The Glass Cliff: Women’s Leadership Roles in Times of Crisis
“So much for smashing the glass ceiling and using their unique skills to enhance the performance of Britain’s biggest companies. The triumphant march of women into the country’s boardrooms has instead wreaked havoc on companies’ performance”

Judge, 2003, The Times, p.21
The glass cliff

FTSE 100 Cranfield Index

- 6 of the top 10 companies on Cranfield Index are underperforming
- All of the bottom 5 are overperforming

Conclusion:

“Corporate Britain would be better off without women on the board.”
The glass cliff

There is a relationship between performance and number of women.
• But is the analysis correct?
• Could the causal sequence be reversed?

Perhaps women only get given senior positions when companies are doing poorly.
The glass cliff

- Detailed archival examination supported this alternative analysis.

Ryan & Haslam (2005)
The glass cliff

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Ryan & Haslam (2005)
The glass cliff

• Extending the metaphor of the ‘glass ceiling’, we argue women are more likely than men to confront a ‘glass cliff’, such that their leadership appointments are more likely to be made in problematic organizational circumstances and are thus more precarious.
Experimental Research

Is there any evidence that women are preferentially selected for challenging leadership positions?

To answer these questions we conducted experimental research (Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Ryan, Haslam & Kulich, 2010)

- Participants asked to select a candidate for a leadership position when things are going well or going badly

- Given a choice between multiple candidates — but best candidates are a man and a woman whose applications are matched on key dimensions.

- Who do they prefer and when?
Choice of Candidate

higher rank

lower rank

Company performance

improving

declining
A female candidate is more likely to be appointed to a leadership position when the position is risky and there is an increased risk of failure.

Demonstrated with:

- Lead lawyer of a risky and highly criticised case
- Financial director of a poorly performing company
- Youth representative for a festival experiencing declining popularity
- Political candidate for an unwinnable seat
Anecdotal Examples...

APRIL 29, 2014

IS MARY BARRA STANDING ON A “GLASS CLIFF”?

BY JACLYN TROP
As Yahoo sale nears, do women in tech get pushed more onto the ‘glass cliff’?

By Jena McGregor  July 18

Final bids for Yahoo are expected today, and it won't be long before we know the fate of its embattled CEO Marissa Mayer. (Robert Galbraith/Reuters)
Anecdotal Examples...

On Leadership

As Yahoo sale nears, do women in tech get

The Glass Cliff

Women are more likely to break the glass ceiling in times of crisis.
Anecdotal Examples...

April 29, 2014

On Leadership

The Glass Cliff

Theresa May is the latest woman leader appointed in a crisis and set up for failure.

The Glass Cliff

Women are more likely to break the glass ceiling in times of crisis.
Anecdotal Examples...

Theresa May is the latest woman leader appointed in a crisis and set up for failure

Will the U.K’s Election Frontrunner Theresa May Get Shoved Off A Glass Cliff?

By Jay Newton-Small
July 6, 2016

Crises help women get elected. But are they being set up for failure?

Women are more likely to break the glass ceiling in times of crisis.
Underlying Processes?
Stereotypes

Gave Ps list of 92 traits and asked them to identify those that were stereotypic of **men**, **women**, **ideal** managers of **successful** and **unsuccessful** companies

Ryan, Haslam, Hersby & Bongiorno (2011, Study 2)
But not just women...
But not just women…

Kulich, Ryan, Haslam (2013)
Ethnic Minorities in the political sphere
- Electoral Success
- Seat Winnability
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Signalling Change?
Signalling Change?

Kulich, Lorenzi-Cioldi, Faniko, Iacoviello, & Ryan (2015)

Described a company (strong or poor performance) and a leadership position:

• choice of male or female candidate
• suitability for position (ability to produce change)
• ability to signal change
Signalling Change?

Diagram:
- **Signal of change**
  - Strong vs. poor performance (0.67*)
  - Actual change (0.01)
- **Choice** (man vs. woman)
  - Performance (0.75 n.s.)
  - Actual change (-0.14)
  - Signal of change (0.44*)
Setting up for failure....
Setting up for failure....

Ryan, Haslam, Hersby & Bongiorno (2011, Study 3)

Described a poorly performing company and a leadership position:
• stay in background and endure the poor performance
• take responsibility for the inevitable failure
• manage people and personnel issues through the crisis
• be a spokesperson providing damage control
• take control and improve performance

Asked to rate how desirable 12 traits were
• 6 masculine traits:
  assertive, adventurous, forceful
• 6 feminine traits:
  understanding, tactful, courteous
Results
Introducing... the glass cliff

By Michelle Ryan and Alex Haslam
Psychologists

Forget the glass ceiling. The big threat to women's success in top roles is now the 'glass cliff' - being promoted into risky, difficult jobs where the chances of failure are higher.

Women are "smashing through the glass ceiling" of the country's top businesses, a report in the Times last November said.

Numbers of female directors on the boards of FTSE 100 companies have increased by ten since the start of the year.
Understanding reactions (Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007)

The explanations people generate for the glass cliff

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## Understanding reactions (Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007)

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<td>Scientific error</td>
<td>Women are <em>not</em> differentially placed in precarious leadership positions</td>
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Understanding reactions (Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007)
Summary

- The phenomenon is robust
- The phenomenon is multiply determined
- Think crisis – think female
- Signalling change
- Setting up for failure…
General Conclusions

- The research suggest that equal opportunity is about the *nature* of leadership positions as well as their number.
- Thus it is important to note not just that the quantity of women given senior positions is low but also that the quality of those positions is typically low too.
- Women’s unexpected leadership positions may reinforce gender stereotypes and stymie gender equality.
- The multiply determined nature of the phenomenon suggests that it may be difficult to combat.
Thank you!

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