

# Gender Differences in Leadership Style: A Study on Graduate Students' Task and Relationship Orientations

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## Abstract

The purposes of this mixed sequential-explanatory study were: (a) to investigate the leadership behaviour difference between male and female graduate students in terms of task and relationship orientations and (b) to explore the reasons why they demonstrate these differences. There were quantitative and qualitative phases. In the quantitative phase, we collected data from 37 graduate students who enrolled in a leadership course. Due to small sample size, a non-parametric test was utilized to analyse the quantitative data. We surprisingly found that: (a) there is no difference between male and female students in terms of leadership behaviours and (b) graduate students tend to be more likely to adopt relationship orientation in their leadership positions. In the qualitative phase, we extracted three main themes: (a) similar leadership orientations between male and female students; (b) situation-dependent leadership; and (d) shift toward balanced behaviour. These themes supported and complemented the findings in the quantitative stage.

**Keywords:** Graduate Students, Gender Differences, Leadership Behaviour, Task and Relationship Orientations

## Introduction

The research on gender and leadership has drawn much attention in the field of leadership and organization study for quite a long time (Eagly & Heilman, 2016; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). Scholars and practitioners are always attempting to answer whether there is any difference between men and women in terms of

leadership styles, and if so, how they function differently. These questions are important as an increasing number of women globally have entered into and advanced to higher-management positions. Although women have become a large proportion of the workforce, the presence of them in administrative positions is still far from paralleling that of men (Cuadrado, Navas, Molero, Ferrer, & Morales, 2012). A plausible reason is that male leaders are historically stereotyped to be more effective due to personality characteristics and behaviour patterns (Morgan, 1992). Women, as proposed by the role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), are expected to assume roles in their leadership position that are not congruent with the communal goals that are assumed to be part of their gender role. There is some evidence that suggests women who are leaders are perceived in a less positive manner (Ritter & Yoder, 2004). As women have become more prevalent in leadership positions, these stereotypes are gradually changing.

However, research results from studies appear to be mixed and sometimes contradictory. It is sometimes difficult to determine which line of study has more validity. While some contend that men and women display no leadership differences (Andersen & Hansson, 2011; Cliff, 2005; Gilbert, Burnett, Phau, I., & Haar, 2010; Hyde, 2014; Vecchio, 2002), others argue that male and female leaders have different types of social interactions and consequently differ in terms of the leadership behaviour (Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Grant, 1988; Tourigny, Han, & Baba, 2017). Still, there are some others, based on contingency leadership (Fiedler, 1967), who assert that gender differences in leadership style are due to status, power, and other contextual factors

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associated with gender, and males and females lead in similar ways when put in leadership positions in similar situations (Klenke, 1993; Powell, 1999). Up until now, the topic of gender differences remains contentious, and there is no definitive evidence from which to draw a decisive conclusion. Even a latest meta-analysis failed to find a consistent pattern of gender differences in leadership styles (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Therefore, more research is needed, especially when more Millennials are assuming leadership positions. Moreover, the better research methodology is required to describe the gender difference or examine the relationship between gender and leadership effectiveness. In this study, we utilized a mixed sequential-explanatory method to examine the different leadership behaviour orientations and explore the reasons why they demonstrate these differences, if any. We believe that we will gain more empirical insights on this phenomenon by using quantitative and qualitative study sequentially.

## Literature Review

### Leadership Style

The style approach theory of leadership focuses on the behaviour of a leader (Northouse, 2014). This theory dates back to the late 1940s and makes a hypothesis that leadership effectiveness is determined by the leader's action towards subordinates in various situations, rather than only by personality characteristics or traits (Bertocci, 2009). As proposed by the early researchers in this strand, leadership styles essentially consist of two distinct behaviour categories: task-directed behaviour and relationship-directed behaviour. This distinction is further developed in the Ohio State studies on leadership and expanded in the Michigan studies, which are subsequently followed by Blake and Mouton's Leadership Grid. In Ohio State studies, researchers formulate a questionnaire named the Leader Behaviour Description Questionnaire (Hemphill & Coons, 1957; Stogdill, 1963). The two general types of leader behaviours are initiating structure and consideration. The two orientations the Michigan studies identify are labelled employee orientation and production orientation (Likert, 1961). Building on these two factors, Blake and Mouton (1964) propose their managerial-behaviour model, in which they portray five major leadership styles on Leadership Grid: impoverished

management (1,1), authority-obedience (9,1), country-club management (1,9), middle of the road management (5,5), and team management (9,9).

Although the terminologies used in these above mentioned studies are different, the phenomenon they refer to is virtually the same. Basically, task-oriented behaviours are "concentrated on performing the job that the work group faces and are thus similar to those of the initiating structure factor. The leader is concerned with setting work standards, supervising the job, and meeting production goals" (Riggio, 2013, p. 346). In contrast, relationship-oriented behaviours are focused on maintaining interpersonal relationships on the job, including "showing concern for the employees' wellbeing and involving them in decision-making processes" (Riggio, 2013, p. 346). Generally, leaders with the former orientation tend to engage in top-down communication by explaining what the follower is to do, as well as when, where, and how each function is to be accomplished. Conversely, people with the latter leadership behaviour are expected to engage in joint communication, provide socio-emotional support, and build camaraderie, respect, trust, and liking with followers.

### Gender and Task and Relationship Orientation

Studies on gender difference in leadership behaviour are nothing but new. Several social scientists have examined the styles of male and female leaders since 1950s. Probably Hennig & Jardin (1977), Sargent (1981), and Loden (1985) are among the early researchers who advocate that gender differences exist in leadership styles. For example, Loden (1985) claims that men tend to exhibit masculine qualities such as competitiveness, hierarchical authority, high control, and unemotional and analytic problem solving. Women, however, prefer to use a management style characterized by cooperation, collaboration, lower control, intuition, and empathy. Subsequent adherents compare the leadership styles in terms of task and relationship dimensions and further argue that males rely on a more task-oriented style, whereas females adopt the leadership approach heavily based on leader-follower relationships (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Gray, 1992). Eagly and Johnson (1990) found the strongest evidence that women are more likely to adopt a participative leadership style while men to adopt a directive style.

In sharp contrast, there are a number of authors who generally hold the opposite position. They assert that women and men do not differ in leadership style. Bass (1981) and Kanter (1977) are two representatives in this camp. Bass (1981) opines that: "The preponderance of available evidence is that no consistently clear pattern of differences can be discerned in the supervisory style of female as compared to male leaders" (p. 499). Kanter (1977) also states, "There is as yet no research evidence that makes a case for sex differences in either leadership aptitude or style" (p. 199). Eagly and Johnson (1990) subsequently review a large amount of literature that compares male and female managers in terms of task and interpersonal styles. They conclude that although evidence is found for both the presence and the absence of differences between the sexes, some aspects of leadership style were somewhat gender stereotypic laboratory experiments assessment studies settings. Actually, gender differences in interpersonal and task styles are quite small in the organizational settings (with real leaders).

As more females enter or rise to leadership roles that traditionally have been occupied by males, the research on leadership styles differences between women and men surges but still remains controversial. However, the pendulum appears to swing to no-difference side. The latest study by Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2010) supports the argument of Eagly and Johnson (1990). Cuadrado, et al. (2012) also agree that there appears no presence of differences between male and female leaders in task- and relationship-oriented styles. For them, both male and female leaders grant the same importance to both aspects.

### Contingency Leadership

The basic assumption of contingency leadership is that there are moderating variables that can enhance or nullify the effects of a leader's trait or behaviour on the leadership effectiveness. In other words, a leader's effectiveness hinges on how well his or her leadership style matches the situation. As such, people can never decide which leadership style is better than any others. Different situations demand different leadership styles (Yukl, 2010).

Among the contingency theories of leadership, the most recognized approaches are Situational Leadership Model

developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1969) and Fiedler's (1967) contingency theory. Based on Ohio State studies mentioned previously, Hersey and Blanchard (1969) further separate task behaviour and relationship behaviour into four behaviour types using four quadrants: directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating. Another component of the Situational Leadership Model is concerned with the maturity level of followers. What leadership behaviours displayed in the workplace are determined by followers' maturity level.

Compared with the situational model that only has one factor (maturity level) as situation variable, Fiedler's contingency theory provides a more comprehensive model and suggests that three situational dimensions determine leadership styles. These three factors are leader-member relations, task structure, and position power. Fielder (1967) assumes that a specific manager's leadership style cannot be changed. If a specific situation requires "a task-oriented and the person in the leadership position is relationship oriented, either the situation has to be modified or the leader has to be replaced to achieve optimal effectiveness" (Robbins & Judge, 2012, p. 154).

### Research Questions and Hypotheses

In this study, we attempt to answer the following questions:

- (a) Will graduate students tend to be more task-directed towards their subordinates, relationship-directed, or balanced?
- (b) Will male and female students be more likely to adopt a task orientation or relationship orientation when leading others?
- (c) Is there any difference between male and female graduate students in task orientation and relationship?
- (d) Are there ways students could change their style to shift the emphasis they give to tasks and relationships?

Accordingly, the hypotheses in the quantitative phase are:

Hypothesis 1: There are no significant difference between men and women in terms of task and relationship-directed leadership orientations.

Hypothesis 2: There are no significant differences between men and women in terms of task-directed leadership orientations.

Hypothesis 3: There are no significant differences between men and women in terms of relationship-directed leadership orientations.

Hypothesis 4: There are no differences between male and female graduate students in task orientation.

Hypothesis 5: There are no differences between male and female graduate students in relationship orientation.

## Methodology

The researchers used a mixed sequential-explanatory method approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). According to Creswell (2014), mixed methods research incorporates both quantitative and qualitative approaches in many phases of the research process to collect, analyse, and mix their respective data in a single study. The rationale for using mixed methods is that while quantitative research can net general explanations for relationship among different variables, qualitative results can render us in-depth insights to capture the meaning behind these relationships among graduate students. In combination, mixed methods research can complement each other and provide a path towards deeper understanding of research problems and quantitative results than either approach alone (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Quantitative

and qualitative data collected require different analytic approaches to increase the validity of the findings and/or discover the paradoxes, contradictions, and fresh perspectives (Creswell, 2014).

More specifically, in this study, we employed a sequential explanatory design that included two phases. First, we used a quantitative phase to collect and analyse numeric data to address the first five questions aforementioned. Then, qualitative phase followed to explain and elaborate on the quantitative results obtained in the first phase (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The purpose of the second phase was to further explain the findings derived from the quantitative phase and explore whether there are ways students could change their style to shift the emphasis they give to tasks and relationships. The priority was given to the qualitative data. The reason is that the qualitative approach provided a deeper understanding of quantitative results and research questions. Specifically, in this study, qualitative approach assisted in explaining and interpreting the findings of the primarily quantitative study. In addition, to some degree, the small sample size in this study thwarted the generalizability of the findings of gender differences from quantitative method with reference to task and relationship orientation in leadership. Table 1 provides an overview of the procedural steps for implementing this two-phase mixed methods sequential explanatory design.

**Table 1: Diagram of Sequential Explanatory Design**

Quantitative Data Collection	Quantitative Data Analysis Quantitative Data Analysis	Qualitative Data Collection	Qualitative Data Collection	Interpretation of Entire Results
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## Data Collection

We collected data from graduate students who enrolled in a leadership course offered in the 2016 summer and fall semesters in a southern US research university. The University has a large graduate student population from other states and other nations. In the middle of each semester, we administered a survey asking students to fill out the Leadership Behaviour Questionnaire (Northouse, 2015) and write a weekly reflection on leadership behaviour as an assignment. Leadership Behaviour Questionnaire consisted of 20 items. We used it to measure two major types of leadership behaviours with regard to task and relationship orientations. Examples items included “Tell group members what they are supposed to

do” for assessing task orientation, and “Acts as friendly with members of the group” for measuring relationship. All 20 items were measured using 5-point scales where 1 = “Never” and 5 = “Always”.

After completing the questionnaire, students needed to sum their responses on the odd-numbered items to determine the score for task-orientation behaviours. Similarly, the responses were needed to be added up on the even numbered items for relationship-orientation behaviour score.

## Sample

Thirty-seven students submitted this assignment. Twenty-one were female students while 16 were male. They all

assumed leadership roles in their organizations. We did not have other demographic information such as age, ethnicity, organizational tenure, leadership position, and number of followers.

## Data Analysis

Prior to further analysis of the data, we computed statistical reliability scores of the Leadership Behaviour Questionnaire. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.808, exceeding the cut-off score of 0.70 recommended by Nunnally (1978). The measurement of distribution showed that the skewness of task score is -0.043 whereas

that of the relationship is -0.405. The Kurtosis values of the task and relationship are -0.509 and -0.348, respectively (Table 2). According to Bulmer (1979), the distributions for these two orientations are approximately symmetric. However, the sample size was relatively small. Therefore, we decided to use non-parametric test to analyse the quantitative data. Specifically, Mann-Whitney Test was used to test whether there are differences between male and female students in adopting task-directed and relationship leadership styles. In contrast, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was utilized to ascertain if there are differences between task and relationship orientations for the students.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics**

	Descriptive Statistics						
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skewness</i>		<i>Kurtosis</i>	
	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>
relationship	37	41.7838	3.82343	-.405	.388	-.348	.759
task	37	37.2973	4.70145	-.043	.388	-.509	.759
Valid N (listwise)	37						

## Findings

As can be seen from the descriptive statistics in Table 2 that while the students' mean score for task orientation falls in "moderately high range" (Mean = 37.30, SD = 4.70), their relationship mean score falls in "high range" (Mean = 41.78, SD = 3.82). Table 3 Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test further shows that positive mean rank (20.48,

relationship > task) is greater than negative mean rank (12.64, relationship < task). The value of Asymptotic Sig. (2-tailed) is 0.000. Therefore, there is a statistically significant difference between task and relationship orientation ranks for graduate students. Graduate students are more relationship-oriented in leadership and they tend to be putting more emphasis on relationships when leading other people. Hypothesis 1 was rejected.

**Table 3: Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test**

		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Rank</i>	<i>Sum of Ranks</i>
relationship - task	Negative Ranks	7 <sup>a</sup>	12.64	88.50
	Positive Ranks	30 <sup>b</sup>	20.48	614.50
	Ties	0 <sup>c</sup>		
	Total	37		

a. relationship < task ; b. relationship > task; c. relationship = task

**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

	<i>relationship - task</i>		
Z	-3.976 <sup>b</sup>		
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test;

b. Based on negative ranks

As can be seen from Table 4, we can see that the difference between female and male mean ranks is minimal for task orientation (18.31 vs. 19.91), while the difference in relationships is much larger (21.19 vs. 16.13). The test statistics reveals that female and male graduate students have similar mean ranks on task orientations (Asymp. Sig. = 0.656). Their difference in relationship orientation is also non-significant (Asymp. Sig.= 0.156); however, the scores for the female students are larger than those of male students. Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3 were supported.

**Table 4: Mann-Whitney Test**

Ranks				
	gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
task	F	21	18.31	384.50
	M	16	19.91	318.50
	Total	37		
relationship	F	21	21.19	445.00
	M	16	16.13	258.00
	Total	37		

**Table 5: Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive Statistics					
	gender		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
F	relationship		21	42.4762	3.74992
	task		21	36.9524	5.19111
	Valid N (listwise)		21		
M	relationship		16	40.8750	3.84491
	task		16	37.7500	4.09064
	Valid N (listwise)		16		

The same trends are also observed from the results of the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test. As can be seen from Table 6, for female students, the positive and negative mean ranks are 12.38 and 5.13, respectively. The value for Asymptotic Sig. (2-tailed) is 0.001, indicating that there

Test Statistics <sup>a</sup>		
	task	relationship
Mann-Whitney U	153.500	122.000
Wilcoxon W	384.500	258.000
Z	-.446	-1.417
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.656	.156
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.660 <sup>b</sup>	.165 <sup>b</sup>

a. Grouping Variable: gender

b. Not corrected for ties.

Table 5 shows descriptive statistics of task and relationship scores for both male and female graduate students. It is indicated that for female students, the task mean score is 36.95 while the mean score for relationship approximates 42.48. For males, their respective scores are 37.75 and 40.88. The difference between task and relationship for females is much larger than that for male students.

is a significant difference between relationship and task ranks. For males, Asymptotic Sig. (2-tailed) is 0.021 (see Table 6). The difference between positive and negative is also statistically significant based on these results. Hypothesis 4 and hypothesis 5 were rejected.

**Table 6: Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test**

Gender		Ranks			
			N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
F	relationship - task	Negative Ranks	4 <sup>a</sup>	5.13	20.50
		Positive Ranks	17 <sup>b</sup>	12.38	210.50
		Ties	0 <sup>c</sup>		
		Total	21		

Gender			N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
M	relationship - task	Negative Ranks	3 <sup>a</sup>	7.83	23.50
		Positive Ranks	13 <sup>b</sup>	8.65	112.50
		Ties	0 <sup>c</sup>		
		Total	16		

a. relationship < task; b. relationship > task; c. relationship = task

#### Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>

Gender	relationship - task			
F	Z	-3.308 <sup>b</sup>		
	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.001		
M	Z	-2.307 <sup>b</sup>		
	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.021		

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

b. Based on negative ranks.

As aforementioned, previous research results appear to be mixed and even contradictory. Our quantitative phase study indicated that there is no difference between male and female in terms of both task and relationship orientation. Overall, both male and female leaders exhibit more relationship directed behaviours. This is especially true for female leaders. Although these findings are inconsistent with a few studies on this topic, they seem to substantiate non-difference argument between two genders. However, the finding of men showing more relationship-oriented behaviours towards their subordinates appears to be counterintuitive and against people's stereotype. Also, despite our used robust non-parametric test, the relatively small sample size may affect its reliability. Therefore, more evidence and explanation are needed to provide further support and justification for this contention.

The quantitative study does not provide much insight. Clear and decisive answer to this phenomenon is obviously beyond the scope of above quantitative methods. More data are required to resolve the elusive result. Furthermore, we could not obtain any clue in answering the last research question in light of quantitative study concerning students' shift of leadership orientations. Qualitative study seems critical to understanding these conundrums.

As mentioned before, aside from finishing the Leadership Behaviour Questionnaire, students were required to write a reflection on their leadership behaviours as their assignment. In the reflection, they needed to answer three

questions: (a) What do your scores suggest about your leadership style? (b) Are you more likely to lead with an emphasis on task or with an emphasis on relationship? (c) As you interpret your responses to the style questionnaire, are there ways you could change your style to shift the emphasis you give to tasks and relationships? Students' responses to these three questions might shed some lights on understanding the above findings.

## Qualitative Phase

### Qualitative Research Design

When quantitative data cannot offer enough description of a phenomenon, a follow-up qualitative data can enhance our understanding (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). In this study, we used a qualitative procedure to help explain the relationships between male and female students concerning task and relationship orientations, and to address whether there are ways students could change their style to shift the emphasis they give to these two different leadership orientations.

### Qualitative Data

Qualitative content analysis is a qualitative method selected to identify important themes within student assignment content, and to provide a thick description of leadership orientation. Patton (2002) defined this

qualitative technique as “any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (p. 453). Through careful coding, examination of the meanings, and interpretation, the results of qualitative content analysis can complement and explain the findings of quantitative research.

In the current study, students’ response to three prompt questions were compared in order to find themes (similarities). We did not strictly follow the process of qualitative content analysis proposed by Zhang and Wildemuth (2005). Also, we did not use any computer programs such as

NVivo or ATLAS.ti to assist us to organize, manage, and coding the qualitative data. In our case, although these computer programs would provide an efficient manner to analyse the data, we were afraid that in the coding process, they would miss some insightful information. When using qualitative content analysis, we meticulously viewed each passage of textual material. The goal of the explorers was to obtain useful themes to richly describe and explain the students’ leadership style options.

We read all the students’ answers to three questions for three times. Thereafter, we took notes and extracted the most important linguistic units (e.g., a single word, a phrase, a sentence, or a paragraph). In the process, we were primarily looking for the expressions of an idea (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1990). Afterwards, we identified keywords and phrases and then clustered them to discern patterns and themes. Finally, three themes emerged which are similar leadership orientations, situation-dependent leadership, and balanced leadership orientation. The trustworthiness of this qualitative phase study was evaluated in terms of the criteria suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was ensured mainly by repeated reading, checking interpretations against raw data, and member checking. Dependability and confirmability were established through investigators’ research notes, member checking, and the research results.

## Findings

### Similar Leadership Orientations Between Male and Female Students

From the students’ answers to the abovementioned three questions, we can derive some useful information about students’ leadership orientations. Generally, both male and female students think they are more relationship-oriented. Closely looking at male students’ scores, we found out of 16 male graduate students in our sample, only one scored higher on task orientation than relationship with greater than 3-point difference. For some females, the discrepancies between task and relationship are huge. In addition, most females describe their style as Team Management. Males, however, perceives to be moderate on task and relationship.

The only one male student whose task score is three points greater than relationship places himself in the Team Management (9,9) zone. While it is important for him as a leader to accomplish any and all tasks that are assigned to him and his team, it is equally important to him that “*I make my followers feel at ease in the workplace and with the tasks that they have been assigned to perform for our organization*”. Another male student interprets his 36 of task score and 38 of relationship as falling into the moderately high range. He thinks that little difference between these two scores appears to be balanced.

Compared with their counterparts, female students hold different opinions about their orientations. One female notes that after scoring 34 points for task behaviour and 46 for relationship behaviour in the questionnaire, she surprisingly realizes that she is extremely people-oriented. She provides evidence by describing her leadership behaviours. Although often describing to her team members what their role in the group is and what is expected of them, she also finds that she always acts with a relationship behaviour.

*“My main concern is making sure others feel welcome into the group and are comfortable with the tasks that are asked of them. I feel more confident as a leader when I am able to fully interact with participants rather than just focusing on what needs to be completed.”*

Of all 21 female students, 12 of them decide that they have a high emphasis on relationship in the context of leadership. Only four women have slightly higher scores in task orientation. Yet, there is one female student who confidently declares that she practices more task-directed behaviours in leading a student organization. *“I have a moderately high tendency to be task directed toward others while the degree to which I try to make comfortable relationship with people is moderately in a low range”*.

### Situation-Dependent Leadership

For both male and female students, what they manifest themselves diverges in their practices of leadership styles. Most of them, however, admit that they may adjust their behaviour to meet various internal and external demands and circumstances. It appears that they already possess the situational awareness to understand aspects of the situations that are relevant for the leadership effectiveness. This is much truer for those who are in leadership position for many years. They seem to realize that it is essential for them to understand the external events and their followers' needs and be able to balance and adapt their leadership style as dictated by a particular situation.

One of our female students is an assistant coach for young teenage girls. She opines that the leadership orientations managers' display are dependent on the positions they take. As a coach, she feels that many of the items on the questionnaire relating to task behaviours are things for which she sees her head coach take primary responsibility. From her coaching standpoint, it is her job to improve teenage girls' physical skills on the court, encourage their work ethic, and help them develop leadership skills such as sportsmanship and commitment. In effect, *“I feel that I naturally gravitate towards more relationship-oriented behaviors in the process of trying to empower my players”*. For her, it is her position as an assistant coach that affects her leadership choice. The remark of another female student illustrates more conspicuously the importance of situation in leadership. As an instructor at a research university, she believes that in certain circumstances, she is more likely to have a high relationship focus; but in others, she becomes task focused. When in her classroom, she enacts more task behaviours than relationship behaviours. The reason is that *“if I were to be very relatable to my students and focus*

*less on the task aspects, they would begin viewing me as a peer, or as a friend, thus jeopardizing the effectiveness of myself as a legitimate instructor”*. However, when in a meeting with her fellow graduate students, she is more likely to have a greater interest in ensuring she is creating and maintaining relationships with people she will be working with for a long time.

Male students are no exceptions. Sometimes, they show more adaptability in choosing what styles are more suitable for certain situations. A male student working as captain at a fire station states that he uses task orientation and people-orientation leadership styles almost equally. At a fire scene, he uses a task orientation so that the team functions safely, quickly, and efficiently. Job tasks at the fire station do not bear the same amount of urgency. Therefore, he feels that sometimes he needs to use a people-oriented leadership style. Another male student observes that leadership style may change over time as people become more mature emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. When he worked as a supervisor in his youth, he was primarily concerned with task orientation and not relationship. At that point in his career, he needed to have more in the middle, which coincides with “Middle-of-the-Road Management” on the Leadership Grid. But gradually he has gained the full understanding of the weaknesses of being task-directed leader. Now, his leadership style *“is slightly different, which shows how I have grown in my understanding of personal relationships and the value that needs to be placed on team members”*.

### Shift Towards Balanced Behaviour

This observation is specifically geared towards answering the third question of the assignment. Superficially looking at the students' response, you might gain nothing about what tendency they are about to shift towards. Some believe that task-oriented behaviours may be better for them, whereas others think that they will lean towards the relationship side. Still, some others are content with their current leadership style. However, after carefully checking their scores for both task and relationship, we captured the common theme for the shift tendency of their leadership behaviours. Regardless of their current orientation, they are wishing to move towards more balanced-leadership behaviour.

A female student in this class who received higher score on task hopes that she can work with both styles of leadership to become a more powerful and influential leader. By focusing on tasks whilst maintaining a relationship with subordinates, she believes leaders can maintain a position of authority and still be considered as friendly. Specifically reflecting on the scores, she comments that she needs to practice to be more friendly and supportive. As a task-oriented leader, building a rapport with co-worker is a first step to change for better.

*“I need to actively seek input from people before implementing ideas, and collaborate to find solutions to work-related problems. Also, I need to be flexible ..... Being receptive to new ideas encourages people to develop creative solutions to issues and will increase my overall adaptability as a leader”.*

The motivation for her to do so is to shift towards balanced behaviour to be a more effective leader.

For another student who scores 34 on task and 45 on relationship, the priority is to place greater emphasis on task-oriented behaviour in an effort to balance her leadership style. *“Particular things I believe I need to practice include setting clear standards for performance for group members, developing a plan of action as well as a blueprint for how to accomplish it, and defining specific responsibilities of group members”.* She highlights the importance of relationship-oriented behaviours in her job. However, it is more critical for the time being to obtain a balanced orientation and she could be more effective as a leader if she learns to better exhibit task-oriented behaviours. Most male students tend to maintain their high level of relationship while balancing their style, for the two male students who received a little bit higher score on the task than relationship. They decide to make efforts to shift emphasis from a task-oriented leadership style to one that is more relationship centred. One of them lists three areas of subordinate interaction that need to improve on. *“Improving in these areas will help increase the balance I am able to apply as a leader and will in turn deliver a more productive workforce”.*

## Discussion

This study demonstrated the relevance and feasibility of using mixed sequential-explanatory research method

on the graduate students’ task and relationship-oriented leadership behaviours. In the quantitative study, we found that: (1) Graduate students tend to be more relationship-directed towards their subordinates; (2) There are no significant differences between male and female students in terms of using task or relationship orientation; (3) Both male and female students are more likely to adopt relationship orientation. From all these three conclusions, we can infer that no significant difference exists between two genders with respect to adopting task and relationship-oriented behaviours when in leadership positions. In the qualitative phase, we reviewed the students’ response to the three assignments prompts and extracted three main themes: (1) Similar leadership behaviours for both genders, (2) Situation-dependent Leadership, and (3) Willingness to shift towards balanced behaviour. Also, in the qualitative study, we found how students would like to make a change for better leadership.

It is understandable to observe that females are more likely to use relationship style. The finding that graduate students tend to be more relationship-directed towards their subordinates is consistent with most studies of the same kind. However, it seems inexplicable that male students also tend to adopt relationship-directed leadership style in leadership positions. Simply using quantitative evidence cannot justify why this happens. Students’ reflections help to offer us some insights. Out of 16 male students, only four vacillatingly perceive themselves as task-oriented. Even so, they still believe that it is equally important to use relationship focused leadership style, because as one student comments, he needs to make his followers feel at ease in the workplace. It is vital to be sensitive for them to what the employees are going through and maintain balance in order for everyone to be successful. There is one student from the law-enforcement sector, which is traditionally considered to be hierarchically structured and task-focused. Even he still feels that he tends to focus more heavily on relationships, more so than being task oriented. He explains that

*“I am comfortable interacting with people. This score in this area was not surprising. Relationship building is important for a leader.....I think that through relationship building a leader may inspire their followers to go beyond behaviors expected in their job description. My ability to build relationships has provided me with success when working within teams and in my career”.*

For most male students, being fair, open, and approachable are traits that they hope to possess, or at least, their team would feel so. These graduate students want their followers to know that they care about the employees first and foremost. As a result, they can build trust and mutual respect amongst their team and achieve success. Task completion and goals are important. But in their eyes, how to complete the task and achieve the goals is even more critical. Only by putting people first can leaders enhance the work effectively and ethically.

From the reflections, we could derive other insights. In the qualitative study, we extracted “situation-dependent leadership” as one of the themes. In addition, we concluded that our graduate students could adjust their behaviour to meet various internal and external demands and circumstances. They appear to possess the situational awareness to understand aspects of the situations that are relevant for the leadership effectiveness. This outcome is one of the benefits this leadership course can offer to the students.

Among others, generational difference in nowadays' workforce is one of the biggest external human resources environment graduate students are increasingly grappling with on a daily basis. Deal (2007) and Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal, & Brown (2007) found that although there is a difference existing among different generations, employees across generations all value honesty in their leaders, supporting, trustworthiness, listening, and helping others to achieve their goals. Specifically, modest evidence shows that younger generations prefer leadership characterized by interpersonal dependability, support, and trust (i.e., relationship focused), and they tend to seek leaders who provide a working environment conducive to individual fulfilment rather than task-focused leaders (Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal, & Brown, 2007). The students seem to be acutely aware of the generational difference problems that may arise from differing mind-sets and communication styles of workers born in different eras. Also, they appear to have strategies to adapt to these arising issues by building camaraderie, respect, trust, and liking between them and their subordinates. As one student wrote that, “*no single viewpoint is wrong, only different*”. Therefore, “*it is important to understand each generation*”. This is the main plausible reason why they reported they emphasize on using relationship-oriented leadership style in the workplace.

## Limitations

There are a few limitations in this mixed study. The first limitation is its sample size. In the quantitative phase, we only used 37 graduate students to participate in this study due to the class size. Of these 37 participants, 21 are women while 16 are men. For this reason, we used non-parametric tests to analyse the data. Although non-parametric tests would be appropriate in this case, they have less power due to small sample size, meaning less likelihood to detect the effect. For example, we concluded that there is no significant difference between task and relationship orientations for male students. Even though large effects in our study increase the statistical power (e.g., the value of Asymptotic Sig. is large) we are still concerned about it. Moreover, small sample also limits the generalizability of the study. Future research could use a larger sample size to draw conclusions with the same degree of confidence. If sample size is large enough, we would recommend using parametric test.

Another limitation of this study is its use of a single students' assignment response. We didn't recruit any former students to participate in a focus study, nor did we call them to be interviewed. This might raise a serious issue regarding generalizability of the findings. Although our conclusions were derived from the deep reflections on and explanations of students' assignments, we still recommend that future study includes a triangulation technique to enhance validation of data through cross verification from more sources.

## Implication and Conclusion

The purpose of this mixed methods sequential-explanatory study is to examine the difference between male and female graduate students in terms of leadership-behaviour orientation and explore the latent reasons why they demonstrate the difference. We found that both male and female graduate students tend to be more relationship-directed towards their subordinates and there are no significant differences between male and female students in terms of leadership behaviours. Three major themes derived from the students' response to the three assignment prompts are similar leadership orientations, situation-dependent leadership, and shift towards balanced behaviour. That is to say, most students tend to

think that the effectiveness of leadership is predicated on the situation they face. Cognizant of their own weakness, they are willing to shift towards balanced behaviour to make a change for better leadership.

This study has significant theoretical and practical implications. First, this study provides an extra scaffold to no difference argument about leadership behaviours between two genders, thus assisting to break down the stereotype and the glass ceiling against women. Second, this study evinces the value of mixed methods, sequential explanatory model in the leadership arena. By using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, it becomes possible to examine whether there are differences in leadership behaviours between genders, and subsequently to gain more insights into this phenomenon and illuminate important nuances that otherwise would not be found. Third, this study provides proof to organizations that will promote staff employment, management and leadership training, career development, delegation, and empowerment. Lastly, this study indicates effective leaders should maintain balanced-leadership behaviours depending on the internal and outside situations, they need to concern for both the task and the relations in order to obtain maximum benefit out of their human resources.

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