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Gender and Leadership: A Review of Pertinent Research

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Gender and Leadership: A Review of Pertinent Research

As we explored the roles of women as leaders of symphony orchestra organizations, the thought occurred also to explore existing research about gender and leadership. We were fortunate to find Alice Eagly, a psychology professor at Northwestern University, who has done considerable work in this area. She agreed to answer our questions about research on gender differences and leadership, and to extrapolate that research to symphony orchestra organizations.

Institute: When did your interest in differences and similarities between the sexes, and in research on this topic, emerge? How did your interest come about?

Alice Eagly: I began this research in the mid-1970s in the height of activism of the feminist movement. I had noted psychologists' many claims about sex differences and believed that these claims should be subjected to careful empirical scrutiny. At that time, I suspected that good research would disprove many of the generalizations about sex differences that psychologists had offered.

Institute: Has there been a good deal of research on this topic?

Eagly: The amount of research comparing the sexes is immense in psychology because most studies have participants of both sexes, allowing a researcher to compare their behavior. But only a relatively small number of research psychologists have taken an interest in cataloging these reports and understanding the causes of the psychological differences and similarities of women and men.

Institute: What is the difference between "primary" and "meta-analytic" research in the area of gender differences?

Eagly: Because psychologists have so many male-female comparisons available for many kinds of behaviors, answers to the question of whether the sexes differ are properly based on a large number of studies—ideally, these answers are based on all of the relevant studies that have been conducted. The convention has developed to label as "primary research" the individual studies that have investigated some topic and to label as "meta-analytic research" or "research synthesis" the effort to integrate and aggregate all of these individual studies.

Institute: Might the differences between the sexes be a matter of biology, i.e., genetic differences? Or perhaps, the result of evolution and adaptation through the ages, i.e., the emergence of aggressive, dominant "hunter" males and nurturing "gatherer" females? Could the differences people tend to think about between men and women be simply a result of human biological factors at work on the planet over the ages?

Eagly: Psychologists debate the causes of sex differences vigorously. One influential position, promoted by evolutionary psychology, is indeed that men and women adapted psychologically to different niches in primeval environments, with the differing relation that women and men have to reproduction being an important influence on these adaptations. Another position—the one that I advocate—is that men and women are specialized to occupy whatever social roles the society makes available to their sex. According to this viewpoint, known as "social role theory," men and women flexibly adapt to the division of labor of their own society. Indeed, the distribution of women and men into social roles has varied greatly over human history, in response to the constraints imposed by economies, women's tasks of giving birth and lactating, and physical differences between the sexes (e.g., men's greater size and strength).

As far as what Americans tend to think about psychological sex differences, there is a certain amount of research evidence that they tend to hold "mixed" theories, in the sense that they believe that the causes of these differences lie in culture and in biology. Researchers, of course, try to partition causation on the basis of scientific evidence.

Institute: If social role theory helps to explain why there are differences in behaviors between men and women, what kinds of factors go into bringing about these behavioral differences?

Eagly: According to social role theory, a division of labor between the sexes fosters the development of gender roles by which each sex is expected to have characteristics that equip it for the work roles that are typical for people of this sex. For example, if caring for children is a task much more often assigned to women, they would be expected to have appropriate characteristics, such as nurturance and interest in helping others. If warfare is common in a society, and men are expected to be warriors, they would be expected to have appropriate characteristics, such as aggressiveness and a willingness to take risks. Societies insure that both men and women develop the psychological characteristics that are generally needed for competent adult functioning, as it is defined by the culture.

Generally speaking, societies work through socialization processes that are tailored somewhat to children's sex. These socialization processes involve some direct teaching and much modeling oneself after parents and other adults. Also, societies give children direct experience in practicing the kinds of roles in which they would learn components of their adult roles. Different cultures would, of course, have somewhat different emphases in socializing their boys and girls,

depending on the kinds of adult responsibilities that are typically assigned to men and women. In our society, as the adult roles of women have changed substantially to emphasize paid employment, girls may be given more independence in the home, and they are certainly expected to gain more education than in the past (with women now staying in school longer than men in the U.S. and other postindustrial economies). Girls' sports activity has increased dramatically as well.

Women and men would have somewhat different personalities, attitudes, and self-concepts to the extent that they receive and internalize into their personalities the expectations that their culture fosters about people of their own sex. Personality research suggests, for example, that women, more than men, think of themselves as caring and nurturant—a tendency that personality psychologists sometimes describe as "tender-mindedness." Public opinion research shows that women are more attitudinally compassionate than men in relation to the plight of the poor, minorities, and the like. These tendencies probably flow from the still strong expectation in our culture that women are the primary nurturers in the family and the main caretakers of children.

Institute: Let's turn now to your first meta-analytic research project which dealt with gender and leadership style. What were the basic questions this research addressed, and what were the findings?

Eagly: The issue of whether men and women differ in relation to leadership is a many-sided question. The most striking observation that follows from everyday life is that there are few women in higher executive positions in large organizations or in major leadership roles in society. These roles are dominated numerically by men. Women's dramatic increase in education and labor force participation has not changed these facts very much when we look at high-level leadership positions. Nonetheless, women have moved into administrative and lower-level management positions in great numbers. In the United States in 1997, the census indicates that 45 percent of managers and administrators are women. This figure can be compared with approximately 18 percent females in this occupational category in 1960.

One of the questions that seemed interesting to me in relation to leadership and the paucity of women "at the top" was whether women and men tend to lead or manage in different styles. I was interested to see if gender would make a difference in leadership styles when comparing women and men in the same leadership roles. For example, if researchers compared male and female middle managers in a business organization, or male and female school principals, would there by a systematic tendency for the women to proceed differently from the men?

In general, we thought that the particular leadership role would be more important than gender, in the sense that women and men in the same leadership or managerial role would behave similarly. Each organization should have its own traditions of management, and thus men and women would have to learn

how to proceed, more or less by the same set of rules.

Our expectations were generally confirmed across the 162 studies of leadership style that we located and that allowed a comparison of female and male leaders. In organizational studies, male and female managers did not differ in their tendency to adopt an interpersonally oriented style or a task-oriented style. However, college students in laboratory studies did show gender stereotypic differences on these aspects of style, but the students had not been trained to lead in particular ways. Nonetheless, among the organizational managers (and the college students as well), there was one important difference between the women and men: Women tended to adopt a more participative or democratic style, compared with the more directive and autocratic style of men.

Women's tendency to be more democratic, participative leaders could reflect more than one cause. Women could prefer this way of treating other people because of their personalities and socialization, and perhaps their greater interpersonal skill at handling complex interactions. Alternatively, women could revert to democratic styles because they learn that people are prejudiced against women who are "tough" in the sense that they use autocratic, "command and control" styles of leadership. One of our later meta-analyses provided some test of these ideas.

Institute: Those are interesting findings, and later we will talk about how they might apply in symphony organizational settings. But meanwhile, let's discuss your next meta-analytic research project, which involved looking at how sex influences the emergence of leaders in leaderless group settings. Can you summarize this project and your findings?

Eagly: This project examined 58 studies of the emergence of leaders in groups that were initially without leaders. Many of these studies were run as experiments on group process, generally with college students as participants. Others were carried out on natural groups in field settings, often groups organized by professors as project groups in their university courses. Researchers observed which group members became leaders, sometimes by recording (and coding) their leadership behaviors, and other times by having group members rate one another's contribution to leadership. The studies we analyzed all had groups containing both men and women, and provided reports of the extent to which group members of each sex emerged as leaders. In general, men emerged as leaders more often than women, yet women emerged slightly more often than men in the role of "social leaders" or facilitators, who contribute to morale and good interpersonal relations.

The tendency for men to show more leadership than women seemed to be related to their somewhat greater specialization in the strictly task-oriented aspects of interaction in the group—for example, making lots of suggestions about how the group should accomplish the work it has been assigned. Nevertheless, women became more equal in their leadership contributions in groups that were in existence for longer periods of time and that had tasks to

perform that were socially complex in the sense that they involved negotiation, deliberation, and generating novel solutions to complex problems. My interpretation of these findings is that both in long-term groups and in groups that have socially complex tasks, women's interpersonally facilitative behavior is quite valuable to the groups, and thus is more likely to be recognized as an important form of leadership.

Institute: Your next research project would appear to have some application to symphony organizations, in that it deals with how women are evaluated for higher level roles in an organization. Does it turn out that discrimination or "devaluation" of women candidates for leadership positions takes place, and how is it manifested? Does the extent of such devaluation depend in part on the circumstances?

Eagly: Our next project concerned the possibility of prejudice toward women in leadership roles. We found a marvelous group of 61 experiments that had equated the leadership of women and men by holding all of its characteristics constant except for sex itself. In some of these experiments, leadership was described in written vignettes, and the researchers gave the leaders a male name or a female name. In other experiments, leadership was acted out by female and male leaders who had been carefully trained to use the same style. The participants in these studies then evaluated the leader's performance. Because the male and female leaders engaged in the same behaviors, any tendency to see the woman's performance as inferior to the man's would reflect prejudice toward female leaders. These experiments are subtle, in the sense that the participants, each of whom generally reacts to only one leader, do not realize that they are in a study of gender prejudice.

Taken as a group, these experiments did show some prejudice toward female leaders. More interesting were our findings showing that women leaders and managers are especially at risk for biased reactions under some circumstances. One of these circumstances had to do with using a leadership style that might be considered masculine, especially an autocratic, "command and control" style. Women were also more likely to elicit prejudiced reactions when they occupied leadership roles that were especially male-dominated, and when their evaluators were men rather than women. These findings shed some light on the much-discussed "glass ceiling," which may slow or block women's ascents into higher-level leadership roles. In such roles, it may be necessary for an executive to "take charge" in a clear way at least some of the time. Leadership roles are very male dominated, and evaluators are predominantly men. The glass ceiling may indeed be a barrier manufactured largely from people's prejudices against women in high places.

The underlying reason why people tend to devalue female leaders, especially if leaders are in male-dominated roles and use more masculine leadership styles, is that people simultaneously expect a female leader to behave like a leader—that is, authoritatively and confidently, yet expect her to behave like a somewhat feminine woman—that is, with much friendliness, kindness, and consideration

toward other people. The more a woman violates the standards for her gender—by being a very assertive and commanding leader who is not especially concerned with showing interpersonal concern, for example—the more she may be penalized by prejudiced reactions that would not be directed toward her male counterpart.

Institute: The Institute is particularly interested in fostering improved effectiveness of symphony organizations. Certainly, the personal performance of leaders within the organization, especially people in managerial roles, supports the development of organizational effectiveness. What does an analysis of the research literature tell us about the effectiveness of female versus male leaders in organizational settings?

Eagly: Another of my meta-analytic projects concerned the effectiveness of female and male leaders. This time, we located 96 studies that had compared the effectiveness of men and women who held leadership roles, generally in organizations and occasionally in groups assembled for laboratory experiments on group process. The measures of effectiveness were generally subjective ratings of how well the leader or manager performed, because more objective measures are scarce in organizations (but sometimes used in laboratory experiments in which groups produce some output like solving problems). Our overall finding from this integration of research was noncontroversial: women and men performed equally well when we averaged all of the studies.

A more detailed look at the findings showed that men and women did not fare equally well in all environments. We took a close look at the leadership roles themselves to determine the extent to which they were defined in more masculine or feminine terms. We determined roles' masculinity or femininity by having men and women rate how competent they thought they would be in each role and how interested they would be in performing each role. A role was considered masculine if men indicated more competence and interest, and feminine if women indicated more competence and interest. We also considered the role more masculine if it was rated as requiring the ability to direct and control people, and more feminine if it was rated as requiring the ability to cooperate and get along with other people.

So, after doing all of this work, we were able to test our "gender congeniality" hypothesis—the idea that women would fare better in feminine roles and men in masculine roles. Our hypothesis was confirmed, as was the related hypothesis that men fared better than women in roles that were especially male dominated numerically, and that women fared somewhat better than men in roles that were less male dominated.

Despite these findings, I don't think that organizations should strive to place women in roles that have more feminine definitions, and men in roles that have more masculine definitions. Such placements would only perpetuate a biased system that is driven somewhat by the prejudices people hold against leaders who function in what might be considered the other gender's organizational

territory (e.g., a woman CEO in a large company). It is only by stretching the barriers of gender congeniality that we can produce a world characterized by greater equality of opportunity for all.

Institute: Let's talk specifically about how some of your findings might apply to symphony orchestra organizations. Having read the Institute's interviews with orchestra committee chairs, board presidents, and executive directors, do you have any general, overall thoughts about "leadership and gender" in orchestras?

Eagly: My overriding impression is that symphony organizations are increasingly providing women excellent opportunities for leadership. Attaining leadership positions that were formerly occupied almost exclusively by men is never a simple process for women, and it is neither simple nor free of stresses in orchestra organizations. Yet, as the data presented in this issue show, there is a steady progression by which women are gradually achieving more opportunities to lead within symphony organizations, although women remain few in the ranks of music directors.

I am also impressed by the fact that orchestra organizations offer several different kinds of leadership roles, because these organizations contain distinct components that, for the most part, recruit their members from quite different populations. Musicians are recruited into leadership roles within the orchestra, citizens into board roles, and people with administrative experience into the management roles of the professional staff. This diversity means that women and men from different backgrounds can have the opportunity to function as leaders within symphony organizations.

Institute: The participation of women in the three primary "administrative leadership" roles within symphony organizations appears to be relatively high overall. But clearly women are represented less in leadership roles than in the underlying universe of candidates, and, in general, women leaders in larger, more prominent organizations are fewer than in smaller, less prominent organizations. What is one to make of these trends?

Eagly: In these aspects, orchestras show the same kinds of trends that we see in other types of organizations in the United States and, for that matter, in other countries. The tendency for men to be concentrated in more powerful and better compensated leadership roles usually is evident within organizations and across organizations. For example, if we look at universities, there are fewer women in professorial and administrative roles at higher levels of these hierarchies than in the lower levels (for example, far fewer women as full professors than as instructors and assistant professors). These trends are exacerbated in the most prominent universities, where there are very few women in higher-level roles. These same trends can be seen in business, with few women at the executive vice president level or higher in major corporations. Organizations thus reflect the larger social structure, which, to use feminist language, can be described as "patriarchal"—that is, men hold more power and control far more resources than women. As women's status rises, women gain access to power and

resources, but these changes tend to start at what might be considered the lower levels—in the smaller organizations and the less powerful roles.

Institute: In symphony organizations that are relatively open to women, including many administrative leadership roles, it stands out that the role of music director/conductor appears to be very closed and "non-congenial" to women. Why might this be?

Eagly: Women's difficulties in gaining access to this role tell us a lot about how gender is implicated in leadership. Leadership roles of course vary in their definitions. Some leadership roles—for example, being the principal of an elementary school—are thought to require a good deal of social skill and the ability to deal sensitively and tactfully with a variety of constituencies. Roles like this have an implicit definition that could be considered feminine in the sense that aspects of the societal stereotype of women are similar to our idea of the qualities that are needed to function appropriately in such a role. In contrast, other leadership roles—for example, being a military officer—are thought to require a more autocratic approach that involves "taking charge" and obtaining unquestioning compliance from subordinates. Roles like this have an implicit definition that could be considered masculine.

The symphony conductor role has a thoroughly masculine image. Marietta Nien-hwa Cheng made this point very clearly in her essay. "A conductor must be the boss: assertive, decisive, with no room for doubt; surely he alone knows the way." To the extent that this definition of conductor is widely shared in our culture, it is difficult for people to reconcile their ideas of what a conductor should be like with their ideas of what a woman should be like. This disjunction makes the role especially challenging for women, but fortunately there are some women willing to take on this challenge.

Institute: Overall, many of our discussants have suggested that they believe that leadership qualities are gender blind—that is, leadership style depends entirely on the individual. But in many other ways, our discussants, particularly in their interchange of views, highlighted their more collaborative and consensus-building orientations, their more participative decision-making styles, and their more nurturing approaches to their responsibilities, compared with men in comparable roles. What do you think about these subtle shades of difference?

Eagly: I detected considerable ambivalence on this topic among the women leaders who were interviewed for this project. I think that this ambivalence is justified. One reason for ambivalence may be the difficult politics of sex differences. Many people are not comfortable discussing differences for fear that acknowledging differences would work to the disadvantage of women.

Another reason that ambivalence and reticence on this subject are very understandable is that any overall sex differences in leadership styles are probably relatively small. Therefore, differences between individual men and between individual women overwhelm our perceptions of the differences between men and women in general. Even if we think that women do have more collaborative

styles, for example, we can probably come up with examples of non collaborative women and collaborative men, and these examples lead us to distrust our generalization about sex differences.

Nonetheless, people often can detect group differences accurately. So it is not surprising that, despite being uncertain about any group differences, the women who were interviewed did share a common theme to some extent. This theme, as you note, relates to being more collaborative, more participative in decision making, and more concerned with good communication and the careful building of consensus. The research that I have done on leadership styles confirms as genuine this tendency for women to be democratic and participative, at least as an overall trend when women and men are compared.

Despite some acknowledgment of differences along these lines, the female orchestra leaders consistently emphasized a range of other leadership qualities as well, such as vision, the ability to inspire others, and of course being very knowledgeable about the workings of orchestras. I agree that, without these qualities, neither women nor men are likely to be effective orchestra leaders.

Institute: There are some suggestions that a more "androgynous" style, mixing masculine and feminine traits, may be even a more optimal path to follow. What do you think about this effectiveness issue?

Eagly: Theorists of leadership have long maintained that there is no one generally effective leadership style, and I concur. Some situations call for a more autocratic, directive style, and others call for a much greater component of communication, consensus building, and participation by many parties in making decisions. The ideal leader therefore would shift from one style to another, after an astute sizing up of the style that would be optimal in each situation. Therefore, if an androgynous style meant the flexibility to sometimes be autocratic, sometimes be democratic, and sometimes find a mix of autocracy and democracy, androgyny would surely be preferable.

If androgyny meant constantly using what we might consider a blended style, that approach would not be superior, because there are situations that call for more extreme versions of what might be considered more masculine or feminine styles. For example, an organization that is in danger of disintegrating might need a leader with vision and charisma who, at least temporarily, takes charge in a relatively autocratic style. Now, the realities are that leaders are often not as astute as they might be about tailoring their styles to the situation, and they often tend to develop personal styles that are not very flexible. Another reality suggested by research on leadership is that women are restricted from the more masculine modes of leadership by the negative reactions that many people have to being directly told what to do by a woman. As long as women are penalized more than men by these negative reactions, women will be restricted from adopting the masculine styles that are sometimes the optimal approach in a difficult situation.

Institute: Some discussants have described or alluded to differences on a

"community" level in attitudes about women occupying leadership roles in important organizations within the community. As unique, central cultural institutions, symphony organization have high profiles. Has there been any research on the topic of "community-based gender-leadership discrimination"? Do you think that the social, business, and civic leaders of communities should be asking themselves whether, as a community culture, they have such an underlying gender bias?

Eagly: This issue of community-based gender discrimination toward leaders and potential leaders is virtually untouched by formal research. Yet, social scientists think that some areas of the country have cultures that favor more traditional ideas about gender—the South compared with the North, for example. I would therefore expect more reluctance to give women equal access to leadership roles in all types of organizations in regions and cities that have more traditional cultures. Particularly in such cities, it can take considerable courage on the part of decision makers to make a non-traditional choice of a woman or minority group member to fill a role that has been held only by majority men in the past.

Decision makers may also be fearful of moving in a direction that might be considered progressive, but would be considered too extremely nontraditional by many members of their community. After all, symphony orchestras are highly dependent on the community for attendance at concerts and for financial support. A certain conservatism on the part of decision makers may follow from trying to anticipate community reaction. Therefore, I think that social, business, and civic leaders of communities should be continually asking themselves about their potential to show gender bias. If they believe that the community is not prepared to accept a woman in a role such as conductor, they should carefully scrutinize that belief for its validity. Some interviewing and surveying of community members might reveal that the relevant constituency is actually more progressive in relation to women than they realize. And, of course, community organizations have some responsibility to be progressive forces rather than regressive ones.

Institute: It is generally well known, and confirmed in many ways in the views we have collected, that the administrative leadership roles in symphony organizations require a great deal of time and energy. They can be very stressful roles. And yet there may be some evidence in what our discussants said that, as women, they feel an urge to "work even harder" in their jobs. What are your reactions to this theme?

Eagly: Surely the interviews of the women leaders of orchestras give me the impression of a very hard-working group of people. There is utmost seriousness about competently carrying out leadership roles, and many of these roles are very demanding of time and energy. Whether they are professional or volunteer, when women realize that they are relatively new in a role—that they are "break-through women"—I think that they often feel some responsibility to their gender and to women's collective efforts to improve their status and opportunities. A woman leader might feel, for example, that if she should be regarded as failing

in her work, it might be a long time before another woman would have a chance to undertake this same role. She might also feel, with some justification, that at least some people are skeptical of her abilities, and consequently that she has to be especially competent to be considered competent at all. Although these beliefs may drive women to work especially hard, women simultaneously meet the counterpressures that follow from attempting to lead fulfilling family lives. To the extent that women are more invested in the private sphere than men are, women may feel somewhat more pressure and conflict in demanding work roles, and may devote more thought to finding creative solutions to work-family conflict.

Institute: Do you have any other insights and advice for the readers of *Harmony*, many of whom are active and dedicated participants in symphony organizations, and anxious to have their organizations prosper and grow?

Eagly: My final observation concerns one of the advantages of giving women access to all leadership roles in orchestras, including the role of music director/conductor. When women are given equal access to these roles, the pool of candidates becomes larger. Because the qualities most important to leadership—such as vision, charisma, and expertise—are distributed to both women and men, larger numbers of highly qualified candidates are available when both women and men are considered without prejudice. Also, if women begin to trust that they will be evaluated in a gender-blind way, more women will step forward and become candidates for important roles. Research suggests that the anticipation of gender prejudice causes many women to hesitate to apply for higher-level positions until their qualifications are exceedingly good—in fact, better than those of the men who apply. In a gender-blind world, women would not be any more hesitant to apply than their male counterparts; this hesitation can create the perception that there are few female candidates available.

And the belief that prejudice against women is alive and well can make women hesitate to initiate a particular career at all. For example, although it is true that there are few women in the pool of potential conductors, this situation comes about because the great majority of talented female musicians no doubt believe that the career of conductor would be a poorer choice, compared with performance, because it is virtually closed to women. To increase opportunities for women and enlarge their pool of candidates, symphony organizations need to communicate their equal-opportunity stance at every opportunity. Such communication would help create an atmosphere in which women step forward to become leaders, and have the confidence to initiate careers even in areas that have been considered inappropriate for women or have even been entirely closed to them. In the long run, organizations will benefit from having a more talented and effective group of women and men in their leadership roles.

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