Stereotyping Women in Leadership Positions: What We Know and What We Can Do About It

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Abstract: *Research on stereotypes and stereotyping (Acker, 1990; Bergeron, Block & Echtenkamp, 2006; Carton and Rosette, 2011; Heilman, 2012) has so far shown that female leaders, in particular, can experience increased threat when attempting leadership positions in organizations. In this article, I explore the many ways in which stereotypes can undermine women performance in leadership and I discuss the factors that may help women become less vulnerable when faced with negative stereotyping. These factors are analyzed at various levels – the individual, the organizational and the situational/contextual levels.*

In the end, I suggest some ways designed to increase women's belief in their leadership abilities as well as some interventions meant to determine organizations to become "aware" of their unconscious biases when evaluating women job positions and performance.

Keywords: negative stereotyping, stereotype threat, vulnerability, reactance, growth mindset

JEL Classification: M10, M20

Introduction

Women hold today a greater percentage of leadership positions in business and politics. However, they still remain underrepresented in governments, institutions and at the top of corporations (World Economic Forum, 2014). Research suggests that fostering participation of women is important for any society's advancement and wellbeing. Moreover, it is demonstrated that women have specific leadership styles that match the increasing complexity of contemporary organizations and can help them improve its efficiency and effectiveness (Eagly, Garzia and Carli, 2014). Women are also unique in that they have original perspectives on organizational life and goals, social capital and accountability (Eagly, Garzia and Carli, 2014). Despite all the above mentioned potential benefits women may bring to their working place, when in a leadership positions they are often confronted with negative stereotypes that affect their performance.

Women experience difficulty in reaching leadership positions because it is assumed that they lack characteristics and skills necessary for leaders. In general, people have only an intuitive view on what a leader is or what leadership really means. They evaluate leaders and their capabilities based on these implicit leadership theories (Forsyth and Nye, 2008) that reflect social identities associated with traditional leaders. One such social identity commonly associated with leadership is being male. This association can result in biased perceptions and evaluations of people who do not fit the image, such as women (Koenig et al, 2011).

According to Eagy and Karau (2002) and Heilman (2001), the female gender stereotype is largely incongruent with the leadership role. Gender stereotypes are generalizations about the attributes of men and women that are shared in a society and include descriptive components (how men and women are) and prescriptive components (how men and women should be). Most relevant gender stereotypes associated with the field of leadership are based on the idea that "women take care" and "men take charge" (Heilman, 2001; Hoyt, 2010). In other words, women are associated with characteristics that highlight a concern for others (empathy, warmth, etc) while men are viewed as being rational, confident, self-reliant and dominant (Eagly, Wood and Dickman, 2000). The qualities used to describe men are similar to those used to describe effective leaders therefore men are better suited to fit with a leader role than women (Koenig et al, 2011). This is a stereotype that can lead to a shortage of female leaders across occupations, to lower performance and disengagement and to fewer women that access science, math, technology or engineering fields (Shapiro and Williams, 2012). It can leave entire domains and professions with fewer women assuming leadership roles and positions.

In this article I explore the implications of stereotyping women on their performance in leadership positions. First, a literature review on the phenomenon of stereotypes and stereotyping women is presented. Second, I focus on the consequences that negative stereotypes may have on women in the workplace. And third, I identify some factors that may help women become less vulnerable when faced with negative stereotypes – at the individual, organizational and situational/contextual levels. In the end, some implications for future research are presented in order to reduce the potential of negative stereotypes and stereotyping.

A literature review

Starting with the work of Steele and Aronson (1995), negative stereotyping has been one of the most largely studied topics in the field of social psychology. Thinking that one is evaluated through the lens of stereotype can direct an individual's attention towards the negative aspects of a stereotype and serve to undermine achievement. Research demonstrates the power of stereotypes in reducing the performance of stigmatized individuals, of individuals with devalued social identities, on a variety of cognitive and social tasks (Steele, 1997).

One aspect of negative stereotyping is that is situational/contextually induced. Thus, even members of traditionally advanced groups can experience threat in certain situations. For example, white men have been shown to underperform on a math test when the stereotype of Asian superiority is made salient (Aronson et al, 1998). In one study designed to highlight the situational nature of stereotype threat, researchers examined the math performance of individuals who have two identities that are associated with conflicting stereotype-based expectations regarding math abilities: Asian women. Asian women who were subtly reminded of their gender identity underperformed those in the control condition, whereas those reminded of their Asian identity performed better than the control (Shih, Pittinsky and Ambady, 1999).

Stereotypes and negative stereotypes in particular can lead to reduced performance of those targeted by it (Schmader, Johns and Forbes, 2008). In their review of literature, Schmader et al found that stereotypes can impair performance on social (and cognitive) tasks by means of three specific physiological

and psychological processes namely: physiological stress responses that impair working memory, enhanced monitoring of one's performance and active suppression of negative emotions. Furthermore, according to Shapiro and Neuberg (2007), stereotype threat is not a singular process, but a term that has been used to describe distinct and yet related processes. The distinctive form of threat an individual experiences depends on the target of the threat (self or group) and the source of the threat (who judged these actions – self, outgroup others, ingroup others). In the case of women, they may experience stereotype threats defined as "the concrete, real-time threat of being judged and treated poorly in settings where a negative stereotype about one's group applies" (Steele, Spencer and Aronson, 2002, p. 385).

Finally, the consequences of stereotype threat are multidimensional. In addition to reduced performance, these processes can lead to distorted perceptions on owned skills, including academic performance Schmader et al, 2008).

Consequences of negative stereotyping for female leaders

Decreases in motivation and engagement are prevalent in most cases of women in leadership positions. Gender stereotype-based expectations of inferiority may lead to underperformance on important tasks (e.g. decision-making and negotiation) across many fields, such as entrepreneurship and engineering, science and math. The threat of confirming a negative stereotype has been shown to lead to women's underperformance in managerial and leadership tasks (Hoyt and Blascovich, 2010) and make women less

fluent and alter their decision-making (Carr and Steele, 2010).

The cost of negative stereotyping extends beyond decreased performance. According to Cheryan et al (2009), stereotyping can also undermine women's sense of belonging to a field of specialization and their motivation to pursue a career in that field. A sense of belongingness and social connectedness is extremely important in any field, particularly in male dominated domains where women may often face belonging uncertainty. Therefore, women become less interested in their field of specialization and expertise since they feel they do not belong to that field (Walton and Cohen, 2007). Furthermore, stereotypic gender commercials have been shown to lead women to emphasize cooking and gardening, raising children and cleaning the house rather than professional achievement (Geis et al, 1984). Davies et al (2005) found that gender stereotypic commercials undermined women's leadership aspirations as well as their interest in quantitative majors and career paths. Similarly, threatening women with a gender stereotype diminished female business students' entrepreneurial intentions (Gupta and Bhawe, 2007). Self-confidence and job attitudes also decrease in organizations where stereotyping women is part of the organizational climate (von Hippel et al, 2013).

Other consequences of negative stereotyping revolve around making the stereotype less relevant. When faced with stereotyping, women often try to separate their sense of self-worth from their performance in that field by distancing themselves from that field or from the devalued group. Disengagement from a field that is threatening to one's self-worth may be ego-protective and may facilitate motivation in the short term. However, it can reduce performance and motivation and, in the end, refusal to identify with the field (Major and Schmader, 1998). When trying to distance themselves from the stereotyped group, women may either deny their female identity or refuse to identify themselves with certain aspects of the group that are linked to negative expectations in the field. In both cases, women alter their professional identities (Kalokerinos et al, 2014).

People also try to make stereotypes less relevant by engaging in counter-stereotypical behavior: that is they actively engage in reactive responses. However, these reactive responses tend to produce unintended costs. For example, when women are threatened with the stereotype that men are better leaders, they adopt a more masculine communication style (von Hippel et al, 2011). Others responded negatively to this new communication style and viewed women as less likeable and warm. Similarly, activating the negative stereotype that women are not as good negotiators as men challenged women to engage in strong and effective negotiation behavior (Kray et al, 2011). In other words, women face greater social costs than men when negotiating because they exhibit a greater reluctance in the process of negotiation which is an adaptive response to social disincentives (Bowles et al, 2007).

Despite costs, reactive responses can also have some favorable outcomes. For example, Kray et al (2004) showed that women underperformed men at the bargaining table. However, when the stereotype of women being less capable to bargaining was activated, women reacted against it and outperformed men. The same response to activation of negative stereotypes was also found in the case

of women in entrepreneurship (Gupta et al, 2008) and leadership contexts (Hoyt and Blascovich, 2010).

In sum, women respond to stereotyping with vulnerability-type, reactive-type or resiliency depending on a number of factors. These factors reside at various levels - the individual, organizational and situational levels. I present these factors that help women face stereotyping and become less vulnerable when confronted with negative stereotypes.

Factors at the personal level

The vulnerability-type or reactive-type of responses depend on a set of individual differences factors that are related to the extent to which women see themselves as having or being able to develop leadership abilities. For example, researchers have demonstrated that women who rated themselves low on ambition, independence, assertiveness (stereotypically associated with the leader role) showed decreased performance in the face of negative stereotyping. In general, research shows that individual differences that help women believe that they have what they need in order to be successful leaders (power, mindset, determination to achieve goals) can help women deal with the disheartening effect of negative stereotypes (Bergeron et al, 2006).

In the leadership domain, women have been shown to respond to explicit gender stereotype activation in a standard way: "I'll show you" – type of response is present when women have sufficient power and self-efficacy. According to Hoyt et al, women who are highly confident in their leadership abilities respond positively when put in a position to disconfirm the gender-leadership stereotype on a task requiring them to motivate employees (2010). Specifically, women with high levels of leadership self-efficacy

performed better, identified more with the leadership field and reported better levels of psychological wellbeing when advising and motivating employees.

How people respond to threats to their identity is also determined in part by their mindsets. A growth mindset - specifically the belief that leadership abilities can be cultivated - have been shown to play an important role in fighting the consequences of negative stereotyping. For example, experimentally manipulating beliefs that entrepreneurial ability can be increased led women to show greater resilience in the form of self-efficacy for future entrepreneurial endeavors (Pollack, Burnette and Hoyt, 2012). Finally, only women who were led to believe that negotiating skills can be learnt and developed versus cannot be developed were able to successfully react against the stereotype that women are inferior negotiators (Kray et al, 2010).

Female role models can also play an important part in protecting women from stereotype threats to their identity as leaders. The effectiveness of these women resides in that they demonstrate that success in their field is attainable and the models can both increase a sense of social belongingness and a sense of self-worth when confronted with negative stereotyping (Dasgupta, 2011). Role models, on the other hand, may have contradictory effects. Although comparing oneself to a successful individual can be potentially inspiring, it can also have the potential of being self-deflating by realizing how deficient one is when compared to the successful other (Collins, 2000). For example, exposure to highly successful business leaders (e.g. Oprah) has been demonstrated to reduce women's self-ratings of competence

(Parks-Stamm et al, 2008). The same can be said about counter-stereotypical role models. Learning about successful female CEOs or female surgeons diminished women's interest in these traditional masculine occupations relative to those who were not exposed to such role models (Rudman and Phelan, 2010). In other words, whether leader role models are perceived as inspiring or harmful to women depends on the extent to which women are able to identify with their role model and see their success as possible to attain.

Factors at the organizational level

Many workplaces abound in gender stereotypes that are not observable at first glance: low numbers of women at the top of the organization, job descriptions that are "gendered", etc. Exposure to masculine environments, including objects that are stereotypically associated with men can also have threatening effects. For example, women who were exposed to stereotypically masculine items at their working place (e.g. video games, famous football players posters) showed less interest in pursuing computer sciences compared to those who were not exposed to such items (Cheryan et al, 2009).

Organizational cultures that are outstanding in terms of competitiveness and highlight innate brilliance as a key-factor for success have the potential to be threatening especially to women who move in the upper echelons, in leadership positions (Kray and Shirako, 2011). These environments are generally associated with negative stereotypes implying women may not be able to "hold their own" (Niederle and Vestlund, 2008). Beyond competition, cultures that see

success in terms of inherent skills may harm women. According to Leslie et al (2015), across the academic spectrum, "women are underrepresented in fields whose practitioners believe that…innate talent is the main requirement for success because women are stereotyped as not possessing such talent" (p. 262). In sum, women can experience stereotype threats in organizations where female employees are scarce, in contexts where gender stereotypes are visible in the physical environment and in organizational cultures where competition, brilliance and talent are overrated and perceived as the only/best key for success.

What can we do to reduce the potential of threat for women who work in such organizations? One way of reducing women stereotyping at the organizational level may be creating identity-safe environments. Research shows that these environments "challenge the validity, relevance or acceptance of negative stereotypes linked to stigmatized social identities" (Davies et al, 2005, p. 278).

Empirical research shows the power of identity-safe tasks in reducing stereotype threat effects. For example, presenting the leadership task as identity safe helped women participant feel not vulnerable when pursuing the respective task (Davies et al, 2005). In another study, women showed underperformed men on a managerial task when the predecessor was described as a man with stereotypically masculine traits, but they did much better in terms of performance when the predecessor was described as a woman with female characteristics (Bergeron et al, 2006). The task of negotiation can be made identity safe by faming the situation as an opportunity for asking than an opportunity

for negotiation (Small et al, 2007). Although women were less likely to initiate negotiations than men, when framed as an opportunity to ask, women were equally likely to initiate negotiation. Furthermore, emphasizing positive stereotypes may be effective, as in the case of valuing feminine traits and highlighting the power of education, career and aspirations that helped women while at the negotiation table manifest greater engagement and achieve better results in the process (Kray et al, 2002). Similarly, presenting entrepreneurship as a gender-neutral field reduced the potential for negative stereotyping and reduced the gender gap in entrepreneurial intentions (Gupta et al, 2008).

In sum, organizations that promote identity safety and the belief that anyone has talent and abilities to pursue a successful career are best equipped to eliminate or at least considerably reduce stereotype threats for women.

Factors at the situational/contextual level

One key aspect of stereotyping women is that, more often than not, takes place in specific contexts/situations. In their seminal work, Steele and Aronson (1995) showed that when the stereotype of African-American intellectual inferiority was present in school, and female students were asked to take a test on their abilities, black students underperformed white students. However, when they removed the relevancy of the stereotype by framing the same task as an exercise of problem solving, rather than an assessment of their abilities, there was no difference in the performance of black and white students.

On the other hand, even members of traditionally advantaged groups can experience threat in specific situations. For example, female Romanian volleyball players have been shown to perform worse when the superiority stereotype of Norwegian players was in the air (Naum, 2012). Similarly, researchers have demonstrated that stereotype threat effects impair performance and undermine trust in own abilities not only in the academic field, but also at group level such as Latinos and Afro-Americans (Gonzales et al, 2002), athletes (Stone et al, 1999) and men in social sensitivity tasks (Koenig and Eagly, 2005.

An example of successfully fighting situational stereotyping comes from the medical field: medical students who did not have any leadership skills were encouraged to experience to volunteer and lead their workgroups by stating that the small group provided a safe environment to practice leadership. This apparently "no harm-no good" message significantly increased the number of groups choosing female leaders (Wayne, 2010).

In sum, stereotype threats in specific contexts may be reduced either by framing the problem to be solved in a different manner (a different perspective or frame) or by altering the message delivered to the targeted group. As research shows, efforts to avoid situational stereotyping would be made by stereotyped groups and, unfortunately, there would be no progress in eliminating it (Wayne, 2010).

Conclusions

Programs for reducing stereotype threats and negative stereotyping typically focus on lessening individual reactions or on modifying the context (Block et al, 2011).

Many organizations instead focus on proactively reducing discrimination and stereotyping at work. In this respect, Williams (2014) recommends a three steps approach: undertake organizational audits to examine gendered practices; identify methods of tracking the efficacy of interventions; implement interventions to curb the bias, which he calls "bias interrupters".

The research literature offers a number of approaches to reduce the potential of negative stereotyping such as: to make employees and senior leaders in particular, aware of unconscious biases and stereotypes that affect their evaluation of others; to examine the gendered aspects of organizations or jobs that disadvantage individuals who do not adopt a male style of leadership; to increase minority representation at all organizational levels; to present stereotype inconsistent information in order to help reduce stereotyped thinking; to capitalize on the stereotype threat reducing effects of successful ingroup role models; to make explicit the characteristics of good leadership that avoid stereotyped descriptions.

As I have shown in this paper, the effects of stereotype threat depend in part on the extent to which women see themselves as being able to have and develop leadership abilities. This suggests that programs focused on increasing both leadership abilities and leader identity may significantly help women face negative stereotyping. In consonance with the existing literature in the field, I would also suggest that women should develop their social capital as a form of support for their own profession and personal development. In addition to developing new skills and competences it is important to cultivate women' leader identity and beliefs that leadership abilities can be learnt. Because, as research shows, leadership is also a matter of mindset and helping women cultivate a growth mindset of leadership is perhaps the most important step in changing women responses and actions when confronted with stereotypes and stereotype threats (Burnette et al, 2010).

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