



Invited Commentary

Prestige-based leadership offers women leaders an advantage and reduces gender inequality in leadership

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Wiesel, Barlev, Martos, & Kenrick, n.d. research finds evidence of followers' strong preference for prestigious leaders who influence others via respect and admiration derived from their success and skill, regardless of whether they are men or women, and a strong distaste for dominant leaders who resort to coercion and fear to get their way. This finding is interpreted to suggest that women can receive as much support as men for leadership roles when they exercise prestige-based leadership. Beyond this focus on exploring what kind of leader is preferred (and how gender factors into preferences), we could take this one step further and ask: Who tends to manifest a prestige-based leadership style that is deemed effective and desirable by followers? Is this form of effective leadership more congruent with how men or women tend to lead? Evidence suggests that when we consider who manifests more effective leadership, women may possess an advantage—they on average tend to lead in ways that better meet the needs of followers than men. Some evidence in support of this hypothesis follows below.

Women are (on average) more inclined to build egalitarian, democratic, and empathic relationships with others, which translates into the ability to maintain respect and admiration from followers (emotions that continue to drive their prestige deference) and to suppress coercive dominance and the induction of fear and shame in others (which could compromise prestige). To name a few lines of evidence, consider how in meta-analyses that review over hundreds of studies of gender differences, women (more than men) manifest more democratic, egalitarian, consensus-building behavior when interacting with others, and less autocratic or directive behavior (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). In recent behavioral experiments examining competitiveness—a trait often

considered conducive to gaining status and leadership—women increase their competitive inclination when winning means they can restore egalitarianism by sharing the rewards with losers to equalize the outcomes for winners and losers (Cassar & Rigdon, 2021). These gendered patterns are also found across countries and emerge early in development. For example, large cross-cultural surveys of values and attitudes across countries reveal that women are generally less power and achievement oriented than men, and more benevolent and universalistic, with these gender differences being larger in more gender-equal countries. In developmental studies, girls (more than boys) tend to forge small same-sex friendship groups characterized by strong egalitarianism and intimacy, and show less interest in overtly competitive games and instead prefer collaborative games that emphasize social cohesion rather than winning and losing. One implication of these gendered patterns is that, in most organizations, particularly those in which collective success depends on building egalitarian and cooperative (rather than hierarchical and competitive) teams and relationships, women leaders on average better match these needs and should have a leadership advantage.

Of course, these documented gender differences in behavior are not only the product of genes and evolution, but also reflect the interplay with local cultural norms and constraints. The historical gender division of labor, in which women invest more effort in intra-household labor including childcare and men pursue labor outside of the household, contributes to norms and expectations about men and women's roles in and outside of the home. This includes the normative expectation that women take on less agentic roles in groups, or otherwise risk social

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backlash or disapproval. This backlash against dominant women is well documented, including in studies that show that although both dominant men and women emerge as leaders of groups, only dominant women (but not men) are penalized socially, including being less liked and preferred as social partners (Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, & Henrich, 2013). These findings also highlight that women possess both advantages and disadvantages in leadership roles (Eagly & Carli, 2003). When it comes to asserting their authority or other more coercive forms of influence, there is a female disadvantage. This contributes to (though does not necessarily justify) women's tendency to wield less dominance and more prestige. The different leadership styles that men and women use therefore reflect both adapted traits and internalized (consciously or unconsciously) norms of behavior reflective of gender norms and trade-offs.

An important caveat—any gender differences in leadership styles and related behavior are relatively small, according to dozens of weak effect sizes documented across studies ($d \sim 0.20$). In fact, gender typically explains roughly the same (little) variance as education, but less variance than age and much less so than cultural context. So, while female advantage in pursuing prestige-based leadership is likely small, it can still nevertheless contribute to the rise of more women leaders, particularly in organizations that reward women's values and preferred forms of teamwork and disincentivize risk-taking, overconfidence, and direct competition typical of more traditional workplaces characterized by a masculinity contest culture. Another reason why women and other prestigious leaders should become more valued is the ongoing cultural shift toward greater individualism, autonomy, and freedom of choice. Given these changes in values, it is expected that anti-dominance impulses and egalitarian-favoring sentiments among subordinates will also grow. Unlike prestigious leaders whose influence rests on willful persuasion, dominant leaders compel others into submission by force. This coercive tactic inherently undermines individual choice and autonomy, and will becoming less tolerated (Cheng, 2020), rendering dominance an increasingly less and prestige more focal means to climb

rank across interpersonal, professional, and political spheres. The future therefore belongs to prestigious leaders—those who, regardless of whether they are men or women, can cultivate a following based on respect and admiration, and not on fear and intimidation.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Joey T. Cheng: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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