
Deanna L. Burgess, Megan K. McCarty & Nicole E. Iannone, Purdue University
Professor Janice R. Kelly, Mentor

The Glass Cliff Effect

Previous research suggests that members of underrepresented groups may be more likely to attain leadership positions during troubled or risky times. Ryan and Haslam (2005) demonstrated support for this effect for women in what became known as the Glass Cliff effect. Their research showed that women were perceived to be significantly more hirable when the organization’s performance was declining as opposed to improving (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). The purpose of the current study is to examine whether this effect also holds for Black targets.

Skin tone

The current study combines previous research on the Glass Cliff effect with studies done on skin tone of Blacks. In addition to exploring whether the Glass Cliff effect holds for Blacks, we are also interested in whether the pattern of results will differ based on skin tone. Researchers have found that people see dark-skinned Blacks as most qualified for low status jobs, rather than high quality positions and as a result, negative connotations are placed on these individuals. Lighter-skinned individuals are more likely than darker-skinned individuals to be recommended for occupations regardless of educational results will differ based on skin tone. Researchers have found that people see sturdier of skin tone of Blacks. In addition to exploring whether the Glass Cliff effect holds true for racial minorities. It also explores the role of skin tone in the Glass Cliff effect. We hypothesize that Glass Cliff-like Effects will be seen when comparing light-skinned Blacks with qualified Whites in bad performance conditions. Also, regardless of performance condition, dark-skinned Blacks will always be rated lower than light-skinned Blacks or qualified Whites.

Hypothesis 1: There will be a main effect for race such that qualified White candidates will be favored over qualified Black candidates, regardless of skin tone and company performance.

Hypothesis 2: When an organization has a history of poor performance, the light-skinned Black candidate will be more likely to be hired than the darker-skinned Black or White candidates.

Purpose of Present Study

The present study examines whether the Glass Cliff effect holds true for racial minorities. It also explores the role of skin tone in the Glass Cliff effect. We hypothesize that Glass Cliff-like Effects will be seen when comparing light-skinned Blacks with qualified Whites in bad performance conditions. Also, regardless of performance condition, dark-skinned Blacks will always be rated lower than light-skinned Blacks or qualified Whites.

Methods

Participants
157 undergraduate students (79 male and 78 female)

Procedure
Participants were presented with a scenario that described an organization with either good or bad performance that was looking for a candidate to fill an open leadership position. Participants were then presented with pictures along side candidate descriptions of possible candidates to fill the position, one Black candidate (either light-skinned or dark-skinned), one qualified White candidate, and one unqualified White candidate (which served as a filler). Participants were asked to rank the candidates from 1 to 3, with 1 indicating the most favorable ranking, and rate each of the candidates independently on several scales of competence. Finally, participants completed demographic information.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a 2 (company type: good and bad performance company) x 2 (applicant race: Black and White) x 2 (skin tone: light and dark-skinned applicant) repeated measures analysis of variance, with applicant race as a within subjects factor and company type and skin tone as between subjects factors. African American participants (N= 8) were not included in the data analysis. Those participants that ranked the bad candidate above the two good candidates (N= 8) were also eliminated.

References


Results

The predicted main effect of target race was obtained such that Black candidates were overall rated significantly lower than qualified White candidates on candidate ratings (F (1, 139) = 8.418, p = .004 for ratings of competence levels, F (1, 139) = 4.158, p = .043 for ratings of leadership ability, and F (1, 139) = 5.202, p = .023 for ratings of spokesperson representation).

A significant three way interaction between candidate race, skin tone, and company performance level was obtained for evaluations of leadership ability (F (1, 70) = 8.727, p = .004) showing that Whites were rated more positively in good performance conditions, but this is only significant when they are being compared with light-skinned Black applicants. A marginal three way interaction for competence ratings (F (1, 139) = 3.868, p = .051) demonstrates a similar pattern.

A logistic regression analysis found that overall candidate rankings were marginally related to the interaction between skin tone and performance (B = 1.261, p = .069). In good company performance conditions, White candidates were significantly more likely to be ranked as first when paired with the light-skinned candidate, as opposed to being paired with the dark-skinned candidate (B = 1.097, p = .028). However, this effect did not hold true for bad company performance conditions.

Conclusion

Although these results do not completely support what was hypothesized, they do show qualities of a Glass Cliff effect where light-skinned applicants would be hired into more precarious positions than equally qualified White applicants. Also, results were consistent with what was hypothesized in that the White candidate was rated as significantly more favorably than both Black candidates for multiple dimensions of candidate ratings. Future work may investigate explanations for this effect, such as whether darker-skinned Blacks cause race to be more salient than do light-skinned Blacks, leading to more socially acceptable responses. Less salient manipulations of race in future studies may lead to findings that show more Glass Cliff-like tendencies in regards to target race and skin tone.