

**Report for the Center for the Study of Diversity, University of Delaware****“Gender Code Switching and Political Decision Making”****By Faith Okpotor and Samantha Kelley****December 2, 2015**

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**Introduction and Scope**

This research is situated within a growing political science literature at the intersection of gender, politics, and political behavior. Stereotypical masculine communication styles that are aggressive, direct, and succinct are valued in politics, while stereotypical feminine communication styles that are submissive, indirect, and elaborate are not. Female politicians are often confronted by this gender stereotype threat, and thus frequently adopt stereotypically masculine behavior for legitimization (e.g., speaking more directly, less disclaimers, etc.).

Extant research has largely ignored how a group’s sex composition affects this gender code switching, and if behavioral adaptations influence decision outcomes. As such, this research investigates to what extent a group’s sex composition prompts female leaders (1) to adopt behavior considered masculine, and (2) to make more aggressive political decisions considered masculine. We hypothesized female leaders would adopt stereotypically masculine behavior and make more aggressive decisions when in groups comprised of a majority of males.

We would like to thank UD’s Center for the Study of Diversity for being the primary funder of this exciting project. This study is of particular relevance to the CSD mission because it probes the diversity question regarding the naturalized assumptions of who makes a successful leader.

**Methods**

Using an experimental and survey research design, we collected data from 250 UD students during the Spring 2015 semester. Participants were undergraduate volunteers between the ages of 18 and 24 from 70 different majors. We also hired and trained two Research Assistants. To avoid bias, our study was a double-blind experiment, where participants and Research Assistants were unaware of the purpose of the research.

Participants were recruited via research solicitations sent by UD’s OCM’s weekly emails to undergrads, flyers posted around campus, and extra credit offerings in POSC 100- and 200-level introductory classes. Participants signed-up via a secure website and took a Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ), a 24-item questionnaire designed to measure a baseline for participants’ self-reported “masculinity” or “femininity.”

After participants were registered, we randomly selected female and male leaders from our population. Group leaders and group members then received an email with available time slots to participate in 30-minute small group deliberative experiments that took place in Morris Library over two months. Half the groups were led by females and the other half were led by males (serving as our experimental control). The sex composition of group members was stratified, ranging on a spectrum from all-female to all-male. Research Assistants administered an adapted prisoner’s dilemma game couched in foreign policy, which prompted leaders to deliberate within their group, and ultimately

make risk-averse (i.e., stereotypically feminine) or risk-maximizing (i.e., stereotypically masculine) policy decisions.

Group deliberations were video recorded. Research Assistants later coded each deliberation for hedges, hesitations, tag questions, and rising intonation (stereotypically feminine communication), as well as leader interruption by female group members, leader interruption by male group members, total leader floor time, and the group's final decision. In total, 44 leaders led 44 groups. These data, along with data from the PAQ survey, were assessed using statistical analysis.

## **Results**

While female and male leaders had approximately equal self-reported scores on the PAQ survey measuring levels of masculinity and femininity, female leaders exhibited more masculine speech patterns than their male counterparts. Additionally, female leaders adopted more masculine communication when in the presence of male group members than when in all-female groups, suggesting gender code switching due to gender stereotype threat. Finally, female leaders were more likely to make risk-maximizing decisions than their male counterparts when in all-male groups. These results suggest that group sex composition in deliberative settings prompts gender code switching by female leaders.

## **Significance**

This research illustrates how a group's sex composition may trigger gender stereotype threat in female leaders, prompting them to adopt masculinized behavior and make aggressive decisions to avoid negative gender assumptions. In doing so, this research also generates greater implications for how a group's power dynamics may influence political leaders from other marginalized populations to mimic dominant group traits to prevent negative stereotyping.

Overall, the research demonstrates that prized leadership behaviors are all too often associated with masculinity. Given the socially shared expectations of gender and leadership, females are constrained in their behavior, as appearing stereotypically feminine is often viewed as correlating with inability. By exposing the adaptations females may feel are necessary to be judged as competent, we hope to facilitate a dialogue that rethinks conventions about leadership, advocating diversity rather than stereotypical beliefs about women and men.

## **Future Plans**

We plan to present our findings at the 2016 New York State Political Science Association Annual Conference and the 2016 American Political Science Association. We will submit our results for publication in high impact political science journals over the next year.



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