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(UN)EASY LIES THE HEAD THAT WEARS THE CROWN: LEADERSHIP SELECTION AND GROUP PERFORMANCE AMONG UNDERGRADUATE WOMEN

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Abstract *The present study investigated the effect of the process of leader selection (formal, random, and no leader/control) on the group performance of college students, measured through goal achievement and team maintenance, using an experimental design. A sample comprising 119 female undergraduate students at women's college in Delhi in the age range of 18–21 years was randomly assigned to one of the three leadership selection conditions. Each condition comprised of seven sub-groups each (a total of 21 sub-groups), containing five to six participants each. After the appointment of the leader (formally or randomly), the groups participated in a desert survival task. One-way analysis of variance revealed that the group where the leader was randomly selected outperformed the group with a formally appointed leader and the group with no leader, in terms of goal achievement and team maintenance, respectively. Our findings suggest that under certain circumstances, the systematic selection of leaders may have a deleterious impact on group performance. These counterintuitive findings are discussed in the light of past and current body of organizational research.*

Keywords: *Leadership Selection, Formal/Random/No Leader, Team Maintenance, Goal Achievement*

INTRODUCTION

Given the huge volume of research on leadership, it is rather surprising that there is a lack of consensus regarding the very importance of a leader. On one hand, theorists like Kerr and Jermier (1978) contend that employees seek both good feelings and guidance from their work settings. A leader is merely a vehicle for providing these services and there could be a substitute for leadership. Some organizations are indeed increasingly abandoning leadership positions and are giving traditional leadership roles in hands of employees into special work teams (Zaleznik, 2004). On the other hand, others have suggested that substitutes for leadership cannot fully replace the role of the leader (Dionne et al., 2002; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 1996). For example, Amit, Popper, and Lisak (2008) compared "leader" with "no-leader" and found that the presence of a leader increases the chances of making better decisions, even enhancing work group processes.

Leadership effectiveness is believed to be vital to the success of individuals, groups, and organizations. For instance, style of the leader has been shown to impact group cohesion (Vahdani et al., 2012); organizational performance (Funda et al., 2014; Peris, Koech, & Namusonge, 2012); employee performance (Iqbal et al. 2015; Khan & Channar, 2016); and group effectiveness (Jung & John, 2002; Solat et al., 2017). Effective leaders motivate their followers, communicate a clear sense of purpose, and ultimately improve the performance of their teams and organizations (Harris, Wheeler, & Kacmar, 2009).

Traditional theories of leadership have been criticized for giving more emphasis to the leaders than to followers (e.g., Felfe & Petersen, 2007; Sronce & Arendt, 2009). Leader-centric theories, such as trait and behavioural approaches to leadership, focus on the traits or behaviours of a leader that lead to success (Derue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey,

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2011; Stogdill, 1948). Contingency theories, through their focus on the aspects of situation, address the needs of followers somewhat (e.g., Hersey & Blanchard, 1974). Some others (e.g., Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Baker, 2007; Hollander, 1995; Howell & Shamir, 2005) have explored the role of followers in several aspects of leadership processes.

If followers are indeed relevant, how crucial is the process of leader selection? Does it matter how the leader is chosen? Are leaders selected through procedures that afford their position with greater legitimacy being more effective for inducing organizational change? Some early researchers who addressed this were Goldman and Frass (1965) and Haslam et al. (1998). Goldman and Frass (1965) examined the effect of leadership selection procedure upon performance using four conditions – leader elected by a group vote (LE), leader selected according to ability to perform the group task (LS), leader arbitrarily selected by an experimenter (LA), and no leader appointed (NL), and found that leader selected according to ability (LS) did the best, followed by leader from elected by a group vote (LE) condition.

Haslam et al. (1998) investigated the differences brought about by the manner of selection of leaders – random, formal, and informal. In experiment 1 on 188 undergraduate students from Australia, groups with randomly selected leaders performed a survival task better than groups whose leaders were systematically selected. In experiment 2 on 167 participants, groups with a random leader performed better than groups with no appointed leader and followers adhered more strongly to the group decision. These findings suggested that systematically selected leaders can undermine group goals and group maintenance, while informal methods of selection could actually foster group functions.

Another quasi-experimental design of team leadership (Markulis et al., 2006) reported nearly similar results. The experiment took place with undergraduate business majors at a university with three team leader modes: the designated, where the team leader was assigned by the instructor; the emerging mode, being those with no formal authority or appointment, but perceived by team mates as having substantially influenced the team; and the rotating mode, where the instructor appointed each member to lead the team for a set period of time, after which the leader role rotated to another member. An instructor taught three sections of an Organizational Behaviour class using these three modes, and no statistically significant difference was found in the three team-leader modes (rotating, emerging, and designated) and team project performance.

One study (Brandts et al., 2014) reported contrasting results. They compared two different mechanisms for appointing a leader, with the leader either determined at random or selected by a vote. They found that leaders who were elected by followers were significantly better at improving their group's outcome than randomly selected ones.

Similarly, Rivas and Sutter (2011) showed that voluntary leadership increased contributions significantly, compared to a treatment condition where leadership was enforced exogenously. Moxnes and Heijden (2003) studied the effects of leadership by using a laboratory public bad experimental design with two different conditions – with and without a leader. Results indicated a significant effect of leadership. On an average, investments in the public bad were 13% lower in the presence of a leader setting a good example as opposed to a situation with no leader. More recently, Arbak and Villeval (2013) gathered data from undergraduate students that involved several sessions of public good games with randomly formed teams, and found that voluntary leaders improve the overall efficiency of their group.

The above provides mixed findings. While some research favours informal/voluntary selection processes, other stresses the importance of systematic leadership selection. Due to lacunae of literature in the Indian context, the current study seeks to provide further insight into leadership selection in the Indian context. While there have been some studies on professional teams (sports and business), only a few studies have been done in the area of team-leadership in the classroom, at the college level, and/or in business schools. The present study thus attempts to assess the effect of the process of leader selection on group performance of female college students, measured through both goal achievement and team maintenance.

HYPOTHESES

- There will be a difference in goal achievement in the three conditions of leadership selection (formal, random, and no leader/control).
- There will be a difference in team maintenance in the three conditions of leadership selection (formal, random, and no leader/control).

METHOD

The present study used a one-way ANOVA experimental design with three conditions of leader selection. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the three leadership selection procedures (formal, random, and no leader / control), while ensuring that the number of participants in each condition remained equal. The independent variable thus was the process of leadership selection, that is, formal selection of the leader (wherein the participant who got the highest score on the leadership skill inventory in the group was selected as the leader of the group), random selection of the leader (leader was selected by the draw of lot method),

and no leader/control condition (no leader was appointed). The dependent variables for the study were goal achievement and group maintenance (Cartwright & Zander, 1960). Goal achievement is the achievement of some specific group goals. In this case, the quality of survival strategy groups decided on the given task. Team maintenance is the strengthening of the group itself. It was measured by assessing the extent to which the strategy chosen by individuals post activity deviated from that on which their group had previously agreed.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants included 119 female undergraduate students at a large women's college of Delhi University in India. Participants were recruited from undergraduate liberal arts courses, age range of the participants being 18–21 years. Their average age was 19.40 years (standard deviation = 1.06). All participants gave a written informed consent. No course credits or other emoluments were offered in return.

PROCEDURE

To manage the large number of participants, the study was conducted over six separate days based on the three leadership conditions (formal, random, and control) that participants were randomly assigned to. In each condition, there were seven sub-groups (a total of 21 sub-groups), containing five to six participants each. At the start of the activity, participants were all seated together and were given the informed consent form. They were then told that they were "about to take part in a group problem solving exercise in which you have to decide about appropriate behaviour in a desert survival task." They were also requested to fill the demographic profile with items such as their name (optional), age, course, and educational qualification. The leadership skill inventory (described later) was administered in all the three conditions at the outset so that it seemed to the participants that a legitimate method has been utilized for dividing them into groups.

According to the experimental condition to which they had been assigned, groups were instructed by experimenters to select a leader by one of the following methods. In the group assigned to the condition of the "formally selected leader," the person who obtained the highest score on The Leadership Skill Inventory was appointed the leader after announcing her score. In the experimental condition of the "randomly selected leader," the names of all the members in the sub-group were written down on slips of paper. Through draw of lots, a leader was appointed. In the control condition, no leader was appointed.

The experimenters then took the leaders of the formal/random condition groups aside and gave them a leadership package. This contained all the material for the group survival task as well as the instructions relating to the leader's role in the group. The leader was free to explain the activity as she wanted. The leader was given the following instructions to read aloud to the other members of their group:

In this study, we are about to take part in a group problem solving task. As a leader, my job is to ensure that we agree with all the suggestions that we make. However, as a leader I am also going to try to encourage everyone to participate so that we can all generate ideas and each make a contribution to the group. At the end of the experiment, the experimenters will look at how good we have been at directing ourselves to a decision with which we all agree.

In the control condition group, which had no appointed leader, the experimenter kept the sets of desert survival task material on the table and asked the participants to read the instructions on their own and proceed with the activity. The time provided for the completion of the activity was 30 minutes but the participants were allowed to carry on if they did not complete it within the prescribed time. In each of the conditions, the experimenters also acted as observers of the processes and dynamics of the group.

After the groups had finished the activity, the groups disbanded and each participant was accompanied by one experimenter (a trained undergraduate psychology student) who asked her to complete a post-test exercise asking her to provide her own ranking of the 15 items once again. The participants were then debriefed, explained the correct ranking as given by experts, and thanked for their participation.

TOOLS

Leadership Skill Inventory (LSI) by Ritchie and Moses (1983) was used to measure self-reported leadership skills. It requires the participants to respond to the 10 questions on a scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *extremely* (7). Each item relates to a personality dimension identified as a predictor of managerial success. Questions 2, 5, and 8 are reverse-scored, and the participants' scores on all items are aggregated. The maximum score on the inventory could be 70. The greater the score, the more skilled is the person as a leader. This tool has been widely used in previous studies of leadership (e.g., Cramer & Dijk, 2005; Hogg & Terry, 2014). It has a reported reliability of 0.63–0.83.

Experimental Task

Participants in each of the three conditions were given the desert survival task, an arbitrary situation, developed by Johnson and Johnson (1991) in which, the participants have crash landed in the Atacama Desert in South America. In the present study, this exercise was adapted slightly to make it relevant to the Indian context. The team task was to rank in

sequence of importance 15 items salvaged from the plane in the order of their importance to the team's survival. They provided an individual rating (my ranking), then through a unanimous discussion the team ranking of the items (team ranking). Goal achievement was measured by calculating the deviance of the team ranking from the standard scoring key, based on experts' rankings. The group's deviance from the standard answer key (Team Error) was taken to be a measure of goal achievement. The range of the score is from 0 to 112, where lower is the score or deviance, the higher is the goal achievement.

After the completion of the group task, each participant was once again asked to rank order the 15 items individually. This post exercise rating shows the impact of the group's rating of the items and the individual member's conformity to it at the end of the exercise. The individual's deviance from the team answer was taken to be a measure of team maintenance. The range of the score is from 0 to 112, where lower is the score or deviance, the higher is the team maintenance, suggesting that the individuals were more bound to the group and its original decision. This tool has been found to be have been used in previous studies of groups (e.g., Staples & Zhao, 2006) and team work (Ahuja, Srivastava, & Padhy, 2017).

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations were calculated for goal achievement and team maintenance for the three groups, i.e. formal, random, and control. Following this, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated to study the difference in goal achievement and team maintenance between the three groups with different leadership selection: random, formal, and control. The effect size was calculated using eta square. Games Howell post hoc analyses was used to identify statistically significant differences between specific groups.

Tables 1 and 2 provide the means and standard deviations of the measures of group achievement as a function of leadership selection, and the one-way analysis of variance results (ANOVA), respectively.

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations on Group Achievement as a Function of Leader Selection

Groups	N	Mean	SD
1. Formally Selected Leader	39	86.97	7.19
2. Randomly Selected Leader	41	82.26	9.177
3. No Leader (Control)	39	86.23	7.33
Total Group	119	85.09	8.19

Table 1 indicates that goal achievement was the highest in the group with randomly selected leader (mean = 82.6, SD = 9.177) followed by the group with no leader (control) (mean = 86.23, SD = 7.33). Goal achievement was lowest in the group with formally selected leader (mean = 86.97, SD = 7.19).

Table 2: One Way Analysis of Variance of Goal Achievement as a Function of Leader Selection

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	$P\eta^2$
Between	519.52	2	259.7614	4.07	.019 .65
Within	7460.47	117	63.76		
Total	7979.99	119			

One-way ANOVA was calculated in order to determine the impact of leader selection on goal achievement (refer to Table 2). This effect was found to be significant ($F = 4.07$, $p = 0.019$, $\eta^2 = 0.65$). Thus, hypothesis 1 which stated that there will be a difference in goal achievement in the three conditions of leadership selection (formal, random, and no leader/control) is accepted. Games Howell post hoc comparisons demonstrated a significant difference between goal achievement of groups led by formally selected leader and randomly selected leader (Games Howell $p = .032$).

The means, standard deviations of the measures of team maintenance as a function of leadership selection, and the one-way analysis of variance results (ANOVA) are presented in Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

Table 3: Means and Standard Deviations on Team Maintenance as a Function of Leader Selection

Groups	N	Mean	SD
1. Formally Selected Leader	39	20.51	14.73
2. Randomly Selected Leader	41	15.61	12.29
3. No Leader (Control)	39	23.54	15.82
Total Group	119	19.82	14.58

Table 3 indicates that team maintenance was best in the group with randomly selected leader (mean = 15.61, SD = 12.29) followed by the group with formally selected leader (mean = 20.51, SD = 14.73). Team maintenance was lowest in the group with no leader (control) (mean = 23.54, SD = 15.82).

Table 4: One-way Analysis of Variance of Team Maintenance as a Function of Leader Selection

Source	SS	df	MS	F	P
Between	1284.74	2	642.37	3.13	.041
Within	23803.19	116	205.19		
Total	25087.93	118			

One-way ANOVA was calculated in order to determine the impact of leader selection on team maintenance (refer to Table 4). This effect was also found to be significant ($F = 3.13$, $p = 0.041$, $\eta^2 = 0.51$).Thus, hypothesis 2 which stated that there will be a difference in team maintenance in the three conditions of leadership selection (formal, random, and no leader/control) was also confirmed. Games Howell post hoc comparisons demonstrated a significant difference between team maintenance of groups led by randomly selected leader and no leader (Games Howell $p = .039$).

DISCUSSION

The findings from the present study give rise to a complex picture, one that captures the layered complexities of leadership and, to some extent, followership. Results revealed that the group where the leader was randomly selected outperformed the group with a formally appointed leader and the group with no leader, in terms of goal achievement and team maintenance, respectively. Clearly, this finding is counterintuitive in light of the body of organizational research that suggests that processes of systematic leader selection should generally enhance group performance (e.g., Sarros & Butchatsky, 1996). On the other hand, our findings are consistent with the idea that under certain circumstances systematic selection of leaders may have a deleterious impact on group performance. Haslam et al. (1998) also found that groups with a randomly elected leader made higher-quality decisions than those where the leader had been non-randomly chosen.

Sutton (1990) suggested that the very act of selecting one individual, of singling him as better than the rest or simply focusing attention on that person undermines the group's sense of unity and shared identity and may lead to social loafing. According to the social identity theory, people tend to classify others and themselves into different types of social categories, such as those based on gender, age cohort, religious affiliation, and organizational membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). In the present study, participants across conditions are likely to have classified themselves – and other members – as belonging to the same institution, gender, and age cohort. In the random and control conditions, since leaders were not formally assigned, it may have led the participants to believe that they have been grouped together on the basis of the similarity of the LSI scores, contributing to perceptions of similarity among members. In such cases, the followers tend to be more inclined to compensate for the perceived shortcomings of the leader (Williams & Karau, 1991). These phenomena can be explained using the social compensation hypothesis, wherein people tend to work harder collectively than individually when they expect their own co-workers to perform in a poor manner on a meaningful task. Perhaps, the members of the random group and control compensated for the shortcomings of the leader or lack of a leader, respectively. Random leaders may have been successful not only because they did not threaten group cohesiveness, but also because they simply did not interfere in group proceedings, where it was not needed.

On the other hand, formally appointed leaders may have felt the need to prove their leadership potential, when in fact leadership was not really called for in the present task and situation. In some cases of formal leadership, leaders were seen to be authoritarian and exerted influence over the group by imposing and explaining convincingly their solutions, which may not have been correct to begin with. Various factors such as lack of legitimacy of the selection of the leader, social loafing, and bitterness towards the leader may have de-motivated the members of the group to work to their potential. Because the effectiveness of the leader was assessed by the quality of group's survival strategy, the group with the formal leader scored low on goal achievement and team maintenance.

In the formal leader condition, the leader was introduced by the experimenter as, "the person who obtained the highest score on the leadership tool and has been appointed the leader of this group." This might have undermined group solidarity and a sense of shared social identity, and in turn, group functioning, by drawing attention to individual differences among group members rather than to those things they had in common (Hollander, 1995). This could have resulted in poor performance of the formal group, with regard to both hypotheses 1 and 2.

Also, according to the implicit leadership theory (Lord, Foti, & Phillips, 1982) individuals hold conceptions of prototypic leaders (i.e., what they think leaders are like) and then evaluate actual leaders according to their conceptions. It is possible that in the formal condition, the appointed leader being one with the highest score on LSI, may not have fit into the participants' schema of a prototypical leader. Introspective reports indicated that participants felt that this method was unfair as it was self rated, and not based on some ability test. It is possible that the group members could have felt that the individual is exaggerating her capabilities while answering the scale, leading her to emerge as the leader, resulting into disapproval by the group members. This may have been more unacceptable in the Indian context, where women particularly are expected to behave somewhat modestly and not draw undue attention to themselves. This could have pos-

sibly led to a sense of alienation from the leader which may have caused a reduction in the acceptance of the leader.

Our results align with earlier findings of Goldman and Fraas (1965), who found that their groups functioned more effectively with a leader; but, the manner in which this leader obtains his position – whether democratically elected or arbitrarily imposed – was important. They showed that followers are more likely to accept someone as their leader if she/he has proven himself, something that the leaders in this study did not have a chance to do, as the task was such that they had no prior knowledge or expertise in the field.

There are a number of other possible reasons that can explain why a formally appointed leader may not necessarily have been better than the others. In the present study, the nature of the "desert survival task" is intellective (figuring something out) rather than, say, judgmental or moral (deciding what's right and wrong) task. As an intellective task, the presence of a leader was somewhat redundant in helping the group achieve the final goal. Research has also shown that on intellective tasks, leaders perform less well in comparison to moral/judgmental tasks (Fiedler & Gibson, 2001).

Another plausible explanation is that leadership in groups emerges slowly over time, for a leader may not demonstrate good performance immediately and, thus, members may grow to respect his or her judgment, acumen, and group-management skills over time. A one-time, 90-minute laboratory experiment leaves no scope for that sort of leadership to emerge. Thus, the temporary, time-bound nature of groups that are going to be disbanded soon may have undermined the significance of the formally appointed leader.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study have some important implications for understanding how leadership selection can have an impact on group processes. The way in which leader is selected does make a critical difference to the group performance. Thus, all institutions, like colleges, schools, corporate, etc., should make sure that a procedure is followed to ensure that leaders are made in legitimate ways that are more transparent, democratic, and credible.

LIMITATIONS

Reflecting back on the study and its design, a few limitations emerged. Firstly, the present study was able to test only for differences between groups with and without an officially designated leader; thus, there is no independent measurement of how effective leadership is. Some of the assigned leaders in the current study may actually be quite passive, while strong leadership could have emerged spontaneously in some of the groups without a designated leader; similar to what was found by Zaleznik (2004). It is also essential here to comment that the narrow concept of leadership used in this study owing to the experimental design used in the context of dessert survival task does not correspond to the common meaning of "leadership" in reality. Secondly, since the tool used in the present study is a self-report measure, the responses may have been influenced by social desirability. The third limitation is that the scores on team maintenance are not normally distributed and hence the results need to be interpreted with caution. The fourth limitation relates to the generalizability of the findings. The present homogeneous sample, being only women from an all-women's college, is certainly not representative of the individual differences of the outside world, where people of diverse backgrounds are deliberately appointed, in an era where successful diversity management has been shown to enhance performance (e.g., Rock & Grant, 2016).

As such, the potential for disagreement over the groups' strategy was lower in the present study, which might have allowed more scope for effective leadership.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future studies can be carried out on a mixed population of varying ages and gender. Future studies could also study how different styles of leadership impact group performance. The individual group as well as group dynamic variables can be studied as predictors of leadership emergence. Instead of an intellective task with correct responses, perhaps a judgmental task can also be undertaken. Also, a different way of selecting a leader can be used rather than simply using a self-report inventory. Perhaps, the outcomes of a similar task can subsequently be used to decide the leader. To strengthen the design, qualitative analysis done through interviews can perhaps supplement the obtained findings.

While the results show that groups with randomly selected leaders outperformed those with formally appointed leaders or no leader, the results do not suggest that leadership per se is a less useful construct. Finally, and more broadly, this research continues to add to the body of work that illustrates that under certain situations, leaders may not be very effective. As in the present study, perhaps in the case of homogeneous groups where the perceived illegitimacy of leaders may prop up as a concern, or when the nature of task is intellective, or when the nature of the group is time bound, the group size is small, or when the leader has no prior experience with the task, the leader may not turn out to be effective. Future research could focus on uncovering and refining such situational variables that will optimize leader performance.

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