

Literature review of Behavioural Themes on Women in Management

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ABSTRACT

This review paper, based on survey of literature in the field of women in management, presents a panoramic view of the behavioural themes that recur in research during the past about four decades. The field of women in management spans a variety of disciplines ranging from feminism to gender studies and the role of women in society, family and organisations. Coupled with the fact that women increasingly play an important role in all these areas, research in the field has traversed a number of themes and issues.

This review article identifies five broad behavioural themes in the literature. These are: attitudes, communication styles, leadership styles, motivational patterns and personality traits. While many studies reported may be confined to one theme yet there are a number of studies that transcend one specific theme and incorporate elements of the other prevalent themes. This results in a rich tapestry of research studies. In view of the abundance of studies reported in literature, this paper picks up some representative research studies to demonstrate the nature, content, and direction of research in this challenging field.

Introduction

Traditionally, men have worked outside their home and have been considered as the breadwinners for the family. In the society, they have held more significant and powerful jobs such as those of doctors, lawyers or politicians. Women, on the other hand, have managed the home front with their role confined to the domestic sphere. They are expected to stay at home, raise children and cook meals for their family. Some of the women who work outside home are usually engaged as nurses, secretaries, school teachers, receptionists, telephone operators or in some

such stereotyped female profession. Changes in these stereotypes have taken place albeit at a slow pace. The acceptance of these changes in the gender stereotypes have often been even more difficult to accept.

Research in the broad field of women in management has attracted considerable attention in recent years picking up particularly after the launch of the feminist movement. Interest in women's studies around the world has also led to increasing focus on working women in organisations.

Contemporary research literature on subject of gender in management has been nurtured by

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intellectual contributions coming from several different streams of knowledge. Among these are debates in and around feminism, the burgeoning field of women's studies and critical studies on gender, and on recognizing women and their experiences, situations and viewpoint in organizations and management.

Recurring Themes in Literature on Women in Management

Research on 'women managers' or 'women in management' leads one to several overarching themes. These themes recur throughout the literature on the subject. This section of the article briefly focuses on some of the major themes that appear in the literature pertaining to women managers.

In one of the earlier reviews of literature on women in management, attention is paid to the entry of women into business and the factors that influence the socialisation of women once they have entered the organisation. That review suggested that women's self-perceptions and pressures by vocational counsellors serve to inhibit decisions for careers in management. Discrimination in hiring women based on stereotypes is questioned offering alternative explanations. The survey also discussed role conflict as a barrier to women managers entering organisations. (Terberg, 1977) While Terberg's review is focused on a narrow range of issues – as looked at from the present perspective – there are so many other pertinent issues that have emerged from time to time in the field of women in management.

A scheme of identifying the overarching themes has been evolved in the present research project from which material for this paper is drawn. This scheme identifies three broad directions of

research in the area of women in management. These are: behavioural themes, organisational themes, and spatial themes. *Organisational themes* include the significant issues of work-life balance, gender inequality, and glass ceiling syndrome. *Spatial themes* include women in different geographies and in different industries and types of organisations. *Behavioural themes* identified are attitude, communication, leadership, motivation and personality and are the subject matter of this paper.

This review is based on a comprehensive search of databases available in library databases including ProQuest's ABI/Inform Global, EBSCO's Academic Search Complete, Emerald Fulltext Plus, ScienceDirect, and Social Science Research Network; and search engines such as Google Scholar and Directory of Open Access Journals. Since the repertoire of sources is large, it has been possible to include only a small set of representative studies on each of the themes identified in the research review. These could be indicative of the trend in research directions under a particular theme.

Attitudes Towards Women Managers at Work

Quite a few studies provide insights into the factors associated with attitudes towards women managers. Studies have attempted to look into the attitude of women towards women managers as well as that of men managers towards women managers. There are also comparative studies of attitude of men and women towards women managers. Such studies are also done in the specific context of an industry or a geographical region.

An early study found that managers do not perceive women as possessing the decision-

making skills and competitive aggressiveness required to be successful executives. Significantly, women were thought of as too emotional for managerial positions. (Bowman, et al, 1965)

In the 1970s, the Women as Managers Scale (WAMS) attempted to determine the extent to which men perceived women as being different from their social group. Hackbarth et al., 2010 summarised the results of 16 studies conducted during the period 1974 – 2002 using the WAMS and reported that women scored better than men on summary scores of WAMS and these relationship held true in studies done in the Chinese, Chilean, Indian and Nigerian contexts.

A later study investigated gender-related differences in perceptions of work rewards, work values, overall work satisfaction, and the determinants of work satisfaction. The findings identified a number of similarities as well as differences between male and female workers regarding their perceptions and attitudes about work. (Mottaz, 1986)

A study in Nigeria found that Nigerian females have more positive attitudes toward women managers than their male counterparts. (Adayemi-Bello & Tomkiewicz, 1997) Mostafa, 2005 reports a study in the context of United Arab Emirates (UAE). The results show that the younger generation of UAE students have significantly different attitudes towards women managers from those of the older generations. The study predicts that as modernity takes roots in the Arab societies patriarchal attitudes towards women managers may diminish.

In the Indian context, stereotypes about the role of women have influenced how women are perceived in society as well as leaders of

organizations. Patriarchal attitudes and the subordination of women are still prevalent in India. (Bandyopadhyay, 2000). Although widespread inequality remains in India, in recent decades, rapid urbanization and industrialization, along with gender-focused policies, have resulted in a rapid process of social change. Progressively, over the years, more women are entering traditionally male dominated fields, such as police and military services and information technology. (Nath, 2000). The perception is that educated working women in India enjoy a much higher status than women who engage in domestic work and are not economically independent (Ghosh & Roy, 1997). Women managers in the public-sector of India face various prejudices and stereotypes, are not given full credit for their work, are considered inferior by their male colleagues, must work harder than men to prove their capability, and faced task discrimination (Naqvi 2011).

Communication Styles and Patterns of Women Managers

A galaxy of scholarship in the area of gender-related communication has done a commendable task of delineating the differences in the ways how men and women communicate. For instance, it is widely accepted that women communicate to realise intangible outcomes such as establishing relationship while men do so to create tangible ones like solving problems or creating dominance. It is natural to expect miscommunication and lack of understanding when male managers communicate with women managers and vice versa.

Merchant, 2012 in her thesis points out that there are two main bodies of research on gender differences in communication styles: academic research and popular literature. While academic

research focuses on the communication characteristics and traits that men and women exhibit, popular literature makes the connection between psychological gender traits and communication styles and gender differences in terms of basic goals of conversations. Academic research, for instance, has dealt with major differences in conversation characteristics and traits across gender, while popular research has focused on major stylistic differences in conversation styles between men and women.

A study using written managerial communications to test the quality and stylistic differences purported to exist between genders concluded that the gender of the sender and the receiver did not have a significant effect on the style or quality of written communications. Differences in communication styles between men and women managers may be limited to verbal and nonverbal communication. (Smeltzer & Werbel, 1986)

The fact that women managers might possess characteristics like empathy and ability to listen may make them more suitable for certain tasks required in organisations. Thus, there have been suggestions that women may be especially good at public relations or human resources. They might even be better marketers than male managers. (Freeman & Varey, 1997)

Kaul, 2012 notes that there has been little or no study on the communication across genders in the Indian setting. Her empirical study reveals that linguistic variances in the organizational setup begin to fade at the middle management level and communication styles in organisations are not gender specific. Additionally, language in organisations is more masculine in nature and hinges on aggression and assertion rather than nurturance or submission. (Kaul, 2012)

Vasavada, 2012 in her study on women in non-profit organisations in India noted that there was general agreement among respondents in her study that they created space for informal communication. The women believed that a great deal of professional and organizational communication happens informally, and this informal communication can be vital in solving complicated problems. However, women being polite and non-assertive in communication may sometimes create the perception of weak leadership. (Vasavada, 2012)

Overall, there is limited research that examines the perceptions of the communication competence of women managers.

Leadership Styles of Women Managers

Snaebjornsson & Edvardsson (2013) in their literature survey on gender, nationality and leadership styles point that researchers have focused on three topics in relation to gender and leadership. First, whether there is a difference in the leadership styles of men and women. Secondly, the focus has been on gender and leadership effectiveness (questions such as: Are men better leaders than women or vice versa?). Thirdly, the focus has been on the glass ceiling, or the obstacles that prevent women from reaching top management positions in organizations (Northouse, 2007).

Literature offers an indeterminate picture with regard to the question of differences in leadership styles of men and women managers. Many researchers tend to agree that gender differences in leadership styles do exist and that men often use a more task-oriented approach, while women generally rely on leadership style heavily based on the quality of interpersonal leader-follower

relationships. (e.g. Eagly & Karau, 2002) While there is no solid evidence in literature to demonstrate whether men or women are better organisational leaders but men tend to score above women and this is explained by the lack of opportunities for women in organisations to demonstrate their leadership abilities.

Differences in leadership styles are observed from a meta-analysis of 45 studies of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles. The analysis found that female leaders were more transformational than male leaders and also engaged in more of the contingent reward behaviours that are a component of transactional leadership. Male leaders were generally more likely to manifest the other aspects of transactional leadership (active and passive management by exception) and laissez-faire leadership. (Eagly, et al, 2003) Another research supports the idea that women tend to use the transformational style of leadership while men favour the transactional leadership approach. (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Leadership styles of women managers across cultures has also been a subject of interest in some research studies. A representative study compared and contrasted the role perceptions, decision-making patterns, leadership styles, and performance of American, Japanese and Taiwanese female managers. The results show differences across cultures. The American women managers experienced the least problems concerning their gender and social roles as they see themselves as independent and risk-taking women capable of making decisions efficiently and effectively. Japanese female managers experienced more problems due to their gender and social roles as they were reluctant to make decisions or risks without carefully consulting with their colleagues. Taiwanese female

managers perceived an average level of role problems and personal traits, and tended to be risk-takers with rapid emphasis on adopting both transformational and transactional leadership styles. (Wu, et al., 2000)

In the Indian context, according to Kulkarni (2002) the masculine hegemony in society, nurtured by parents and reinforced by the social structure, inhibits women's desire to attain leadership positions. Masculine hegemony is also prevalent in organizations because socially constructed gender stereotypes influence how women are treated at the workplace (Khandelwal, 2002). Vasavada, 2012 based on her study of women leaders in Indian non-profit organisations suggests a non-conforming approach to leadership as the strength of women's leadership lies not in their ability to conform to prevailing masculine stereotypes of leadership, but in their unique abilities. Noting the low standing of India on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index, *Business Today* raises hopes in the fact that more women leaders are climbing the corporate ladder than ever before. (Punj, 2013) Gupta and Saran, 2013 observe the beneficial impact of economic liberalisation in India on the second generation of women leaders – the trendsetters - born after 1970. Their empirical study points out that women trendsetters experienced accelerated leadership formation in the context of the freedom offered by various dimensions of economic liberalization, and were not slowed down or held hostage by the cultural traditions and entrenched systems.

Motivational Patterns of Women Managers

The question whether women managers are more or less motivated than male managers has attracted attention among researchers in gender

in management. A study examined the influence of gender on satisfaction with job related factors, overall job satisfaction, attitudes toward various motivators, and overall job motivation among managers. The findings showed that there are many significant differences between male and female managers' perceptions and attitudes. (Forgionne & Peeters, 1982). Another study using thematic apperception tests on men and women managers found differences in certain aspects related to motivation at work. Changing social values as well as the obstacles women face in first getting managerial jobs and then having to overcome sex-role conflicts-all possibly channel a specific type of woman into these managerial positions. (Chusmir, 1985)

While most of the studies come up with the conclusion that men and women managers differ in terms of motivation at work, there are only a few studies that succeed to find such differences.

A study of Chinese business students in Hong Kong found no significant differences between male and female managers in terms of motivation to manage. This is despite the fact that, generally, Chinese women are often perceived as passive, submissive, lacking aggressiveness and drive to be successful managers. (Ebrahimi, 1999) Another study in the American context, aimed at determining whether managerial motivation is related to management success indices and whether female managers have less managerial motivation than males. Managerial motivation did prove to be significantly related to the success of female managers, but no consistent differences in the managerial motivation of male and female managers were found. (Miner, 1974)

A survey on gender-related motivation studies reported that studies have produced conflicting results with some finding that men have more

motivation-to-manage than women and other studies finding the opposite. Such differences appear to be small and closely related to subordinate status and role stereotyping. (Kalkowski & Fritz, 2004)

Vasavada, 2012 in her study on women in non-profit organisations characterized their most important leadership function in terms of building organizational capacity by nurturing employees of the organization. Desai, et al., 2011 report a survey of women comparing their level of job satisfaction and life satisfaction and conclude that self-employed women are better placed as compared to working women and homemakers in terms of career satisfaction.

Personality traits of Women Managers

Masculine and feminine characteristics are often the basis for differentiation among men and women managerial roles. Thus, women are believed to possess feminine personality traits as compared to men who have masculine personality traits. Many research studies, broadly in the area of social sciences such as sociology and psychology, have attempted to delineate personality traits associated with men and women in general as well as male and female managers.

It can be observed from the studies referred earlier in this review of literature. For instance, there are references to gender stereotypes, sex role theory, and the concept of culture trap (Claes, 1999) and the explanation by Eagly and Steffen (1984) of how through a process of socialisation women come to assume certain personality traits. Routine performance of tasks by men and women thus helps to create the perception that males are agentic (assertive, masterly) and women are communal (selfless, compassionate). Being

assertive is then assumed to be a masculine personality trait or being compassionate a feminine personality trait.

With the limited aim to delineate the personality traits associated with women managers, it is instructive to reiterate the important conclusions derived from Schein's 1973 study that confirmed successful middle managers were perceived to possess characteristics, attitudes, and temperaments more commonly ascribed to men than to women. There was a significant resemblance between the mean ratings of men and managers, whereas there was no resemblance between women and managers.

Rather than assume a binary segregation of masculine and feminine personality traits recent researches highlight women manager's own preference for management style combining both type of traits. The issue of management style and women manager's evolution has been underscored in the past, but women's perceptions of successful management styles are important too, especially where women's own preferred management style differs from their view of the top team. A study provides further evidence of a shift in perceptions of leadership styles towards androgynous management, high on both instrumental and expressive traits. The study points out women are still thinking in "think manager, think male" mode, which may constrain them in their effort to progress in their careers. (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2002)

With regard to personality traits of women managers, feminization of management is a recurring theme in both popular and scientific management literature. However, several studies have shown that successful managers are generally attributed predominantly masculine characteristics. A study of management students

in Netherlands, using a checklist with masculine, feminine, and gender-neutral traits, concluded that masculine characteristics were rated as more applicable to successful managers than feminine characteristics, but gender-neutral characteristics were rated even more applicable. The finding indicates that the successful manager is still perceived as male, even though on a checklist this manager seems to possess predominantly gender-neutral traits reconfirming the preference of an androgynous style than a gender specific one. (Willemsen, 2002)

A study of women leaders in India, including leaders of public sector enterprises, found compassion and empathy in relationships, the ability to network more effectively among colleagues, and better management of crisis situations as strengths of women leaders (Budhwar, et al., 2005). However, Mehra (2002) reported that the majority of organizations do not consider these traits important, and are reluctant to accept an approach that would accommodate feminine values. Instead, men managers believe that emotions influence the decision-making processes of women managers. Women managers are considered weak because they are perceived as less assertive, less competitive, and less aggressive in the demanding work environment (Gupta et al., 1998). However, women on their part feel that their leadership style is based on an interpersonal style of management where they personally talk to employees when there are issues and find out what is happening in the employee's life so that they can create a more family-friendly work environment to develop an organizational structure that supports the woman's way of working. (Vasavada, 2012)

Concluding Comments

Contemporary research into different issues in the area of women in management traverses a

wide range of topics and concerns. This article has sought to identify five behavioural themes discernible in the literature. Among these we have identified five aspects of significance namely the attitudes towards women managers at work; the communication styles and patterns of women managers; the leadership styles of women managers, the motivational patterns of women managers, and the personality traits of women managers.

The discussion in this article has been demarcated into different behavioural aspects related to women managers. However, as is evident, in many sources these different aspects are inter-related and intertwined in many different ways. For instance, leadership styles are not independent of communication or motivational styles; personality traits of women managers do impact their attitudes to work and communication styles may vary in organisations of different types. Most of the research studies that were reviewed are not focused on one aspect but cut across boundaries to include other aspects too. However, for ease of presentation the review has been done keeping in view the major aspect covered in a source of reference.

Overall, research on behavioural themes related to women in management offers a wide canvas of opportunities for researchers to delve wide and deep into this interesting and challenging field of inquiry.

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