Only in Crisis? Leadership Selection in Intercollegiate Athletics After an Ethical Scandal

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Women and other racial/ethnic minority groups continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions in intercollegiate athletics, most notably at the highest level of competition (i.e., Division I FBS universities). White women hold approximately 6% of the athletic director positions; while Black men hold approximately 10% of the athletic director positions in NCAA Division I FBS universities. There are no women of color holding the position of athletic director at the Division I FBS level (Lapchick, 2013). Despite continued underrepresentation of women and minority men and women in leadership in intercollegiate athletic administration, there have been some notable advances. For example, in the past two years, White women were hired at the athletic director position at two NCAA Division I FBS institutions. However, the institutions in which the aforementioned women were hired happen to have been negatively impacted by very public ethics scandals immediately prior to their hiring.

In exploring stereotyping of gender in management, Schein (1973, 1975) found that individuals, particularly men, identified characteristics of successful managers to be more closely associated with masculine characteristics. This finding has received consistent support following Schein’s initial work (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Carli, 2007) confirming the perceived incompatibility between being female and being an effective manager, leading to the ‘think manager, think male’ stereotype. This stereotype has served as part of the foundation to role congruity theory, which describes that women are less likely to be perceived as having the necessary skills or attributes required to be a successful leader, and if serving in a leadership position, is negatively evaluated for displaying those necessary skills or attributes (Eagly & Karau, 2002). However, scholars have noted the context and circumstances impacting an organization may have additional influence on whether a woman is selected for a leadership position (Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Haslam 2005, 2007).

The ‘glass cliff’ phenomenon examines the context in which women experience leadership and describes how women are more likely to be placed into precarious leadership positions, when compared to men (Haslam & Ryan, 2008). In other words, the ‘glass cliff’ phenomena suggests that women may be preferentially hired into leadership roles that are associated with an increased risk of negative consequence and greater risk of failure (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Thus, in precarious circumstances, such as the impact of a crisis (e.g., ethical scandal) on an organization, perceptions of leadership effectiveness appear to move away from masculine stereotypical characteristics as being most appropriate, and a subsequent devaluation of those characteristics may signal female leaders as more appropriate. Therefore, it can be argued that when organizations are in a precarious situation or crisis, people do not necessarily ‘think manager–think male’ (Schein, 1973), but may be more inclined to ‘think crisis–think female’ (Ryan et al., 2006).

A related framework, the ‘bold moves’ hypothesis (Cook & Glass, 2014) has been proposed to examine the concept of the ‘glass cliff’ as it may be applied to the promotion of minorities into leadership positions. The ‘bold moves’ hypothesis describes that when an organization reaches a point of crisis, a shift in perception of leadership effectiveness may occur. This shift away from the current model of leadership (i.e., most often White male leadership) to a new and perceived different leadership approach (i.e., White female leadership or male or female racial/ethnic minority leadership) is perceived as a mechanism to address the crisis and potentially improve organizational performance (Cook & Glass, 2014; Ryan & Haslam, 2007).

The purpose of this study is to further explore the concept of the ‘glass cliff’ and contextual effects related to the selection of leaders in intercollegiate athletics. This study seeks to understand if the selection of particular leaders in athletic administration can be explained using the concept of the ‘glass cliff’. Based on the research findings described above, the following hypotheses are proposed:
H1: When an athletic department, led by a White man, is experiencing success, preference for selection of his replacement will be another White man over equally competent minority candidates (e.g., White female, minority male, minority female).

H2: When an athletic department, led by a White man, is experiencing crisis, preference for selection of his replacement will be a minority candidate (e.g., White female, minority male, minority female) over an equally qualified White male candidate.

H3: Perceptions of leadership and suitability for leadership will mediate the relationship between context (e.g. athletic department in crisis or athletic department not in crisis) and perceived fit of the candidate for the athletic director position.

Given the unique context of sport, level of fan identification to a college or university athletic department may influence leadership selection. Further, scholars have reported equivocal findings regarding the influence of sexism on the ‘glass cliff’ phenomenon (Bruckmüller, Ryan, Rink, & Haslam, 2014). Given that these areas do not have previously established influences on the outcomes in question, we propose the following two research questions:

R1: How does level of fan identification influence perceptions of hiring for an athletic director when the athletic department has experienced a crisis?

R2: How does level of sexism influence perceptions of hiring for an athletic director when the athletic department has experienced a crisis?

Method
This study will follow a 2 (crisis, non-crisis) x 2 (race) x 2 (gender) experimental design. Participants (n = 600) will be recruited from Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and will evaluate one candidate (i.e., White man, White woman, Black man, Black woman) for the position of athletic director in either a crisis or non-crisis athletic department. Measures in evaluation for the position include perceptions of leadership ability and suitability for the position (Haslam & Ryan, 2008) and person-job fit (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Sexism will be measured using the Modern Sexism scale (Swim & Cohen, 1997) and fan identification will be evaluated using the scale developed by Trail and James (2001). Manipulation checks for crisis, race, and gender will be included as measures in a post-experiment survey. Data will be analyzed using moderated mediation as described by Hayes (2014). Results of the study will be evaluated and discussed using the framework of the ‘glass cliff’ as described by Haslam and Ryan, 2008.