**The impact of women leaders on organizational culture: Will they break down the borders women managers face today?**

Stream 15: The new territories of gender equality: corporate boards, feminine networks and pro-women employees resource groups

**Abstract**

Although the scientific literature comes to the conclusion that the presence of female leaders and organizational culture are strongly linked, no research thus far has assessed how the increasing number of women in management positions impact the as yet highly masculine organizational cultures. The goal of this study is to provide first results for that research gap. To assess the influence of women managers on organizational culture it is necessary to find out whether women actually behave according to their sex. This study deliberately focuses on the topic of sex differences as opposed to gender differences, because of the conflicting findings in Gender in Management research and because of the universality of biological as opposed to social influences. A research framework based on empirical findings that provide evidence for sex differences in behaviour guides the empirical investigation. Applying an ethnographic approach the author conducted a semi-covered participant observation in four stores of a globally operating system-catering company. The leader behaviour and the organizational cultures were assessed through qualitative content analysis of the observation minutes. Data analysis is still in progress but should be completed until the EDI Conference 2017. Due to the small sample size, which is typical of ethnographic research, the results are classified as a first step at understanding how female leader behaviour influences organizational cultures.

**Keywords:** Gender in Management, Women in Management, Organizational Culture, Sex Differences, Biology

**1. Purpose**

The scientific literature on women in leadership comes to the conclusion that organizational cultures und the cultures of the management elite in particular have to change in order to break down the borders that women in management currently still face (Derks et al., 2016; Walker and Aritz, 2015; Kloot, 2004). So far, organizational cultures are highly characterized by male norms, such as a 24/7 working morale, strategic alliances, and a winner-loser mentality, which violate female needs and act as a barrier for aspiring female managers (Sinclair, 2005; Rutherford, 2001). However, at the latest since the introduction of government legislations such as gender quotas in many European countries and private initiatives such as the 30% Club in the UK and the 30% Coalition in the USA, the number of women in highly visible leadership positions increased (Grant Thornton, 2016). In 2012, most of the industrial world exhibited at least one woman on corporate boards in more than 80% of its corporations, although considerably less companies reach a ‘critical mass’ of three women or more (Credit Suisse, 2012; Torchia et al., 2011; Konrad et al., 2008; Kanter, 1977). These figures imply that the highly masculine organizational and managerial cultures are increasingly infiltrated by female managers.

While the importance of organizational culture for women managers has been well established, no research so far has focused in return on the effect that the increasing number of women managers has on organizational cultures. Organizational cultures are not static, but capable of changing (Hatch, 1993). The way they are and how they change is highly dependent on their leaders’ actions (Schein, 1983, 1992; Alvesson, 1992; Martin and Siehl, 1983). Hence, the question is raised whether the increasing number of female managers will de-masculinize the existing organizational cultures and make the current borders women face more permeable.

Since organizational culture is strongly linked with company success (Sackmann, 2011), it is important for managers to understand their companies’ culture in order to consider it when making strategic decisions. One goal of the present study is to provide first empirical evidence of the female influence on organizational cultures. Before, however, it needs to be clarified what behaviour there is to expect by female leaders that could influence organizational culture.

Since at least the introduction of popular science literature like *Why Men Don't Listen and Women Can't Read Maps* (Pease and Pease, 2000) and *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (Gray, 1992) it is common knowledge that men and women are - to a certain extent - different. Many of the differences relate to behaviour that has a biological basis and is therefore believed to have been shaped by evolution (Baron-Cohen, 2003; Geary, 2010; Brizendine 2006, 2010). These behavioural differences are referred to as *sex* differences, as opposed to *gender* differences, which are based on the socially constructed images of men and women (Unger, 1979; Eagly and Wood, 2013). The scientific literature provides evidence for significant sex differences in various behaviours related to e.g. aggression, empathy, occupational interest, cognitive abilities, agency, and communality (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974, 1980; Archer, 2004; Baron-Cohen, 2003; Su et al., 2009; Geary, 2010).

That there are sex differences in behaviour between men and women has also been embraced by the scientific literature on gender in management. Although only very few authors explicitly include evolutionary psychology (e.g. Wood and Eagly, 2012; van Staveren, 2014), the assumption is that female managers are more communal, people-oriented, democratic, and nurturing than male managers, while male managers are more agentic, task-oriented, autocratic, and dominant than female managers (Eagly, 1987). Since most of the literature aims at enhancing women’s position in the male dominated management elite, many focus on the “business case for women” (Bilimoria, 2000) that arises from the “female advantage” (Helgesen, 1995; Eagly and Carli, 2003). They find that companies admitting female leaders are financially more successful (Credit Suisse, 2012; Desvaux et al., 2007; Fang et al., 2012), show higher levels of organizational innovation (Torchia et al., 2011), and are less likely to experience insolvency (Wilson and Altanlar, 2009; Wilson et al., 2014).

Surprisingly, research on leadership behaviour finds no or at the most small sex differences (Andersen and Hansson, 2011; Cuadrado et al., 2012; Eagly et al., 2003; Eagly and Johnson, 1990). Furthermore, the similarity between men’s and women’s behaviour has even been found to increase with managerial level (Diamond, 1971). It has been proposed that this lack of differences in behaviour is caused by the belief that women should more or less consciously adapt their behaviour in leadership positions to the male management cultures (Vanderbroeck, 2010; Adams and Funk, 2012).

While sex differences in leadership behaviour are often reported to be small to non-existent, evolutionary psychology predicts sexual dimorphism in certain behaviours. This leads to research question (1): *Do leaders demonstrate sex-typical behaviour?*

Based on the findings on research question (1) a second research question (2) analyzes how female behaviour affects organizational cultures: *What is the female influence on organizational culture?*

**2. Design/methodology/approach**

To answer the posed research questions, I developed a theoretical research framework, which guided the empirical investigation of both leader behaviour and organizational culture.

**2.1 Framework**

In a first step a research framework was developed that illustrates sex differences that evolved over the course of evolution. The framework is based on the model by David Geary (2010) and adapted to fit the purpose of the study. Geary’s model illustrates the evolutionary development of the human mind in order to solve recurring problems through adaptive behaviour. The model was adapted to include only those mechanisms, which are (1) considered to demonstrate sexual dimorphism based on the theory of parental investment, (2) result directly in observable behaviour, and (3) are relevant in organizational settings. The final framework is still based on Geary’s model, but was extended by existing theory and inductive subcategories derived from empirical studies. It includes six behavioural categories organized in three levels: Strategies to control resources, interests, and skills. The categories address behaviour related to hierarchy- and community preference, interest in systems and people, and aggressive and empathic skills. Each category comprises two to four subtypes of behaviour. Men are predicted to demonstrate higher levels of behaviour enforcing hierarchies, a higher interest in systems, and higher levels of aggression. Women on the other hand are predicted to demonstrate community-enforcing behaviour, show higher levels of interest in people, and more behaviour motivated by empathy as compared to men. The complete framework is depicted in figure 1.

Based on this framework existing literature on sex differences was analyzed and classified according to Tinbergen’s (1963) classic four problems: phylogeny, adaptation, biological mechanism, and ontogeny. By demonstrating that the included behaviour patterns are sexually dimorphic from all four perspectives, I ensure in the best possible way that they are actual *sex* differences in behaviour as opposed to *gender* differences. In a second step the same framework was used to sort existing literature on organizational culture and the relevant behaviour in order to derive working theses on how leader behaviour could be influencing organizational culture.

**Control**

**motivation**

**Hierarchy**

* Dominance
* Prestige

**Level 1: Strategies**

**Community**

* Equality
* Intimacy
* Trust

**Level 2: Interests**

**Interest in systems**

* Involvement systems
* Abstraction
* Knowledge

**Interest in people**

* Involvement people
* Verbal
* Nonverbal

**Level 3: Skills**

**Aggression**

* Direct aggression
* Indirect aggression

**Empathy**

* Comforting
* Helping
* Sharing

Figure 1. Framework of sexually dimorphic behaviours

**2.2. Method**

Data was collected by an ethnographic approach in four stores of a globally operating American franchise company based in the fast food industry. The choice of a franchise organization was deliberate, because it provides the advantage of good comparability due to the binding standards of the franchiser present in each restaurant. German headquarters and one franchiser were collaborating with the researcher on the research project. Both selected two restaurants of which one was led by a female and the other by a male manager who were comparable in terms of age, ethnic and educational background, and work experience as managers. Furthermore, in each store there worked shift supervisors, who were included in the study. Neither the restaurant managers and supervisors, nor the employees were informed about the real purpose of the researcher’s presence in order to avoid biased behaviour and obtain the most reliable data. Overall the data on leader behaviour and organizational culture was collected from 28 (11 female) individuals in managerial or supervisory positions and 102 employees (58 female).

Method of data collection was participant observation. Because it was suspected that the observees would change their behaviour if they knew about being observed, the observation was covered. This was made possible through the researcher being disguised as business student absolving a two-week internship in each of the four stores. Overall 280 hours of observation were coded in field notes, which were derived from jotted notes (Lofland et al., 2006) taken during work breaks and from memory after each shift.

To answer the research questions the ethnographic field notes are analyzed by qualitative content analysis in four steps (Mayring, 2014; Kohlbacher, 2006). In a first step the data is pre-structured using the qualitative content analysis tool MaxQDA by assigning observed behaviour to the individual it was demonstrated by. To answer research question (1), in a second step leader behaviour is categorized according to the categories and subcategories provided by the research framework and compared to the theoretical predictions. During the third step, employee behaviour is categorized according to the framework to determine the existing culture in all of the four stores. In a final fourth step research question (2) is answered by interpreting the findings in terms of the influence of the leader behaviour on organizational culture.

**3. Findings**

Although data analysis has not been finalized yet, first preliminary results on research question (1) are beginning to assert themselves. In line with the existing literature on gender in management and contrary to the predictions made by evolutionary psychology, women leaders did not behave in a female-typical manner. Instead their behaviour seems to be neutral in terms of sex since they adopt neither female-typical nor male-typical behaviour. Male managers on the other hand demonstrated more female-typical and also more male-typical behaviour than their female colleagues. The impact of these behaviour patterns on organizational culture is yet to be determined.

**4. Research limitations/implications**

The framework on sexually dimorphic behaviours was developed based on existing literature, which provides strong support that those behaviours have a biological component. At the moment, however, there is no possibility to prove that behaviour is genetically influenced. Hence, there is a chance that there is actually no sexual dimorphism in included behaviours.

The presented developmental paper has several limitations. First of all, the ethnographic approach is well suited to assess organizational cultures, but rarely used to determine sex specific behaviour. Research on sex differences is mostly based on experimental laboratory settings, because they are best assessed when influential variables can be controlled for. Field observations on the other hand are less common, because they are far more complex and easily distorted through uncontrollable variables.

Ethnographic fieldwork is extremely time-consuming and costly. As a consequence the investigated sample is very small including only four stores/cultures and four leaders. Therefore the results obtained should not be classified as empirical evidence, but as a first step to understand how female leader behaviour influences organizational cultures. The study provides first insights and carves out *possible* relationships between female leadership and organizational culture, which must be tested in future large-scale quantitative analyses.

**5. Originality/value of the paper.**

The study contributes to existing research in three ways. Firstly, it evaluates differences in leader behaviour from an evolutionary psychology perspective trying to dissolve the existing discrepancy of predictions made by evolutionary psychology and gender in management research. Secondly, the study aims at uncovering the link between leader behaviour and organizational culture. Thirdly, through the ethnographic approach used, the study provides deep insights into the mechanisms behind that link.

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