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Beyond a gendered model of leadership in higher education in France

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Abstract

More and more women are accessing positions of power across various industries and job levels yet there is still a dearth of women in elite executive roles. Previous research in the social sciences has revealed little or no evidence of a difference in management style between men and women; however representations of leadership are often gendered. The purpose of our research is to explore a possible evolution of the leadership model in France. A first study of how the French press portrays male and female leaders suggests a trend towards a non-gendered view of leadership. A second study was conducted amongst students in higher education to determine whether this trend was confirmed. The results have led to recommendations concerning the acquisition of leadership skills by future managers.

Key words: gender, leadership model, press, higher education

Introduction:

For nearly fifty years, the sex variable was absent from research on leadership, almost all leaders under study were men. Finally, in 1990, Judy Rosener, an American academic, published an article (Rosener 1990) defending the existence of a "feminine" style of management. This management style specific to women, is described as leadership that is collaborative and consensual, more people-oriented and less authoritative than men's. Much debate ensued, (Eagly & Carli 2003) and as modern management theory places great emphasis on the human dimension in leadership, women were seen to have the natural skills to be the kind of managers today's world seeks. In jostling for positions of power, women were thus considered to be at an advantage. Be that as it may, there is still a dearth of women in high level managerial roles although more and more women are accessing positions of power across various industries and job levels, (Clark 2010). Furthermore, recent figures show that women's corporate power still remains slight. (IFA-ORSE-EPWN, 2009). Previous research in the social sciences has revealed that there is little or no evidence of a difference in management style between men and women. However, in ascending the corporate ladder, there may be a lack of a perceived "perfect fit" between female behavioral norms and the leader model which often remains predominantly masculine; (Oakley, 2000; Atwater & al., 2001; Marry, 2004; Laufer, 2005; Scott, 2006). As increasingly companies in the 27 member states of the European Union are being called upon to exercise management that favors male-female equity, we can foresee a possible evolution of the model of the leader. This was the motivation behind our research. We carried out two studies, the first aimed at seeing how the French press portrays male and female leaders. The second, a field study of a hands-on leadership learning experience in higher education, investigated whether future executives, both male and female, have a balanced leadership model in terms of gender.

1. Study No. 1: How the French press portrays male and female leaders.

1.1 The study

We used the Factiva documentary database to access French newspapers to constitute a corpus. Our keyword for the search was "management style" and we looked at articles from

2006 through 2008. We eliminated articles on management in political settings and sport so as to concentrate on the business world. We retrieved a corpus of 298 articles from 51 different editions of the printed press. Half of the managers discussed in the articles were men, a quarter were women and as regards the final quarter the journalist simply spoke about management style in general.

Total number of articles in corpus	Number of men portrayed	Number of women portrayed	Indifferent
298	147 (49%)	78 (26%)	73 (25%)

Considering the small number of women in high level positions, one may conclude that the French press tends to focus more on female leaders than male.

1.2 Method

We focused on articles where the leader's personal life was mentioned. Twenty-one articles included information on a female manager's non-professional life; this represented 27% of all articles which dealt with female leaders. Forty-six articles gave details about a male manager's personal life; these represented 31% of all articles dealing with male managers. We concluded that the physical appearance, personal tastes and personality of both sexes are often mentioned in the press. We went on to study specific aspects mentioned, for example: character traits, extraprofessional activities and family responsibilities. Concerning character traits we used the Bem grid (Bem, 1974) and classified traits according to: masculine, feminine and androgyne. With regard to physical appearance, we looked for terms indicating femininity, masculinity or androgyny in the descriptions given. Leisure activities were divided into four categories: sports, culture, community life and social activities. Finally, we looked to see if there was mention of their family responsibilities, either a role (mother, father, spouse etc.) or reference to a family member (son, daughter, children etc.).

1.3 Results

Results are given in the table below. The table is divided into two parts: women and men. In each subpart, the first line of figures represents the number of hits or occurrences; the second line is the percentage with respect to each category, male or female, and the third line is the percentage with respect to the total number of articles in our corpus.

Character traits			Physical Appearance			Extra-professional Activities				Family responsibilities
feminine	masculine	androgyne	feminine	masculine	androgyne	Sport	Culture	Community	Social	
WOMEN										
14	4	7	5	1	3	2	3	1	0	8
66.7%	19.0%	33.3%	23.8%	4.8%	14.3%	9.5%	14.3%	11.1%	11.1%	38.1%
17.9%	5.1%	9.0%	6.4%	1.3%	3.8%	2.6%	3.8%	1.3%	1.3%	10.3%
MEN										
8	15	20	0	9	12	20	12	6	3	17
17.4%	32.6%	43.5%	0.0%	19.6%	26.1%	43.5%	26.1%	13.0%	6.5%	3.0%
5.4%	10.2%	13.6%	0.0%	6.1%	8.2%	13.6%	8.2%	4.1%	2.0%	11.6%

As expected, descriptions of women yielded the highest number of feminine traits (66.7%) and descriptions of men the highest number of masculine traits (32.6%). In fact, men were more often described in neutral terms (43.5%) contrary to women (33.3%). Nevertheless, parity is reached where men are described in feminine terms (17.4%) and women in masculine terms (19%). Physical appearance was referred to significantly less than character, and concerning this aspect, again men (26.1%) are more often described in neutral terms than women (19%). Portrayals of leaders differ significantly in terms of gender as regards the extraprofessional activities mentioned. Male leaders appear to have many extraprofessional activities, in particular sports (43.5%), followed by cultural activities (26.6%). On the other hand, few of the portraits of women leaders mention leisure activities; cultural activities represent 14.3% and sport 9.5%. Finally in terms of family responsibilities, we note near parity for men and women leaders. It would appear that family responsibilities are shared equally by men and women in leadership positions.

1.4 Discussion

Comparing portrayals of management leaders in the press revealed a more balanced picture than might have been expected. In particular, reference to gender in terms of physical appearance is slight in the case of women (6.4%), as well as men (6.1%). Men are more often described in neutral terms both in terms of personality and physique. However, results - particularly in terms of personality traits - are encouraging: 9% of the corpus for women compared with 13% for men. References to family are not found solely in articles about female managers. On the contrary, family responsibilities appeared to be equally shared by male and female interviewees. The large disparity between male and female scores concerning extraprofessional activities may be a result of the discrepancy in the division of labor in domestic life, where women often have less time for leisure. Furthermore, the sports activities, which are most often promoted by companies and which receive most media coverage, are for the most part exclusively male sports. This may explain why they are mentioned by the interviewees.

2. Study No. 2: Developing leadership skills in higher education

2.1 The study

The study was carried out in a French *grande école*¹ in the Paris suburbs. There are two schools on the campus, an engineering school and a management school. Once a year during the spring semester second year students from both schools compete in a weeklong competitive project called “Challenge”, designed to simulate real-world entrepreneurship. Students form teams of five or six individuals and then designate a project leader. The project’s time span also reflects a “real world” context: Student teams have one week to build their business model for the creation of the start-up company. A jury of faculty members then assigns a grade to each team’s project. The 16 teams proposing the best business plans present their work before a panel of business professionals, and the winners are announced at a prestigious awards ceremony held in the French Senate in Paris. Many students go on to successfully set up the companies they have proposed.

¹ The *grandes écoles* of France are higher education establishments outside the mainstream framework of the public university system. Unlike French public universities which have an obligation to accept all candidates of the same region who hold a *baccalauréat*, the selection criteria of *grandes écoles* are based on national competitive examinations taken after two to three years of dedicated preparatory classes. The *grandes écoles* are generally focused on a single subject area, mainly engineering, business or the humanities.

This study consisted of two phases: an initial investigation in 2006 focusing primarily on teamwork and interpersonal relations, and then a follow-up study in 2008 where we looked more closely at leadership factors.

2.2 The method

In 2006, we tracked two (one of which reached the finals) of the 59 teams during the week of the “Challenge” project. We observed students’ behavior during meetings and discussions. Following the awards ceremony, we carried out individual semi-directive interviews with nine of these students. A further nine students from two of the award winning teams were also interviewed. Thus, in all, we interviewed eight female students and ten male students focusing on their experience during the weeklong project. In particular we sought feedback concerning team work and interpersonal relations. Following this, we analyzed the 59 business model files/briefs submitted during the “Challenge” project.

Examining the students’ discourse, we noted that leadership and interpersonal conflicts were impassioned topics and were often mentioned. It was therefore decided to extend the study and interview students who had participated in the 2008 “Challenge” project. However, in this second phase, the interviews instead focused on students’ visions of leadership and on how they developed leadership skills. Eleven students in all were interviewed, seven female and four male students (all from winning teams).

2.3 Results

2.3 a) Analysis of the students’ business model proposals

We made two major observations concerning gender from the study of the 59 business model proposals handed in by students involved in the 2006 “Challenge” project. Team leadership roles reached parity in terms of gender: For the 320 students (34% female and 66% male) in the 2006 study, 32 % of the team leaders were women. The number of women “CEOs” in the projected start-ups was even higher, at 35%.

	Percentage of male & female students in group	Team Leader	CEO of projected start up
Female	34%	32%	35%
Male	66%	68%	65%

In terms of performance, it is also interesting to note that teams led by female students did slightly better in terms of performance (performance is measured here by grades given for the “business plan” written assignment). So one may conclude, that in the context of higher education a woman in a leadership position is no longer seen as unacceptable and, that secondly, male/female parity in leadership positions has been achieved. However, our in-depth study of personal and group interactions yielded a more ambiguous picture.

2.3 b) Observing and analyzing teamwork

Looking first at the four teams interviewed in 2006, we noted a) that two of them were involved in serious conflict situations (T1 and T4), b) that in gender terms a rather non-conformist leader emerged in the third group (T3) and finally c) that the fourth group, (T2) where four male students, though clearly not chauvinist, nevertheless excluded the only female team member. This latter behavior could be seen as unconscious, it was however unrelenting.

For team 1 we found contrasting behavior: On the one hand, three female students literally threw themselves into the power games and for whom the “Challenge project” was clearly a rich learning experience. What we observed and studied of their behavior seriously calls into question the belief that female leadership is by nature conciliatory and consensus-seeking. On the other hand, the fourth female student on the team appeared less self-assured and only took on leadership, *in extremis*, when the others had virtually abandoned their roles. She played a role traditionally assigned to women, i.e., most of the time she was indispensable but remained invisible. Lastly, as the week progressed, we observed within this team an attitude of superiority mingled with ethnic exclusion on the part of certain engineering students towards another engineering student.

Just before the beginning of the project, the five male students in T 2 accepted a foreign, female student on their team. Despite hard work and diligence, the team did not reach the finals. This could be explained, to a certain extent, by the fact that conflict was rigorously avoided, even at the initial stage where conflict frequently arises due to individuals defending their personal vision of the project. Furthermore, no member of the team actively took on the role of leader and for the most part they worked in subgroups based on close friendships. This homo-sociability led to a situation where the only female on the team remained an outsider and this went unquestioned by all the male students on the team. Despite the fact that this female student, had succeeded in enrolling in a prestigious French engineering school, she adopted a role assigned to women in traditional societies, i.e. remaining in the background, but ready to come to the aid of others when called upon.

T 3 was very different. A young black African female student clearly challenged social norms in positioning herself as team leader from the outset. She deliberately recruited three white male students to her team, as they had often held leadership positions on the campus in the past. Her position as leader was never called into question by the other team members and she went on to lead her team to victory. However, during the interviews, we noted that the male students on the team felt the need to justify her presence as leader and/or attempted to diminish the importance of the role she had played.

Finally, with regard to T4, the major feature that emerged from the interviews was domination based on social class. The team included four engineering students and two management students. The academic background of the latter, however, differed from most of the students in the school. They joined the “*grande école*” system following an initial diploma obtained in a French university. The university system in France is generally considered less prestigious than the “*grandes écoles*” and in the latter there is little social diversity. The engineering students on the team considered themselves superior to the management students. Nevertheless, the two management students proved to be excellent in terms of skills and knowledge. One team member, a female engineering student rejected this attitude of superiority and took on the management of the project. She clearly enjoyed the leadership experience. She nevertheless was the butt of sexist remarks from the other engineering team members who had difficulty accepting that she would abandon her own social group and take up a position of power.

In conclusion, the study of the 2006 corpus of interviews revealed that students, who are supposed to be equal among their peers, may engage in fiercely competitive power games in hands-on learning experiences of leadership. Norms linked to social class, race or gender may be called into play, but they can be challenged. For this reason we sought to pursue our research concentrating specifically on students’ vision of leadership.

2.3 c) Analysis of data collected concerning leadership

Following the 2008 “Challenge” competition we interviewed 11 students, (seven female students and four male students) concerning what they had experienced and observed with regard to leadership in their respective teams. We questioned them further, seeking their opinion on the qualities of a leader and asking them to compare this profile with leaders they had encountered during internships, in school associations and on sports teams. The interview data were analyzed and revealed that students held very differing views. Both female and male students spoke of feelings of self-confidence which encouraged them to occupy leadership positions. Nevertheless, several female students expressed doubts about women holding top positions. Indeed, only the female students appeared to believe that gender, social class or being a foreigner could prevent them accessing leadership positions. No male students expressed such an opinion. In our preliminary study self-devaluation related to social or racial characteristics had already been noted. However, we did observe that barriers related to race or social class can be attenuated if they are offset by considerable self-confidence. Nevertheless, despite norm transgressing behavior, the leader model for many students clearly remains confined by social, sexual or racial markers.

3. Pedagogical perspectives and recommendations

Following this study of a hands-on learning experience of leadership we come back to our initial question: Do these future executives hold a more balanced leadership model in terms of gender than that which is prevalent in the business and professional fields? We observed that women students have the same opportunity as male students to exercise leadership and they clearly seize this opportunity, as parity was achieved with male students in terms of the number of project leaders. However, looking more closely, the situation appears more ambiguous and this for three reasons. Firstly, during exchanges within teams, several female students (but no male students) remained in the background and thus did not receive recognition for contributions to the project or the team. Secondly, women who took on leadership roles were all exceptional individuals either in terms of their energy, their charisma and/or their academic track records, whereas several of the male students who took on the role of leader did not appear to have specific leadership qualities. Furthermore, two female students expressed a gendered view of leadership and two of the male students in male majority teams felt the need to justify the presence of a woman at the head of their team. Last but not least, only women appeared to question their legitimacy as leaders. All these elements would lead us to conclude that the students’ model of the leader remains to a certain extent masculine.

These results raise many pedagogical questions. For example how can we avoid that the development of leadership skills subsumes the learning of gender roles? How can we favor the development of a leader model which leaves room for mixed-sex education?

Albert Bandura’s socio-cognitive theory provides a possible response. Belief in personal efficacy is seen as the central mechanism of human agency. Other elements, both human and environmental, serve as guides and motivators. However, they are rooted in the belief that one can produce desired effects by one’s actions and that without this belief one would have no reason to act or to persevere in the face of adversity. Socio-cognitive theory has been usefully applied to the areas of education and learning where empirical research suggests that in order to sustain learning one must look at the learner’s view of his efficacy. (Galand & Vanlede, 2004). Bandura uses the term “self-efficacy” (Bandura, 1995), to describe the belief that people have the ability to exercise control over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy is constructed (Bandura, 1997), positively or negatively from four sources of information:

direct experience; vicarious experience i.e. observing what your peers do; social influences, for example being verbally persuaded by people close to you of your capacity to succeed or not; and lastly your physical and emotional states, which provide signals concerning your ability to accomplish certain actions. In the sample of students we observed, socio-cognitive theory could help elucidate why several individuals did not hesitate to take on the management of the project despite no previous experience and others did not venture to do so, although they clearly aspire to a leadership position.

The teams where women played a major role had at least 50% women, raising doubts concerning mixed-sex groups. However, single-sex groups can be called into question for three main reasons. According to comments that were made during the interviews concerning the image of a leader, 1) an all-female team may be discriminated against because they may be seen as being less competent and less hard-working, whereas an all-male team would not be judged in the same way. 2) An all-female team may be suspected of having benefited from positive discrimination by the jury, as certain comments by male students during the interviews would lead one to believe. 3) Lastly, a mixed-sex group can offer the team the experience of a leader who does not fit stereotypes.

Concerning courses on leadership, our first recommendation would be to encourage hands-on experience. Each student could be required to take on a leadership role at least once during the three-year study program (working in teams, project work, school clubs and associations). This would send a clear message that all students are capable of holding positions of responsibility. Our second suggestion would be to boost female students' feeling of self-efficacy in leadership roles. In order to do so, we have outlined a three-stage program involving both students and teaching staff. The first step would be an academic course on leadership to be taught before the Challenge competition. A major objective of the course would be to promote a non-gendered image of leadership. For this purpose, the focus would be on the leadership role in terms of tasks to be performed and criteria for success. This could help undo the image of the leader/manager as a figure of domination, authority and privilege, as described by several students, in particular some female students, during the interviews. Such a role description might help clarify the responsibility inherent in project management and encourage those who hesitate to assume this role. The second phase would be to intervene in team work in other courses and extracurricular activities, where teams generally elect their leaders, by providing notably a document clearly specifying the leadership role thus utilizing the content of the academic course on leadership. Following this, the leader would be required to self-evaluate the role he or she played and the other team members would also evaluate the leader. Such pedagogy would familiarize all students with leadership, in particular those who had not yet taken on a leadership role. Finally, we would suggest a group feedback session after the Challenge project where each team member would be required to analyze their experience with respect to leadership during the competition. Such an exercise would allow students to gain perspective and reflect upon their experience thus aiding them to further develop and hone their leadership skills and abilities. Faculty members would study the students' feedback (both oral and written assignments) in order to improve and adapt the contents and pedagogy of the academic course on leadership.

This research and the above propositions could contribute to undoing gender stereotypes of the leader model.

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