Gender differences in transformational leadership among the field leaders of New South Wales Police students

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Abstract

Gender differences in transformational leadership were investigated using NSW police student ratings of their field leaders (EDOs) at both the beginning and end of training. According to Bass (1998), female leaders should be more transformational (and effective) than males. Contrary to this prediction, Study 1 revealed that junior police students (n=162) rated their *male* EDOs as being significantly more *transformational* and *effective* than their female EDOs. Furthermore, female leaders were seen as significantly more *laissez-faire* than males, a style which is not appropriate in field training. In a follow up study (Study 2), leader ratings from a sample (n=194) of students who had reached the *end* of their formal training revealed *no* differences between male and female leaders on any of the variables discussed above. That is, male and female leaders were perceived as equally transformational and effective, and there were no longer any gender differences in terms of the use of laissez-faire leadership. The results of these two studies may be interpreted as either: (a) real differences in the way that women police lead recruits at different stages in their training, or (b) changes in student perceptions of female leaders as these students progress through their training.

PART 1: BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

The research reported herein represents a small part of a Doctoral research project (Panopoulos, 1998) conducted at the University of Sydney and with the cooperation of staff and students at the New South Wales Police Academy. The broad aim of the research was to investigate factors affecting successful police recruit adjustment to their new occupation. The form of leadership provided to new recruits in the field was considered to be one factor of major importance in their adjustment to policing. The present paper focuses on gender differences in leadership styles among the Education and Development Officers (EDOs) who were assigned to supervise NSW police recruits at different stages in their field training.

PART 2:   TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The role of transformational leadership in training

Crucial among the factors which shape adjustment to the work environment is the new employee's relationship with his/her immediate superior and with others who are formally designated or have placed themselves in a position to act as mentor. The supervisory/mentoring relationship is no less important in the context of police recruit field training. Indeed, the supervisor or mentor is in a unique position when contributing to the field training of recruits during their earliest exposure to the realities of policing. The leader in this context may have a profound impact on the recruit's early adjustment and impressions about the profession.

This paper will consider the role of *transformational leadership* during this early defining period in the working lives of new police. Research has consistently suggested that transformational leadership is a superior form of leadership (see Bass, 1998 for a review), and the effectiveness of transformational leadership is a major premise underlying the present paper.

Transformational leadership can be defined as inspirational leadership aimed at motivating followers to achieve organisational goals whilst emphasising the importance of follower well-being and need fulfilment. The concept of transformational leadership holds a great deal of intuitive appeal, particularly when one is searching for a comprehensive leadership paradigm to apply in the context of leaders acting as mentors to new employees.

Components of transformational leadership

The term "transformational leadership" was first coined by Burns (1978). In more recent work, Bass (1985, 1998; Yammarino & Bass, 1990a, 1990b) undertook the further development of Burns' original theory, with an impressive body of research accumulating in the area over the past fourteen years. At present, transformational leadership is defined in terms of *four* inter-related sub-types or factors: (a) idealised influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individual consideration. Taken together, these sub-types are believed to represent the most effective attitudes and behaviours present in a leader's repertoire.

(a)   Individual consideration

In a humanistic sense, the most outstanding component of transformational leadership is the leader's *individualised consideration* of his/her followers. According to Bass and his colleagues (Yammarino, Spangler & Bass, 1993), a leader's use of individual consideration is a crucial element in followers' achievement of their full potential via a close consideration of their developmental needs. In providing

individual consideration, the leader is not only cognisant of and sensitive to the current needs of followers, but is also aiming to elevate those needs to a higher level (in combination with the use of the other sub-types of transformational leadership). This is done, for example, by coaching and mentoring, as well as by setting examples and tasks which are developmentally consistent with the needs of each individual.

(b)   Idealised influence

The transformational characteristic of *idealised influence* is based on earlier conceptualisations of charisma (e.g. House, 1977). In essence, the charismatic leader is able to inspire respect and higher order motivation in followers. The leader is able to communicate a sense of power and confidence in higher values and beliefs. The charismatic leader possesses a clear set of idealised qualities with which followers might wish to be associated.

(c)   Inspirational motivation

The leader who provides *inspirational motivation* to followers is likely to speak optimistically about the future, articulating a compelling vision of what must be achieved. The inspirational leader motivates followers by his/her own enthusiasm and confidence that these compelling end states lie within the realm of achievable possibilities (Bass & Avolio, 1995; Yammarino et al., 1993). The leader is therefore not merely a distant charismatic source of referent power but is also able to directly and effectively translate his/her own enthusiasm to followers.

(d)   Intellectual stimulation

The leader must also provide intellectual stimulation to followers. In providing intellectual stimulation, the leader is said to orient followers to "an awareness of problems, to their own thoughts and imagination, and to the recognition of their beliefs and values" (Yammarino & Bass, 1990a, p.153). Furthermore, by providing an intellectually stimulating environment, transformational leaders are able to foster the development of creative solutions to problems which stand in the way of organisational goal attainment.

The measurement of transformational leadership

Many leadership/management evaluation systems and instruments are labelled "360-degree-view" because they measure leader characteristics via the ratings of those who surround the leader being rated. Those rating the leader may include not only followers but also the leader's peers and superiors. Traditionally, the *Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire* (MLQ) has been used to measure the various components of transformational leadership, and may be used as a self rating instrument or may be filled

out by peers, superiors, or followers. The latest version of this instrument is the *MLQ-5x*, which also measures *laissez-faire* leadership and a number of leader *performance* outcomes, discussed below.

The role of laissez-faire leadership in training

Laissez-faire leadership is often defined as *non* leadership or the absence of the leader. This definition of laissez-faire leadership is strongly reflected in the relevant survey items contained in the MLQ-5x. For example, one of the items measuring laissez-faire leadership is as follows*: "My leader delays responding to urgent questions"*. In essence, the laissez-faire leader is one who is absent when needed.

In the context of field training, laissez-faire leadership is the *least* effective form of leadership. During this period of rapid skill acquisition and work orientation, police students require stronger forms of leadership . Recent research conducted in NSW has indeed shown that when asked about the type of leadership which they *prefer*, police recruits give very *low* ratings for laissez-faire leadership, particularly as it compares with transformational leadership. Furthermore, laissez-faire leadership shows a significant *negative* correlation with effectiveness outcomes. That is, police recruits have a strong *negative* view of the role of laissez-faire or absent leaders in their training (Panopoulos, 1998).

Follower generated ratings of leader performance

The MLQ-5x also measures leader *performance*. Those completing the questionnaire are asked to rate their leaders on a number of items pertaining to performance. Firstly, respondents are asked to indicate the extent to which they are satisfied with the leadership which they have received. Secondly, participants are asked to rate the effectiveness of their leader. Finally, a number of items are designed to measure the amount of extra effort expended, by respondents, as a result of their leader's style.

Transformational leadership and gender

Empirical evidence surrounding the role of *gender* in transformational leadership is relatively scarce. It has however been suggested that female leaders may be more transformational (and hence more effective) than males. Furthermore, the available survey evidence (e.g. Bass, 1985; Bass, Avolio & Atwater, 1996) appears to support this line of reasoning.

PART 3:   THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Research hypotheses

Given the relative lack of empirical research on transformational leadership and gender, the present author set out to investigate the issue of gender and leader effectiveness. Based on earlier theoretical arguments, it was anticipated that female leaders would attract universally higher ratings on factors thought to be associated with greater effectiveness as a leader. That is, it was expected that female police leaders would be viewed as being more transformational and less laissez-faire than males. Furthermore, it was expected that female leaders would attract higher effectiveness ratings and that followers would be more satisfied with their female leaders. Ultimately, followers who had female leaders would also be expected to expend a higher degree of effort at work/in training.

Research methodology

The most recent version of the *Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire*, the *MLQ-5x* (Bass & Avolio, 1995), was used in the present research. This instrument contains 45 items measuring three facets of leadership and three outcome variables. The leadership types are *transformational*, *transactional*, and *laissez-faire (*Please note that the present paper will not include data on the use of transactional leadership, focusing instead on transformational and laissez-faire leadership). The MLQ-5x outcome or performance measures are: (a) *satisfaction with the leader*, (b) ratings of *leader effectiveness*, and (c) ratings of *extra effort* expended by followers as a result of their leader's style.

All of the MLQ-5x responses are made on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (frequently, if not always). For example, participants are asked to rate the frequency with which their leader *specifies the importance of having a strong sense of purpose*. The possible responses are: "not at all", "once in a while", "sometimes", "fairly often", or "frequently, if not always". Mean scores for each factor (e.g. transformational leadership) are an average of all of the items corresponding to that particular factor.

The sampling procedure

Participants in the research were two groups of NSW Police recruits who provided MLQ-5x ratings of their field supervisors (EDOs). In the first instance (Study 1) 162 junior students provided ratings of their EDOs following the first phase of field training. At a later time, 194 *senior* students who had been in training for 18 months were also asked to rate their EDOs using the MLQ-5x.

It should be noted that the provision of ratings by others (peers, superiors and followers) is considered to be a more valid method of assessment than *self* ratings. As will be discussed below, the primary

purpose of this research was to gauge student *perceptions* of their leaders. The use of leader ratings made by persons other than the leader was therefore considered to be appropriate in the circumstances.

Study 1 results: Junior student ratings of their field leaders

(a)   Overview

When filling out the MLQ-5x, the junior recruits were asked to respond to each of the items with specific reference to their EDOs. They were also asked to indicate whether or not their EDO was male or female. The majority of the respondents (79%) reported that their EDOs were male, and 21% stated that they had been supervised by female EDOs during their field training.

(b)   Transformational leadership

One way ANOVAs were carried out to determine the extent to which the gender of the leader influenced his/her use of transformational leadership. Significant differences were found between male and female leaders in their use of transformational leadership. That is, mean transformational leadership among male EDOs (M=2.52, SD=0.80) was significantly *greater* than mean transformational leadership (M=2.12, SD=0.88) among females (F=5.22, $p < 0.05$).

(c)   Laissez-faire leadership

Significant gender differences were also found in terms of the use of *laissez-faire* leadership. Again, female EDOs were rated less positively than males. That is, females were *more* likely to use laissez-faire forms of leadership (M=1.20, SD=0.89) compared to males (M=0.77, SD=0.80) (F=6.07, $p < 0.05$).

(d)   Leader performance

One way ANOVAs revealed significantly higher scores for male EDOs (compared to female EDOs) on *all three* of the MLQ-5x outcome measures. In other words, male leaders attracted higher effectiveness ratings (M=2.70, SD=0.90) than female (M=2.29, SD=0.93) leaders (F=4.65, $p < 0.05$). The recruits were also significantly more satisfied with their male EDOs (M=2.75, SD=0.98) than they were with their female leaders (M=2.16, SD=1.04) (F=7.65, $p < 0.01$). Finally, recruits expended more effort when they had male leaders (M=2.49, SD=1.01) as compared to those who were led by females (M=1.99, SD=0.91) (F=5.58, $p<0.05$).

(e) Study 1 summary

In summary, female leaders were viewed less positively than males in terms of all of the variables measured. The results of Study 1 are therefore contrary to the prediction that female leaders should be more transformational and effective than males. Female EDOs attracted universally poorer ratings than male leaders in terms of the three performance measures. That is, females were perceived as less effective leaders, recruits being more satisfied and eager to perform when they were led by males, whom they also considered to be more transformational than females.

The laissez-faire (or "absent") leader is one of the least appropriate types of leaders, particularly in the context of early training and supervision. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that female EDOs were seen by recruits as significantly *more* laissez-faire than male EDOs.

Study 2: Senior student ratings of their field leaders

(a) Overview

In Study 2, the participants were a more occupationally mature group of police recruits who had been in training for 18 months. Like their more junior counterparts, the senior group were asked to respond to each of the MLQ-5x items with specific reference to their EDOs. Overall, female EDOs were more highly represented (45%) in Study 2 compared to Study 1.

(b) No gender differences in Study 2

In short, the senior group of students did not report any significant differences between their male and female leaders. That is, male and female leaders were not differentially transformational or laissez-faire in their style of leadership, nor did they differ in the extent to which they engendered extra effort in recruits. Similarly, recruits did not rate male and female leaders differently in terms of effectiveness or how satisfied recruits were with the level of leadership provided to them.

Integrative discussion of Studies 1 and 2

The breakdown of the leadership results by EDO *gender* yielded some interesting findings. To reiterate, Study 1 suggested that, compared to male EDOs, female EDOs may have been engaging in less satisfactory forms of leadership. That is, females were more laissez-faire, less transformational and attracted lower scores on the MLQ-5x performance indicators compared to males.

However, the Study 1 findings were *not* replicated by the senior group ratings obtained in Study 2. In the latter case, no differences were found between male and female leaders in terms of their use of

transformational or laissez-faire leadership, nor did they receive differential ratings on the three MLQ-5x performance measures.

The results of Studies 1 and 2 therefore reveal marked differences in the way in which recruits view their leaders *across* the training period. It would appear that, at least during the entry level field training period, male leaders are perceived as more dynamic, present, and effective than female leaders (Study 1). The question is therefore raised as to why these gender issues do not appear at later phases in recruit training. That is, why do more senior students fail to perceive any leadership differences between their male and female leaders ?

One possible explanation for the Study 1 findings is that new recruits begin training with an already biased perception of leadership and gender. For example, new recruits may be of the opinion that men make better leaders than women, particularly in policing. This view may later be replaced by a perception of men and women being equally as effective in terms of police leadership. That is, the data reported here may reflect changes in the way that students perceive their female leaders as these students progress through their training.

A second explanation is that real differences may exist in the way in which women police lead recruits at different stages in their training. This explanation runs contrary to the intuitive and theoretical expectation that women placed in leadership positions should, by their very nature, possess greater transformational tendencies and skills than males.

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