

WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP POSITIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF YOUNG ADULTS OUTLOOK

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ABSTRACT

This study examines perceptions about the role of women in leadership positions. Specifically, it examines the views of university students and their opinion of women in current leadership positions. A sample of 136 students was randomly surveyed to find out who they currently view as leaders and visionaries of today's society. The survey included questions about positive and negative labels used to describe themselves. Finally, students were asked to develop a preferential order of life events, which included getting married, having children, climbing the corporate ladder, and seeking personal fulfillment. This study is unique for the questions asked to students concerning their perceptions of future life events, the personality characteristics of leaders and their own personality characteristics. Other studies have focused on the characteristics of leadership but the authors did not discover any other studies that linked future perceived events with leadership.

Keywords: women, leadership, future life events

INTRODUCTION

Women have been told for decades to endure and aim for leadership positions. However, they continue to make-up only a fraction of top management in industry and government. On the jacket of Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 book *Lean In* she wrote, "Thirty years after women became 50 percent of college graduates in the United States; men still hold the vast majority of leadership positions in government and industry." Even though great strides have been made by women in various industries, women still account for only 4.2 percent of the Fortune 500 CEOs and 4.5 percent of Fortune 1000 CEOs (Knowledge Center, 2013). Therefore, this paper investigates the views of students, currently at a four year public university in both undergraduate and graduate management programs, about women in leadership positions. In addition, this paper analyzes the positive and negative labels many young adult place on themselves, when describing themselves as a leader or visionaries of today. This study is unique for the questions asked to students concerning their perceptions of future life events, and their own personality characteristics. Other

studies have focused on the characteristics of leadership but we did not discover any other studies that linked future perceived events with leadership.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is evidence that stress often accompanies positions of leadership and power, whether the leader is male or female, and it is believed that men and women handle stress differently (Kiamba, 2008). It is well-known that climbing the corporate ladder to positions of authority and leadership can be stressful. However, can it be harder on a female than a male? There are barriers related to culture, family, and gender biases in the business world (Carter, 2011). Even with barriers, a few women have risen above these circumstances and fought for equal opportunities, even though some have been labeled in negative ways. Few women have gained top management positions without facing challenges (Kiamba, 2008). A select few women have truly succeeded in obtaining positions of leadership, however this does not mean true equal opportunity has been realized (Mullany, 2011).

In many cultures, leadership is viewed as a masculine trait and many have the perception that males make better leaders. In the United States government, 17 percent of senators are women, and only 16.8 percent of the members of the House of Representatives are women. Only one-third of the Supreme Court is women and a mere 12 percent of United States governors are women. “Although the number of women leaders has increased, they are often named as an afterthought” (Kiamba, 2008, p. 2). Some believe that social convention disregards women in top management because of the masculine undertones of leadership (Højgaard, 2002). Højgaard also explained that only in the past two decades have women truly gained access to top leadership positions; this cannot be said for all countries.

The True Meaning of Leadership

At one time it was believed that leaders were born and not made. Most of today’s understanding of leadership is that it is taught and learned. Beyond this understanding many management professors and practitioners also believe that leadership is both a skill set and a behavior (Critical Leadership Skills, 2006). Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) stated that leadership is a learned process. It is not something that comes naturally and generally takes tremendous preparation. Being placed in a leadership role does not automatically mean that individual is an effective leader. Leadership involves much more than simply learning a new skill set. In a sense, the new leader’s identity must completely change. Effective leaders must take necessary action regardless of apprehensions in order to adequately serve and benefit their subordinates and company as a whole (Ibarra et al., 2013).

The Gender Discriminations of Leadership

Stereotypes regarding women’s performance may in fact lead to reduced female performance or may even prevent women from pursuing positions that are traditionally considered male positions (Farrington, 2012). These gender stereotypes may lead women to believe that they do not have the appropriate qualities to succeed in traditionally masculine occupations, which may make it less likely for women to strive for promotions into those

positions (Bosak & Sczesny, 2008). Employers may also fail to notice qualified women workers, therefore making the probability of getting promoted that much more difficult for women. However, the stereotypes may not be accurate. Studies have shown that companies headed by female leaders, typically tend to outperform companies that are headed by males, particularly public companies (Treasurer, Adelman, & Cohn, 2013). Even though these stereotypes may not be accurate, women may steer away from traditionally male fields altogether, because they do not feel as though they belong or that they would have opportunity for advancements (Farrington, 2012). In several studies conducted by Fine (2010), participants examined identical resumes, the only difference being the gender of the applicant. Both male and female subjects stated that the male applicant was more qualified than the female applicant far more often than the reverse (Fine, 2010).

Studies have also shown that superiors tend not to acknowledge women's future leadership potential even though they recognize their capabilities in the present (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). Perhaps society simply views men as more capable than women in leadership positions because most of these positions were conceived when few women were working and therefore were specifically intended for men (Ely et al., 2011). One study of the backgrounds and experiences of female board members showed that women had to be more qualified than their male counterparts to even be considered for a position on the board (Groysberg & Bell, 2013). The women in this study stated that they often felt as though they were treated as if they were not full members of the board. They stated that they often felt as though they constantly had to reestablish their credentials to the male board members. However, the women in the study believed that the men were seemingly unaware that they created this unequal playing field (Groysberg & Bell, 2013).

Are there Gender Specific Barriers in Leadership?

Leadership has long been thought of as a man's domain with women incapable of possessing the appropriate attributes of a leader. Women are typically thought of as weaker, more emotional, and less decisive than men (Ely et al., 2011). With these characteristics women are usually seen as unable to provide proper leadership. Society seemingly believes that men naturally possess the appropriate qualities of a leader, including strength, independence, and responsibility (Ely et al., 2011). Women who do reach leadership positions may be forced to sacrifice or hide feminine attributes so they are seen as more capable. However, this may reduce their likeability as they may be seen as not being genuine (Ely et al., 2011). Evidence has indicated that women leaders tend to be evaluated less favorably than male leaders, even when they have the same attributes and behave in exactly the same way (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). This seems to be more pronounced when women are perceived to behave in a stereotypically masculine way. Men who are assertive are seen to possess quality leadership attributes; however assertive women are seen as too pushy. It seems as though women are always caught in a "lose-lose" situation (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). When women behave in a way that goes along with gender stereotypes, they are seen as incapable of being an adequate leader. Yet when women behave with stereotypical leader qualities they are seen as not acting like proper women (Ryan & Haslam, 2007).

With so few women in top leadership positions, women are lacking appropriate role models who could potentially help them develop their identities as leaders (Ely et al., 2011). This may be especially troublesome for non-majority women as they have even fewer role models to identify with. Similarly, due to the small amount of women in top leadership positions, women have fewer opportunities to network with individuals of the same-sex (Ely et al., 2011). While women can also network with men, males may put more emphasis on assisting fellow males with career development or opportunities for advancement due to the assumption that they are more likely than women to succeed (Ely et al., 2011). It is crucial that women be active and direct when networking since those connections do not come as easily as they do for men. However, women may feel as though they are not being their genuine selves when they force the networking process (Ibarra et al., 2013).

To get to the top, women may need to make tradeoffs (Groysberg & Bell, 2013). Career interruptions due to pregnancy and motherhood may serve as a barrier for women to obtain leadership positions (Matsa & Miller, 2011). One study showed that female board members were less likely to be married or have children and more likely to be divorced than their male counterparts (Groysberg & Bell, 2013). However, studies have indicated that women tend not to leave management positions due to family commitments, but rather they leave these positions because there is no opportunity to advance (Ryan & Haslam, 2007).

Then of course there is the well-known glass ceiling; the invisible and informal barrier that stops women from reaching top management positions (Bruckmuller & Branscombe, 2011). More recently there has been a phenomenon happening that has been termed the glass cliff. The glass cliff is when women break through the glass ceiling and gain access to those coveted top management positions, but only when the organization is in crisis. A company's previous leadership history seems to play a role in the appointment of women to these glass cliff positions. A company without a history of women in leadership positions is more likely than those with previous women leadership to appoint women to leadership in times of crisis. This may suggest that as women gain more and more access to top management positions and as other's get used to seeing women in leadership roles companies will be less likely to only appoint women to leadership positions in times of crisis (Bruckmuller & Branscombe, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

The survey was administered to both males and females in the same room at the same time. None of the students had knowledge of the research being completed. Students in several randomly selected management classes at a four year public university were asked to complete a twelve question survey. In this survey female and male students were asked to develop a preferential order of life events, which included getting married, having children, climbing the corporate ladder, and seeking personal fulfillment. Male students' answers were compared with the answers of their female counterparts. Male and female students were also asked to give both positive and negative self-perception labels of themselves and identify who they perceived as leaders and visionaries of today.

The students were unaware of the use for the survey. A total of 149 surveys were collected, however, only 136 surveys were used in this study. The other thirteen surveys were

evaluated as unusable due to their incomplete nature. The survey was designed with three unique sections. The first section of the survey consisted of nine demographic questions. These questions asked the participant about gender, age, ethnicity, current residing state, major, GPA, and marital status. The next section of the survey asked participants about their future plans. Students were given six life events; which included getting married, having children, climbing the corporate ladder, and seeking personal fulfillment. They were asked to place them in order of however they see these events occurring in their future. These events were chosen after reading the book “Life After College: The Complete Guide to Getting What You Want,” which is a book that offers life coaching information for recent college graduates. These six events are the top concerns for most: relationships, money, life, goals, happiness, and career (Blake, 2011).

Finally, Students were also asked to list individuals they see as being leaders. They were given seven labels and asked to identify an individual for each label. The labels they were given were: ambitious, leader, visionary, self-confident, risk taker, aggressive, and powerful. In the final section of the survey, students were given seventy-nine positive labels and ninety-four negative labels to choose from for self-labeling. They were asked to circle five positive and five negative labels that best identified them.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The 136 participants in the study consisted of 40% female and 60% male. The age breakdown was 9% younger than 20, 87% were between the ages of 20 to 25, and 4% were older than 25.

Below is a table with the ethnicity distribution.

Table 1. Ethnicity Distribution

28%	African American
1%	Asian American
64%	Caucasian
4%	Hispanic
3%	International

The next table shows the distribution of the participants’ current college classification.

Table 2. College Classification

7%	Freshmen
32%	Sophomore
58%	Junior
3%	Senior

The breakdown of their college major is shown in the table below.

Table 3. College Major

22%	Accounting
3%	Economics
2%	Finance
17%	Marketing
48%	Management
8%	Non Business

The participants’ self-reported GPA distribution is shown below.

Table 4. GPA Distribution

16%	3.5 to 4.0
30%	3.0 to 3.49
45%	2.5 to 2.99
8%	2.0 to 2.49
1%	1.0 to 1.99

The participants were asked to rank the six life events in the order that they are likely to occur in their future. The life events included; getting married, starting a career, raising children, climbing the corporate ladder, contributing to society, and seeking personal fulfillment. The sample was stratified based on gender. An average ranking for each life event for each gender was calculated. For females the average ranking in order of most importance to least importance was starting their careers, personal fulfillment, contributing to society, getting married, climbing the corporate ladder, and raising children. For males the average ranking in the same order was starting their careers, personal fulfillment, climbing the corporate ladder, getting married, contributing to society, and raising children. For each life event an unpaired *t*-test was run. The average ranking and standard deviation for each life event for both genders is given in the table below. The results of each of the unpaired *t*-tests are also shown in the table below.

Table 5. Gender Ranking of Life Events

Gender to Life Event	Average Ranking		Unpaired <i>t</i> -test	Standard Deviation	
	Female	Male		Female	Male
Getting married	3.92	3.86	No significant difference in means	1.24	1.11
Starting my career	1.48	1.49	No significant difference in means	0.69	1.11
Raising children	4.83	4.62	No significant difference in means	1.33	1.57
Corporate ladder	4.11	3.59	Significant difference in means at 0.05 alpha	1.40	1.46
Contributing to society	3.81	4.03	No significant difference in means	1.44	1.82
Personal fulfillment	2.54	3.01	Significant difference in means at 0.1 alpha	1.61	1.62

Table 5A: Gender View of Life Events by Priority (from Table 5 above)

Life Events in Order for Males		Life Events in Order for Females	
Starting my career	1.49	Starting my career	1.48
Personal fulfillment	3.01	Personal fulfillment	2.54
Corporate ladder	3.59	Contributing to society	3.81
Getting married	3.86	Getting married	3.92
Contributing to society	4.03	Corporate ladder	4.11
Raising children	4.62	Raising children	4.83

In summary, there were no significant differences between the average ranking for males and females in terms of getting married, starting a career, raising children, or contributing to society. However, there was a significant difference between the average ranking by females and males in terms of climbing the corporate ladder ($p < 0.05$). Females ranked climbing the corporate ladder significantly lower than males. Also, there was a significant difference between the average ranking of females and males in terms of personal fulfillment ($p < 0.1$). Females ranked personal fulfillment significantly higher than males.

The participants were asked on the survey to circle five positive qualities that best describe their personality. The list contained seventy-nine positive personality labels. The table below shows the top five positive terms picked by participants. It also shows the number and percentage of females and males that included these terms in their choices. The term “Competitive” was significantly more likely to be used by males than females ($p < 0.001$). The term “Ambitious” was significantly more likely to be used by females than males ($p < 0.1$).

Table 6. Top 5 Positive Terms

Number of Participants	Top 5 Positive Terms	Number of Males	Percent of Males	Number of Females	Percent of Females	Two Proportion Test
56	Easy Going	36	43.9%	20	37%	No significant difference
41	Competitive	34	41.5%	7	13%	Significant at the 0.001 alpha level
33	Achiever	17	20.7%	16	30%	No significant difference
25	Ambitious	11	13.4%	14	26%	Significant at the 0.1 alpha level
22	Compassionate	12	14.6%	10	19%	No significant difference

The participants were asked on the survey to circle five negative qualities that best describe their personality. The list contained ninety-four negative personality labels. The table below shows the top five negative terms picked by participants. It also shows the number and percentage of females and males that included these terms in their choices. The term “Impatient”

was significantly more likely to be used by females than males ($p < 0.1$). The term “Sarcastic” was significantly more likely to be used by females than males ($p < 0.05$).

Table 7. Top 5 Negative Terms

Number of Participants	Top 5 Negative Terms	Number of Males	Percent of Males	Number of Females	Percent of Females	Two Proportion Test
50	Impatient	25	30.5%	25	46%	Significant at the 0.1 alpha level
50	Sarcastic	24	29.3%	26	48%	Significant at the 0.05 alpha level
42	Stubborn	25	30.5%	17	32%	No significant difference
32	Lazy	22	26.8%	10	19%	No significant difference
28	Indecisive	14	17.7%	14	26%	No significant difference

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Graduate and undergraduate students were asked to respond to a survey designed to measure their perceptions of the importance of future possible life events, as well as to rank themselves with regard to positive and negative personality traits.

The results of the survey showed some significant differences in the desirability of future life events between females and males. There was a significant difference between the average ranking by females and males in terms of climbing the corporate ladder. Females ranked climbing the corporate ladder significantly lower than males. Also, there was a significant difference between the average ranking of females and males in terms of personal fulfillment. Females and males ranked personal fulfillment second most important. These differences may be influenced by the difficulty that women encounter in attempting to attain leadership positions. The differences could also possibly be explained by the general differences in gender disposition. Future research would be needed to better understand the factors influencing the results obtained in this research.

Differences in perception of positive personality traits were seen between females and males. Males chose the term “competitive” to describe themselves significantly more than females did, and females chose the term “ambitious” to describe themselves significantly more than males. Having the perception of being more competitive, that relates more to action than ambitious which relates more to desire, may give males an advantage of realizing their goals of attaining leadership positions. Future research is needed to develop this idea more fully.

There were also differences in the perception of negative personality traits between females and males. Females chose the terms “impatient” and “sarcastic” to describe themselves significantly more than males did. These two terms are not the characteristics firms look for in people aspiring to leadership positions. If women express their impatience and sarcasm while

working or interviewing, that may be a factor in limiting their ability to climb the corporate ladder.

It has been shown that women in leadership positions have contributed positively to corporate success. Narrowing the gender gap in leadership positions is important for continued improvement in business. Understanding the differences in female and male perception of life goals and differences in personality traits may help give managers important knowledge of how to better prepare more women for leadership roles. We expect this area to lead to further research and understanding of the factors that influence women's aspirations to obtaining leadership positions. This research had limitations in that the surveyed population was students. We recommend future research that incorporates surveys given to people in varying stages of their careers.

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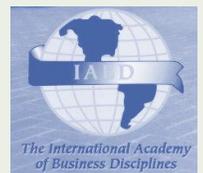
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