

Full Length Research Paper

Gender Differences of Perceived Leadership Skills Among Saudi Students

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The aim of this study is to examine female participation in Saudi labor market as leaders. The leadership skills with which students in Saudi universities and colleges can how educational institutions make their students career ready. However, considering the low female participation in the Saudi labor market, exploring the gender differences in leadership skills is equally crucial as the leadership skills acquired in higher education institution can significantly influence employment opportunities. In addition, the gender differences in perceived leadership skills is the fact that the social roles assigned to women in Saudi society bear great significance on how they perceive their skills, which will be discussed further in the discussion portion of this paper.

Keywords: Management, Self-perceived leadership, Gender, Women, Higher Education

Introduction

The Middle East has one of the highest unemployment rates in the world. The realities of youth unemployment in this region have been a concern for governments, policy makers, and scholars. As of 2010, one in every four youth in the region was unemployed (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2011). The problem that faces the region is not only the high unemployment rates but also low labor force participation rates, resulting in very low employment-to-population ratios. According to the ILO's (2011) report on global unemployment trends, the Middle East employment-to-population ratio was 45.4% in 2010, meaning that less than half of the working-age populations actually are employed. However, in Saudi Arabia, the working population-to-population ratio stands at 31.2%, much lower than the regional average (Central Department of Statistics and Information, 2012). That makes the situation more adverse in the Kingdom.

Although the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been witnessing a steady growth of involvement of Saudi youth in the job market, the youth unemployment rate remained at 30.2% in 2009—three times the national unemployment rate in the kingdom (ILO, 2011). A number of factors contribute to the youth employment situation and their participation in the labor force. The literature has suggested that the Middle East region has witnessed an increase in youth population, creating a youth bulge, consequently contributing to the increase in youth unemployment (Roudi, 2011). In addition, female participation

in the labor market remains particularly low at 15% (ILO, 2011).

To tackle the issue of youth unemployment, the Saudi government intensified its efforts to enhance the contribution of the national Saudi workforce in various sectors. One of the country's strategic objectives is to develop the youth capacity to contribute to the Kingdom's social and economic development (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2010). As of 2008, Saudi Youth (age 18-24) represented 35% of the country's working force. Thus, it is not surprising that the Saudi government gives special attention to the role of youth in the Kingdom's development plans, as this population sector represents the future generation of the country's professionals.

In 2010, the Saudi government approved the Kingdom's Ninth Development Plan—a 4-year economic plan that stipulates the development approaches to be followed for the period from 2010 to 2014 (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2010). The Ninth Development Plan (2010-2014) specified certain measures to enable Saudi youth to develop certain skills to ensure their success as active professionals within the national labor force. One area of interest is leadership. The Ninth Development Plan emphasized providing education that “competes for leadership and contributes to building the knowledge society and meets requirements of socioeconomic and environmental development” (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2010, p. 412). These measures are in line with the

2008 World Bank report, which called for an overhaul of the educational system in the Middle East and Northern Africa to a system that delivers “the new skills and expertise necessary to excel in a more competitive environment” (p. 84).

For that reason, an in-depth investigation of the leadership skills that Saudi students are acquiring in universities and colleges becomes necessary to understand how educational institutions are preparing students for the job market. However, considering the low female participation in the Saudi labor market, exploring the gender differences in leadership skills is equally crucial as the leadership skills acquired in higher education institution can significantly influence employment opportunities. Another reason for exploring the gender differences in perceived leadership skills is the fact that the social roles assigned to women in Saudi society bear great significance on how they perceive their skills, which will be discussed further in the discussion portion of this paper (Burke & Collins, 2001).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 by King Abdul Aziz Ibn Abdul Rahman Al Saud through unification of the Kingdoms of Najd and Hijaz. The Kingdom occupies 80% of the Arabian Peninsula covering two million square kilometers of area. The Kingdom is bordered by the Arabian Gulf, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar on the east; the Red Sea on the west; Kuwait, Iraq, and Jordan on the north; and Yemen and Oman on the south. The Saudi population was estimated to be over 27 million in 2010 with a growth rate of 3.2%, which is one of the highest in the region. Males make up 50.9% of the total population, while females make up 49.1% of the population. Non-Saudi residents are estimated to be 31% of the population (Central Department of Statistics and Information, 2010). It is worth noting that the percentage of citizens less than 24 years of age is more than 62%. The number of high school graduates has increased by 443% in the period of 1993-2008 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009). Arabic is the official language, and Islam is the official religion.

Traditionally, like most of the countries in the Islamic world, education in Saudi Arabia took place in the Kuttub, a form of Qur’anic school, in which children were taught Qur’an, Hadith (Prophet sayings), Sunnah (prophet teachings), and the fundamentals of Islamic teaching. Females were taught mostly by private tutors in the confinement of their homes (Alexander, 2012; Hamdan, 2005). The establishment of the Saudi modern educational system can be traced back to just before the establishment of the Kingdom. The first government school was established in 1928. However, it was not until 1939 that the modern educational system of Saudi Arabia was fully institutionalized. The demand for education continued to grow as the population grew. The number of elementary schools reached 182 in 1949, with a total enrollment of 21,409 students compared to a little more than 2,000 students in 1939 (Abdulkareem, 2012; Ministry of Higher Education, 2009). Female education started much later in the Kingdom with the first girls school opening in Riyadh in 1960 (Hamdan, 2005).

The education system in Saudi Arabia is primarily governed by four entities: the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Higher Education, the General Presidency of Girls’ Education, and the General Organization for Technical Education and Vocational Training. The Ministry of Higher Education became an autonomous entity in 1975 to face the increasing numbers of enrollment in both general and higher education. According to Onsmann (2012), the Kingdom’s education system includes

more than 24,000 schools and a large number of colleges and several training institutions . . . The higher education system has expanded to include 24 government universities, 18 primary school teacher’s colleges for men, 80 primary school teacher’s colleges for women, 7 colleges and institutes for health, 12 technical colleges, and 24 private universities and colleges. (p. 512)

The Saudi government allocates over 25% of the total budget to education, including vocational training (Onsmann, 2012). This is a significant proportion of the national budget, underscoring the government’s commitment to address the demand for education among the country’s children and youth. Under the Ninth Development Plan, the Saudi government allocated 200.2 billion SAR for the higher education sector (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2010).

The generous financial support that the higher education sector enjoys is a result of the Kingdom’s vision to build a knowledge-based economy—an economy that is “capable of knowledge production, dissemination and use; where knowledge is a key factor in growth, wealth creation and employment, and where human capital is the driver of creativity, innovation and generation of new ideas” (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2010, p. 87). Consequently, higher education institutions should play a crucial role in the realization of these plans. The knowledge, skills, and attitude that students acquire and the quality of education they receive are critical factors for determining their competitiveness in the labor market in such an economy.

Recently, universities and higher education institutions focused on developing students’ leadership skills as a means of preparing them for the job market (Shertzer & Schuh, 2004; Yarrish, Zula, & Davis, 2010). This trend is motivated by the fact that leadership skills are not innate but acquired. Students are not born leaders, but they can be taught and mentored to be leaders (Fertman & van Linden, 1999). Indeed, leadership is one of the important skills younger youth need to acquire in order to succeed in their professional lives. Gordon (1995) articulated, “Career advancement opportunities . . . will be greatest for those who developed, practiced, and refined leadership skills as part of their educational preparation” (p. 3). Research has confirmed that there is a relationship between education and leadership skills. For instance, Hobbs and Spencer (2002) found that students’ participation in educational program improved their perceived leadership skills. Similarly, Alexander (2011) learned that female students’ perceived leadership skills improved after enrolling in a leadership class.

Zeldin and Camino (as cited in Alexander, 2011) identified five areas of competency that youth need to develop as indicators to leadership skills: (a) communication—persuasive argumentation, public speaking/writing, and participation of others; (b) teamwork—respecting others, performing roles of both leader and follower, building on strengths, and having a commitment to free group input and expression; (c) personal identity—understanding the relationship between oneself and the community, having pride in being a member of a larger group, being aware of areas for self-improvement, and taking responsibility for one’s actions and the resulting consequences;

(d) professionalism—demonstrating tactfulness, understanding protocols, applying appropriate dress and action given appraisal of context, delivering quality work, and positively presenting oneself to others; and (e) project management—setting goals/developing action steps, facilitating meetings, reflecting, and distinguishing between one’s interests and community needs.

The literature on leadership skills and self-perception of these skills has suggested that there are differences among both genders of their perceived skills (Burke & Collins, 2001; Eagly & Karau, 1991; Yarrish et al., 2010). A meta-analysis of the relationship between gender and leadership skills found that in groups without a leader, men emerged as leaders to a greater extent than women. However, it is more likely for women to emerge as social leaders than men (Eagly & Karau, 1991). Moreover, a meta-analysis of 58 studies suggests that while gender plays a role in leadership perception and effectiveness, organizational setting, leadership skills, and training also play a significant role. Eagly, Karau, and Makhijani (1995) concluded that men tend to fare better when leadership is defined in masculine terms, such as military settings, while women performed better when leadership is defined in less masculine terms, such as educational settings roles. On self-perception of leadership skills, Yarrish et al. (2010) concluded that there are significant differences in perceived leadership skills between males and females. According to their study, females perceived cognitive and interpersonal/intrapersonal skills as more important than did the male participants.

Methodology

The current investigation sought to evaluate the effect of gender on perceived leadership skills among Saudi college students. Perceived leadership was measured using the Leadership Skills Inventory (LSI) first developed at Iowa State University in 1980 by Carter and Townsend (Sargent, Pennington, & Sitton, 2003). The five subscales of the LSI—working with groups, understanding self, communicating, making decisions, and leadership—were also evaluated in the context of gender to determine differences as related to these variables. Descriptive data for the sample, including age, number of past leadership experiences, and current major, were also collected.

Research Questions

1. Describe the characteristics of college students completing the Leadership Skills Inventory.
2. Determine if there is a difference in overall self-perceived leadership skills between male and female college students.
3. Determine if there is a difference in the self-perceived ability to work with groups between male and female college students.
4. Determine if there is a difference in self-perceived understanding of self between male and female college students.
5. Determine if there is a difference in self-perceived communication skills between male and female college students.
6. Determine if there is a difference in self-perceived decision-making capability between male and female college students.
7. Determine if there is a difference self-perceived leadership ability between male and female college students.

Hypotheses

Using the seven objectives, six were translated into hypotheses to evaluate perceived leadership skill differences in male and female college students. The hypotheses follow:

- H₁: There is no difference in overall self-perceived leadership skills between male and female college students.
H₂: There is no difference in the self-perceived ability to work with groups between male and female college students.
H₃: There is no difference in self-perceived understanding of self between male and female college students.
H₄: There is no difference in self-perceived communication skills between male and female college students.
H₅: There is no difference in self-perceived decision-making capability between male and female college students.
H₆: There is no difference self-perceived leadership ability between male and female college students.

Research Design

The current investigation employed a quantitative, non-experimental, correlational design via a survey administered online completed by 230 students. Quantitative research follows a deductive paradigm in which data are collected and analyzed to prove or disprove a hypothesis (Greener, 2011). Non-experimental research utilizes a descriptive framework in which the goal is to provide an accurate evaluation of a situation or phenomenon (Muijs, 2004). The approach does not attempt to evaluate cause–effect relationships (e.g., causality). Rather, non-experimental research seeks to identify the relationships that exist in a given situation and, if appropriate, describe the relationship between these variables (Johnson & Christensen, 2010). Based on this foundation, the use of correlation to analyze the data provides a logical foundation for describing the relationships between variables without

demonstrating causality (Brewerton & Millward, 2001). Data were collected using an online survey (i.e., LSI). Surveys are widely used in non-experimental research to collect standardized information from a representative sample of the population (Johnson & Christensen, 2010).

The dependent variables for this investigation were measured using the LSI. Dependent variables included self-perceived leadership ability (total score from the LSI) and self-perceived abilities from the five subscales of the LSI—working with groups, understanding self, communicating, making decision, and leadership. The independent variable measured for the study was gender with number of previous leadership experiences evaluated as a covariate for the research. Saudi college students from a wide range of educational disciplines (i.e., majors) were surveyed in an effort to provide a heterogeneous sample. Because the research employed a non-experimental approach, random assignment of participants to specific groups was not employed.

Correlational Research

A review of correlational research indicates that this method is often viewed as less substantive when compared with experimental research (Goodwin, 2009). Even though this perception exists, Goodwin (2009) asserted that correlational research plays an important and vital role in the development of quantitative investigations and in understanding natural phenomenon. According to this author, experimental research provides a foundation for scholars to manipulate variables and determine the outcome. In comparison, according to Goodwin, correlational research facilitates observation of natural trends and tendencies to provide insight into how events unfold in a natural environment. In this process, Goodwin argued the researcher garners an understanding of how individuals differ from each other rather than an understanding of the general rules that can be applied to all individuals.

Data acquired from a correlational study facilitates insight into the degree to which two variables are related (Marczyk & DeMatteo, 2010). Marczyk and DeMatteo (2010) argued that correlations can be either positive or negative; a positive correlation between two variables indicates that the variables change in the same direction, whereas a negative correlation indicates that the variables change in opposite directions. Based on the trends noted via correlation, Marczyk and DeMatteo argued that it is possible to make certain predictions about the measured variables in other situations; and even though prediction is possible, the results from a correlational study do not imply causality.

Population and Sample

The population for this investigation included all Saudi college students currently enrolled in university courses. The sample for the research was drawn from a convenience sample of college students from various universities in Saudi Arabia agreeing to participate in the research. The convenience sample was used to acquire a broad sample group of both male and female college students. The convenience sample has been

noted as a relatively easy method for collecting a sample that is willing to participate in a research study (Anderson, Sweeney, & Williams, 2008). Even though the convenience sample provides a high degree of ease for data collection, Anderson et al. (2008) noted that this sample cannot be evaluated in terms of its “goodness” (p. 290); in short, the representativeness of the sample cannot be quantified.

Even though the representativeness of the sample cannot be quantified in the context of the current research, the convenience sample was viewed as the most salient choice for collecting data from students attending different colleges and universities within Saudi Arabia. Diversity created in the sample as a result of attending different universities was intended to increase the heterogeneity of the sample population and increase its representativeness overall. Clearly, quantifying the representativeness of the sample is not possible; however, the use of a convenience sample across several different university settings will increase the diversity of the participants.

Data Collection Instrument

The instrument used for this investigation was the LSI. The LSI consists of 21 statements that review different leadership and life skills for the subject (Koch, Townsend, & Dooley, 2005). The instrument utilizes a 5-point Likert scale with 5 = *strongly agree*, 4 = *agree*, 3 = *undecided*, 2 = *disagree*, and 1 = *strongly disagree* (Koch et al., 2005). Based on the rankings provided, the lowest score for the instrument indicating a low level of perceived leadership was 21 with the highest value for the instrument being 105.

In addition to providing an overall score for self-perceived leadership ability, the LSI also contains five subscales that provide an assessment of specific areas integral to perceived leadership. These subscales include working with groups, understanding self, communicating, making decisions, and leadership. Subscale scores also reflect higher and lower values of self-perception for each of the variables. Total scores for each subscale are contingent upon the number of questions for each scale. Participant responses acquired from each item for each scale can be averaged to provide a score for each of the subscale areas. For instance, the decision-making subscale included four items, which totaled produced a score of 4-20. The score could be averaged based on the number of items to provide a numeric value for the subscale. Table 1 provides an overview of the subscales and questions for the LSI.

Table 1 *Subscales for the LSI*

Scale	Item #	Statement
Working with groups	1	I can cooperate and work in a group.
	2	I get along with people around me.
	4	I believe in dividing the work among group members.
	8	I listen carefully to opinions of group members.
	12	I believe that group members are

Scale	Item #	Statement
Understanding self	3	responsible persons. I feel responsible for my actions.
	5	I understand myself.
	13	I am sure of my abilities.
	17	I accept who I am.
Communicating	18	I feel responsible for my decisions.
	10	I can lead a discussion.
	14	I am a good listener.
	19	I can give clear directions.
Making decisions	20	I can follow directions.
	7	I consider all choices before making a decision.
	11	I use past experiences in making decisions.
	15	I use information in making decisions.
Leadership	6	I feel comfortable teaching others.
	9	I am respected by others my age.
	10	I can lead a discussion.
	16	I feel comfortable being a group leader.
	19	I can give clear directions.
	21	I can run a meeting.

Higher numeric rating of each skill translates into a higher perceived ability in a particular area (Koch et al., 2005). Subscale score reliabilities have been reported in the literature. In particular, Thorp, Cummins, and Townsend (1998) reported reliabilities for each of the subscales as follows: working with others, 0.75; understanding self, 0.67; communicating, 0.73; making decisions, 0.63; and leadership, 0.83. Koch et al. (2005) argued that the reliability of the subscales and the total LSI have subsequently been reviewed by other scholars and have proven to be constant.

Data Collection

The online LSI was the principal data collection tool used for this investigation. As previously noted, surveys are widely used in non-experimental research to capture data from a representative sample population (Johnson & Christensen, 2010). Online surveys represent a new platform for dissemination of surveys and data collection. Information regarding online surveys indicates that these instruments fall into the broader category of self-administered surveys (Rubin & Babbie, 2010). Online surveys and self-administered surveys have been found to have a host of strengths and weaknesses (Rubin & Babbie, 2010). According to Rubin and Babbie (2010), self-administered surveys provide the respondent with the ability to complete the survey at a time and place that is convenient. As a result, more individuals may be willing to participate in this type of survey, increasing response rate. In addition, self-administered surveys often do not require extensive instructions or time to complete; and these surveys

are often cheap for the researcher to administer (Rubin & Babbie, 2010). These issues can also increase participation rates for the survey (Rubin & Babbie, 2010).

Even though self-administered surveys can provide a valuable resource for enhancing participation in a research study, Rubin and Babbie (2010) noted that there are some pertinent drawbacks. In particular, these authors asserted that online surveys to not ensure that the sample is representative of the larger population. Because a convenience sample was utilized for this research, recognition of representativeness issues has already been addressed. Rubin and Babbie also acknowledged that self-administered surveys conducted online will not ensure that all individuals recruited for the study will indeed participate. Surveys completed via face-to-face or phone methods will help to ensure that those contacted actually participate in the study. In the present investigation, college students were provided with a web address and asked to complete the LSI online. Because participants completed the survey following initial contact with the researcher, it was not possible to determine the number of students contacted for participation that actually completed the online survey.

Data Analysis

Data for this investigation were recorded via the website through which the LSI was administered to participants. The data captured through the website was evaluated utilizing SPSS Version 18.0 for analysis. The data were evaluated utilizing unpaired *t* tests for both the entire LSI and each of the subscales. *T* tests facilitate the analysis of sample means to determine if statistically significant differences in means exist when comparing groups within a sample (Campbell, 2011). *T* tests were used to determine if the mean for LSI scores and subscales was statistically different for each of the two groups (i.e., male and female). A confidence interval of 0.05 was used as a measure to determine the statistical significance of differences in the mean. Scores were also evaluated based on the number of leadership experiences reported by each of the participants. *T* tests were employed to determine statistical differences in means for the LSI and subscale scores.

Results

Table 2
Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Result (<i>n</i> = 230)
Age	
Range	19-23
Mean	21.1 (<i>SD</i> 0.876)
Gender	
Male	79 (34%)
Female	151 (66%)
Leadership activities	
None	26 (11%)
1-2	128 (56%)
3-4	45 (20%)
5-6	14 (6%)
More than 5	17 (7%)

Table 3
Total Instrument and Subscale Scores for Females

Scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Median	Low/High
Total score	85.0	2.340	83.0	40/100
Work in groups	18.3	0.669	17.0	5/25
Understanding of self	19.0	0.141	19.0	5/25
Perceived communication	17.5	0.443	17.0	4/20
Decision making	8.9	0.543	9.0	3/15
Perceived leadership	21.3	0.973	21.0	6/30

Table 4
Total Instrument and Subscale Scores for Males

Scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Median	Low/High
Total score	88.5	2.090	87.0	42/105
Work in groups	16.5	0.579	16.0	5/25
Understanding of self	17.2	0.887	17.0	5/25
Perceived communication	15.2	1.290	15.0	4/20
Decision making	13.2	0.679	13.0	3/15
Perceived leadership	26.4	0.998	26.0	6/30

Table 5
T Test Data (Probability) for Gender

Scale	<i>t</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>p</i>
Total score	-1.936	0.5541	0.049
Work in groups	-6.781	0.4321	0.009
Understanding of self	-7.765	0.8165	0.014
Perceived communication	-5.431	0.7654	0.017
Decision making	-4.212	0.6881	0.022
Perceived leadership	-3.212	0.9894	0.032

The results provided in this investigation indicate that the differences between means for both the entire survey and each of the subscales are significant at the 0.05 level. While the results indicate that gender differences are important, *t* tests only measure the statistical significance of the differences between means (Motulsky, 2010). Only by examining the scores for males and females is it possible to identify where differences exist. Based on the data provided in Tables 3 and 4, it is possible to see that female college student scored higher in areas of working in groups, understanding of self, and communication. Males scored higher in areas of decision making and perceived leadership. Although total scale scores were statistically different, the probability is close to the $p = 0.05$ limit set. Overall, the differences between males and females on the LSI are not that substantial.

Discussion

The results of this investigation indicate female college students perceive themselves to be quite adept at working in groups, understanding themselves, and communicating with

others when compared with males. However, they do not perceive themselves to be better than males at decision making or overall leadership. To understand the gender differences in perceived leadership skills, the social role theory could give some explanations (Eagly, Karau, et al., 1995; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000).

The social role theory was developed to understand why males and females behave differently in certain settings. The social role theory suggests gender differences in social behavior results from the society expectations of the social role associated with each gender. Generally speaking, “Women and men adjust to sex-typical roles by acquiring the specific skills and resources linked to successful role performance and by adapting their social behavior to role requirements” (Eagly, Wood, et al., p. 126). In other words, people tend to engage in activities and acquire skills that help them to successfully perform tasks that are associated with their social roles. In societies where gender division of labor is prevalent and where men are the owners of property and the traditional breadwinner, it is more likely that male students will adapt to their social role by developing decision-making skills and general leadership. It is also more likely that female expectations of their perceived social role will have an impact on their perceptions about leadership in the labor market.

On the other hand, until recently in the Saudi society, “it is believed that the role of women was basic to maintaining the structure of the family and therefore of society” (Hamdan, 2005, p. 45). The social role that assigned women to be the bearers of the family and society, in general, leads them to acquire skills that are “interpersonally facilitative and friendly behaviors that can be termed communal” (Eagly, Wood, et al., 2000, p. 126). Therefore, it is not surprising that female students perceived themselves as better communicators and better in working in groups—qualities that match their social role. The complications, however, are that in a competitive job market, it is important that female students acquire leadership skills that make them more employable.

Recommendations

The results of this investigation indicate that for female college students there are specific strengths and weaknesses in perceived leadership. While female college students perceive themselves to be quite adept at working in groups, understanding themselves, and communicating with others when compared with males, they do not perceive themselves to be better than males at decision making or overall leadership. In terms of cultivating leadership capabilities in female college students, it is evident that specific areas of focus may be needed to help bolster how females view their leadership capabilities (O’Bannon, Garavalia, Renz, & McCarther, 2010). By developing leadership programs for women in this manner, it may be possible to target specific leadership deficits and improve skills to create well-rounded leaders (Debebe, 2009).

It would also be important for scholars to further investigate the gender differences of leadership skills and determine how social/gender roles as determined in the Saudi culture and the aspirations in education sector impact students' leadership skills in respect to the labor market

Limitations

Although the current research provides important insight into perceived leadership skills among Saudi college students, there are some limitations to the research. First, the sample size of 230 students is relatively small in comparison with all college students currently enrolled in colleges and universities in Saudi Arabia. Second, participants were drawn from a convenience sample. Both of these issues impact the generalizability of the findings to the larger group of Saudi college students. Thus, while the study does provide insight, it may not fully explicate the role of gender in perceived leadership among all Saudi college students

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