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Ceilings, Cliffs, and Labyrinths: Exploring Metaphors for Workplace Gender Discrimination

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Ceilings, Cliffs, and Labyrinths: Exploring Metaphors for Workplace Gender Discrimination

Introduction

It has been more than 25 years since the ‘glass ceiling’ metaphor was popularized by the Wall Street Journal (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986) to describe women’s inability to reach the upper echelons of leadership. Now metaphors abound to describe the challenges that women and other underrepresented groups face in business and in politics. We have all manner of structural barriers that can contribute to gender inequality – from ‘sticky floors’ (Booth, Francesconi, & Frank, 2003) to ‘maternal walls’ (J. Williams, 2001), from ‘leaky pipelines’ (Blickenstaff, 2005) to ‘glass escalators’ (C. L. Williams, 1992). There are also creative extensions of these metaphors. Some of these encapsulate the experience of other marginalized groups, such as those based on sexuality, as in the case of the ‘pink ceiling’ (Czyzelska, 2000); some capture barriers in particular sectors, such as the ‘brass ceiling’ in the military (Iskra, 2008) or the ‘celluloid ceiling’ in the film-making industry (Lauzen, 2006); and yet others describe barriers that arise at the intersection of multiple minority group memberships, such as the ‘concrete wall’ that women of color must climb or chip away at before they can even approach the glass ceiling (Bell & Nkomo, 2001).

Such metaphors provide a framework for our thinking about certain groups’ underrepresentation in particular roles or in leadership positions. As such, they can be seen as anovel way of framing an idea, as a heuristic to simplify our understanding, or as a powerful message to communicate a cause. However, metaphors are not only tools for facilitating communication; they imply a way of thinking that pervades our understanding of the world more generally (see Landau, Meier, & Keefer, 2010). As a result, a given metaphor can lead to new meanings and interpretations that are not inherent in the phenomenon that the metaphor is intended to describe (Cornelissen, 2006; Fauconnier & Turner, 1998; Weick, 1997).

The metaphors that have been used by academics, commentators, and policy-makers to describe gender inequality in the workplace have proven extremely successful insofar as they have enjoyed mainstream popularity with the press and the public at large. But importantly, these metaphors also impact on our understanding of the world, and they influence not only what we see, but also what we do not see. By highlighting certain aspects of a phenomenon, metaphors necessarily render other aspects less salient or even invisible (Morgan, 1997). For example, despite their variety, one characteristic that most popular metaphors capturing group-based inequality in the workplace have in common is that they focus on the obstacles and challenges that women and members of other underrepresented groups face as they try to succeed professionally; the career paths and experiences of (white, straight) men are merely implied as background for these metaphors.

In this chapter, we provide an overview of the various metaphors that have been used to illustrate gender discrimination in the workplace, focusing on the classic glass ceiling metaphor as well as on the ‘labyrinth’ (Eagly & Carli, 2007) and the ‘glass cliff’ (Ryan & Haslam, 2005) as more recent examples. We review discussions concerning the usefulness and appropriateness of these metaphors before we examine the potential problems associated with our reliance on metaphors that focus almost exclusively on the experiences of women, thereby implicitly reinforcing men as the norm that ‘goes without saying’ (Pratto, Korchmaros, & Hegarty, 2007). The goal of this chapter is not to provide an in-depth evaluation of any one particular metaphor (for work that has done so, see Bendl & Schmidt, 2010; Eagly & Carli, 2007) but instead to take a critical look at the general picture painted by these metaphors. Finally, we derive implications for organizational practice and for future research pertaining to gender inequality in the workplace.
Ceilings, Walls, and Floors: Describing Barriers

The metaphor of the glass ceiling was originally invoked to capture the essence of a phenomenon whereby women were reaching positions in middle management but seemed unable to obtain senior and executive positions – which were reserved almost exclusively for men. The glass ceiling thus describes the experience of women who find themselves blocked from higher-level leadership positions by dint of a seemingly invisible (hence the glass) and yet very real barrier (hence the ceiling) that their male colleagues do not have to contend with (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986).

When the metaphor emerged in the 1980s (first used by magazine editor Gay Bryant, see Frenkiel, 1984), it resonated well with many women’s experience of upper management as a realm that was in their sights and yet unattainable. In subsequent years, the glass ceiling metaphor became a highly successful tool for calling attention to gender discrimination in the workplace and for motivating both research (for an overview see Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009) and practical interventions. This is best illustrated by the fact that when the US Department of Labor (1991) created a commission to address group-based ‘barriers … preventing qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization’ (p. 1) it was titled the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1987).

The extent to which such efforts to remove the glass ceiling have been successful is open to question. On the one hand, the proportion of women in executive positions has increased over the past few decades (e.g., Catalyst, 2009). At the same time, we are far from achieving equal representation, especially in top-level positions, and progress towards gender equality in upper management has been much slower than one might expect given the numbers in middle management in the 1980s. For example, in 2012, 85% of directorships in the FTSE 100 (the top 100 companies on the London stock exchange) were held by men (Sealy & Vinnicombe, 2012), and the situation is similar in other European Countries (European Commission, 2010) and in the United States (Catalyst, 2009).

Factors Contributing to the Glass Ceiling

These numbers demonstrate that although more women make it to the top today than at the time the metaphor of the glass ceiling was first coined, gender inequality in higher management persists. Much research has tried to understand the reasons for this inequality – although this research has not always been explicitly linked to the glass ceiling metaphor. We can give only an abrief overview of some of this research here (for a more detailed compilation see Barreto et al., 2009), but two important factors are gender stereotypes and differential access to informal networks and mentoring.

Prevalent gender stereotypes portray women as communal (i.e., as affectionate, friendly, helpful, empathetic, cooperative) and men as agentic (i.e., as assertive, independent, self-confident, determined, competitive; e.g., Williams & Best, 1990). Importantly, these stereotypes about men match stereotypes about typical managers more closely than do stereotypes about women, a phenomenon dubbed the ‘think manager–think male’ effect (Schein, 1973; see also Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, & Bongiorno, 2011). Because of these stereotypes, men often appear to be a better fit for leadership roles than women (see Eagly & Sczesny, 2009). Moreover, stereotypes are not only descriptive, but also highly prescriptive (prescribing what women and men—or managers—should be like). As a consequence, women in leadership roles often face a double bind where they run the risk of being seen as unsuitable for leadership when others perceive them as not being sufficiently agentic, and the risk of being disliked for appearing too masculine and ‘pushy’ when they do display such qualities (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In this way, women who succeed in leadership roles often appear competent and agentic but this typically also entails being seen as less warm and not ‘feminine’ enough (Fiske, Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux, & Heilman, 1991). Although men in powerful positions can face similar challenges, these are exaggerated for women (see Cikara & Fiske, 2009). Accordingly, overcoming the think manager–think male stereotype, remains one of the most important challenges for women aspiring to senior leadership positions (Wellington, Kropf, & Gerkovich, 2003).

Another factor that contributes to continued gender inequality in higher management is women’s restricted access to – often informal – support networks and ingroup favoritism within the ‘old boys’ club’ (Moore, 1988).
Internal and external networks and support from senior colleagues and peers are key resources for career progression (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000) and the lack of such support is a key predictor of workplace stress (Health and Safety Executive, 2005). However, men often have better access to these support networks than women (e.g., Adler, 2000; Ibarra, 1993) and this may not only help men to progress to senior positions, but it can also mean that they avoid the stressful experience of feeling left out or not fitting in – an experience that causes women to opt out of senior positions more frequently than men (Ryan, Haslam, Hersby, Kulich, & Wilson-Kovacs, 2009).

Walls, Floors, and Escalators: Other Metaphors Describing Structural Barriers

Over the past two decades, the glass ceiling has inspired numerous other metaphors describing gender inequalities in the workplace. For example, ‘glass walls’ are said to confine women to management positions within certain sectors, such as human resources or marketing, that usually do not lead to senior positions (Miller, Kerr, & Reid, 1999). The ‘glass slipper’ effect describes a process whereby romanticized implicit associations of men with heroism and chivalry reduce women’s aspirations to powerful positions (Rudman & Heppen, 2003). The ‘glass escalator’ focuses on a phenomenon whereby men in stereotypically female professions, such as nursing or elementary school teaching, are promoted through career ranks in an accelerated fashion (C. L. Williams, 1992). In contrast to the other metaphors we describe in this chapter, the glass escalator focuses on men’s progress, rather than women’s lack of progress, a peculiarity that we will return to in more detail later.

Moving beyond the metaphorical glass, the descriptive use of barriers continues. The ‘maternal wall’ (J. Williams, 2001) describes additional barriers that women experience when they become mothers. For example, while parenthood is associated with higher wages for men (US Government Accountability Office, 2003), mothers earn only 60% of what fathers earn (see Crosby, Biernat, & Williams, 2004). The maternal wall is often explained in terms of women’s own decisions to prioritize family over work. However, research points to the power of stereotypical thinking and behavior (e.g., Fuegen, Biernat, Haines, & Deaux, 2004; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004), and the constrained nature of mothers’ choices resulting from organizational work norms and practices that treat family and job commitments as incompatible as well as from models of career success that are structured around men’s lives and bodies (e.g., Crosby et al., 2004; Crosby & Sabattini, 2009).

While the glass ceiling focuses on factors that prevent women from entering the upper echelons, the metaphor of the ‘sticky floor’ focuses on factors that prevent them from leaving lower levels, so that they feel trapped in low-wage, low-mobility jobs (Noble, 1992). For example, empirical evidence demonstrates that when women and men with identical qualifications are appointed to the same pay rank, men are often appointed further up the scale than women (Booth et al., 2003). Similarly, the gender wage gap widens at the bottom of salary scales (as well as at the top; Arulampalam, Booth, & Bryan, 2006). While these uses of the sticky floor metaphor focus on lower-paying jobs rather than on upper management, it has also been drawn upon in arguments that women hold themselves back from achieving leadership positions because of family commitments, perfectionism, or because they stay in the same roles for too long (Shambaugh, 2008).

A final structural metaphor that focuses less on particular barriers but rather captures their consequences is the ‘leaky pipeline’ (Berryman, 1983). This metaphor is often used to illustrate the higher drop-out rates of women in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and in academia more generally (e.g., Blickenstaff, 2005). For example, despite nearly equal representation of boys and girls among students who take physics in US high schools (with some variation in the levels of these courses), women earn only about one-fifth of bachelor’s degrees in physics at US universities (Ivie & Nies Ray, 2005). Further along the pipeline, more women than men leave STEM fields for alternative careers (Marshall, 2008). Across all STEM fields, women earn 38% of bachelor’s degrees but hold only 24% of jobs (National Science Foundation, 2007; US Department of Commerce, 2011). Thus, the metaphorical pipeline that carries students from secondary schools through university and on to a job in STEM or to higher academic positions ‘leaks’ at various stages.
How Accurate and Useful Are These Metaphors?

As outlined above, these various metaphors used to describe (workplace) gender inequality have enjoyed significant rhetorical success. They provide a useful linguistic handle to attract the attention of policy-makers, the media, and the wider public. Moreover, their vividness captures the imagination of researchers and practitioners, motivating research projects and policy interventions alike. But now that consciousness has been raised, are such metaphors still useful?

According to Cornelissen and Kafouros (2008) the value of a metaphor in organizational theory depends on two factors: the extent to which it helps us conceptualize a complex phenomenon (explicatory impact) and the extent to which it creates new insights and ideas (generative impact). Thus, these structural metaphors will be useful if they provide an accurate representation of the situation and if they help us gain new insights into the experiences of women and men in the workplace.

Various authors across different academic fields have begun to question the accuracy and usefulness of the glass ceiling metaphor (e.g., Bendl & Schmidt, 2010; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). Common critiques are that the metaphor of a single and impenetrable barrier shielding the upper echelons of management fails to capture the complexity of the situation (Altman, Simpson, Baruch, & Burke, 2005) and falsely implies that women and men have equal access to entry- and mid-level positions, and that this barrier is absolute such that it is nearly impossible for women to reach senior or executive positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Thus, the increasing number of women in top management positions in recent years—however small it may be—seems to belie the glass ceiling metaphor, leading to uncertainty about whether it is still accurate (cf. Barreto et al., 2009). If a single woman breakthrough the glass ceiling, is it considered shattered? Such an argument is, for instance, often made in Britain where it is claimed by some that the glass ceiling can no longer exist if a woman (Margaret Thatcher) has already occupied the most powerful political position in the country. To varying degrees, these critiques also apply to several other metaphors that focus on structural barriers like glass walls, the maternal wall, or the sticky floor.

One obvious consequence of these discussions is that researchers and commentators have attempted to generate new metaphors that better encapsulate organizational realities. For example, the ‘firewall’ (Bendl & Schmidt, 2010) describes a more fluid, shifting, and context-specific barrier that everybody can pass through if they know the right password or codes. While this might capture the complexities of the situation better than the glass ceiling, it still gives the problematic impression of a single barrier that only needs to be overcome once; it also implies that individual ‘programmers’ intentionally write codes that keep certain people out (see Bendl & Schmidt, 2010). However, rather than being a form of overt exclusion, workplace gender inequality is often the result of relatively subtle and unintended processes (Agars, 2004; Blickenstaff, 2005; Dasgupta & Stout, 2012; Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Schmitt, Ellemers, & Branscombe, 2003).

Another criticism that can be leveled at these structural metaphors is their tendency to focus attention on describing the problem. The glass ceiling or the sticky floor direct our attention to the numbers of women in particular roles or positions, while the maternal wall or the leaky pipeline encourage us to identify when and where inequality takes place. Thus, while research in the area has illuminated some of the processes through which inequalities become manifest, the metaphors themselves encourage us to focus on mere numbers (with the exception of the glass slipper that does focus on an involved process). An alternative approach is to develop metaphors that place a greater emphasis on the experiences of women (and men) in the workplace. Below, we describe two of these metaphors in more detail: the ‘labyrinth’ (Eagly & Carli, 2007) and the ‘glass cliff’ (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007).

Labyrinths and Cliffs: Describing Experiences

In response to the above criticisms, new metaphors have been coined. The labyrinth encapsulates the often circuitous paths that women striving for leadership positions take (Eagly & Carli, 2007), while the glass cliff focuses on the circumstances under which they obtain these positions (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007).
The Labyrinth

Eagly and Carli (2007) argue that the image of a glass ceiling as an absolute barrier is seriously outdated. They suggest that the notion of a labyrinth provides a more appropriate metaphor because women can obtain positions of organizational leadership (and do so in increasing numbers) but to get there they must navigate a labyrinth of expected and unexpected barriers, twists, turns, detours, and dead ends. Rather than a single barrier at the top, they face multiple difficulties along the way while men often follow a much straighter route with fewer obstacles. Instead of a glass ceiling just underneath the executive suite, a multitude of factors that disadvantage women and benefit men are seen to operate at all levels and to accumulate along an individual’s career path. Eagly and Carli specify a number of key factors creating the labyrinth, including gender stereotypes and prejudice, differential access to social resources, and differences in domestic responsibilities.

As noted above, stereotypes based on think manager—think male associations cause men to appear more suitable for leadership than women. Such stereotypes also create a tricky double bind for women in leadership positions (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009). Perhaps as a result of such stereotypes, men still earn considerably more than women (Blau & Kahn, 2000; Kulich, Trojanowski, Ryan, Haslam, & Renneboog, 2011) and are more likely to be promoted (Blau & DeVaro, 2007) even when important factors such as education and experience are held constant. Importantly, instead of being a particular problem surrounding executive positions, these biases appear to operate at all levels of the organizational hierarchy (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Differences in women’s and men’s support networks with peers and senior colleagues also make it more difficult for women to find their way through the labyrinth, while at the same time helping men to navigate through professional life and along career paths more smoothly.

Another important factor that adds twists and turns to women’s career paths are domestic responsibilities. Although men in industrialized countries are increasingly contributing more to housework and childcare duties, women continue to do the bulk of this work (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Crosby & Sabattini, 2009; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Mothers are also more likely than fathers to interrupt their careers and to work part-time (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Miree & Frieze, 1999) and even when they do not, decision-makers often assume that mothers have important domestic responsibilities and therefore cannot be promoted to demanding positions (Crosby & Sabattini, 2009).

In sum, the labyrinth as a metaphor identifies reasons for gender discrimination in the workplace that are very similar to those that have been seen to explain the glass ceiling and the maternal wall. Importantly, these processes do not form a unique barrier to boardrooms and executive positions. Instead, the unequal representation of women and men in these positions is the result of many obstacles along the way.

The Glass Cliff

While women are more likely than men to face challenges en route to leadership positions, they are also more likely to face challenges once they achieve them. In an archival analysis of appointments to the boards of FTSE 100 companies, Ryan and Haslam (2005) found that in a period of general financial downturn, companies that appointed a woman to their board had experienced a pattern of consistently poorer stock market performance in the months preceding the appointment than companies that had appointed a man. Similar patterns of favoring women for difficult leadership tasks in times of crisis while preferring men under more promising circumstances have been demonstrated in additional archival studies in business (Haslam, Ryan, Kulich, Trojanowski, & Atkins, 2010) and politics (Ryan, Haslam, & Kulich, 2010), as well as in many experimental studies (e.g., Ashby, Ryan, & Haslam, 2007; Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Haslam & Ryan, 2008). In these experiments, participants typically read scenarios about an organization that is either performing well or in crisis, and then evaluate and/or choose between male and female candidates for a leadership position in this organization. Paralleling the findings of archival studies, participants in these experimental studies tend to favor male candidates for successful organizations and female candidates for organizations in crisis (for an overview see Bruckmüller, Ryan, Rink, & Haslam, in press).

To describe this pattern of appointing women in times of crisis and men in times of stability and organizational success, Ryan and Haslam (2005, 2007) coined the metaphor of the ‘glass cliff’ to capture the precariousness
of the leadership positions that women are likely to obtain. This precariousness stems from the generally higher risk of failure associated with these positions and from the intense scrutiny and criticism that leaders face in times of organizational crisis (Ryan & Haslam, 2007).

Among other factors, experimental studies of the glass cliff phenomenon again point to the importance of think manager–think male associations and additionally to stereotypes that portray women as better crisis managers (‘think crisis–think female’, Ryan et al., 2011). While perceptions of the typical manager include many more stereotypically male than female traits, descriptions of the ideal manager in times of crisis include more stereotypically female than male characteristics. Particularly important aspects of this think crisis–think female association are expectations that women are better people managers (Ryan et al., 2011) and will be able to garner more support than men from their colleagues and followers (Rink, Ryan, & Stoker, 2012) – although there is also an element of women being set up to fail (Ryan et al., 2011; Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007).

In experimental studies, the ascription of traits capturing these think manager–think male and think crisis–think female stereotypes have been shown to predict the differential selection of men and women to leadership positions in times of success versus crisis (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Rink et al., 2012). Relatedly, women are perceived to represent the necessary change from a default male standard of leadership (e.g., Brown, Diekman, & Schneider, 2011), particularly in historically male-dominated organizations (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010).

In sum, although it is likely that the glass cliff is multiply determined (see Bruckmüller et al., in press; Ryan & Haslam, 2007), people seem to prefer men for leadership in most situations because male candidates better fit stereotypical assumptions of what leaders are (and should be) like. At the same time, women represent a change from the default think manager–think male standard, and are perceived as particularly skilled at bringing about the kind of change that is needed in a crisis.

How Metaphors Frame Our Understanding of Gender Discrimination

Considering the metaphors for workplace gender discrimination as a whole it is immediately apparent that these metaphors focus almost exclusively on women and women’s experiences. Ceilings, walls, sticky floors, and glass slippers are holding women back from advancing to leadership positions, leaky pipelines predispose them to drop out, labyrinths make their career paths particularly difficult and complex, and glass cliffs make their lives risky and precarious once they have made it to the top.

The only obvious exception to this focus on women is the glass escalator. However, although this metaphor could in principle describe men’s faster advancement towards leadership in general, it is usually invoked to illustrate the career paths of men in prototypically female professions (C. L. Williams, 1992). We think that this is neither a coincidence, nor is it particularly surprising. Indeed, both the overwhelming tendency to focus on women and the challenges they face and the exception of the glass escalator can be understood in terms of the normative framework that informs explanations of group differences by both scientists and laypeople (e.g., Hegarty & Buechel, 2006; Miller, Taylor, & Buck, 1991). Drawing on this research we can also reflect on the implications of a metaphorical focus on women in describing and explaining gender inequalities in the workplace.

Why a Focus on Women?

One important function of conceptual metaphors – in research and dissemination as well as in basic social cognition – is that they help us understand and communicate complex social phenomena (Cornelissen & Kafouros, 2008; Landau et al., 2010). When people try to make sense of group differences, they tend not to focus on the difference itself, but instead to impose asymmetric figure-ground relationships by focusing on how one group (‘the effect to be explained’) differs from another group (Miller et al., 1991).

Research examining which groups are foregrounded as the effect to be explained and which groups are positioned as background has demonstrated that laypersons (Miller et al., 1991) as well as scientists (Hegarty
& Buechel, 2006), and both women and men (Miller et al., 1991), explaining gender differences by focusing on women more than on men. More generally, lower-status groups tend to be compared to the background norm of higher-status groups, and less typical groups tend to be compared to prototypical groups (Hegarty & Bruckmüller, 2013; Pratto, Hegarty, & Korchmaros, 2007). Given that men generally enjoy higher status in society than women (Eagly, 1987) and are perceived to be more prototypical leaders than women (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009), it is not surprising that our understanding of workplace gender discrimination, and the metaphors we develop to illustrate such inequality, are focused on women, while men form the less visible background for these metaphors. The exception, the glass escalator, also proves the rule. It focuses on men’s faster advancement to leadership positions in contexts in which women are more prototypical, so that again, the less prototypical group becomes the effect to be explained.

**Implications of Asymmetric Metaphors and Explanations**

Importantly, metaphors that are focused on women (and other ‘atypical’ groups in leadership) are not only a symptom of this explanatory focus on women, they are also likely to reproduce it. Although research on workplace gender inequality has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of think manager–think male associations (Eagly & Szcesny, 2009) and of male-centered norms for career progression (Crosby et al., 2004), the metaphors reviewed above generally prompt us to focus our understanding of gender discrimination on women. Accordingly, we ask why women are not ‘breaking through’ the glass ceiling (or what they need to do in order to break through), why women are put on glass cliffs, why they ‘leak’ out of the pipeline, and why they are held back by walls, or have to take extra turns and detours in a labyrinth. Relatedly, although the glass slipper describes the importance of heroic images of men, it primarily focuses on the reactions of women, asking how this image affects women’s aspirations to leadership.

We could just as well ask why men are more likely to be appointed to leadership positions and under more promising circumstances, why men stay in the pipeline, or why their career paths include more shortcuts and fewer dead ends. However, these questions seem to require an extra mental step. Indeed, while writing this chapter we not only observed ourselves slipping into the habit of focusing more on women than on men despite our best intention to avoid doing so; in many places it seemed simply impossible to describe these metaphors with an equal focus on women and men while writing in a way that was parsimonious and clear.

Given this overwhelming tendency to see women as the effect to be explained, the question is whether this focus on women is in any way problematic. Metaphors such as the glass ceiling have, after all, proven extremely successful in highlighting workplace gender discrimination and inspiring research and interventions. However, since metaphors shape our understanding of social concepts and phenomena as well as the way we react to them (Landau et al., 2010), the benefits of communicating gender inequality in the workplace by means of these metaphors very likely come at a cost. One obvious consequence is that by highlighting women’s experiences and the barriers they face, discussions of gender inequality are likely to focus on women’s attributes and on stereotypes about them (Eagly & Karau, 2002), on women’s career and family planning choices (Shambaugh, 2008), and so on. In doing so, such metaphors might render other important aspects of gender inequality less visible (cf. Morgan, 1997), such as stereotypes about men (e.g., Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010), or organizational practices and culture, like informal networks within the ‘old boys’ club’ (Moore, 1988). Moreover, focusing explanations of gender differences on women can imply that they, rather than men, need to change their behavior for differences to be reduced (Miller et al., 1991; but see also Hegarty & Pratto, 2001).

In sum, the explanatory focus on women makes gender discrimination an issue for women rather than men. It implies that it is something about women that causes gender inequality and that it is women who will have to change to reduce this inequality, for example by breaking through metaphorical ceilings and walls. In this way, women-focused metaphors avoid confronting men with uncomfortable truths about their own privilege and advantage (Branscombe, 1998). Indeed, even the metaphor of the glass escalator, despite its focus on men, fits this general pattern. It specifically directs our attention to men in stereotypically female professions, thereby implying that men are only, or at least particularly, advantaged in these specific contexts. This obscures the fact that men enjoy faster promotion through career ranks in most other professions as well (Blau & De Vario, 2007). In other words, by contextually limiting the discussion of gender inequality to certain occupations, the glass escalator metaphor distracts us from the pervasiveness of male advantage.
advantagedespite its explanatory focus on men’s career paths.

As the research we have summarized demonstrates, researchers who concern themselves with workplace
gender discrimination have often managed to escape an exclusive focus on women and todetect the
importance of factors ‘backgrounded’ by these metaphors, such as the thinkmanager – think male effect or
the importance of male-centered work norms for the maternalwall. The extent to which these less visible
causes receive the attention that they deserve and towhat extent they can be effectively communicated to
policy-makers, the media, and the public atlarge when illustrations of workplace gender discrimination revolve
around metaphors focusing onwomen is, however, questionable.

Even more important, recent research has demonstrated that a focus on women as the effect to beexplained
and the implicit assumption that men are the normative background in leadership may haveother unintended
consequences. For example, positioning a group as the background norm leads toscriptions of higher status
and power to this group, and to the attribution of stereotypic traits that are often used to legitimize status
inequalities, namely higher agency and lower communion (Bruckmüller & Abele, 2010). Along these lines,
one study found that framing genderdifferences in leadership in terms of how female leaders differ from
male leaders (as most people would do spontaneously) leads to the perception of greater status differences
between women and men, stronger belief in the legitimacy of such status differences, and higher endorsement
of gender stereotypes than when male leaders are compared tofemale leaders (Bruckmüller, Hegarty, &
Abele, 2012).

In addition, a focus on lower-status groups when explaining group differences causes stereotypes about
these groups to be ‘aired’ more often by means of a two-step process (Hegarty & Pratto, 2001). First, their atypicality
causes lower-status groups such as women, gay men and lesbians, or ethnic minorities to become the effect
to be explained (see Pratto et al., 2007). Then, people selectively draw upon stereotypes about these groups
(rather than on their stereotypes about men, straight people, or whites) to explain observed differences.

Moreover, members of lower-status or atypical groups who must explain why their own group differ from
a higher-status or more typical group (rather than vice versa) feel stigmatized and less positive about their
group membership. In a recent set of studies, both single participants (Studies 1 and 2) and left-handed
participants (Study 3) indicated lower collective self-esteem after reading or writing about how their own group
differs from the respective outgroup of coupled people or right-handers than after reading or writing about
how this outgroup differs from their ingroup. Members of higher-status or more typical groups (coupled and
right-handed participants) were unaffected by the explanatory focus in the discussion of group differences
(Bruckmüller, 2013).

Together, then, this research points to a dynamic process through which status differences and habits of
framing group comparisons mutually reinforce one another. Group status and prototypicality influence who
becomes the effect to be explained and this framing in turn stigmatizes atypical groups (Bruckmüller, 2013)
and communicates their lower status and power (Bruckmüller et al., 2012). Transferred to the context of
metaphors for gender discrimination, these findings suggest that a focus on women when illustrating and
explaining gender inequality will implicitly reinforce and legitimize men’s higher status and normativity in
leadership and will cause women to feel stigmatized as peculiar exceptions in need of explanation.

Implications for Research and Practice

Although the metaphors we have described focus on somewhat different observations and contexts and on
different organizational levels, there are some dominant themes that emerge from research on the phenomena
that they are meant to describe. Below, we summarize some of the practical implications for organizational
policy and practice and for research on workplace gender discrimination that arise from the research itself,
and from the use of women-focused metaphors.

Implications for Organizational Practice

Dominant themes that have emerged from the research summarized here include gender stereotypes, social
networks and mentoring, and the challenges of juggling work and family commitments. For each of these themes, practical implications can be derived. Importantly, with their focus on women and the barriers they encounter in the workplace, metaphors suggest particular kinds of interventions or solutions.

For instance, as Schiebinger (1999) has pointed out, the leaky pipeline metaphor directs the focus of interventions on recruiting and retaining more women to STEM fields (e.g., US Department of Commerce, 2011) rather than on considering changes to the system itself. Likewise, strategies designed to help individual women break through the glass ceiling or get off the sticky floor often recommend the modification of women's approaches to leadership. Such advice includes avoiding the 'sticky trap' of perfectionism (Shambaugh, 2008) or finding 'a [leadership] style with which male managers are comfortable' (Catalyst, 2000). Taken together, a focus on women encourages organizations to 'fix' women, for instance, by offering them special training to increase their assertiveness or their leadership skills, by bolstering their self-confidence, or by helping them find the right work–life balance through better time management.

However, as intimated above, such strategies not only focus on women, but also focus the blame for existing inequality on women. They send the message that women fail to make it to the top because they make the wrong choices or have the wrong personalities, styles, or strategies. In addition, they implicitly place the burden of redressing gender inequality on women, on individual women in particular. This may not only direct attention away from an organization's responsibility in creating (un)equal opportunities. It may also prevent women from joining forces and taking collective action - just like tokenistic practices that allow individual women to gain high-status positions while simultaneously keeping the majority of women out can undermine collective action by promoting the idea that individual women can make it to the top, if only they work hard enough (see Schmitt, Spoor, Danaher, & Branscombe, 2009).

Moreover, since a focus on women can enhance gender stereotypes (Bruckmüller et al., 2012) and will likely be perceived as stigmatizing (Bruckmüller, 2013; Crosby & Sabattini, 2009; Miller et al., 1991), women-centered strategies may, paradoxically, exacerbate, rather than ameliorate, the problem. A more effective strategy for organizations – and one that becomes more obvious if we draw back from a focus on women and attempt to see the bigger picture – may be to address the pernicious effects of often implicit gender stereotypes within companies, for example, by means of diversity training for managers and decision-makers.

Considering the importance of the stereotypical association between men and leadership, diversity in management is not only a goal, but also a means to achieve this goal. More diverse management should weaken stereotypical perceptions of the typical manager as male (and white, straight, middle-class, and able-bodied). Affirmative action programs are one way to facilitate the first steps towards a more diverse management. However, these programs are often perceived as stigmatizing by the groups they are intended to support and can lead to more negative perceptions of the (presumed) beneficiaries of these policies (Crosby, Sabattini, & Alzawa, Chapter 29 this volume; Iyer, 2009). One would imagine that these problems are exacerbated when gender inequality is understood as being about women and when affirmative action programs are designed and communicated with a particular focus on women and other minorities.

Another recurring theme in discussions of gender inequality in the workplace is the importance of networks and mentoring. Focusing less on the barriers that women face, and more on informal support systems within organizations and the workings of the old boys' club, leads to somewhat different recommendations for organizations and policy-makers. A focus on women might lead to special mentoring and support systems being instituted for women, although those again risk placing the blame for gender inequality as well as the burden of reducing it on women and can be experienced as stigmatizing. In contrast, a focus on the workings of informal support networks in the 'background' might encourage organizations to recognize that men often have greater access to such informal networks (e.g., Adler, 2000), and to work towards reducing the impact of such networks, for example, by introducing more transparent appointment and promotion procedures and providing more structured and formalized networking and mentoring programs throughout the organization that all employees can benefit from.

Finally, because of the unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities between women and men, work–life balance programs are an important step towards reducing gender inequality more generally, and for addressing the 'maternal wall' in particular (Crosby et al., 2004; Eagly & Carli, 2007). However, work–life
balance programs are often underutilized and one important reason for their limited success is the stigmatizing effect of using these programs (Crosby & Sabattini, 2009). Organizational work norms often portray ‘face time’ (i.e., actual time spent in the workplace) as the most important and most reliable indicator of productivity (Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999). As a consequence, employees – both men and women – often fear that taking advantage of work–life balance opportunities such as flexible or part-time work will be perceived as an indication of low job commitment and will therefore negatively impact on their career (e.g., Bagilhole, 2006; Eaton, 2003). Accordingly, work–life programs that are framed as a response to women’s unique needs create additional challenges for women, especially mothers, by stigmatizing them and reinforcing the notion that they are not ‘ideal’ employees (Crosby & Sabattini, 2009; J. Williams, 2001).

A more promising approach may be to shift the focus from the question of how organizations can help individual women to juggle the different demands of work and family to the problematic work norms that unnecessarily require employees to be constantly available or that reward hours on the job rather than actual performance on measurable outcomes (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In line with this point, work–life balance policies, such as flexible work arrangements, that are aimed at both women and men, not only increase employees’ productivity, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (Thompson et al., 1999), they also appear to have the highest chance of reducing workplace gender inequality (see Crosby & Sabattini, 2009).

**Implications for Research and Dissemination**

The present analysis of metaphors also has important implications for researchers examining workplace gender discrimination. Indeed, we are conscious that as researchers we are not immune to the allure of a women-focused metaphor and we do not intend to argue that we should abstain from the use of metaphors altogether. Conceptual metaphors are essential for understanding abstract or complex (social) constructs (Landau et al., 2010) and therefore play an integral role in the creation and communication of scientific knowledge (Bicchieri, 1988). Nonetheless, there is a need to be more conscious of the metaphors we select and the implications that they may have. This includes but is not limited to, the need for greater reflexivity about the focus of our explanations, keeping in mind that there are many different ways to frame a question and different perspectives from which we can examine any given phenomenon. Considering the power of metaphors to shape the way we think about the world, we should exercise caution when using common metaphors and when coining new ones to communicate our findings to stakeholders in organizations and to the public at large. The ‘catchy’ metaphor that comes to us most easily might often be one that renders women the effect to be explained and thereby implicitly reinforces men as the norm in leadership.

Perhaps, then, it is time to move away from the myriad of women-focused glass metaphors and to instead turn our attention to the privileges and advantages that men often enjoy, and the reasons for these advantages. This may place us in a better position to address the stereotypes that portraymen as the default in leadership, to question the organizational cultures and work norms that are structured around men’s lives and bodies, and to untangle the informal networks within the old boys’ club that underlie gender inequality in the workplace.

**Conclusion**

The multitude of metaphors that have been invoked to illustrate workplace gender discrimination have proven extremely powerful in drawing attention to the challenges that women face in organizations and in raising awareness for the sometimes very subtle workings of gender discrimination. They also facilitate understanding of and communication about these problems. Yet, by placing our focus on women, women’s experiences, and the barriers and challenges that women face, these metaphors may be counterproductive in the long run. They implicitly suggest that gender discrimination in the workplace is predominantly a problem for women. They may thus not only carry the danger of creating detrimental blind spots in our endeavors to understand workplace gender discrimination and in the interventions we develop to redress it. They may also implicitly strengthen gender stereotypes and subtly reinforce status differences between women and men.

In conclusion, we think that the time has come to take a step back from metaphors that make women the effect to be explained and to turn our lens to what has been hidden in the background. Staying within the conceptual framework of the metaphors we discussed, the bottom line is that the time has come not just to see the glass,
but to see through it.

References


24March.

- gender in the workplace
- glass ceiling
- gender inequalities
- metaphor
- maternal wall
- glass escalator
- sticky floor

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