

## **How Hillary fell off the “cliff” and why theory cannot explain it**

I have to admit, it has been a while since I last posted. First, there were many topics I wanted to write about but could not decide on one. Now, there is only ONE topic in the world – the outcome of the U.S. elections. But it has indeed taken me almost two weeks to digest the outcome. Why? Because I am a fierce Hillary proponent? I am not even sure. But I guess, the other possibility that now became reality, namely that Trump made it, was sort of unthinkable before. And here, I am in good company with all the pseudo experts on U.S. politics, the scholars, the media folks, the statistics jugglers. Nobody expected this to happen but it did. So what now? And what does this have to do with diverse leadership matters?

Exactly around the time of the election, I was reading an article on the so-called “Glass Cliff” for my research. As one might expect, it is related to women in leadership positions. While most people might know the famous “Glass Ceiling,” i.e., the invisible ceiling women hit on their way to the top, the glass cliff might not ring a bell at first. The glass cliff theory is highly interesting because it actually explains the opposite case: why women do make it to the top. It all depends on the circumstances, of course. The theory states that women are more likely to break through the glass ceiling if a company is in trouble. The empirical I read about was from a study that asked more than 100 college students to read an article on a company and then choose between two equally qualified candidates as the new CEO. One article described a company that was doing well. The other students got one that described a company that was in severe trouble. Now, guess what, in the case where the company did poorly, the woman was the number one choice. The results are different however if there is a history of (successful) female leadership in the company. Read here: <https://hbr.org/2011/01/how-women-end-up-on-the-glass-cliff>

This is also where the glass ceiling and the glass cliff theory overlap again. The suspected reasons why people are in favor of women getting the job in the glass cliff cases are of the same nature as in the glass ceiling case. All the scientific vocabulary one could use here can be summarized by one term: stereotypes. So, in the glass cliff case, it is millennium-old stereotypes about women as caretakers who nurse even the sickest child back to health that make people rely on women in times of crises. In addition, on a more critical note, one could also suspect: Well, if the company is almost dead anyway, what could a woman mess up? Of course, stereotypes are somehow thought to be changeable if we just work on structures a lot, as demonstrated by Iris Bohnet's fabulous book "What Works: Gender Equality by Design." Here, she shows how changing structures implicitly change our brains toward less stereotypical behavior toward others (<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674089037>).

Nevertheless, do not be fooled, even you, the fiercest most determined feminist or LGBT activist certainly have stereotypes programmed into your cognitive system. Just check out this Implicit-Association Test [here](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html), you will be surprised: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>.

Now back to Hillary – what does all this leadership theory have to do with her devastating loss? To make it short, I have no definite answer but I would like to share a little thought experiment with you. So, if we transfer the cliff theory to politics for a moment and pretend that America is a huge corporation (which it probably is, according to the understanding of the current president-elect), then what? Can the glass cliff theory help us make sense of the situation? Could it have helped us predict the fact that Trump would become the new CEO of America Inc.? As you might expect if you got the point of the theory above, it will not help at all. The interesting part is to go through the different possible explanations, why it does not help. I will just go into some possible explanations

that immediately came to my mind when I thought of the cliff in connection with the big Trump clou.

*Explanation 1: America is not in as much trouble as people think*

Given the fact that the glass cliff only works for companies in trouble, one could think that America is not in trouble at all, so people do not need a woman savior. Given the data, there is some truth to this. Even though many things might be worse than people want them to be, the “crisis” that is much talked of today in all possible contexts is not really happening. Just go to Starbucks in any American (or German) city and watch people spend 20 bucks on some coffee and a sandwich. Things cannot be as bad as they are made to appear.

*Explanation 2: Hillary is not considered a woman*

Let’s assume that America is in trouble and people would technically be more inclined to choose a woman over a man. Hillary – a woman – would have been ready to go. The problem? Maybe Hillary biologically is a woman but does not offer the typical “womanly” characteristics that people rely on when following their stereotypical male/female compass. Does that mean that Trump is considered more feminine than Hillary? Certainly not. But there is something about Hillary that especially women do not like, e.g., her supposed hunger for power (and many other things). So, there is some food for thought in this possibility...

*Explanation 3: The theory is valid but cannot be transferred to other realms outside companies*

What scholars always state in their introductory notes is how limited whatever they are going to say is. This also means that the

very move of taking a theory that applies to companies/organizations does not work in politics and other social arenas. The most obvious indication for this is of course the fact that, given the huge mess the world is facing – climate change, TTIP, war, business corruption... - we would certainly have to see loads of women saving the planet in top positions. Maybe I missed that part of contemporary world history but to me, this does not seem to be happening right now.

*Explanation 4: The theory is bullshit*

There is also the fourth option of course, namely that the theory is bullshit altogether. Just because supposedly brainy scholars from good universities came up with it and found data in support of it, it would not be the first time that a smart theory must be abandoned due to even smarter long-term evidence. This can either refer to the evaluation of the situation when a corporation actually is considered “in crisis” or to the fact that instead of women, other personality profiles might equally be suitable to turn the wheel from the perspective of those people who make the decision.

Now what? I promised at the beginning that I will not provide answers. That might be disappointing but I basically want to leave you with these thoughts. I am of course aware that there are plenty of other reasons why people would not have voted for Hillary that are totally outside the gender game debate. True. But that does not change the fact that the U.S. was very close to having its first female president and screwed up. Now, they, for a period of 4 to x years, will have to mess with the incarnation of a male WASP (not the animal but a so-called White Anglo Saxon Protestant – cultural studies slang). Right now, this is the only thing we know for sure. We do not know which policies he will actually implement, how much they impact diverse groups in society and what these groups

in society end up thinking about him. We also do not know how exactly Angela Merkel ,who today announced that she will run again as candidate for the chancellery in 2017, will deal with him. Teach him a quick lesson in Feminism 101 when he comes to visit?

What I know, at least, is that I still liked Hillary's speech after her defeat. She did encourage women to pursue their goals despite drawbacks and severe personal attacks. One can blame her for whatever one does not like about her. But this will to fight for some pretty healthy social values, one cannot really deny. I am just curious if she is able to crawl back up the mountain after falling from the cliff at such skyrocketing speed. This is a human question to me, not a gendered one. Whatever we do and whatever our goals are, we all need people to motivate us to make it out of the mud after going through shitty times – men and women. The research smarties call this quality “resilience” nowadays. Where I come from, one simply calls this “getting your a... back up.” And I sincerely hope that we all keep doing that – no matter if we are angry about Trump or sad or both. Theories might be a nice toolkit to help us find orientation. But as this little thought experiment has shown: no theory can beat experience and the determination to not lose hope in pursuing your dreams.