



Are male leaders penalized for seeking help? The influence of gender and asking behaviors on competence perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This study draws on research derived from role congruity theory (RCT) and the status incongruity hypothesis (SIH) to test the prediction that male leaders who seek help will be evaluated as less competent than male leaders who do not seek help. In a field setting, Study 1 showed that seeking help was negatively related to perceived competence for male (but not female) leaders. In an experimental setting, Study 2 showed that this effect was not moderated by leadership style (Study 2a) or a gender-specific context (Study 2b). Study 2b further showed that the cognitive tenets of RCT rather than the motivational view espoused by the SIH explained our findings. Specifically, leader typicality (perceptions of help seeking as an atypical behavior for male leaders; the RCT view), and not leader weakness (a proscribed behavior for male leaders; the SIH view), mediated our predicted moderation.

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In today's rapidly changing and complex workplaces, leaders often need and seek help from their subordinates to enact change, make effective decisions, and successfully expend scarce resources (Charan & Colvin, 1998; George & Bennis, 2008; Smith, 2007; Terry, Rao, Ashford, & Socolof, 2009). Seeking help is an effective strategy that leaders can use to increase learning, foster creativity, and enhance organizational performance (Edmondson, 1999, 2002; George, 2007; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006; Kotter, 1999; Lee, 2001; McDonald & Westphal, 2010; Schein, 2009; Sutton, 2010; Westphal, 1999). Although the merits of help seeking are considerable, previous research has suggested that help seeking may undermine perceptions of one's competence (DePaulo & Fisher, 1980; Fisher & Nadler, 1974; Lee, 1997, 1999, 2002; Nadler & Fisher, 1976). Perceptions of competence are integral not only to judgments of leadership effectiveness (Lord & Maher, 1991; Rudman & Glick, 2001), but also to the normative characteristics that are expected of the male gender role (Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie, & Reichard, 2008). The competence costs that one suffers as a result of asking for help may be particularly salient for those who occupy a leadership role, and especially for men. Hence, the current investigation asks the following question: Do male leaders suffer competence costs when they ask subordinates for help?

At least two theoretical perspectives provide insight into the response to this critical question: role congruity theory (RCT) and the status inconsistency hypothesis (SIH). Traditional research on gender and leadership, generally consistent with RCT, suggests that, all things being equal, men in leadership roles, as compared to women in leadership roles, generally do *not* suffer substantial competence costs due to the overlap between the expectations of the male gender and the leadership roles (for a review, see Eagly & Karau, 2002). Because the agentic characteristics and behaviors ascribed to the male gender role are congruent with typical leadership roles, men are more easily categorized as leaders than women, and men's behaviors are evaluated as more prototypical of leader behavior

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than women's behaviors (Nye & Forsyth, 1991; Scott & Brown, 2006). As a result of this assumption of prototypicality, male leaders are frequently evaluated more favorably than female leaders, especially when female leaders engage in agentic behaviors, such as dominance and assertiveness, which are explicitly proscribed for their female gender role (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; Johnson et al., 2008; Rudman, 1998). Moreover, conventional gender and leadership research that has identified greater behavioral freedom for male leaders and few competence costs for men occupying leadership roles (Carli, 1990; Carli, LaFleur, & Loeber, 1995) has focused primarily on *influence* behaviors (both communal and agentic) that closely map onto prototypical leadership expectations (Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980). In aggregate, this research suggests that the extent to which help seeking behaviors—interpersonal requests for information, assistance, or advice to remedy difficulties or even failure (Lee, 1997, 1999, 2002; Sandoval & Lee, 2006)—could benefit or undermine male perceptions of competence would depend on the degree to which help seeking is perceived as a *prototypical* leadership behavior for men.

The SIH (Moss-Racusin, 2015; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012), a burgeoning theoretical perspective, offers an alternative process by which such negative perceptions may occur for men. According to the SIH, just as dominance and other agentic behaviors are proscribed for women, communality and other feminine-like behaviors that may convey weakness are proscribed for men (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). When men enact proscribed behaviors that demonstrate weakness, this can alter their expected rank on the gender hierarchy (e.g., perceptions that men are higher in status than women are). Because motivations to sustain existing social hierarchies are prevalent (Jost & Banaji, 1994), the change in rank on the hierarchy resulting from men showing weakness—a low-status behavior explicitly proscribed for men—can result in negative evaluations of them (Moss-Racusin, 2015; Rudman et al., 2012). Indeed, existing studies show that men are evaluated negatively when exhibiting behaviors or displaying traits that may be interpreted as weak (Heilman et al., 2004; Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). Hence, contrary to RCT, which suggests that competence costs may occur because help seeking may not represent a prototypical leadership behavior for men, and may reduce the overlap between the male gender and leadership roles, SIH suggests that competence costs may arise because help seeking conveys weakness, a proscriptive attribute for men.

On one hand, help seeking may not represent a prototypical leader behavior because it involves showing vulnerability (Lee, 1999). Observers may view help seekers as dependent upon those whom they ask for help, and therefore lacking the competence to complete tasks on their own (DePaulo & Fisher, 1980). Although help-seeking behaviors can facilitate a resource flow from subordinates to leaders (Schein, 2009), this resource flow runs counter to prototypical views of leaders as influencing followers, providing resources to followers, and having answers to problems (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003). Because help seeking runs counter to existing leadership expectations, this behavior may negatively affect men's perceived competence. On the other hand, because weakness is proscribed for men (Rudman et al., 2012), and help seeking may engender weakness (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Good, Dell, & Mintz, 1989), engaging in these behaviors may be particularly problematic for men, especially those in leadership positions. As such, this study suggests first that when male leaders seek help, perceptions of their competence will become lower relative to those of male leaders who do not seek help. Second, this study pits the cognitive tenets of RCT against the motivational view of the SIH to ascertain if this proposed difference occurs because help seeking is not perceived as a prototypical leadership behavior for men or if the behavior connotes weakness, a proscribed attribute for men.

This study contributes to the literature on gender and leadership in two important ways. First, the current research integrates the status incongruity perspective into the ongoing dialogue, usually dominated by RCT, about the influence of gender on leadership to potentially reveal a competence cost for men who occupy a leadership role. Second, the study expands the types of behaviors considered in the gender and leadership literature to include help seeking, which can assist leaders in obtaining valuable resources (Bamberger, 2009) but at the same time diminish perceptions of their competence (DePaulo, 1978). According to leadership categorization theory (LCT), perceptions of competence constitute one of the strongest predictors of leadership (Lord, Foti, & DeVader, 1984; Lord & Maher, 1991). Following LCT, the study of help seeking may provide substantial insight into views of effective leadership perceptions. The current study tested our predictions across one field and two experimental studies to enhance external and internal validity.

Role congruence and help seeking

Social roles consist of sets of shared assumptions and expectations about the behavior of actors in particular social contexts (Biddle, 1979). RCT posits that the female gender role competes with the leader role (Eagly & Karau, 2002). That is, minimal overlap exists between the female gender and leadership roles because the communal expectations (e.g., kind, helpful, and warm) that comprise the female gender role diverge from the agentic expectations (e.g., assertive, independent, and decisive) that comprise the leadership role (Brenner, Tomkiewicz, & Schein, 1989; Schein, 1973; Willemssen, 2002). Because the female and leadership roles are deemed mostly incongruent, female targets who are considered for possible leadership positions are perceived as possessing minimal leadership potential (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and are not easily categorized into leadership roles (Nye & Forsyth, 1991; Scott & Brown, 2006). Moreover, when women do occupy leader roles and violate communal expectations proscribed to the female role by fulfilling the agentic requirements expected of the leadership role, they are evaluated negatively for doing so (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Because agentic behaviors, such as dominance and assertiveness, are explicitly proscribed for women (Prentice & Carranza, 2002), when they try to lead in this manner, negative perceptions of their effectiveness as leaders can ensue (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

In contrast, RCT posits that the expectations of the male and leader roles converge (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Favorable male leader evaluations are mostly attributed to similarities in descriptive stereotypes (beliefs about how group members behave) between the male gender role and the leader role (Brenner et al., 1989; Schein, 2001; Scott & Brown, 2006). One of the earliest empirical demonstrations of the masculine nature of leadership role expectations was Virginia Schein's (1973) study in which male managers at

insurance companies across the United States were asked to rate “women in general,” “men in general,” and “successful middle managers” on a 92-item attribute inventory. The results demonstrated strong agreement between the ratings of “men in general” and “successful middle managers,” but only weak agreement between ratings of “women in general” and “successful middle managers.” Heilman, Block, Martell, and Simon (1989) replicated Schein’s findings and extended this earlier research by showing that descriptive traits of male managers were viewed as more similar to successful managers than were descriptive traits of female managers. Furthermore, almost 30 years after Schein’s groundbreaking research, Willemssen (2002) noted a pattern of findings similar to Schein’s and showed that, in open-ended descriptions of a successful manager, participants indicated male-biased imagery by using the terms *he*, *him*, or *his* more frequently than the terms *she*, *her*, or *hers*. These findings demonstrate a perceived convergence between the male gender and leadership roles.

Additional research suggests that the expected overlap between the two roles provides more behavioral leeway for male rather than female leaders. For example, Jago and Vroom’s (1982) study showed that men were evaluated as superior to women when they exhibited autocratic behaviors and equal to women when they exhibited participative leadership behaviors. Moreover, Carli (1990) demonstrated that men were seen as equally persuasive when they used assertive or tentative speech. Carli (1998) also showed that female confederates were more influential if they had previously agreed with participants, whereas male confederates were influential regardless of prior agreement or disagreement. These findings suggest that due to the significant similarities between the expectations for the male and leadership roles, male leaders may engage in a broader array of behaviors (i.e., agentic and communal) than female leaders without substantial penalty or disadvantage.

Although these findings clearly demonstrated an advantage for male leaders, the research heavily focused on behaviors—both communal (e.g., participative, feminine, agreement, and warmth expressed while persuading another) and agentic (e.g., assertive, directive, masculine, and capacity expressed while persuading another)—that involved leaders or participants *influencing* the actions of their followers, subordinates, or other participants. In other words, the male leaders in these studies displayed communal and agentic (mostly top-down leader-to-follower) influence behaviors that affected, directed, and guided the actions of others. Accordingly, their competence was likely not in question but rather implied because of the nature of the exhibited influence behaviors. The theory of downward social comparison (Festinger, 1954) supports this assertion, in that perceivers view an attempt to influence others as indicative of having greater resources (Blau, 1964), power (French & Raven, 2004), and status (Ridgeway, 1991), all of which have been associated with perceptions of greater competence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002).

Help-seeking behaviors are similar to influence behaviors, as both are interpersonal and proactive, often resulting in the acquisition of needed resources (Flynn & Lake, 2008). However, help-seeking behaviors in the domain of leadership differ from influence behaviors because, unlike influence behaviors, help-seeking behaviors imply dependence upon the recipient of the request for help. For leaders, seeking help suggests that the leader cannot accomplish the task alone. Help-seeking shifts the direction of influence, such that subordinates are not merely required to accomplish the leader’s goal, but are relied upon to remedy a difficult occurrence. This resource flow runs counter to prototypical behaviors of leaders as influencing followers by providing resources and having the answers to problems (Ashford et al., 2003). Consequently, the benefits and behavioral freedom that generally accrue to male leaders may be dampened sharply when they engage in help seeking. In other words, help seeking, a non-prototypical leader behavior, may reduce the perceived overlap between the male and leader roles. Accordingly, we predict that male leaders who seek help will be evaluated as less prototypical leaders than male leaders who do not seek help. Extensive research has demonstrated that non-prototypical leaders are evaluated less favorably than prototypical leaders (Foti, Fraser, & Lord, 1982; Foti & Lord, 1987; Lord, DeVader, & Alliger, 1986; Phillips, 1984). Given that help seeking is a non-prototypical leadership behavior that can minimize one’s ability to influence others, one of the central tenets of leadership (Kotter, 2001), we predict that this distinction will help explain the diminished influence of help seeking on perceptions of competence for male leaders.

Status incongruence and help seeking

As compared to RCT, the SIH offers a different mechanism by which men will incur competence costs for seeking help. According to the SIH (Moss-Racusin, 2015; Rudman et al., 2012), men are inextricably linked to high status, whereas women are generally relegated to a lower rung on the gender hierarchy. The SIH proffers that men who exhibit communal characteristics that specifically convey weakness are status incongruent because portrayals of weakness are proscribed for men but not for women (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Hence, men ought not display behaviors that convey weakness because such behaviors are low in status and incongruent with the gender hierarchy (Moss-Racusin, 2015; Rudman et al., 2012). Because motives to maintain functioning social hierarchies are generally high (Jost & Banaji, 1994), people may inherently oppose men who are perceived as weak. Hence, motivational factors may result in perceptions that men who seek help are weak, and these lowered status perceptions may result in a backlash.

The backlash effect—that is, suffering negative consequences for violating gender norms (Rudman, 1998)—typically refers to women who display proscriptive behaviors (e.g., agentic or masculine behaviors; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Heilman et al., 2004; Phelan, Moss-Racusin, & Rudman, 2008). However, men also face a backlash on a variety of dimensions, including decreased perceptions of competence, for demonstrating behaviors or exhibiting characteristics that may be akin to weakness. For example, Rudman (1998) showed that self-effacing behaviors, such as appearing meek or humble, decreased competence perceptions for men but not for women. Also, Rudman and Glick (1999) showed that male job applicants who behaved communally by speaking modestly about their skills and accomplishments were evaluated as less competent than male applicants who behaved agentially, conveying confidence and providing specific examples of their achievements. Furthermore, Heilman and Wallen (2010) showed that this gender-incongruent behavior may not only influence competence perceptions but also negatively influence perceptions of leader effectiveness. Specifically, these scholars showed that men extracted a “wimpiness” penalty when they

demonstrated success in a stereotypically female job, such as a relationship counselor, as compared to a stereotypically male job, such as financial advisor. Men who occupied gender-inconsistent positions were perceived as weaker and less effective leaders than their male and female counterparts in gender-consistent jobs. These findings suggest that the extent to which a backlash will result in diminished perceptions of competence for male leaders likely depends upon the degree to which help seeking conveys weakness.

Existing research suggests that help seeking may indeed connote weakness. Help seeking involves a request for resources to help solve a specific problem (Bamberger, 2009; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The act of seeking help conveys that the seeker's prior efforts to solve the problem have failed to produce a viable solution (Baumeister, 1982), and the seeker is dependent upon the help-giver to move forward in a new direction (Mueller & Kamdar, 2011). Furthermore, help seeking involves interpersonal costs, as help-seekers can be viewed as relatively inferior, incompetent, weak, and dependent on others to achieve important goals (DePaulo & Fisher, 1980; Lee, 1997). In counseling psychology, Good et al. (1989) argue that because help seeking is so incongruent with societal values associated with men, they may experience help seeking as both a sign of failure and weakness.

Given that help seeking may represent weakness, male leaders who engage in help seeking may be particularly susceptible to negative evaluations of their competence (a dimension that is presumed to be a prescriptive norm for men). This may occur because male leaders who ask for help are at risk for gender status violations, as help seeking does not align with the high status ascribed to their gender. Hence, we predicted that male leaders who sought help would be evaluated as less competent than male leaders who did not seek help because help seeking is indicative of weakness.

Study overview

One field study (Study 1), along with two experimental studies (Studies 2a and 2b), tested our predictions and thus enhanced the external and internal validity of our findings. Study 1 tested the overarching prediction supported by both RCT and the SIH: Male leaders who sought help would be evaluated as less competent relative to male leaders who did not seek help. Study 2 examined the potential tension between these two theoretical perspectives by investigating the mechanisms by which the proposed effect would occur. Also, one of the strongest threats to perceptions of leader competence is likely to occur when they seek assistance in accomplishing goals central to their leadership objectives. Accordingly, the studies focus on help seeking initiated by leaders and directed toward others to remedy struggle or manage difficulty in carrying out a leader's job tasks and responsibilities.

Based on the tenets of RCT and the SIH, we do not expect the competence of women leaders to differ on the extent to which they engage in help seeking behaviors. Women leaders should not extract competence costs for seeking help because, although weakness is proscribed for men, it is tolerated for women (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Moreover, although agentic behaviors are explicitly proscribed for women because they are incongruent with gender hierarchies, the SIH suggests that communal behaviors that may be akin to help seeking are, on average, status neutral for women on the gender hierarchy, conveying neither high nor low status (Rudman et al., 2012). Furthermore, although RCT posits that women are evaluated less favorably than men when being considered for *potential* leadership roles and when displaying masculine, agentic behaviors when *occupying* leadership positions, the theory suggests that adding communality to their leadership behavior may temper negative evaluations, and even enhance positive reactions, for women in leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In support of this contention, both field research (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Engen, 2003) and experimental research (Powell, Butterfield, & Bartol, 2008) have shown that women are rated favorably on most dimensions of transformational leadership, a leadership construct comprised of behaviors consistent with communal characteristics (Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999; Bass, 1985; Judge & Bono, 2000). In fact, women are evaluated as both communal and competent when occupying top leadership positions (Rosette & Tost, 2010). Hence, leading communally and engaging in interpersonal behaviors such as help seeking should not be detrimental to others' perceptions of women leaders' competence.

Study 1

Study 1 explored the question of whether male leaders experience greater social costs in terms of competence than female leaders when seeking help in a field setting. Help seeking has been shown to occur at a lower frequency for higher status individuals (Lee, 1997), especially men (Lee, 2002); hence, Study 1 attempted to identify a context where leaders would likely engage in help seeking to some extent. The research site required that participants lead others on a variety of tasks during a leadership venture. The purpose of the venture was to help the participants develop leadership skills during a wilderness excursion. Because the leaders were inexperienced at problem solving in this environment, which was rich with potential for failure from such factors as changing weather, injury, and lack of technical experience, the leaders would need to seek help from subordinates in order to achieve their goals, thereby making this an ideal setting in which to study this phenomenon.

Method

Participants and procedures

Of the 144 business students enrolled in seven leadership ventures, 65 students completed the post-venture questionnaire—a response rate of 45%, which is consistent with prevailing standards for survey research (Baruch, 1999; Baruch & Holtom, 2008; Hinkin & Holtom, 2009). The sample included 38 men and 27 women who ranged in age from 25 to 35 years ($M = 28.20$, $SD = 2.15$). Although specific demographics were not available for the students who chose not to participate in the study, the demographics of our sample are comparable to the demographics in the business school from which the sample was drawn (gender—men (62%), women (38%); average age—28 years).

Each venture lasted an average of 1.3 weeks and focused on learning or developing skills in a challenging and unfamiliar environment. Such skills included articulating a vision, communicating complex information clearly, setting team goals, making rapid decisions, holding others accountable, giving and receiving feedback, and managing individual and team outcomes. There were seven individual ventures including: (1) Antarctica—ski sledding and mountaineering on a glacial ice cap, (2) Atacama (Chile)—mountaineering, mountain biking and rock climbing in the desert, (3) Cotopaxi (Ecuador)—climbing a volcano, (4) Patagonia (Chile)—rock climbing, mountaineering and sailing in sub-Antarctic wilderness, (5) Alaska—mountaineering through a national park and preserve, (6) Kilimanjaro (Tanzania)—climbing mount Kilimanjaro and taking a safari across the plains, and (7) Wyoming—mountaineering in a national park. On each leadership venture, administrators randomly assigned each participant to act as “leader of the day.”¹ The participants occupying the role of leader on a specific day were expected to organize, coordinate, and plan all outdoor and learning activities, such as feedback sessions, for a single day of the venture. Immediately upon their completion of the leadership venture, the participants completed a post-questionnaire. The survey questions were tailored to the field context. Specifically, one of the authors observed a venture that was not included in the current study sample and then collaborated with university administrators to ensure that the items included on the survey questionnaire were in accord with the venture context.

Because each of the seven ventures included an average of 8.3 participants, we chose to split the sample of participant ratings such that the study participants who rated leaders on help seeking were not the same participants who rated the leaders on competence.² Specifically, we randomly assigned each participant a unique number within the sample and employed even-numbered participants within a given venture to assess a leader's help seeking, and odd-numbered participants to assess a leader's competence. This method ensured that the raters within each venture who assessed help seeking for a given target leader were not the same raters who assessed competence for the same target leader. Although this method effectively eliminated single-source bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), the split-sample design can be limited by having a somewhat small number of within cluster observations in which case a chance occurrence in the split could account for the findings. To address this possibility we also employed analysis using the odd-numbered participants within a given venture to assess a leader's help seeking, and the even-numbered participants within a given venture to assess a leader's competence.

The odd-numbered participants' assessments of help seeking was highly correlated with the even-numbered participants' assessments of help seeking ($r = .79, p = .00$). Also, the odd-numbered participants' assessments of competence was highly correlated with the even-numbered participants' assessments of competence ($r = .70, p = .00$). Furthermore, the pattern of results was the same regardless of whether we employed even-numbered participants' assessments of help seeking and odd-numbered participants' assessment of competence, or odd-numbered participants' assessment of help seeking and even-numbered participants' assessment of competence. Knowing that the odd- and even-numbered participants' assessments were correlated, and that the pattern of results held regardless of which combination of raters we employed gives us greater assurance that our findings are reliable. All questions were measured on a 7-point Likert-scale anchored by 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much so*).

Help seeking

To assess help seeking, we asked the participants to consider how the target leader performed during the leadership venture when acting in the role of “leader of the day.” That is, we were explicitly interested in how participants evaluated the target occupying a specified leadership role. Peers rated each target leader on the following question: “To what extent did this person ask for help when in the leadership role?” ($M = 2.62, SD = 1.19$). Because we split the sample, an average of 4.5 venture participants rated each target member on help seeking. An intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC2) identified an acceptable level of inter-rater reliability for the single-item help-seeking measure ($ICC2 = .65$). Previous research has proposed that using a single-item measure can be appropriate when multiple raters evaluate a single target, as this allows for the calculation of inter-rater reliability (Amabile & Mueller, 2008; Hennessey, Amabile, & Mueller, 2010; Mueller, 2012).

Competence

An average of 4.6 venture participants rated each leader on perceived competence. Participants rated each target leader on three items central to the context of the leadership venture. The items began with the stem, “To what extent did you view the person as...” and concluded with one of the following: “a competent leader?” “competent in managing difficult relationships?” and “competent in technical tasks?” The composite items shared a univariate factor structure, and inter-item consistency was high (*Cronbach's* $\alpha = .87$; $M = 5.04, SD = .95$). An intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC2) identified that inter-rater consistency was high ($ICC2 = .76$).

Analyses

As the data included participants nested within ventures, we used analyses that appropriately accounted for non-independence of the model residuals within ventures due to between-venture differences (Nezlek & Zyzniewski, 1998). The model included only individual-level variables; thus, its focus was on predicting individual-level variance rather than group-level variance. Accounting for group-level variance, however, was necessary to obtain valid inferences at the individual level.

Given these considerations, we employed SAS General Linear Modeling whereby venture was included as a clustering variable in the SAS ABSORB statement (Allison, 2005). This type of fixed effects approach allowed us to control for group-level variance and to

¹ Leaders of the day were not assigned on travel days and were usually not assigned on the first and last day at the venture location. On average a leader of the day was selected for 5 to 6 days of the venture.

² Only those venture participants who agreed to partake in the study were included as target leaders on the survey questionnaire.

rule out the possibility of any third variable at the group level that might account for our findings (Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2014). In addition, help seeking was grand-mean centered to enhance the interpretation of the lower-order effects. See descriptive statistics and correlation matrix in Table 1.

Results

We regressed perceived competence on gender and help seeking and the related two-way interaction, controlling for venture level variance with the fixed effects. The model revealed no main effect of leader gender ($\beta = -.13, p = .56$) but a significant negative main effect for seeking help when in a leadership role ($\beta = -.43, p < .01$). Further, the interaction term between leader gender and seeking help was significant ($\beta = .44, p < .05$). Fig. 1 displays the plot of the interaction. The simple slope for the relationship between seeking help in a leadership role and competence for men was significant and negative ($\beta = -.44, p < .01$). The simple slope for the relationship between seeking help in a leadership role and competence for women was not significant ($\beta = .00, p = .99$).

Discussion

As predicted, and consistent with the tenets of both RCT and the SIH, help seeking was negatively related to perceptions of competence for male leaders, whereas there was no significant relationship between help seeking and perceptions of competence for female leaders. Although these findings are consistent with our theoretical rationale, they have at least two limitations. First, administering a survey questionnaire in a field setting did not allow us to assess causality or to control for potential sources of extraneous variance that might co-vary with the independent and dependent variables and thereby account for the results (Williams & Podsakoff, 1989). Furthermore, although the response rate was within the average range for a survey study, we wanted to diminish concerns associated with non-response bias—concerns mitigated when replicating findings using multiple methods (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007).

Second, although we controlled for between-level variance (venture level variance) such that the results were not likely attributable to the venture context, we cannot speak as to whether the interaction between help seeking and gender on leader competence would be generalizable to different contexts. For example, it is possible that help seeking only represents a problem for men who engage in the behavior in masculine-oriented contexts where status violations for male leaders may be more salient. In addition, we did not consider leaders' styles in this study. It is possible that seeking help in a more task-oriented way may mitigate the penalty extracted against men. Thus, we conducted two experimental studies, Studies 2a and 2b, to address these limitations. In addition, Study 2b tested the predicted mediating mechanisms, leader typicality and weakness perceptions.

Study 2

This study sought to replicate the results of Study 1 and to extend the findings in two very important ways. First, the Study 1 effects may be restricted to a particular manner in which leaders seek help. An interpersonal leadership style, marked by expressing consideration for followers and a desire to build relationships with them, is well-matched with the female gender role (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2002; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly et al., 2003). By contrast, a task-oriented leadership style, focused on goal attainment, task-structuring activities, and directing subordinate behavior, is more compatible with the male gender role (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2002; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly et al., 2003). Given its emphasis on communality and collaboration, an interpersonal leadership style may exacerbate perceptions of weakness for men. Men may be able to not only avoid diminished competence perceptions but enhance perceptions of competence by seeking help using a leadership style that is closer to the male gender role, namely a task-

Table 1
Descriptives and correlation matrix for Study 1, $n = 65$.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1) Venture 1	.11	.31													
2) Venture 2	.11	.31	-.12												
3) Venture 3	.06	.24	-.09	-.09											
4) Venture 4	.15	.36	-.15	-.15	-.11										
5) Venture 5	.15	.36	-.15	-.15	-.11	-.18									
6) Venture 6	.09	.29	-.11	-.11	-.08	-.14	-.14								
7) Venture 7	.11	.31	-.12	-.12	-.09	-.15	-.15	-.11							
8) Gender (1 = male)	.42	.50	.09	-.01	-.04	-.16	.10	-.05	.09						
9) Asking for help 1	2.77	1.25	-.03	.33**	-.23	-.40**	.24	-.25*	.06	.21					
10) Asking for help 2	2.62	1.20	-.15	.22	-.34**	-.15	.14	-.21	.00	.06	.79**				
11) Interaction term 1	1.12	1.54	.00	-.04	.29*	.09	-.10	.08	-.10	.86**	.42**	.36**			
12) Interaction term 2	1.28	1.75	-.05	-.13	.27*	.24	-.16	.12	-.13	.89**	.51**	.27*	.94**		
13) Competence 1	5.04	.95	-.06	-.15	-.28*	.12	.32*	-.05	.06	-.03	-.18	-.16	.04	-.18	
14) Competence 2	5.19	.82	-.13	-.05	-.15	.10	-.08	.23	-.08	-.21	-.31**	-.22	.056	-.12	.70**

Please note. *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

Asking for help 1 and asking for help 2 represent odd-numbered participants' and even-numbered participants' assessment of help seeking, respectively. Competence 1 and competence 2 represent odd-numbered participants' and even-numbered participants' assessment of leader competence, respectively. The interaction term 1 (#13) in the table above includes the interaction term between gender and asking for help 1. The interaction term 2 (#14) in the table above includes the interaction term between gender and asking for help.

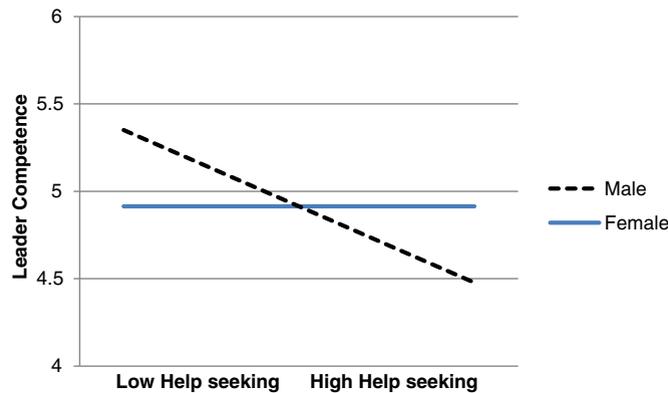


Fig. 1. Interaction between leader asking behavior and leader gender predicting leader competence. Note. The intercept is not estimated when employing the ABSORB statement in PROC GLM. Hence we re-estimated the model using PROC GLM placing “venture” in the CLASS command and including venture-level dummy variables as predictors of leader competence to control for any venture level variance.

oriented leadership style. To assess whether the observed phenomenon was restricted to a particular manner in which men seek help, we included a third condition in Study 2a: leadership style.

In addition to leadership style, the extent to which people perceive the context to be masculine or feminine may influence the manner in which they evaluate help-seeking behavior. For example, Heilman and Wallen (2010) showed that when men were portrayed as successful in a female-oriented context, they were evaluated as less effective and less influential than women who were portrayed as successful in the same context. In addition, Rudman and Fairchild (2004) showed that individuals sabotaged men who scored high on communal assessment tests, thwarting their likelihood of subsequent success, because the men’s performance deviated from the expected male gender role. Moreover, a gendered context can influence the extent to which men and women are expected to ask for help (Lee, 1997), which may subsequently influence perceptions of competence. To ascertain if a gendered context moderates our primary prediction, we include the type of business setting (masculine, feminine) as a third factor in the study design for Study 2b.

In addition to investigating potential boundary conditions (i.e., leadership style and gendered industry) for our general prediction, the study seeks to replicate the findings from Study 1 in a more controlled setting. We conduct Study 2 in an experimental laboratory setting to control for extraneous variance by maintaining constant stimuli, which participants experience across conditions, and varying only our independent variables. This provides a means of triangulating the results (Jick, 1979) and additional confidence that the findings would be generalizable beyond the specific field context employed in Study 1 (Tsang & Kwan, 1999). We conduct two separate studies, each with a separate third factor to examine if leadership style (Study 2a) and gendered context (Study 2b) represent separate boundary conditions. The participants in Studies 2a and 2b use similar procedures. The only difference is the third factor of interest. As in Study 1, we expect that only male leaders would be penalized when seeking help and would be viewed as less competent when seeking help as opposed to not seeking help.

Study 2 also tests our two competing hypotheses. In accordance with RCT, we predict that leader typicality would explain the difference in competence perceptions between male leaders who sought help and male leaders who did not. In accordance with the SIH, we also predict that leader weakness would explain the proposed differences in competence perceptions. Accordingly, in addition to studying leader industry as a boundary condition to our proposed effect, Study 2b also assesses whether leader prototypicality or leader weakness mediate the relationships between gender, help seeking, and perceptions of competence.

Participants

Two hundred and fifty-five (55% women) and 103 (53% women) undergraduate students participated in Studies 2a and 2b, respectively, in exchange for monetary compensation. Participants in Study 2a were not the same as participants in Study 2b. Because participant gender did not qualify the results for either study, we will not discuss it further. At the time of the study, most of the participants (93% for Study 2a; 94% for Study 2b) were employed full-time, employed part-time, or had worked previously. Thus, most participants in both studies likely had exposure to leadership roles in organizational settings. The average age of the participants was 20.19 years ($SD = 1.88$) for Study 2a and 20.04 years ($SD = 1.93$) for Study 2b.

Procedure and study design

The participants were given a vignette describing a fictitious company, Lancom.³ They were told to imagine that they were employees at Lancom as they evaluated the performance (i.e., rated the competence) of a leader at this organization. The participants

³ We conducted a pilot test with Amazon Mechanical Turk participants ($n = 76$) to assess if the fictitious company name, Lancom, was perceived as a gender-neutral name. Analysis showed that participants were not more likely to categorize Lancom as a masculine or feminine company than what would normally be attributed to chance ($\chi^2 = 1.92, p = .38$).

then read a job description of a top-level manager at Lancom, [Mr./Ms.] Chris Bennett, and a description of a meeting called by Bennett to address an issue posed by a large client of the company. The vignette described Bennett as either male or female (leader gender), and Bennett's behavior as either asking or not asking for help (asking behavior). In the vignette, Bennett asked, or did not ask, for help, guidance, or assistance from others in the client meeting. The participants were assigned randomly to each of the conditions. All survey items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale anchored by 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*).

Competence

The competence scale was assessed with four items, each starting with the stem "I think that [Mr./Ms.] Bennett is..." and concluding with the items "competent," "capable," "intelligent," and "confident." Previous studies have used these items to assess perceptions of competence as rated by observers (Fiske et al., 2002; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005; Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001; Rudman et al., 2012). The composite items shared a univariate factor structure, and inter-item consistency was high (Study 2a: *Cronbach's* $\alpha = .82$; $M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.95$; Study 2b: *Cronbach's* $\alpha = .78$; $M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.10$).

Leader typicality

Leader typicality was assessed with the following three items: "I think that [Mr./Ms.] Bennett is a typical leader," "[Mr./Ms.] Bennett has a lot in common with other leaders," and "[Mr./Ms.] Bennett is similar to other leaders." The composite items shared a univariate factor structure, and inter-item consistency was high (*Cronbach's* $\alpha = .92$; $M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.21$).

Leader weakness

Leader weakness was assessed with an established three-item measure of strength (e.g., "I think that [Mr./Ms.] Bennett is a strong leader; see Johnson et al., 2008) that we then reverse-coded to represent a measure of weakness. The composite items shared a univariate factor structure, and inter-item consistency was good (*Cronbach's* $\alpha = .74$; $M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.08$).⁴

Leadership style

We varied two leadership styles: (a) an interpersonal leadership style, and (b) a task-oriented leadership style. For the interpersonal leadership style, Bennett was described as using relationships and connections to accomplish tasks and focusing on collaborative decision-making. In the second, Bennett was described as employing a directive approach to managing others, focusing on making straightforward, independent decisions. These distinct leadership styles have been shown to influence leader evaluations (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992).

Gendered context

We varied the business industry in which the leader worked as either masculine or feminine: a large information technology (IT) firm in which men comprised 80% of its executives and employees, or a large retail services firm in which women comprised 80% of its executives and employees, respectively. We chose these two industries based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov) indicating that men comprise a large proportion of workers in the IT industry and that women comprise a comparably large proportion of workers in the retail industry. Accordingly, we chose two industries that differed in terms of gender context.

Results

The participants completed questions to confirm that their perceptions of Bennett's gender and asking behavior were in accordance with their randomly assigned conditions. Their responses confirmed that 99% and 97% of Study 2a participants and 91% and 90% of Study 2b participants correctly reported Bennett's gender and asking behavior, respectively. Also, 91% of Study 2a participant and 85% of Study 2b participants correctly reported Bennett's leadership style and industry, respectively. Given the high reliability of these checks, all participants were included in the final analysis. Removing failed responses revealed the same pattern of results.

An ANOVA was run on the ratings of leader competence with leader gender and asking behavior as between-participant factors. In Study 2a, leadership style was a third between-participant factor. In Study 2b, business industry was the third between-participant factor. The Study 2a analysis revealed a main effect for asking behavior ($F(1,247) = 16.55$, $p < .001$, $r = .25$), whereby leaders were considered less competent when asking for help ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.98$) than when not asking for help ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 0.86$). The analysis also revealed a marginally significant effect for the leader style ($F(1,247) = 3.74$, $p = .054$, $r = .12$), whereby leaders who exhibited an interpersonal leadership style ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.93$) were evaluated more negatively than leaders who exhibited a task-oriented leadership style ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 0.95$). In support of the hypothesis, the two-way interaction between leader gender and asking behavior was significant ($F(1,247) = 4.85$, $p = .03$, $r = .14$). No additional main effects or interactions were present. See the ANOVA estimates in Table 2 and see descriptives and correlations for Studies 2a and 2b in Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

Fig. 2 presents the two-way interaction between leader gender and asking behavior. Further supporting our prediction, the pairwise comparisons for the two-way interaction show that the male leaders who asked for help ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.97$) were perceived as less competent than the male leaders who did not ask for help ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 0.76$; $F(1,251) = 19.09$, $p < .001$). However,

⁴ As a test of the convergent validity of this measure, 207 employed individuals in the United States recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk assessed if the mostly reverse-coded measures of strength used here were consistent with weakness measures identified by Rudman and colleagues (2012) in their initial investigation of the SIH. The measures from their list that were deemed most relevant to the leader context were: weak, uncertain, naive, and insecure. The weakness measures used in their initial investigation were significantly correlated to the measures included here ($r = .59$, $p < .001$).

Table 2

ANOVA with leader competence on leader gender, asking behavior, and leadership style (Study 2a) and business industry (Study 2b) as between-participant factors.

Variables	Study 2a		Study 2b	
	F(1,247)	r	F(1,95)	r
Intercept	6482.01***	.98	1815.24***	.97
Leader gender (LG)	.02	.00	.01	.00
Asking behavior (AB)	16.55***	.25	7.14**	.26
Leadership style (LS)	3.74 ⁺	.12		
Business industry (BS)			1.29	.11
LG*AB	4.85*	.14	4.48*	.21
LG*LS	.03	.00		
AB*LR	.50	.04		
LG*BS			.77	.09
AB*BS			1.08	.10
LG*AB*LR	1.11	.06		
LG*AB*BS			.42	.06

Note: ⁺ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

the difference between the female leaders who asked for help ($M = 4.50$, $SD = .98$) and those who did not ($M = 4.71$, $SD = .93$) was not significant ($F(1,251) = 1.73$, $p = .19$).

The Study 2b findings are comparable to those in Study 2a. The analysis revealed a main effect for leader asking behavior ($F(1,95) = 7.14$, $p = .009$, $r = .26$), whereby leaders were considered less competent when they asked for help ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.15$) than when they did not ask for help ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.96$). In support of our overarching prediction, the results showed a significant two-way interaction between leader gender and leader asking behavior ($F(1,95) = 4.48$, $p = .04$, $r = .21$). No additional main effect or interactions were present. See the ANOVA estimates in Table 2.

Pairwise comparisons for the two-way interaction showed that male leaders who asked for help ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.03$) were perceived as less competent than male leaders who did not ask for help ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 0.88$; $F(1,95) = 11.38$, $p = .001$). Similar to our findings in Study 2a, the difference between the female leaders who asked for help ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.22$) and those who did not ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.01$) was not significant ($F(1,95) = .16$, $p = .69$). See the results depicted in Fig. 3.

For Study 2b, we submitted leader typicality to a three-way ANOVA with the same between-participant factors used for competence perceptions. The analysis revealed a significant two-way interaction between leader gender and asking behavior ($F(1,94) = 6.72$, $p = .011$, $r = .26$). Pairwise comparisons for the two-way interaction showed that the male leaders who asked for help ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.22$) were perceived as less typical than the male leaders who did not ask for help ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.17$; $F(1,94) = 4.10$, $p = .046$). In addition, the men who asked for help were perceived as less typical leaders than the women who asked for help ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.25$; $F(1, 98) = 5.33$, $p = .02$). We submitted leader weakness to the same three-way ANOVA; no significant main effects or interactions were noted.

We predicted that leader typicality would mediate the effect of the interaction between leader gender and asking behavior on perceptions of competence. Prior to testing this hypothesis, we first assessed if the mediation tests recommended by Edwards and Lambert (2007) were appropriate for our data by testing for endogeneity—the possibility that error terms used to predict the mediator and outcome variable are related (Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2010). We conducted a Hausman (1978) test to determine if our predicted mediator, typicality, was exogenous with respect to our dependent variable, competence. A non-significant result suggests that endogeneity is not present and the mediator is exogenous with respect to the dependent variable. The test was not significant, $\chi^2(2) = 1.71$, $p > .05$, hence, we tested for mediated moderation using methods developed by Edwards and Lambert (2007), as the exogeneity assumption was met for utilizing this estimator for mediation.

We tested the overall significance of the indirect effect (i.e., the path through the mediator) by using 5000 bootstrap samples to construct a bias-corrected, 95% confidence interval (Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Stine, 1989). If zero falls outside the confidence interval, the indirect effect is deemed significant (Shrout & Bolger, 2002), and mediation can be said to be present. The results showed that the confidence interval for the indirect effect of the highest order interaction excluded zero [$CI: .11, 1.02$], suggesting that leader

Table 3Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix for Study 2a, $n = 255$.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Competence	4.61	.95							
2. Leader gender (LG; 1 = male)	.49	.50	.00						
3. Asking behavior (AB; 1 = no ask)	.49	.50	.24**	−.00					
4. Leader style (LS; 1 = task-oriented)	.50	.50	.11	−.02	−.02				
5. LG × AB	.24	.43	.22	.58**	.57**	−.01			
6. LG × LS	.24	.43	.08	.58**	−.00	.56**	.33**		
7. AB × LS	.24	.43	.23**	−.00	.57**	.57**	.33**	.33**	
8. LG × AB × LS	.12	.32	.18**	.38**	.37**	.36**	.65**	.65**	.64**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

Table 4Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix for Study 2b, $n = 103$.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Competence	4.42	1.10									
2. Typicality	3.91	1.21	.49**								
3. Weakness	4.70	1.08	-.39**	-.51**							
4. Leader gender (LG; 1 = male)	.50	.50	-.00	-.07	.15						
5. Asking behavior (AB; 1 = no ask)	.48	.50	.25**	.03	.04	.03					
6. Industry (ID; 1 = retail)	.50	.50	.10	-.06	.01	.05	-.03				
7. LG × AB	.24	.43	.27**	.13	.08	.57**	.59**	.02			
8. LG × ID	.26	.44	.01	-.09	.08	.60**	.01	.59**	.33**		
9. AB × ID	.23	.42	.27**	-.02	-.00	.05	.58**	.55**	.38**	.35**	
10. LG × AB × ID	.13	.33	.25*	-.07	-.04	.38**	.40**	.38**	.67**	.64**	.69**

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

typicality mediated the indirect effect of leader gender and asking behavior on competence perceptions. Furthermore, the results showed that the effect of asking behavior on competence perceptions was mediated by leader typicality for men [$CI: .03, .65$], but not for women [$CI: -.57, .02$].

Discussion

Studies 2a and 2b replicated the findings of Study 1 and showed that male leaders were perceived as less competent when they sought help, relative to male leaders who did not seek help. Furthermore, the findings suggested that the differences in perceptions of competence occurred due to differences in perceptions of leader typicality as proposed by RCT and not distinctions in weakness perceptions as proffered by the SIH. Interestingly, the leader style by leader gender interaction was not significant in Study 2a. That is, women who lead with a task-oriented style were not evaluated negatively for doing so when compared to their male counterparts. Initially, this null finding may appear to contradict existing research which has shown that women in leader roles are evaluated negatively when they lead in such an agentic manner (Eagly et al., 1992). However, recent findings suggest that the extent to which a penalty is extracted for women leaders is contingent on additional factors. For example, agentic Black women leaders were shown not to elicit the same backlash as did agentic White women leaders (Livingston, Rosette, & Washington, 2012). In addition, when occupying top-level as opposed to mid-level leader positions, women were evaluated as particularly effective because they were perceived to have incurred a double standard (when stricter requirements are applied to subordinate group members; Foschi, 2000), as they matriculated up the organizational ladder (Rosette & Tost, 2010). Given that in this study, the leader was described as occupying a top-level position, the non-significant interaction between leader gender and leader style is reasonable and consistent with previous findings.

General discussion

Based on research derived from RCT and the SIH, we predicted that male leaders would suffer greater competence costs than female leaders when seeking help. The findings of the three studies presented here support the prediction. Study 1 showed that, in a field setting rife with problems and opportune with potential failure, male leaders who sought help were perceived as less competent than male leaders who did not seek help. Study 2a replicated this finding in a controlled experimental setting and showed that neither a task-oriented leadership style nor an interpersonal leadership style qualified the central prediction. That is, male leaders who sought help were evaluated as less competent than male leaders who did not seek help, regardless of the manner in which they engaged leadership.

Study 2b also replicated our central prediction. Furthermore, Study 2b showed that the central prediction did not vary according to gendered contexts. In both a retail industry setting (feminine context) and an information-technology firm (masculine context), men

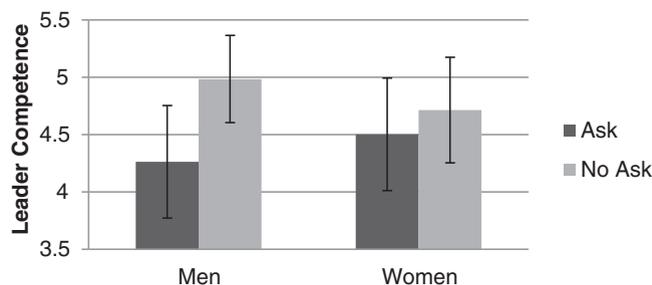


Fig. 2. Mean ratings (and standard deviations) of leader competence by leader asking behavior and leader gender (Study 2a).

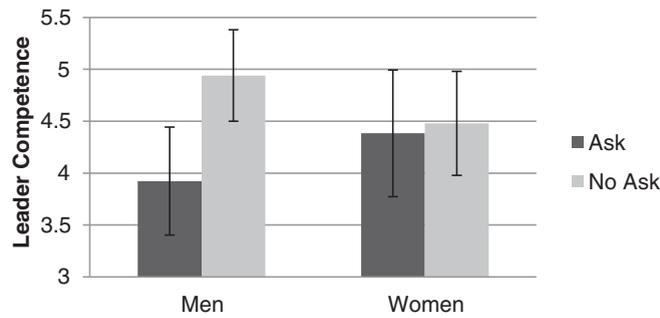


Fig. 3. Mean ratings (and standard deviations) of leader competence by leader asking behavior and leader gender (Study 2b).

seeking help were perceived as less competent than men not seeking help. In addition, Study 2b showed that leader typicality mediated the central prediction. That is, consistent with the tenets of RCT, our findings suggest that help seeking was a non-prototypical behavior for male leaders. Hence, male leaders who sought help were perceived to be less prototypical leaders, and these perceptions accounted for decreased competence perceptions. Moreover, in further support of the central prediction, across the three studies, women who sought help did not incur any diminished perceptions of competence, as they were evaluated comparable to women who did not seek help.

The current work incorporates research derived from the SIH with conventional gender and leadership research to suggest that male leaders may not have as much behavioral freedom as previous research consistent with RCT may have suggested. Instead, when male leaders exhibit atypical behaviors that are not influential in nature, they may lessen the overlap between their leadership and male roles, triggering diminished perceptions of competence. In addition, the current research expands the types of behaviors that previously have been considered in gender and leadership research to those behaviors that are explicitly proscribed for men. Although the proposed SIH mechanism did not account for our findings here, proscribed behaviors for men should be just as much of a consideration for understanding and investigating gender perceptions in leadership as prohibited behaviors are for women because both female *and* male proscriptions help to reinforce gender hierarchies. A mounting body of evidence has investigated behaviors proscribed for women (e.g., Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Heilman et al., 2004; Phelan et al., 2008), but given the perceived overlap between the male gender role and the leadership role, less attention has been devoted to those behaviors that are somewhat forbidden for male leaders. It is possible that these seldom-investigated behaviors can provide substantial insight into the influence of gender on leader perceptions.

Practical implications

Initially, one may be tempted to conclude that men should be particularly concerned when seeking help. After all, existing help-seeking research shows that masculine social role expectations serve as barriers to men's willingness to ask for assistance when needed (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). For example, research in counseling psychology has explicitly shown a negative link between help seeking and the male gender role. Good et al. (1989) found that traditional conceptualizations of the male gender role for male participants were related to negative attitudes toward seeking professional counseling, specifically, and seeking help in both vocational and emotional domains more generally.

However, help seeking is an adaptive behavior that increases learning, creativity, and the acquisition of valuable resources for leaders (Ashford, 1986; Edmondson, 1999; George, 2007), which, in turn, can have positive performance implications on the organizational level (Lee, 1997). This has led scholars to suggest that wise leaders should “ask others for help and gratefully accept their assistance” (Sutton, 2010, p. 97). Moreover, the popular press is riddled with instances where leaders have failed because they chose not to ask for help from subordinates, who are often closer to day-to-day operations (Charan & Colvin, 1998). For example, Stan O’Neal, the former CEO of Merrill Lynch, was fired during the subprime mortgage crisis in part because he did not seek help from subordinates (Smith, 2007). Taken together, this work suggests that male leaders should consider seeking help despite the possible costs in terms of competence perceptions.

In particular, male leaders may need to develop additional proficiencies to mitigate the potential competence costs that can be associated with help seeking. Such development would align with research indicating that female leaders can alter their behavior to better match the existing agentic leadership prototype—becoming more similar to men in terms of assertiveness, dominance, and masculinity (Eagly & Carli, 2003), but without violating female gender-role expectations. This finding suggests that the extent to which male leaders can amend their help-seeking behavior to diminish perceived role violations, and still reap the performance benefits associated with interpersonal requests for assistance, may be a promising path to explore. For example, the extent to which an individual’s behavior is attributed to personal traits (e.g., internal attributes) or the environment (e.g., external attributes) may have substantial consequences when competence perceptions are under consideration (Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006). Framing help-seeking attempts as attributable to external factors may help mitigate the perceived role violation and insulate male leaders from perceptions that they lack competence, whereas framing help-seeking attempts as attributable to internal factors may emphasize the status violation and thereby diminish perceived competence.

Limitations, strengths, and future research

The overarching goal of the current investigation was to explore whether male leaders experience competence costs when seeking help. One possible limitation is that our participants in Studies 2a and 2b were undergraduate students, who may lack significant work and leadership experience. However, we coupled these undergraduate samples with an MBA sample in Study 1. These MBAs had an average of over 5 years of work experience, and most had previously held managerial-level positions. Given that the undergraduate sample (the majority of which had work experience) replicated the results of the MBA sample, we believe that this concern is somewhat mitigated. Furthermore, the MBA sample included participants from seven very different contexts, which required different leadership demands, and where venture participants were engaged in a variety of different activities and challenges. Because we statistically controlled for these extreme differences using a fixed effects approach in Study 1, and were still able to show a competence cost for male (but not female) leaders, we believe our findings may be applicable to a variety of different contexts and domains.

Another potential study limitation is the distinction in the relative positioning of the participants in Study 1 as compared to Study 2. Specifically, the participants in Study 2 rated leaders to whom they were subordinate, whereas in Study 1, participants assessed leaders with whom they were peers. Failing to hold constant the position of the participant relative to the leader from Study 1 to Study 2 may at first be perceived as a study limitation, but we believe this difference adds to the robustness of our findings, as we have demonstrated that our prediction is supported when both subordinates and peers evaluate men and women in leadership roles.

In addition, the findings for Study 2a suggest that the results did not vary according to an interpersonal- or task-oriented leadership style. Although these factors represent two of the more predominant leadership styles (Eagly & Johnson, 1990), it is possible that our help-seeking results may vary when other leadership styles are considered. In addition, in Study 2b, we operationalized a masculine context with an IT firm and a feminine context with a retail company. Although these are particularly fitting domains for representing masculine and feminine contexts, respectively, it is feasible that our findings may differ with gendered contexts operationalized using other domains. Hence, we do not assert that context characteristics and leadership style may not qualify the predictions; we simply show that the contexts and leadership styles investigated here (some of the most prominent contexts and styles investigated in gender and leadership research) did not constrain the results. Future research should investigate additional boundary conditions for our findings.

Conclusion

These findings represent a paradox for male leaders. Specifically, a large body of literature has shown that help-seeking behaviors contribute to positive functioning in a host of domains, including leadership (Bamberger, 2009; Edmondson, 1999, 2002; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006; Kotter, 1999; Lee, 2001; McDonald & Westphal, 2010; Mueller & Kamdar, 2011; Nadler, Ellis, & Bar, 2003; Schein, 2009; Sutton, 2010). Yet, when men engage in these beneficial behaviors, their skills and abilities as leaders may be questioned, and perceptions of their male gender role may be impaired. Indeed, leadership frequently encompasses the need to enact typically masculine behaviors (e.g., being decisive, assertive, achievement-oriented) that are representative of prototypical leadership behaviors, but leaders cannot possibly have all the answers all the time. Hence, *effective* leadership may necessitate a balance that incorporates collaboration, relationship building, and seeking assistance from others, including subordinates, when needed. Our results suggest that finding the right parity may not come easy for male leaders, but for the good of the organization (and not just the leader), it should be worth pursuing.

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