Gender, Social Facilitation, and Task Influences on Leadership Selection

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Introduction

The opportunities for women to be placed in leadership positions are steadily increasing. With the rise in these positions and the fact that in many cases women are competing with men for the same leadership position, it is very important to understand how gender or other variables may affect who is chosen for such roles. Past research has shown that men are chosen much more frequently than women for leadership roles (Porter, Geis, & Jennings, 1983). The current study examined how additional variables may affect or interact with the selection of leaders of different genders.

Hebl (1995) found that characteristics of the task may influence which gender may be selected as the leader. Task-oriented competitive (tasks with the goal of competing and winning) and social cooperative (tasks with the goal of getting along and working together) tasks alter the frequency of females chosen to leadership roles. Socially cooperative tasks led to females being chosen more equally with males, whereas task-oriented competitive tasks supported previous research in that males were chosen significantly more frequently.

Method

The present study utilized a 2 (Voting Type: public, private) x 2 (Task Scenario: social-cooperative, competitive) mixed design. Participants chose, either publicly or privately, from four potential leaders (2 male, 2 female) to lead a cooperative group and a competitive group. The potential leaders were presented as photographs of two males and two females. The pictures were arranged in random orders. Also, the order in which participants voted for cooperative- and competitive-oriented groups was counterbalanced. The gender of the leader the participants chose was the dependent variable. Data was drawn specifically from the amount of males chosen as females chosen was the direct reciprocal of males. A pilot study was run on images of potential leaders (N = 10) to find the most average photographs. (See *Figure 1* for sample images.)

Results

Data collected from undergraduate students (N = 101) revealed a significant main effect for task type (cooperative and competitive), F (1, 99) = 36.83, p < .001. In the competitive task males were chosen as leaders 58% of the time. In the cooperative task males were chosen as leaders only 18% of the time, while women were chosen as leaders 82% of the time. There was not a significant main effect for voting type (public vs. private). There was also no significant interaction. (See *Figure 2*)

Figure 1. Sample photographs of potential leaders.

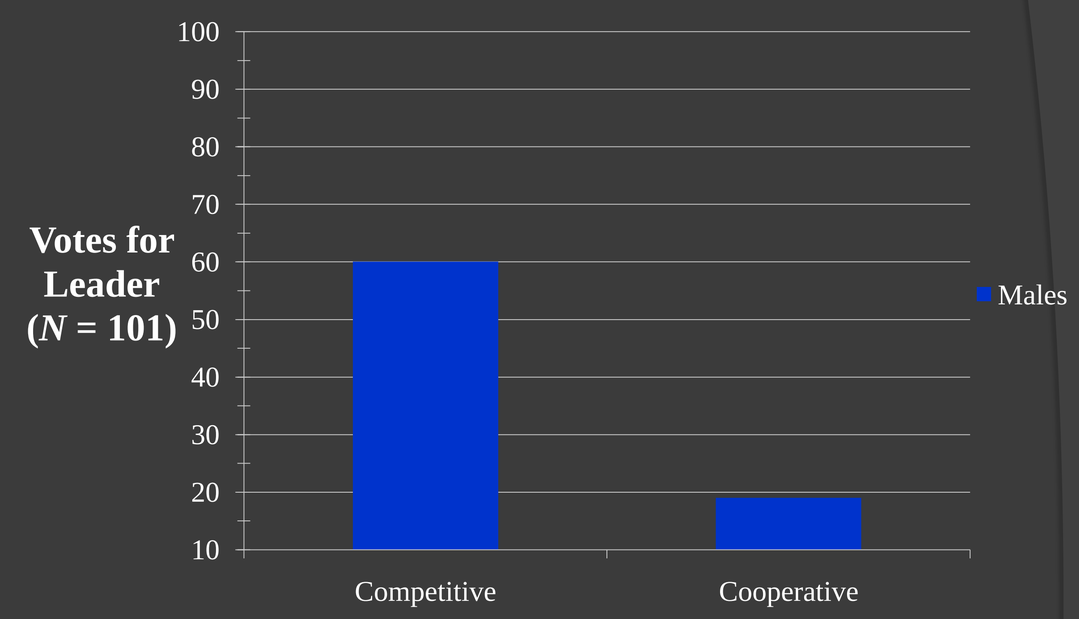

Figure 2. This figure shows the main effect for task type. The graph contains each of the votes cast for leader in both competitive and cooperative task types.

Conclusions

This study continued to show that men are chosen for leadership roles more frequently than women, but only under competitive tasks. However, in the competitive task the frequency of men chosen versus the frequency of women chosen seems more evenly distributed than in previous studies. These findings seem to show that women are receiving more respect as potential leaders, but that inequalities still exist. This study also shows that women can have a much higher rate of being chosen to leadership roles under the right circumstances, i.e., leading a cooperative group. This information is encouraging but begs the question of why women are overwhelmingly respected as leaders of cooperative groups but not of competitive groups. It also opens the question of why males are not chosen more equally in the cooperative task. It would seem that gender stereotypes play a role in the difference over task type but more research is necessary. Future research would be more specific in the definition of cooperative and competitive tasks.

Selected References

Hebl, M. (1995). Gender bias in leader selection. *Teaching of Psychology 22*, 186-188.

Porter, N., Geis, F., & Jennings, J. (1983). Are women invisible as leaders? *Sex Roles, 9*, 1035-1049.