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Beyond the Glass Ceiling: The Glass Cliff and Its Lessons for Organizational Policy

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It has been almost 30 years since the metaphor of the "glass ceiling" was coined to describe the often subtle, but very real, barriers that women face as they try to climb the organizational hierarchy. Here we review evidence for a relatively new form of gender discrimination—captured by the metaphor of the glass cliff—that women face when they obtain positions of leadership. Such positions often prove to be more risky and precarious than those of their male counterparts. We summarize evidence demonstrating the existence of glass cliffs in business and politics as well as experimental work that identifies a number of factors contributing to the phenomenon. We then discuss implications for policy and practice, highlighting the importance of understanding women's and men's experiences in the workplace rather than treating gender diversity as merely "a numbers game."

It was 1984 when "the glass ceiling" was first coined as a metaphor to describe gender inequality in upper management (see Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009).

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The phrase captures a phenomenon whereby women aspiring a top management position find themselves blocked from these positions by seemingly invisible (hence the glass), yet very real barriers (hence the ceiling) that serve to keep the upper echelons of leadership a predominantly male domain. In the intervening decades a substantial body of research has documented a variety of subtle, and not so subtle, barriers that obstruct gender equality in the leadership arena (for overviews see Barreto et al., 2009; Bruckmüller, Ryan, Haslam, & Peters, 2013; Eagly & Carli, 2007). However, it is increasingly the case that a select number of women do achieve positions of leadership in organizational and political life, leading critics to ask whether the glass ceiling metaphor is still apposite (Eagly & Carli, 2007). With this increase in the number of women in leadership positions, it becomes more and more important not only to examine the number of men and women in these roles, but also to understand their *experiences* in these roles.

One good starting point for such an analysis is to take a closer look at the circumstances under which women and men are appointed or promoted to leadership positions and at the nature of the positions they obtain. In this article, we review evidence from our own and others' research, which demonstrates that the contexts in which women and men tend to achieve leadership positions differ markedly. We will demonstrate that, compared to men, women who "break through" the glass ceiling are often appointed to positions that are more precarious and associated with a higher risk of failure—a phenomenon captured by the metaphor of the *glass cliff* (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). We provide an integrated summary of the archival and experimental evidence on the glass cliff that has been accumulated over the past years. In doing so, we also review both lay explanations for the glass cliff and empirical research that sheds light on the factors contributing to the phenomenon. Finally, we discuss the importance of understanding women's and men's experiences in the workplace, rather than simply seeing gender diversity as "a numbers game," and conclude by discussing a range of empirically informed implications for policy and practice.

Glass Cliffs in Business and Politics

Although women are increasingly advancing to positions of organizational and political leadership, the vast majority of these positions are still held by men (Catalyst, 2012; Sealy & Vinnicombe, 2012). As a result, female leaders are something of an exception to the norm. Numerous studies have demonstrated that individuals who are seen as atypical in a given context attract more attention and are more easily singled out for criticism (Brescoll, Dawson, & Uhlmann, 2010; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hegarty & Bruckmüller, 2013). On this basis we can expect that female leaders may face higher scrutiny than their male colleagues.

Illustrative of such scrutiny is an article that *The Times* published in 2003 (Judge, 2003) that inspired us to look more closely at the circumstances

under which women and men obtain leadership positions. This newspaper article examined the stock-market performance of FTSE 100 companies (the top 100 companies listed on the London Stock Exchange). Looking at the companies with the highest proportion of women on their boards of directors, the article's author drew attention to the fact that six out of ten of these diversely led companies underperformed (as indicated by change in share price) relative to the FTSE 100. On this basis she concluded that women had "wreaked havoc" on the organizations that they led and that "Britain would be better off without women on the board" (Judge, 2003, p. 21).

Archival Evidence for the Glass Cliff

The strong claims in the *Times* article prompted us to look in greater detail at the circumstances surrounding the appointments of women and men to company boards (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Was it really the case that having more women in leadership positions caused company share prices to drop? Or was there an alternative explanation, one of reverse causality, such that when companies were performing poorly, women were more likely to obtain leadership positions? To answer these questions, we compared all FTSE 100 companies that had appointed a woman to their board of directors in 2003 to a matched sample of companies that had appointed a man. We found that those companies that had appointed a man to their board showed a relatively stable stock-market performance over the year. However, for companies that had appointed a woman, the pattern was more complex. For appointments made during a general downturn in the stock market, companies, on average, experienced a consistent drop in share price performance in the months preceding a woman's appointment; for appointments made when the stock market was up, companies that appointed a woman had, on average, experienced significant fluctuations in their share prices in the preceding months. Thus, in both contexts women were most likely to be appointed to board positions when a company was in a state of crisis, while, in the companies that had appointed a man, things were going much more smoothly. Alluding to the metaphor of the glass ceiling, we dubbed this phenomenon "the glass cliff" (Ryan & Haslam, 2005) to capture both the high level of these positions and the riskiness and precariousness inherent in them.

Since this first analysis, additional archival studies have found evidence of such a relationship between organizational performance and the selection of men and women for leadership positions in business contexts as well as in politics. It does, however, seem to matter how organizational performance is defined. For example, Adams, Gupta, and Leeth (2009) examined the relationship between the appointment of male versus female CEOs at US Fortune 500 corporations and company performance using accountancy-based measures that capture relatively objective measures of a profitability, such as companies' return on assets (the ratio

of its net earnings to the book value of its total assets) and companies' return on equity (the ratio of its net earnings to the shareholders' equity). This study found no evidence of a glass cliff. Indeed, when we subsequently analyzed the relationship between organizational performance and the presence of women and men on the boards of FTSE 100 companies over a 5-year period using a range of different performance measures, we similarly found no evidence of a glass cliff when we examined these objective accountancy-based measures of success (Haslam, Ryan, Kulich, Trojanowski, & Atkins, 2010). However, we *did* find that glass cliff appointments were particularly visible when more *subjective* stock-based measures of success were considered (specifically, Tobin's Q, i.e., the ratio of a firm's stock-market value to the book value of its assets; Tobin, 1969). Here, the appointment of women correlated negatively with stock-market performance in the preceding year. Similarly, in an investigation of the appointments of men and women to the boards of companies listed in the German stock market index (the DAX), Morgenroth (2012) found that a stock-based measure of performance predicted the appointment of women, but that accountancy-based measures did not.

This variability in findings suggests that the glass cliff is most apparent on measures of performance that are psychological rather than material. As such, the appointment of women is primarily a response to *perceptions*—rather than necessarily the reality—of failure and crisis. However, although perceptions of crisis need not be aligned with the underlying reality of a companies' financial performance, there is evidence that the presence of women on boards can lead to a subsequent devaluation by investors. In the study described, we also found that, relative to firms with at least one woman on their board, companies with male-only boards enjoyed a valuation premium of 37% in the following year (Haslam et al., 2010). A crucial point to make here is that although share prices are a subjective measure of success based largely on perceptions, hunches, and betting on the stock market, this does not mean that they are immaterial or inconsequential. In the long run, they can affect the more objective financial realities of a company, for example, when confidence in a corporation reduces sales or increases interest rates on credits—thus potentially turning a perception of crisis that was initially unrelated to a firm's objective performance into a reality.

Importantly, glass cliff appointments are not restricted to boardroom positions in large corporations. In an archival analysis of the 2005 UK General Election, we found that, in the Conservative party, male candidates contested seats that were easier to win (defined by the percentage of votes won by the party in the previous election) than those fought by their female counterparts (Ryan, Haslam, & Kulich, 2010). As a result, Conservative men won significantly more votes in the general election, a pattern that was fully explained by the greater "winnability" of the seats they contested—or conversely, women secured less votes because they ran for seats that were harder to win.

Our findings in the political arena also illustrate a number of potentially detrimental implications of the glass cliff. First, these positions place women at a higher risk of personal failure that can be harmful for an individual's career. In business contexts, directors of poorly performing organizations are less likely to obtain subsequent directorships than are directors of successful companies (Fama & Jensen, 1983; Ferris, Jagannathan, & Pritchard, 2003). In addition, patterns of gendered success (and failure), such as those seen in the UK General Election data, can easily be misinterpreted (as they were by Judge, 2003) as an indication of women's limited capacity for leadership. This is obviously especially true if differences in the circumstances under which male and female leaders typically obtain their positions are disregarded. Thus, glass cliff appointments not only hamper individual women's careers, the association of female leaders with crisis and failure can also harm women at a collective level by conveying the impression that they "wreak havoc" on organizations.

Experimental Evidence for the Glass Cliff

While these archival studies are open to a number of different interpretations, the notion of the glass cliff is reinforced by numerous experimental studies, which demonstrate that people tend to select women to lead under problematic conditions but prefer men to lead in more promising circumstances (Ashby, Ryan, & Haslam, 2007; Brown, Diekman, & Schneider, 2011; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Gartzia, Ryan, Belluerka, & Aritzeta, 2012; Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Hunt-Early, 2012; Rink, Ryan, & Stoker, 2013; Ryan et al., 2010).

In these experiments, participants typically read about an organization that is either performing poorly or successfully and then either (1) indicate their preference for a male or a female candidate for a leadership position in this organization, or (2) evaluate the suitability or effectiveness of a male and/or female leader. For example, in our first experimental study on the glass cliff phenomenon (Haslam & Ryan, 2008, Study 1), we asked graduate students enrolled in an international management course at a British university to read about a fictional leadership vacancy in a company that had either experienced improving or declining performance over the past years. Participants were then given brief descriptions and photographs of three candidates for the position, one male and one female candidate who were equally well qualified for the position and one additional, less qualified, male candidate. They were then asked to rank these three candidates with regard to their appointability. When the company was in a state of crisis, participants showed an overwhelming preference for the female candidate; when the company performed well, the two equally qualified candidates were ranked similarly.

In a later study with business leaders as participants (Haslam & Ryan, 2008, Study 3), participants only evaluated one candidate, who was either male or

female, for a position in a company that was performing poorly or well. When the company was successful, evaluations of the male and the female candidate's leadership ability and suitability for the position were very similar. However, when the company was on a downward trend, participants evaluated the female candidate as much more suitable and more capable of leading than the male candidate. In other studies, we not only found such a preference for a female candidate in times of crisis, but also a preference for a male candidate under more promising circumstances (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Rink et al., 2013).

The majority of the experimental studies demonstrating the phenomenon of the glass cliff have been conducted in a business context (e.g., Brown et al., 2011; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Gartzia et al., 2012; Hunt-Early, 2012; Rink et al., 2013). However, we have found evidence of a preference for female leaders in problematic circumstances in a number of other contexts as well. This includes law students' assignment of a problematic or a promising legal case to a male or a female attorney (Ashby et al., 2007), secondary school students' choice of a male or female youth representative for a successful or unsuccessful music festival (Haslam & Ryan, 2008, Study 2), and political science students' choice of a man or a woman to contest a safe or hard-to-win political constituency (Ryan et al., 2010, Study 2).

These experimental studies control for a range of individual factors, such as the candidates' qualifications and motivations. Because of this, together they demonstrate that the preference for female leaders in precarious organizational circumstances arises from the attitudes and beliefs of decision makers rather than something specific to particular candidates or contexts. In this way, the studies suggest that the glass cliff appointments revealed by the archival studies summarized may stem, at least in part, from the leadership selection process. In addition, because experimental studies allow us to systematically vary or assess a number of variables, we are able to use them to examine the factors that moderate, and the processes that mediate these decision-making processes.

What Causes the Glass Cliff?

The archival and experimental studies reviewed provide compelling evidence that women and men are chosen to lead under quite different circumstances. Given that problematic organizational circumstances are more likely to present difficulties for leaders (in terms both of what they have to do and of how they are likely to be perceived; Meindl, 1995) than are nonproblematic ones, the notion of the glass cliff suggests a number of challenging or discriminatory outcomes that may arise when selectively appointing women to lead in situations of crisis and preferring men under most other circumstances. These potential outcomes have important implications for organizational policy and practice, if we are to prevent this relatively subtle form of gender discrimination. However, before

we can develop appropriate interventions and shape better practices, we must first understand how and why glass cliff appointments occur. Below, we outline common lay explanations of the phenomenon before going on to review the key factors that have been identified in the empirical research that has been conducted thus far.

Lay Explanations for the Glass Cliff

In order to develop ways of combatting the potentially deleterious impact of the glass cliff on gender equality we must first have a better understanding of the processes underlying the phenomenon. One way to do this is to investigate how people spontaneously explain and react to the glass cliff, as such explanations can inform our understanding of how likely it is that particular interventions or policies will be well received by employees or the public. To this end, we have conducted two studies to examine how individuals explain the phenomenon.

A first study examined the way in which members of the public spontaneously explained the glass cliff (Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007). In response to an online news story about our first archival study on the glass cliff (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), 164 participants completed a survey in which they were asked to indicate what they thought explained the appointment of women to leadership positions in poorly performing organizations. Thematic analysis of the statements was conducted, blind to participant gender, and led to the identification of nine categories of responses. This revealed a wide array of explanations, from those that pointed to relatively benign factors (e.g., that women are particularly suited to difficult leadership tasks), to those that alluded to factors that were significantly more malign (e.g., outright sexism or the fact that women are more expendable in the workplace). The explanations also ranged from those that suggested the glass cliff arose from intentional behavior (e.g., ingroup bias, where men express greater favoritism toward other men), to those positing more unintentional processes (e.g., that women often lack alternative leadership opportunities).

Importantly, the research demonstrated clear differences in men's and women's reactions to the glass cliff. While women were more likely to acknowledge the existence of the glass cliff and recognize its danger, unfairness, and prevalence, men were more likely to question the validity of research into the glass cliff and to downplay the precariousness of women's leadership positions. These patterns were evident in the explanations that individuals generated. While women were more likely to explain the glass cliff in terms of pernicious processes (e.g., a lack of alternative opportunities, sexism, or men's ingroup favoritism), men were more likely to favor benign interpretations (e.g., women's suitability for difficult leadership tasks, the need for strategic decision making, or company factors unrelated to gender).

While such gender differences suggest that men and women may react differently to interventions designed to address the glass cliff, this study was clearly limited by the self-selected nature of the sample. To address this issue we conducted a second survey study with 205 working members of the public (Ryan, Haslam, & Bellenca, 2013). Participants read the same article presented in the online study, but rather than generating explanations, they indicated their agreement with a series of explanations for the glass cliff (malign, benign, and denying the phenomenon, based on Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007). Results confirmed gender differences in the endorsement of particular explanations, such that men were more likely to endorse benign explanations than malign ones but also more likely to deny the existence of the phenomenon altogether than to explain it. In contrast, women were much less likely to deny the phenomenon than they were to endorse either malign or benign explanations. These gender effects were, however, moderated by participants' own seniority within their organizations, such that the greatest gender differences were observed for the more junior and midlevel participants. In contrast, no gender differences were found at the most senior levels. Instead, senior women here responded more "like men"—that is, they were more likely to endorse benign explanations of the glass cliff or else to deny its existence.

In addition to these surveys, we have conducted qualitative research with a view to gaining a better understanding of the processes underlying the glass cliff (Ryan, Haslam, Wilson-Kovacs, Hersby, & Kulich, 2007). This research consisted of a series of one-to-one interviews and focus groups with nearly 60 men and women. We examined each interviewee's career path to date, with particular emphasis on the critical events that shaped its direction and a focus on issues of precariousness, risk, and gender. In the following sections, excerpts from these interviews are provided to illustrate key moderators and mediating processes.

Empirical Explanations—Key Moderators and Mediating Processes

Participants' speculations about what causes the glass cliff give us valuable insights into what people *think* underlies the phenomenon and which explanations they will find plausible. But how accurate are they? Empirical research can provide further evidence concerning the factors and processes contributing to the appointment of women to precarious glass cliff positions, and the circumstances under which the glass cliff is likely to occur.

The role of gender stereotypes. One recurring theme in our participants' spontaneous explanations for the glass cliff were gender stereotypes (Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007). Both women and men suggested that women might be appointed to leadership positions because they "are perceived to be more competent in crises involving other people," or "are thought to inherently possess the soft skills" required to "smooth things over" (p. 191). Such intuitions are echoed by

the experiences of women who have themselves been faced with glass cliff positions. As one female manager told us: "I have been assigned projects which are failing with the belief that I can rescue these. The factors for the belief in my ability include that I am a woman and that this gives me some sort of advantage" (Ryan, Haslam, Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2007, p. 17). Indeed, gender stereotypes as an explanation for the glass cliff have, to date, received the most attention from researchers (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Gratzia et al., 2012; Rink et al., 2013; Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, & Bongiorno, 2011).

Prevalent gender stereotypes portray women as *communal* (i.e., as affectionate, empathic, cooperative) and men as *agentic* (i.e., as assertive, independent, self-confident; e.g., Williams & Best, 1990). Importantly, the overlap between these stereotypes about men and the stereotypical perception of managers is much higher than the overlap between stereotypes about women and managers, a phenomenon dubbed the "think manager–think male" association (Schein, 1973). Because of these stereotypical associations, men may appear to be a better fit for leadership roles than women (for an overview see Eagly & Sczesny, 2009). Overcoming the perceived "lack of fit" with common leader prototypes has therefore been identified as one of the key challenges that women must overcome if they are to succeed in leadership (e.g., Wellington, Kropf, & Gerkovich, 2003).

However, the think manager–think male association seems to vary with context (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011), and of particular relevance here, it varies as a function of organizational performance and stability. First evidence of this variation comes from research on transformational leadership—a manner of leading that is characterized by consideration, motivation, stimulation, and trust (Bass & Bass, 2008). Transformational leadership is often associated with female leaders (e.g., Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003) and it is particularly sought after, and more likely to emerge, in times of crisis (e.g., Pillai, 1996).

To examine contextual variations in leader prototypes more systematically, we conducted two studies in which we asked participants to indicate how characteristic (descriptive stereotype, Study 1) and how desirable (prescriptive stereotype, Study 2) they thought a number of stereotypically male or female attributes were for managers of a successful versus an unsuccessful company (Ryan et al., 2011).

Descriptions of managers in a successful company included more stereotypically male attributes (e.g., decisive, dominant) than stereotypically female attributes (e.g., intuitive), thus replicating the think manager–think male association for managers in times of success. However, participants' characterizations of managers in unsuccessful companies focused on the absence of masculine traits, think crisis–think *not* male. More importantly, in Study 2, when participants were asked how *desirable* they considered various attributes for managers in successful and unsuccessful companies to be, we found no evidence of a think manager–think male association. Instead, in both types of company, ideal managers were seen as combining both stereotypically male and stereotypically female attributes.

However, in prescribing the ideal manager for an unsuccessful company, the number of stereotypically female attributes deemed desirable (e.g., understanding, intuitive, tactful) markedly outweighed the number of desirable characteristics that were stereotypically male (e.g., decisive, assertive).

In sum, leaders in general were still seen as stereotypically male; and although *ideal* leaders in both successful and unsuccessful companies were seen as combining stereotypically female and stereotypically male characteristics, those characteristics that were seen to be desirable for a leader in times of crisis were more strongly associated with the female gender stereotype. In other words, participants were not only thinking manager–thinking male, they also tended to "think crisis–think female." Such stereotypes about gender and leadership could be a very plausible explanation for the glass cliff. Because of the think manager–think male association, people see men as more suitable for leadership in general (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009). But as this association no longer holds when an organization is in crisis, here a think crisis–think female association might instead lead people to see female leaders as a better fit when it comes to running unsuccessful companies.

Two experimental studies provide evidence for this interpretation. In a study by Gartzia and colleagues (2012), participants read brief descriptions of eight candidates for a leadership position in a company in crisis. These candidates were either male or female and were described either with stereotypically masculine, agentic attributes or with stereotypically feminine, communal attributes. Results revealed not only an overall preference for female leaders in this crisis situation, but also an overall preference for candidates with stereotypically female traits (e.g., kind, understanding) that was independent of the candidate's gender.

This study by Gartzia and colleagues (2012) only examined leader choices in times of crisis, but in another study we compared the importance of gender stereotypes for leader preferences in a successful versus an unsuccessful company (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010, Study 2). Participants read the description of a corporation with a vacant leadership position that was either very successful or in a severe crisis. Participants then read about a male and a female candidate and indicated their perceptions of these candidates in relation to stereotypically male characteristics capturing the think manager–think male stereotype (e.g., independence, decisiveness) and stereotypically female characteristics capturing the think crisis–think female stereotype (e.g., communication skills, ability to encourage others). When the company was described as successful, perceptions of the candidates' stereotypically male characteristics were most predictive of participants' selection of a future leader; when the company was described as being in crisis, stereotypically female characteristics predicted leader selection. Accordingly, participants were more likely to choose the male candidate for the successful company and more likely to choose the female candidate for the company in crisis, and gendered differences in the attribution of these stereotypical characteristics partially explained this pattern.

However, it was the importance of stereotypically male characteristics that varied most with organizational performance. These think manager–think male attributes were highly predictive of participants' choice of a new leader for the successful company but were not at all important for leader choices in times of crisis. The attribution of stereotypically female characteristics, on the other hand, remained relatively stable across conditions, thus outweighing male characteristics in times of crisis but being outweighed by them in times of success. In addition, further analyses revealed that it was perceptions of the male rather than the female candidate's characteristics that changed with organizational performance. In other words, the selection of a woman to lead in times of crisis was driven not only by the stereotypical perception that she would bring what was needed to this situation, but even more so by the perception that the male candidate and his attributes no longer seemed to fit.

Together, these studies demonstrate that variations in the think manager–think male association and think crisis–think female notions are, at least in part, responsible for the glass cliff. However, they tell us very little about *when* and *why* we tend to think crisis–think female. Why do we expect women to be particularly suitable leaders in times of crisis—or conversely, what is it about men that makes them seem less suitable in crisis contexts if we prefer them for leadership under most other circumstances? Moreover, it is very unlikely that people experience all crisis situations in the same way, and recent research indeed demonstrates contextual variation in the glass cliff phenomenon.

The role of expectations of the leader. In order to examine further the role of gender and leadership stereotypes in explaining the glass cliff, we conducted a study where participants were provided not only with information that a company was in trouble but also with information about what would be expected of a leader in this specific crisis situation (Ryan et al., 2011, Study 3). More specifically, the leader was described as needing (1) to stay in the background and endure the crisis; (2) to take responsibility for the inevitable failure (i.e., to act as a scapegoat); (3) to manage people and personnel issues through the crisis; (4) to be a spokesperson providing damage control; or (5) to take control and improve performance. We then asked participants to rate how desirable they found a number of stereotypically male and stereotypically female characteristics in a leader in this specific crisis situation. We only found a think crisis–think female association—that is, a perception that stereotypically female traits were more desirable than stereotypically male traits—when the leader was expected to endure the crisis, to act as a scapegoat, or, most particularly, when the main task was to manage people through the crisis. When participants were asked to describe desirable traits of a leader who would act as a spokesperson for the organization or who needed to improve performance, male and female characteristics were rated as equally desirable. These findings suggest that women are not necessarily appointed to

glass cliff positions because they are seen to be able to turn things around or to represent the company well in times of crisis. Instead, they may be recruited for these roles because they are seen to have the "people skills" to manage staffing issues that may arise in times of crisis (e.g., redundancies) or for more pernicious reasons, including the need to find a suitable scapegoat.

The role of social support. Another line of research demonstrates that the perceived suitability of men and women for leadership roles in a crisis situation is also dependent on the availability of social support. In particular, women are perceived as more effective leaders than men only when the decision to appoint a new leader does not receive full support from relevant stakeholders, such as senior management and shareholders (Rink et al., 2013). In line with our finding that stereotypically female characteristics appear particularly important when the task is to manage people through a crisis (Ryan et al., 2011), we again found that gendered leadership expectations led people to believe that women, more than men, would be capable of generating acceptance for their leadership position once placed in it. In other words, because female leaders are expected to excel in managing and building social relations, they were considered particularly suitable for positions that were accompanied by financial problems and internal relational problems caused by a lack of social support. If the crisis only involved financial problems but social support was present, participants reverted to traditional gender and leadership stereotypes, and expected a male leader to be more effective than a female one.

Having the support of senior management keeps a leader well informed, which is crucial in situations where leaders must make tough decisions and implement swift changes (Hunt, Boal, & Dodge, 1999). When this support is absent, crisis situations are likely to be particularly difficult to manage and hence particularly precarious and risky. Indeed, our qualitative interviews demonstrate that a lack of social support and resources was seen by women as one of the most important factors that made a leadership situation precarious. For example, when asked what most hindered her progress, one interviewee stated, "although they have all the policy-speak about equality and diversity, it's not really there—it's just a whole lot of spin and PR, and the real infrastructural and pragmatic support is not there for women" (Ryan, Haslam, Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2007, p. 9). Another woman explained "... to be honest, I felt very unsupported. I was given this remit and they just wanted me to get on with it and not bother them with the minor details. The 'minor details' meaning... the sustainability of the whole organization" (p. 10).

Taken together, this research suggests that the gender stereotypes that portray women as good people managers who will be particularly effective in recruiting social support may lead decision makers and stakeholders to selectively place women in particularly challenging situations (Rink et al., 2013). Moreover, it may

also, somewhat ironically, cause them to see there to be no need to provide additional support in these challenging situations. Such perceptions may exacerbate the already well-documented phenomenon whereby women report significantly less support in the workplace than their male counterparts, especially once they reach senior positions (Cross & Armstrong, 2008; Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 1998).

Female leaders as signals of change. Another factor that may contribute to the appointment of women to glass cliff positions may be that they are simply not men. When an organization is in crisis this is likely to be seen as an indication that the current approach is not working and that a change from the current (most likely male) model of leadership is needed (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). As one of our participants put it, "... for most companies a female CEO is something they haven't tried and so when things look bleak they start thinking what was previously 'unthinkable'" (Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007, p. 119).

In an archival study, Morgenroth (2012) found evidence of glass cliff appointment patterns among companies listed in the general German stock market index (DAX) that receives the most media attention, but not among the usually much smaller and less publicly visible companies listed in two more specialized indices (the TecDAX and the MDAX). Although this archival study tests the proposition that women are chosen to signal change in times of crisis in a rather indirect fashion, at least two experimental studies provide further support for this hypothesis. In one experimental study, we systematically varied the history of leadership in a successful or an unsuccessful company, so that for some participants all past leaders mentioned in a brief company description were male, while for other participants they were all female (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). Results of the study revealed that glass cliff appointment patterns were contingent on a male-dominated history of leadership. In this condition, participants again chose a male candidate to lead a successful company and a female candidate to lead an unsuccessful company. However, this pattern disappeared when the company had a history of female leadership. Importantly, however, it was not reversed. Reading about a few previous female leaders apparently was not enough to cause participants to see a male leader as representing change.

Additional evidence that speaks to this point comes from a study by Brown and others (2011). These authors found that an experience of threat (manipulated via a word completion task including words such as "crisis," "fear," or "threat," or via reminding US participants of the 9/11 terrorist attacks) leads to a preference for change rather than stability (Study 1); they further found that change is implicitly associated with women, while stability is associated with men (Study 2). Accordingly, when participants were exposed to a threat-manipulation the tendency to favor a male over a female leader that was observed in a control condition disappeared (Study 3) or was reversed (Study 4). To the extent that poor organizational performance or a state of crisis lead decision makers to feel

threatened, these studies suggest that this experience of threat might then initiate a desire for change and hence a preference for female leaders. Interestingly, Brown and colleagues (2011) also found that this preference for a female leader under conditions of threat was only evident among participants who subscribed to ideologies legitimizing the current sociopolitical system. This suggests that, somewhat paradoxically, opting for change by selecting women in times of crisis might actually be driven by an implicit desire to protect the status quo.

A somewhat related possibility is that organizations might not only seek actual change, but that they might deliberately appoint a nonprototypical leader in times of crisis to signal to stakeholders and other onlookers (e.g., the media) that they are embracing change (Lee & James, 2007). Although such processes are difficult to investigate via controlled experiments, there is some evidence suggesting that, at least in Japan, poor company performance is associated with the appointment of highly visible "outsiders," such as foreign nationals (Kaplan & Minton, 1994).

Sexism and ingroup favoritism. Another seemingly straightforward explanation of the glass cliff, and one that was particularly favored by the female participants in Ryan, Haslam, and Postmes' (2007) study, is that it may be the result of sexism and ingroup favoritism. Given that most decision makers are men, it may be the case that they protect fellow ingroup members (i.e., other men) from particularly risky positions, leaving precarious glass cliff positions for outgroup members (i.e., women). A more malign interpretation would be that appointing women to precarious positions is an expression of sexist decision makers' desire to set women up to fail while simultaneously being able to look gender-fair as a result of having provided women with these "opportunities." A similar explanation that some participants mentioned was based on the notion that decision makers may see women as more expandable than men and may therefore be more willing to appoint them to risky glass cliff positions (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007).

The evidence for this line of argument is mixed and depends on how one defines ingroup favoritism and sexism. In the experimental studies reviewed so far, the relative preference for a male leader in times of success and for a female leader in times of crisis was always independent of participants' own gender, providing no straightforward evidence of ingroup favoritism (Brown et al., 2011; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Gartzia et al., 2012; Haslam & Ryan, 2008, Study 1; Rink et al., 2013). Nevertheless, in one study Hunt-Early (2012) found that a preference to appoint women to leadership positions in times of crisis (i.e., the classic glass-cliff effect) co-occurred with evidence of a preference for a candidate of the same gender. However, as noted, qualitative and survey-based research conducted in corporate settings demonstrates that women often do lack the support networks and resources that are provided to men throughout their career (e.g., Ibarra, 1993; Tharenou, Latimer, & Conroy, 1994). Indeed, as mentioned, in

our interviews with (mostly female) professionals, a lack of social support stood out as the most important factor that caused leadership positions to be experienced as risky and precarious. This suggests that dynamics related to ingroup favoritism might indeed play an important role in glass cliff appointments in the corporate world.

Only very little research has looked directly at the role that sexist attitudes play in glass cliff appointments, but this research suggests that although blatant sexism might provide a very straightforward explanation, it may also be too simplistic. In an initial study, where we directly measured sexist attitudes, we found no relationship between these and the tendency to favor women for precarious positions (Ashby et al., 2007). In contrast, in a later study we found that participants who held more sexist attitudes were more likely to select a male candidate and more likely to favor a candidate with stereotypically masculine traits for leadership in times of organizational crisis than were participants with more egalitarian attitudes (Gartzia et al., 2012).

However, moving away from blatant sexism and explicitly held sexist attitudes, a number of studies that explore the more pernicious underpinnings of the glass cliff point to the subtle workings of sexism. For example, as mentioned, stereotypically female leaders seem more desirable than stereotypical male leaders when a manager's main task is to take responsibility or act as a scapegoat for continuing failure (Ryan et al., 2011, Study 3). Moreover, Haslam and Ryan (2008, Study 3) found that participants preferred a female over a male candidate in times of crisis, despite an expectation that taking on this leadership position would be more stressful for a woman than for a man. Indeed, mediation analyses revealed that this expectation of higher stressfulness for her than for him was a reason why they perceived the female candidate as more suitable for the position. This willingness to expose a woman to the higher stress associated with leading in a context of declining performance—and the associated decision to keep a man away from such a position—can certainly be interpreted as a form of sexism.

Finally, the finding that participants who endorse ideologies that legitimize the status quo are particularly likely to favor women under conditions of threat (Brown et al., 2011) hints at another process that might be involved in the creation of glass cliffs. For the well-documented changes in the think manager–think male and think crisis–think female associations might serve as a *justification* to protect men from precarious glass cliff positions, or even to set women up to fail. Although we are aware of no direct evidence for this proposition, we know from previous research that people, often unwittingly, adjust their perception of what is required in a position to justify the selection of a man over a woman for a desirable position (e.g., Phelan, Moss-Racusin, & Rudman, 2008). Suddenly seeing stereotypically male characteristics as less important and highlighting the importance of stereotypically female qualities when the position that needs to be filled is particularly risky and precarious might be one instantiation of this effect.

In sum, whether or not sexism should be added to the list of factors contributing to the glass cliff largely depends on how one defines sexism. The scarce empirical evidence that we have to date speaks against explicitly held sexist attitudes, especially blatant sexism, as a key factor, but suggests that more subtle and implicit sexist dynamics are likely to play an important role.

Do women actively seek the challenge?. Finally, given that it is generally harder for women to obtain positions of organizational leadership than it is for men, some have suggested that women may be more willing than men to embrace the dangers associated with a precarious leadership position (Lyness & Thompson, 2000; Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007). To explore this possibility, we recently conducted a series of studies in which we examined whether women were in fact more attracted to precarious leadership positions than men. In these studies, men's and women's evaluations of a leadership position were assessed across different crisis scenarios, which varied in terms of the availability of financial and social resources (Rink, Ryan, & Stoker, 2012).

Interestingly, the results demonstrated that it was men, and not women, who were more attracted to risky positions. However, both men's and women's evaluations of a risky position were informed by features of the situation that were related to prevalent gender stereotypes and leadership beliefs. Men were most cautious when a position lacked financial resources but were less hesitant about taking on a position that lacked social support. In contrast, women were relatively hesitant when a leadership position lacked such social resources. Here, women were concerned that they would not be able to live up to the communal notions of leadership often expected from them and that were clearly needed in the situation at hand (Carli, 1990; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004). This and other findings hint at the role of self-stereotyping; that is, in deciding whether or not to take on a leadership position, women's own views about how they could contribute to an organization were aligned with the gendered leader stereotypes that exist about them (Barreto, Ellemers, Cihangir, & Stroebe, 2008; Koenig & Eagly, 2005). Nevertheless, these studies (as well as the scenario studies with fictitious candidates summarized earlier) make it very unlikely that the glass cliff is simply the result of women themselves seeking the challenge of risky positions—or of men wanting to shy away from risk.

Robustness and Generalizability

Taken together, the research summarized thus far provides compelling evidence of the influence of organizational performance on gendered leadership preferences and selection. Archival research documents glass cliff appointment patterns in stock-market-listed corporations in the United Kingdom (Haslam et al., 2010; Ryan & Haslam, 2005) and in Germany (Morgenroth, 2012) as well as in

UK politics (Ryan et al., 2010). Experimental evidence comes from various samples of participants in the United Kingdom (e.g., Ashby et al., 2007; Haslam & Ryan, 2008), the United States (Brown et al., 2011; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010), the Netherlands (Rink et al., 2012; 2013), Australia (Ryan et al., 2011), and Spain (Gartzia et al., 2012), attesting to the robustness and generalizability of the phenomenon across a number of contexts and methods.

However, this does not mean that we would expect the glass cliff everywhere and in every crisis situation. As summarized, we have found considerable variation depending on the kind of crisis (Haslam et al., 2010; Morgenroth, 2012; Rink et al., 2013) and on what is expected of a future leader (Ryan et al., 2011). Moreover, all empirical evidence for the glass cliff comes from cultural contexts in which women are breaking through the glass ceiling in noticeable numbers (even though men are still grossly overrepresented in leadership roles). In contexts in which female leaders are still extremely rare exceptions or completely absent, decision makers might simply not consider women for leadership regardless of the circumstances. Conversely, if we were to achieve a situation in which men and women were equally well represented in leadership roles, women may no longer represent the change from the default think manager–think male stereotype that seems to play a key role in the etiology of the glass cliff.

Summary

In summary, the research we have reviewed thus far demonstrates that although women are increasingly advancing into positions of leadership, men and women tend to obtain different kinds of positions and their experiences in these positions differ accordingly. The reviewed research further demonstrates the importance of stereotypes about gender and leadership for the glass cliff. People's tendency to rely on gender stereotypes to define successful leadership is fairly robust (Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996). However, research into the glass cliff demonstrates that the default association of leadership with men disintegrates in times of crisis and that gender stereotypes further cause people to expect that women will be better crisis managers—better people managers and better marshals of social resources in particular. As a result, women are more likely to be appointed to leadership positions in times of crisis, although most women wish to avoid such precarious leadership positions where they have little chance to succeed.

Now that research has documented this relatively subtle form of gender discrimination and unveiled some of the moderating factors and mediating processes involved in it, how can we use what we know about the glass cliff to inform organizational policies and practice? What recommendations can we give to organizations concerning the steps that they can take to prevent glass cliff appointments in particular and to enhance gender equality in the workplace more generally? What

can individual women do to navigate around precarious glass cliffs, or to get the support they need when they find themselves in such a position?

Practical Implications of the Glass Cliff: For Women and for Organizations

Gender diversity remains an important organizational issue, and many organizations have policies and practices in place that are intended to promote this. Many of these initiatives aim to increase the number of women in leadership roles, for example, through women-focused leadership training initiatives, women's networks, and specialized mentoring programs, or more directly through gendered targets and quotas at senior management and executive levels. However, the research we have reviewed on the glass cliff suggests that gender equality is not simply about the number of women and men in leadership roles, it is also about the types of leadership roles they attain, the expectations surrounding their appointment, and their experiences in those roles. Thus, gender equality is not simply about increasing the quantity of women in certain positions, but also about the quality of those positions and their experience within those roles.

The glass cliff phenomenon has the potential to exacerbate the challenges that many organizations already face in achieving and maintaining gender equality in their upper echelons. Research into the nature of the glass cliff and the processes underlying precarious leadership appointments has a number of specific practical implications both for the women who may find themselves in glass cliff positions and for organizations. In the coming sections, we outline a number of these implications and then provide some examples of potential initiatives and interventions that may be instructive not only for women who are striving for leadership positions but also for human resources staff and managers more generally.

Implications for Women

Women's careers. No one wants their leaders to fail. But in some circumstances failure may be highly likely, or even inevitable. For example, within the political arena there are always going to be winners and losers, and within organizations there may simply be times when there is no choice other than to engage in damage control or to ride out a storm. We have seen that under these particularly precarious circumstances women (and the traits stereotypically associated with them) are favored over men (and masculine traits).

What are the implications for women's careers? We argue that glass cliff positions are precarious because of the increased likelihood of negative evaluations and failure (Ryan & Haslam, 2007) and that leading in a time of crisis is necessarily more difficult than keeping an organization on an even keel. One of the best predictors of current organizational performance is past performance. Thus, if women are overrepresented in companies that have been performing poorly in the

past, they are also likely to be overrepresented in companies performing badly in the present. Moreover, an organization in crisis is likely to be facing many leadership challenges, such as dealing with bad press, financial constraints, and making decisions about restructuring and employee retrenchment.

Even though many events may have been set in train long before women are appointed to glass cliff positions, we know from work on the romance of leadership (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985) that leaders are an important focus for explanations of organizational success and failure. This may be even more true for female leaders, who are highly visible because they are less common (Kanter, 1977). Thus, even where a woman has not caused a crisis or the events that lead to it, it is likely that she will be blamed or criticized for its consequences. Such attributions have the potential to have an adverse impact on women's careers. Apart from anything else, poor organizational performance and the need to make difficult decisions are likely to increase stress and strain (Ryan, Haslam, Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2007), to lead to less positive performance evaluations (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992), and to compromise one's chances of securing future leadership roles.

The glass cliff as an opportunity. The fact that we have outlined some potentially career-damaging aspects of glass cliff appointments does not mean that glass cliff positions should be avoided at all costs. Although our empirical research suggests that, overall, women are no more likely than men to actively seek a challenge (Rink et al., 2012), some women may see the think crisis–think female association as an opportunity. If women's access to positions of power is generally restricted, anything that opens doors to these positions may be seen as a positive step. Indeed, the very visibility that we discussed as being potentially detrimental to one's career, could also be framed positively, as a way of drawing attention to oneself and to one's abilities.

Confirming gender stereotypes. The appointment of women to glass cliff positions not only has implications for individual women themselves, but also has the potential to hurt women at a collective level. Having women overrepresented in challenging and risky positions may reinforce stereotypes in distinct ways. By having unequal representation of men and women across situations where things are going well and things are going badly, glass cliffs can reinforce the stereotypical association of successful management with men and masculinity, further perpetuating a think management–think male mind-set (Ryan et al., 2011; Schein, 1973). Moreover, if women do experience turbulent times in glass cliff positions, then this can reinforce stereotypes that women are not suited to leadership roles. Indeed, as we have seen, the original newspaper article that sparked research into the glass cliff (Judge, 2003) did precisely this—blaming women for poor organizational performance that occurred prior to their appointment and suggesting that

"corporate Britain would be better off without women on board" (p. 21). These stereotypes, and the conclusions they encourage, need to be challenged, so that individual women—and men—are selected for positions on the basis of individual merit rather than on the basis of gendered expectations (think crisis–think female; think manager–think male) or the desire for a scapegoat (Ryan et al., 2011).

Implications for Organizations

The business case. It is in the interests of all organizations to ensure that all employees are successful in their roles. But this is especially true in the case of leaders. For this reason, it is important for organizations to prevent glass cliffs from occurring. Beyond the moral and legal imperatives of ensuring that discrimination does not occur, there is also a business case for the prevention of glass cliff positions. For if the biggest asset for any organization is its employees and their skills and knowledge, then it is clearly problematic if a particular set of practices lead to the depletion of a particular part of the talent pool. The goal of recruiting, retaining, and developing one's "top talent" should not be reserved only for those who have a Y chromosome.

Moreover, those who occupy glass cliff positions are more likely to experience stress in the workplace and are more likely to be unhappy with their positions. Such experiences are likely to lead to absences, sickness leave, and ultimately employee turnover. These are all outcomes that are highly costly to organizations, leading to increased demand on recruitment and training budgets, lost time due to staff absences, and (if these are not frightening enough) the possibility of legal challenge.

Finally, to look at this the other way round, if it is the case that one is relying heavily on stereotypes either to make leadership appointments or to engage with managers then this is unlikely to yield optimal results—especially if one is seeking the best-fitting person for a job and the optimal solution to the specific challenges that an organization faces.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

Given the implications of the glass cliff phenomenon for both women and the organizations in which they work, the need for organizations to develop clear empirically based interventions and policies to address these inequalities seems quite obvious. Two of the most well-known policies to address gender inequality in the top layers of business and politics involve ensuring transparency about the representation of women in key positions and the implementation of gender quotas.

Speaking to the first of these, in many countries, listed companies are now required to disclose the number of female employees currently employed

at senior ranks and to provide a diversity agenda with measurable objectives in their annual report. When companies choose an alternative approach, they need to include an "if not, why not" clause and publicly explain the rationale behind their actions (Catalyst, 2012). More contentiously, a growing number of countries now formally regulate gender diversity on company boards and in political bodies. In politics, Spain and France are just a few of the European countries that have successfully introduced electoral quotas to boost the numbers of women in top positions (European Commission, 2011); in business, Norway has a legal requirement for 40% of board members to be female (Sweigart, 2012).

These two general measures have yielded some desired numerical effects, but our discussion of the glass cliff phenomenon makes it clear that simply appointing women to elevated positions will not improve gender diversity if higher management still endorses gendered leadership expectations (Ellemers, Rink, Derks, & Ryan, 2012). In this situation, organizations adopt these measures either because it is "the right thing to do" or because it is "the only thing to do," but, at best, still tend only to value women when their behavior is in line with the stereotypical leadership style that is expected from them (Eagly et al., 1992). This means that women may still not be able to display their full leadership potential. Accordingly, they run the risk of being placed in relatively precarious positions, where they lack freedom to act in accordance with their own professional identity, and experience a lack of fit with other leaders (as shown in the case of women surgeons; Peters, Ryan, Haslam, & Fernandes, 2012). One important consequence of these processes is that women who accept leadership positions as a result of an organizations' desire to "make the numbers look good" still might not entirely escape disadvantage. This then calls for additional policies, some of which we will describe.

Objective performance evaluations. As we have seen, glass cliff appointments are related to more subjective stock-based measures of organizational performance but not to more objective accountancy-based measures (Adams et al., 2009; Haslam et al., 2010; Morgenroth, 2012). This suggests that what matters most is perceptions of crisis, not the underlying financial realities in an organization. At the same time, the subjective perceptions of investors and stakeholders may be particularly sensitive to the enhanced visibility of women leading in crisis situations, and to the stereotypes they evoke (Haslam et al., 2010)—thus making glass cliff positions particularly precarious. The importance of stock-market performance notwithstanding, a first recommendation to organizations as well as to commentators evaluating the performance of women on corporate boards (as Judge did in her 2003 *Times* article), is therefore to base their evaluations more on objective accountancy-based indices than on measures that are highly susceptible to the influence of stereotypic expectations and unconscious biases.

Diversity programs. Furthermore, we propose that organizations ensure that senior management is made aware of the presence of subtle forms of gender discrimination at work, such as the glass cliff. One strategy could be to engage employees in training to reduce gendered associations such as think manager–think male and think crisis–think female (e.g., Kawakami, Dovidio, & van Kamp, 2005). Managers could be informed of the existence of gendered leadership beliefs within their own rank and given explanations of how these beliefs can play an important role in the selection and appointment of men and women to leadership positions. In this way, senior management will learn that they need to combat these beliefs not only to achieve gender diversity at the top but also to ensure that leadership appointments are driven by the actual fit between a candidate's skills and qualifications and the requirements of a particular situation.

Alongside this, organizations could develop training programs for both men and women that make them more aware of the barriers that women face at different levels of their career. Such training would ensure that female employees are able to make informed attributions about their own performance and ability and to develop appropriate strategies to combat the challenges that they face. For example, being aware of the stereotypic expectations surrounding the appointment of women in times of crisis is an important first step toward developing an effective strategy for managing those expectations—whether one wants to avoid precarious glass cliffs, or intends to leverage the extra attention drawn to such positions. Such training would also ensure that male colleagues are aware of the differential experience of men and women and be able to adjust their attitudes and evaluations accordingly.

Furthermore, ensuring that others are aware of the contexts in which women tend to become leaders and to the surrounding stereotypes has the capacity to improve both their decision making and the quality of support that they provide. Again, though, whether or not this actually occurs will depend largely on the motivations that underpin organizational responses to diversity (Peters, Haslam, Ryan, & Fonseca, 2013). Certainly, although awareness is preferable to ignorance, there is no sense in which awareness on its own necessarily translates into improvement, since, as we have seen, it can also be a stimulus for threat and backlash (Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007).

Social resources. Based on the empirical evidence we provide, one can also draw the conclusion that organizations should address the potential problems of the glass cliff by giving leaders in precarious positions greater access to social resources (Rink et al., 2012). Indeed, social networks, mentors, and support programs, many of them informal, may help leaders to build and maintain relationships and give them assistance in their career planning (Vinnicombe, Singh, & Kumra. 2004). However, women often have less access to these resources than men (Ibarra, 1993) while, ironically enough, they are at the same time expected to be particularly good at mobilizing such support (Rink et al., 2013). Certainly,

providing such resources to women (e.g., in the form of mentoring; Hersby, Ryan, & Jetten, 2009) would seem to be a promising strategy not only to help women attain the mantle of leadership, but also to help them perform at their full potential once they have secured it.

At the same time, though, our research clearly suggests that these resources should be designed in such a way that they do not strengthen the association between women and stereotypically feminine leadership traits. Only then will women experience less threat when they try to advance at work (Ellemers et al., 2012). One way organizations could achieve this is by developing social resources that advance women's position as a collective, rather than their positions as individuals. Research has demonstrated, for example, that networks or mentorships that benefit just a select group of high-potential women do not necessarily challenge the gendered leadership beliefs that are characteristic of an organization's broader management culture. That is, these very few women may still preferentially be appointed to difficult glass cliffs due to think crisis–think female stereotypes.

The right framing of interventions. One further reason why interventions of the form discussed above may fail is that they focus exclusively on the experiences of women, and the stereotypes that surround them. However, stereotypes about male leaders—and the think manager–think male association in particular—are of at least equal importance for gender inequality in the workplace in general, and for the glass cliff in particular (Bruckmüller et al., 2013; Eagly & Sczesny, 2009; Ryan et al., 2011). Thus, focusing interventions exclusively on women and stereotypes about women might not be the most effective strategy for achieving gender equality in the workplace. On the contrary, recent research shows that a predominant focus on women in the discussion of gender differences in leadership can enhance gender stereotypes and legitimize gender inequality, because such a focus on women as "the odd ones out" implicitly reinforces the normative status of men in leadership roles (Bruckmüller, Hegarty, & Abele, 2012)—that is, the think manager–think male stereotype.

Thus, when initiatives are designed to educate decision makers and/or prospective leaders about the glass cliff it is crucial not only to discuss the pernicious effects of stereotypes about women, but to also raise awareness of the prevalent think manager–think male association that creates the backdrop for these. More generally, implicitly marking female leaders out as "special" by focusing policies and interventions exclusively on them—for example, through selective training or networking programs—might subtly reinforce the think manager–think male association, and thereby undermine the very purpose of these policies (see Bruckmüller et al., 2012). Importantly, the point here is not that such programs are problematic *per se*, but rather that organizations need to be mindful about the way in which they present them to employees. Rather than framing such programs as extra help for women, it might be more effective to present interventions such

as mentoring or networking programs as a necessary way of countering structural inequality; training programs could be promoted in a more gender-neutral fashion, with a focus on the acquisition of specific skills rather than on gender demographics—especially when the designated skills are traditionally linked with gender stereotypes.

To conclude, in order to combat the glass cliff and to achieve true gender diversity at the top of organizations, we recommend adopting measures that decrease the likelihood that higher management, as well as women themselves, associate stereotypically feminine qualities with female leaders and contrast these with a masculine norm of leadership. Such policies should also target the collective, with a view to making it more likely that women feel that they can fit in with higher management because of who they are as individual leaders, rather than because of (or despite) their gender and the skills stereotypically associated with it.

How to Get the Best Out of Gender Diversity

In the preceding section, we focused on policies that help to promote gender diversity at the top of organizations. Yet, our research on the glass cliff demonstrates that many organizations build their business case for gender diversity on the wrong grounds. They often hold to a belief that gender diversity is beneficial because women bring a communal, interpersonal leadership style to the table, which is assumed to be particularly helpful in times of crisis or when internal relations are disturbed. As such, many organizations may believe that by increasing the number of women in top positions, they will automatically improve their outcomes. But the positive link that has been established in some studies between gender diversity in top positions and various objective organizational outcomes cannot be attributed to the fact that women enact this feminine leadership style (e.g., Erhardt, Werbel, & Shrader, 2003; Krishnan & Park, 2005; Welbourne, Cycyota, & Ferrante, 2007). Rather, it seems that these outcomes flow from the availability of multiple task perspectives and an open diversity climate (see Rink & Ellemers, 2010). This conclusion is in line with the findings of research on diversity in organizations more generally (Joshi & Roh, 2009). Any form of diversity at the top, including gender diversity, can serve as a catalyst for increasing productive work outcomes and creativity, but only under conditions where it is managed carefully by the organization and where it is embraced as part of its core ideology (van Knippenberg, Haslam, & Platow, 2007). Selecting women for precarious positions because they are deemed to bring an interpersonal leadership style, or to simply set them up as easy-to-blame scapegoats (Ryan et al., 2011) is unlikely to result in a positive, and therefore beneficial, diversity climate. In the following paragraphs, we provide recommendations about how to ensure that organizations can benefit from gender diversity—and how this might help to eliminate the glass cliff.

Diversity climate. Although all programs designed to harness the benefits of diversity aim to create awareness about the value of diversity among higher management, they can do so in different ways. Many programs, for example, emphasize that people should make use of the diverse talents and backgrounds available to meet organizational goals (Pless & Maak, 2004). These programs thus try to create a diversity climate where the differences between groups are acknowledged and celebrated (e.g., Dwyer, Richard, & Chadwick, 2003). In the case of gender diversity, however, there is a need to counteract the existing gendered stereotypes about leadership. By merely emphasizing the differences between men and women, organizations may unintentionally signal that they endorse these stereotypes rather than question them (see also Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, & Crosby, 2008), and the negative consequences of stereotypical think manager–think male and think crisis–think female associations, including the creation of precarious glass cliffs for women, may be compounded rather than challenged.

We therefore suggest that in the specific case of gender diversity, organizations should try to create a diversity climate at the top that acknowledges differences between individuals. That is, the goal is to realize that women, just like men, can hold very different professional identities, display very different leadership styles, can differ in the task strategies that they work with, and may also differ in the career paths to which they aspire (Ellemers et al., 2012; Rink & Ellemers, 2007). In such a diversity climate, organizations should seek to emphasize the importance of individual or nongendered group differences (e.g., in professional background), rather than simply gendered differences between men and women and the stereotypical expectations that are associated with them. We believe that such a diversity climate will put organizations in a better place to benefit from gender diversity at the top because it minimizes the likelihood of women and men being straightjacketed by a particular set of group-based expectations, such as being deemed particularly good "people managers" in times of crisis. Certainly, group differences are an important part of social and organizational life, but it is a serious mistake to imagine (or to act as if it were the case), that those based on gender are of supreme importance.

Conclusions

In summary, we have seen that rather than a single "glass ceiling" simply cordoning off the upper reaches of organizations, women face a diverse range of barriers and challenges as they start to reach the top of organizations. In particular, research into the glass cliff phenomenon demonstrates not only that women are less likely to obtain leadership positions than men but that the positions that they do obtain tend to be more precarious and to be associated with higher levels of stress and a greater risk of failure. Accordingly, it is important that we see gender diversity in leadership not simply as a matter of increasing the number of women

in senior roles, but also as a matter of ensuring that the positions they achieve offer the same opportunities as those given to their male counterparts.

Our review reveals that the phenomenon of the glass cliff is determined by multiple causes. These include stereotypical perceptions that women are better crisis managers and better people managers (think crisis–think female) as well as a stereotypical association between leadership and men (think manager–think male) that lies at the heart of many forms of gender discrimination in the workplace (Bruckmüller et al., 2013; Eagly & Szcesny, 2009). Additional, and not entirely unrelated, factors include the perception of women as representing change from the default (male) standard, and the subtle workings of sexist dynamics.

As outlined, there are a number of approaches that organizations can take to prevent glass cliff appointments and to encourage gender diversity and equality in leadership positions. Importantly, the different explanations for the glass cliff that individuals or organizations endorse are likely to impact on the support for particular interventions. Indeed, a key point here is that if the explanations that are provided for phenomena such as the glass cliff are not persuasive, then interventions based on these notions are unlikely to be embraced or to achieve desired outcomes. For example, research reveals the appeal of explanations for social phenomena that help affirm (or do not threaten) one's identity (Morton, Haslam, Postmes, & Ryan, 2006). Consistent with this, men are less likely than women to endorse explanations of the glass cliff that see it as a consequence of men's sexists beliefs or ingroup favoritism (Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007). On the other hand, explanations of the glass cliff that revolve around stereotypes about women as better crisis managers (without simultaneously interrogating stereotypical assumptions that leadership is a male activity), run the risk of reinforcing the notion that women are in some way suited for specific management tasks—but (unlike men) not necessarily for leadership in general.

Thus, interventions need to be carefully selected, explained, and implemented. On the one hand, it is important for policy makers to know which explanations are likely to be seen as credible and which justifications for interventions will be accepted within an organization. On the other hand, it is important for them to be critically aware of the potential consequences of the various gender-relevant explanations and interventions that they offer. For example, given that experimental evidence highlights the importance of stereotypes about gender and leadership for the glass cliff, an important dual goal of policies and interventions must be to reduce both the stereotypic perception of female leaders as a category all to themselves and the stereotypic definition of leadership itself as normatively male. That is, we need to work against those norms and ideologies that lead us to imagine that for women leadership is always about their gender, but that for men it never is.

Importantly too, policy and practice must be seen as inextricably linked in our quest for gender equality. On the one hand, we must ensure that good practice

(e.g., the positive experiences of women and men leaders) is translated into formal policy so as to make the most of constructive opportunities for progress. On the other hand, we must ensure that our policies are not just an exercise in ticking the diversity box but that they are properly enacted through organizational practice. For while practice without policy is hapless, policy without practice is worthless.

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