Gender, Hierarchy, and Leadership: An Introduction

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Although women’s status has improved remarkably in the 20th century in many societies, women continue to lack access to power and leadership compared with men. This issue reviews research and theory concerning women’s leadership. The articles included in the issue provide evidence of bias in the evaluation of women, discuss effects of gender stereotypes on women’s influence and leadership behaviors, and evaluate strategies for change. This introductory article provides a brief summary of changes in women’s status and power in employment and education and the absence of change at the upper echelons of power in organizations. Also included is an outline of the contributions of the other articles in the issue.

It is an exciting period for scholars who study how gender affects leadership: The presence of greater numbers of women in positions of power has produced new opportunities to observe female leaders along with male leaders. There has been an increase in the numbers of women in positions of public leadership, including highly visible positions. Of course, focusing on women who occupy such leadership positions should not cause us to forget that women have always exercised leadership, particularly in families and throughout communities. However, until recently, women were extremely rare in major positions of public leadership. Now women are in a small minority in such roles, but present. Political leadership illustrates this trend: In history only 42 women have ever served as presidents or prime ministers, and 25 of those have come to office in the 1990s (Adler, 1999). Almost all of the women who have attained top positions in corporations around the world have done so in the 1990s.
Public interest in women’s potential as leaders is fueled by high-profile women serving in powerful positions; Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, U.S. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright are just three recent examples from the United States. Many of the newspaper and magazine articles written about these and other female leaders have a positive tone (e.g., Dobbs, 1999; “A Practical Judicial Eye,” 2000). The idea that women might hold such positions and the suspicion that they might exercise power somewhat differently than men no longer seems as alarming to people as in the past. Indeed, people are receptive to the idea that different might be better or at least not worse than what the nation experiences now. In response to the Gallup Poll’s question, “Do you think that this country would be governed better or worse if more women were in political office?” 57% of the respondents in the United States chose the response “better,” with greater endorsement by women (62%) than men (51%; Gallup, 1995). Only 17% of the respondents indicated that such a change would worsen government.

The excitement about the presence of just a few women in powerful positions raises the question of why, with women’s roles changing so dramatically in the last decade, the numbers of women in these positions are so small. Indeed, the concept of the glass ceiling was introduced by the Wall Street Journal to account for this disjunction (“The Corporate Woman,” 1986) and has since been acknowledged by journalists and the public as an invisible but powerful barrier that allows women to advance only to a certain level.

Evidence supports the glass ceiling metaphor. By some yardsticks, the United States and other advanced industrial societies appear to be approaching gender equality. In the United States, women have entered the paid labor force in large numbers and now constitute 47% of workers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001b). Whereas in 1972 only 18% of managers were female, the proportion of women has steadily increased over time (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1982) and currently women make up 45% of managers and administrators (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001a). In education, women possess 51% of all bachelor’s degrees that have been awarded (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Since 1981–82, more of these degrees have gone to women than men, with women currently receiving 56% (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Women also possess 45% of the advanced degrees that have been awarded (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000) and currently earn 42% of PhDs and 43% of professional degrees (e.g., those in law or medicine; Morgan, 2001).

Although these aggregate statistics on labor force participation and education suggest gender equality, the distributions of men and women in elite leadership positions tell quite a different story. To borrow former President Clinton’s phrase, the tops of managerial and governmental hierarchies do not “look like America.” In Fortune 500 companies, women constitute only 4% of the top officers, 3% of the most highly paid officers, and 0.4% of CEOs (Catalyst, 2000). In U.S. politics,
only 13% of senators, 14% of congressional representatives, and 10% of state governors are women (Center for the American Woman and Politics, 2001). In the military, women make up 2% of the top officers (U.S. Department of Defense, 1998). Although about 30% of lawyers are women, women make up only 15% of law firm partners and 5% of managing partners in large firms (Rhode, 2001). In contrast to the changes in women’s education, labor force participation, and employment as managers, little change has occurred in terms of placing women in the most powerful leadership positions.

The lack of women in powerful positions used to be explained by many as a “pipeline problem,” that is, the interpretation that women with the appropriate education and background were not available. Even though the pipeline explanation remains popular among male CEOs (Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998), its plausibility has been eroded by the dramatic increases in women’s employment as managers. Because the pipeline is full of women, this idea has given way to the glass ceiling in the popular imagination.

The glass ceiling is a metaphor for prejudice and discrimination. To the extent that people are prejudiced against women as leaders and potential leaders, this prejudice would manifest itself in many ways and have multiple effects. Prejudice can take subtle or blatant forms and can be held by employers, customers, voters, and even by the targets of prejudice themselves. Prejudice against women as leaders and potential leaders would interfere with women’s ability to gain authority and exercise influence and would produce discrimination when it is translated into personnel decisions within organizations and political structures. Because social psychologists have long studied prejudice and industrial/organizational psychologists have studied managerial roles and organizational processes, the stage is set in these fields for understanding the rarity of women in powerful positions. The authors of the articles in this issue have all made important contributions to this developing knowledge.

Organization of the Issue

Bias in the Evaluation of Women Leaders

The articles in the first section of the issue present evidence of biased evaluation of women’s competence and potential for leadership, showing that across a wide variety of settings and contexts, women are presumed to be less competent than men and less worthy to hold leadership positions. In the first article of the section, Cecilia L. Ridgeway gives an overview of expectations states theory and proposes that gender differences in influence and leadership occur because people presume that men are more competent and legitimate as leaders than women are. These beliefs foster hierarchical patterns of social interaction through which men exert more influence and exercise more leadership. In support of the theory,
Ridgeway reviews research examining gender differences in behavior in task-oriented groups and identifies conditions that modify these differences.

In the section’s second article, Madeline E. Heilman reviews research on leadership in organizations, showing that as a consequence of biases against women, people devalue the work of female managers. When the value of that work is impossible to deny, people tend to attribute it to external factors rather than the women’s competence. Finally, when external attributions cannot be made, people dislike and reject successful female managers.

Virginia E. Schein’s article, the third in the section, reviews cross-cultural research on bias against female leaders. Studies in the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, China, and Japan all reveal that men are perceived to be more qualified as managers than women are, especially by men. In addition, Schein identifies changes in the perception of management over time and discusses why men from different countries with varying political, economic, and social conditions all continue to view women as less competent and suited to leadership than men.

In the section’s fourth article, Jennifer Boldry, Wendy Wood, and Deborah A. Kashy describe an empirical study that revealed gender biases against women in a military setting. The authors report that both male and female cadets considered men to have more leadership ability and women to have more character (e.g., integrity, lack of selfishness) than the other sex, perceptions that are congruent with traditional gender stereotypes. Unfortunately for women’s potential in the military, cadets’ success in the corps was best predicted by perceived leadership ability, not perceived character, suggesting that a person’s success in the military depends on conforming to a masculine model of leadership.

In the final article in this section, Monica Biernat and Kathleen Fuegen report two new empirical studies documenting shifting standards in evaluating women and men in work and academic settings. Presenting further evidence of bias against women, their findings revealed that female study participants set harsher standards for hiring female than male applicants and were less likely to hire women than men. In contrast to other articles in this issue showing greater gender bias by males than females, male study participants did not show gender biases in their hiring decisions.

Gender Effects on Social Influence and Hireability

The authors in the issue’s second section provide evidence showing that, in order to be influential, women must combine agentic qualities, such as competence and directiveness, with communal qualities, such as warmth and friendliness. In the first article of the section, Linda L. Carli reviews the literature on gender effects on social influence, reporting that males exert greater influence over others than females do. She argues that this occurs for two reasons. First, females are generally
presumed to be less competent than males and therefore less credible as influence agents. Second, when women are perceived to be as competent as men, they are often seen as violating prescriptive gender role norms that require women to be communal. As a result, people, especially males, often dislike highly competent women and reject their contributions.

In the section’s second article, Laurie A. Rudman and Peter Glick report on an empirical study that further explores pressures on female job applicants to be both agentic and communal. Results showed that agentic men were considered more socially skilled than agentic women. Moreover, agentic male applicants were considered more hireable than agentic female applicants for jobs requiring both agentic and communal skills. Women who possessed both agentic and communal qualities, however, were considered to be as hireable as their male counterparts, regardless of job requirements.

In the third article in this section, Felicia Pratto and Penelope Espinoza discuss the importance of the interaction of race and gender in affecting discrimination in hiring. They report the results of two empirical studies showing that study participants preferred to hire White male job applicants over White female applicants for jobs that enhance group-based hierarchy but did not prefer Black and Hispanic male applicants over Black and Hispanic women for those same jobs. Instead, Blacks and Hispanics were generally more often selected for jobs that attenuated group-based hierarchy than Whites were.

**Characteristics of Women’s Leadership**

Leadership has traditionally been construed as a masculine enterprise with special challenges and pitfalls for women. This perception raises the very interesting question of how women lead. The two articles in the issue’s third section discuss current research on gender differences and similarities in the ways men and women perceive themselves as leaders and engage in leadership. In the first of these articles, Alice H. Eagly and Mary C. Johannesen-Schmidt examine the controversy in the popular and academic literatures about whether there are gender differences in leadership style. These authors review the empirical literature on gender differences in leadership style, including recent research on transformational and transactional leadership. They conclude that, although male and female leaders are quite similar in a number of ways, on average they do behave somewhat differently.

In the section’s second article, Hilary M. Lips reports an empirical investigation of the ways in which samples of college students from Virginia and Puerto Rico perceive themselves as future leaders. Her findings indicate that both men and women expect to lead in domains that are relatively traditional for their gender—for example, men in business and women in education. Compared with men,
women also expect more difficulties in their personal relationships and other negative consequences as a result of their leadership.

Strategies for Change

The articles in the first three sections of this issue present evidence of gender inequalities in leadership and influence and propose theoretical explanations for these inequalities. This research helps clarify why women are underrepresented in positions of power and provides a framework for identifying possible strategies for reducing gender discrimination. In the final section of this issue, Janice D. Yoder focuses on strategies that can be used to increase women’s emergence and effectiveness as leaders. In particular, she endorses a wide range of organizational strategies for increasing women’s leadership. She also describes individual approaches that women can use to reduce resistance to their leadership but argues that individual approaches, because they demand more of women than men, are inherently unfair.

Importance of the Effects of Gender on Hierarchy and Leadership

Scholarship on gender has addressed a range of issues in past decades, with early work concentrating on gender stereotypes and sex-differentiated personality traits. An underlying goal of this work was to understand the status of women in society and foster favorable change in women’s status. Although women’s status has risen substantially in the 20th century in many societies, women’s subordination remains apparent in their lack of access to positions of power. Earlier researchers rarely addressed this issue directly. If women are ever to achieve a status equivalent to that of men, however, they will have to participate equally in those contexts where the most important and far-reaching decisions are made. Decision making with major impact on what is valued in societies and how resources are allocated is surely not shared equally by citizens, but concentrated among people who hold positions of power in organizations and governments. Women must be present in sizeable numbers in these settings and must perform effectively in order to produce a balance between male and female power. The research and theory considered in this issue help us understand why power has remained unequally allocated between the sexes and how greater equality can be achieved.

References

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