



GLASS CLIFFS

Appointment of women to precarious positions in times of crisis as an organizational sign of change

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State of research

Ryan and Haslam (2005) discovered the “glass cliff”, a phenomenon describing that women – if they become leaders in an organization (thus breaking through the “glass ceiling” to upper echelons) - are more likely than men to find themselves in a position that is associated with a greater risk of failure (like standing on a “cliff”) because they are promoted to become leaders in organizational units that are in crisis. Figure 1 displays the amount of scientific publications on the glass cliff during the last 15 years. In the meantime, Bruckmüller, Ryan, Rink and Haslam (2014) as well as Ryan et al. (2016) published new reviews of existing glass cliff research, attesting to the robustness of its effect. However, recent studies have only *in part* supported the existence of this phenomenon. Cook and Glass (2014) could not identify the glass cliff effect using archival data of CEO transitions in Fortune 500 companies in the US but found board diversity to have a significantly positive relationship with the promotion of female top managers. Likewise, Hennessey, MacDonald, and Carroll (2014) could not find a glass cliff in their study of board appointments in the 100 largest companies in Canada. However, Mulcahy and Linehan (2014) identified crisis severity as an important situational variable in the UK, finding a glass cliff particularly for companies that had experienced big losses as opposed to small or no losses. Newer findings using an experimental methodology to replicate the glass cliff phenomenon have also been mixed. Acar (2015) did not identify the glass cliff using a sample of Turkish Business Administration students. Kulich and colleagues conducted two studies that directly relate to the propositions of signaling change motives of our original research program, demonstrating that a female candidate's potential to signal change rather than the ascribed leadership characteristics predict her appointment to leadership positions (Kulich, Lorenzi-Cioldi, Iacoviello, Faniko & Ryan, 2015) and that actual change motivations in a crisis lead to a preference for leaders who are high in *both* agentic and communal traits (Kulich, Iacoviello, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2018). Taken together, this brief research update shows that there still is a great degree of *inconsistency* in the literature. The glass cliff seems to be a rather complex phenomenon that is contingent on diverse influence factors related to attributed leader characteristics (=candidate), signaling change motives (=company) or broader circumstances (=crisis details). The following documented results of our own project add to these insights and substantiate that the continuation of research seems worthwhile.

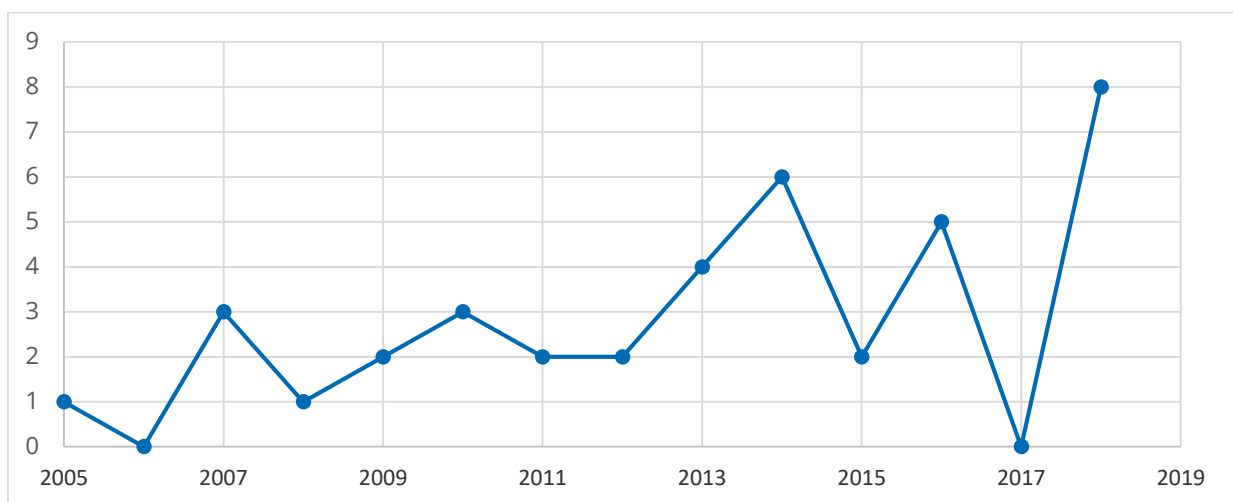


Fig. 1: Number of journal articles on the glass cliff from 2005 to 2018 (data abstracted from Web of Science, February 2019).

Report on own work

The funded project (WE 1504/23-1) focused on an organizational perspective of the glass cliff by examining how the appointment of women to precarious leadership positions may reflect an organization's desire to signal strategic change to its stakeholders. The main goal was to contribute to existing glass cliff research by testing novel

Table 1. Hypotheses tested in Studies 1-3.

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Glass cliff effect	●	●	●
Visibility		●	●
Gender of previous leader		●	●
Crisis severity		●	
Identification			●

moderators that affect these relationships (e.g., public visibility of organizations, gender of previous leader, severity level of crises) using archival and experimental methodologies (see Table 1 for investigated Hypotheses). In the following, the work completed to date and the insights achieved will be briefly presented: the core findings of Study 1 (archival study with an extended German sample), as well as Studies 2 und 3 (experimental studies with German and Dutch samples). The project activities have been quite successful so far as shown by the resulting outcomes listed below.

Study 1

Study 1 helped to gain novel insights regarding the moderating role of organizational visibility for the glass cliff effect, however, in order to account for significant environmental changes in Germany (the year 2011 marks the onset of political discussions on the use of a female quota in management boards), we extended the sample of study 1 with additional data points until the year 2014 and also employed a different methodology – *matched sample analysis* – following standards of more recent archival glass cliff research (Cook & Glass, 2014).

For extending data in the German context, we conducted a search on all female board member appointments in companies listed in the German stock exchange from 2003 to 2014 (160 companies in the DAX, MDAX, SDAX, and TecDAX stock indices). For this purpose, we used information obtained from annual reports, company homepages, and financial databases and websites. In total, there were 42 cases of female board member appointments in the time period under review. We then composed a comparison dataset with 42 male board member appointments that was matched for stock index, company size as measured by market capitalization, and appointment period. We computed a performance measure by calculating the slope of the monthly stock price trend from twelve months leading up to the appointment. In order to account for the political influence on companies' decisions to appoint female board members that could nullify the glass cliff effect, we split the dataset into cases of appointments up to and after the critical year of 2011. We then conducted an ANCOVA with the performance measure as the dependent variable and the matched samples and time period as the factors. As covariates, we included stock index, industry sector, company size, size of management and supervisory board, the existence of female board members on the management as well as the supervisory board. Results indicate a significant effect of the interaction on company performance.

These results indicate that in Germany, women were preferentially appointed to companies in crisis up to the critical time mark of 2011, but not after.

Study 2

Adding to Study 1 which made use of archival data, we conducted Study 2 as an experimental study in which we further investigated boundary conditions of the glass cliff phenomenon. In 2 pilot studies ($N=39$ and 115), we first examined the perceived desirability of feminine vs. masculine leadership characteristics for a leader in crises of different degree of severity. Our results showed, as expected, that feminine (masculine) characteristics are seen as more important in crisis (severe crisis) situations. Study 3 employed a vignette design where we experimentally manipulated crises of differing severity, gender of the previous leader and the visibility of the organization in order to shed light on the organizational signaling-change motive ($N=193$). A logistic regression revealed a two-way interaction of organizational performance and visibility on appointment of female leaders when comparing crisis and severe crisis. In less visible organizations, female candidates were more likely to be appointed in crisis than in severe crisis. When comparing crisis and severe crisis, an ANOVA revealed that female candidates were perceived as being more suitable in crisis than in severe crisis.

Then, we performed an ANOVA with signal of change as dependent variable and performance (success vs. crisis vs. severe crisis), visibility (low vs. high) and gender of previous leader (male vs. female) as independent variables in the sub-sample of participants who chose the female candidate ($n = 114$). The ANOVA revealed a main effect of crisis, with a subsequent test of contrasts revealing that success ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.04$) and crisis ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.85$) significantly differed whereas crisis and severe crisis ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.58$) did not differ. In addition, there was a marginally significant main effect of gender of previous leader. Signaling change might be a stronger motive for the appointment of women in organizations with a previous male leader ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.95$) than a previous female leader ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.95$).

Study 3

Study 3 focused on one explanation for this effect: By appointing women as leaders in a crisis companies often aim to signal fundamental strategic changes to stakeholders. Of course, this is only possible if the previous leader was male. We seek to extend this approach by analyzing how organizational identification influences this process. Organizational identification has been found to promote commitment to the organization's goals, behavior that serves the group one identifies with as well as organizational citizenship behavior. Therefore, strong organizational identification should strengthen the glass cliff phenomenon.

Preliminary results based on a sample of $N = 125$ participants were presented at the Congress of the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP) in Dublin and are promising as we found a marginally significant three-way interaction of visibility, gender of previous leader and organizational identification. Figure 2 displays the poster presented at a conference on Context, Identity and Choice in May, 2018.

Don't change a winning team

How high organizational identification can buffer the glass cliff

Anika Ihmels & Jürgen Wegge, TU Dresden, Germany | Meir Shemla, Rotterdam School of Management, Netherlands

1. Introduction. Women are more likely to reach top-leadership positions in times of crisis (glass cliff; Ryan & Haslam, 2005). By appointing women as leaders in a crisis, organizations may aim to signal strategic changes to stakeholders (Kulich et al., 2015). Thus, glass cliffs should be more pronounced in highly visible companies with a male leadership history. Behavior and decisions are guided by group identity (social identity theory, Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As organizational identification (OI) promotes commitment to organizational goals (Ashforth et al., 2008, Riketta, 2005), strong organizational identification should increase the likelihood of glass cliff appointments.

2. Methods. We conducted two vignette studies and manipulated the following experimental factors.

Experimental manipulation of OI

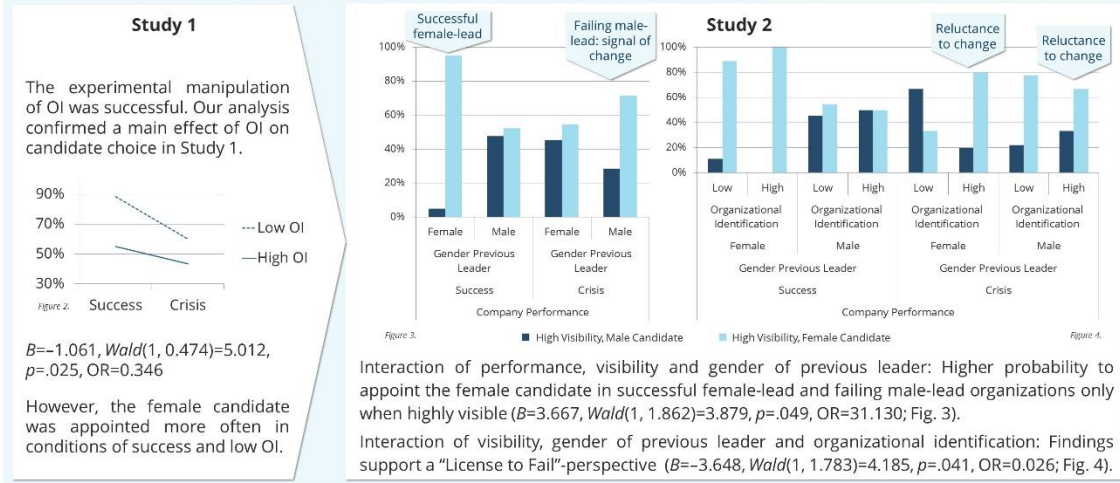
- Instruction (Van Knippenberg et al., 2006): Similar values and attitudes, interested in your colleagues, feeling at home
- Task: List 10 characteristics that you share with the company.

Experimental factors	Study
Organizational factors	
• Company performance: success vs crisis	1, 2
• Gender of previous leader: female vs male	2
Contextual factors	
• Visibility of the organization: low vs high	2
Personal factors	
• Organizational identification: low vs high	1, 2



Study	N	Sex	Age	Study design
1	94 university students (online)	58 ♀ 36 ♂	Ø 24.41 years (SD=4.76)	Student-oriented context: 2 (company performance) x 2 (organizational identification) design
2	192 business students (paper & pencil)	87 ♀ 105 ♂	Ø 24.15 years (SD=3.09)	Business context: 2 (company performance) x 2 (gender of previous leader) x 2 (visibility) x 2 (organizational identification) design

3. Results. We performed logistic regressions with candidate choice as dependent variable.



4. Discussion. We did not find a glass cliff as such. Women were appointed more often in successful (Study 1), specifically successful female-lead and failing male-lead organizations, yet only in highly visible organizations (Study 2). In conditions of crisis and high OI, participants were reluctant to change gender of CEO. The present research helps to reflect decision making processes by analyzing the important role of high organizational identification. It combines the decision makers' and the organization's perspectives in understanding appointments of leaders. Additional field studies are warranted to prove the generalizability of our findings.

Fig. 2: Poster presented at the conference Context, Identity and Choice: Understanding the Constraints on Women's Career Decisions (May 2018, London).

Project outcomes

One of the major outcomes was the completion of the doctoral thesis of Dipl.-Psych. Anika Ihmels.

Conference Presentations (8)

- Jungbauer, K.-L., Bohne, A., Shemla, M. & Wegge, J. (2014, July). Glass Cliffs: Die Beförderung von Frauen auf unsichere Positionen als ein organisationales Signal der Veränderung. Presented at the 6. Colloquium of I/O-Psychology in Saxony, Leipzig.
- Bohne, A., Wegge, J., Jungbauer, K.-L. & Shemla, M. (2015, September). Jetzt wird alles anders! Die Beförderung von Frauen auf unsichere Positionen als ein organisationales Signal der Veränderung. In S. Stegmann (Chair), Was halten Sie von Diversität? Paper presented at 9th Conference of the German Society of Psychology (DGPs), Section Work, Organizational, and Business Psychology (AOW), Mainz.
- Bohne, A., Wegge, J., Jungbauer, K.-L. & Shemla, M. (2015, July). Glass Cliffs - Die Beförderung von Frauen auf unsichere Positionen als ein organisationales Signal der Veränderung. Paper presented at the 7. Colloquium of I/O-Psychology in Saxony, Chemnitz.
- Bohne, A., Wegge, J., Jungbauer, K.-L. & Shemla, M. (2015, July). Glass Cliffs - Die Beförderung von Frauen auf unsichere Positionen als ein organisationales Signal der Veränderung. Paper presented at the Workshop for Early Career Scientists of the German Society for Psychology (DGPs), Section Work, Organizational, and Business Psychology (AOW), Paderborn.
- Ihmels, A. & Wegge, J. (2017, May). Gläserne Klippen - Die Beförderung von Frauen ins Topmanagement in Zeiten von Unternehmenskrisen. Paper presented at the Conference for Early Career Scientists of the Gender Concept Group at TU Dresden, Dresden.
- Ihmels, A., Jungbauer, K.-L., Wegge, J. & Shemla, M. (2017, June). Explaining the Glass Cliff: Combining the think crisis – think female and the signaling change approach. Poster presented at the Small Group Meeting of the European Association of Social Psychology (EASP), Berlin.
- Ihmels, A., Jungbauer, K.-L., Wegge, J. & Shemla, M. (2017, September). Frauen als ideale Führungskräfte in der Krise – Fördert die Identifikation mit der Organisation das Glass Cliff Phänomen? Paper presented at 10th Conference of the German Society of Psychology (DGPs), Section Work, Organizational, and Business Psychology (AOW), Dresden.
- Ihmels, A., Shemla, M., & Wegge, J. (2018, May). Don't change a winning team – How high organizational identification can buffer the glass cliff. Poster presented at the conference Context, Identity and Choice: Understanding the Constraints on Women's Career Decisions, London.

Organized Symposia (5)

- A symposium entitled “Advances in Glass Cliff research” was organized at the Conference of the German Society for Psychology (DGPs) in Leipzig, 2016, which was attended by international glass cliff researchers. Members of the project team presented the following presentations:
 - Jungbauer, K.-L., Ihmels, A., Shemla, M. & Wegge, J. (2016, September). Archival evidence for the glass cliff in Germany: Political discussions on female quotas influence the appointment of women to precarious leadership positions. Paper presented at the Conference of the German Society for Psychology (DGPs), Leipzig.
 - Ihmels, A., Jungbauer, K.-L., Shemla, M. & Wegge, J. (2016, September). Explanations for the Glass Cliff: Combining the think crisis – think female and the signaling change

- approach. Paper presented at the Conference of the German Society for Psychology (DGPs), Leipzig.
- A symposium entitled “Leadership in times of crisis: What motivates glass cliff appointments?” was organized at the congress of the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP) in Dublin, 2017, with international glass cliff researchers. Members of the project team presented the following presentation:
 - Ihmels, A., Jungbauer, K.-L., Shemla, M. & Wegge, J. (2017, May). Women as ideal leaders in times of crisis - Does organizational identification promote the glass cliff? Paper presented at the Conference of the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP), Dublin.
 - A symposium entitled “Beyond the glass cliff: Antecedents, extensions and new moderators of board appointments in times of crisis” was organized at the 29th International Conference of Applied Psychology (ICAP), in Montréal, Canada, 2018, with international glass cliff researchers. Members of the project team presented the following presentation:
 - Ihmels, A., Hirschfeld, M. S. A., & Wegge, J. (2018, June). Think crisis – think feminine: Effects of gender-specific visual cues on the glass cliff phenomenon. Paper presented at the 29th International Conference of Applied Psychology (ICAP), Montréal.
 - Wegge, J., Ihmels, A., Haslam, S. A., & Shemla, M. (2018, June). Revisi(ti)ng the Glass Cliff: The Moderating Role of Company Visibility. Paper presented at the 29th International Conference of Applied Psychology (ICAP), Montréal.
 - A symposium entitled “When times are a-changing: Does the wish for signals or for actual change motivate glass cliff appointments in business and politics?” was organized at the 51st Conference of the German Society of Psychology (DGPs) in Frankfurt/Main, 2018, with international glass cliff researchers. Members of the project team presented the following presentation:
 - Ihmels, A., Kleineberg, K., Kulich, C., & Dörfel, D. (2018, September). Looking like a leader? Outward appearance and the political glass cliff in Germany. Paper presented at the 51st Conference of the German Society of Psychology (DGPs), Frankfurt/Main.
 - Wegge, J., Ihmels, A., Haslam, S. A., & Shemla, M. (2018, September). Revisi(ti)ng the Glass Cliff: The Moderating Role of Company Visibility. Paper presented at the 51st Conference of the German Society of Psychology (DGPs), Frankfurt/Main.
 - A symposium entitled “Solidifying the glass cliff: Empirical, theoretical and meta-analytical insights on women in precarious leadership positions” was organized at the Conference of the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP), in Turin, 2019, with international glass cliff researchers. Members of the project team presented the following presentation:
 - Ihmels, A., Kaplonek, M., Andree, A., & Dörfel, D. (2019, May). Behind closed doors: Investigating appointments and arguments in glass cliffs as group decisions. Paper presented at the Conference of the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP), Turin.

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