



The preference to work for a man or a woman: A matter of sex and gender?[☆]



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ABSTRACT

A survey of 455 individuals sampled from two populations that varied in age, educational level, and work experience posed a question asked in Gallup polls over six decades: "If you were taking a new job and had your choice of a boss, would you prefer to work for a man or a woman?" Respondents could state that they would prefer a male boss, prefer a female boss, or had no preference. As expected from theory and Gallup results, respondents who had a preference preferred to work for a man more than a woman, although a majority expressed "no preference." When they expressed a preference, women preferred to work for a female boss over a male boss more than men did, whereas men preferred to work for a male boss over a female boss more than women did. Sex-typed (i.e., masculine or feminine) respondents in gender identity exhibited a greater preference to work for a boss of a particular sex over having no preference than non-sex-typed respondents. Further, feminine respondents preferred to work for a female boss over a male boss more than masculine respondents did, whereas masculine respondents preferred to work for a male boss over a female boss more than feminine respondents did. Overall, these results suggest that the preference to work for a man or a woman is a matter of both sex and gender. Implications for job applicants' vocational decisions and how female leaders fare in the workplace are discussed.

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If you were taking a new job and had your choice of a boss, would you prefer to work for a man or a woman?

For over six decades, starting in 1953, the Gallup Organization has regularly asked American adults (age 18 and over) to respond to the above question in telephone interviews as part of a larger public opinion survey; interviewees could also state that they had no preference. In these telephone surveys, Americans have consistently expressed a preference for a male boss over a female boss (Carroll, 2006; Moore, 2002; Newport, 2011; Newport & Wilke, 2013; Simmons, 2001). When Gallup extended its telephone survey to adults in 21 other nations, it found that interviewees in every nation were more likely to respond that they would rather work for a man than a woman (Simmons, 2001). Every time that Gallup releases new results regarding this question, they receive considerable media interest. For example, results of the most recent Gallup survey (Newport & Wilke, 2013) were greeted with headlines of newspaper, magazine, and blog stories such as "Good news for male bosses" (Feintzeig, 2013), "The latest depressing gender poll" (Lobello, 2013), "Why women don't like lady bosses" (Crocker, 2013), and "The stereotype of

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the ‘horrible female boss’ is still a problem” (Filipovic, 2013); in addition, numerous and often vitriolic comments on such articles were posted online. Obviously, both the Gallup survey question and how people respond to it touch a raw public nerve. However, no prior scholarly attention has been devoted to the factors that may predict responses to this provocative question. The present study was designed to fill this gap.

In this study, we suggest that the preference to work for a man or a woman invokes issues of both sex and gender. Similar to other scholars, we use the term *sex* to refer to the categories of male and female into which individuals are generally divided based on their reproductive apparatus and functions and the term *gender* to refer to the psychosocial implications of being categorized as male or female (e.g., Archer & Lloyd, 2002; Lippa, 2005; Unger, 1979; Wood & Eagly, 2010). According to theories of the psychology of gender, individuals develop gender belief systems, or a multi-faceted and internally consistent set of ideas that they have about gender (Deaux & LaFrance, 1998). Gender belief systems act as filters through which individual women and men are perceived and expectations for their traits and behaviors are developed (Deaux & LaFrance, 1998). Individuals’ preferences to work for a man or a woman may be predicted by both their own sex and their gender belief systems.

Accordingly, the purpose of the present study was to examine the roles of sex and gender in predicting preferences to work for a man or a woman. Specifically, it examined whether respondents’ sex and gender identity, a component of their gender belief systems that represents their self-descriptions in relation to gender stereotypes (Ashmore, 1990; Deaux & LaFrance, 1998; Kite, Deaux, & Haines, 2008; Wood & Eagly, 2009), would predict their preferences. In doing so, it included survey data from samples of two populations that differed in age, educational level, and work experience.

The preference to work for a man or a woman has implications for individuals’ vocational decisions and behavior, which in turn have implications for how female vis-à-vis male leaders fare in the workplace. In most situations, individuals have little influence over what the sex of their boss will be in their current job. However, job applicants may be influenced by the sex of their potential boss when making a decision about whether to take a new job (the decision-making context in the Gallup question), either upon entering the labor force or with a different employer. Such a preference may also influence whether employees accept a promotion or transfer. Further, it may influence their motivation to perform well; they may decide to work harder to please the boss’s expectations if the boss is the kind of person they want to work for. Thus, job applicants and employees, as well as the bosses for whom they choose to work or are assigned to work, may all be affected by whether they prefer to work for a man or a woman.

1. Theory

Several theories offer explanations for why individuals might prefer to work for a man rather than a woman if they had a choice. For example, Perry, Davis-Blake, and Kulik’s (1994) theory of sex-based selection decisions proposes that when organizations fill open jobs, decision makers are likely to have a mental prototype or image of the ideal job holder that influences their selection decision; as they evaluate job applicants, they are likely to favor those whose attributes best match their prototype. Prototypes of what attributes make a manager effective, which comprise an essential component of individuals’ implicit leadership theories (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984; Schyns & Schilling, 2011), are likely to include the demographic characteristic of sex, or psychological traits that are specifically linked to one sex, when persons primarily of that sex occupy the managerial job under consideration or comprise the pool of candidates. Because men have historically dominated managerial jobs, leader prototypes favor men over women (Perry et al., 1994) and masculine traits primarily associated with men in gender stereotypes over feminine traits primarily associated with women (Kite et al., 2008), which may contribute to a preference to work for a man rather than a woman.

According to role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), female leaders are placed at a distinct disadvantage by being forced to deal with the perceived incongruity between the leader role and their gender role. If women conform to the female gender role by displaying predominantly feminine traits, they fail to meet the requirements of the leader prototype, which calls for masculine assertiveness and a “command and control” leadership style (Rosener, 1990). On the other hand, if women conform to the leader role by displaying predominantly masculine traits, they fail to meet the requirements of the female gender role, which calls for feminine niceness and deference to the authority of men (Bosak & Sczesny, 2011; Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie, & Reichard, 2008). Thus, role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) also would predict a preference to work for a man rather than a woman.

According to status characteristics theory (Berger, Fisek, & Norman, 1998; Berger & Webster, 2006; Ridgeway, 2006b), people form expectations about the competence of others based on inferences from the status value assigned by the society as a whole to their personal characteristics. Status value is assigned to a personal characteristic when consensual societal beliefs suggest that people who have one state of the characteristic are more worthy than those with a different state of the characteristic. In Western societies, men are generally held in higher honor and esteem, seen as more able and competent, and thereby readily granted higher social status than women (Ridgeway, 1991, 2006a; Ridgeway, Backor, Li, Tinkler, & Erickson, 2009). Individuals may prefer working for a man over a woman because men hold the higher status and are thereby seen as the more competent leaders.

Further, a considerable body of research initiated by Schein and her colleagues (Schein, 2007; Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996) and subjected to meta-analysis by Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, and Ristikari (2011) has supported the notion of “think manager–think male” as a global phenomenon. The think manager–think male prototype clearly may contribute to a preference for working for a man rather than a woman.

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