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The road to the glass cliff: Differences in the perceived suitability of men and women for leadership positions in succeeding and failing organizations

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ABSTRACT

Research into gender and leadership has tended to focus on the inequalities that women encounter while trying to climb the corporate ladder, with particular emphasis on the role played by the so-called glass ceiling. However, recent archival evidence has identified an additional hurdle that women must often overcome once they are in leadership positions: the glass cliff [Ryan, M. K., & Haslam, S. A. (2005a). The glass cliff: Evidence that women are over-represented in precarious leadership positions. British Journal of Management, 16, 81–90; Ryan, M. K. & Haslam, S. A. (2007). The glass cliff: Exploring the dynamics surrounding women's appointment to precarious leadership positions. Academy of Management Review]. This refers to the phenomenon whereby women are more likely than men to be appointed to leadership positions associated with increased risk of failure and criticism because these positions are more likely to involve management of organizational units that are in crisis. This paper presents three experimental studies (*N*s = 95, 85, 83) that represent the first experimental investigations of the glass cliff phenomenon. In these, management graduates (Study 1), high-school students (Study 2) or business leaders (Study 3) selected a leader for a hypothetical organization whose performance was either improving or declining. Consistent with predictions, results indicate that the likelihood of a female candidate being selected ahead of an equally qualified male candidate increased when the organization's performance was declining rather than improving. Study 3 also provided evidence that glass cliff appointments are associated with beliefs that they (a) suit the distinctive leadership abilities of women, (b) provide women with good leadership opportunities and (c) are particularly stressful for women. These findings define an important agenda for future research.

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1. Introduction

Historically, research into gender and leadership has focused on the under-representation of women within the upper echelons of management and on possible explanations for this gender inequality. Research has focused on a diverse range of explanations including (a) overt sexism in the workplace (e.g., Schwartz, 1971), (b) perceived incompatibilities between women's abilities and the requirements of leadership (e.g., Arvey, 1979; Schein, 1973), (c) women's competing responsibilities in the home (Equal Pay Task Force, 2001; Schwartz, 1994), and (d) women's fear of success (Horner, 1972). However, despite differing opinions about what the underlying processes may be, it is clear that while women traditionally encounter a 'glass ceiling' (an invisible barrier preventing their rise into leadership ranks, see *The corporate woman*, 1986; Kanter, 1977; Morisson, White, & Van Velsor, 1987), men are more likely to be accelerated into management positions by means of a 'glass escalator' (Williams, 1992).

However, recent evidence suggests that women are beginning to break through the glass ceiling that has, up until now, prevented them from achieving the upper reaches of organizational leadership (e.g., Davidson & Cooper, 1992; Dreher, 2003;

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Goodman, Fields, & Blum, 2003; Stroh, Langlands, & Simpson, 2004). In this regard, the past 15 or so years has seen great gains in women's representation in leadership roles. For example, recent data from the United States indicates that in 2004 women represented just over 50% of the 48 million employees in management, professional, and related occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005). Similarly, in Britain, the number of women executives has doubled over this period, while the number of women company directors has tripled (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2002).

While these statistics are encouraging, not all is rosy for women in leadership. Worldwide, the distribution of gender in the management hierarchy is skewed such that women tend to occupy the lower and middle ranks, while men cluster around the most powerful positions at the top (e.g., Catalyst, 1996; EOC, 2002; Vinnicombe, 2000). Furthermore, women managers still receive significantly less remuneration for their work, with female managers receiving 24% less pay than their male counterparts (Blau & Kahn, 2000; EOC, 2002). Nonetheless, despite these inequalities, it is clear that the gender composition of management is very different from that 20 years ago.

These corporate and social changes have been mirrored by a diversification of research investigating gender and leadership. Instead of looking solely at the barriers that women face while trying to attain leadership positions, research has broadened to encompass investigations of what transpires when women achieve these leadership roles. Much of this research has concentrated on the relative differences (or similarities) between male and female managers. For example, studies have investigated the way in which female managers differ from male managers (or from women who have not reached management roles) in terms of (a) demographic characteristics such as age, education, and marital status (e.g., Harlan & Weiss, 1982), (b) career path (e.g., Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003), (c) management style (e.g., Bass & Avolio, 1994; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001), (d) ability to cope in a crisis (e.g., Mano-Negrin & Sheaffer, 2004), and (e) effectiveness as leaders (e.g., Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995).

In this way, ongoing research in the field of gender and leadership tends to focus on the individual *abilities* of women leaders and on the evaluation of these abilities. Indeed, the focus on the traits and abilities of leaders has yielded many interesting findings and has for the most part sent a message that women make good managers (e.g., Bass & Avolio, 1994; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003; Vecchio, 2002). An alternative strategy, however, is to examine the circumstances surrounding leadership positions or the nature of the positions themselves (see Cappelli & Sherer, 1991; Haslam, 2001; Haslam et al., 2001; Meindl, 1993). Along these lines, recent research by Ryan & Haslam (2005a) suggests that there are important differences in the *types* of leadership positions that men and women may hold.

1.1. The glass cliff

Recent archival research by Ryan & Haslam (2005a) investigated the circumstances surrounding the appointment of directors of companies in Britain in 2003. More specifically, these researchers examined share price performance of FTSE 100 companies both immediately before and after the appointment of a male or female board member. What was striking in the data was not that the appointment of a man or a woman had a differential effect on company performance, which would suggest that there were gender differences in leadership abilities (cf. Judge, 2003), but rather that company performance *leading up* to the appointment of a director was very different depending on the gender of the appointee. For companies that appointed men to their boards of directors, share price performance was relatively stable, both before and after the appointment. However, in a time of a general financial downturn in the stock market, companies that appointed a woman had experienced *consistently poor performance* in the months preceding the appointment.

In this extensive data set it was therefore apparent that men and women were being appointed to directorships under very different circumstances. To characterize the nature of this difference, Ryan & Haslam (2005a,b, 2007) extended the metaphor of the glass ceiling to suggest that women are more likely than men to find themselves on a 'glass cliff'—an allusion to the fact that their leadership positions are relatively risky or precarious since they are more likely to involve management of organizational units that are in crisis. Such positions, the researchers argue, are potentially dangerous for the women who hold them, as companies that experience consistently bad performance are likely to attract attention, both to their financial circumstances and to those on their boards of directors. Moreover in these circumstances the co-occurrence of two relatively rare events—the appointment of a woman director and continuing poor organizational outcomes—is likely to lead to them being seen as meaningfully related (Hamilton & Gifford, 1976), not least because this association fits with prevailing theories and ideologies (Haslam, McGarty, & Brown, 1996; McGarty, Haslam, Turner, & Oakes, 1993). This in turn should shift focus on to the individual abilities of the leaders involved rather than to the situational and contextual factors that affect the company (Lord, Binning, Rush, & Thomas, 1978; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985). In this way, compared to men, women who assume leadership positions may be differentially exposed to criticism and in greater danger of being apportioned blame for negative outcomes that were initiated well before they assumed their new roles. Indeed, this is seen in Judge's (2003) conclusion that the appointment of women to boards in the UK has "wreaked havoc on companies' performance" (p. 21).

This phenomenon of the glass cliff is consistent with previous research exploring the women's career trajectory. Such research provides evidence that women often encounter a range of problems and barriers on the other side of the glass ceiling. For example, longitudinal research by Stroh, Brett, & Reilly (1996) found that, in a sub-sample of 20 Fortune 500 companies examined over a two-year period, more women left management positions than men (26% vs. 14%, respectively). Importantly, this difference was *not* because women had more family commitments (as is often portrayed in the popular media, e.g., Helping women get to the top, 2005; Hall, 2005) but rather because women had become more disaffected with their working life because their career opportunities were limited and sub-optimal (see also Merritt, Reskin, & Fondell, 1993). Indeed, the authors concluded that women left their jobs for exactly the same reasons as men—it was simply that they had *more* reason to do so.

Possible sources of this disaffection have been examined in a number of studies. For example, archival research examining the workplace experiences of male and female senior executives revealed several key differences in the nature of men's and women's positions (Lyness & Thompson, 1997). Specifically, the positions women occupy tend to (a) be more restrictive (e.g., involving less opportunity for career mobility), (b) involve less authority (see also Jacobs, 1992; Wright, Baxter, & Birkelund, 1995), and (c) offer fewer tangible rewards (such as stock options, see also Kulich, Ryan, & Haslam, 2007). Furthermore, overall, women's satisfaction with their positions has been found to be significantly lower than that of men, leading Lyness & Thompson (1997) to conclude that women were now encountering new, and relatively subtle, forms of discrimination.

Such subtle differences were demonstrated in an analysis by Frankforter (1996) who found that when women broke through into senior management they tended to obtain positions that involved dealing with other staff (e.g., in areas of personnel and human resource management) rather than with production (see also Gold & Pringle, 1988). This pattern is relevant to the present analysis because 'soft' personnel work (and the *emotional labor* associated with it) tends not only to be less valued by organizations than 'hard' production work (which is more often defined as 'core business'; Powell, 1980), but also to involve more interpersonal conflict and greater stress (Burke & McKeen, 1995; Erickson & Ritter, 2001; Guy & Newman, 2004; Pugliesi, 1999). It is also less likely to lead on to more senior appointments.

Taken together, these studies, and the archival research on the glass cliff (Ryan & Haslam, 2005a) suggest that the senior positions that women take on may be very different from their male counterparts. Indeed, as suggested by Ohlott, Ruderman, & McCauley (1994), men are more likely than women to report that the challenges they face on climbing the organizational hierarchy serve a positive self-developmental purpose, while women are more likely to experience the barriers they face as obstacles.

Along related lines, the glass cliff phenomenon is also consistent with research which suggests that charismatic (or transformational) leadership—which is often associated with women leaders (e.g., Eagly et al., 2003)—is more likely to emerge, and to be sought, in times of crisis (e.g., Bass, 1990; Hunt, 1991; Pillai, 1996; Weber, 1946). Specifically, it is argued that in times of crisis, feelings of confusion, fear, and uncertainly may lead to charismatic leadership being seen as highly desirable. Data consistent with this idea emerge from research in the political realm where it has been found that in the context of crisis, leaders' actual behaviour becomes more charismatic in the sense that their rhetoric is more likely to have a collective focus and to emphasize the role of followers (Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl, 2004; House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991; see also Pillai, 1996). Again, then, to the extent that women's leadership style tends to be more charismatic than that of men, it may be seen as particularly valuable in times of crisis.

1.2. The present research

The archival research conducted by Ryan & Haslam (2005a) is suggestive of the existence of glass cliff appointments in FTSE 100 companies. However, while high in external validity, there are at least three reasons why this archival research needs to be supplemented by controlled experimental research. First, it needs to be established whether the glass cliff is a *robust* phenomenon that generalises to other contexts. Second, experimental research needs to be conducted to clarify the *causal structure* of any relationships between gender and company performance (Haslam & McGarty, 2004). In particular, there is a need to establish that poor company performance can be a basis for women to be appointed to leadership positions ahead of men, and that the relationship between candidate gender and nature of appointment is not simply the product of some extraneous (hitherto uninvestigated) factor. Third, such research is necessary to investigate the *psychological processes* associated with the phenomenon. For example, can the appointment of women to precarious leadership positions result from decision-making and judgmental processes surrounding the appointment process? If so, what are the critical dimensions on which such decisions and judgments are made? Are women perceived to be better qualified than men for leadership positions that involve crisis management? If so, why?

The present research was conducted in an attempt to answer such questions. In the first instance its purpose was to gather evidence pertaining to the glass cliff phenomenon in a controlled experimental setting. In the event that the studies provided evidence of the phenomenon (i.e., by showing that women were selected ahead of men for leadership positions in organizations that were in crisis), a second aim was to provide an initial exploration of the psychological and contextual factors that might contribute to this.

2. Study 1

The first study was designed as an initial empirical investigation of the glass cliff phenomenon in a corporate setting. Is it the case that, compared to men, women are more likely to be chosen for leadership positions when organizations are in crisis rather than when they are doing well? Study 1 also aimed to identify factors that might contribute to the appointment of women to glass cliff positions—including the culture of the hiring company and the evaluation of candidates.

First, it is important to investigate whether company culture plays a role in glass cliff appointments. That is, are particular types of companies more likely to place women in risky positions? Suggestive of this possibility, there is some evidence that gender inequalities in leadership are more prevalent in specific sectors, with a higher proportion of women managers in service sectors such as health and social services, retailing, and banking than in industrial sectors such as manufacturing, farming, or mining (e.g., Davidson & Cooper, 1992; EOC, 2002; Goodman et al., 2003; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2003). It is possible that those areas that are less likely to have women managers may be more likely to differentiate on the basis of gender and thus be more likely to appoint women to glass cliff positions.

Second, it is important to investigate the reasons why women might be being placed in risky leadership positions. One way to do this is to look at the way in which potential candidates are evaluated when being appointed to risky or non-risky positions. Is it the case that a woman is seen as being the best person for the risky job? Consistent with this idea, there is evidence to suggest that company performance may not only affect who is appointed to a leadership position within a company (as suggested by the glass

cliff phenomenon), but may also affect the evaluation of potential leaders. Along these lines, Emrich (1999) demonstrated that, as well as influencing the evaluation of incumbent leaders, company performance also affected the perceptions of candidates for a leadership position within the company. The study revealed that a potential leader (Mark) was falsely perceived to display more leadership qualities when he was a leadership candidate for a troubled company than when he was a candidate for a tranquil one. For these reasons, it is important to look at whether male and female candidates are differentially evaluated in the context of varying company performance.

Following on from Ryan & Haslam's (2005a) archival study, a risky leadership position was defined as a role on an executive board of directors in a company with consistently declining performance (and hence an increased risk of failure), as opposed to a role in a company with continuing success (a position that was more safe). Here it was hypothesised that, compared to men, women would be more favourably evaluated and more likely to be recommended for leadership positions in a company when its performance was declining rather than improving (H1). It was further hypothesised that glass cliff positions would be more pronounced in companies whose core business was 'masculine' in nature, rather than 'feminine' (H2).

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and design

Participants were 95 graduate students enrolled in an international management course at a British university who took part in the study as part of a class exercise. The median age of participants was 24; 61 were female and 32 were male (2 did not specify their gender). Participants received information about a leadership vacancy in a company that was described as being a manufacturer of either (a) health and beauty products or (b) building construction materials and whose performance over the past decade had been either (a) improving or (b) declining. Participants then evaluated a male and female candidate for the position. The study thus had a 2 (company description: masculine or feminine)×2 (gender of candidate: male, female)×2 (company performance: improving or declining)×2 (gender of participant: male, female) design, with repeated measures on the second factor.

2.1.2. Materials and procedure

At the start of the study, participants were randomly provided with one of four versions of a seven-page questionnaire. The first page consisted of a job advertisement for a desirable senior management position, a financial director for a large, international firm. Half of the participants were told that the company was a 'major manufacturer and distributor of organic health and beauty products' (feminine company) while the other half were told that the company was a 'major design and manufacturing firm specializing in high-tech building products' (masculine company). Participants then received information about the performance of the company in the form of a newspaper article. In the improving performance condition, the article was entitled *From Strength to Strength: Eco-Beauty's [Eco-Construction's] Outstanding Stock Performance*, and described a 'steady increase in its financial performance', backed up by a graph showing a dramatic increase in the trading value of the company's stock over the past decade. In contrast, participants assigned to the declining performance condition were presented with an article entitled *Going Down: Eco-Beauty's [Eco-Construction's] Disastrous Stock Performance*, which described a 'steady drop in its financial performance', backed up by a graph showing a dramatic decrease in the company's stock over the past decade.

Participants were then presented with a description and photograph of three candidates for the advertised position. From the descriptions it was readily apparent that two of the three candidates stood out as being well qualified for the position: Candidate 1 (a male candidate) and Candidate 3 (a female candidate). Both these candidates were highly experienced, currently holding Financial Director positions and both having earned MBAs from prestigious business schools. A third (male) candidate (Candidate 2) was included to enhance mundane realism and capture features of the typical shortlist for management positions—in which women are a numerical minority (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003). However, this candidate was obviously much weaker than Candidates 1 and 3: having had far less management experience, having worked in an area that was less relevant to the position, and having only just begun an MBA at a distinctly less prestigious institution. The photographs were chosen after pilot testing so that Candidates 1 and 3 were as similar as possible on all dimensions other than gender: they were both white and of equivalent age and attractiveness.

Participants were then asked to evaluate each of the candidates by indicating their level of agreement with six statements (from 1, *do not agree at all*, to 7, *agree completely*). The statements were designed to measure perceptions of (a) the candidates' leadership ability ('The candidate would be a good leader', 'The candidate has the skills and experience to lead other people', 'The candidate has clear leadership credentials'; male candidate α=.69; female candidate α=.78), and (b) the candidates' suitability for the position ('The candidate's past experience is relevant to the position', 'The candidate will bring the required skills to the job', 'The candidate is suitable for this position'; male candidate α=.85; female candidate α=.86).

Participants were then asked to rank the three candidates from 1 to 3, where 1 was the most appointable and 3 was the least appointable. Finally, participants answered some basic demographic questions. After completing the questionnaire they were debriefed in full.

2.2. Results

2.2.1. Ranking of candidates

Preliminary analysis of variance on both ranking and evaluation measures with all four factors revealed that, as expected, Candidate 2 was indeed seen by participants as significantly less suitable for the position. Accordingly, subsequent analysis focused

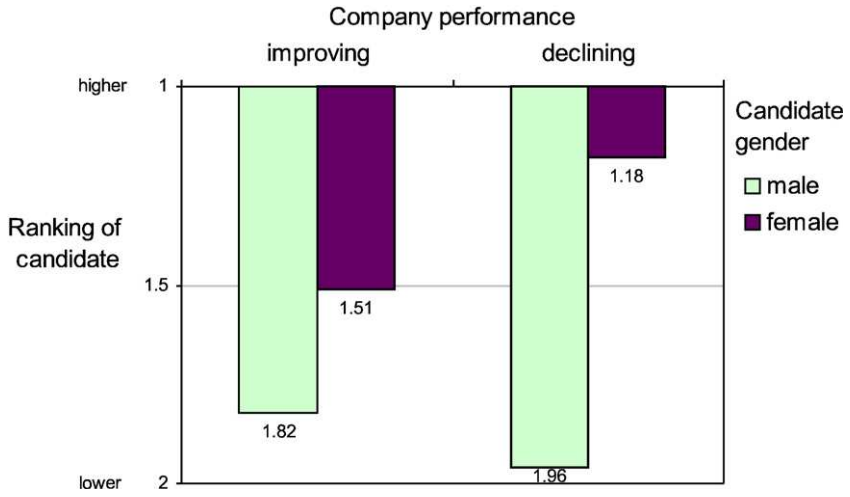

Fig. 1. Study 1: Mean rankings of candidates for leadership position as a function of candidate gender and company performance.

solely on evaluations of Candidates 1 and 3. This analysis also revealed that the gender of participant had no impact on the ranking or evaluation of candidates (all *p*s>.10) and so this variable was dropped from subsequent analyses.

In order to investigate the impact of company performance and company culture on the ranking of the focal candidates, a 2 (performance: improving, declining)×2 (company description: masculine or feminine)×2 (evaluated candidate: male, female) ANOVA was conducted with repeated measures on the last factor. In contrast to H2, the results indicated that the description of the company as either masculine or feminine had no effect on the ranking of the focal candidates, either on its own or in conjunction with any other variables, all *p*s>.10. There was, however, a significant main effect for gender of the evaluated candidate, $F(1,91)=31.58$, $p<.001$, such that the female candidate tended to be ranked higher (i.e., a lower score, $M=1.36$) than the male candidate ($M=1.89$). However, as can be seen in Fig. 1, this main effect was qualified by the predicted two-way interaction between gender of the evaluated candidate and the performance of the company, $F(1,91)=5.37$, $p=.02$. Tests of simple effects to decompose this interaction revealed that it arose from the fact that for the male candidate, the performance of the company had no impact on his rankings ($M_{\text{declining}}=1.96$, $M_{\text{improving}}=1.82$), $F(1,91)=1.27$, $p=.26$, but that, in line with H1, the performance of the company did have a significant impact on the ranking of the female candidate—so that she was ranked higher when the company's performance was declining ($M=1.18$) than when it was improving ($M=1.51$), $F(1,91)=7.75$, $p=.01$.

In addition, a chi-square analysis was performed to examine the ranking of the focal candidates as a function of company performance. In ranking the candidates, participants overwhelming favoured the female candidate, with 70.5% ranking her first, while only 21.1% of participants ranked the male candidate first. However, again in line with H1, chi-square analysis revealed that company performance had a marginally significant impact on the ranking of the male, $\chi^2(2)=5.30$, $p=.07$, and a significant impact on the ranking of the female candidate, $\chi^2(2)=10.33$, $p=.01$. So, although participants generally favoured the female candidate over the male, this pattern was much more pronounced when the performance of the company was declining (see Table 1). When the company had been performing poorly, 86.4% of participants preferred the female candidate to the male candidate, but when the company was performing well only 56.9% preferred the female candidate to the male.

2.2.2. Evaluation of candidates

In order to examine participants' perception of the focal candidates, scales were created to measure perceptions of (a) the candidates' leadership ability, and (b) the candidates' suitability for the leadership position. Each of these measures was subjected to a 2 (company description: masculine, feminine)×2 (performance: improving, declining)×2 (evaluated candidate: male, female) ANOVA, with repeated measures on the last factor. The results for each of these analyses are reported below.

2.2.2.1. Perceptions of leadership ability. Analysis revealed no significant effects for company description either on its own or in conjunction with other variables. There was, however, a significant main effect for gender of the evaluated candidate, $F(1,87)=43.80$, $p<.001$, such that the female candidate tended to be seen as a better leader ($M=5.68$) than the male candidate ($M=5.03$). However,

Table 1
Study 1: Percentage of participants who ranked candidate first as a function of candidate gender and company performance

Gender of candidate	Company performance		
	Improving (%)	Declining (%)	Overall (%)
Male	29.4	11.4	21.1
Female	56.9	86.4	70.5

in line with H1 this was qualified by a significant two-way interaction between gender of the evaluated candidate and the performance of the company, $F(1,87)=5.98$, $p=.02$. Tests of simple effects revealed that this arose from the fact that while the female candidate was perceived to be an equally able leader when the company performance was improving and declining (both Ms = 5.68), $F(1,87)<1$, ns, the male candidate was perceived to be a significantly more able leader when the company performance was improving ($M=5.24$) than when it was declining ($M=4.77$), $F(1,87)=6.33$, $p=.01$.

2.2.2.2. Perceptions of suitability. Analysis revealed a significant main effect for gender of the evaluated candidate, $F(1,89)=33.70$, $p<.001$, such that the female candidate tended to be seen as better suited for the position ($M=5.76$) than the male candidate ($M=5.19$). There were no significant effects for company performance or company description, either on their own or in conjunction with other variables.

2.3. Discussion

The results of this study provide the first experimental evidence of the glass cliff phenomenon, and demonstrate the importance of company performance in determining the perceived suitability of male and female candidates for leadership positions. Although (unexpectedly) participants overall tended to rank the female candidate higher than the male candidate, in line with H1, she was seen as significantly more appointable to a leadership position when the company's performance was declining than when its performance was improving.

However, what remains unclear are the psychological processes underlying this effect. In the present case this is because there was no support for the hypothesis (H2) that glass cliff appointments would be more likely in masculine companies. Here, then, the description of the company as either masculine (manufacturers of building materials) or feminine (an organic health and beauty company) had no impact on rankings of the candidates.

Furthermore, the above results suggest that glass cliff appointments cannot be explained simply in terms of women being seen as better qualified for jobs in risky situations. While women were more likely to be appointed to leadership positions when company performance was declining, the performance of the company did not have an impact on any evaluation measures: she was not seen to be a better leader or be more suitable for the risky position.

Indeed, the only evaluation measure affected by company performance was the participants' judgment of the *male* candidate's leadership ability. Here, in contrast to Emrich's (1999) research—in which a male candidate was perceived to have more leadership qualities when he was applying for a position in a troubled company than in a tranquil one—our results revealed that the male candidate was seen as having *less* leadership ability when the company was experiencing declining, rather than improving, performance. In order to investigate these issues further, a second study was conducted.

3. Study 2

Following from Study 1, this second study attempted to provide further empirical evidence of the glass cliff phenomenon. More specifically, it aimed to do this using a non-corporate context and a different sample of participants. In this case the sample was comprised of high-school students, and the leadership context centred around a novel scenario involving a successful or an unsuccessful music festival. Along the lines of Study 1, it was hypothesised that, compared to an equally qualified male candidate, a female candidate would be seen as more appointable to a leadership position in a festival whose popularity was declining (and involved an increased risk of failure) than in a festival whose popularity was improving and whose continued success seemed assured (H1).

In Study 1 pilot testing had been conducted to match the descriptions and photos of the focal candidates as closely as possible. However, as each of the target photographs and descriptions that were used in that study were confounded with gender, it could still be argued that the glass cliff effects obtained in those studies were a product not of gender differences but of differences between the specific targets that were used (e.g., in terms of their perceived attractiveness and intelligence). Although it seems unlikely that such attributes could have had such an effect independent of gender, it is important to address this potential confound. To this end, Study 2 (a) counterbalanced descriptions of focal male and female candidates, (b) used multiple photographs of focal candidates, and (c) incorporated measures of candidate attractiveness and intelligence as gauged from their photographs.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants and design

Participants were 85 students attending a community college in the UK. The median age of participants was 16; 61 were female and 24 were male. Participants received information about a job vacancy for a youth consultant to a music festival whose performance (measured by popularity) over the past decade had been either improving or declining. Participants then evaluated a male and female candidate for the position. The study thus had a 2 (festival performance: improving, declining)×2 (gender of candidate: male, female)×2 (gender of participant: male, female) design, with repeated measures on the second factor.

3.1.2. Materials and procedure

The procedure was similar to that used in Study 1. Participants were randomly provided with one of two versions of a seven-page questionnaire. The first page consisted of a job advertisement for a desirable youth consultant position with a large-scale

annual music festival (the 'Big Day Out') intended to provide a voice for youth in the region where the participants lived. Participants then received information about the performance of the festival in the form of a newspaper article. In the improving performance condition, the article had the headline *From Strength to Strength*: *The Big Day Out's Outstanding Youth Attendance*, and described a 'steady increase in its appeal for the youth market', backed up by a graph showing a dramatic increase in youth attendance over the past decade. In contrast, participants in the declining performance condition were presented with an article headed *Going Down: The Big Day Out's Disastrous Youth Attendance*, which described a 'steady drop in its appeal for the youth market', backed up by a graph showing a dramatic decrease in youth attendance over the past decade.

Participants were then presented with a description and photograph of three young people who were candidates for the advertised position. As in Study 1, two of the three candidates stood out as being well qualified for the position: Candidate 1 (a male candidate) and Candidate 3 (a female candidate). Both of these candidates met the selection criteria outlined in the job advertisement—both were being actively involved in the local music scene, both belonged to a successful band, and both took an interest in student politics. The third candidate (a male candidate) had no musical experience other than an interest in music, and had no experience in student politics.

In order to rule out the possible confounds, the descriptions of the focal candidates (Candidates 1 and 3) were counterbalanced across conditions. As candidate photographs could not be counterbalanced across gender, two photographs were used for each of the focal candidates. In order to measure physical attractiveness (and related inferences), two additional questions were also included in the evaluation of each of the three candidates: 'The candidate looks intelligent', and 'The candidate looks attractive'.

As in Study 1, participants were then asked to evaluate each of the candidates by indicating their level of agreement with five statements (from 1, *do not agree at all*, to 7, *agree completely*). The statements were designed to measure perceptions of (a) the candidates' suitability for the position ('The candidate's past experience is relevant to the position', 'The candidate does *not* have the required skills for the job' (reverse-scored), 'The candidate is suitable for this position'; male candidate α=.62; female candidate α=.61), and (b) the candidates' ability to be a youth representative ('The candidate would be a good youth representative', 'The candidate will provide a good voice for youth in the region'; male candidate r=.54, p<.001; female candidate r=.57, p<.001).

Participants were then asked to rank the three candidates from 1 to 3, where 1 was the most appointable and 3 was the least appointable. Finally, they completed some basic demographic questions and were debriefed in full.

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Ranking of candidates

As in Study 1, analysis of variance on both ranking and evaluation measures with all three factors revealed that Candidate 2 was indeed seen by participants as significantly less suitable for the position than Candidates 1 and 3. Accordingly, subsequent analysis focused solely on evaluations of the latter two candidates. This analysis also revealed that the gender of participants had no impact on the ranking or evaluation of candidates (all ps>.10) and so this variable was dropped from the analysis. Importantly too, preliminary analysis showed that there were no differences in perceptions of attractiveness and intelligence as a function of candidate descriptions or photos, and, further analysis also established that neither candidate descriptions or photographs had a significant impact on the ranking of candidates (all ps>.10). Therefore these variables were also dropped from subsequent analysis.

In order to investigate the impact of festival performance on the ranking of the focal candidates, a 2 (performance: improving, declining)×2 (evaluated candidate: male, female) ANOVA was conducted with repeated measures on the second variable. The results revealed no main effect for the gender of the evaluated candidate, $F(1,83)=2.00$, $p=.16$ or for the performance of the festival, $F(1,83)=1.78$, $p=.19$. However, in line with H1, there was a significant two-way interaction between gender of the evaluated candidate and the performance of the festival, $F(1,83)=13.49$, $p<.001$. Means are presented in Fig. 2. Simple effects to decompose this interaction indicated that it arose from the fact that the male candidate was ranked higher when the company's performance was improving ($M=1.32$) than when it was declining ($M=1.87$), $F(1,83)=14.89$, $p<.001$, while, in contrast, the female candidate was ranked significantly higher when the company's performance was declining ($M=1.38$) than when it was improving ($M=1.68$), $F(1,83)=9.18$, $p=.003$.

In addition, chi-square analysis was performed to examine the ranking of the focal candidates as a function of festival performance. Overall, participants showed slight favouritism towards the female candidate, being more likely to rank her first (55.3%) than the male candidate (42.4%). However, again in line with the hypotheses, chi-square analysis revealed that the performance had a significant impact on the ranking of the male candidate, $\chi^2(2)=13.73$, $p=.001$, and a significant impact on the ranking of the female candidate, $\chi^2(2)=10.64$, $p=.01$. As can be seen from Table 2, when the festival's performance was improving, 62.2% of participants ranked the male candidate first, while only 37.8% of participants ranked the female participant first. In contrast, when the performance of the festival was declining, 75% of participants ranked the female participant first while only 20% ranked the male candidate first.

3.2.2. Evaluation of candidates

In order to explore participants' evaluations of the leadership ability and suitability of the focal candidates, two separate 2 (performance: improving, declining)×2 (evaluated candidate: male, female) ANOVAs were conducted with repeated measures on the last factor.

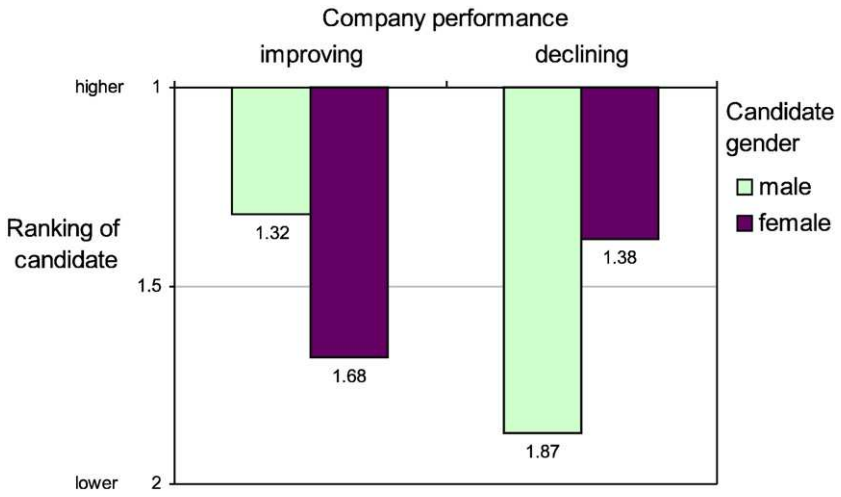

Fig. 2. Study 2: Mean rankings of candidates for leadership position as a function of candidate gender and company performance.

3.2.2.1. Ability to be a youth representative. Analysis of responses on this measure revealed a significant main effect for gender of the evaluated candidate, $F(1,83)=6.94$, $p=.01$, such that the female candidate tended to be seen as more able ($M=5.71$) than the male candidate ($M=5.46$). This was not qualified by a significant two-way interaction between gender of the evaluated candidate and the performance of the festival, $F(1,83)<1$, $p=.35$, but tests of simple effects revealed that it was only when the festival's performance was declining that the female candidate was perceived to have significantly more ability ($M=5.71$) than the male ($M=5.36$), $F(1,83)=6.02$, $p=.02$, as this was not the case when the festival's performance was improving ($Ms=5.71$, 5.56, respectively), $F(1,83)=1.54$, $p=.23$.

3.2.2.2. Perceptions of suitability. Analysis revealed no significant effects for company performance or gender of candidate, either on their own or in conjunction with other variables, all $ps>.10$.

3.3. Discussion

Consistent with Study 1 and with previous archival work (Ryan & Haslam, 2005a), the results of this study provide a further replication of the glass cliff phenomenon. Participants' rankings revealed that overall, candidate gender did not affect appointability, but in line with H1, the female candidate was seen as more appointable to a senior position when the performance of the festival was declining than when it was improving. As a corollary, the male candidate was seen to be more appointable when the festival had been doing well than when it had been doing badly.

Importantly, the present patterns were obtained under conditions where steps had been taken to control for potential confounds that may have been present in Study 1. In particular, counterbalancing and the use of multiple photographs ensured that the effects did not reflect systematic differences in the focal candidates' attractiveness or perceived intelligence, and this was confirmed by data obtained on additional measures. These findings clearly increase our confidence that the patterns observed in Study 1 were not simply the product of experimental artefacts but reflected meaningful differences in the perceived suitability of men and women for particular leadership positions.

4. Study 3

Taken together, Studies 1 and 2 give us some confidence that the glass cliff phenomenon may be due, at least in part, to the decisions and judgments of those who make leadership appointments. In both studies, the choice of candidate for a leadership position was dependent upon both the gender of the candidate and the performance of the organization, such that (a) women were more likely to be chosen for positions associated with a high rather than a low risk of failure (because the organization was failing

Table 2
Study 2: Percentage of participants who ranked candidate first as a function of candidate gender and company performance

Gender of candidate	Company performance		
	Improving (%)	Declining (%)	Overall (%)
Male	62.2	20.0	42.4
Female	37.8	75.0	55.3

rather than succeeding; Studies 1 and 2) or, as a corollary, (b) that men were more likely to be chosen for leadership positions when these were associated with low rather than high risk (because the organization was succeeding rather than failing; Study 2).

One advantage of these studies is that their experimental design allows the glass cliff phenomenon to be explored while controlling for key variables such as leaders' work experience and ability. However, while the within-participants design allows the appointment process to be investigated through participants' *ranking* of candidates for a leadership position, this design makes it difficult to investigate people's *evaluations* of the candidates. Indeed, as candidates were carefully matched on key aspects of their descriptions, it is not surprising—given the within-participants design—that no clear differences were found in the evaluations of candidates' suitability for the position or their leadership ability. For this reason it is difficult to establish whether evaluations of male and female candidates' suitability for leadership positions, and of their leadership ability, are aligned with patterns of appointment to those positions. A further potential problem with the within-subjects design of Studies 1 and 2 is that it heightens the likelihood of participants being able to deduce or second-guess the experimental hypothesis. Although there was no evidence of this in post-study debriefings, and it is hard to see how this could account for the observed interactions with the between-participants factor (organizational performance), it was thought desirable to address this in a further study.

Accordingly, a third study was conducted in which the gender of candidates was manipulated *between*-participants. This design enabled us to provide identical candidate descriptions and to examine participants' evaluations of equally qualified male and female candidates for leadership positions in companies whose performance was either improving or declining. More specifically, it was hypothesised that a female candidate would be evaluated as more suitable for a leadership position than a male candidate when company performance was declining rather than improving (H1) and that the female candidate would be perceived to have greater leadership ability than a man when the company's performance was declining rather than improving (H2).

In order to try to shed additional light on issues of process, this study also incorporated two further measures designed to establish the basis on which participants' evaluations of candidate suitability were made. These assessed the degree to which the leadership position itself was perceived to (a) provide a good career opportunity, (b) to be stressful. In line with previous analysis of the factors that might contribute to the creation of glass cliffs (Ryan & Haslam, 2005b, 2007; Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007), the inclusion of these items allowed two further hypotheses to be tested. The first hypothesis was that, compared to positions in successful companies, leadership positions in failing companies (i.e., glass cliff positions) might be perceived to provide a better career opportunity for women than for men (H3). The second hypothesis was that compared to positions in successful companies, leadership positions in failing companies might be perceived to be more stressful for women than for men (H4). Mediational analysis following up on these tests also allows us to establish whether women are selected for leadership positions in failing companies (i.e., glass cliff positions) (a) *because* these are perceived to represent good opportunities (H5), or (b) *because* the positions are perceived to be more stressful (H6).

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants and design

Participants were 83 businessmen and businesswomen attending a regional forum for business leaders hosted at a British university. They took part in the study as part of an illustrative exercise prior to a lecture on leadership. The median age of participants was 46; 43 were female and 33 were male (7 did not specify their gender). As anticipated, participants tended to occupy senior positions in their places of work. Twenty-nine per cent described themselves as very senior, 32% as senior, 30% as intermediate, and only 8% as junior.

Participants received materials which comprised three key documents: (a) a brief curriculum vitae (CV) from either a male or a female candidate, (b) a job advertisement for a finance director for a company, and (c) a newspaper article explaining that the company's performance had been either (i) improving or (ii) declining over the past decade. Participants then responded to questions about the candidate and the advertised position. The study thus had a 2 (gender of candidate: male, female)×2 (company performance: improving or declining)×2 (gender of participant: male, female) between-participants design.

4.1.2. Materials and procedure

At the start of the study, participants were randomly provided with one of four versions of a four-page questionnaire. The first page consisted of a brief CV from either a male candidate (Jonathan Hawker) or a female candidate (Julie Hawker). The CVs included a brief biographical sketch of the candidate (based on that used in Study 1) with identical summaries of the candidates' qualifications, higher education, job experience, and personal details.

Participants then read a job advertisement. This presented details of a vacancy for a desirable senior management position, as a financial director for Jefferson's, a company that was described as a large, international firm, similar to that described in Study 1. Unlike Study 1, however, the masculinity/femininity of the company was not manipulated in this study, and the company was instead described neutrally, as a manufacturer and distributor of office supplies. As in Study 1, participants then received information about the performance of the company in the form of a newspaper article. In the improving performance condition, the article was entitled *From Strength to Strength: Jefferson's Outstanding Stock Performance*. The article described a 'steady increase in [the company's] financial performance', illustrated with a graph showing a dramatic increase in the trading value of the company's stock over the past decade. In contrast, participants assigned to the declining performance condition were presented with an article entitled *Going Down: Jefferson's Disastrous Stock Performance*. This described a 'steady drop in [the company's] financial performance', and was illustrated with reference to a graph showing a dramatic decrease in the company's stock over the past decade.

Participants were then asked to evaluate the job candidate by indicating their level of agreement with five statements (from 1, *do not agree at all*, to 7, *agree completely*). The statements were adapted from Study 1 and measured (a) the suitability of candidate ('His/Her past

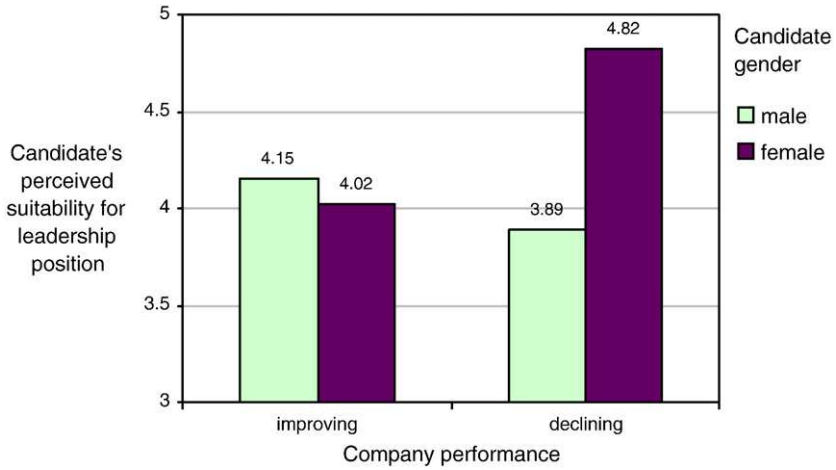

Fig. 3. Study 3: Mean levels of perceived suitability for leadership position as a function of company performance and candidate gender.

experience is relevant to the position'; 'S/He is suitable for this position'; 'S/He will fit in with the company', α=.70); and (b) the candidates' leadership ability ('S/He would be a good leader'; 'S/He will have a positive impact on the company', r=.40, p<.001).

Participants were then asked to evaluate the position by indicating their level of agreement with two statements (from 1, *do not agree at all*, to 7, *agree completely*): (a) 'This position offers Jonathon/Julie Hawker a good opportunity to further his/her career'; and (b) 'This would be a stressful position to be in'.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Evaluation of candidates

In order to investigate the impact of candidate gender, company performance, and participant gender on the evaluation of candidates, two separate 2 (gender of candidate: male, female)×2 (company performance: improving or declining)×2 (gender of participant: male, female) between-participants ANOVAs were conducted for ratings of the candidates' suitability for the leadership position and of their leadership ability.

4.2.1.1. Perceived suitability. Consistent with H1, and as can be seen in Fig. 3, analysis of the candidates' perceived suitability for the leadership position revealed a significant two-way interaction between candidate gender and company performance, $F(1,68)$=4.44, p=.04. Simple effects to decompose this interaction revealed that when company performance was improving, the male and female candidates did not significantly differ in terms of their perceived suitability for the position (Ms=4.15, 4.02, respectively), $F(1,68)$<1, p=.77. However, when the company's performance was declining, the candidate's gender had a significant impact on perceived suitability, with the female candidate being seen as much more suitable (M=4.82) than the male (M=3.89), $F(1,68)$=7.85, p=.007. There were no effects for participant gender.

4.2.1.2. Perceived leadership ability. Similar patterns emerged from the analysis of the candidates' perceived leadership ability. This revealed a significant main effect for gender of the candidate, $F(1,68)$=7.31, p=.009, such that the female candidate tended to be perceived as having greater ability as a leader (M=4.59) than the male (M=3.88). However, consistent with H2, and as can be seen in Fig. 4, this main effect was qualified by a two-way interaction between candidate gender and company performance, $F(1,68)$=4.98, p=.03. Tests of simple effects were conducted to decompose this interaction and these revealed that it arose from the fact that when company performance was improving, the male and female candidate did not differ significantly in terms of their perceived leadership ability (Ms=4.18, 4.31, respectively), $F(1,68)$<1, p=.75, but when the company's performance was declining the female candidate was seen to be a much more able leader (M=4.81) than the male (M=3.60), $F(1,68)$=13.46, p<.001. Again, there were no effects for participant gender.

4.2.2. Evaluation of position

In order to examine participants' perceptions of the leadership position itself, separate 2 (gender of candidate: male, female)×2 (company performance: improving or declining)×2 (gender of participant: male, female) between-participants ANOVAs were conducted for measures of (a) the perceived quality of the leadership position and (b) its perceived stressfulness.

4.2.2.1. Perceived quality of opportunity. Analysis of the degree to which the leadership position was seen to represent a good opportunity for the candidate revealed a main effect for participant gender such that, overall, male participants saw the position as a better opportunity for the candidate (M=5.12) than did female participants (M=4.37), $F(1,68)$=7.35, p=.01. Consistent with H3,

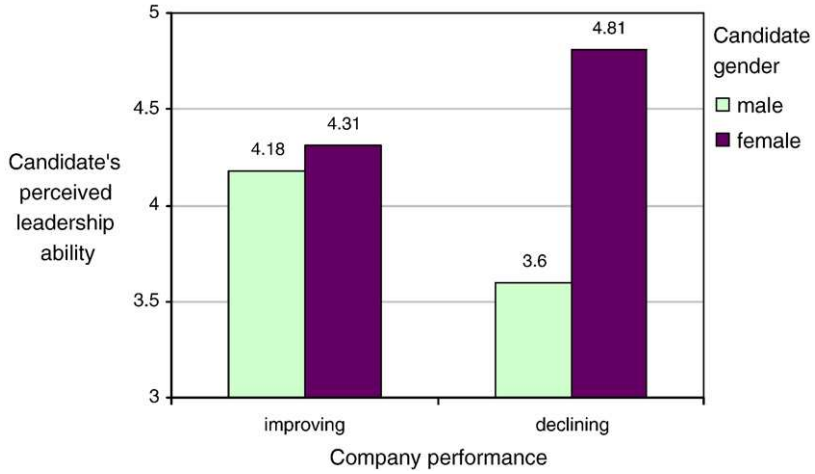

Fig. 4. Study 3: Mean levels of perceived leadership ability as a function of company performance and candidate gender.

analyses also revealed a significant two-way interaction between gender of the evaluated candidate and the performance of the company, $F(1,68)=9.69$, $p=.003$. This interaction is displayed in Fig. 5 and was decomposed using tests of simple effects. These revealed that when company performance was improving the advertised position was seen to offer an equally good opportunity for both male ($M=4.90$) and female ($M=4.69$) candidates, $F(1,68)=1.35$, $p=.25$, but that when the company's performance was declining this position was seen to offer a significantly better opportunity for the female candidate ($M=5.32$) than for the male ($M=3.95$), $F(1,68)=11.20$, $p=.001$.

Interestingly, this two-way interaction was also qualified by a marginally significant three-way interaction with gender of participant, $F(1,68)=3.11$, $p=.08$. This was decomposed by conducting separate two-way ANOVAs for male and female participants. These revealed that the pattern of results observed in the above two-way interaction between gender of the evaluated candidate and the performance of the company was reliable for male participants, $F(1,68)=11.58$, $p=.002$, but not for female participants, $F(1,68)<1$, $p=.33$.

4.2.2.2. Stressfulness of position. Consistent with H4, analysis of the perceived stressfulness of the leadership position revealed a significant two-way interaction between the gender of the candidate and the performance of the company, $F(1,68)=4.58$, $p=.04$. This interaction is presented in Fig. 6 and was decomposed using tests of simple effects. These revealed that for the female candidate, the leadership position in the declining company was seen to be more stressful ($M=5.95$) than the position in an improving company ($M=4.81$), $F(1, 68)=6.12$, $p=.02$. However, perceptions of the stressfulness of these positions for the male candidate were very similar ($M_{\text{declining}}=5.42$, $M_{\text{improving}}=5.45$), $F(1,68)<1$, $p=.63$.

4.2.3. Mediational analysis

The above analyses suggest a complex relationship between company performance, candidate gender, perceptions of the leadership position, and evaluations of the candidates. In order to examine issues of process underlying these relationships, a series of linear regressions were conducted. These involved conducting separate analyses for the male and female candidates.

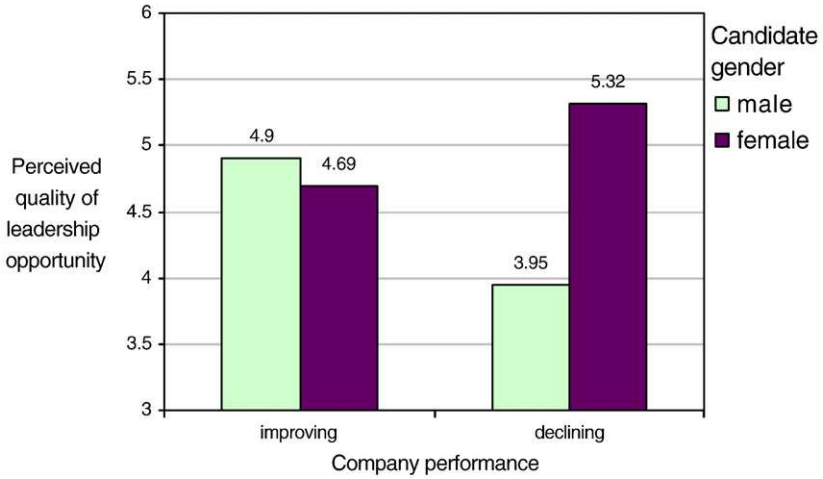

Fig. 5. Study 3: Mean levels of perceived quality of opportunity as a function of company performance and candidate gender.

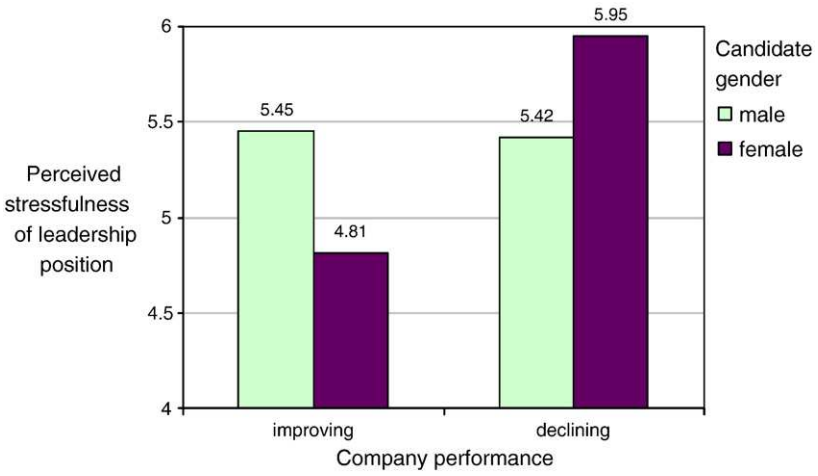

Fig. 6. Study 3: Mean levels of perceived stressfulness of leadership position as a function of company performance and candidate gender.

In the case of the male candidate, these analyses revealed that the only significant predictor of his perceived suitability for the leadership position was perceptions of his leadership ability, $\beta = .78$, $p < .001$.

However, a much more complex set of results was apparent for the female candidate. In the first instance, there was again a significant correlation between her perceived suitability for the advertised position and her perceived leadership ability, $\beta = .69$, $p < .001$. In addition, though, consistent with H1, here there was a clear relationship between company performance and the candidate's perceived suitability for the leadership position such that she was seen as more suitable when company performance was declining $\beta = .37$, $p = .02$. That being the case, it was possible to conduct additional mediational analysis (following steps identified by Baron & Kenny, 1986) to see whether this relationship was mediated by either (a) the perceived quality of the leadership opportunity, or (b) the perceived stressfulness of the position. Each of these analyses is considered in turn.

4.2.3.1. Quality of opportunity. In the first instance, regression analysis was performed to test H5—exploring the role that the perceived quality of the leadership opportunity played in mediating between company performance and the perceived suitability of the female candidate for the leadership position. Here though, minimal conditions for mediation were not met as neither the relationship between company performance and perceived quality of opportunity nor the relationship between quality of opportunity and the perceived suitability of the female candidate was significant (βs = .22, .18, ps = .17, .27, respectively). Accordingly, H5 was not supported.

4.2.3.2. Perceived stressfulness of position. Analysis of identical form was conducted in order to test H6. This examined the role that the perceived stressfulness of the leadership position played in mediating between company performance and the perceived suitability of the female candidate for the leadership position. Relevant statistics are presented in Fig. 7. From this it can be seen that when the perceived suitability of the female candidate was simultaneously regressed on company performance and perceived stressfulness, the previously significant relationship between company performance and perceived suitability was significantly reduced (Sobel test; $z = 2.30$, $p = .02$) and became non-significant ($\beta = .12$, $p = .50$). At the same time there was a significant relationship between company performance and perceived stressfulness ($\beta = .55$, $p < .001$) and between perceived stressfulness and the perceived suitability of the female candidate ($\beta = .47$, $p = .008$)—thereby again satisfying the conditions for full mediation.

4.3. Discussion

Consistent with the results of Studies 1 and 2, the findings of this study provide a further replication of the glass cliff phenomenon. In line with H1 and H2, evaluations of the job candidates revealed that when company performance was declining,

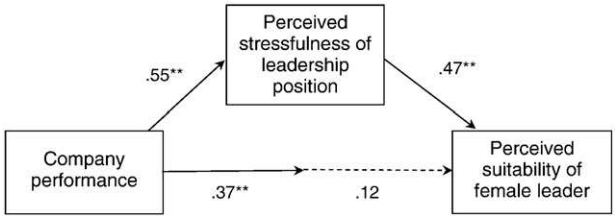

Fig. 7. Study 3: The mediating effect of perceived stressfulness of position on the relationship between company performance and the suitability of the female candidate.

the female candidate was seen (a) as more suitable for a senior position and (b) as having more leadership ability, than an identically qualified male candidate. Again, then, this study provides clear evidence that women are preferentially selected for precarious leadership positions associated with organizations in crisis (Ryan & Haslam, 2005a,b, 2007). The fact that the participants in this study were senior business leaders also foils any suggestion that the effects obtained in Studies 1 and 2 were peculiar either to students or to people with minimal business experience.

Importantly, evidence that judgments of the candidates' suitability for the leadership position mirror (and were correlated with) effects for their perceived ability, also suggests that the processes that lead to glass cliffs are bound up with beliefs about gender and leadership and are not simply a reflection of structural factors (e.g., a desire to signal change, the nature of the available leadership positions). This observation is consistent with other research in the present programme which suggests that glass cliff appointments result in part from beliefs that women are peculiarly suited to crisis management (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, & Bongiorno, submitted for publication).

In other ways too, the present results extend those of Studies 1 and 2 in helping to shed light on the processes involved in glass cliff appointments. In the first instance the studies show that a woman's preferential selection as a leader of a failing company is associated with perceptions that such a position (a) provides a better opportunity for a woman than for a man (H3), and (b) involves more stress for a women than for a man (H4). These findings are consistent with previous explanations for the glass cliff that have been generated both by researchers (e.g., Ryan & Haslam, 2007) and by research participants (e.g., see Ryan et al., 2007).

Specifically, support for H3 is consistent with the argument that one reason why women end up in precarious leadership positions is because for them (but not for men) these are more likely to be construed as 'golden opportunities' than as 'poisoned chalices'—in part because women have *fewer* leadership opportunities than their male counterparts (e.g., Frazier & Hunt, 1998). Thus while men who are invited to lead an organization that is in crisis may feel able to decline this invitation and 'wait for something better to come along', women may have no such luxury and be encouraged to 'take whatever they can get'. Related to this, participants may also feel that failure would be less likely to have a detrimental impact on the leader (i.e., that they would have 'less to lose') if they were a woman rather than a man. Such perceptions can be seen to reflect views about women's relative 'expendability', and may also be linked to the traditional view that men have primary responsibility as breadwinners, while women's work simply provides 'extra' income (Zuo & Tang, 2000).

Along somewhat different lines, support for H4 suggests that one reason why women are perceived to be more suited than men to lead organizational units that are in crisis is because these positions are perceived (presumably with some validity) to involve more stress than positions in successful organizations. The subsequent assignment of women to these roles may therefore be a consequence of beliefs that traits that are found to be stereotypically associated with women leaders (e.g., being understanding, aware of the feelings of others, intuitive, and creative; Schein, 1973) are particularly suited to stress management (e.g., Dunahoo, Geller, & Hobfoll, 1996; Lindquist, Beilin, & Knuiman, 1997). However, a more malign interpretation of this pattern would suggest that women are placed on glass cliffs simply because people are more willing to subject women to stressful situations than they are to subject men to them—perhaps again because they consider women leaders to be more 'expendable'.

Interestingly, although analysis of variance provided support for both H3 and H4, mediational analysis suggested the association between company performance and perceived suitability of the woman leader was fully mediated by the perceived stressfulness of the leadership position (H6) but not by the perceived quality of the opportunity it represented (H5). Although such analysis is limited in terms of its capacity to test between these alternative explanations (see Haslam & McGarty, 2004), this increases our confidence that women tend to be selected ahead of men for glass cliff positions in part *because* these positions are stressful.

5. General discussion

Taken together, the results from the above three studies provide a clear experimental demonstration of Ryan & Haslam's (2005a) archival study into the glass cliff. In all three studies, interactions between candidate gender and organizational performance indicated that women were more likely to be placed in (or be seen as suitable for) leadership positions when those positions were in organizational units that were in crisis and hence associated with an increased risk of failure. As a corollary, there was some evidence in Study 2 that men were more likely to be placed in leadership positions when those positions were associated with no such risk, although across the three studies this pattern was unreliable.

These studies demonstrate that the glass cliff phenomenon is not restricted to board appointments in FTSE 100 companies, and can be reproduced under laboratory conditions, where key variables (in particular, candidates' biographical details and the precise nature of the positions) are controlled. This is important, as, in the absence of this data, it could be argued simply that women prefer, and actively choose, leadership positions which are more risky (an explanation favoured by some senior women themselves; see Ryan et al., 2007; Woods, 2004) or, more drastically, that women leaders are actually the cause of organizational crisis (e.g., as argued by Judge, 2003). Indeed, whatever else they do, these studies surely demonstrate that the previously observed association between organizational crisis and women's appointment to leadership positions has an underlying causal structure inconsistent with attributions to women's incompetence. In light of the invidiousness of such beliefs, this is no trivial point.

5.1. Underlying process

As well as providing experimental evidence of selection preferences that can contribute to the creation of glass cliffs, the present studies also attempted to provide evidence of the social psychological and structural processes that might underpin such preferences. Although the within-participants design in Studies 1 and 2 did not reveal clear differences in evaluations of the male

and female candidates in contexts of improving or declining company performance, the between-participants design of Study 3 served to demonstrate that a female candidate was evaluated (a) as more suitable for a glass cliff position than an identically qualified male candidate and (b) as having better leadership ability in the context of declining company performance.

Such findings resonate with other research which suggests that traits which are typically associated more with women leaders than with their male counterparts (e.g., understanding, intuitive, and tactful; Schein, 1973) are seen as being particularly desirable for leaders in times of crisis (Ryan & Haslam, 2005b, 2007). In this way, it can be argued that when organizations are in crisis, people do not automatically 'think manager–think male' (Schein, 1973), but may be more inclined to 'think crisis–think female' (Ryan et al., submitted for publication). It is possible, of course, to construe this inclination positively. Indeed, in this vein, a journalist once told us that she had a sign above her desk which read "Women are like tea bags—You don't know how strong they are until you put them in hot water" (a claim, incidentally, that receives over 50 hits if entered into a Web-based search engine and is variously attributed to *both* Eleanor Roosevelt and Nancy Reagan). However, in response, we pointed out that while this message can be seen as an affirmation of women's distinctive leadership potential, it was also an invitation for her colleagues to keep plunging her in hot water. Observing that this was what they routinely did, at the end of the conversation she took the sign down.

Related to this analysis, Study 3 also provided evidence that the female candidate's suitability for a leadership position in a company whose performance was declining was fully mediated by beliefs that such a position would be more stressful than a leadership position in a successful organization. Intriguingly, though, this result is open to quite different interpretations. On the one hand, it can be seen as compatible with the above view that women leaders' traits and abilities render them particularly well-suited to the management of crisis and the stress that this involves (e.g., Dunahoo et al., 1996; Lindquist et al., 1997). Less positively, though, this pattern can be seen as evidence that people are simply more willing to place women in stressful leadership situations—possibly because they are perceived to represent a less valuable and more expendable resource than male leaders, and one less worthy of protection. Such a view chimes with the observations of around 15% of the women (but none of the men) who participated in an on-line study reported by Ryan et al. (2007). The following comment is typical of these:

> In my experience I was given the jobs no one else (i.e. the males) wanted. These were seen as dead-end or over-exposed to failure. Somebody had to do them, so why not choose somebody expendable—a woman, of course. A woman is likely to be chosen when all the other (male) options fail, and she's likely to take the job because it's the best one she can get.

Related to this view, Study 3 also revealed that glass cliff positions were seen to provide better opportunities for women than they were for men. Although there was no evidence that this perception mediated assessments of the woman's suitability for a position of leadership in a failing organization, it may nonetheless tap into a significant corporate reality whereby—in light of the continued existence of the glass ceiling (e.g., Catalyst, 1996; EOC, 2002; Vinnicombe, 2000)—glass cliff positions offer women their best opportunity to break into upper management.

5.2. An agenda for future research

Although the present research starts to throw light on the processes and contextual factors that contribute glass cliff appointments, it clearly remains for future work to investigate the processes that underpin the glass cliff phenomenon in greater depth. In the first instance this work needs to clarify the interrelationship between the multiple processes that the present studies identify as being implicated in the phenomenon (i.e., men and women's distinct leadership abilities, the stressfulness of the leadership positions they are given; the quality of available leadership opportunities). Moreover, although participant gender was not found to play a consistent role in the decisions and judgments evinced in the above studies, Study 3 provided an inkling that this factor may be important in some contexts. It is worth noting too that other research in the present programme suggests that sexism and ingroup favouritism are explanations of the glass cliff phenomenon that are particularly favoured by women (Ryan et al., 2007; see also Branscombe, 1998). Accordingly, there would appear to be value in attempting to clarify the conditions under which men and women's appointment decisions diverge (and are perceived to diverge). In this context it also seems important to examine more forensically the role of attitudes and norms specifically related to gender discrimination (e.g., as tapped by the Modern Sexism Scale, Swim, Aiken, Hall, & Hunter, 1995, and the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, Glick & Fiske, 1996).

At the same time, future research also needs to hone in on processes that the present studies did not tap into—in part due to the simplicity of their design. An initial challenge here is to explore what it is about the group 'women' that contributes to the effects observed in the present research (Rudman & Goodwin, 2004). In line with arguments that this is a reflection of specific stereotype content (as noted above), it could be argued that it is femaleness *per se* that is responsible for glass cliff appointments. Alternatively, it can be argued that it is the fact that—at least within the echelons of upper management—women represent a minority group that contributes to their being selected for more challenging leadership tasks (e.g., Kanter, 1977). Indeed, this suggestion is consistent with evidence from other research that asymmetrical evaluation of men and women becomes particularly pronounced to the extent that women constitute a minority (less than 25%) of the pool of applicants for a given position (Heilman, 1980; see also Reskin, 1993).

More generally too, there is a need to conduct studies with elaborated designs in order to capture the interactive group dynamics associated with status protection and social change that seem likely to contribute to glass cliff appointments in organizations and in society at large (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see also Haslam & Platow, 2001; Haslam & Reicher, 2007; Reicher & Haslam, 2006; Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005). For although these processes were not examined in the present studies, in these contexts it seems plausible that the appointment of women leaders can be used to signal to external audiences that change in the

organization is afoot (Lee & James, 2004). In this way, women may be selected for positions in poorly performing companies, not (or not only) because they are perceived to be better equipped to perform the role, but (also) because their appointment will be highly visible and attract attention. Consistent with this idea, there is some evidence to suggest that, at least in Japan, poor company performance is associated with the appointment of highly visible 'outsiders' to boards of directors (Kaplan & Minton, 1994). If this is the case, then as the proportion of men and women within leadership positions evens out (as it has in fields which are traditionally female-dominated such as nursing or childcare) women may be less likely to attract attention and less likely to be treated differently to men (Kanter, 1977).

In the broader social and organizational context it may also be the case that the glass cliff phenomenon results, at least in part, from social structural relations between men and women. Women are not simply a numerical minority, they are also accorded lower status than men, both in society at large and in the workplace (e.g., Ridgeway, 2001). However these relations are not set in stone. Accordingly, it is important not to objectify them, by seeing either them or the phenomena they lead to as 'natural' expressions of psychological primitives (see Turner, 2006, for an excellent discussion of this point). Indeed, in many ways glass cliffs can be seen to result from both the possibility and the very *fact* of social and organizational change. For it is only when the existing status hierarchy is threatened—which it clearly is by the fact that women are starting to break through the glass ceiling into senior leadership positions—that this threat starts to be countered through discriminatory practices that reduce the prospects of success on the part of low-status group members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see also Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998; Haslam & Ellemers, 2005; Schmitt, Ellemers, & Branscombe, 2003). In this way, glass cliffs can be seen as by-products of complex dynamics associated with both low-status groups' challenge to, and high-status groups' protection of, the status quo. However, if this analysis holds true, then one important implication is that it should generalise to other low-status groups such as those based on ethnicity, religion, age, and disability—so that aspiring members of these groups also encounter glass cliffs. Anecdotal evidence supports this suggestion (e.g., Kozol, 1991), but archival and experimental studies to test this hypothesis are currently underway.

It is important to note as well that the factors discussed above (sexism, gender stereotypes, minority status, social status) are not necessarily independent from one another. There is no doubt, for example, that women's lower status, relative to that of men, contributes to their being a numerical minority in the upper ranks of management, and is related to the content of stereotypes both of women and (successful) managers (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In this way, all of the above factors are likely to interact with, and reinforce, each other. For this reason the glass cliff seems likely to be an over-determined phenomenon. Indeed, in line with a number of the above observations, our general view is that there is an important sense in which the various elements identified above are interrelated and reflect meaningful socio-structural and social psychological realities associated with a particular social and ideological context (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994). In part, then, the broader task for researchers is to identify the general social psychological principles that contribute to phenomena such as the glass cliff rather than to fetishize this as a discrete and isolated effect—as it were an island of injustice in the archipelago of group and organizational life.

5.3. Conclusion

Importantly, the three studies reported above provide the first controlled experimental evidence of decision-making processes that can contribute to the creation of glass cliffs. In this, they uncover evidence of a psychologically subtle, but potentially formidable, hurdle that women must overcome when attempting to proceed up the leadership ladder (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). The present research also provides important insights into processes that can contribute to this effect. These relate to beliefs about (a) women's leadership abilities, (b) the quality of their leadership opportunities and (c) women's exposure to stress. However, this analysis of process is far from conclusive or exhaustive. It is therefore apparent that more work needs to be conducted in order to identify the range of factors that contribute to women being selected to lead organizational units that are in crisis and thereby being placed in positions associated with greater possibility of failure. For it is only by understanding these processes that sensible attempts can be made to address the dangers that glass cliffs pose, both for effective leadership and for principles of equal opportunity.

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