Uncovering the Glass Cliff: Examining the precariousness of women’s leadership positions
Michelle Ryan
University of Exeter, UK
“So much for smashing the glass ceiling and using their unique skills to enhance the performance of Britain’s biggest companies. The triumphant march of women into the country’s boardrooms has instead wreaked havoc on companies’ performance”

Judge, 2003, The Times, p.21
The glass cliff

FTSE 100 Cranfield Index

- 6 of the top 10 companies on Cranfield Index are under-performing
- All of the bottom 5 are over-performing

Conclusion:

“Corporate Britain would be better off without women on the board.”
The glass cliff

There is a relationship between performance and number of women.
• But is the analysis correct?
• Could the causal sequence be reversed?

Perhaps women only get given senior positions when companies are doing poorly.
The glass cliff

- Detailed archival examination supported this alternative analysis.
  Ryan & Haslam (2005)
The glass cliff

• Contrary to the *Times* report, the appointment of a woman to the board of directors was *not* associated with a subsequent drop in company performance.
• Companies that appointed a woman had experienced consistently poor performance in the months preceding the appointment.

• Extending the metaphor of the ‘glass ceiling’, we argue women are more likely than men to confront a ‘glass cliff’, such that their leadership appointments are more likely to be made in problematic organizational circumstances and are thus more precarious.
Does it matter?

• To the extent that women experience glass cliffs there is a differential likelihood they will fail. It is likely they will be blamed for negative outcomes that are not their fault (Meindl, 1993).

• Research suggests that female CEOs in the US are more likely to face glass cliffs and have shorter tenure than their male counterparts (Blanton, 2005)
The glass cliff

“I was promoted into a difficult management role (where previous male manager had failed) with the hope that I would turn it around. When I did, the 'reward' was to be moved to another turnaround role — without any additional financial reward or kudos. Meanwhile male peers appear to work less hard and fewer hours in maintenance roles — and with greater reward. I often wonder if I'm just a fool to accept such challenges. I doubt that the men would.”
Is there any evidence that women are preferentially selected for challenging leadership positions?

To answer these questions we conducted experimental research (Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Ryan, Haslam & Kulich, 2010)

- Participants asked to select a candidate for a leadership position when things are going well or going badly

- Given a choice between multiple candidates — but best candidates are a man and a woman whose applications are matched on key dimensions.

- Who do they prefer and when?
Experimental Research

A female candidate is more likely to be appointed to a leadership position when the position is risky and there is an increased risk of failure.

Demonstrated with:

• Lead lawyer of a risky and highly criticised case
• Financial director of a poorly performing company
• Youth representative for a festival experiencing declining popularity
• Political candidate for an unwinnable seat
Underlying Processes?
Stereotypes

‘I have been assigned projects which are failing with the belief that I can rescue these. The factors for the belief in my ability include that I am a woman and that this gives me some sort of advantage.’

Female Middle Manager, 35
Gave Ps list of 92 traits and asked them to identify those that were stereotypic of **men, women, ideal** managers of **successful** and **unsuccessful** companies.

Ryan, Haslam, Hersby & Bongiorno (2011, Study 2)
Stereotypes

Ryan, Haslam, Hersby & Bongiorno (2011, Study 3)

Described a poorly performing company and a leadership position:

• stay in background and endure the poor performance
• take responsibility for the inevitable failure
• manage people and personnel issues through the crisis
• be a spokesperson providing damage control
• take control and improve performance

Asked to rate how desirable 12 traits were

• 6 masculine traits:
  assertive, adventurous, forceful
• 6 feminine traits:
  understanding, tactful, courteous
Study 3: Results

- **Endure**: Mascline 3.6, Feminine 3.9
- **Responsible**: Mascline 3.4, Feminine 3.9
- **Manage People**: Mascline 3.8, Feminine 3.8
- **Spokesperson**: Mascline 3.7, Feminine 4.2
- **Improve**: Mascline 3.5, Feminine 3.4
Precariousness?

Our initial research looked specifically at poorly performing companies, and thus the precariousness of these positions stemmed from an increased risk of failure.

• However, our more recent research looks at a number of other factors that can lead to feelings of precariousness.
• In particular, we have conducted in-depth case-studies and interviews with those in leadership roles.
‘I was] promoted to manager at a time when failure of the company was inevitable. In my estimation I needed 6 months to put new practices in place and put the company on an even keel… I was made redundant after three and a half months.’

Female Manager, 39
Lack of Networks

‘I was placed on a project to manage that was the "project from hell". Was I set up for failure? I don't know. But I know it would have been different if I was male. I would have been part of the old schoolboy network that they had going.’

Female Executive, 42
Lack of Support

“I was selected to take on a role far beyond the responsibility for my grade. It was only after I left that job that I realised that I was being expected to take on a disproportionate level of risk, and that there was no support for me in that role. I think I was put in there to fail.”

Female Professional, 29
General Conclusions

- The research suggest that women’s experiences in the workplace are very different from their male counterparts.
- Equal opportunity is about the nature of leadership positions as well as their number.
- Thus it is important to note not just that the quantity of women given senior positions is low but also that the quality of those positions is typically low too.
- However, support in the form of resources, networks, and appropriate time can all help to ameliorate the precariousness of the glass cliff.
Thank you!
m.ryan@exeter.ac.uk
Understanding reactions (Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007)

The explanations people generate for the glass cliff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Form taken</th>
<th>% women</th>
<th>% men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexism</td>
<td>Women singled out for inferior positions</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group dynamics/ingroup bias</td>
<td>Those in senior positions prefer to hire ingroup members for ‘cushy’ jobs</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women seen as more expendable and make potential scapegoats</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women lack peer &amp; institutional support</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-company factors</td>
<td>Women have fewer opportunities and therefore accept riskier positions</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appointment of a woman to signal change</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotypes</td>
<td>Women more suited to dealing with crisis</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific error</td>
<td>Women are <em>not</em> differentially placed in precarious leadership positions</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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