

Research Letter

Think Leader, Think Gender? The Gendered Attributes Associated with Ideal Leadership Roles

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Abstract: The top-ranking official of a public organization might be called a leader, manager, public manager, or a more specific term tied to the organization. While these terms have similar meanings and are sometimes used interchangeably, each one might convey a very different set of normative role expectations and requisite attributes. This study examines how the word used to describe the top-ranking official of an organization is associated with gendered attributes. Results from an online experiment suggest that thinking of an “ideal leader” prompts individuals to think less of feminine traits compared to an “ideal manager,” while an “ideal public manager” does not have such clear gender connotations. Specific titles can also be associated with gendered attributes as the results suggest that an “ideal high school principal” should possess many feminine traits. In addition, individuals tend to think of men more often than women regardless of the leadership role they are envisioning. These findings suggest that the choice of word used to describe top officials matters for both research and practice as it can make women—or men—appear to be more or less fit for certain roles.

Keywords: Research methods, surveys, experiments, public management, women in leadership

Supplements: Available on Journal Website

Public management researchers use a range of terms when describing persons of authority in public organizations. Terms such as leader, supervisor, chief executive, manager, and public manager are common in research (e.g., Orr & Bennett 2017; Prysmakova and Evans 2022; Pedersen and Stritch 2018). For particular organizations, more specific terms might be used (e.g., school principal, police captain, district superintendent, heads of department) (e.g., Callier 2020; van der Hoek, Beerkens, and Groenveld 2021; Funk et al. 2023). While these terms reference similar concepts and the differences might seem superficial, these terms could connote different roles and may evoke very different traits and images in the minds of the public and employees.

For instance, what or who comes to mind when envisioning a good *leader* might be different than when envisioning a good *public manager*, or a specific role like school principal, police captain, mayor, or CEO. Moreover, the traits and ideas associated with each of these roles can have gendered connotations (Schein 1973). Since leadership positions have been dominated by men throughout history, men have become the default leader (de Beauvoir 1953). Thus, thinking about a leader might evoke images of men and masculine traits such as strength, decisiveness, and competitiveness (Badura et al. 2018; Eagly and Karau 2002). This connotation persists into the present day in contexts like the United States where women remain underrepresented in top leadership positions (deHart-Davis et al. 2020). However, given women’s greater presence in service-delivery organizations—especially those that engage with vulnerable populations like

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children—thinking of a public manager in a service-delivery organization might evoke images of women and feminine traits, such as care and compassion (Funk et al. 2023; Offringa and Groeneveld 2023).

This study uses an online experiment to examine how the traits and types of individuals associated with certain leadership roles might be gendered. The results suggest that, indeed, different types of roles are associated with gendered traits. Individuals think less of feminine traits when they imagine an “ideal leader” compared to an “ideal high school principal” or “ideal manager,” but there are no significant differences comparing an “ideal leader” to an “ideal public manager.” Individuals also tend to think of men more often than women when thinking of an ideal leader, manager, public manager, or principal.

Though the differences among these words may seem trivial, these results have important implications for both research and practice. In terms of research, scholars should be deliberate in their choice of terminology as these words can have gendered connotations that evoke images of men/masculinity or women/femininity. In practice, the words used to describe top-ranking officials can impact perceptions of fit and thus influence evaluations of women (and men) in these roles as well as who is viewed as a potential candidate for these roles.

Research Design

To better understand how the term used to describe the highest-ranking official of an organization might evoke a different set of qualities or characteristics, and thus create a different frame for characterizing success, we implement a simple 4 x 1 factorial experiment. We asked respondents to “Take a moment to think about an ideal...” and we randomly inserted “leader,” “manager,” “public manager,” or “high school principal” to complete the sentence. The experimental research design is useful for assessing causality because of the random assignment of participants to treatment groups.

Respondents were then presented with a list of 21 traits derived from the personal attributes questionnaire or PAQ (Helmreich, Spence, and Wilhelm 1981). Each trait has a 5-point scale where the endpoints are polar opposites; one endpoint indicates greater femininity/expressivity and the other indicates greater masculinity/instrumentality, as shown in Figure 1. We asked respondents to identify where the “ideal [manager/public manager/leader/high school principal]” would fall along the scale between the two endpoints.

Data

Respondents were recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform. The platform has been widely used in public administration and management research as a means of collecting experimental data regarding individual responses to administrative activities (Marvel and Girth 2016; Piatak, Mohr, and Leland 2017) and performance (e.g., Deslatte 2020), and also in research on public service motivation and prosocial motivation (Resh, Marvel, and Wen 2018).

MTurk provides access to a heterogeneous set of respondents. To bolster data quality, we implemented the protocol written by Burleigh, Kennedy, and Clifford (2018) using Qualtrics survey software. The protocol filters out bots and scripts and ensures respondents are based in the U.S. through a third-party verification of location and by preventing individuals using a VPN/VPS from participating in the study.

Data were collected in December 2018, yielding 392 usable responses. The sample is 50.51% male, 47.96% female, and 1.53% another gender identity. Respondents’ ages range from 18 to 74, with a mean of 38.33. The majority of participants were white (71.17%) and most held a 4-year degree (52.3%). Additional respondent demographics are shown in the supplemental appendix. A manipulation check suggests the treatments were received as intended: 93.11% of respondents correctly recalled who they were asked to consider (i.e., an ideal leader, manager, public manager, or high school principal).

Figure 1: Traits Displayed to Survey Respondents

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all aggressive	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very aggressive
Not at all independent	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very independent
Not at all emotional	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very emotional
Very submissive	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very dominant
Not at all excitable in a major crisis	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very excitable in a major crisis
Very passive	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very active
Not at all able to devote oneself completely to others	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Able to devote oneself completely to others
Very rough	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very gentle
Not at all helpful to others	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very helpful to others
Not at all competitive	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very competitive
Very home oriented	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very worldly
Not at all kind	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very kind
Indifferent to others approval	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Highly needful of others approval
Feelings not easily hurt	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Feelings easily hurt
Not at all aware of the feelings of others	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very aware of the feelings of others
Can make decisions easily	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Has difficulty making decisions
Gives up very easily	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Never gives up easily
Never cries	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Cries very easily
Not at all self-confident	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very self-confident
Feels very inferior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Feels very superior
Not at all understanding of others	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very understanding of others

Results

To facilitate the analysis, we re-scaled the 21 personality traits so that higher values indicate greater femininity and lower values indicate greater masculinity (e.g., 1 = very aggressive and 5 = not at all aggressive). We then summed the values of each trait to create an aggregated femininity score, where the highest possible value is 105 and the lowest possible value is 21. In the actual dataset, the femininity score ranges from 37 to 90 (mean = 59.06, standard deviation = 6.13).

Comparing averages across treatment groups suggests that the ideal high school principal is viewed as the most feminine (mean = 60.12), followed by the ideal manager (mean = 59.63), while the ideal public manager (mean = 58.90) and the ideal leader (mean = 57.69) are viewed as the least feminine.

In order to determine whether these differences are statistically significant, we conducted difference of means tests comparing average femininity scores for each treatment group. Difference of means tests are commonly used to evaluate randomized data. These tests report the likelihood that the observed differences between the group means is due to a real effect rather than random chance. The results presented in Table 1 suggest that the ideal leader is viewed as less feminine compared to both the ideal principal and the ideal manager, and these differences are statistically significant at the .05 level.

Table 1: Difference of means tests for the femininity score

Comparison	Mean 1	Mean 2	Difference	P-Value	Stat. Sig.
Ideal Leader vs. Ideal Manager	57.69	59.63	-1.94	0.031	*
Ideal Leader vs. Ideal Public Manager	57.69	58.90	-1.21	0.201	
Ideal Leader vs. Ideal HS Principal	57.69	60.12	-2.43	0.006	**
Ideal Manager vs. Ideal Public Manager	59.63	58.90	0.73	0.397	
Ideal Manager vs. Ideal HS Principal	59.63	60.12	-0.48	0.544	
Ideal Public Manager vs. Ideal HS Principal	58.90	60.12	-1.22	0.146	

Note: Difference equals Mean 1 minus Mean 2. The reported p-value is from a two-tailed t-test with equal variances.

*+p<0.1, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.*

Robustness checks using alternative models and different measures of the femininity score suggest that the ideal principal is consistently viewed as more feminine compared to the ideal leader; however, the ideal manager is viewed as more feminine than the ideal leader in only a few models. (See the supplemental appendix for more details.)

Next, we analyze whether differences emerge among the individual traits. Figure 2 shows the mean value of each trait across treatment conditions.

Difference of means tests for the individual traits (reported in the supplemental appendix) support the finding that the ideal high school principal is viewed as the most feminine. The ideal principal is viewed as less aggressive and better able to devote themselves to others compared to the ideal leader, manager, and public manager. The ideal principal is also more helpful, kind, and understanding (vs. ideal leader or ideal manager). The principal is less competitive (vs. leader or public manager), gentler (vs. leader), and less confident (vs. public manager), but also less excitable in a major crisis and less in need of others' approval (vs. public manager) as well as less submissive, less likely to give up, and less likely to have their feelings hurt (vs. manager).

There is some evidence that the ideal manager is viewed as more feminine as well, though these are not always positive feminine attributes. The ideal manager is viewed as more submissive than the ideal leader, public manager, and principal. The manager might give up more easily (vs. public manager or principal) or their feelings might be hurt more easily (vs. leader or principal). The ideal manager is viewed as more passive, less confident, and less worldly—but also less helpful and less aware of others' feelings—than the ideal public manager. And the manager is perceived to be less competitive and more needing of others' approval than the ideal leader. Yet, compared to the ideal principal, the ideal manager is less feminine: The manager is more

aggressive and less helpful, kind, understanding, and able to devote themselves to others compared to the principal.

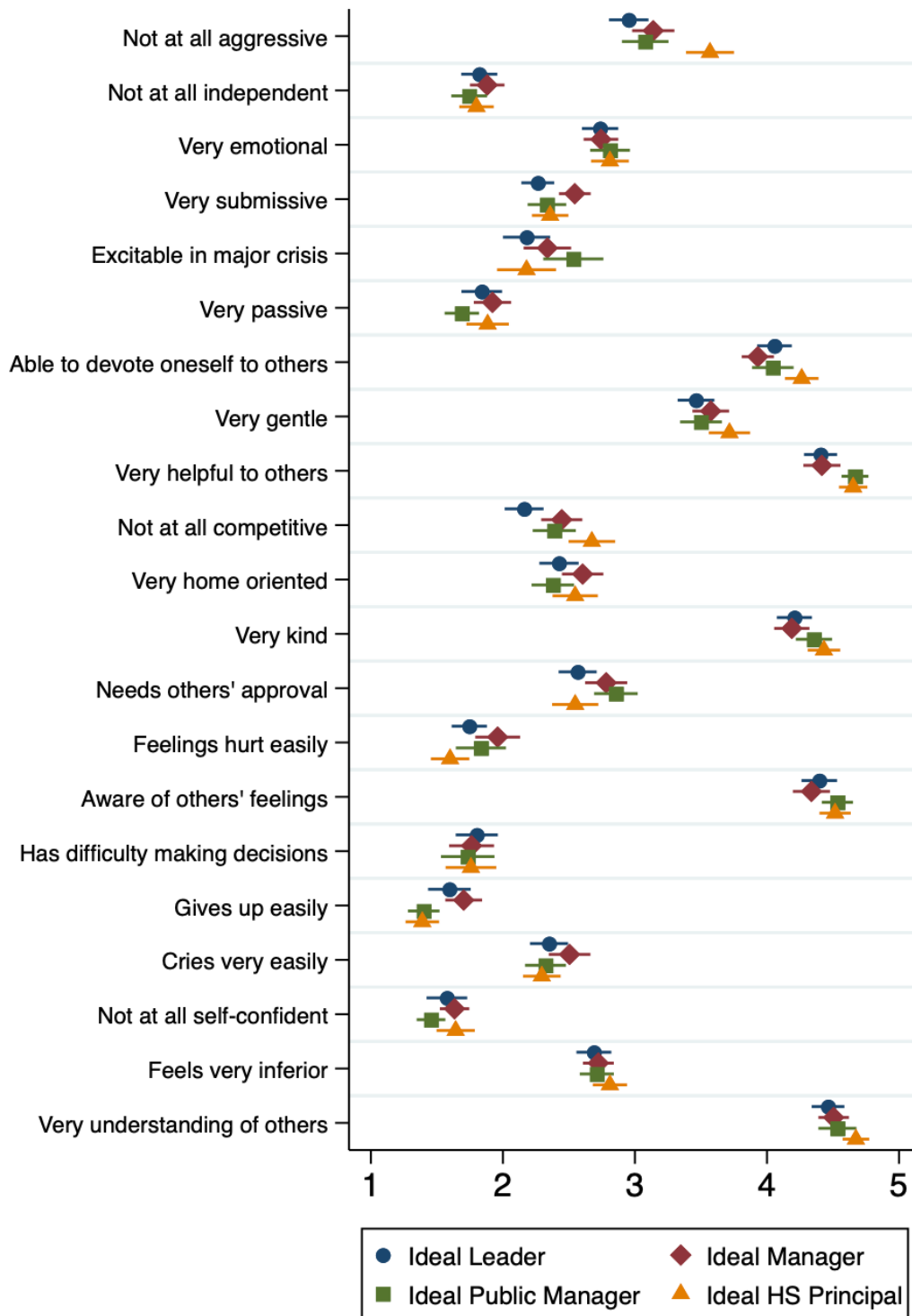
The ideal public manager is viewed as having a mix of feminine and masculine traits. The ideal public manager has feminine traits such as they are more excitable in a crisis and more in need of others' approval compared to the ideal leader and ideal principal. The public manager is also more helpful (vs. manager or leader), aware of others' feelings (vs. manager), and less competitive (vs. leader). However, the ideal public manager is also viewed as more masculine on several traits: They are more dominant, active, worldly, and less likely to give up (vs. manager) as well as more confident (vs. manager or principal), aggressive, competitive, and less able to devote themselves to others (vs. principal).

The ideal leader is viewed as the most masculine and was not rated as more feminine on any trait compared to the ideal manager, public manager, or principal. The ideal leader is more competitive (vs. manager, public manager, or principal), less needing of others' approval (vs. manager or public manager), less helpful (vs. public manager or principal), less excitable in a crisis (vs. public manager), more dominant and less likely to have their feelings hurt (vs. manager), as well as more aggressive, rougher, less kind, less understanding, and less able to devote themselves to others (vs. principal).

The final way we examine the gendered associations of different roles is by asking respondents whether they had a particular person in mind when choosing traits. Most respondents said they were not thinking of a specific person. Others listed individuals such as political figures, celebrities, or people they know. We categorized these responses according to whether the respondent was thinking of a man or a woman by inferring gender based on names and titles as provided by the respondent (e.g., my father, my boss Ted, Mr. Dean, Hillary Clinton, my wife).

The results presented in Table 2 suggest that people mostly think of men when they think about the top official in an organization. Respondents were more likely to have a man in mind than a woman regardless of whether they were thinking about an ideal leader, ideal manager, ideal public manager, or ideal principal. These results hold true for both men and women respondents (see the supplemental appendix.)

Figure 2: Mean value of each trait with 90% confidence intervals



Note: Lower values indicate greater masculinity/instrumentality (e.g., very aggressive) and higher values indicate greater femininity/expressivity (e.g., not at all aggressive).

Table 2: Type of person the respondent had in mind

	Ideal Leader	Ideal Manager	Ideal Public Manager	Ideal HS Principal
<i>Person in Mind</i>				
No one	60.38	65.35	80.00	72.63
Past President	4.72			
Barack Obama	10.38		4.44	1.05
Donald Trump	3.77	0.99		
Hillary Clinton	1.89			
Celebrity or Public Figure	2.83	0.99	2.22	
Religious Figure	0.94	0.99		
Former Boss or Personal Acquaintance	13.21	27.72	8.89	23.16
Family Member	1.89	1.98	2.22	2.11
Myself		1.98	2.22	1.05
<i>Gender of Person in Mind</i>				
No one in mind	60.38	65.35	80.00	72.63
Gender not specified	11.32	23.76	4.44	18.95
Man	24.53	9.90	11.11	8.42
Woman	3.77	0.99	4.44	

Note: Each cell is the percent of respondents in each treatment condition who had this person in mind.

Discussion

The results of this study echo previous research indicating that leadership and management roles are gendered (e.g., Koenig et al. 2011). An “ideal leader” is associated with more masculine traits, while an “ideal school principal” is associated with more feminine traits. An “ideal manager” or “ideal public manager” falls somewhere in the middle. Both men and women respondents were also more likely to think of a man rather than a woman when envisioning an ideal leader, manager, public manager, or principal—suggesting that the “think manager—think male” paradigm (Schein 1973) persists.

These results have important implications for public administration and management research, especially research involving surveys or experiments. Future research should be as specific as possible when asking participants to envision or evaluate a public sector official as participants may employ different standards and metrics to evaluate individuals across different roles, sectors, and organizations. For example, participants in an experiment involving a hypothetical female leader may assess this individual differently than they would assess a female administrator or supervisor. The words used to describe top-ranking officials should be chosen thoughtfully and these terms should not be assumed to be fully interchangeable.

The results of this study also have implications for practice. For instance, a woman candidate might be viewed as less fit for a “leadership” role compared to a “management” role if men are still assumed to be the default leaders (de Beauvoir 1953). Likewise, women might receive less favorable performance evaluations compared to their men counterparts depending on the language that is used in evaluations. In sum, the words used to describe the top-ranking officials in an organization can add to the gendered barriers that women already face in the public sector (Bishu and Headley 2020).

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