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An Exploration of Gender Stereotypes in Perception and Practice of Leadership

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An Exploration of Gender Stereotypes in Perception and Practice of Leadership

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Abstract

Gender-role stereotypes i.e. characteristics of jobs being defined in terms of gender are common in society. In this study we examine the role of socially constructed gender stereotypes in leadership and their influence on leadership behaviour of people. Based on literature the study has hypothesized society perceives leadership to have predominantly masculine characteristics, such that those who see themselves as having more masculine characteristics would be more willing to assume leadership roles. Further, gender identification of individual would explain their leadership behaviour rather than their biological sex. The hypotheses are proposed to be tested by creating measures of congruence- self-male, self-female, male-leader and female-leader, based on respondent's ratings of self, males or females and leaders. Correlations between the four types of congruence and leadership intention and behaviour would be used to test the hypotheses.

Keywords: *gender-role stereotype; leadership behaviour*

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1. Introduction

Gender stereotypes are generalized beliefs about the characteristics and qualities attributed to men and women in society (Eagly, 1987). In general, men are characterized as aggressive, risk-taking, decisive, and autonomous (agentic attributes), whereas women are characterized as kind, caring, relational, and humble (communal attributes). Expectations and beliefs concerning the qualities that men and women have often dictate the type of jobs that are considered appropriate for them, leading to a situation in which the requisite characteristics for some jobs are defined in terms of gender, such as 'men's work or women's work' (Heilman, 1997). For example, we hear more often about "male mechanics" and "female kindergarten teachers" than vice versa as gender stereotyping reinforces the belief that kindergarten teachers require characteristics associated more with women, than with men.

In the organizational literature, evidence suggests that gender stereotyping is present as on qualities believed to be necessary to succeed in business, women are generally seen as inferior to men (Marlow, 2002). It has also been reported that there is gender bias with regard to the assessment of leadership in organizations (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1993). Hence it is relevant to ask whether gender stereotyping is playing a role in the choice of organizational leaders, such that leadership is believed to require characteristics associated with men and thus women do not make leaders. Though leadership is widely researched topic in organizational literature, there is surprisingly little research to suggest whether men and women in contemporary society see characteristics associated with leadership as more masculine or feminine. This study aims to fill this gap.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypothesis

2.1 Gender-role Stereotype of Leadership

Gender-role stereotypes i.e. the gender typing of jobs as predominantly masculine or feminine is common in society and is encouraged through socialization during childhood and adolescence, by parents, schools, peers, and the mass media, such that men and women learn at an early age that gender is associated with some tasks and not with others (Miller & Budd, 1999). The study of history in schools is replete with stories of kings rather than queens. Across the world, political leadership is seen to be dominated more by men than women. Even in the field of business, leadership role models are built around men like Jack Welch, Carlos Ghosn, Bill Gates, etc. Leadership being an abstract concept, perception of society plays an important role in the way it is seen and defined. Thus, the greater number and visibility of male leaders in all walks of life would have led to socialization in society that leadership role is associated with characteristics that is more masculine than feminine. This may be true, as research suggest that entrepreneurship (leadership in starting new business) is seen to be predominantly associated with masculine characteristics (Gupta, et al, 2009 forthcoming). In the organizational context, managers are seen as leaders by their subordinates and evidence confirms that managerial characteristics are considered more similar to typically masculine than feminine characteristics (Schein, 2001). Based on the above we hypothesize:

H1: Both men and women will perceive leaders to have predominantly masculine characteristics.

In the recent years more and more women have emerged as successful leaders in

the field of politics and business, traditionally dominated by men. Emergence of leaders like Angela Merkel, Hillary Clinton, Sonia Gandhi in politics and Anita Roddick, Carla Fiona, Indra Nooyi in the field of business are being looked upon as successful role models to be emulated. As gender-role stereotyping is facilitated through socialization in society, it is expected that emergence of female leaders would influence how society would look at leaders. Therefore, what influence does the emergence of women leaders have on the gender-role stereotyping of leaders in the contemporary society?

It has been argued that the increase in women managers has led women, but not men, to see resemblance between feminine and managerial characteristics (Duehr & Bono, 2006). It is possible that shared biological sex leads women to psychologically identify with female managers and to believe that feminine characteristics are suited to managerial tasks. Empirical evidence confirms that as the number of women in management position increases, women see a stronger relationship between characteristics of females and characteristics of managers (Schein & Mueller, 1992). So the same effect may be expected with the emergence of more women leaders. Moreover, as men tend to hold more deep rooted views on gender-role stereotypes (Miller & Budd, 1999), emergence of a small number of women leaders in recent years may not be enough to change their views on the relationship between leadership and feminine characteristics. Therefore, though both men and women may perceive leadership characteristics as being more similar to masculine characteristics, only women may see leaders and females (as also) having similar characteristics. Thus, we can hypothesize:

H2: Women will perceive characteristics of leaders to have a stronger resemblance with feminine characteristics as compared to men, though there will be no difference in the perception between men and women regarding resemblance of leaders and masculine characteristics.

2.2 Gender-role stereotype and Leadership Behaviour

Heilman (1983) argued that when people perceive a lack of fit between themselves and the stereotypes associated with a particular task, they negatively evaluate their ability to engage in activities associated with that task and thus tend to reduce the likelihood of pursuing such tasks. This is true, as evidence indicates that individuals are attracted to tasks and jobs that are perceived as requiring characteristics similar to their own (Markman & Baron, 2003). Individuals identify with characteristics attributed to males or females based on gender (Schmader, 2002). Because gender is 'done' rather than something people 'have' (Bruni et al., 2004), men and women vary in the extent to which they identify with masculine or feminine characteristics, i.e. people may see themselves as more or less masculine or feminine (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and this identification influences their attitudes towards stereotyped tasks (Nosek et al., 2002). So if leadership is associated with masculine characteristics, then people who see themselves as having more masculine characteristics are likely to have higher intentions to take up leadership role as compared to people who see themselves as having less masculine characteristics.

H3: There will be a positive relationship between people who see themselves as possessing masculine characteristics and their intention to take up leadership role.

Leadership behaviour i.e. the way leaders engage in their activities or perform their role as a leader, and the antecedents of behaviour has been widely studied. It has been found that personal orientation of leaders is associated with patterns of leadership displayed by individuals (Bass & Dunteman, 1963). Evidence suggests that individuals with more empathic personalities tend to display more considerate

leadership behaviour (Fleishman & Salter, 1963). As indicated earlier, individuals are attracted to tasks and jobs that are perceived as requiring characteristics similar to their own, and thus leaders would try to display leadership behaviour that is perceived as similar to their own characteristics.

Leadership literature has identified different styles of leadership based on leader's orientation towards task and people (Blake & Mouton, 1978). Transactional leadership behaviour is associated with the leader being more task oriented and with low consideration towards people. Transactional leadership is characterised by behaviour associated more with the "agentic attributes" of masculine gender. While, transformational leadership behaviour is associated with the leader having high consideration for people. Transformational leadership is characterised by behaviour focusing on relationship and consideration for people and is associated with the "communal attributes" of feminine gender. It is also perceived that women have different leadership characteristics than men (Johnson, 1976), indicating that gender characteristics impact on leadership behaviour. Thus it could be argued, that leadership behaviour would be influenced by the gender identification i.e. how individuals identify with characteristics attributed to males or females based on gender. People who see themselves as having more masculine characteristics are likely to exhibit the transactional leadership behaviour while people who see themselves as having more feminine characteristics are likely to exhibit the transformational leadership behaviour.

H4a: There will be a positive relationship between people who see themselves as possessing masculine characteristics and their intention to follow transactional leadership role.

H4b: There will be a positive relationship between people who see themselves as possessing feminine characteristics and their intention to follow transformational leadership role.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample

It is proposed to obtain response from participants who are working in organizations as they would be more familiar with the concept of leaders and leadership. It is also proposed to have the participants from the junior level in the organization so that they are more exposed to leadership acting on them rather than vice versa. This would remove the bias of their personal practice influencing their perception of leadership.

3.2 Data Collection

The Schein 92-item descriptive index would be used to measure characteristics associated with self, with leaders, and with males or females. The Schein Descriptive Index (SDI) is a list of 92 descriptive items (e.g. single-word adjectives like submissive, industrious, and hasty as well as phrases like high need for power and strong need for social acceptance) that has been used extensively in the gender stereotype literature both nationally and internationally. Leadership intention and style would be measured on a 28 item developed based on existing scales used to measure leadership styles. Items will be measured on a five point Likert scale (1- Strongly disagree to 5- Strongly agree). Data is proposed to be collected over two rounds. In the first round, each respondent would fill the SDI for leader and male or female (which will be distributed randomly). In the second round, each respondent would fill SDI for self and leadership intention and style questionnaire.

3.3 Data Analysis

Each respondent's ratings of self, males or females and leaders would be used to create measures of congruence using a methodology suggested and used by Chatman (1991). Four types of congruence would be developed- self-male, self-female, male-leader and female-leader. Correlations between the four types of congruence and leadership intention and styles would be used to test the hypotheses.

4. Conclusion

The above study is expected to throw light how men and women in contemporary society see gender-stereotyping of leadership. This would provide a better understanding of why the "glass ceiling" exists for women in their career advancement and what needs to be done to break the "glass ceiling". The findings would help organization while making the choice of leaders, to be more aware of how gender bias could lead to the exclusion of a deserving candidate leading to a loss for the organization.

The finding related to gender-role stereotype and leadership behaviour would help explain why certain individuals are more than willing to assume leadership role than others. This might help organizations to differentiate between initiative-driven leaders from passive leaders. The findings might help to unravel an interesting dichotomy – why some leaders always exhibit the same behaviour even in different context and which might organizations to assess a leader's gender profile before assignment to the task.

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