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Women shy away from competition: How to overcome it

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Center for Research in Economics, Management and the Arts

Women Shy Away From Competition – How To Overcome It

Working Paper No. 2020-21

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Amanda Goodall, Margit Osterloh & Mandy Fong**WOMEN SHY AWAY FROM COMPETITION –
HOW TO OVERCOME IT****Abstract**

Women remain underrepresented at the upper echelons. An aversion to competition has been suggested as a factor that discourages women from applying for top jobs. This paper reviews the research showing that high-ability females compete less than males. We develop a theoretical approach to explore why there are gender differences in competitive behaviours and identify flaws in the current recruitment methods, which constrain the supply of qualified candidates. On this basis, we discuss two policy implications that may mitigate competitiveness and thereby motivate high-ability women to apply for leadership positions. The first is quotas. Next we introduce an innovative tool that has a long yet little-known history - focussed random selection from a pre-chosen pool of candidates. We suggest this as a way to contribute to closing the gender gap in competitiveness and enlarging the pool of high-performing women applying for top jobs.

Keywords: Competitive behaviour, focussed random selection, gender stereotypes, leadership

In recent decades, women have made considerable progress in middle management, yet they remain heavily underrepresented at the top of organizations. The infamous leaky pipeline continues to be a problem, despite a number of societal changes. For example, women's position in education has reversed (McDaniel & Buchmann, 2015) insofar as they now have more formal qualifications and achieve higher scores compared with men (OECD, 2015). Diversity training has been widely introduced (e.g., Bezrukova, Jehn, & Spell, 2012), and there is evidence suggesting that female representation in top management is positively associated with organizational performance (e.g., Deszö & Ross, 2012; Rost & Osterloh, 2010). Finally, numerous global corporations claim to be committed to diversity in management (see, e.g., Bertrand, 2020). Taken together, highly qualified women nowadays enjoy great potential. What are the reasons why even today so few females occupy top management positions?

The role of competitive behaviour is gaining increasing attention as an important factor: women may prefer not to compete for top jobs. Several laboratory and field studies have demonstrated that, on average, women—especially high-performing women—opt out of competitions or tournaments more often than their male counterparts (Balafoutas & Sutter, 2012; Flory, Leibbrandt, & List, 2015; Niederle, Segal, & Vesterlund, 2013; Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007, 2010). However, with few exceptions¹, this important area has been largely excluded from management research. If fewer females than males apply for top jobs, and firms fail to motivate high-performing women into these positions, their overall share will remain small. Companies do not ensure that they promote the brightest and the best. The pool of talented candidates is greatly underexploited (Cuberes & Teignier, 2016).

The aim of our paper is twofold. We try to explain why high-performing women hesitate more than men to take part in competitions, thus sorting themselves out of top

¹ One exception is *Management Science*: this journal has developed into a major platform for empirical studies on the gender gap in competitiveness.

management positions. We then draw on these insights to suggest a novel measure—focussed random selection—that could be used in promotion and recruitment to encourage women to take part in competitions.

In the second section of our paper, we consider the empirical outcomes from studies that have recently demonstrated females' aversion to competition. We elaborate under which conditions this may be the case. The next section develops a theoretical approach to explore why there are gender differences in competitive behaviours. Our fourth section analyses the disadvantages of current recruiting practices, which help explain why women shy away from competition. We then consider what can reduce the gender gap in competitiveness. We begin with an examination of quotas—their strengths and weaknesses. Then we propose a radical new idea: the use of random selection from a pre-chosen pool of candidates. Our fifth section explores how random selection might be applied to raise the number of female candidates in top management positions and, further, how it could be used to improve selection procedures in general. The last two sections address caveats to our selection approach and close.

WOMEN SHY AWAY FROM COMPETITION: THE EVIDENCE

During the past two decades, gender differences in competitiveness have received considerable attention. In their pioneering study, Niederle and Vesterlund (2007) found both that women shied away from competing with men, and that they underperformed when competing against men. These authors used an experimental setting to investigate men's and women's preferences between pay for performance and tournament-based compensation. They found that men chose tournament-based compensation schemes twice as often as women. The results were obtained despite the absence of differences in performance between men and women in the tasks they fulfilled.

Numerous laboratory and field studies adopting the design of Niederle and Vesterlund (2007) or modified versions have replicated their finding that women are less willing to compete than men (see, e.g., Buser, Niederle, & Oosterbeek, 2014; Buser, Peter, & Wolter, 2017; Flory et al., 2015; Hospido, Laeven, & Lamo, 2019; Niederle, 2016.).

There are several conditions under which women are more likely to opt out of competitions. First, the gender gap increases with the performance of candidates. Buser et al. (2017) showed that the willingness of eighth-grade girls and boys to compete was equal when they all had poor grades, whereas high-ability girls were about 30 to 40 percentage points less likely than boys to compete (see also Balafoutas & Sutter, 2012; Fryer & Levitt, 2010). Second, the gender gap in competitiveness seems largely to be restricted to contests with males (Burow, Beblo, Beninger, & Schröder, 2017; Geraldes, 2016). Accordingly, differences in competitiveness were found between girls from single-sex schools and those in co-educational ones (Booth & Nolen, 2012). Third, the disparity to compete is the highest in traditionally male domains,² as mathematics once was. It is made stronger when gender roles become salient (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2010; Riener & Wagner, 2018). The experiments Buser et al. (2017) conducted showed that the competition gap was the largest in mathematics, approximately 60%, among the highest ability students (see also Fryer & Levitt, 2010). Whereas gender differences in willingness to compete have been established in traditionally male domains such as maths, this result seems not to hold for gender-neutral or female domains such as reading or writing (Dreber, von Essen, & Ranehill, 2014; Flory et al., 2015; Günther, Ekinici, Schwieren, & Strobel, 2010). Fourth, gender differences in competitiveness are culture dependent³ and therefore are difficult to change.

² This agrees with the finding that women are less willing to lead a team in male-dominated environments (Born, Ranehill, & Sandberg, 2018).

³ For examples, see Andersen, Ertac, Gneezy, List, and Maximiano (2013), Booth, Fan, Meng, and Zhang (2018), Gneezy, Leonard, and List (2009).

In sum, there is a considerable gender gap in competitiveness between high-performing men and women, particularly in traditionally male domains. This gap has important consequences for high-ability women's self-selection into ambitious careers and thus into top management positions. The fact that even today this gap exists among 15-year-old students (Buser et al., 2017) signals that the problem is unlikely to disappear soon.

WHY DO WOMEN SHY AWAY FROM COMPETITION?

Theoretical explanations about why high-performing women shy away from competing with men are rare, but they are necessary if we are to understand these differences in competitive behaviour and how they can be overcome.

Explanations from nature focus on evolutionary biology, socio-biology, or the role of hormones (e.g., Apicella & Dreber, 2015; Shurchkov & Eckel, 2018). However, these studies have yielded inconsistent findings (Apicella et al., 2011; Ranehill et al., 2018). Also, gender intensification theory in psychology (Hill & Lynch, 1983) suggests that sex differences interact strongly with socialization effects.

Some propose that women have a genuine distaste of competition (e.g., Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007) or a distaste in conjunction with other psychological dispositions, such as risk aversion (e.g., Falk et al., 2018), low confidence (Barber & Odean, 2001; Kamas & Preston, 2012), and reactions to negative feedback (Bohnet, 2016; Buser, 2016). It has been suggested that these psychological dispositions are driven by gender identities (e.g., Bertrand, 2011, 2020), which encompass social norms about how people *should* behave.⁴ Deviation from these norms produces psychological costs (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000) or “hidden taxes”

⁴ Bertrand (2020) argues that psychological traits are mainly socially constructed. Reviewing previous findings on gender differences in skills and traits, she found that within-group variations were considerably larger than between-group variations (see also Eyal & Epley, 2017). However, this kind of comparisons cannot be applied to binary outcomes such as those reported by Niederle and Vesterlund.

(Mullainathan, 2018), which are not paid in euros or dollars, but in annoyance, unhappiness, and other negative feelings.

According to role congruity theory, gender identities interact with prejudices, discrimination, and other barriers (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 1999). This theory helps explain why high-ability women prefer not to compete with men; barriers for female leaders follow from the incongruity of expectations and norms that many people perceive between female stereotypes and the requirements of leader roles (e.g., Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). Such expectations and norms protect the status quo.⁵ They contribute to beliefs that men are and should be superior in traditionally male domains, for example, winning competitions, holding higher status jobs, earning more than women, and valued for their “provider” role. Women who threaten this status can be considered socially deficient and unlikable (e.g., Ridgeway, 2001; Rudman et al., 2012; Williams & Tiedens, 2016). For them, “being competitive in male settings includes a negative stigma of being ‘bitchy’” (Günther et al., 2010, p. 400). Consequently, those women are punished or discouraged in both their professional and private lives. They bear psychological costs. To avoid such costs, women, especially high-ability women, shy away from competition. The following findings underpin this conjecture.

In professional life, successful men are well received, while successful women are less welcomed and are prone to losing others’ approval, especially when they thrive in male-dominated domains (see, e.g., Cardador, 2017; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). Furthermore, females’ performance is often underestimated, especially in a male context (e.g., Cardador, 2017; Goldin & Rouse, 2000).⁶ Compared with men, women in powerful positions are viewed as less legitimate, leading to increased rejection and reduced

⁵ This corroborates the finding that masculine construal of leadership was found to be more pronounced with men and high-status holders (Koenig et al., 2011).

⁶ Recent evidence has shown that, although males and females were found to ask equally often for promotion and rises, women did not receive these equally (Artz, Goodall, & Oswald, 2018).

cooperation by subordinates (Vial, Napier, & Brescoll, 2016). These experiences are likely to dampen women's career expectations (e.g., Brands & Fernandez-Mateo, 2016).

Stereotypes in private life suggest that women are less likely to enjoy both high occupational status and successful partnerships. The cost of women's success is sometimes labelled the "Oscar curse" (Serjeant, 2010). Actresses who win Oscars or have been nominated are more prone to being divorced afterwards (Stuart, Moon, & Casciaro, 2011). This effect can be generalized to women outside Hollywood (Byrne & Barling, 2017; Folke & Rickne, 2020). Anticipation of the "Oscar curse" can lead women to reduce their competitive behaviours in many ways.

First, research suggests that single women may portray themselves as less ambitious when more unmarried men than married ones are present in a group. They may avoid career-enhancing actions in order not to signal undesirable personality traits to the marriage market (Bursztyn, Fujiwara, & Pallais 2017, p. 3317; see also Fisman, Iyengar, Kamenica, & Simonson, 2006). Second, women tend to hide their earning ability. Their participation in the labour force is dependent on their share in the family income. As demonstrated by Bertrand, Kamenica, and Pan (2015), a wife was less likely to participate in the labour force or reduced her working hours when she earned more than her husband. She was also more likely to take on a greater share of household chores to assuage her husband's unease with the situation. Consistent with this finding, Syrda (2019) showed that men suffered from psychological distress when the relative household income of their wives exceeded 40 percent. Roth and Slotwinski (2018) observed that women misreported their relative income to just below the point where they would earn more than their partner. According to the authors, misreporting reflects the gender norm of men being superior to women.

Overall, we conjecture that in our culture the social norms still hold that men should have higher status and be superior in traditionally male domains. Women who threaten this

status bear the cost of being considered unlikable. Therefore, women, particularly high-ability women in traditionally male domains, are more likely to avoid outperforming men in competitions. As top management is still considered a male domain, women are less likely to compete, and they may withdraw further when they are high achievers. This explanation leads to the paradoxical consequence that competent women are likely to self-select out of leadership positions unless they are prepared to pay the “hidden taxes”.

RECRUITING MEASURES TO CLOSE THE GENDER GAP

Conventional recruiting practices are based on the assumption that the best candidate will reach the top. However, there are problems associated with this. On the supply side, high-ability women avoid competition more than men and, therefore, have a poor chance of increasing their share of leadership positions.⁷ Consequently, the pool of suitable candidates is under-exploited.

On the demand side, recruiters are often prone to biases and other irrationalities (Kahneman, 2011; Latham, Almost, Mann, & Moore, 2005). Evidence from neuroscience suggests that stereotype associations involve conceptual learning systems, in particular those located in the temporal cortex and prefrontal cortex (Amodio, 2014). These conceptual associations are acquired through repeated exposure and need cognitive control to regulate their expression.⁸ However, under conditions where cognitive resources are reduced, such as time pressure, stress, and ambiguity (Bertrand, Chugh, & Sendhil, 2005), the influence of unconscious biases on behaviour is less controllable. Moreover, when candidates differ in their characteristics that are difficult to compare, evaluations may be implicitly influenced by prejudices, stereotypes, and in-group favouritism (Messner, Wänke, & Weibel, 2011; see also

⁷ This effect is reinforced by Matthew effects: “the poor get poorer and the rich get richer”, see Merton (1948).

⁸ According to Amodio (2014), this involves two processes: the monitoring of biased tendencies (increased awareness) and top-down control of behaviour (planned responses).

Weichselbaumer, 2015).⁹ In addition, recruiters may ignore regression to the mean in performance evaluations. This happens when an extreme performance is followed by a less good performance, because the former was due to luck. Luck is unlikely to persist, so future performance often regresses to the mean (Harrison & March, 1984; Kahneman, 2011; Liu & De Rond, 2016). In sum, although decision makers are eager to select the most qualified candidate, they often fail to do so.

Women may anticipate these biases, such that the demand-side factors influence their supply-side decisions not to apply for certain jobs (Fernandez-Mateo & Kaplan, 2018). This effect may be reinforced in high-ability women who react even more to negative feedback compared with men, and are more likely to relinquish effort after a setback (Buser & Yuan, 2019; Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007).

How can organizations overcome the gender gap in competitiveness? Some approaches address the supply side by trying to “fix the women”, encouraging them to “ask more” (Artz, Goodall, & Oswald, 2018). Female managers should be changed to make them more competitive and “lean in” (Sandberg, 2013). However, forcing women to compete may backfire and increase the activation of stereotypes (Niederle, 2017). Moreover, changing stereotypes and preferences takes time or requires radical social change, or both (Booth et al., 2018). This was recently demonstrated in a meta-analysis by Eagly, Nater, Miller, Kaufmann, and Sczesny (2020). The authors asked respondents to rate whether selective traits were more evident in women or men, or both equally. They found that gender-specific stereotypes such as ambition and courage (labelled agency) had not altered in over 70 years.¹⁰

Instead of trying to “fix the women”, one could try to “fix the organizations” (Chrobot-Mason, Hoobler, & Burno, 2019; Fernandez-Mateo & Kaplan, 2018). The aim of

⁹ These effects are exacerbated by serial position effects (Ginsburgh & van Ours, 2003), the Peter Principle (e.g., Lazear, 2004; Pluchino, Rapisarda, & Garofalo, 2010), and the performance paradox (e.g., Meyer & Gupta, 1994).

¹⁰ The female communal stereotype has even increased over time. However, belief in the equality of competence between men and women has also risen (Eagly et al., 2020).

this approach is to create “identity-safe environments”¹¹ (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016, p. 393) by reducing competition in the recruitment process and by mitigating the effects of recruiters’ biases.

A much-debated measure is the use of quotas. They have been applied in political elections in several countries, and for the appointment of supervisory board members. However, gender quotas are controversial and are unpopular (Wiersema & Mors, 2016). On the supply side, it is feared that the quality of board membership could be reduced (see, e.g., Ahern & Dittmer, 2012). The evidence suggests this fear is unfounded. In political elections, quotas have been shown to raise the level of formal qualifications among male and female politicians (Besley, Folke, Persson, & Rickne, 2017; Profeta, 2017). Most importantly, laboratory experiments have demonstrated that the introduction of soft gender quotas is very effective in increasing high-ability women’s willingness to compete (Balafoutas & Sutter 2012; Niederle et al., 2013; Sutter, Glätzle-Rützler, Balafoutas, & Czermak, 2016). Contrary to common belief, under such a quota the most qualified women are more likely to enter the competition. Nevertheless, one concern is that they may be viewed as “token women”, which could entrench negative stereotypes (Leibbrandt, Wang, & Foo, 2018). On the demand side, quotas may mitigate the effect of biases by circumventing gender stereotypes (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019). However, some consider them discriminatory, as illustrated by a lawsuit filed by the organization “Students for Fair Admissions” (Hartocollis, 2020). Additionally, quotas may be blocked by regulations citing legal objections, such as the violation of freedom of choice (Hailbronner & Rubio Marín, 2020).

As an alternative for dealing with the weaknesses of both conventional recruiting practices and quotas, we suggest the use of focussed random selection from a pre-chosen pool

¹¹ Hoyt and Murphy (2016, p. 393) give an empirical example of creating “identity-safe environments” for women: After the emphasis on risk-taking was removed as a selection criterion for the prestigious National Institutes of Health Directors’ Pioneer Award, the proportion of female applicants and winners increased considerably.

of candidates. This measure extends the current selection process by adding a random element. Random selection has a long yet little-known history. It was used as a political mechanism by the Athenians over two and a half thousand years ago. In medieval Venice and Florence, random selection was combined with a preselection either of candidates or of committees (Buchstein, 2009; Manin, 1997; Sintomer, 2011; Van Reybrouck, 2016). In the 18th century, vacant professorial chairs at the University of Basel were filled by lot from a list of three candidates (Berger, Osterloh, Rost, & Ehrmann, 2020; Burckhardt, 1916; Stolz, 1986).

Although random selection has been all but forgotten as a decision mechanism, an exception is its use in juries in Anglo-Saxon legal systems such as in the UK and United States (Sintomer, 2011). Recently, the idea of selecting by lots from a pre-chosen pool has been rediscovered. Today, it is applied in grant allocations (Adam, 2019)¹², and it has also been proposed as a technique for accepting academic papers for publication (Osterloh & Frey, 2020a; Oswald, 2020). In politics, examples of application include its use in citizens' forums (e.g., Buchstein, 2010). In Switzerland, a referendum may soon be held to have the members of the highest judicial court appointed randomly from a pre-chosen pool (Swiss Broadcasting Corporation, 2019).

In the management literature, random selection is rarely mentioned as a decision-making tool (for exceptions, see Boyle, 1998; Osterloh & Frey, 2019; Zeitoun, Osterloh, & Frey, 2014). A recent study designed a laboratory experiment in which subjects were appointed as group leaders into three treatment conditions: a competitive selection treatment, a random selection treatment, and a partly-random selection treatment, in which competitive selection is combined with a lottery (Berger, Osterloh, Rost, & Ehrmann, 2020). The study found that partly-random selection reduced hubris and abuse of power by leaders. Another

¹² For example, see the German Volkswagen Foundation (2018) and the Health Research Council of New Zealand (2019).

laboratory experiment using a similar setup showed that partly-random selection closed the gender gap in competition without diluting the qualifications of the entrants (Berger, Osterloh, & Rost, 2020).

FOCUSSED RANDOM SELECTION AS A NEW RECRUITING TOOL

The process of focussed random selection involves three stages. To summarise, in stage one, recruiters publish a job advertisement which announces the vacant position and that it will be filled at the final stage by random selection out of a shortlist. In the second stage, the hiring committee selects a group of suitable candidates who meet various performance (or other) criteria. In particular, they must have the necessary qualifications and core business experience suitable for the vacant post (Bäker & Goodall, 2020; Goodall, 2011). In stage three, the final candidate is randomly selected from among this pre-chosen “talent pool”. HR recruiters are in charge of the procedure.

Focussed random selection mitigates many of the problems associated with conventional recruiting measures. On the supply side, it encourages women to enter competitions. In a recent laboratory experiment, it was demonstrated that under this condition the proportion of women who chose to compete was equal to that of men (Berger, Osterloh, & Rost, 2020). This outcome supports the conjecture that focussed random selection reduces the psychological costs of violating gender role norms. Females who win the selection lottery may be less exposed to various forms of negative stereotypes, and males who fail in the process do not lose face. Additionally, this kind of selection could motivate applications from those people who are humble and consistently think of themselves as less superior to other candidates (Burckhardt, 1916, pp. 35-36) including those with low self-confidence, as is often attributed to women (Kamas & Preston, 2012). This is supported by a laboratory experiment

in which men and women revealed substantial gender differences in selection aversion when entering a pool of candidates for political representation. The difference disappeared when the candidates were picked randomly (Kanthak & Woon, 2015).¹³

On the demand side, random selection may remove biases against women and minority groups. Most importantly, because of the uncertainty surrounding future individual performance, candidates with diverse characteristics are difficult to compare. Random selection offers a solution to this problem. A mathematical model based on Jensen's inequality theorem (Jensen, 1906; Oswald, 2020) implies that random selection of pre-chosen candidates can be rational under the following conditions: (a) appraisers lack perfect foresight about candidates' future performance; (b) the organizational benefits of leader performance are characterized by convexity, so the best candidates produce far larger gains than moderate quality candidates: outstanding managers have special "multiplying" effects on the success of an organization. In such cases, random selection is optimal. The reason is that, on average, the gains from appointing a superb leader outweigh the occasional mistakes from appointing poor managers. The benefit of randomization therefore comes from averaging across a convex function (Oswald, 2020).¹⁴ The risk of randomly selecting incompetent managers is reduced when a rigorous preselection process has been followed to create the pool.

There are two further reasons why random selection from a shortlist of qualified candidates may be more effective than choosing the seemingly highest performer by conventional selection methods. Shortlists often reduce the heterogeneity in qualifications among preselected candidates, which increases the likelihood of luck or uncontrolled randomness. As a result, "almost random careers" (March & March, 1977) are the unintended consequences, which may give rise to in-group favouritism or homophily (e.g., old boys' networks). Finally, random selection helps to avoid the common bias of ignoring regression

¹³ The authors controlled for ability, confidence about relative ability, and risk aversion.

¹⁴ One general reason to expect convexity is that in a wide range of settings it is known that human ability and performance follows the curve of Lotka's Law (Lotka, 1926).

to the mean (Liu & De Rond, 2016). It prevents overestimation of a candidate's singular past performance. In both cases, instead of being subservient to uncontrolled randomness, recruiters using random selection can consciously apply randomness in a valuably controlled way.

DISCUSSION

Focussed random selection has the potential to increase the proportion of highly competent women in leadership. Not only does this increase diversity but there is reason to believe that organizations' performance will also be improved. On the supply side, more high-ability women might be expected to apply for leadership positions because of reduced competition in the recruitment process, which tallies with women's expressed preferences. On the demand side, biases and other irrationalities that overtly or covertly influence recruitment can be mitigated. This encourages more women into the pool and may also benefit other well-suited candidates who are disadvantaged by current recruiting practices, including those who dislike competition and members of minority groups.

There are possible caveats that need to be addressed. It might be that female leaders do not display "typical" gender characteristics. They may differ from the female population in general because they arrive at their positions through a process of selection. Such selection effects have been shown to exist with respect to risk aversion and self-directed behaviour, but not with respect to overconfidence and other-regarding preferences (Adams, 2016). Further research will be needed to identify whether and to what degree typical gender gaps in competitiveness are found among females in leadership positions.

Moreover, it could be argued that a taste for competition is a necessary characteristic for senior managers. Random selection could then be counterproductive. However, some kinds of competition are known to be detrimental, in particular when emphasizing

individuals' inferiority in comparison to their better-off peers, leading to feelings of envy and of threatened self-conception (Sapegina & Weibel, 2017). In contrast, competition that focuses on the similarities with better peers provides positive expectations. Further research is required to learn which kind of competition female leaders are more likely to avoid, and under which conditions.

A further possible limitation of our proposal is that focussed random selection is a generic concept. Its adoption would need to be sensitive to, and accommodate, the cultural subtleties of different countries, organizations, and groups. At the country level, the implementation of this proposal would need to take account of regulations tied to different legal systems.¹⁵ Among organizations, those doing the hiring might fear a loss of control over the selection process. However, we have argued that hiring committees supported by HR should be actively involved in the process and in its design, particularly in appointing to the shortlist. At the group level, male candidates who have a strong taste for competition might under our proposal be less inclined to apply.

In general, random selection procedures are likely to be accepted more readily in environments that emphasize equality of opportunity and low levels of power distance.¹⁶ Further research is needed to investigate factors relevant to the adoption of focussed random selection, which has potential in other areas, such as research governance (Adam, 2019; Osterloh & Frey, 2020a, b), leadership research (Berger, Osterloh, Rost, & Ehrmann, 2020; Oswald, 2020), and politics (Buchstein, 2009, 2010; Van Reybrouck, 2016).

¹⁵ Several HR specialists have confirmed that, in Switzerland, for instance, this proposal seems not be in conflict with local regulations.

¹⁶ Power distance according to Hofstede's (1991) cultural dimensions.

CONCLUSION

The aims of our paper are twofold: to discuss a theoretical framework to understand why high-performing women hesitate more than men to enter competitions, and to use this to develop proposals to reduce the gender gap in competition within organizations. This may also benefit other kinds of appropriate candidates who fear discrimination (e.g., on grounds of race, disability, sexual orientation).

We believe the idea of using random selection makes an important contribution to management research, from which policy implications can be derived. By analysing the abundant evidence on the competition gap, we gain theoretical insights into why women shy away from competition. Women have to bear identity costs that men are spared. Success is greatly approved of in males, whereas the opposite appears to be true for females, and especially if women succeed in male-dominated contexts. Further, we identify flaws in the current recruitment methods, which discourage qualified candidates from applying. Females anticipate these biases and other irrationalities common in the current selection process. As a consequence, many high-ability women attempt to avoid these disadvantages by largely not competing in male-dominated domains such as top management.

Based on these theoretical insights, we propose policy changes that enable institutions to create “identity-safe environments” for both men and women. We suggest that women are more likely to apply when overall competition for high-level positions is mitigated by eliminating competition within the shortlist. We discuss two measures to do so: quotas and focussed random selection. Although quotas encourage some high-ability women to engage in leadership positions, they are unpopular. Women fear being negatively labelled as “token women,” and men fear reverse discrimination. To avoid these disadvantages, we suggest focussed random selection as a bold but promising proposal which has a long yet little-known

history. We expect this measure to close the gender gap in competitiveness and to enlarge the pool of high-performing women who apply for top jobs in favour of the whole organization.

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