a legal case that they had a low chance of winning and which was attracting negative publicity was considered to be riskier and to offer a lower quality opportunity than taking a legal case which was going as planned and attracting no adverse publicity. This distinction, in terms of risk, was not made for female candidates. In addition, the riskier case was seen to offer her a higher quality opportunity than the low risk case. Riskier management roles would seem to be undesirable, so the fact that it is viewed as a good option for a woman suggests that she has no alternative options. Yet Haslam and Ryan (2007) found no evidence that leadership roles in unsuccessful companies were deemed any less desirable than those in successful companies, challenging the idea that these roles are only provided to women as they lack other options. Haslam and Ryan (2008) also oppose the view that the glass cliff is caused by structural factors such as availability of positions. Rather, they propose that implicit theories of gender and leadership are the main underlying cause of the glass cliff. As previously discussed, this opinion is supported by their study’s findings that candidates’ suitability was correlated with their perceived ability. Therefore, women were deemed more suitable for the position due to their perceived abilities, which were seen to map directly onto the described managerial role.

VI. Hiring Female Leaders as a form of Corporate Strategy

The final underlying process which this essay will discuss is the belief that when a company is performing poorly, hiring a female leader is a form of corporate strategy which signals to shareholders that dramatic changes are being made to the company (Furtado & Rozell, 1987). Our interviewee
suggests that selection boards may wish to ‘correct deficiencies in the person who held the role previously, by going for a very different candidate’. If the company is performing well there is no need to change the status quo, so it is more common to select a male leader. However, if the company is failing, the selection of a different type of leader will signal that drastic changes are underway, and may result in more positive press coverage as well as reassure the shareholders. As shareholder confidence partly determines the performance of a company, it is necessary to convince such individuals that radical change is on the way (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

It appears that this approach is also adopted in politics, with male candidates being more likely to be running for a safe seat (i.e. easy to win) and female candidates more likely to be running for marginal seats (Ryan, Haslam, & Kulich, 2010). The researchers also found that when participants were asked to select a candidate for a by-election, a male candidate was more likely to be chosen for a safe seat, while a female candidate was more likely to be selected for a seat which was described as hard to win. This phenomenon can also be seen in Australia, where only three women have ever served as State Premiers. All of whom were appointed mid-term to replace a male counterpart after their party had been exposed to a scandal, making the election unwinnable. As said by a Former Democratic National Committee Chair: ‘The only time to run a woman is when things look so bad that your only chance is to do something dramatic’ (Ryan, Haslam, & Kulich, 2010, p.57). Ryan and Haslam (2007, p560) argue that this is a ‘win–win’ approach for companies. If the female leader is successful the company will benefit, and if she is unsuccessful it serves as evidence that women are unsuited to management roles and men can continue to be given the best positions. However, as our interviewee points out, selecting a leader whom you
believe will fail seems rather unsound if the company’s reputation is at stake.

It is also possible that women are appointed to these roles because vacant positions in a company are likely to be the ones which require a change of management, rather than positions where the manager is successful. The finding that women are most likely to break through the glass ceiling in companies which have a high turnover supports this idea (Goodman, Fields & Blum, 2003). Bruckmuller and Branscombe (2010) also challenge the theory that the glass cliff occurs in order to signal change. The authors found that even when a successful company was described as having a history of female leadership, a male candidate was still more likely to be selected. Under these circumstances, those who believe that the motivation to ‘signal change’ drives the glass cliff effect, would expect the status quo to be maintained by hiring another female leader as the company did not need to signal change to shareholders. Although, as the authors note, it is possible that the four previous examples of female leaders used in the experiment were not enough to create a history of female leadership.

VII. Conclusions

From the reviewed literature, as well as our interview with a senior education manager within the University of Exeter, it appears evident that women do not cause poor performance of a company, nor choose glass cliff positions. Rather, they are selected for such positions due to a number of underlying psychological and structural processes. This indicates that legal mechanisms or corporate strategy may be required in order to eliminate the glass cliff. For example, Ryan, Haslam, and Kulich (2010) report on the affirmative action ‘twinning’ strategy implemented by the British labour
party. This involves pairing constituencies with the safe likelihood of a labour candidate winning the seat, and then assigning a male candidate to one constituency and a female candidate to the other. As a result, women enjoyed the same level of electoral success as men. Such findings support the use of affirmative action to eliminate the glass cliff and may encourage other companies and organizations to adopt similar policies.

Fortunately, some evidence does exist which suggests that attitudes are changing. Studies such as that by Schein (2001) show that as more women move into managerial roles subordinates have become less likely to view men as better leaders, however this was only true among female participants. ‘Men continue to operate with blinders on’ (Schein, 2001, p. 684). However, as transformational leadership styles become more popular, traditionally feminine traits which are associated with this style are likely to be viewed more positively.

Some of the underlying processes discussed in this essay can be viewed as resulting from a more malignant motivation, such as the belief that women are more expendable. However, there appears to be a high degree of support for the theory that implicit theories of gender and leadership play a central role in placing women on the glass cliff, suggesting that a more benign cause is responsible for this trend. While there is varying support for each of the processes discussed in this essay, Haslam and Ryan (2008, p.540) propose that such processes do not exist independently but are ‘likely to interact with, and reinforce, each other’. Therefore it is essential that research continues to investigate the underlying processes behind the glass cliff effect in order to ensure that women are not disadvantaged by unequal hiring practices for desirable management roles.
Works Cited


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Abstract

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An evaluation of psychological and structural processes behind the glass cliff effect.

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This paper will examine the social and psychological processes underlying the glass cliff phenomenon. This describes the tendency to preferentially place female managers in positions that have an elevated likelihood of failure. It will put forward existing evidence within the literature to challenge the notion, put forward by Judge (2003), that women are placed in desirable leadership positions and are responsible for the subsequent downfall of the company, or that they voluntary elect to hold positions which are doomed to failure. Further evidence that the glass cliff exists due to various underlying processes will be provided by an interview with a senior academic from the University of Exeter who was placed in a glass cliff position herself. The paper discusses each proposed underlying process in turn and debates the merit of each, before concluding by offering a number of solutions to the problem.

Key Words: Female, Lack or opportunities, process, glass ceiling, glass cliff

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