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# Emphasizing the Female Leadership Advantage: The Unintended Consequences of Positive Stereotypes

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## **Emphasizing The Female Leadership Advantage: The Unintended Consequences of Positive Stereotypes**

Over the last 30 years, the popular press has consistently emphasized the differences between men and women in their leadership styles (e.g. Young, 2016). The feminine method of leadership largely focuses on positive stereotypical characteristics attributed to women, particularly attributes associated with communal behavior such as warmth and cooperation (Eagly & Karau 2002). Yet over this same period, we have seen relatively small increases in the number of female leaders in corporate America (e.g. Hinchliffe 2021). The small numbers of executive female leaders, during an era encouraging women to lead by emphasizing their positive stereotypically female traits, suggest that perhaps the emphasis on positive stereotypes may not effectively promote women as leaders.

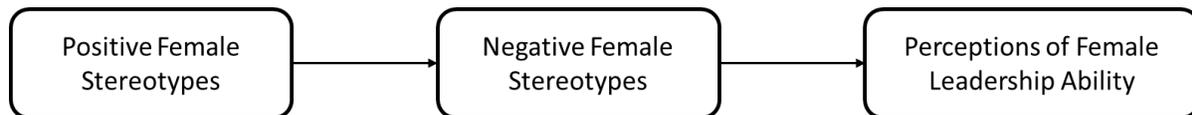
Positive stereotypes constitute a relatively new field of research, stemming from the general stereotype literature which has traditionally focused on the negative aspects of stereotypes. Czopp et al. (2015) define positive stereotypes as “subjectively favorable beliefs about members of social groups that directly or indirectly connote or confer domain-specific advantage, favorability, or superiority based on category membership” (p. 451). Positive stereotypes are typically intended as complimentary and thus are often viewed as socially acceptable, while negative stereotypes are typically considered blatantly unacceptable (Bergsieker et al. 2012). Yet positive stereotypes still rely on oversimplifications based on categories and ultimately prove harmful and potentially limiting (Czopp et al. 2015).

Our research contributes to the diversity and inclusion literature by seeking to understand the mechanisms by which positive stereotypes operate to produce potentially harmful effects, as well as the factors impacting this relationship. Very little research has explored the mechanisms whereby positive stereotypes impact evaluations of a target individual or group. However, Kay et

al. (2013) found that exposure to positive stereotypes regarding African Americans, specifically regarding athletic ability, triggered negative stereotypes and produced prejudicial beliefs in evaluators. This leads to our first hypotheses:

- H1 – Positive female stereotypical descriptors will be more highly associated with negative female stereotypes than will gender-neutral descriptors.
- H2 – Positive female stereotypical descriptors will be associated with lower perceptions of female leadership ability than will gender-neutral descriptors.
- H3 – Negative female stereotypes will mediate the relationship between positive female stereotypical descriptors and perceptions of female leadership ability.

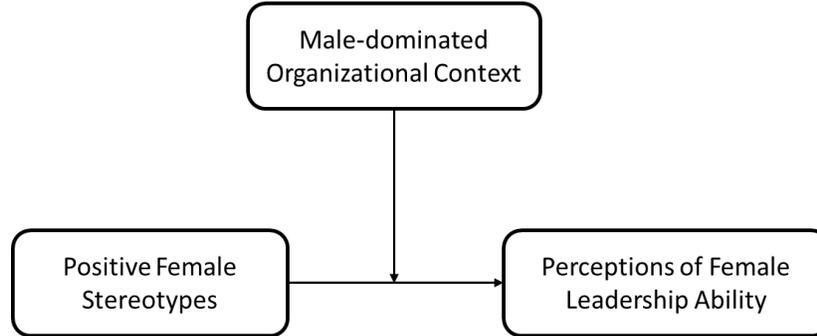
Figure 1: Conceptual Model of H1, H2, and H3



Additionally, the impact of positive stereotypes within a specific context has also received little research attention. Literature on gendered organizations shows that women in male-dominated organizations experience more discrimination, hostile work environments, and prejudice than women in gender-neutral organizations (Ahuja, 2002; Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006). The context in which a woman leads matters. This leads to our next hypothesis:

- H4 – Context will moderate the relationship between positive stereotypes and perceptions of female leaders such that using positive stereotypes will have a larger negative impact on perceptions of female leaders in male-dominated organizations than in gender-neutral organizations.

Figure 2: Conceptual Model of H4



## Methods and Results

To test our hypotheses, we developed two studies. In both studies, we recruited a sample of Master's students in a business school to participate in an online experiment.

Study 1 addresses the overall impact of positive stereotypes on perceptions of female leadership ability. Consistent with H1, participants attributed negative female stereotypes more to the leader in the positive female stereotype condition ( $M = 3.08$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ; 7-point scale) than the leader in the gender-neutral condition ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ,  $F(1, 295) = 6.59$ ,  $p = .011$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ ). However, contrary to our prediction in H2, participants rated the leader in the positive female stereotype condition higher ( $M = 6.15$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ) than the leader in the gender-neutral condition ( $M = 5.79$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ,  $F(1, 295) = 10.37$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ ).

In study 2, we manipulated the organizational context, comparing a male-dominated organization with a gender-neutral organization. We employed a 2 (descriptors: positive female stereotypes vs. gender-neutral) x 2 (context: male-dominated vs. gender-neutral) between-subjects design.

Study 2 results again corroborated H1 as ratings of negative female stereotypes were higher in the positive female stereotype condition than in the gender-neutral condition.

Additionally, consistent with H4, we found a moderating effect of context such that the leader in the positive female stereotype condition was rated highest in the neutral context ( $M = 6.40$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ) and lowest in the male-dominated context ( $M = 5.75$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ,  $F(1, 267) = 12.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ ), emphasizing the importance of context when employing positive stereotypes.

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