Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: **University of Exeter**
Unit of Assessment 4: **Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience**
Case Study 3: Discovering the glass cliff: Insights into subtle gender discrimination in the workplace
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) Michelle Ryan and Alex Haslam, working at the University of Exeter, uncovered the phenomenon of the 'glass cliff', whereby women tend to occupy risky and precarious leadership positions. Main impacts include: (1) The term 'glass cliff' has entered public discourse and informs public debate and an understanding of women's leadership roles. (2) The research has been adopted and promoted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, and its lessons have been integrated into organisation practice by trainers, coaches, and HR professionals. (3) Influential employers (e.g., Met Office, IBM) have changed HR procedures as a result of the research, including revising flexible working options, bonus schemes, and the creation of internal support networks.
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) The glass cliff is a concept emerging from a programme of research investigating the contexts in which women (and other minorities) are appointed into leadership positions. The research has clearly demonstrated that women are more likely to be appointed to leadership positions that are associated with an increased risk of criticism and failure. Extending the metaphor of the 'glass ceiling' and the 'glass elevator', Ryan and Haslam dubbed this phenomenon 'the glass cliff'. In November 2003 The Times published an article (by E. Judge, Nov 11) entitled 'Women on Board: Help or Hindrance'. It reported a tendency for UK FTSE 100 companies with women on their boards to perform less well than those that have all-male boards. Their conclusion was that women were "wreaking havoc on UK companies". In response, Professor Ryan (joined Exeter Psychology in September 2003 as a postdoctoral fellow) and Professor Haslam (appointed in Exeter as Professor of Social and Organisational Psychology 2000, since 2012 Professor and ARC Laureate Fellow at U. of Queensland but with a continuing part-time appointment at Exeter) conducted rigorous, in-depth analysis of the 2003 performance of FTSE 100 companies and published the results in the *British Journal of Management*[3]. The research revealed that while there was a relationship between female board members and share price performance, the causal relation was very different from that claimed by the Times. Rather than women in top jobs causing poor company performance, they were more likely to be appointed to such jobs after a consistent pattern of poor company performance. Thus, women tended to occupy leadership roles that were more risky and more precarious than their male counterparts – the glass cliff[4]. The hypothesis that women are more likely than men to be appointed to risky and precarious leadership positions (because these positions are more likely to involve leadership of organisational units that are in crisis) was tested in a series of experimental studies[1,2]. Consistent with predictions, results indicated that the likelihood of a female candidate being selected ahead of an equally qualified male candidate increased when the organisation's performance was declining rather than improving. The studies also provided evidence that glass cliff appointments are associated with beliefs that they suit the distinctive leadership abilities of women. This view was further tested by a series of experimental studies which revealed that the traits required from a leader in times of crisis are more likely to be stereotypical of women than they are of men – and that female traits are seen as especially useful when a leader is required to manage people in times of crisis, or more worryingly, when they are needed to serve as scapegoats[5]. Research into the glass cliff is still underway, examining the explanations and boundary conditions for the phenomenon. Research suggests that the glass cliff is multiply determined[4]

and is related to gendered stereotypes, a lack of support for female leaders in the workplace[2], and subtle sexism.

* Relevant publication from *References to the research*

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Research into the glass cliff by University of Exeter academics has been disseminated widely including 18 articles in high quality peer-reviewed academic journals, 7 book chapters, and key industry publications. These publications include a review in the top management journal (*Academy of Management Review*) and an experimental paper in a top Psychology Journal (*Psychological Science*), award-winning papers in *Leadership Quarterly* and the *Journal of Change Management*, and two commissioned pieces for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

1. Haslam, S. A., & Ryan, M. K. (2008). The road to the glass cliff: Differences in the perceived suitability of men and women for leadership positions in succeeding and failing organizations. *Leadership Quarterly, 19*, 530-546. (Emerald Management Reviews Citation of Excellence - one of the 50 best management articles in 2008)

2. Rink, F., Ryan, M. K., & Stoker, J. I. (2012). Influence in times of crisis: Exploring how social and financial resources affect men's and women's evaluations of glass cliff positions. *Psychological Science.*

3. Ryan, M. K. & Haslam, S. A. (2005). The glass cliff: Evidence that women are over-represented in precarious leadership positions. *British Journal of Management, 16,* 81-90.

4. Ryan, M. K. & Haslam, S. A. (2007). The glass cliff: Exploring the dynamics surrounding women's appointment to precarious leadership positions. *Academy of Management Review, 32,* 549-572.

5. Ryan, M. K., Haslam, S. A., Hersby, M.D., & Bongiorno, R. (2011). Think crisis–think female: Glass cliffs and contextual variation in the think manager–think male stereotype. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 96,* 470-484.

6. Ryan, M. K., Haslam, S. A., Wilson-Kovacs, M. D., Hersby, M. D., & Kulich, C. (2007). *The Glass Cliff: Precariousness beyond the Glass Ceiling. A CIPD Research into Practice Publication.* London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

Recognition:

- The research was shortlisted for the 2005 *Times Higher's* Research Project of the Year.

Funding: Research into the glass cliff has been funded by a series of peer reviewed public and private sector grants awarded to Ryan, Haslam, and colleagues at Exeter:

- 2007-10: £1,063,021 (FEC) ESRC large grant (Haslam PI, Ryan et al., co-Is): *'The individual in the group: Social identity and the dynamics of change'.* 10% allocated to the glass cliff;
- 2005-10: £125,000 RCUK (Research Council UK) Academic Fellowship awarded to Ryan, of which 50% was allocated to the glass cliff (£62,500);
- 2005-06: £20,000 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development grant to Ryan
- 2005-06: £625,498 (FEC) European Social Fund: '*Beyond the Glass Ceiling: Social Psychological Analysis of the 'Glass Cliff' and the Precariousness of Women's Leadership Positions*' (Ryan PI, Haslam Co-I).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The discovery and understanding of the glass cliff by Ryan, Haslam, and colleagues has led to two distinct types of demonstrable impact:

A. Informing public debate

Since its discovery, the term 'glass cliff' has entered public discourse. The concept now informs and shapes debate and the public understanding of women's leadership positions. This impact can be demonstrated in a number of ways:

- The media embraced the notion of the glass cliff, incorporating it into analyses of women's leadership positions. A Google news search for 'glass cliff' reveals over 160 news articles that refer to the glass cliff.
- A broader phrase search reveals over 21,000 hits which include blogs (e.g., the Wall Street Journal blog, July 2012), HR websites (e.g., Human Capital Online, Oct 2008), and online resources for female leaders (e.g., femalebreadwinners.com)
- The UK media coverage has included all major British newspapers and television stations as well as local newspapers. The research has also been represented worldwide[2,3,4,5], from the Boston Globe to the Calcutta Times, from CNN to Australian radio.
- Importantly, while initial media coverage was restricted to reports about the research project, in more recent years this has no longer been the case. The glass cliff is now frequently discussed without reference to the research itself; rather the term has achieved the status of a common phrase used within public discourse to explain women's leadership. Indicative of this, in 2011, of the nearly 1,600 web hits which included mention of the glass cliff, over 500 of them made no mention of the research or the researchers.
- An economic value can be allocated to media activity. According to HM Treasury's method of "shadow pricing", which values exposure achieved at what it would have cost to buy the 'column inches', £1.6 million of media exposure were generated by the glass cliff between 2005 and 2010. If 'glass cliff' were a commercial brand this could be thought of the value of the 'marketing campaign' to establish it.
- The New York Times[1] named the glass cliff as one of the Top 100 ideas that shaped 2008.

B. Informing HR professionals, Industry, and Policy

Glass cliff researchers at the University of Exeter have actively engaged in two-way knowledge transfer with both industry and public policy bodies. Their aim is to address gender discrimination in the workplace by providing evidence to challenge industry preconceptions and to engage with businesses and organisations to educate them and help develop more appropriate HR systems.

First, the researchers engaged with a large number of private and public sector organisations and professional bodies. These include the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, Europe's largest HR and development professional body with over 135,000 members across 120 countries)[7]. Together with the CIPD the researchers produced two publications. One was a Change Agenda report, which outlined the research and the implications for HR Professionals. This document was circulated free to all 135,000 members. The researchers also produced a more extensive Research into Practice publication, which provides HR professionals with concrete directions about applying the research in everyday practice. This publication is available to buy through the CIPD.

Illustrations from just two of the leading organisations the team worked with:

IBM reports the following changes in practice since 2010[9]:
- Catalysing changes in HR procedures to promote equality, which would otherwise have been delayed or developed to a lower standard. Changes catalysed include:
  - Formation of a dedicated "Connect Women" group within the company to engage the management on women's issues;
  - Extension of flexible time operating to a number of additional roles within the

- company to increase the opportunity for female engagement;
  - o Introduction of sabbaticals to support women having children and continue their careers, addressing the current imbalance at the senior management level;
  - o Extension of part-time working and job sharing to a larger number of roles.
- In addition, the operator is a recognised global leader in its field. Thus it was felt that their adoption of this agenda and enabling policies would likely be copied by other companies within the industry hoping to achieve best practice.

The **Met Office** reported the following changes in practice since 2010[8].
- Positive engagement at the management level to support future research collaborations in the field;
- Restructuring of the current self-nomination bonus scheme, as the current allocation method was felt to under-represent female employees;
- Formation of a women's group and recognition of their activity by senior management to influence HR policy making.

From 2008 onwards researchers have also worked directly with a number of other large companies and organisations, including the EU Directorate-General for Internal Policies, PriceWaterhouseCooper, the MoD, Ford, British Association of Women in Policing[10], Microsoft, the Royal College of Surgeons, UBS, and The Association of Women Solicitors. This engagement included delivering seminars and tailored workshops which function both as awareness raising activities and as catalysts for real economic change through advising appropriate HR strategies to address the current gap in female employment.

In addition, the researchers have recently been invited to engage with government policy bodies, both at the UK level, through the Home Office's Government Equality Office, and at an EU level. The researchers were invited by the European Parliament's Policy Department C: Constitutional Affairs and Citizens' Rights to produce a briefing paper for EU Parliament, and they presented the work in Brussels in March 2013[6].

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5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Examples of public debate and policy
1. New York Times (Dec, 2008): Year in Ideas: http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2008/12/14/magazine/2008_IDEAS.html?_r=0 (under: Women in Power are Set Up to Fail)
2. Financial Review (July, 2011): http://www.afr.com/p/opinion/lagarde_appointment_tests_glass_DLVt4mTpAqOTaxhjxL8y8H
3. Wall Street Journal Blog (July, 2012): http://blogs.wsj.com/ideas-market/2012/07/17/is-yahoos-new-female-ceo-headed-for-the-glass-cliff/
4. Forbes (July, 2012): http://www.forbes.com/sites/helaineolen/2012/07/16/marissa-mayer-and-the-glass-cliff/
5. Huffington Post (March, 2013): http://www.huffingtonpost.com/candy-spelling/falling-off-the-glass-cli_b_2974082.html
6. European Parliament briefing paper (March, 2013): http://www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201303/20130315ATT63291/20130315ATT63291EN.pdf

Individuals providing external corroboration:
7. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development - Diversity Advisor
8. MET Office – Business Manager
9. IBM – HR Business Development-Engagement Manager
10. Police – Head of HR Business Management, South Yorkshire Police