

# A Focus Group Study: Examining Women Managers' Attitudes on Management and Firing Decisions in *The Apprentice* with Donald Trump

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## ABSTRACT

*Women face many challenges in the workplace. Those challenges are chiefly attributed to gender issues. Examining women's issues in the field of management remains an intriguing subject for research. The purpose of this study is to examine female management decision behavior using The Apprentice as a focus group for research. The study was conducted with three focus groups. This study was conducted over a four-year period. This study is a continuation of a pilot study on the reality television show. A sample (N = 139) consisted of female industry professionals and managers, and female MBA students. The participants viewed various episodes of the reality show and then answered a questionnaire based on their observations and decisions. The data was collected following the observations and analyzed. The statistics design used a one sample t-Test and a Pearson Correlation. First, the results indicated that a majority the female participants thought the project manager should be fired. Second, the findings revealed a fair majority of the participants agreed with Trump's firing decisions. Lastly, the results revealed a strong correlation between (a) task type, (b) industry type, and (c) focus group type and the participants' firing decisions.*

**Keywords:** Women in management, *The Apprentice*, termination decisions, Donald Trump, management, focus groups, reality television.

## Introduction

The prior research on gender and management remains an interesting subject matter. The research on females in the field of management continues to be an interesting subject matter as well. Females in management continue to deal with the glass ceiling phenomenon in many organizations.

The idea for this study originated from observing the popularity of reality televisions such as *Survivor*. The researchers decided it would be interesting to conduct research on *The Apprentice* with Donald Trump. The researchers also thought it would be interesting to conduct focus groups with females in management and how they make management decisions. After some consideration on this subject, the researchers made the decision to pursue this inquiry.

First, a pilot study was conducted with small focus groups. The initial pilot study was conducted with focus groups of business students at a public university (Miles, 2012). As a result of the

research process the researchers amassed a wealth of data and insight into this subject. Some adjustments were made. Second, based on the experiences with the initial pilot study, the researchers made improvements to the formal study. One decision that was made was to work around the time constraints and take a more quantitative approach (rather than a qualitative approach). Last, the formal study was conducted. This study is a continuation of the initial pilot study. This study can be beneficial and make a significant contribution field of management. As a result of this four-year study on *The Apprentice*, this research was presented at two academic conferences and was well attended by a cross-section of researchers.

## **Objectives of Study**

This study attempts to examine perceptions and management decisions of female managers. The two objectives of the study are to: (1) examine perceptions of female industry professionals and female MBA students in focus groups after viewing *The Apprentice*; and (2) examine and compare female firing decisions and if they are in agreement with Trump's decisions.

The study is structured as follows. First, a review of the body of research and prior studies is presented. Second, the article discusses the sample, variables and data collection. Third, the results and the statistical analyses of the data are presented. Last, the discussion of the results and the conclusion and summary are presented.

## **Background**

### **Prior Studies on Women in Management**

A large body of the literature and prior research on females in management has ranged from management roles to comparing and contrasting gender differences. Some of the prior studies have examined women in management roles. Female supervisors at higher levels are moderately argumentative, indicating that the relationship between argumentativeness and success is more complex than previously identified. Furthermore, argumentativeness per se is not linearly related to supervisory level, but rather, moderation in argumentativeness is characteristic of women who have attained advanced supervisory positions (Schullery, 1998). Females as senior managers had an increased capacity to impact on decision-making in managerial universities, mainly related to 'soft' management skills. However, these skills were not valued in a competitive management (Whitea, Carvalhob & Riordanc, 2011).

### **Women and Management Styles**

Some of the other prior studies have examined management styles of women. Females tend to be more participative in their leadership behavior compared to males. Specifically, females tend to make use of group decision-making procedures more frequently and one-to-one consultation less frequently compared to males (Jago & Vroom, 1982). Consultative management style was found to be the most common among women executives (Osland, Snyder, & Hunter, 1998).

## **Women and Management Decisions**

Other prior studies have examined women and management decisions. Historically, concerning the gender effects on managerial hiring decisions, females tend to make more favorable evaluations compared to males. This source of evaluative error could be as detrimental to personnel decisions as errors due to halo, contrast, and first impression effects (Rose & Andiappan, 1978). There were no significant differences between the male and female executives on any of the decision task variables. However, female executives were less prone to risk taking compared to male executives (Muldrow & Bayton, 1979). Women, in general, do not differ from men in general, in the ways in which they administer the management process (Donnell & Hall, 1980). One of the notable factors that contribute to the success of female managers is their decision style. Female managers' decision style tends to be a combination of conceptual, moderate directive and low behavioral (Boulgarides & Rowe, 1983). Despite some of the prior research that stated otherwise, females did not differ in their managerial decision abilities (Johnson & Powell, 1994). Females are significantly more risk averse, tend to be less overconfident and behave less competitively oriented; thus, females behave differently in these three domains (Beckmann & Menkhoff, 2008).

## **Women and the Glass Ceiling**

Some of the other prior studies have examined women in management and the glass ceiling. Women tend to make career choices, which highlight the limitations, which see women's absence as the result either of procedural discrimination or women's primary orientation towards home and family. They had either decided not to have children or were prepared to, and felt able to, work in the way the organization required even when they had children yet this was disregarded (Liff & Ward, 2001). Female executives are more unwelcome as leaders among female than among males. The vote for a male is given because of tradition and habit that the manager should be a male (Vuksanović, 2012). There were other notable studies on the women, barriers and the glass ceiling (Guy, 1993; Wright & Tellei, 1993; Mathur, & Salmi, 2006; Fogliasso & Scales, 2011).

## **Gender and Management Performance**

Other prior studies have examined women in terms of gender and performance. There were no significant correlations between group gender compositions. Gender had no effect on performance in management performance (Fenwick & Neal, 2001). In terms of fund managers, male- and female-managed funds do not differ significantly in terms of performance, risk, and other fund characteristics (Atkinson, Baird, & Frye, 2003). Females are significantly more risk averse, tend to be less overconfident and behave less competitively oriented; thus, females behave differently in these three domains (Beckmann & Menkhoff, 2008). In terms of assessed management dimensions (e.g., organizing and planning, decision making, and leadership), females did not significantly differ from males (Moses & Boehm, 1975).

## **Women in Management and Ethics**

Lastly, the other prior studies have examined women and ethics in management decisions. In terms of ethical decisions, male and female managers generally do not differ in their perception

of what is ethical and what is unethical (Kidwell, Stevens & Bethke, 1987). Lastly, one of the more interesting and recent studies was conducted on gender and ethics. Overall, female professionals appeared to have significantly higher ethics judgment than their male counterparts (Lund, 2008).

### **Prior Research on *The Apprentice***

The body of research on *The Apprentice* has been limited to a few notable studies. Some of the prior studies have focused on the ethical behavioral and communication dynamics of the reality show (Eliot, 2004; Gyenes, 2004; Popejoy, 2004). Other studies have examined the reality show for group dynamics and decision behavior in management (Henle, 2005). Some studies have focused on communication and leadership skills (Kinnick & Parton, 2005).

Many college and university business programs around the country have used *The Apprentice* for teaching basic principles of business in the classroom. In addition, the reality show has been used in many MBA programs. For example, the University of Washington developed a business course based on *The Apprentice* (Gyenes, 2004). This study attempts to fill that gap in the prior research by examining and measuring female management decisions. This study attempts to take on this endeavor by using the focus groups and the reality show to examine female decision behavior.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Methodology**

This study used a focus group methodology. The researchers made the decision to use a focus group because it provided the optimal way to study decision-making in terms of firing. Focus groups provided the best methodology and opportunity to facilitate a discussion. It also provided the opportunity to explore specific discussion on firing decisions. The use of focus groups as a methodology has the two advantages: (a) the ability to probe in-depth questions on a specific topic which cannot be done otherwise with quantitative consumer tests; and (b) the advantage of allowing for new topics and ideas to be brought up by the interaction among the participants (Stewart & Shamdasani 1991; Wan, Lee, & Lee, 2007). Focus groups were also found to be suitable with studies involving problem identification, planning, product development, implementation of new product or service, evaluation, marketing and research on topics explored using individual interviews, survey or participant observations (Chalofsky 1999; Wan, Lee, & Lee, 2007). The study also used a survey methodology to collect data from the focus group. The overall methodology of the research involved both a survey-based study and structured discussions with the participants (females).

### **Sample**

Three focus groups with a total of 139 participants were conducted. The focus groups were recruited and conducted with in large metropolitan city in Texas. The eligibility criteria for participation in the study were as follows: (a) professional females in the industry; (b) female



students in an MBA program; and (c) age range from 25 – 55 and over. The tables underscore the demographic profile of the focus group participants (see Table 1 and Table 2).

### **Focus Group Questions and Measurement**

The focus groups were based on the use of *The Apprentice* as observation material. Several episodes of the reality show were shown in numerous focus groups with female participants. The participants consisted of both professional females and female MBA students.

The participants in the focus groups were asked questions derived from the research aim of the study. The focus groups for *The Apprentice* used a survey questionnaire for collecting data from the workshop sessions. Respondents were asked to evaluate management decisions in the reality television show used in the focus groups. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale structure. The following questions were used to structure the focus groups: (a) What is your gender? (b) What is your ethnicity? (c) Who do you think should be fired? (d) Did you agree with Trump's decision? (e) Did you enjoy this case study (*The Apprentice*)?

Due to the time constraints and one-hour episodes, there was limited time for administering the survey to the focus groups. Because of the time constraints, the participants were asked only five questions in the survey. To allow for the data collected from the focus groups, the researchers made the decision to use the same questions and format for all of the focus groups. The challenge was to facilitate each focus group and collect good data in study.

### **Experiment**

The aim in our experiment was to investigate female firing decisions in focus groups using *The Apprentice*. Respondents were asked to answer evaluate the firing decisions in the reality show. In this study, respondents were instructed to select an answer that corresponds most closely to their opinion. These items measured a single construct ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and the results yielded an index. The values of coefficient alpha ranged from .51 to .90, and the items of all the dimensions were summed to represent the dimension of perceived risk in online shopping.

### **Research Procedures**

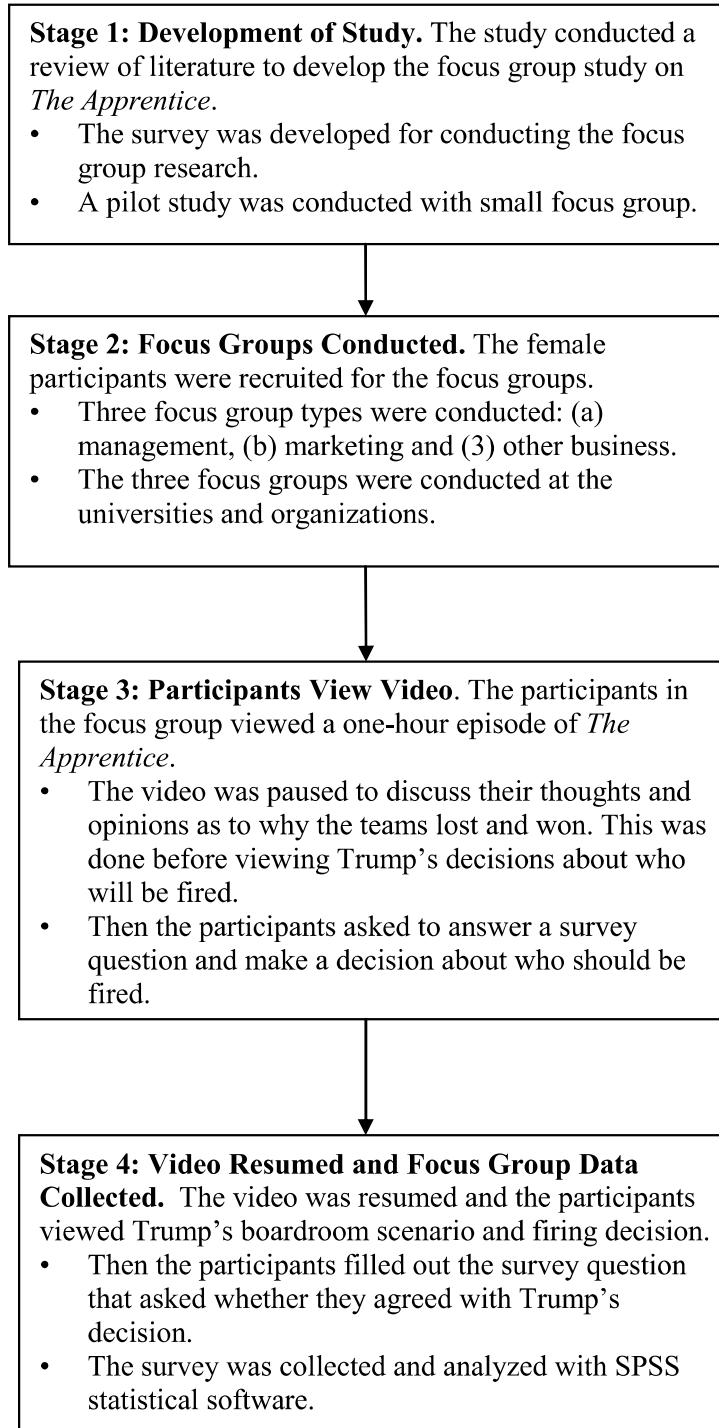
The research with the focus groups has been conducted since Fall 2011 to Spring 2015. The focus groups were arranged with the Business departments at two universities (public and private) and two outside liaison organizations. The focus groups were held at two places: on site at the university and off-site with liaison organizations. The participants were recruited by telephone and email for this study. As noted above, because of the focus group methodology, a convenience sample approach was used in the study. The participants were given the choice to participate or not to participate in the study. There was a 1-hour time duration for each focus group. The female participants were asked to discuss their perceptions and opinions along the following research themes: (a) reasons why the team lost or won for the task; (b) reasons for choosing a person on the team to be fired; and (c) thoughts and opinions about the project manager and team members. The second stage of the method was to view Trump's firing

decisions in *The Apprentice* episode. Then the participants were asked to make a decision if they agreed with Trump's firing decision. Then the surveys were collected following the focus group [see Figure 1].

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected for this required the use of a statistical analytical methodology. A systematic approach was used to clean and organize the data for analysis. After the data collection and screening, the entire data set ( $N = 139$ ). All analyses are conducted using Social Sciences Program Version 21.0 statistical analysis software for Windows (SPSS, Chicago, IL USA). Three statistical analyses were used for this study: (a) descriptive statistics and frequencies for sociodemographic characteristics and behavior were calculated; (b) one-sample  $t$ -test was used for the mean values and standard deviations; and compare the responses of the participants and the  $p$  scores; and (c) Pearson Correlation to examine correlations within the data.

**Figure 1.** Methodology Framework of Study.



## Results

The sample consisted of 139 female participants for the focus group study. Table 1 shows the demographic variables of the sample. The significant descriptive statistics were as follows: (a) 71.2% of the participants were Hispanic females; (b) 42.4% of the industries in the focus groups were in retail trade sector; and (c) 67.0% of the focus group types were in the field of marketing [see Table 1]. **Table 1.** Demographics of Female Participants in *The Apprentice* Focus Group Study

Demographic Variables	N	%
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Asian	2	1.4
Black	6	4.3
Hispanic/Latino	99	71.2
White	31	22.3
Other	-	-
<b>Industries</b>		
Manufacturing	48	34.5
Retail Trade	59	42.4
Services	8	5.6
Other Industry	24	17.3
<b>Task Types</b>		
Product	131	94.2
Service	8	5.8
<b>Focus Group Types</b>		
Management	38	27.3
Marketing	93	67.0
Other/Business	8	5.8

(N = 139)

Table 2 illustrates the results of the descriptive statistics of the termination decisions. The results

from the study with female participants prove to be interesting concerning the focus groups in *The Apprentice*. When examining the question, (V3) - *Who Should Be Terminated*, 42.0% of the participants chose the project manager to be fired. However, only 16.5% chose the both the project manager and a team member should be fired. When examining the question, (V4) - *Did You Agree With Trump's Decision*, 33.1% of the participants agreed with Trump's firing decisions chose the project manager to be fired. However, what was very interesting is that the 24.5% disagreed with Trump's decision. The decisions among the participants were interesting because they were more diverse in terms of agreement with Trump's decisions.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics of Termination Decisions in *The Apprentice*

<b>V3 - Who Do You Think Should Be Fired?</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Project Manager	58	42.0
Team Member	39	28.1
Neutral	19	14.0
Both Project Manager and Team Member	23	16.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>V4 -Did you agree with Trump's Decision?</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Strongly Agree	46	33.1
Agree	30	22.0
Neutral	11	8.0
Disagree	18	13.0
Strongly Disagree	34	24.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>100.0</b>

(N = 139)

Table 3 shows the results from the one sample *t*-test and the means and standard deviations of the ethnicity groups. When examining (V2) ethnicity, the Hispanic participants had a significantly higher mean yet lower standard deviation ( $M = 2.13$ ,  $SD = 1.085$ ) compared to the White participants ( $M = 1.90$ ,  $SD = 1.165$ ). This means there was some significance between the two ethnic groups with this variable. When examining (V5) *Focus Group Type*, the Hispanic female participants had a higher mean and a lower standard deviation ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = .563$ ) compared to the White female participants ( $M = 2.81$ ,  $SD = .477$ ). However, when examining (V6) *Task Type*, the Hispanic female participants had a higher mean and standard deviation ( $M = 1.07$ ,  $SD = .258$ ) compared to the White female participants ( $M = 1.03$ ,  $SD = .180$ ). This means there was some significance between the two groups in the sample. However, when examining the means and standard deviations of Hispanics ( $M = 2.69$ ,  $SD = 1.496$ ) compared to Whites ( $M = 2.68$ ,  $SD = 1.585$ ) they were nearly equal. There were not much any significant gender differences [see Table 3]. One-sample *t*-test indicated that ethnicity is significant to the participants in the decision making in *The Apprentice*.

Lastly, Table 4 shows the results from the Pearson correlation are shown in Table 4. There were some statistical correlations was found between some of the variables. Correlational analyses were used to examine the relationship between the variables for the study and their scores on the psychometric measures of the study. The correlation between (V4) - Did You Agree with Trump's Decision and (V5) - Focus Group Type was found to be statistically significant,  $r(139) = +.346$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , two-tailed. The results suggest that 1 out of 6 correlations were statistically significant.

The results indicate an inverse relationship between the (V7) – Industry Type and (V4) - Did You Agree with Trump's Decision  $r(139) = -.229$ ,  $p < 0.005$ . There was also an inverse

relationship between V6) – Task Type and (V4) - Did You Agree with Trump’s Decision  $r(139) = -.311, p < 0.001$ . The results suggest that 5 out of 6 correlations were statistically significant. The conclusion is that for decisions made by female participants, there is evidence that the decisions made using *The Apprentice* are related to task type and focus group and industry type.

**Table 3.** Results: One Sample *t*-Test and Ethnicity Group Means and Standard Deviations Statistics (*N* = 139)

Sample: Females	Means and Standard Deviations and <i>n</i>	V3 - Who Should Be Terminated?	V4 - Did You Agree With Trump's Decision?	V5 - Focus Group Type	V6 - Task Type	V7- Industry Type	Weighted	<i>t</i> -Test
Asian	Mean	2.50	3.00	3.00	1.00	5.50	2.000	42.025
	Std. Dev.	2.121	1.414	.000	.000	.707		
	<i>n</i>	2	2	2	2	2		
Black	Mean	1.50	3.50	2.67	1.00	7.17	6.000	21.867
	Std. Dev.	.837	1.761	.516	0.000	2.994		
	<i>n</i>	6	6	6	6	6		
Hispanic	Mean	<b>2.13*</b>	2.70	2.78	1.07	6.55	99.00	20.045
	Std. Dev.	<b>1.085*</b>	1.625	<b>.563*</b>	<b>.258*</b>	<b>2.047*</b>		
	<i>n</i>	99	99	99	99	99		
White	Mean	<b>1.90*</b>	2.71	2.81	1.03	6.65	31.00	61.335
	Std. Dev.	<b>1.165*</b>	1.616	<b>.477*</b>	<b>.180*</b>	<b>2.229*</b>		
	<i>n</i>	31	31	31	31	31		
Other	Mean	1.00	3.00	3.00	1.00	6.00	1.000	53.343
	Std. Dev.	-	-	-	-	-		
	<i>n</i>	1	1	1	1	1		
Total	Mean	2.05	2.74	2.78	1.06	6.58	139.00	36.875
	Std. Dev.	1.105	1.612	.535	.234	2.102		
	<i>n</i>	139	139	139	139	139		

\***Bold** indicates significant coefficients observed.

**Table 4.** Pearson Correlation Results of Females in Focus Group Statistics ( $N = 139$ )

<b>Variables</b>	<b>V2 – Ethnicity</b>	<b>V3 – Who Should Be Terminated?</b>	<b>V4 – Did You Agree With Trump’s Decision?</b>	<b>V5 – Focus Group Type</b>	<b>V6 – Task Type</b>	<b>V7- Industry Type</b>
V2 - Ethnicity	1	-.074	-.032	.027	-.038	.012
V3 - Who Should Be Terminated?	-.074	1	-.102	.116	.101	-.115
V4 - Did You Agree With Trump’s Decision?	.032	-.102	1	<b>.346**</b>	<b>-.229**</b>	<b>-.311**</b>
V5 - Focus Group Type	.027	.116	<b>.346**</b>	1	<b>-.363**</b>	<b>-.675**</b>
V6 - Task Type	-.038	.101	<b>-.229**</b>	-.363	1	.050
V7- Industry Type	.012	-.115	<b>-.311**</b>	<b>-.675**</b>	.050	1
<i>Means</i>	3.40	2.04	2.74	2.78	1.06	6.58
<i>Standard Deviations</i>	.653	1.105	1.612	.535	.235	2.102

\*\*Indicates the correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) and \*\*Correlation at 0.05 level (2-tailed)



## Limitations

Despite the superior advantage of focus groups as a research methodology such as a larger groups and group opinions, forum for developing ideas and creative thinking, the study acknowledges its limitations. One limitation in the study was the use of a focus group methodology. The use of focus groups has been considered to be significantly more in depth than other research methods. However, the issue of groupthink or conformance was a limitation. Furthermore, because of this can be vulnerable to bias because it used a convenience sample approach for collecting data. Lastly, another important limitation in the in study was homogeneity of the sample. This dynamic may have influenced the data given to the research team by the participants. This homogenous makeup of the sample could be vulnerable to some bias. It is because of this research approach that applying the results to the general population must be taken with caution.

We therefore suggest that opportunities for further research be undertaken to address those limitations. First, extend the research to wider population sample. Second we suggest further research with low-level, mid-level and high-level management tiers in organizations, rather than a general focus group approach. We suggest further research would be fruitful by examining different management levels because the results may lead to some interesting findings. Lastly, further research could focus more on management experience as a construct. Examining the years of management experience of managers would be interesting. It would be interesting to see how experience would influence management decisions and firing decisions.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The main objective of this study is to examine female's management decisions in *The Apprentice*. The focus group method used in this study seems to be a helpful in examining management decisions and firing decisions. The focus group research worked for this study. This study succeeded because the focus groups were carefully chosen for this type of research process.

A critical observation is that focus group findings indicated that females tended to examine their decisions somewhat differently. They felt the firing the project manager was the optimal choice in their decisions. The research study suggests that women are more attentive to the responsibility of the project manager rather than the team member in *The Apprentice*.

Thus, the findings of this study are as follows: (a) first, a majority of the female participants chose the project manager to be fired; furthermore, only a few chose the both the project manager and a team member; this is supported by the significant findings in the data; (b) second, a majority of the participants agreed with Trump's firing decisions by choice of the project manager to be fired; but some of the participants tended to disagree with Trump's firing decision; and lastly, (c) there were some correlations there were found between the focus group type, task type and industry. These correlations were found to be found to be statistically significant in the study.

The conclusions of this study suggest that females tend to frame management problems and decision making. They have a unique way of framing their management decisions, maybe be different compared to their male counterparts. The findings indicate that ethnicity differences played an important role with the women in the study and are a noteworthy observation. The participants' perceptions of the scenarios portrayed in *The Apprentice* provided a window into their management decisions in terms of firing team members. It was noted in the study the females' attention is drawn to certain aspects (such as management competence, leadership and group dynamics) that provides insight into their decisions.

Our study contributes to the field in two ways. First, this research contributes to the field by opening a new inquiry by attempting a different approach by using a focus group and reality television as a methodology for examining females in management and their management decisions. Second, this research extends the prior research on females and gender studies in management. This study extends the prior research by using a focus group specifically on women and their decision behavior in management decision making. Therefore, this study makes an important contribution to the field of management and gender studies.

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