



Beyond the Glass Ceiling:  
The precariousness of glass cliff leadership  
positions

# IAL TIMES

Tuesday September 7 2004

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## Women who break through glass ceiling likely to become fall guys

By Clive Cookson in Exeter

Women who break through the glass ceiling into senior management often find themselves on the edge of a glass cliff, psychologists said yesterday.

A study by Alex Haslam and Michelle Ryan at the University of Exeter found that women who break through the glass ceiling into senior management often find themselves on the edge of a glass cliff, psychologists said yesterday. The study, published in the journal *Journal of Applied Psychology*, found that women who break through the glass ceiling into senior management often find themselves on the edge of a glass cliff, psychologists said yesterday. The study, published in the journal *Journal of Applied Psychology*, found that women who break through the glass ceiling into senior management often find themselves on the edge of a glass cliff, psychologists said yesterday.

tion science festival in Exeter. He believes difficulties stimulate companies to appoint women to jobs "where they risk falling off the precipice". By contrast, when things are going well, "there is no need to change the usual practice of jobs for the

tions. Similarly, women working in the law are assigned to less promising legal cases than are men.

In addition to studying the glass cliff in FTSE 100 companies, the Exeter psychologists also sought to recreate it experimen-

was doing badly and the male when it was doing well.

Despite doubts expressed about the research by some scientists - all male - Prof Haslam had no doubt that the glass cliff was a real phenomenon. "In all the studies we have done, we have



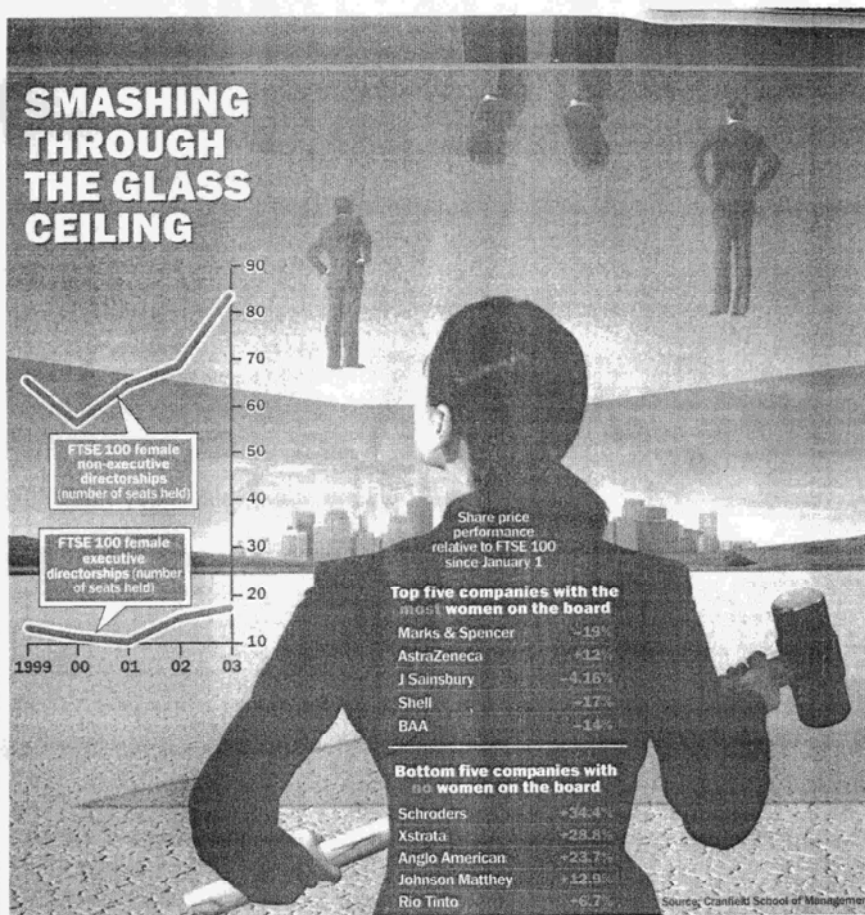
**Michelle Ryan  
Alex Haslam**

**University of Exeter, UK**



**EUROPEAN UNION  
European Social Fund**

# The glass cliff



By Elizabeth Judge

SO MUCH for smashing the glass ceiling and using their unique skills to enhance the performance of Britain's biggest companies. The triumphant march of women into the country's boardrooms has instead wreaked havoc on companies' performance and share prices.

Research from Cranfield School of Management shows

## Women on board: help or hindrance?

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However, corporate Brit-

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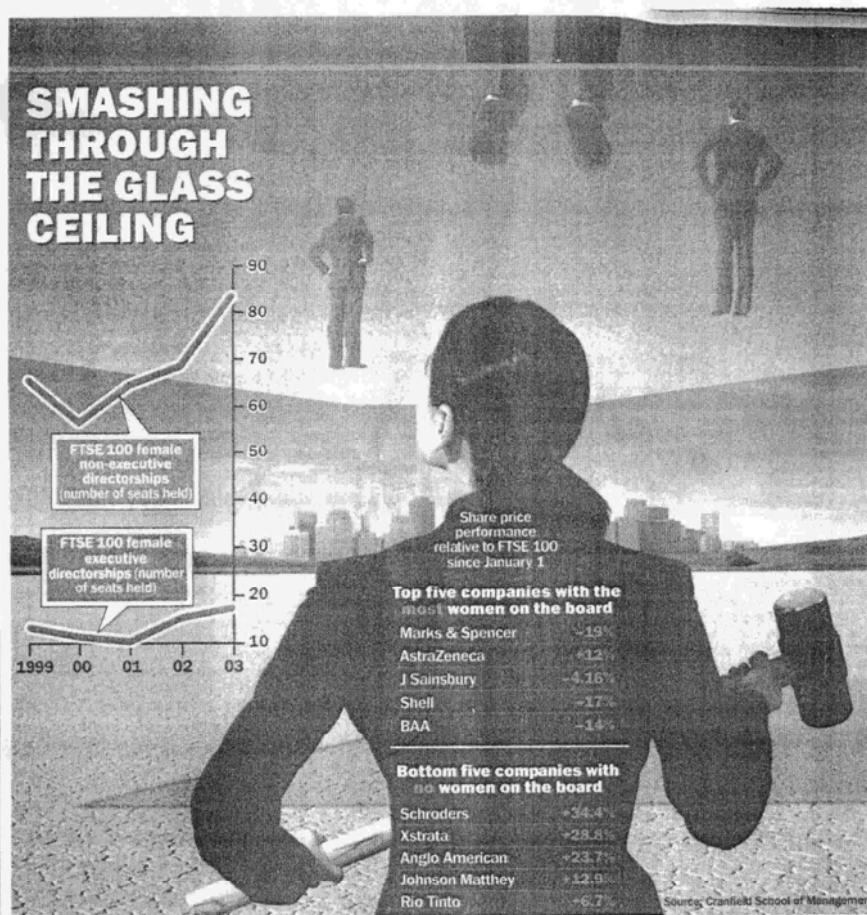
cent have underperformed the FTSE 100 this year. Marks & Spencer, with four women on the board, underperformed by 19 per cent. BAA, with three women, underperformed by 14 per cent.

Companies at the bottom of the Cranfield index, with a woeful lack of female representation on their boards, have generally outperformed the index since the start of the year.

*“So much for smashing the glass ceiling and using their unique skills to enhance the performance of Britain’s biggest companies. The triumphant march of women into the country’s boardrooms has instead wreaked havoc on companies’ performance”*

Judge, 2003,  
The Times, p.21

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## FTSE 100 Cranfield Index

- 3 of the top 5 companies on Cranfield Index are under-performing
- All of the bottom 5 are over-performing

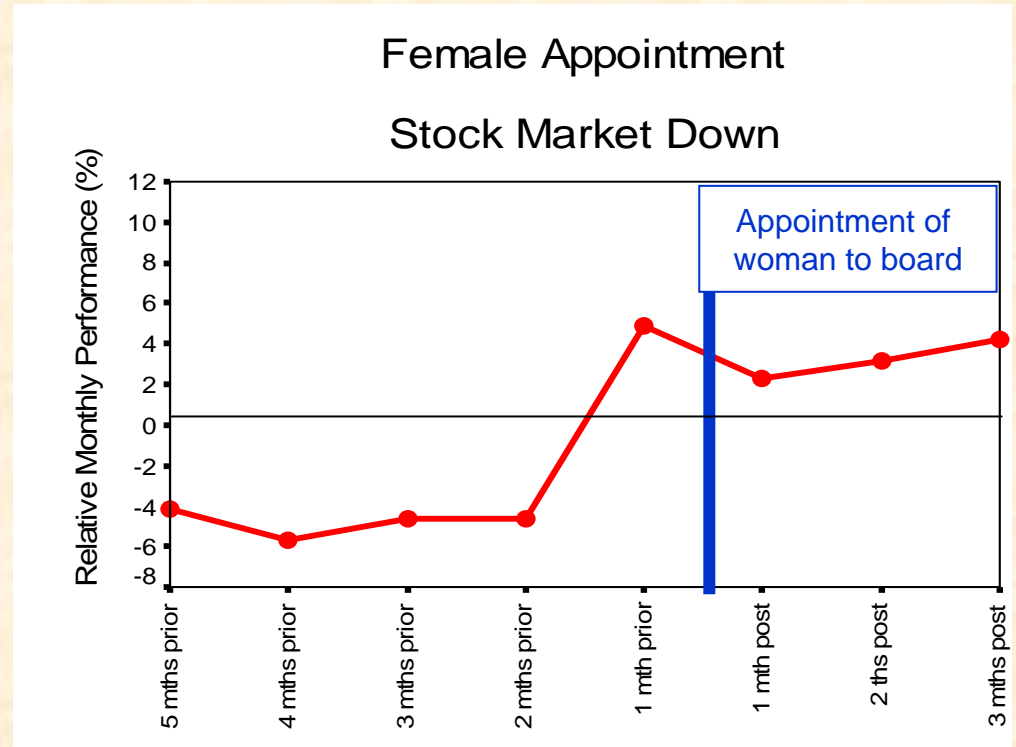
## Conclusion:

*“Corporate Britain would be better off without women on the board.”*

# The glass cliff

- Ryan & Haslam (2005a)
- There is a relationship between performance and number of women.
- But is the analysis correct?
- Could the causal sequence be **reversed**?

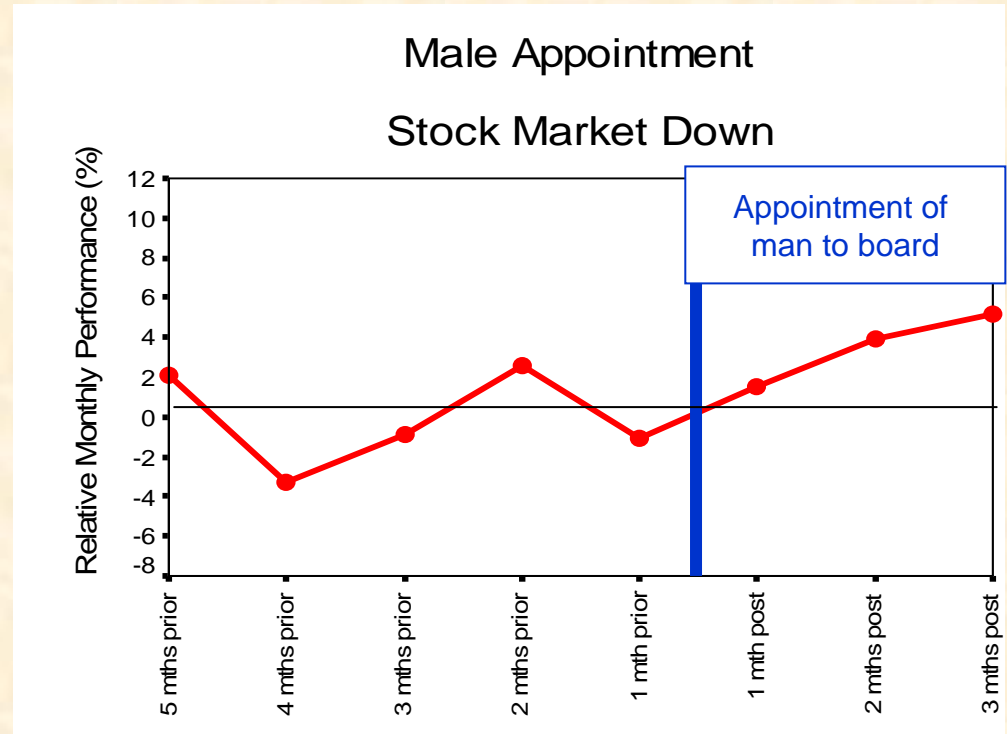
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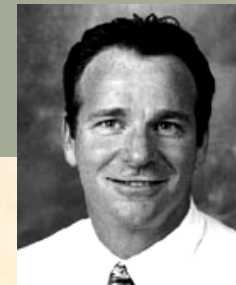


# The glass cliff

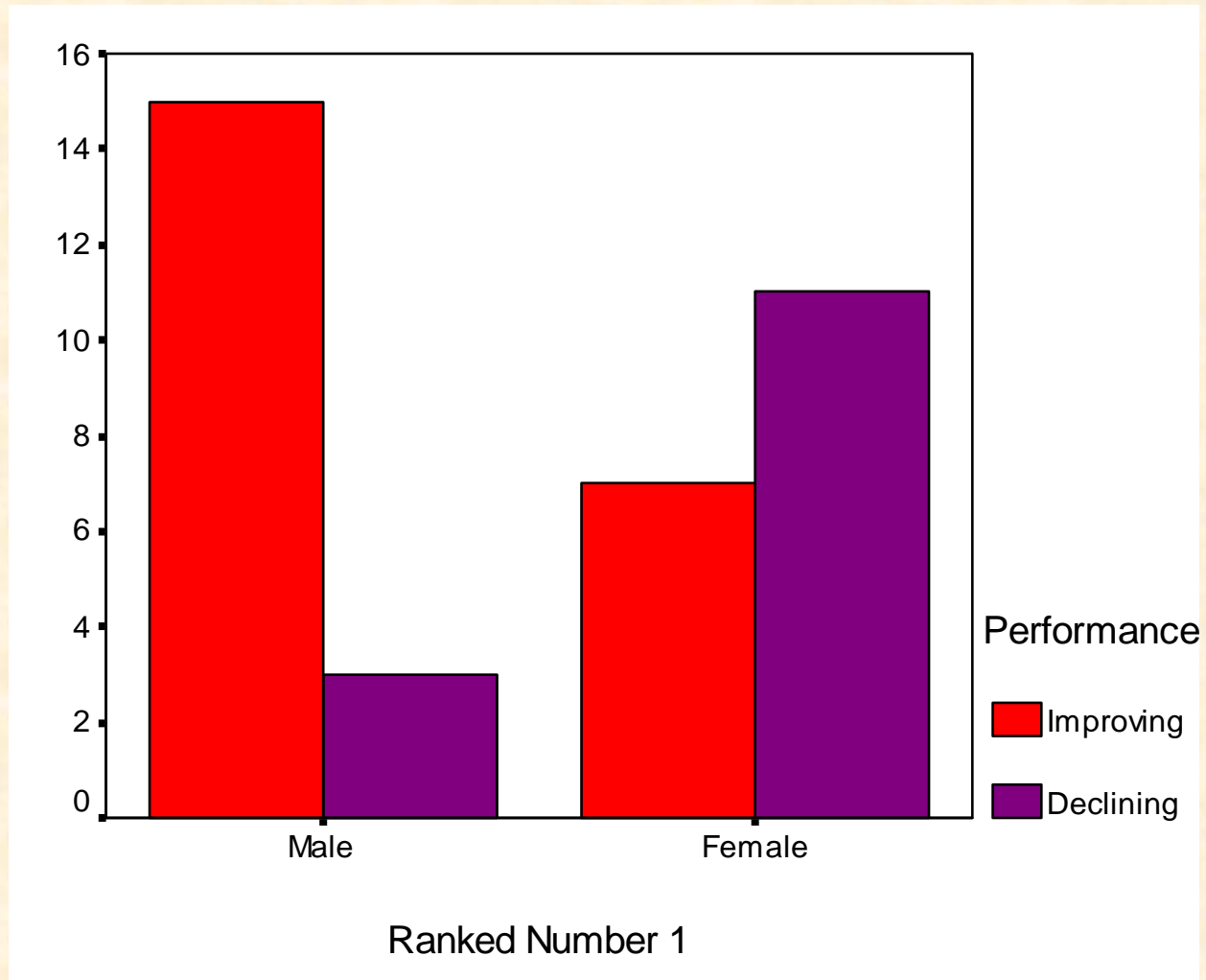
- Contrary to the *Times*, the appointment of a woman was **not** associated with a subsequent drop in company performance.
  - Companies that appointed a woman had experienced consistently poor performance in the months preceding the appointment.
- 
- Extending the metaphor of the 'glass ceiling', we argue women are more likely than men to confront a '**glass cliff**', such that their leadership appointments are more likely to be made in problematic organizational circumstances and are thus more **risky and precarious**.

# Experimental Research

- Is there any evidence that women are preferentially selected for challenging leadership positions?
- To answer this question we conducted **experimental research**  
Ryan & Haslam (2005b; 2005c; Ashby, Ryan, & Haslam, 2005)
- Participants asked to select a candidate for a leadership position under circumstances that were **going well** or **going badly**
- Given a choice between multiple candidates — but best candidates are a man and a woman whose applications are matched on key dimensions.
- Which do they prefer and when?



# Choice of Candidate

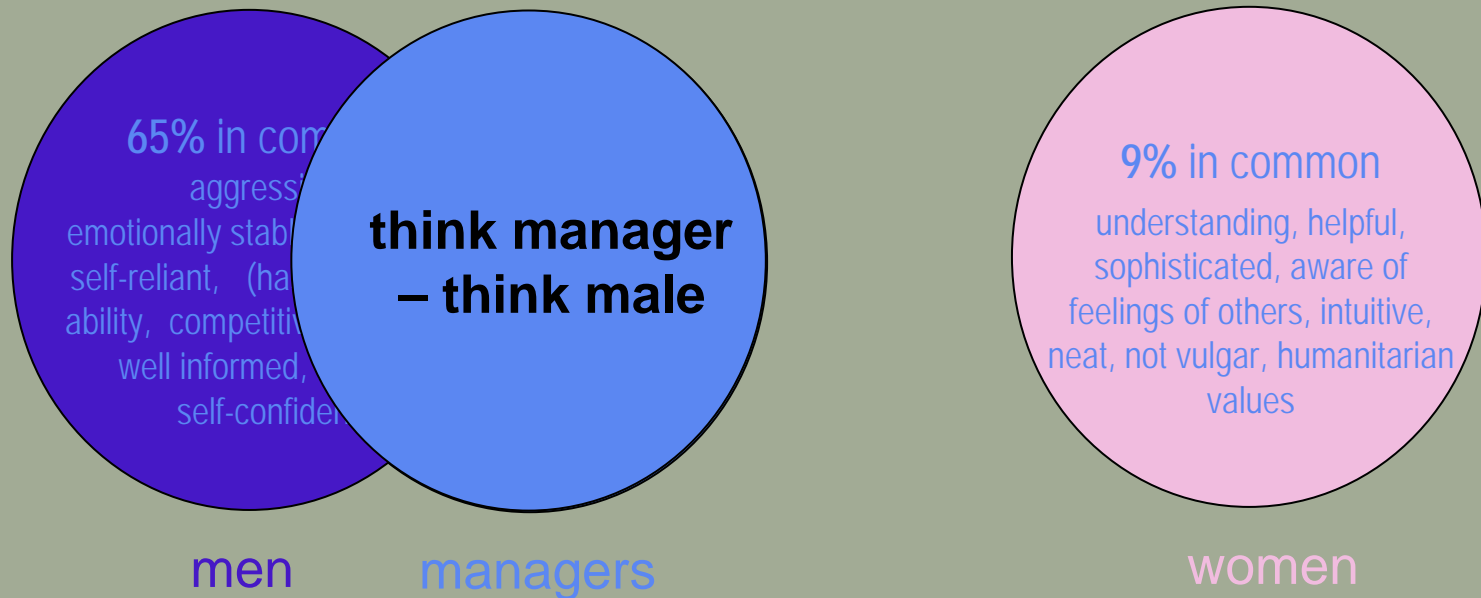


# Experimental Research

- A female candidate is more likely to be appointed to a leadership position when the position is risky and there is an increased risk of failure.
- Demonstrated with:
  - Lead lawyer of a risky and highly criticised case
  - Financial director of a poorly performing company
  - Youth representative for a festival experiencing declining popularity
  - Political candidate for an unwinnable seat

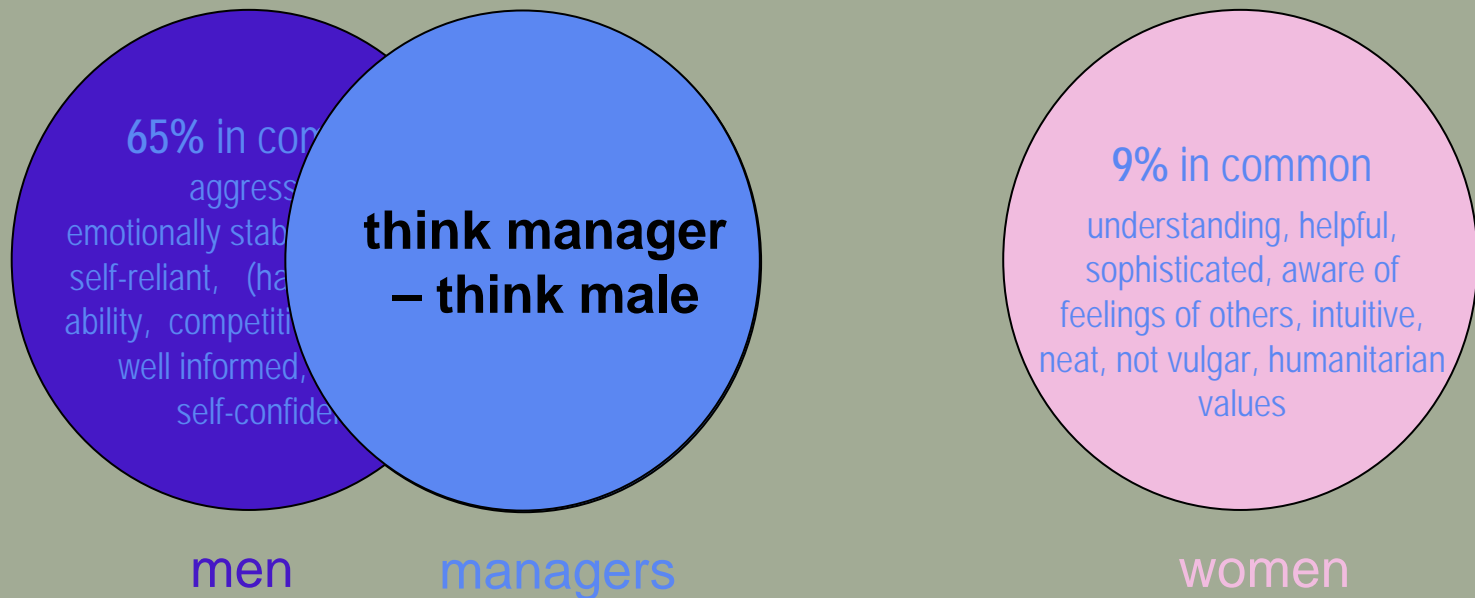
# Stereotypes

- **Implicit leadership theories**
- Schein (1973): Traits shared by managers and (a) men and (b) women



# Stereotypes

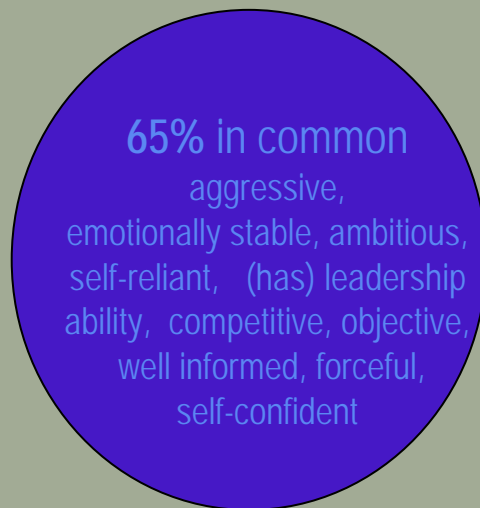
- **Implicit leadership theories**



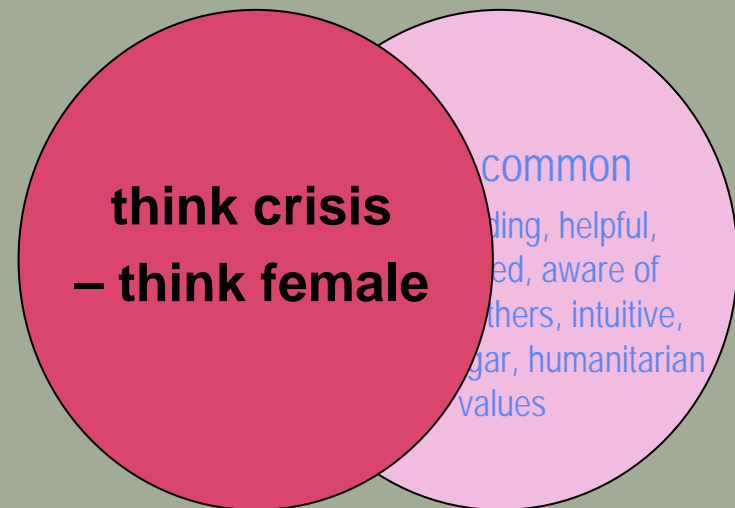
- This may hold for 'normal' contexts but what about **abnormal** ones?
- For example, what happens in a **crisis**?

# Stereotypes

- **Implicit leadership theories**
- Could there be a different pattern for managers in a crisis?



men

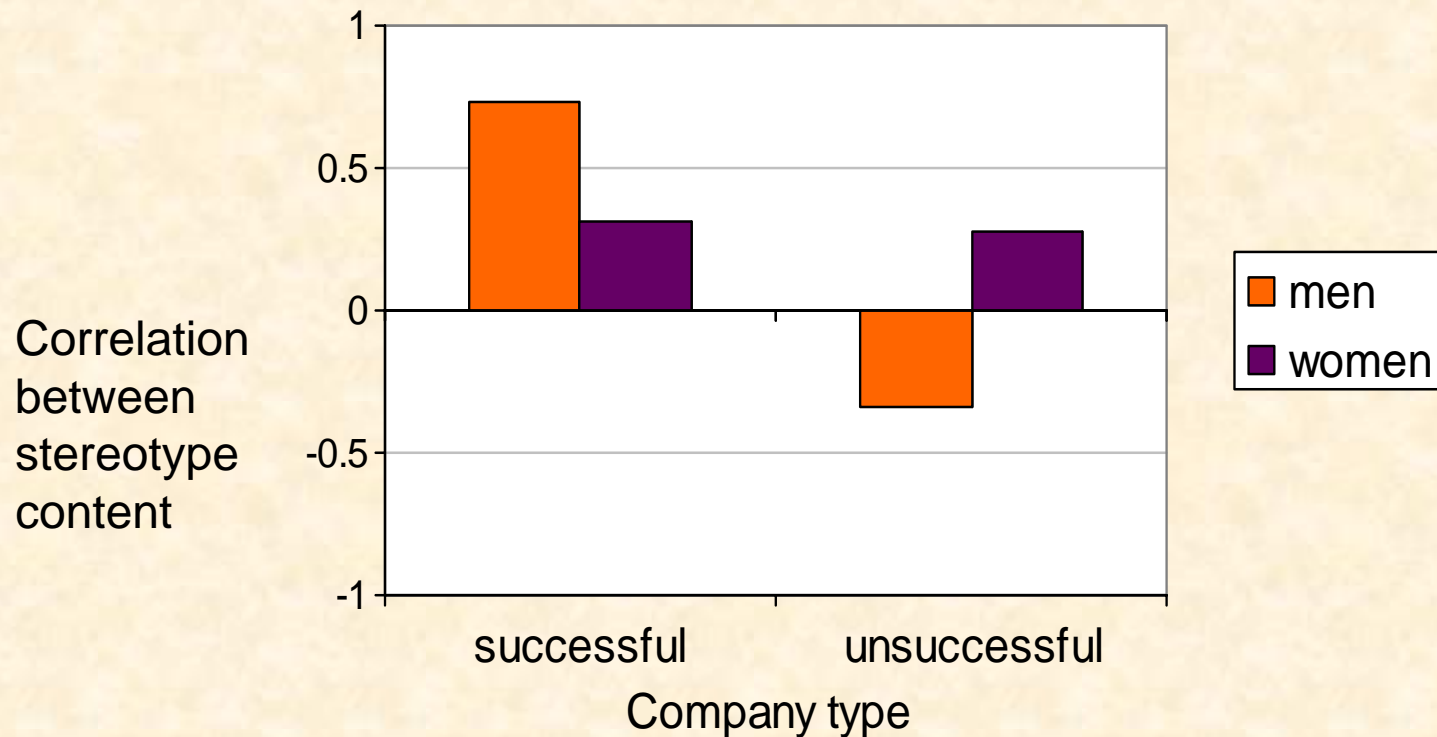


crisis

women

# Stereotypes

- Gave Ps list of 92 traits and asked them to identify those that were stereotypic of **men**, **women**, managers of **successful** and **unsuccessful** companies



# Understanding reactions

BBC NEWS WORLD EDITION

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What patterns do we see in reactions to glass cliffs?

## Introducing... the glass cliff

**Internet Research** (Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2004)

- Through a link from a BBC on-line story people were asked to
  - (a) explain why they think the glass cliff occurs
  - (b) tell us about their glass cliff experiences
- This attracted 80,000 readers from around the world.
- Provides insight into
  - (a) the sorts of explanations people self-generate and prefer
  - (b) the nature of leadership experience (from a sample of people that social scientists can't routinely access)

Education said,

MAGAZINE REGULARS

Magazine

Business

Numbers of female directors on the boards of FTSE 100



Magazine M

Caption com

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## Introducing... the glass cliff

By Michelle Ryan and Alex Haslam  
Psychologists

Forget the glass ceiling. The big threat to women's success in top roles is now the 'glass cliff' - being promoted into risky, difficult jobs where the chances of failure are higher.

Women are "smashing through the glass ceiling" of the country's top businesses, a report in the Times last November said.

Numbers of female directors on the boards of FTSE 100



## In today's Magazine

### LEAD STORY



**Live fast, die young**  
The flash can't last  
holidays and  
clout of the n

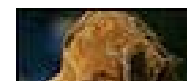
### Do protests work?

What difference do they

### Moat house

Perfect for weddings, pe

### MAGAZINE REGULARS



**Magazine M**  
Caption com

# Understanding reactions

## The explanations people generate for the glass cliff

		<i>% women</i>	<i>% men</i>
<b>Sexism</b>	Women are singled out for inferior positions	20%	4%
<b>Bias</b>	Men prefer to hire other men for 'cushy' jobs	18%	0%
	Women are seen as better potential scapegoats	17%	0%
	Women leaders lack peer and institutional support	9%	4%
<b>Social Factors</b>	Women have fewer opportunities	31%	8%
	Appointment of a woman as a signal of change	14%	8%

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<b>Social Factors</b>	<p><i>"Speaking as a research scientist, I am disgusted .... Your approach is entirely unscientific." Male professional, 21</i></p>		
<b>Stereotype</b>	Women are more suited to dealing with a crisis	17%	17%
<b>Denial</b>	Women are NOT placed in more risky positions	3%	50%

# Conclusion



- Our advice?
  1. **Be aware.** Wanting to take on a challenging position is a good thing, but ensure that this is not a poisoned chalice and that you are not being 'set up' to fail.
  2. **Make your colleagues aware.** If you are the only person who recognizes the dangers of glass cliffs, it is unlikely that others will be attuned to the issues that you confront: you may be unfairly evaluated.
  3. **Work collectively.** It is unlikely that you will be able to change things for the better on your own — indeed, the strategy of 'going it alone' may be more likely to reinforce the status quo than to challenge it.



**Thank You!**

**M.Ryan@exeter.ac.uk**