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ARE WOMEN MANAGERS REALLY MORE PARTICIPATIVE? SOME CONFLICTING EVIDENCE FROM A FIELD STUDY

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Abstract

A number of studies have suggested that women in managerial positions are more likely to be participative (involving subordinates in their decision-making) than their male counterparts. The research described here was initially designed to determine whether there are features in the culture of particular organizations (professional firms) that make this gender gap more or less likely to occur. However, the results suggested that the higher scores for participation obtained by women on a well-known instrument (the Vroom-Yetton problem set) may not reflect their actual workplace behavior. Implications of the findings for researchers are discussed.

Introduction

Over the past decade, some researchers have claimed that women, by virtue of their gender, bring unique strengths to positions of organizational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Helgesen, 1990; Rosener, 1990). Although evidence for some gender differences is anecdotal, one particular discrepancy in leadership style has been observed across a number of studies: women in authority are more likely to adopt a participative approach —including subordinates in their decision-making — than their male counterparts (Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

Use of participation by managers is associated with development of subordinate capabilities (Vroom & Jago, 1988). As organizations downsize, shedding managerial layers and functions, and as work teams and task forces increasingly replace hierarchical structures, the ability to develop subordinate judgment and decision-making capability is an important attribute for a manager (Appelbaum, Bailey, & Berg, 2000). Hence, the finding that women tend to engage in participative management is seen as one of their strengths in the current work environment. At the same time, it raises the question of whether this difference is innate and universal, or whether it arises from gender-specific socialization within the larger society or the workplace (or both). If cues present in the workplace help to create a gender difference in managerial behavior, that difference could disappear as women adopt the managerial role in larger numbers and gender becomes less salient as an attribute for individual managers (Kanter, 1977).

The purpose of the research described here was to examine the relationship between aspects of the workplace organizational culture and participative behavior on the part of managers in professional firms, to determine whether the gender difference discussed above was affected by the organizational culture of these workplaces. Starting from the observed gender difference, the study posed the following research questions:

1.   Will the gender difference that has emerged in

some workplaces be present in a work environment (e.g., a professional firm)

where there are equal numbers of mid-level male and female managers?

2. How do managers in these firms view participative decision-making? Is it seen

as a positive attribute or a liability within a professional work environment?

Review of the Literature

Participative Leadership and Decision-making

Although the term "participation" is used in various ways in the management literature, in this study it is defined as the degree to which a manager gives subordinates power over the decision-making process. Interest in participative management styles is not a new development. In 1958, Tannenbaum & Schmidt proposed a typology of leadership styles along a continuum: at one end, the leader/manager takes sole responsibility for the decision and announces it to subordinates; at the other end is what amounts to consensus decision-making by the leader with the subordinates (Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1958). The former approach is often termed directive leadership or management; the latter participative (Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

In 1973, Vroom & Yetton published a description of their normative model of decision-making, based on earlier work by Maier (1963) as well as Tannenbaum & Schmidt (1958). Maier suggested that the success of a particular strategy (directive, participative, or in between) depends not only on its applicability to the problem, but also on the likelihood and importance of subordinate acceptance of the decision. Vroom & Yetton's model employs a diagnostic approach; they assume that situational factors -- including those related to decision acceptance -- will be paramount in determining the success of a decision strategy. Extensive testing of the model seemed to validate their approach (Bass, 1990; Vroom & Yetton, 1973; Vroom & Jago, 1988). Although Vroom and his colleagues did not advocate a participative approach in all situations, the model suggests two reasons why increased participation by subordinates may contribute to organizational well-being: first, by increasing decision acceptance among those who are often partly re-

sponsible for carrying out the decision; and second, by developing subordinate capabilities over the longer run (Vroom & Jago, 1988).

The importance of Vroom and Yetton's approach for the present study lies in their emphasis on participation as a rational choice made by managers, rather than a matter of personality or of organizational fiat. Such a choice may be affected by the workplace's organizational culture in specific ways that will be described below.

Gender and Participative Leadership

The relationship of gender to various aspects of leadership, including participation, has been extensively investigated. In 1990, Eagly & Johnson published a meta-analysis of 162 studies that examined male-female differences in leadership style. While most of the studies examined facets of leadership unrelated to the present topic, a subset of 28 (embodied in eighteen published and unpublished documents) was concerned with the directive-participative dimension. Only on this dimension did a gender-based difference emerge: women were more likely than men, by about 1/5 of a standard deviation, to employ a participative approach with subordinates. Although this is a small effect size by social science standards (Cohen, 1977) the 95% confidence interval for the d-statistic does not include zero, which makes us more inclined to view the null hypothesis with a certain skepticism.

While some might assume that this difference in leadership style derives either from innate, sex-based differences between men and women or from childhood socialization in gender roles (Eagly, 1987), there is a body of research that suggests more immediate influences may be at least partly responsible. For example, both Jago & Vroom (1982) and Eagly, Makhijani & Klonsky (1992) found that while men were per-

ceived as equally effective in leadership roles whether they adopted a directive or a participative style, subordinates perceived directive women bosses as less effective than participative ones. Gender stereotypes based on societal norms and beliefs (Eagly, 1987) may play a role in creating expectations that women managers are more likely to pay attention to subordinate feelings, and hence adopt a more participative style. When these expectations are violated, perceptions of the manager's competence suffer as a result (see Jago and Vroom, 1982, for a discussion of this possibility). In addition, there may be a less direct effect of the organizational culture of the workplace on the behavior of women managers, as discussed in the next section.

Organizational Culture and Gender

Organizational culture is sometimes defined as "the shared values and norms that exist in an organization and that are taught to incoming employees" (Vecchio, 1991, p. 550). According to Schein (1992), the values and norms emerge in the first place, and are transmitted to newcomers, in a learning process that is expected to help the organization adapt to its environment. Methods of transmission include organizational symbols such as dress (Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail & Mackie-Lewis, 1997), rituals, and stories (Trice & Beyer, 1984).

Organizational culture implies a shared frame of reference among organization members, as a taken-for-granted basis of communication. From the cultural point of view, problems arise when an organizational member cannot be trusted to share the prevalent values and norms (Van Maanen, 1991). Organizational culture influences gender-based perceptions of individual roles, competence, and trustworthiness, since trust (in the absence of specific information about an individual) is often based on the perception

that s/he is "similar to me" (Kanter, 1977). Organizational culture both includes and perpetuates notions of gender appropriateness that constrain individual actions and perceptions.

Many researchers have asserted that there is a link between organizational culture -- particularly norms associated with the managerial role -- and gender (Acker, 1991; West & Zimmerman, 1991). In the first place, most organizations in the twentieth century have been and are run by men, while women have tended to predominate in low-status positions that allow little autonomy (Lorber, 1994; Morrison, White & Van Velsor, 1992). That picture is slowly changing, but in 1992, despite the fact that 42% of managers in the U.S. were women, the percentage of women in top management was still less than 5 (Powell & Butterfield, 1994), In Canada, according to Almey (1995) 43% of managers and administrators were women in 1994, but this figure almost certainly includes large numbers of supervisors and lower-level managers. Thus, workplace organizational cultures in these countries have been shaped primarily by men. In addition, there is a common stereotypical association between maleness and managerial ability (Heilman, Block, Martell & Simon, 1989). The result within many organizations is that women promoted into managerial positions feel isolated and singled out for scrutiny. When this occurs, the organizational culture reinforces a message that women have received more generally from their overall socialization: a woman who occupies a high status job is by definition deviant (Marshall, 1995).

Recent work on organizational demography has helped to demonstrate that where women are located in the organization, in terms of power and status, has a bearing on perceptions of gender in relation to career success. For example, Ely interviewed women

who were associates (in effect, middle managers) in law firms, and discovered that women in firms which had higher proportions of female partners were less likely to see being female as a liability, and less likely overall to emphasize the role of gender in organizational life, than those from male-dominated firms (Ely, 1995). Burke and McKeen (1996) found that women working in firms that were either disproportionately male (more men than women at all levels) or male dominated (more men than women in senior management) were less satisfied with their jobs and had higher intentions to quit than women working in organizations where senior management was gender-balanced or where women predominated.

These studies demonstrate that, although the culture within organizations has been often alien, and in many cases hostile, to women, culture within a particular organization is likely to exhibit certain features that either emphasize or downplay the saliency of gender to the managerial role. To the extent that women managers are few and therefore anomalies in organizational terms, they are likely to experience pressures that have less to do with their work roles than their gender roles (Ely, 1994, 1995; Gutek, 1985; Martin, 1985).

The Organizational Culture of Professional Firms

The professional firm has certain characteristics that differ from those of other businesses or industries. To begin with, the firm sells services and relies heavily on the expertise of its employees, even at entry level. In Canada as in the U.S., public accounting firms tend to hire accounting graduates – students who have taken an accounting specialization as undergraduates – and provide further training by means of subsidized courses while the new employee continues to work full-time. By the time the employee

takes the qualifying exam to become a chartered accountant (CA – the Canadian equivalent of the U.S. certified public accountant, or CPA) the firm already has invested substantial resources in training him or her.

In 1994, Canadian statistics showed that 43% of the pool of qualified entry-level employees was female (McKeen & Bujaki, 1994) and women often represent the most qualified applicants to public accounting firms (Schwartz, 1992; R. Todd, personal communication, 1997). At every level up to senior manager, about half of the employees of these firms are women. At that point (where someone would normally be in line for partnership), there is significant attrition in the female half of the workforce (see McKeen & Bujaki, 1994, for the Canadian numbers; Lawlor, 1995, for U.S. ones). While most of the major accounting firms have taken steps in recent years to try and rectify this situation, the proportions of women at the top of these firms are still woefully small, since the pipeline to partnership is narrow and does not accommodate rapid change.

In terms of the gender difference in decision-making, we wondered whether the paucity of women in top-level positions in accounting firms would make gender salient for women at lower levels, despite their equal numbers there. Ely's findings suggest that gender would be salient, but she was looking at attitudes rather than at specific behaviors.

Gender Differences and the Managerial Role

The management literature does not provide consistent theoretical or empirical answers to the question of how women enact the managerial role. On the one hand, as some of the evidence discussed above suggests, there are reasons to think that women behave differently as managers than do their male counterparts. On the other hand, some researchers argue that, in order to fit in and be successful in a managerial role, women

find it necessary to "acculturate": to take on the behaviors and attitudes that are exhibited by male colleagues (Hood & Koberg, 1994). There is agreement that women face contradictory pressures when they become managers. On the one hand, their socialization as women, and often the expectations that surround them, may create a belief that inviting subordinates into the decision-making process is both right and useful (Helgesen, 1990); while on the other hand, the organizational culture may stress a timebound model of decision-making that says the manager should decide without the delay involved in a consensus approach. There may also be cultural pressures (from the organization and the larger society) that link leadership with a decisive, even directive personal style (V. Schein, 19--; Heilmann et al, 19--). For men, these pressures are synchronized with gender messages, even though an individual man's personality may not conform to the gender stereotype. But for a women, taking on a managerial role means in many cases facing a degree of role incongruence, since a personal style that involves nurturing and intensive communication may be at odds with how the organization visualizes its managerial workforce behaving.

Hypotheses

The conceptual framework on which the study is based involves a relationship between organizational culture and decision-making behavior by individual managers. However, the nature of the relationship is unclear. Studies by Eagly, Mukhijani and Klonsky (1992) and by Jago and Vroom (1982) have established that women who take a directive approach to the managerial role are viewed less favorably by other organizational members. This suggests that in an environment where gender stereotypes come into play (for example, a workplace in which there are few women managers), it is easier

for women managers to conform to these stereotypes and engage in participative behavior with their subordinates. However, as numbers of women managers approach those of their male colleagues, this difference should disappear (as the managerial role is no longer associated with gendered attributes). Therefore,

H1: In an organization where women managers are common, there will not be a gender gap in decision-making (i.e., women and men on average will exhibit similar levels of directive or participative management).

On the other hand, Hood and Koberg (1994) and Heilman, Block, Martell and Simon (1989) suggest that women can only succeed in managerial roles by adopting "masculine" characteristics, including a decisive (i.e., directive) approach to making decisions. At the very least, women managers who feel that managerial status makes them conspicuous will want to show that they fit in as managers, suggesting that they will exhibit the same decision-making style (whether directive or participative) as their male colleagues.

If it is the case that women feel it is necessary to acculturate, then what happens as women become a larger proportion of the managerial workforce? Assuming that the gender gap arises from early socialization (rather than workplace-related factors), as more women become managerial role models, their willingness to "be themselves" (to be participative, if that is a mode that feels comfortable to them) should increase rather than diminish. (We make the assumption, which perhaps oversimplifies the case, that male managers will not change their behavior. This belief is based on the consideration discussed above: that they have never experienced a contradiction between maleness and the managerial role.) Therefore,

H2: In an organization where women managers are common, the observed gender gap in participative behavior will increase.

Another issue which comes into play here is how organizational features of professional firms may encourage or discourage participativeness as a mode of decision-making. On the one hand, these firms employ people, even at entry level, who have needed skills and who are valued by the organization (Schwartz, 1992). As discussed above, participation can be considered a developmental approach from the subordinate point of view, which tends to lead to higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Appelbaum, Bailey & Berg, 2000). Therefore,

H3: For managers in accounting firms, a participative decision-making style is likely to be viewed as a positive attribute.

On the other hand, accounting firms are notorious as work environments that place people under heavy time pressure (Schwartz, 1992). Timebound decision-making is more efficient if the manager adopts a directive approach, which minimizes consultation and discussion (Vroom & Yetton, 1973). Therefore,

H4: For managers in accounting firms, a directive decision-making style is likely to be viewed as a positive attribute.

Research Design and Method

The research design combined quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. From one point of view, the intent of the study was to determine whether previous findings of a gender gap in decision-making style would be replicated in the specific settings of this study. For this reason, we decided early on to use a quantitative measure (the Vroom-Yetton problem sets) to measure decision-making style; this

measure was utilized in 6 of the 28 studies cumulated by Eagly and Johnson (1990) and thus constitutes important evidence for the existence of the gender gap in decision-making.

However, we were also interested in the reasons for the gender gap, which seemed likely to be located in the perceptions and mindset of the respondents – both their attitudes about management, and their understanding of what the organizational culture valued as managerial strengths seemed likely to play a part in determining behavior. In order to tap into this dimension, we believed it would be most useful to employ a qualitative strategy (semi-structured interviews) and gather data which could be content analyzed for themes that could help us understand whether and how the organizational culture helped to shape decision-making behavior.

Quantitative Measure of decision-making

The Vroom-Yetton problem set was used to measure the decision-making style of individual managers in the sample (both male and female). This is a diagnostic instrument in the form of short cases that embody varying combinations of circumstances facing a manager. A (real life) manager is asked to decide, with each case, which of the specified five decision modes s/he would adopt. Answers to a set of these cases can be scored for "mean level of participation" (MLP), a number that describes the individual manager's tendency to include subordinates in the fictional decisions. (See Vroom & Yetton, 1973, for a full explanation.) In previous research, the problem set has shown reasonable levels of reliability and validity(Vroom and Yetton, 1973). The instrument has also been extensively validated in both laboratory and field studies (for laboratory studies see Ettling & Jago, 1988; Field, 1982; Heilman, Hornstein, Cage & Hershchlag,

1984; for field studies, Margerison & Glube, 1979; Pate & Heiman, 1987; Paul & Ebadi, 1989; Pasewark & Strawser, 1994).

Qualitative Measure based on interview data

We also employed a qualitative measure, derived from semi-structured interviews with the respondents, to determine their perceptions of whether a gender difference in decision-making existed within their workplace. (The question asking for this information is shown in Table 2, below.) The semi-structured format also allowed us to follow up with probes designed to help us address the second research question outlined above: whether participative behavior on the part of managers was viewed in a positive light within the organizational setting chosen for the study.

Qualitative Data on Perceptions of Participation

Respondents were questioned both about their own decision-making style and on how they felt their values fit with the organization's culture. Responses were content analyzed and certain recurrent themes related to participation (whether individuals viewed it as positive or negative, and where they saw their firms as standing) were identified and examined.

The Settings and the Sample

The organizational settings for the research consisted of five offices of multinational public accounting firms located in south central Ontario. The decision to use public accounting firms as the organizations to research was based on two considerations: first, we believed that these organizations would provide a set of individuals at various levels whose training and job duties would be relatively homogeneous across organizations. This was seen as important to control for potential

differences in subordinate capabilities, which might otherwise influence managers'
tendency towards participative behaviour. Second, accounting firms are a work
environment in which there are large numbers of women managers up to a certain level
(McKeen & Bujaki, 1994). Since gender salience was considered to be implicated in
both the incidence of participative behavior and how it was likely to be viewed by
respondents, we hoped by choosing environments where women managers were common
to minimize or control for that aspect of the organization's culture.

Sample selection involved both calculation and serendipity (McCall & Bobko,
1990). One major consideration was size of the local office: with a view to getting a
reasonable sized sample from each firm (the initial ambition was for 10 individuals per
office). We therefore tried to include firms with relatively large local offices.

The approach in each case was via a gatekeeper (generally the partner in charge of
human resources for the office in question). The first author in a telephone call described
the research to this person, including an estimate of the time involved and benefits to the
sample members (feedback on individual decision-making style, provided by the Vroom-
Yetton measure). If the gatekeeper consented to allow access, he* was asked to supply a
list of potentially eligible employees. We then sent a letter to potential sample members,
repeating the information provided to the gatekeeper, and followed up with a phone call.
For purposes of quantitative data collection, there were 54 respondents from five firms:
28 men and 26 women. Of these, 46 took part in interviews (26 men and 20 women).
The reason for the attrition was that there was a time lag between the quantitative data
collection and the followup interviews. During that time, 3 individuals left their firms, 2
were on leave, and the other 3 proved impossible to schedule an interview time with

despite repeated attempts. There were no ascertainable differences between the sample members who dropped out and those who completed interviews.

Findings

Quantitative Findings on Decision-Making

Table 1 shows the mean male and female scores within each firm in the sample on the Vroom-Yetton instrument, as well as for the sample as a whole. The number shown is the MLP score discussed earlier: a higher score signals a greater willingness for the individual to use a participative approach (at least on paper). The sample mean For all respondents was 4.98; this is very similar to the MLP score of 4.97 that Vroom and Jago found in a sample of 2631 U.S. managers (Vroom & Jago, 1988).

-Insert Table 1 about here-

It is clear that women, overall and within each firm, had higher MLP scores than men. Both for the sample as a whole and for Firm 4, the gender difference was significant. This parallels earlier findings with both the Vroom-Yetton instrument and other measures (Eagly & Johnson, 1990) in that women, by a small margin, chose more often to include subordinates in their decision-making for the fictional problem sets.

Qualitative Findings on Decision-Making

A question in the interview protocol asked respondents whether they believed women were more participative than men specifically in their workplace. In many cases, the answer was not a clearcut yes or no: the respondent would indicate yes or no but then qualify the response in some way. Table 2 shows the overall range of responses on this question.

-Insert Table 2 about here-

Interestingly, and in marked contrast to the quantitative findings, almost twice as many respondents said they did not believe there was a difference based on gender as said they believed there was (21 no; 11 yes). Men were more likely, by a two to one ratio, to respond clearly that they felt there was no difference based on gender. Ten respondents were not sure, and four were so ambivalent that it was impossible to decide whether they were saying yes or no. In addition, 15 of those who responded "yes" or "not sure" also mentioned counter-examples to the generalization: either men who were more participative than the norm, or women who were less so. (Twice as many men as women mentioned counterexamples.)

Given the lack of consistency between the quantitative and qualitative results, it is difficult to say that either H1 or H2 was supported unequivocally. The quantitative results suggest that the presence of equal numbers of male and female managers does not reduce the tendency of women managers to be more participative; but if the qualitative data are accurate, the responses to the Vroom-Yetton problem set do not necessarily reflect the behavior of women managers on the job. This point will be addressed in more detail in a later section of the paper.

Perceptions of Participative and Directive Decision-Making

Both male and female managers demonstrated some ambivalence about participative decision-making. On the one hand, respondents appreciated any tendency for their superiors to take a participative approach:

> The partner here, he's quite open and we talk back and forth to get a lot of input between the two of us, so that – I mean, every decision is not necessarily just him, and he just tells you what to do. He takes my input in stride and we come to some sort of agreed position.

And some respondents, both male and female, indicated that they preferred to use a participative approach with their own subordinates. One respondent, who scored relatively high (indicating strong preference for participation) on the Vroom-Yetton instrument, remarked:

> I think that, for myself, I've got a high score there because I think I try to treat people that way – because I hope that other people treat me that way. And when the partners here have a decision to make, I hope they involve me. If they didn't, I'd feel like I'm not worth their time, right?...And no one wants to work in that environment, right? So if I expect that from partners, I should make sure that I do that for staff.

However, there were significant intra-firm pressures that made it difficult to consistently adopt a participative approach. These pressures took two forms: a normative belief that a directive style was an indication of effective management, and the time pressures that made it difficult or impossible, even for those inclined to be participative, to consult subordinates before making a decision.

The perceived link in respondents' minds between effectiveness as a manager and a directive style of decision-making was mentioned by seven respondents, five of them male. One particularly telling comment came from a man who used media images to make his point:

> We always had this sense for the take-charge kind of guy, I guess is probably looked upon more favorably by society than the consultative type of person. So I imagine that's had an influence [on my decision-making]. I mean, I don't think about it; I don't try to be the guy on TV. But I'm sure at the back of my mind subconsciously, it's there. That people want to see the job get done, and you want to be the guy to get the job done.

In keeping with this approach, two women commented that they felt women in their workplace who exhibited participative decision-making either were or were perceived as unsure of themselves:

> I think somebody who…is within their first few years as manager, I could believe that [they would be more participative], just because seeing the way they react in management meetings – they do not make a decision while they're in the room. But I think if you aspire to be more than that within the firm, they know that they would be more like their male counterparts. Or, in fact, even worse, because I've heard one person say, "The only type of female I would make a partner is a ball-breaker", and you get that type of comment. So just through that, I think you see sometimes people will react even to the other extreme.

Aside from whatever normative pressures existed (and may have been more acute for women managers) to show a decisive, directive style of decision-making, the time pressure under which people worked added another difficulty to involving subordinates, even for someone who would have liked to adopt that style. A woman senior manager commented:

> I think if I did this test [the Vroom-Yetton problem sets] two years ago, I would probably have been consulting everybody on everything. And I think over the past year that's probably where I've changed the most, is that I've said, OK, I know this is the right decision. And if somebody's upset with it, I'll explain it to them later. I don't have five hours to spend on this; I have two minutes and I'll make the decision now.

One male manager combined the normative and time elements in his approach:

> In our business, time is money….And I can cut to the heart of the matter and …make the decision and move on…whereas [participative] people have to banter it around for five hours or ten meetings and they come to a similar conclusion at the end.

To sum up, it would be fair to say that some respondents acknowledged that they preferred a participative style from their own bosses; a subset of these consciously attempted or wished to use it with their own subordinates; but they found it difficult because the prevailing organizational culture both valued and in many situations made a necessity of directive decision-making.

Given the seeming necessity for directive decision-making in these firms, it is interesting that the overall level of participative behavior measured in the Vroom-Yetton

problem sets was almost identical to that found by Vroom and Jago (1988). Some possible explanations for this will be addressed in the discussion section.

Discussion

Within the firms sampled, the pool of female managers who participated in the study showed consistently higher scores on the Vroom-Yetton problem sets than their male counterparts. While this finding is in line with previous research, it seems to be at least indirectly contradicted by the qualitative data, which indicates that most respondents (male and female) did not see clearcut differences in participativeness based on gender.

There are at least three plausible explanations for this discrepancy. The first is that women in the sample, who were at mid-management levels in the firms, were more participative than their male counterparts, but more senior women (partners) would not have showed the same gender gap in decision-making. Partners would then be the frame of reference for the responses that denied differences in decision-making based on gender.

The second possibility is that there may be an element of social desirability in the responses to the Vroom-Yetton instrument, leading to a form of method bias (Schmitt & Klimoski, 1991) where gender comes into play. Women may feel constrained to answer the problem sets in a way that suggests they are participative, whether or not their actual management style reflects that behavior. Conversely, men may feel that they should portray themselves as decisive, leading to artificially low scores on the instrument for male respondents.

The third explanation is that because of gender stereotyping, directive behavior by women managers may stand out more than when men exhibit that style.

Some evidence exists to support each of the explanations. The first possibility is supported to some extent by interview comments such as the one by the woman who said that in order to become a partner, a woman had to exhibit male-stereotyped decisiveness. A man from the same firm commented:

> [The gender difference in decision style] appears with junior staff....In my opinion, the males are more apt to come to conclusions on their own and the women actually will seek advice quicker than a male would.

In all, however, only four respondents named the "organization level" as a possible factor in the gender gap (see Table 2). Presumably, if respondents believed that women partners were equally directive as their male colleagues but women at lower levels were not, this would have emerged more strongly in the interview data.

In terms of a social desirability factor in the Vroom-Yetton scores, in this study we did not control for such a possibility. However, responses to the interview questions suggested that both male and female managers had similar views of participation as desirable (in the abstract) but difficult to adhere to in the time-constrained environment of their workplaces.

On the other hand, it is worth noting that Vroom and Jago found discrepancies between what managers said they did (as measured by the Vroom-Yetton problem set) and what subordinates said they did: subordinates saw the managers as more directive than managers' own scores indicated (Vroom & Jago, 1988, p. 93-94). Thus, there is some precedent for believing that the problem sets are subject to a degree of method bias (i.e., differences in the scores result to some extent from the instrument being used rather than from differences in the respondents).

In terms of the present study, however, the implication is that there may be a gender difference in the perceived desirability of a participative style. The stereotype of a manager as a decisive person (who would presumably shun a participative style in favor of a directive one) has already been discussed above. This stereotype was mentioned by five male and two female respondents, but it may have had more power over the men because of societal pressures "to be the guy on TV".

Lastly, how strong is the possibility that women at all levels are in fact more participative (as the scores on the problem set suggest), but that when they act decisively, that counter-stereotypical behavior stands out disproportionately? Indirect evidence on this point comes from the counter-examples cited by respondents when asked if they saw women as more participative. There were six mentions of men who were more participative than women; nine mentions of women who were more directive than men. Often the respondent seemed to have one particular woman manager in mind:

> [I]n my department there's two other managers, one male, one female.
> Specifically I think of those two, and she is definitely more of a[n]
> individual decision, and he tends to be a "let's talk about it" type person.

Other respondents agreed there was a gender difference, but cited directive females as exceptions to the rule:

> I think women are probably more, they empathize a lot more....[T]hen again, you
> see a couple of odd examples that are totally out of character. It's hard to say, but
> I would say in general I would expect...women [to] have a higher score [on
> participation]. That doesn't surprise me.

To sum up, then, there seems to be some evidence in favour of each of the possible explanations given above. What does not seem to be supported in most of the interview answers is the view that there is a gender-based difference in decision styles:

most respondents seemed to believe that personality was independent of gender, and that it played a stronger role than gender in determining an individual's preference for participation.

Participation in the Professional Environment

Even though some respondents felt that a directive style was part of the managerial role, and a larger number believed that participative decision-making was constrained for managers in their firm by the pressures of time, the overall scores on the Vroom-Yetton problem set were similar to those found in a variety of work environments about a decade previously (Vroom & Jago, 1988). One possible reason for this is that in an environment where managers view subordinates as potential colleagues (based on a shared professional training and orientation) there is more room for delegation (in Vroom and Yetton's formulation of their decision-making model, delegation and participation are essentially equated, with participation involving a group of subordinates while delegation involves a single one). The cases in the problem set were formulated as group situations, so delegation was not an option provided to the respondents. However, the degree to which participation was used as an option in the problem sets may reflect the actual incidence of delegation – which does not involve as much time as consultation and participation, assuming the subordinate is up to speed on the problem – within the firms in the sample.

Another possibility is that while respondents in this study were similar to a large group of managers tested ten years before, organizations by and large may have moved in a more participative direction in the interval. Vroom and Jago (1988) argued that this

was the case at the time they conducted their research – i.e., they would have expected to see higher scores on the instrument by now, given a typical group of managers.

The findings of this study led to some unexpected places. We originally undertook the research in an attempt to investigate the influence of a particular organizational feature – presence of equal numbers of male and female managers at the level being investigated – on the gender gap in decision-making. However, the results cast some doubt on previous findings, making it unclear whether the gender gap exists in reality. Six of the 28 studies in Eagly and Johnson's meta-analysis used the Vroom-Yetton problem set to measure decision-making. Ten of the other studies were unpublished doctoral dissertations. In general, there is little evidence on the reliability and validity of instruments (other than Vroom-Yetton) used to measure decision-making in these studies (Eagly & Johnson,1990, appendix; A. Eagly, personal communication, 1996). In addition, to the extent that the studies used paper and pencil instruments to measure participativeness, they may also have been subject to method bias: individual responses to the instruments may have reflected respondents' views of themselves rather than their actual workplace behavior.

The belief that women differ in their approach to management from their male counterparts is deeply engrained in our society and in the management literature (Bass & Avolio, 19--, etc.). It may in fact be the case that women bring their subordinates into the decision-making process more frequently and consistently than do men. However, it appears that we need more evidence based on observation and data collection in actual workplaces in order to firmly assert that this is the case.

Conclusion

Limitations

The research described here had a number of limitations. It involved a relatively small sample, from a particular type of work environment (professional firms). Everyone in the study consented to take part, and this may have led to some form of response bias.

To some extent, the limitations were a result of deliberate choices in the research design process. The first author, with limited time and resources, was determined to collect qualitative as well as quantitative data, and this constrained the sample size. The choice of work environment had to do with both access and the first research question, which made it necessary to investigate workplaces with relatively large numbers of female middle managers. Followup research may be able to overcome some of these limitations and either confirm or disconfirm the somewhat provocative findings detailed here.

Implications for Future Research and Organizational Practice

The present study leaves a number of questions unresolved. One issue that needs further investigation is whether the gender gap that the problem set identified with middle managers would also be present for partners in accounting firms. If so, the issue of whether method bias is partly responsible for these results would require more rigorous examination, through interviews and observation in the workplace. If not, there would seem to be implications for how the organizational culture influences women as they move up in the firm. This in turn might provide support for Hood and Koberg's (1994) theoretical approach: as women move into partnership positions, they need to acculturate and become more like male managers in their workplace. Generally speaking, the issue

of whether and how women managers differ from their male counterparts seems to require more naturalistic investigation. Field studies employing paper and pencil tests, or laboratory studies with student samples, do not give us enough evidence about context to understand why a gender difference, if there is one, actually exists. And even if women are (as some theorists assert – see for example Rosener, 1990) more naturally suited to managerial roles in contemporary organizations, the question remains of how these attitudes can be more widely inculcated, in men and in women whose approach is currently more like that of men. This is a question of vital interest to researchers and practitioners alike.

Table 1. Scores for Participative Decision-making (MLP)

Firm	Sample Mean (S.D.)	Women Mean (S.D.)	Men Mean (S.D.)	Gender Difference in Mean MLP	t-test
1 (9F, 5M)	4.80 (0.80)	4.91 (0.76)	4.59 (0.94)	0.32	-0.70
2 (5F, 6M)	4.99 (0.92)	5.32 (1.23)	4.71 (0.54)	0.61	-1.02
3 (4F, 5M)	5.73 (1.52)	6.55 (1.12)	5.07 (1.56)	1.48	-1.59
4 (5F, 7M)	4.66 (1.29)	5.55 (0.64)	4.02 (1.28)	1.53	-2.44*
5 (3F, 5M)	4.93 (0.96)	5.04 (0.63)	4.87 (1.18)	0.17	-0.24
Totals (26F, 28M)	4.98 (1.12)	5.38 (1.00)	4.61 (1.12)	0.77	-2.66*

*$p < .05$

Table 2. Opinions on Gender Difference in MLP

Question 3: As I mentioned earlier, the "mean level of participation" scores on this instrument tend to be higher for women than for men, suggesting that women prefer a more participative decision-making style. Do you think that this generalization holds true for managers at [your firm]?

Answers:	Men responded	Women responded	Totals
1. Answer is clearcut:			
a. Yes	5	6	11
b. No	14	7	21
c. Not sure	5	5	10
2. Answer contains elements of both yes and no	2	2	4
3. Respondent cites counter-example			
a. male who is more participative	4	2	6
b. female who is less participative	6	3	9
4. Other factors (besides gender) responsible for difference:			
a. age	1	1	2
b. org. level	1	3	4
c. org. function	0	1	1

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