Think Coach, Think Male? A Comparison of Situational Cues' and Gender Stereotypes' Impacts on Leadership Endorsement

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Considerable attention has been given to the challenges women face when attempting to break through the “glass ceiling” in sport organizations. Together, researchers have evaluated this phenomenon through numerous approaches (e.g., macro, meso, and micro; see Cunningham & Sagas, 2008 for a review). Additionally, Shaw and Hoeber (2003) suggested the placement of men in leadership positions have further bolstered the gendered stereotypes about leadership positions in sport organizations, and these notions should be challenges. One aspect has received minimal attention in the literature is the impact of situational cues on leadership endorsement or expectations within the sport context. These situational cues may reinforce gendered leadership stereotypes and help further understanding of the “think manager, think male” phenomenon (Jackson, Engstrom, & Emmer-Sommer, 2007). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the impact of situational cues on leadership endorsement.

A line of research has evaluated the impact of a boardroom setting and leadership endorsement. Porter and Geis (1981), found seating arrangement impacted leadership endorsement. They found the head of the “table” was the most often selected person as the leader for groups in which were represented by single sex. However, when the group depicted was a mix gender group (i.e., one from each gender on the side of the table and either a man or woman at the head of the table), a man was selected most often when the individual at the head of the table, but a woman did not receive the same endorsement. Jackson and her colleagues extended this line of research and found individuals were more likely to select an individual who was seated at the head of the table. Although the picture has been altered in various ways (e.g., use of symbols rather than pictures, placing individuals at both ends, and depicting the table vertically so the head of the table is at the top of the paper), the results have consistently demonstrated men are endorsed as the leader in the mixed gender condition compared to women (Jackson, Engstrom, Emmer-Sommer, 2007; Jackson, Engstrom, and Hassenzahl, 2005; Porter & Geis, 1981; Porter, Geis, & Jennings, 1983).

To extend this work, the authors extended this research into the sport setting. Utilizing a student sample and a sample of intercollegiate athletics, they found similar results. The depiction of the group was altered to place the symbols of men and women in a circle rather than a boardroom and consisted of all men and one woman, all women and one man, and a mixed group of equal men and women. The results indicated in the mixed group and all women condition the man was endorsed as the head coach. In the condition depicting one woman and the rest men, the woman was selected roughly 50% of the time. Coupled with the previous research studies, this research study indicated gendered leadership stereotypes are a stronger predictor of leadership endorsement than situational cues.

To continue the progression of the literature, the authors developed a scenario depicting the group of individuals rather than pictures. Participants were asked to read a scenario (explained below) and were not prompted to the role of the person by asking the participant to identify the leader (i.e., coach). Instead, individuals were to draw their own conclusion about the person’s role. Utilizing the main tenets of role congruity theory, which states there are congruencies between certain roles and gender stereotypes, and the previous work on situational cues, we proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: The role given to a man depicted in the scenario will be given a leadership role (e.g., coach or athletic director).

Hypothesis 2a: A woman depicted in the scenario will be given a supportive type roles (e.g., trainer).

Although this study is still in progress, we will utilize the following procedures to collect the data. First, we will utilize a sample of undergraduate students at a major university in the Midwest United States. This sample will allow us to determine the internal validity of the instrument. Next, a random sample of athletes competing at the Division I level of the National Collegiate Athletic Association will complete the instrument via an online questionnaire. This will provide greater generalizability because of the multiple data collection methods (see Frankel & Wallen, 2010), and this sample is more apt to elucidate stereotypes about intercollegiate athletics.

As mentioned previous, the respondents will read a brief scenario, which will read:

A group of people involved with a sport team are standing in a circle. Four of the individuals are dressed in uniform, and the fifth person is dressed in khaki pants and a logo polo shirt. The four individuals are (All Women, All Men, Two Men and Two Women, One Woman and Three Men, One Woman and One Man).
Women) and the fifth person is a (Man or Woman).

The participants will then indicate the fifth person's role on the team and denote why they gave the individual that role. In addition, we will collect demographic information as at least one study (Jackson et al., 2007) has indicated the presence of a pro-gender bias.

To analyze the data, we will first have to code the various roles the participants indicated. Together, the researchers will evaluate the roles denoted by the participants, and categorize them into either leadership or support of roles. Next, Hypothesis 1 and 2 will be examined through chi-square analysis, with the condition (i.e., scenario) and the role given to the individual included (i.e., leader or supportive).

The results of the study will allow for a greater understanding of situational cues impact on leadership stereotypes within the intercollegiate athletics context. Additionally, if the hypotheses are supported, the results will offer continued support of the main tenets of roles congruity theory, and potentially the “think manager, think male” stereotype.