

## THE GLASS CLIFF: EXPLORING THE DYNAMICS SURROUNDING THE APPOINTMENT OF WOMEN TO PRECARIOUS LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

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In this paper we explore the "glass cliff" form of discrimination. We review archival and experimental evidence of the glass cliff and identify multiple processes as having the potential to contribute to the phenomenon. We also outline a range of potential reactions to the phenomenon, and we elaborate strategies for eliminating glass cliffs, but, as with other forms of (gender) discrimination, we argue that these depend on the capacity for disadvantaged groups to overcome resistance on the part of those who are motivated to maintain the status quo.

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 and share prices (Judge, 2003: 21).

In my previous company I was appointed to a position that sought to change the business focus. This had been declined by three male colleagues in my peer group on the management board. I was not told this. When I expressed reservations about the viability in the timeframe given, I was told I always produced the results and nothing else was coming up so I would have to do it for the company. At the end of 12 months my reservations were shown to be accurate. The company decided to abandon the plans and I was given another equally risky project which I refused. I was made redundant in three weeks. Four other male colleagues who also refused the "offer" were not (45-year-old female executive; personal communication).

Women continue to be markedly underrepresented in leadership positions in organiza-

tions. The most widely documented explanations of this fact center on (1) the invisible barrier of the "glass ceiling" that prevents them from gaining access to such positions (e.g., Arfken, Bellar, & Helms, 2004; Catalyst, 2000; Kanter, 1977; Maume, 2004; Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987; Ridgeway, 2001; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2004; *Wall Street Journal*, 1986) and (2) the corresponding phenomenon of the "glass escalator," by which means men are accelerated through the organizational ranks (especially in female-dominated professions; Maume, 1999; Williams, 1992). However, despite these barriers, the number of women who occupy management positions is greater than ever before (Bullard & Wright, 1993; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005; Dreher, 2003; Equal Opportunities Commission, 2002). This increase in representation has focused both the media and the research spotlight on the way in which women leaders perform once placed in these leadership roles. As a result, commentators are continually asking a series of probing questions. How good are women managers? Are they as good as men? What happens to the companies that appoint women to senior positions? Indeed, it was questions of exactly this form that inspired Judge (2003) to write the scathing article from which the first of the above quotations was taken.

As Judge's comments indicate, women's march into senior positions has been far from

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smooth. In the first instance, women managers tend to receive greater scrutiny and criticism than men, and they tend to be evaluated less favorably, even when performing exactly the same leadership roles as men (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992). Workers also express a tendency to prefer male supervisors to female ones (e.g., Simon & Landis, 1989), and many men—particularly male managers—remain unconvinced about the effectiveness of women leaders (Sczesny, 2003). An obvious question here is whether this is a reflection of real differences between men and women or whether it is a symptom of additional barriers that women encounter once they have broken through the glass ceiling.

Evidence that companies that appoint women to their board of directors tend to perform worse than those that remain exclusively male might lead one to conclude, as does Judge (2003), that female leaders deserve their cool reception. However, in contrast to this analysis, we argue here that the negative outcomes experienced by companies that appoint female leaders can be seen as the consequence of a "second wave" of discrimination, which women—like the female executive quoted above—must overcome in the workplace. Extending the metaphor of the glass ceiling and the glass elevator, we argue that such women are more likely than men to find themselves on a "glass cliff" such that their positions of leadership are associated with greater risk of failure (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). If and when that failure occurs, it is then women (rather than men) who must face the consequences and who are singled out for criticism and blame.

In support of this analysis, we review some initial research providing evidence of the glass cliff and developing a series of propositions concerning its causes and consequences. Support for these propositions comes from experimental studies, archival studies in corporate and other settings, and qualitative data collected via web-based responses to a series of worldwide news stories. The paper also points to a multiplicity of processes that potentially underlie the glass cliff phenomenon and discusses the implications of these for groups that seek both to promote and to resist gender equality.

## IMPLICIT THEORIES OF GENDER AND LEADERSHIP

### Think Manager–Think Male

As previous commentators have observed, much of the evidence for gender differentiation in the workplace can be seen to reflect people's implicit theories about leadership and gender. More specifically, they can be seen to arise from the perceived incompatibility between beliefs about what it means to be a good leader and what it means to be female (e.g., Agars, 2004; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989; Schein, 1973, 1975, 2001). Along these lines, Berthoin Antal and Izreali suggest that "probably the single most important hurdle for women in management . . . is the persistent stereotype that associates management with being male" (1993: 63).

Early work examining stereotypes of managers, of men, and of women, and the relationships between these stereotypes, was conducted by Schein (1973, 1975). This centered on studies in which participants were given a list of ninety-two descriptive terms and asked to indicate how characteristic each term was of either (1) women in general, (2) men in general, or (3) successful middle managers. Results demonstrated that both male (Schein, 1973) and female (Schein, 1975) managers believed that men were more likely than women to possess the characteristics associated with managerial success. Indeed, of the ninety-two descriptors used, sixty were seen to be characteristic of both managers and men, including being emotionally stable, aggressive, (having) leadership ability, self-reliant, competitive, self-confident, objective, ambitious, well-informed, and forceful.

Furthermore, this perceived relationship between what is managerial and what is male appears to be remarkably durable and global—particularly among male respondents (Deal, 1998; Eagly, 2005; Schein, 2001). Thus, recent replications of Schein's original studies demonstrate that these implicit theories are still endorsed today. In the last decade or so, the think manager–think male effect has been reproduced in the United States (e.g., Brenner, Tomkiewicz, & Schein, 1989; Heilman, Block, & Martell, 1995), the United Kingdom and Germany (Schein & Muller, 1992), and Japan and China (Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996), as well as in military settings (Boyce & Herd, 2003).

Importantly, people's implicit theories of management and gender are not only descriptive but also powerfully prescriptive (Heilman, 2001; Rudman & Glick, 2001). They guide how we act ourselves, as well as our expectations about how others should act. As a result, these stereotypes have the potential to substantially impact the way in which women (and men) are treated in the workplace. In particular, in a recent review, Eagly and Karau (2002) argued that the incongruity between what it means to be female and what is seen to be managerial can produce two forms of prejudice: (1) less favorable evaluation of the potential for women to take on leadership roles compared to men and (2) less favorable evaluations of the actual behavior of female leaders.

In the first instance, then, implicit theories have the potential to affect women's perceived suitability for management roles. This arises from a perceived *lack of fit* (e.g., Heilman, 1983; Kent & Moss, 1994) and expectations of failure. As Schein (2001) notes, if a management position is seen to be inherently masculine, then, all else being equal, a male candidate will appear to be more qualified than a female one. In addition, Eagly and Karau (2002) note that the repeated pairing of notions of masculinity and notions of management means that observers are less likely to "spontaneously categorize" women as leaders or potential leaders. In this way, men's advantage over women may be twofold, since they are seen to have both the traits associated with leadership and greater potential to be a leader.

Implicit theories are also implicated in the subsequent evaluation of individuals as leaders. Here, evidence suggests that women leaders are evaluated less favorably than their male counterparts, even when they behave in exactly the same manner (e.g., Agars, 2004; Eagly et al., 1992). In a meta-analysis of studies investigating gender differences in leader evaluation, Eagly et al. (1992) demonstrated that this tendency is particularly pronounced when leadership behaviors are stereotypically masculine in nature. Thus, a male manager who acts in a forceful or assertive way is perceived as behaving appropriately and displaying leadership, whereas a female leader who behaves in the same way is considered unacceptably pushy. A paradigm case of this double bind in action is provided by the experiences of Ann Hopkins, a

top manager with Price Waterhouse, who, despite her impressive performance in accumulating more billable hours than other prospective partners and attracting \$25 million in business, was denied a partnership on grounds that she was "not feminine enough" (Fiske, Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux, & Heilman, 1991).

In this way, women leaders are often in a lose-lose situation. If their behavior confirms the gender stereotype, they are not thought to be acting as a proper leader, but if their behavior is consistent with the leader stereotype, they are not thought to be acting as a proper woman. Violating either of these stereotypes can then lead to negative evaluations of them and their performance (e.g., Cockburn, 1991; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly et al., 1992; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; Ridgeway, 2001; Rudman & Glick, 2001).

### The Importance of Context

It is apparent from the above review that implicit theories about gender and leadership are an important basis for, and reflection of, women's experiences in the workplace. However, by focusing on the *content* of people's theories about leaders and gender, much research and analysis fails to take into account *contextual variation* in these stereotypes (Haslam, 2001; Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994; Perry, Davis-Blake, & Kulik, 1994). In relation to the present discussion, a key question concerns the flexibility in those theories: Is it the case that implicit theories of leadership and gender are the same across time and across context?

Consistent with the idea that implicit leadership theories are more flexible than commonly supposed, there is some evidence to suggest that there is no single prototype of a good leader that observers (whether leadership theorists or lay followers) endorse in all situations (e.g., Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004; Haslam, 2001; Lord, Brown, Harvey, & Hall, 2001). Indeed, along these lines, in their role congruity theory, Eagly and Karau (2002) argue that the perceived suitability of men and women for managerial roles will vary as a function of cultural norms and the profile of the particular industry (i.e., whether it is stereotypically "masculine" or "feminine"; Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Eagly & Johnson, 1990). In a different way, contingency models of leadership are founded on an assumption that the appro-

priateness of particular leadership styles varies with context. For example, Fiedler's (1964, 1978) contingency model suggests that successful leadership depends on a match between leader characteristics and features of the situation that any leader confronts. Distinguishing between different types of leaders, the model suggests that, on the one hand, task-orientated leaders (i.e., those who are "low LPC" by virtue of holding a low opinion of their Least Preferred Coworker) perform best when the context is either particularly propitious (e.g., the leader has a strong leadership position, relations with followers are good, and the task at hand is structured) or particularly unpropitious (the leadership position is weak, relations with followers are poor, and the task is lacking in structure). On the other hand, a relationship-orientated ("high LPC") leader is argued to be most effective when conditions are mixed—for example, when leader power is lacking and relationships are strained, but the task is well-structured. In this way, particular types of leaders are seen as more suited to some types of tasks than to others.

Beyond contingency formulations of this type, more recent approaches to leadership suggest not only that evaluations of leadership effectiveness vary across situations but also that perceptions of what it means to be a good leader are dynamic and context dependent. In particular, this is true of leadership categorization theory (e.g., Lord, Foti, & DeVader, 1984; Lord & Maher, 1990, 1991; see also Lord & Smith, 1999, and Lord et al., 2001) and the social identity approach to leadership (e.g., Haslam, 2001; Turner & Haslam, 2001; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2004).

Leadership categorization theory emphasizes the importance of followers' perceptions of leaders, suggesting that leadership perceptions are based largely on leadership prototypes (Lord & Maher, 1990). Here, leadership success is predicted to follow from a leader's ability to meet the expectations of his or her followers. Importantly, these prototypes are often specific to a particular context or domain (e.g., business, sport, the military), and, thus, a leader who is perceived to be effective in one domain may not be seen as effective in another (e.g., Lord & Maher, 1990).

Applying this approach to gender, the leadership categorization approach would suggest that women are underrepresented in leadership

roles (and are perceived as unsuccessful when they hold them) in part because they are not perceived to possess the traits required for, and expected of, a managerial role. By the same token, the fact that this match varies across situations might explain why there are more women managers in stereotypically "feminine" service sectors (e.g., in health care or retail) than in more "masculine" industrial sectors (e.g., manufacturing or mining; Blum, Fields, & Goodman, 1994; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2003). In addition, this variation in prototypicality is itself partially a reflection of the underlying reality of variation in the relative proliferation of men and women in these different sectors.

In contrast, the social identity approach to leadership moves away from a simple matching of leaders' abilities to the appropriate situation and looks instead at the way in which perceptions of leadership emerge as a result of the shared social identity of group members and the needs and interests that arise from requirements to enact that identity in different contexts (e.g., Haslam, 2001; Turner & Haslam, 2001; Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005). According to this analysis, a leader must be seen to epitomize what it means to be an ingroup member, and only a prototypical group member (i.e., one that maximizes both intragroup similarity and intergroup differences—self-categorization theory's principle of *meta-contrast*; Turner, 1985) is likely to be able to influence and lead the group (Turner, 1991).

In this way, it is more important for leaders to be prototypical group members than it is for them to have the traits of a prototypical leader in the abstract (e.g., Haslam & Platow, 2001; Turner & Haslam, 2001; see also Duck & Fielding, 1999; Ellemers, De Gilder, D., & Haslam, 2004; Haslam et al., 2001; Hogg, 2001; Reicher et al., 2005). Importantly, though, group prototypicality is not fixed or static but varies as a function of social context and the nature of intergroup relations (e.g., Haslam & Turner, 1992, 1995; Turner & Oakes, 1989).

Applied to gender, the social identity approach would suggest that inequalities in the number of male and female leaders could arise in part because women are seen by those who appoint them (mainly men) to be less prototypical of the groups they are expected to lead than are men. Indeed, the fact that the upper echelons of management are dominated by men



means that this outcome is doubly determined, since women are less likely to be seen to define the leader prototype (because they do not maximize intragroup similarity) and are less likely to be doing the defining.

Again, though, such outcomes should be seen as context dependent rather than set in stone. Most obviously, this is because demographic characteristics such as gender are not the only way of representing a group, and those attributes that are valued by a group may be unrelated to gender or may explicitly counter gender discrimination (van Knippenberg & Haslam, 2003). Thus, if a group's norms value equality or diversity, a woman may be seen to be an appropriate leader for a group, even if that group is male dominated.

### Think Crisis—Think Female?

The literature reviewed above suggests that there is no simple or universal (implicit) theory of what it means to be a leader that is likely to inform perception and action across all situations. In this regard, it is worth noting that Schein's (1973, 1975, 2001) work into perceptions of what it means to be a manager and what it means to be a man or a woman has looked solely at perceptions of *successful* managers. There is, however, some evidence that what is required and expected of a leader when all is going smoothly might be very different from what is required or expected in times of crisis<sup>1</sup> or risk (Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl, 2004; Haslam et al., 2001; Hunt, Boal, & Dodge, 1999; Meindl, 1993; Pillai & Meindl, 1998).

Consistent with this idea, Pillai and Meindl (1998) have identified a negative relationship between evaluations of leaders and perceptions of crisis such that those who hold the reins through a time of crisis are more likely to be seen as poor leaders and to be blamed for being

"part of the problem" (Emrich, 1999). If one assumes that this logic can be applied to people's understandings of the present, not just the past (an assumption that merits empirical investigation but that may follow, *inter alia*, from beliefs in a just world [Furnham, 1993] and from the logic of "guilt by association" [Arbuthnot, 1983]), then when one thinks of leaders in a crisis situation, one may not expect them to have, or attribute to them, the same traits as successful leaders. Accordingly, under these conditions, the close association between what it means to be male and what it means to be a leader might be attenuated.

As an extension of the above arguments, we have argued that, in crisis situations, people may not automatically "think manager—think male" but may, in fact, be more likely to "think crisis—think female" (Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, & Bongiorno, 2007). Consistent with this proposition, in Schein's (1973, 1975) original studies there were a small number of traits associated with managerial success that participants believed women were more likely to possess than men. These included being understanding, helpful, sophisticated, aware of the feelings of others, intuitive, creative, and cheerful. It seems plausible that some of these traits (e.g., being understanding, intuitive, and creative) are ones that are seen to be particularly useful in times of crisis.

Empirical support for this analysis comes from a series of four studies in which participants from a range of backgrounds were asked to identify traits associated with (1) managers in companies doing well, (2) managers in companies doing badly, (3) women, or (4) men (Ryan et al., 2007). Using the procedure previously employed by Schein (e.g., 1973), the studies replicated a think manager—think male association for descriptions of managers of successful companies but demonstrated that this was either attenuated (Studies 1 and 2) or reversed (Study 3) for managers of unsuccessful companies. Moreover, Ryan et al.'s final study showed that when participants were asked to describe *ideal* managers of successful and unsuccessful companies, (1) the think manager—think male association was attenuated in the case of successful companies, and (2) there was a very strong association between the female stereotype and management of an unsuccessful company.

<sup>1</sup> Osborn notes that "the term crisis [is] frequently used but rarely defined" (1995: 118). Osborn himself follows Pauchant and Mitroff (1992) in defining a crisis as "disturbance to a whole system coupled with challenges to the assumptions of that system" (1995: 118). However, for the purposes of the present analysis, we prefer a broader conceptualization based on an adaptation of Osborn's criteria for low-level organizational crisis. This defines such crisis as *any form of dramatic reduction in financial and/or reputational well-being that has an adverse bearing on the perceived state of the organization*.

### WOMEN AND PRECARIOUS LEADERSHIP POSITIONS: THE GLASS CLIFF

Building on the observations in the previous section, we can hypothesize that women's perceived suitability for senior positions is likely to increase under conditions of organizational crisis. This hypothesis is consistent with survey findings reported by Ohlott, Ruderman, and McCauley (1994), which showed that the challenges that men reported facing on their way up an organizational hierarchy are more likely to serve a positive self-developmental purpose than those faced by women—whose challenges are better characterized as obstacles. Such research suggests the idea that men and women are differentially selected for rewarding and unrewarding organizational tasks, but its correlational nature leaves questions of cause and effect largely unanswered. It could, for example, be the case that women preferentially choose to take on (or work less hard to avoid) organizational obstacles, rather than that others select these obstacles for them.

In order to disentangle these issues and explore them as they relate directly to glass cliff phenomena, we recently conducted a series of experimental laboratory studies (Ashby, Ryan, & Haslam, *in press*; Haslam & Ryan, 2007). In the first of these (Haslam & Ryan, 2006: Study 1), we asked participants (graduate business students) to select a candidate for a vacant executive position on a company board. In different conditions, the company's performance in recent years was described either as having improved markedly or as having deteriorated markedly. Participants were given descriptions of three candidates for the position: a male and a female candidate who were equally well qualified and a third male candidate who was clearly less suitable for the job. As predicted, participants were much more likely to select the female candidate for the position when the company's performance was said to be declining than when it was said to be improving.

These findings were also replicated in two studies conducted with high school students (Haslam & Ryan, 2007: Studies 2 and 3). Here, we gave adolescent participants a prospectus of candidates for a position as the youth representative for a major local music festival and told them either that the festival had experienced steady decline in recent years or that it had

been going from strength to strength. As predicted, participants were much more likely to choose the female candidate to be the representative when they were led to believe that the festival's popularity was declining than when they were led to believe it was improving.

Moreover, against suggestions that these processes are peculiar to those with little firsthand experience of workplace realities, this pattern of findings was replicated in a final study of eighty-three senior managers participating in a regional business leaders' forum (Haslam & Ryan, 2007: Study 4). In a scenario that involved appointing a financial director to a company that was a major manufacturer and distributor of office stationery and furniture, these business leaders were much more likely to see the female candidate as suitable for the position (and only saw her as significantly more suitable than the equally qualified male candidate) when the organization was experiencing a marked downturn in performance.

Turning to another domain in which the glass ceiling has previously been investigated—the legal profession (Kay & Hagan, 1995, 1999; Merritt, Reskin, & Fondell, 1993)—Ashby et al. (*in press*) asked law students to select one lawyer from a pool of candidates to take on responsibility for the management of a high-profile legal case. Here again, a glass cliff pattern emerged in the participants' responses. That is, the students were much more likely to select a female lawyer to take the lead role in the case when it was described as being associated with negative publicity and criticism than when the case was described as proceeding smoothly and trouble free.

Below we systematically consider the processes that potentially contribute to these intriguing findings. For now, though, it is sufficient to emphasize that these experimental studies suggest that the processes that contribute to the selection of women for glass cliff appointments are not isolated to a particular context or participant group. Importantly, too, the fact that the studies hold constant key factors that might otherwise contribute to gender inequalities in the workplace (e.g., ability and past experience) increases our confidence that gender, *per se*, has a causal role to play in the perceived suitability of women for class cliff positions.

Clearly, however, the notion of the glass cliff is relevant to the analysis of organizational life because its impact extends beyond mere perceptions of the suitability of women for leadership positions that are precarious because they are associated with management of organizational units that are in crisis. In particular, we would argue that to the extent that these perceptions form the basis for *actual* organizational decisions, they should have an impact on the positions in which women tend to find themselves in organizations if they manage to break through the glass ceiling.

Partly because it is only recently that women have started breaking through the glass ceiling in reasonable numbers, there is very little research providing direct evidence of their glass cliff experiences. Nevertheless, research exploring the trajectory of women's careers on the other side of the glass ceiling provides evidence that they encounter a range of problems, many of which appear to derive from the limited leadership opportunities they secure (e.g., as a consequence of processes of selection, negotiation, and self-promotion). In this vein, Lyness and Thompson (1997) analyzed archival and survey data in order to compare the work experiences of just over 100 male and female senior executives in the financial services sector. Their analysis revealed several important differences between the gender groups. In particular, the positions women came to occupy tended to involve less authority (see also Jacobs, 1992, and Wright, Baxter, & Birkelund, 1995), to have fewer tangible rewards (e.g., in the form of stock options), and to be more restrictive (e.g., affording less opportunity for career mobility). Women also generally found their positions to be less satisfying than men, leading the authors to conclude that while the women had ostensibly broken through the glass ceiling, they were now encountering discrimination of a different and more subtle form.

Such findings also accord with the longitudinal research of Stroh, Brett, and Reilly (1996), who found that the reason more women left management positions than men in the twenty Fortune 500 companies they followed over a two-year period (26 percent versus 14 percent, respectively) was *not* that they had more family commitments but, rather, that they had become more disaffected as a result of the suboptimal career opportunities they were afforded (for a

similar pattern of data and similar conclusions, see Merritt et al., 1993). On this basis, the authors concluded that women left their jobs for the same reasons as men—it was simply that they had more reasons to do so.

Along related but more nuanced lines, in an earlier analysis of 291 listed companies, Frankforter (1996) 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, and Powell, 1980). This gender-based division of managerial labor is clearly consistent with stereotypic differences related to the perceived suitability of men and women for the task- and relationship-oriented forms of leadership discussed above (e.g., Bass & Avolio, 1994; Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995; Schein, 1975). This pattern can be seen as more troubling, though, in light of evidence that "soft" personnel work (and associated *emotional labor*) tends to be less valued by organizations than "hard" production work (which is more often defined as "core business"; Powell, 1980), is less likely to lead to more senior management positions, and often involves more interpersonal conflict and greater stress (Burke & McKeen, 1995; Erickson & Ritter, 2001; Guy & Newman, 2004; Pugliesi, 1999).

Moreover, if it is the case that being placed in more stressful leadership positions causes women to actually become more stressed than men (a possibility supported by statistics—particularly in more "masculine" sectors—on relative levels of occupational stress, burnout, depression, general morbidity, and sick leave [e.g., see Langan-Fox, 2001]), this clearly has the potential to contribute to a dynamic similar to those discussed above. For if stress is attributed to dispositional rather than situational factors—so that women are seen as insufficiently resilient or too "emotional" (e.g., see Matud, 2004, and Sandanger, Nygard, Sorensen, & Moum, 2004)—this can be taken as evidence that they are unsuited to leadership positions and, hence, can be "legitimately" denied opportunities for higher office.

Although this previous work all suggests that, once above the glass ceiling, women's leadership opportunities are limited, none of it speaks directly to the glass cliff phenomenon (which would suggest that women are limited specifi-

cally by the fact that they tend to be excluded from safe or "cushy" positions). Indeed, critically, our argument in this respect is that once women assume leadership offices, glass cliffs represent an *additional* problem that they must overcome, beyond those that have been previously identified in the literature (e.g., relating to lack of support, work-life imbalance, etc.; Maier, 1991). Clearly, these difficulties are likely to be interrelated (e.g., so that lack of institutional and peer support means that women are given limited career choices; see below). Nevertheless, in the "man's world" of the organization, we would argue that glass cliffs only increase the factor by which women's competence needs to exceed men's in order for them to succeed (Eagly et al., 1992).

In an attempt to garner data that would speak directly to this point, we (Ryan & Haslam, 2005) recently initiated a program of research to examine the contexts in which women were appointed to leadership positions in top British companies. The starting point for this work was research lying behind the claims of Judge (2003) that prefaced this paper. Judge's comments here were a gloss on data collated by Singh and Vinnicombe (2003) relating to the percentage of women on the boards of directors of FTSE 100. Inspecting this data, Judge observed that of the ten companies with the highest percentage of women on their boards, six had underperformed relative to the mean performance of FTSE 100 companies. In contrast, the five companies with the lowest percentage of women on their boards—companies whose boards were wholly male—had all performed better than the FTSE 100 average. This led Judge to conclude that "corporate Britain may well be better off without women on the board" (2003: 21).

Taking issue with Judge's interpretation of this relationship, we (Ryan & Haslam, 2005) conducted a more forensic analysis of the performance of these same companies both before and after the appointment of a male or female board member. Challenging the argument that women directors are bad for business, our analysis revealed that the appointment of a woman director was *not* associated with a subsequent drop in company performance. Indeed, in a time of a general financial downturn, companies that appointed a woman actually experienced a marked *increase* in share price after the appointment, although, in relative terms, the com-

panies were still performing poorly. Those appointments that were made in less unsettled times, however, tended to be followed by a period of share price stability.

Yet this study did more than simply refute claims that women have a deleterious impact on the corporate world. In particular, it noted that there was systematic patterning in company performance *leading up* to the appointment of women to boards of directors. In a time of a general downturn in the stock market, companies that appointed a woman to their board had experienced consistently poor performance in the months *preceding* the appointment. Thus, women were more likely than men to be placed in positions *already associated* with poor company performance. Because of the likelihood of continuing poor company performance in these circumstances (subsequently borne out), female directors, thus, were more likely than male directors to find themselves on a glass cliff. That is, their positions of leadership were more risky and precarious (i.e., at greater risk of being associated with failure) than those in which men found themselves.

Importantly, we would argue that glass cliff positions are unlikely to be restricted to businesses and corporations but will also emerge in other spheres of social and political activity. Consistent with this idea, we and a coauthor (Ryan, Haslam, & Kulich, 2007a) identified the tendency to place female candidates in glass cliff positions in patterns of candidate selection for all U.K. general elections since 1966. Here there was evidence that, particularly in more conservative parties, women were required to run for election in constituencies where the likelihood of victory (based on previous election outcomes) was lower than that in the elections fought by men. For example, in the 2005 election, the Conservative Party stood significantly less women candidates than men in the election, with only 19.5 percent of candidates being female—a finding consistent with previous U.S. research pointing to the existence of a glass ceiling in politics (Dolan, 1997).

Speaking to the existence of an additional glass cliff, though, it was apparent that those women who were nominated as candidates were selected to contest seats that were less winnable, in the sense that they were held by an opposition candidate with a significantly larger majority (26 percent) than that of the opposition



candidate in the seats for which men ran (12 percent). Moreover, path analysis showed that the relationship between a candidate's gender and the number of votes he or she actually received was fully mediated by the size of the majority he or she needed to overcome. In general, then, women candidates received far fewer votes than their male counterparts—not because they were worse politicians but, rather, because they were given much greater challenges to overcome.

Along the lines of other experimental studies alluded to above, these patterns were also confirmed in experimental studies where political science students were asked to select a candidate (from a field of men and women) to run in winnable and unwinnable electoral seats (Ryan, Haslam, & Kulich, 2007b). Here, women were regarded as much better candidates when life on the hustings promised to be very tough. Indeed, in this way, the career opportunities for women in politics can be seen to be a product of the sort of thinking displayed by Democratic National Committee chair John Bailey when he opined, "The only time to run a woman is when things look so bad that your only chance is to do something dramatic" (cited in Burrell, 1993: 123).

As we have noted, glass cliff positions should hold a greater element of danger for those who occupy them, because companies that have experienced consistently bad performance are likely to attract negative publicity and attention of the "wrong sort" (e.g., in the media, on the stock market; Lee & James, 2003). In such cases, too, explanations for poor performance are more likely to focus on the individual abilities of those organizations' leaders than on situational and contextual factors that affect organizational performance. Such predictions follow from the work of Meindl and colleagues into the "romance of leadership"—the process through which change in organizational performance tends to be attributed to the internal, dispositional qualities of leaders (and successes and failures of their leadership) rather than external factors (e.g., Meindl, 1993; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985). The findings from such research suggest that while leaders of companies that perform well are likely to be feted as great leaders, those who have the misfortune to be in charge of poorly performing companies are much more likely to be criticized and pilloried—particularly if they are outgroup members

(Haslam et al., 2001). Again, then, to the extent that women are more likely than men to find themselves in the latter situation rather than the former, they are in greater danger of being targets of unfair blame and censure (e.g., of the form meted out by Judge, 2003).

Evidence suggests, however, that criticism of leaders rarely stops there and often precipitates their either being hounded out of office (as illustrated by the experiences of the respondent quoted at the start of the paper) or feeling that they need to "take a fall" on behalf of the organization and their colleagues. This, indeed, may be one reason why women's tenure of senior positions is observed to be very much shorter than that of men. Informal research reviewed by Blanton (2005) suggests, for example, that male CEOs in the United States hold their jobs for approximately twice as long as their female counterparts (8.2 versus 4.8 years, although the data are rendered unreliable by the small number of women CEOs).

#### THE CAUSES OF GLASS CLIFFS: PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESS AND SOCIOSTRUCTURAL REALITY

Recent studies provide a growing body of evidence that speaks to the existence of the glass cliff phenomenon and that reiterates the importance of context in determining the perceived suitability of men and women for positions of leadership. But evidence *that* the phenomenon exists also raises important questions concerning *why* it is that women are more likely than men to be placed in risky leadership positions.

The line of argument developed above leads us to the suggestion that this may, in large part, be a product of implicit theories of leadership in which women are seen as better suited to crisis management than men. As work into the think manager—think male phenomenon suggests, these theories can themselves be quite nuanced, reflecting beliefs (1) that women are best equipped to deal with the socioemotional challenges that (potential) crises present, (2) that men are not suited to these challenges, (3) that men are best equipped to deal with the task demands of success, or (4) that women are "not up to" such tasks (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Schein, 1973).

Having identified the organizational reality of glass cliffs, however, it seems likely that im-

PLICIT theories are not their only cause. Other psychological factors are potentially at work as well, in addition to processes that are related to a range of social and organizational realities (e.g., concerning the extent to which a given organization or sector is male-dominated; Oakes et al., 1994). Indeed, in line with inquiry into other forms of gender inequity in the workplace, it seems plausible that glass cliffs arise from a confluence of social psychological and social structural factors. These can be distinguished with respect to at least two continua: the first ranging from processes that are deliberate (e.g., reflecting overt sexism or discrimination in the workplace) to those that are inadvertent (e.g., arising from beliefs about the distinct competencies of men and women), and the second ranging from processes that are malign (e.g., a desire to find scapegoats) to those that are benign (e.g., a desire to appoint women to available positions). Theoretically, it seems reasonable to assume that these continua are independent insofar as it is possible to identify processes that fall within all quadrants of the event space defined by these two dimensions (i.e., deliberate-malign, deliberate-benign, inadvertent-malign, inadvertent-benign).

### Hostile and Benevolent Sexism

One of the most straightforward explanations for the tendency to place women in precarious leadership positions is that it is a straightforward manifestation of *hostile sexism* in the workplace. Such an analysis would suggest that women are appointed to precarious leadership positions simply because sexist men, or women who reproduce or conform to the norms of a sexist male culture (Cooper, 1997; Ellemers, 2001; Ellemers, van den Heuvel, De Gilder, Maass, & Bonvini, 2004), strive actively to disadvantage women and have a desire to see them fail.

Against this proposition, our (Haslam & Ryan, 2007) experimental research suggests that glass cliffs cannot readily be explained by reference to this factor alone. In particular, this is because negative attitudes toward gender equality—as measured by lack of support for feminist ideals—were not predictive of the tendency to appoint women to risky leadership positions. In other words, people who espoused sexist views were no more likely to appoint women to glass cliffs than those who rejected those views. Sim-

ilarly, in these experimental studies there is little or no evidence that women are any less likely than men to appoint women to glass cliff positions. Accordingly, it would appear that, in general terms, the phenomenon needs to be interpreted in terms of processes that are more subtle and less overtly malign.

In this respect, one possibility is that such appointments result from a form of *benevolent sexism* (Cuddy et al., 2004; Glick & Fiske, 2001) whereby women are assigned (and rewarded for taking on) roles that can be represented as attractive (e.g., as “challenging”) but are actually problematic. By providing women with these “challenges,” those who appoint them may feel that they are doing women a favor (at least in contrast to hostile sexists, who would be opposed to appointing women to senior positions altogether). The sense that they are being done a favor may also mean that women feel unable to refuse such offers (lest they be accused of “looking a gift horse in the mouth”). At the same time, by appearing to support women but actually giving them inferior positions with limited opportunities for development, those in power can deny charges of overt discrimination while ensuring that any change does not dramatically challenge the gender-based status hierarchy or rock the organizational boat too hard.

### Group Dynamics and Ingroup Favoritism

Based on previous analysis of the significant role that group dynamics play in determining the form and content of organizational life (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Haslam, 2001; Haslam, van Knippenberg, Platow, & Ellemers, 2003; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2001; Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939), it is possible to argue that glass cliffs are an expression of intergroup discrimination on the part of decision makers under conditions where (as is typically the case in organizational contexts) those decision makers are predominantly male. This discrimination would take the form of ingroup favoritism (Tajfel, Flament, Billig, & Bundy, 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) such that more attractive (i.e., non-precarious or “cushy”) positions are reserved for fellow ingroup members (i.e., in the form of “jobs for the boys”; Balls, 1992; Gallagher, 1994; Monkturner, 1992; Powell & Butterfield, 2002), while outgroup members are left to occupy those positions the ingroup does not want. Such dis-

crimination can also be seen as a means of reducing threats to the status quo and to men's positions of privilege that are posed by women who seek to ascend the corporate ladder (Schmitt, Ellemers, & Branscombe, 2003).

Related to explanations based on discrimination, it can be argued that women are appointed to glass cliff positions because company decision makers (reflecting widely held societal views) see women as more expendable and, thus, are more willing to "hand them a poisoned chalice" by selecting them for leadership positions that are of dubious value and have an uncertain future. Indeed, women may be regarded as more attractive candidates for such positions because they have greater potential as scapegoats who can be shouldered with blame should things go wrong. Arguments of this form are consistent with previous work (particularly on mentoring) that suggests that the career trajectories of women in organizations differ from those of men because (1) their patterns of organizational and extraorganizational identification are often different from those of men (Lobel & St. Clair, 1992; Schmitt, Ellemers, & Branscombe, 2003), and (2) they lack the "homosociable" (Ramsay & Parker, 1992) support networks, infrastructure, and resources that are provided to males both as they ascend the corporate ladder and once they assume the mantle of leadership (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Ibarra, 1993; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000; Tharenou, Latimer, & Conroy, 1994).

### Perceived Quality of Leadership Options

While explanations based on various forms of group dynamics are popular with organizational respondents, particularly women (Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, in press), they are not lent strong support by findings from experimental studies of the form discussed above. In particular, these studies provide little evidence that participants see leadership positions in poorly performing companies as any less desirable than positions in more successful ones (Haslam & Ryan, 2007). This may, however, be a product of the relatively crude measures of attractiveness used in these studies. Consistent with this view, more subtle measures of desirability of the form used by Ashby et al. (in press) *did* indicate that participants were less likely to recommend a risky leadership position to a friend than a

nonrisky position. This suggests that men may be less likely to find themselves on glass cliffs than women because members of their gender-based ingroup direct them away from such positions and toward more secure career opportunities.

Providing further insights along these lines, Ashby et al.'s research also included measures of the perceived risk of particular leadership positions and the quality of opportunity that those positions provided. In the first instance, measures of perceived risk indicated that, for men, as one would expect, assuming leadership responsibility for a legal case that was going badly and attracting negative publicity was seen to be much riskier than assuming leadership for a case that was proceeding smoothly. Significantly, however, participants displayed no such differential sensitivity when the leader was a woman. In addition, while leadership in the risky situation was seen to provide a man with a much lower quality of opportunity than leadership in the nonrisky situation, the very opposite was true for a woman. Thus, the law students saw leadership of the risky case to be a particularly poor career opportunity for a man but a particularly good opportunity—and one that was far less risky—for a woman.

At the most basic level, these patterns point to the context dependence of perceptions of risk and opportunity, since whether or not the dangers and merits of any given position were acknowledged depended on whether that position was going to be occupied by a man or a woman. In line with the arguments developed above, these findings also suggest that the gender discrimination that contributes to glass cliffs can be subtle and, in some sense, benevolent. This is because it appears that the recommendation of women for high-risk leadership positions can arise from the fact that these positions are construed more as "golden opportunities" than "poisoned chalices"—presumably a reflection of participants' sensitivity to the fact that women have fewer opportunities than their male counterparts (e.g., Fraizer & Hunt, 1998).

Compatible with this world view, participants also appeared to feel that failure would be more likely to have a detrimental impact on the leader (i.e., would have more to lose) if the leader was a man rather than a woman. As with views about women's expendability, these perceptions may also be linked to the traditional

view that men have a primary responsibility to be breadwinners, while women's work simply provides "extra" income (Zuo & Tang, 2000).

### Signaling Change

Although implicit theories of leadership might suggest that women are appointed to precarious leadership positions because their traits or abilities match the challenging managerial tasks they can expect to face in these positions, a less subtle explanation would suggest that they find themselves in these positions simply because they are *not* men. If a company or organizational unit is performing poorly, this failure may indicate that the (default) think manager–think male approach to management is not working and, hence, that a change from the traditional, prototypically male, leader is in order.

It is worth noting, too, that such strategies can be seen to present themselves as win-win options for those who seek to preserve the gender-based status quo. If women succeed after being placed in difficult positions, then the organization is better off, and if they fail, the women can be blamed and the prior practice of appointing men can be justified and resurrected. Moreover, in either event, equal opportunities policy can be seen to have been enacted, and the organization is given the opportunity to present itself as enlightened and progressive.

Related to this last explanation, it may also be the case that appointing a woman to a leadership role is a "last resort" option that is attempted only when other less drastic forms of change have been exhausted. This accords with the pronouncement of John Bailey, alluded to above, regarding the very restricted conditions under which women should be considered for senior political office. In such circumstances women may be appointed to glass cliff positions not primarily as a function of their perceived ability to perform a given leadership role but, rather, because there seems to be nothing left to lose. Alternatively (or in conjunction with this), it may be felt that appointing a woman to a leadership position will attract favorable attention (Kanter, 1977; Wright, Ferris, Miller, & Kroll, 1995)—serving to signal to both internal and external audiences (e.g., investors, auditors, the stock market) that an organization is embracing change (see Lee & James, 2003, who also point out that this strategy can backfire to the extent

that it sends signals that the organization is in trouble). Consistent with this idea, there is 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). By this means, the appointment itself can be used as an opportunity to engage in favorable impression management.

The latter arguments suggest that the selection of women for glass cliff positions can be a strategic response motivated by the desire to present an organization in a favorable light. Less cynically, though, such appointments could arise simply from the motivation to enact principles of gender equality. In particular, if an organization attempts to promote norms of equal opportunity by appointing women to the first vacant positions that become available, it is likely that—because those positions that fall vacant are more likely to be those where a change of leadership is called for (i.e., because company performance is declining; Meindl, 1993)—this policy will tend to mean that women are selectively appointed to glass cliff positions.

Support for this dynamic is provided by Goodman, Fields, and Blum (2003), who found that women are most likely to break through the glass ceiling in companies that have high management turnover. Under this analysis, women may find themselves in precarious leadership positions not because organizational decision makers are deliberately malevolent but because this is the expression of (the early phases of) a developmental process where progressive gender policies are ushered in. Clearly, however, such strategies *could* be both deliberate and malign if it is the case that employers see conditions of high turnover and organizational instability as, in some sense, the "ideal" circumstances in which to implement diversity or equity policies.

### REACTIONS TO GLASS CLIFFS

In the previous section we provided some insight into the range of candidate processes that are likely to play a role in the preferential recruitment of women for precarious leadership positions. Having outlined these, a seemingly obvious next question concerns the extent to which each of these actually contributes to the



observed patterning of leadership responsibilities in organizations.

In seeking to answer this question, we believe two points need to be kept in mind. The first is that the various putative causal factors we have identified are not mutually exclusive, and, hence, each of the processes that we have discussed is likely to play some role in the creation and maintenance of glass cliffs. If one considers the implicit leadership theory that underpins the think crisis–think female association, for example, it is clear that this could (1) derive from and reinforce sexism, (2) be created by and contribute to group dynamics (including communication and interaction), and (3) flow from and promote structural inequalities. Nevertheless, there is clearly value in seeking to explore the role that each of the factors identified above plays in the creation of glass cliffs and in attempting, on this basis, to develop an integrative explanation of their existence that does justice to the range of psychological and sociostructural mechanisms that are almost certainly involved.

A second point to bear in mind is the need to be wary of attempts to prioritize particular explanations of the glass cliff purely on the basis of surveys of, or interviews with, organizational staff. This is because answers developed on this basis are likely to be limited by the identity-based motivations that underpin responses to questions of this form. In particular, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) would suggest that understandings of the processes that contribute to the creation of glass cliffs are likely to vary predictably as a function of the form and extent of participants' identification with their ingroup and their ideological analysis of the nature of status relations between men and women (e.g., whether these are legitimate or illegitimate, stable or unstable; Schmitt, Ellemers, & Branscombe, 2003; see also Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Haslam, 2001; Turner, 1999). This means that women should be more likely to endorse pernicious explanations of glass cliffs to the extent that they identify strongly with their gender ingroup and perceive men's privileged status (in society and in organizations) as both unstable and illegitimate.

However, women should tend to disavow such explanations if they identify weakly with their gender ingroup and/or if they perceive status relations between men and women to be stable

and legitimate. As Schmitt, Ellemers, and Branscombe (2003: 283) observe, this is likely to be true of many women in senior positions in organizations who have achieved seniority within a sexist system only by adopting a strategy of individual mobility requiring them to act in terms of personal identity and to downplay or deny the importance of gender as an organizing category (Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998; Ellemers, 2001; Fajak & Haslam, 1998). Moreover, even if they identify strongly with other women and perceive their treatment to be illegitimate, women may also tend to downplay the significance of glass cliffs for strategic reasons—particularly in the presence of men—in order to avoid either being cast in the role of victim or attracting criticism from the high-power outgroup (Garcia, Horstman Reser, Amo, Redersdirff, & Branscombe, *in press*; Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Postmes, Branscombe, Spears, & Young, 1999; Reicher & Levine, 1994).

Evidence of this pattern emerges from the comments of the majority of senior female executives who were interviewed by journalists in the wake of the first news reports of glass cliff research (in particular, see Woods, 2004). More systematic evidence is also provided by Mainiero (1994), whose research involved interviews with fifty-five senior women executives in top U.S. companies. An overarching theme that emerged from these interviews was that the participants reported scrupulously avoiding the practice of playing gender politics. One clear problem with this strategy is that downplaying the significance of the real (and unfair) obstacles women face on breaking through the glass ceiling may impede their future progress by concealing the need for policy reform and playing into the hands of those who oppose gender equality in the workplace (Blum & Smith, 1988; Ellemers et al., 2004).

How, though, would men be expected to react to glass cliffs? Because they do not typically face a conflict between their personal and collective interests, and because their position of power means that they do not have to be as sensitive to the strategic consequences of expressing particular views in front of particular audiences, the predicted pattern is more straightforward for them in many ways (Reicher & Levine, 1994; Schmitt, Ellemers, & Branscombe, 2003). Here, for reasons opposite to those of women, they should endorse more pernicious

explanations of glass cliffs if they do not identify strongly with their gender ingroup (at least when the content of this identity is defined in "traditional" terms of male superiority) and, at the same time, perceive the privileged status of men (in society and in organizations) to be illegitimate. However, they should be more motivated to challenge those same pernicious explanations (and advocate more benign ones, or even deny the existence of the phenomenon altogether) to the extent that they identify strongly with their gender ingroup and perceive male privilege to be unstable but legitimate. By way of illustration, this would appear to be the case for contributors to the internet site *Mensnews-daily* (2004), in which media coverage of the glass cliff was discussed in the following terms:

Wow, this article [link to Ryan & Haslam, 2004] from the BBC is pretty amazing. Hold on to your hats: it turns-out that "Women are being 'parachuted' into precarious positions within companies where there is a high risk of failure. . . ." That's right—by being promoted into high places when a company might do badly, women are being set-up to be knocked-down. How cruel! . . . Yet another form of discrimination that a small number of high-flying female executives will supposedly have to deal with. Will high-ranking female executives EVER get to enjoy the fruits of Ekwalitee? Will they EVER get a fair deal? Will they EVER become something more than victims who are about to be annihilated all the time?! Probably not—let's all cry a flood of tears on cue, shall we? One, two, three, CRY!

Preliminary evidence consistent with this proposition emerges from responses to a large-scale online study in which people were given the opportunity both to describe their own experiences of glass cliffs and to identify the factors that they thought were responsible for them (Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, in press). One hundred sixty-four people from around the world (mainly from the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia) participated in the study. Of these, nearly 75 percent identified themselves as women. All had read a BBC online news story about the glass cliff phenomenon (Ryan & Haslam, 2004) and, after this, had been given the opportunity to complete a questionnaire and provide open-ended accounts of their experiences and explanations of the glass cliff phenomenon. In total, 300 separate qualitative responses were collected, including 180 comments on the likely causes of glass cliff ap-

pointments and 120 descriptions of glass cliff experiences.

One of the most striking features of the accounts that participants proposed to explain the existence of glass cliffs was that women and men differed markedly in terms of the accounts they endorsed. Thus, while women were most likely to explain the preponderance of women in precarious leadership positions in terms of pernicious processes (29 percent explained it in terms of lack of alternative opportunities, 23 percent in terms of sexism, and 15 percent in terms of men's ingroup favoritism), men endorsed these explanations far less frequently (they were favored by only 10 percent, 7 percent, and 3 percent of men, respectively). Men, however, were most likely to favor benign interpretations of the phenomenon or to downplay the importance of glass cliffs (10 percent explained it in terms of women's suitability for difficult leadership tasks and 52 percent questioned whether the phenomenon existed at all). In contrast, it is striking that only 5 percent of women expressed doubt about the phenomenon's existence.

There are clearly problems in attempting to extrapolate from the results of this online research in order to make statements about the extent to which these different explanations would be endorsed by men and women in the population at large (Birnbbaum, 2003). Among other things, this is because it can be argued that the motivations of this sample of respondents likely differed substantially from those of the population at large and led them to favor certain explanations and deny others. In particular, this is because it is apparent that those who responded were predominantly women who had firsthand experience of glass cliffs and, hence, had "a story to tell" (or, in the terms of some male respondents, "an axe to grind"). The same presumably is also true of responses to a subsequent online survey in which readers of CNN's World Business News were asked the question "Does the glass cliff effect exist?" and 72 percent of 531 respondents selected the option "Yes, management culture is overtly sexist" (CNN QuickVote, 2004).

Despite these limitations, it is noteworthy that while the *intensity* of these results may be much more pronounced, the differential *patterns* of theorizing displayed by men and women in this study mirror those observed in other gender research (including experimental studies), where

men's reaction to accusations or imputations of prejudice tend to be defensive and hostile (Branscombe, 1998; Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998) and women tend to find evidence of gender discrimination both troubling and distressing (Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, & Owen, 2002; Schmitt, Branscombe, & Postmes, 2003). The findings also correspond to other attributional research where group members tend to favor explanations of behavior that are aligned with the functional interests of their ingroup (Hewstone, 1990).

### CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In this paper we have reviewed a novel program of research into the tendency for women who break through the glass ceiling into the upper echelons of management to be placed in more precarious leadership positions than men. We have dubbed these positions "glass cliffs." This is not only because they are associated with more danger than other leadership positions but also because they have hitherto been largely invisible to organizational analysts and commentators—as well as to many of the women who hold them.

Although research into the glass cliff phenomenon is very much in its infancy and, hence, the corpus of empirical research is small, we believe there is now a consistent body of evidence that speaks both to its existence and to its importance. Moreover, the key propositions that we explored above create a clear agenda for future research. In this section we examine some of the key issues that this research needs to address, as well as some of the practical implications of our analysis for workplace equality.

#### Exploring Process

As argued above, clearly much more research needs to be done in order to establish (1) *whether* each of the factors we have identified (i.e., sexism and ingroup favoritism, group dynamics, implicit leadership theories, signaling change) has a role to play in the appointment of women to precarious leadership positions and (2) how this role varies systematically across organizational contexts (e.g., as a function of organizational norms and composition). As we have also noted, a key issue with such research

is that it needs to be nonreactive in order to ensure that identity-based motivations of the form discussed above do not cloud the interpretation of data (Haslam & McGarty, 2004). Nevertheless, a range of methodologies are available to researchers that can circumnavigate this problem, including archival, experimental, and survey techniques of the forms sampled in the research reviewed above. We would advocate the use of all these techniques (see also Cornelissen, Haslam, & Balmer, *in press*).

#### Exploring Outcomes

At another level, further research is needed to chart the career paths of women who find themselves in glass cliff situations. Specifically, what happens to them if they fail, and what happens to them if they succeed? Along the lines of the arguments developed above, we predict that if they fail (which, given the likely correlation between past and future performance, should be a relatively common outcome), women likely will be disenchanted and demotivated. If they have any choice, this, in turn, should increase their inclination either to resile from future leadership challenges (e.g., encouraging them to leave the organization or the workforce altogether) or to contemplate radical career change (e.g., by setting up business on their own). Certainly, preliminary case study research (e.g., Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, Kulich, & Wilson-Kovacs, *in press*; Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, *in press*) provides examples of all these outcomes.

The same research also suggests that, if they succeed, individual women can acquire reputations as effective "troubleshooters" who confirm the utility of the think crisis—think female association and simply progress from one glass cliff to another. While still successful, these women might be expected to downplay their experiences of gender discrimination and to interpret any experience of glass cliffs positively (i.e., as "challenges"; Schmitt, Ellemers, & Branscombe, 2003; Woods, 2004). Yet, if they ultimately fail, it seems likely that their bitterness will be all the more profound, not least because—like the respondent quoted at the start of the paper—they will tend to lack the identity-based support networks that might cushion their fall (Haslam, O'Brien, Jetten, Vormedal, & Penna, 2005; Haslam & Reicher, 2006).

### Exploring Different Domains

In seeking to build on the work outlined in this review, an obvious first step is to conduct additional research to establish how widespread and how severe glass cliff phenomena are in the organizational realm (e.g., see Nutley & Mudd, 2005). Initial investigations suggest that the effect is reliable across contexts and of moderate strength. However, there is clearly utility in seeking to establish whether, in practice, the effect varies across different spheres of business activity. In particular, as a number of observations in previous sections imply, there would appear to be value in comparing patterns observed in traditionally male-dominated and "masculine" organizations (e.g., mining, banking) with those in less male-dominated and more "feminine" sectors (e.g., hospitality and service industries).

In light of the stereotypically different expectations that surround work in these different sectors, the different patterns of recruitment observed in each (e.g., Equal Opportunities Commission, 2002; Goodman et al., 2003; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2003), and the different group dynamics that each involves (e.g., as a function of variation in the proportion of women in senior positions), there are certainly grounds for hypothesizing that glass cliffs should be more apparent, and present a more significant obstacle, in those sectors that are male dominated and more masculine. Against this, in our experimental studies, we (Haslam & Ryan, 2007) have found that women are no more likely to be selected for glass cliff positions in companies whose business is stereotypically masculine rather than feminine. It may also be the case that because women have been less successful at breaking through the glass ceiling in masculine sectors (Judge, 2003; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2003), and because the relative success of such organizations means that they have less turnover and are under less pressure to change, the problems of glass cliffs have yet to be seen here.

As well as making comparisons across different types of companies, there is also clearly a need to establish the degree to which the phenomenon extends beyond the business realm into other sectors of society. Initial studies in the domain of politics (Ryan et al., 2007a,b) and law (Ashby et al., in press) imply that it does, but previous research into the glass ceiling (e.g.,

Bullard & Wright, 1993; Yaffe, 1993) suggests there is value too in ascertaining whether this form of gender discrimination manifests itself in such areas as health, education, government, and administration. By the same token, there is also scope for cross-cultural research to investigate whether the phenomenon is discernible in non-Western cultures (e.g., Japan, Eastern Europe; cf. Fujimoto, 2004; Tabak, 1997; Wright et al., 1995). Here again, one might expect glass cliffs to be more apparent in societies that endorse "traditional" patterns of gender-based division of labor, because gender discrimination and sexism are more insitutionalized. But because women in these cultures have yet to break through the glass ceiling in significant numbers, this phase of discrimination may yet have to manifest itself. Clarification of all these issues will require research that is conducted not just across sectors and cultures but that is also nonreactive and longitudinal.

### Exploring Different Groups

Our exploration here of issues surrounding glass cliffs has focused exclusively on the plight of women in organizations. This is, to a large extent, understandable, given that previous work on discrimination in the workplace has focused more on gender-related issues than on others. This is particularly true of work on the glass ceiling, typically conceptualized as a problem peculiar to women. Nevertheless, although less visible, there is a body of evidence suggesting that the glass ceiling is a problem encountered by members of *all* groups that are defined as "other" by the predominantly white, wealthy, male, heterosexual elites who manage organizations. For example, analysis by Greenhaus, Parasuraman, and Wormley (1990), Duleep and Sanders (1992), and Braddock and Bachelder (1994) has revealed problems that African Americans, Asians, and disabled people, respectively, face in trying to advance to high-paying jobs in the United States, and Jones (1993) has documented the difficulties that Aborigines face in trying to gain entry to management in Australia.

Along similar lines, we hypothesize that the problems of glass cliffs, discussed above exclusively in terms of gender, are likely to be experienced by members of other nonelite (i.e., minority) groups. Indeed, evidence to this effect



comes from the research of Kozol (1991), who found that when people of color were promoted to administrative positions in the U.S. public sector, they were overrepresented in poor and struggling school districts.

Against this line of argument, it could be argued that, as we have presented it, many of the problems of glass cliffs are specific to women in so far as they derive, at least in part, from implicit leadership theories whose content is correlated with gender—for example, the view that men deal best with the task dimensions of leadership and therefore are best equipped to manage when all is going well but that women are best at managing the relationship components of leadership and therefore are better equipped to manage crises (Ryan et al., 2007; Schein, 1973). Importantly, though, we believe there are dangers in essentializing the content of gender categories and in seeing asymmetries in the division of managerial labor as a “natural” expression of underlying sex differences (Ryan & David, 2003; Thompson & McHugh, 2002). In particular, this is because the form that these asymmetries take can itself be understood theoretically (following social identity theory’s analysis of social creativity; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see also Ellemers, 1993) as an expression of consensually negotiated status differences such that the content of the high-status group’s identity (i.e., male) incorporates status-defining attributes (e.g., hard, rational, and task oriented), whereas that of the low-status group (female) is defined by attributes that are status irrelevant (e.g., soft, emotional, and relationship oriented).

Although it is easy to see how these processes can play themselves out in terms of gender, evidence from both the social psychological and organizational literature suggests that they can also operate in the negotiation of status differences defined along other dimensions (e.g., ethnicity, class, nationality, profession; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ellemers, Barreto, & Spears, 1999; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). For this reason, we believe that there is much to be gained by broadening the analysis of glass cliffs beyond the domain of gender. This is because adding breadth to the foregoing analysis should help to move researchers away from a reified, decontextualized (and, at root, deeply pessimistic) understanding of discrimination in the workplace (and in society) and reinforce the point that such discrimination is the expression of political and

social psychological processes that reflect and respond to realities of social structure, group dynamics, and ideology (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Moreover, while certain forms of discrimination are lent stability through history and practice, they are not psychological or social givens but can be changed (Oakes et al., 1994; Reynolds, Turner, Haslam, & Ryan, 2001; Turner, 1999).

### Eliminating Glass Cliffs

The argument that the appointment of women to glass cliff positions is not an inevitable or “natural” phenomenon but one that is the outcome of processes that are sensitive to features of organizational context (e.g., the composition and norms of decision-making groups) of course suggests one further line of research—namely, into the strategies for eliminating glass cliffs. In this respect, the first claim that we wish to make for the present research is that it makes the case for the existence of a problem that needs to be addressed. And because diagnosis—and the awareness and debate that it promotes—is a prerequisite for progressive reform, this, one might argue, can only be a good thing.

Moreover, turning to the literature on strategies for breaking the glass ceiling (e.g., Athey, Avery, & Zemsky, 2000; Burke & McKeen, 1995; Eyring & Stead, 1998), it is apparent that this points to a range of interventions that can be viewed as playing a significant role in improving women’s status in the workplace in the last three decades. The most effective of these include nontokenistic affirmative action policies, active mentoring programs, and group-based consciousness raising. In light of the processes that we suggest contribute to the creation of glass cliffs, it makes sense to hypothesize that each of these three strategies will prove effective in helping to obviate the problems that these processes create for women in the workplace. In particular, to the extent that these programs help to break down or challenge demographically homogeneous decision-making groups whose identity is defined in terms of privilege maintenance, each should have a positive role to play (Schmitt, Ellemers, & Branscombe, 2003).

Yet, having said this, it is apparent, too, that these changes, and the will to implement them, are unlikely to materialize without collective ef-

fort and organization. Based on research in the social identity tradition, we argue that social identity mobilization on the part of women (and other disadvantaged groups) is a key mechanism for creating these motivations (e.g., Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004; Haslam, 2001; Haslam, Powell, & Turner, 2000; Schmitt, Ellemers, & Branscombe, 2003). Moreover, there is a particular role here for forms of leadership that both harness and develop that sense of shared identity (Reicher & Hopkins, 2004; Reicher et al., 2005) and that translate it into viable and equitable social structures (Haslam, Eggins, & Reynolds, 2003).

At the same time, however, that progressive identities are cultivated, we must also bear in mind that the forms of organizational change they promote are bound to be met by multiple forms of resistance or "backlash" (Hegtvedt, Clay-Warner, & Ferrigno, 2002). This is already apparent, on the one hand, in responses to media coverage surrounding the glass cliff from members of groups whose identities are threatened by women's emancipation (in particular, "traditional" males, as illustrated by the above quotation from *Mensnewsdaily*). As we have seen, these responses are likely either to deny the phenomenon or to downplay its significance (Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, in press). On the other hand, a similar response is to be expected from members of disadvantaged groups (e.g., successful career women) who have "gone it alone" and succeeded despite this disadvantage—and whose success therefore appears to give the lie to the facts of discrimination. It is also worth bearing in mind that certain organizational policies—in particular, tokenism (Wright & Taylor, 1998)—can be actively pursued in order to encourage such perceptions and thereby bolster the status quo.

The conflict between these progressive and reactionary motivations presents itself as a real challenge both in corporate life and in society at large—and one that has far broader relevance than the present discussion. But it is a challenge for organizational and social scientists as well. Not only must we work to clarify the facts and terms of the debate, but we must also continue to make the case for structural improvements and forms of identity (e.g., ones whose content is incompatible with unfair treatment of outgroups; Schmitt, Ellemers, & Branscombe, 2003: 292; see also Haslam & Reicher, 2005), which

help turn the rhetoric of equality and justice into material reality and sustainable practice. In this regard, research into glass cliffs serves to underline two nontrivial points: that opportunity is not the same as equal opportunity and that having a more inclusive playing field does not necessarily mean that the field is any more level.

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