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When women emerge as leaders: Effects of extraversion and gender composition in groups☆

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Focusing on the gender of emergent leaders in initially leaderless groups, we explore contextual factors that may influence when women are likely to emerge as leaders. We take a multilevel perspective to understand and unpack the complex interplay between individual gender, group gender composition, and group personality composition. Drawing from perspectives such as social role theory and the social identity model of leadership, we theorize as to when women are most likely to emerge as leaders, even in groups composed predominantly of men. Results from two studies indicated that individual level gender does not interact with group gender composition to predict leadership emergence, suggesting that groups with more men do not disproportionally choose men as leaders, and groups with more women similarly do not tend to have women emerge as leaders. However, a three-way interaction consistently appeared in our studies when group-level extraversion was added to individual and group gender, in a pattern suggesting that group extraversion alters leader emergence patterns in groups with more men. Our findings demonstrate that women become more likely to emerge as leaders when their groups are both high in extraversion, and composed of more men than women. Implications for practice and future research directions are discussed.

Published by Elsevier Inc.

Introduction

The changing demographics of today's workforce, coupled with recent media attention on the role of women in leadership (e.g. the "Lean In" movement; Sandberg, 2013), have sparked renewed interest among academics and practitioners alike in understanding the complex relationship between gender and leadership emergence. As women have emerged more prevalently in modern organizational leadership, and as our understanding of leadership itself has changed from a formal title to a more fluid role (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014), it is an appropriate time to re-examine how and when women emerge as leaders. This need is also demonstrated by the current trend in organizations of replacing traditional hierarchies in favor of autonomous work groups as a means of driving empowerment, productivity, and morale (Armstrong & Priola, 2001; S. G. Cohen, Ledford Jr., & Spreitzer, 1996; Lawler, Mohrman, & Ledford, 1992). Such initially leaderless work groups tend to choose their leaders informally (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Taggar, Hackett, & Saha, 1999), not limiting themselves to a single, titled group leader (D'Innocenzo, Mathieu, & Kukenberger, 2014). Theories on adaptive (DeRue, 2011), shared (Pearce &

Conger, 2003), and complexity (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008) leadership suggest that leadership in this modern context is claimed by some individuals and granted by others, dependent upon individual differences and contextual factors (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Taggar et al., 1999). Altogether, these developments suggest a need to expand our understanding of informal leadership and re-examine the role of gender in these prevalent contexts allowing multiple informal leaders.

Gender has been identified as one of the most salient and important factors determining leadership emergence (Chaturvedi, Zyphur, Arvey, Avolio, & Larsson, 2012; Eagly & Karau, 1991), in line with a variety of perspectives including leader categorization theory (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984) and social role theory (Eagly, 1987). Both perspectives suggest that men are more likely than women to emerge as leaders, all else equal, due to stereotypes regarding men, women, and leadership, with empirical studies generally supporting this view (Eagly & Karau, 1991). However, meta-analytic evidence indicates that leader stereotypes have become increasingly androgynous over time (Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002), incorporating more feminine characteristics in addition to traditional masculine characteristics (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). Concurrently, although women are still unequally represented at the top levels of organizations (ILO, 2015) and concerns remain over the quality of positions into which women are promoted (Ryan & Haslam, 2007), there have been notable increases in the number of women in organizational management roles (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). These increases might suggest changes in how women are viewed in regard to leadership, and reduce perceptions of women as incongruous with leadership, consistent with the demonstrated weakening of the "think manager, think male" stereotype (Koenig et al., 2011; Schein, 1973). Altogether, these findings and the growing proportion of women in leadership roles indicate a need to re-examine how gender and contextual characteristics may play a role in predicting leadership emergence within initially leaderless groups. We take a multi-level approach to investigate this question given that higher-level contextual factors may impact which group members tend to emerge as leaders (DeRue, 2011; Stoker, Van der Velde, & Lammers, 2012).

The question of how groups, rather than individuals, choose leaders remains fertile and mostly unexplored empirical territory. Although three excellent reviews and meta-analyses have been published on the topic of shared leadership – that is, informal leadership enacted by multiple group members – and its relationship with group effectiveness (D'Innocenzo et al., 2014; Nicolaides et al., 2014; Wang, Waldman, & Zhang, 2014), none of them has addressed how and why leaders emerge. This lack of attention to antecedents of group leadership represents a gap in our understanding of leadership in the modern context, where initially leaderless groups have increasingly become a common vehicle for task accomplishment in organizations (Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2009). In this paper, we help to fill this gap by theorizing and testing how individual member characteristics, in conjunction with group-level characteristics, influence leadership emergence.

One such group-level characteristic is the personality composition of the group. The extant literature on personality and leadership emergence has largely examined the personality of the leaders themselves (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014); however, much less work has examined how composition of group members' personalities may serve as a contextual factor affecting what types of members emerge as leaders. Our theorizing of group personality composition involves the group's overall level, or elevation – defined as "a team's mean level on a particular personality trait or set of personality traits" (Neuman, Wagner, & Christiansen, 1999, p. 30) – given the importance of these mean levels to group norms and process development (Barry & Stewart, 1997; LePine, Buckman, Crawford, & Methot, 2011; Prewett, Walvoord, Stilson, Rossi, & Brannick, 2009). We examine extraversion specifically in conjunction with gender, as extraversion has a highly consistent relationship with leadership (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002) and has a powerful role in enabling group communication and cohesion (Barrick, Stewart, Neubert, & Mount, 1998). Might certain constellations of gender and extraversion within a group provide contextual factors which promote female leadership emergence, just as such group-level characteristics can affect performance and other processes (Barry & Stewart, 1997; Bell, 2007)? An examination of contextual factors at the group-level is likely to enable scholars to better understand the dynamics through which certain individuals emerge as leaders.

With this in mind, we conducted two studies testing the joint and cross-level effects of gender and extraversion on leader emergence. We expand the work on leadership emergence by examining how the contextual characteristics of a group, in concert with individual characteristics of the group's members, may influence who emerges as a leader in initially leaderless groups, contributing to literature on shared leadership. In so doing, we expand our understanding of the role of gender in leadership emergence by theorizing and modeling how group gender composition (or the proportion of men and women in the group) and individual gender may interact. This multi-level approach, focusing specifically on the effects of individual gender, group gender, and group-level extraversion, builds on the predictions of social role theory and the social identity model of leadership (D. van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003) to identify contexts in which women, rather than men, are most likely to emerge as leaders.

A contextual consideration of leadership emergence

Leadership emergence in groups

Leadership emergence is considered the extent to which a person is regarded as being leader-like by other group members; that is, guiding social interactions, providing direction, and helping the group and its members to develop and perform at high levels (Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994; Taggar et al., 1999). At the individual level, research on leadership emergence has often been based on leader categorization theory (Lord et al., 1984), which posits that the individuals most likely to emerge as leaders are those who match followers' implicit ideas (or implicit leadership theories: ILTs) of how leaders should look and act. As suggested by this approach, many studies that have examined leadership emergence have focused on the individual differences of those who are ascribed leadership by group members, such as general mental ability (Judge, Colbert, & Ilies, 2004), personality