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Bruckmüller, Susanne; Ryan, Michelle K.; Haslam, S. Alexander; Peters, Kim

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Susanne Bruckmüller Michelle K. Ryan S. Alexander Haslam Kim Peters

Introduction

It has been more than 25 years since the 'glass ceiling' metaphor was popularizedby the Wall Street Journal (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986) to describe women'sinability to reach the upper echelons of leadership. Now metaphors abound to describe the challengesthat women and other underrepresented groups face in business and in politics. We have all manner ofstructural barriers that can contribute to gender inequality – from 'stickyfloors' (Booth, Francesconi, & Frank, 2003) to 'maternal walls' (J.Williams, 2001), from 'leaky pipelines' (Blickenstaff, 2005) to 'glassescalators' (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 onsexuality, as in the case of the 'pink ceiling' (Czyzselska, 2000); some capturebarriers 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 yetothers describe barriers that arise at the intersection of multiple minority group memberships, suchas the 'concrete wall' that women of color must climb or chip away at before they caneven 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 messageto communicate a cause. However, metaphors are not only tools for facilitating communication; theyimply 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 andinterpretations 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 extremelysuccessful insofar as they have enjoyed mainstream popularity with the press and the public atlarge. But importantly, these metaphors also impact on our understanding of the world, and theyinfluence not only what we see, but also what we do not see. By highlighting certain aspectsof 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 capturinggroup-based inequality in the workplace have in common is that they focus on the obstacles andchallenges that women and members of other underrepresented groups face as they try to succeedprofessionally; the career paths and experiences of (white, straight) men are merely implied asbackground for these metaphors.

In this chapter, we provide an overview of the various metaphors that have been used toillustrate gender discrimination in the workplace, focusing on the classic glass ceiling metaphor aswell as on the 'labyrinth' (Eagly & Carli, 2007) and the 'glasscliff' (Ryan & Haslam, 2005) as more recent examples. We review discussions concerningthe usefulness and appropriateness of these metaphors before we examine the potential problemsassociated 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-depthevaluation 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 paintedby these metaphors. Finally, we derive implications for organizational practice and for futureresearch 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 phenomenonwhereby women were reaching positions in middle management but seemed unable to obtain senior andexecutive positions – which were reserved almost exclusively for men. The glass ceiling thusdescribes the experience of women who find themselves blocked from higher-level leadership positionsby 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 wasin their sights and yet unattainable. In subsequent years, the glass ceiling metaphor became ahighly successful tool for calling attention to gender discrimination in the workplace and formotivating both research (for an overview see Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009) and practicalinterventions. This is best illustrated by the fact that when the US Department of Labor (1991)created a commission to address group-based 'barriers … preventing qualifiedindividuals from advancing upward in their organization' (p. 1) it was titled the FederalGlass Ceiling Commission (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1987).

The extent to which such efforts to remove the glass ceiling have been successful is open toquestion. On the one hand, the proportion of women in executive positions has increased over thepast few decades (e.g., Catalyst, 2009). At the same time, we are far from achieving equalrepresentation, especially in top-level positions, and progress towards gender equality in uppermanagement has been much slower than one might expect given the numbers in middle management in the1980s. 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 themetaphor 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 thisresearch has not always been explicitly linked to the glass ceiling metaphor. We can give only 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 networksand 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 aboutmen match stereotypes about typical managers more closely than do stereotypes about women, aphenomenon dubbed the 'think manager–think male' effect (Schein, 1973; see alsoRyan, Haslam, Hersby, & Bongiorno, 2011). Because of these stereotypes, men often appear tobe 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 rolesoften face a double bind where they run the risk of being seen as unsuitable for leadership whenothers perceive them as not being sufficiently agentic, and the risk of being disliked for appearingtoo 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 butthis typically also entails being seen as less warm and not 'feminine' enough (Fiske,Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux, & Heilman, 1991). Although men in powerful positions can facesimilar challenges, these are exaggerated for women (see Cikara & Fiske, 2009). Accordingly,overcoming the think manager–think male stereotype, remains one of the most importantchallenges for women aspiring to senior leadership positions (Wellington, Kropf, & Gerkovich,2003).

Another factor that contributes to continued gender inequality in higher management iswomen's restricted access to – often informal – support networks and ingroupfavoritism within the 'old boys' club' (Moore, 1988).

Internal and externalnetworks 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 workplacestress (Health and Safety Executive, 2005). However, men often have better access to these supportnetworks than women (e.g., Adler, 2000; Ibarra, 1993) and this may not only help men to progress tosenior positions, but it can also mean that they avoid the stressful experience of feeling left outor not fitting in – an experience that causes women to opt out of senior positions morefrequently 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 describinggender inequalities in the workplace. For example, 'glass walls' are said to confinewomen to management positions within certain sectors, such as human resources or marketing, thatusually do not lead to senior positions (Miller, Kerr, & Reid, 1999). The 'glassslipper' effect describes a process wherebyromanticized implicit associations of men with heroism and chivalry reduce women'saspirations to powerful positions (Rudman & Heppen, 2003). The 'glassescalator' focuses on a phenomenon whereby men in stereotypically female professions, such asnursing 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 glassescalator focuses on men's progress, rather than women's lack of progress, apeculiarity 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 womenexperience when they become mothers. For example, while parenthood is associated with higher wagesfor men (US Government Accountability Office, 2003), mothers earn only 60% of what fathers earn (seeCrosby, Biernat, & Williams, 2004). The maternal wall is often explained in terms ofwomen's own decisions to prioritize family over work. However, research points to the powerof stereotypical thinking and behavior (e.g., Fuegen, Biernat, Haines, & Deaux, 2004;Ridgeway & Correll, 2004), and the constrained nature of mothers' choices resultingfrom organizational work norms and practices that treat family and job commitments as incompatibleas 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 leavinglower 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 appointedto 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 onlower-paying jobs rather than on upper management, it has also been drawn upon in arguments thatwomen 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 theirconsequences is the 'leaky pipeline' (Berryman, 1983). This metaphor is often used toillustrate the higher drop-out rates of women in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, andmathematics) and in academia more generally (e.g., Blickenstaff, 2005). For example, despite nearlyequal representation of boys and girls among students who take physics in US high schools (with somevariation in the levels of these courses), women earn only about one-fifth of bachelor'sdegrees 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 STEMfields, women earn 38% of bachelor's degrees but hold only 24% of jobs (National ScienceFoundation, 2007; US Department of Commerce, 2011). Thus, the metaphorical pipeline that carriesstudents from secondary schools through university and on to a job in STEM or to higher academicpositions 'leaks' at various stages.

How Accurate and Useful Are These Metaphors?

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

According to Cornelissen and Kafouros (2008) the value of a metaphor in organizational theorydepends 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 thesituation and if they help us gain new insights into the experiences of women and men in theworkplace.

Various authors across different academic fields have begun to question the accuracy andusefulness 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 andimpenetrable barrier shielding the upper echelons of management fails to capture the complexity ofthe situation (Altmann, Simpson, Baruch, & Burke, 2005) and falsely implies (a) that womenand men have equal access to entry- and mid-level positions, and (b) that this barrier is absolutesuch 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 touncertainty about whether it is still accurate (cf. Barreto et al., 2009). If a single woman breaksthrough the glass ceiling, is it considered shattered? Such an argument is, for instance, often madein 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. Tovarying degrees, these critiques also apply to several other metaphors that focus on structuralbarriers like glass walls, the maternal wall, or the sticky floor.

One obvious consequence of these discussions is that researchers and commentators have attemptedto generate new metaphors that better encapsulate organizational realities. For example, the'firewall' (Bendl & Schmidt, 2010) describes a more fluid, shifting, andcontext-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 stillgives the problematic impression of a single barrier that only needs to be overcome once; it alsoimplies that individual 'programmers' intentionally write codes that keep certainpeople 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 focusattention on describing the problem. The glass ceiling or the sticky floor direct ourattention to the numbers of women in particular roles or positions, while the maternal wall or theleaky pipeline encourage us to identify when and where inequality takes place. Thus, while researchin the area has illuminated some of the processes through which inequalities become manifest, themetaphors themselves encourage us to focus on mere numbers (with the exception of the glass slipperthat does focus on an involved process). An alternative approach is to develop metaphors that placea greater emphasis on the experiences of women (and men) in the workplace. Below, we describetwo 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 encapsulatesthe often circuitous paths that women striving forleadership positions take (Eagly & Carli, 2007), while the glass cliff focuses on thecircumstances 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 isseriously outdated. They suggest that the notion of a labyrinth provides a more appropriate metaphorbecause 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 difficultiesalong the way while men often follow a much straighter route with fewer obstacles. Instead of aglass ceiling just underneath the executive suite, a multitude of factors that disadvantage womenand benefit men are seen to operate at all levels and to accumulate along an individual'scareer path. Eagly and Carli specify a number of key factors creating the labyrinth, includinggender stereotypes and prejudice, differential access to social resources, and differences indomestic responsibilities.

As noted above, stereotypes based on think manager–think male associations cause men toappear more suitable for leadership than women. Such stereotypes also create a tricky double bindfor women in leadership positions (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009). Perhaps as a result of suchstereotypes, 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 heldconstant. Importantly, instead of being a particular problem surrounding executive positions, thesebiases 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 colleaguesalso make it more difficult for women to find their way through the labyrinth, while at the sametime 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 domesticresponsibilities. Although men in industrialized countries are increasingly contributing more tohousework and childcare duties, women continue to do the bulk of this work (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer,& Robinson, 2000; Crosby & Sabattini, 2009; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Mothers arealso 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 assumethat mothers have important domestic responsibilities and therefore cannot be promoted to demandingpositions (Crosby & Sabattini, 2009).

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

The Glass Cliff

While women are more likely than men to face challenges en route to leadership positions, theyare also more likely to face challenges once they achieve them. In an archival analysis ofappointments to the boards of FTSE 100 companies, Ryan and Haslam (2005) found that in a period ofgeneral financial downturn, companies that appointed a woman to their board had experienced apattern of consistently poorer stock market performance in the months preceding the appointment thancompanies that had appointed a man. Similar patterns of favoring women for difficult leadershiptasks in times of crisis while preferring men under morepromising 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 incrisis, and then evaluate and/or choose between male and female candidates for a leadership positionin this organization. Paralleling the findings of archival studies, participants in these scenariostudies tend to favor male candidates for successful organizations and female candidates fororganizations in crisis (for an overview see Bruckmüller, Ryan, Rink, & Haslam, inpress).

To describe this pattern of appointing women in times of crisis and men in times of stability andorganizational success, Ryan and Haslam (2005, 2007) coined the metaphor of the 'glasscliff' to capture the precariousness

of the leadership positions that women are likely toobtain. This precariousness stems from the generally higher risk of failure associated with thesepositions and from the intense scrutiny and criticism that leaders face in times of organizationalcrisis (Ryan & Haslam, 2007).

Among other factors, experimental studies of the glass cliff phenomenon again point to theimportance of think manager–think male associations and additionally to stereotypes thatportray women as better crisis managers ('think crisis–think female', Ryan etal., 2011). While perceptions of the typical manager include many more stereotypically male thanfemale traits, descriptions of the ideal manager in times of crisis include morestereotypically female than male characteristics. Particularly important aspects of this thinkcrisis–think female association are expectations that women are better people managers (Ryanet 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 upto fail (Ryan et al., 2011; Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007).

In experimental studies, the ascription of traits capturing these think manager–think maleand think crisis–think female stereotypes have been shown to predict the differentialselection of men and women to leadership positions in times of success versus crisis(Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Rink et al., 2012). Relatedly, women are perceived torepresent 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 Bruckmülleret al., in press; Ryan & Haslam, 2007), people seem to prefer men for leadership in mostsituations because male candidates better fit stereotypical assumptions of what leaders are (andshould be) like. At the same time, women represent a change from the default thinkmanager–think male standard, and are perceived as particularly skilled at bringing about thekind 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 immediatelyapparent 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 toleadership positions, leaky pipelines predispose them to drop out, labyrinths make their careerpaths particularly difficult and complex, and glass cliffs make their lives risky and precariousonce 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 describemen's faster advancement towards leadership in general, it is usually invoked to illustratethe career paths of men in prototypically female professions (C. L. Williams, 1992). We think thatthis is neither a coincidence, nor is it particularly surprising. Indeed, both the overwhelmingtendency to focus on women and the challenges they face and the exception of the glass escalator canbe understood in terms of the normative framework that informs explanations of group differences byboth 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 onwomen 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 asin basic social cognition – is that they help us understand and communicate complex socialphenomena (Cornelissen & Kafouros, 2008; Landau et al., 2010). When people try to make senseof group differences, they tend not to focus on the difference itself, but instead to imposeasymmetric figure-ground relationships by focusing on how one group ('the effect to beexplained') differs from another group (Miller et al., 1991).

Research examining which groups are foregrounded as the effect to be explained and which groupsare positioned as background has demonstrated that laypersons (Miller et al., 1991) as well asscientists (Hegarty

& Buechel, 2006), and both women and men (Miller et al., 1991), explaingender differences by focusing on women more than on men. More generally, lower-status groups tendto be compared to the background norm of higher-status groups, and less typical groups tend to becompared 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 themetaphors we develop to illustrate such inequality, are focused on women, while men form the lessvisible background for these metaphors. The exception, the glass escalator, also proves the rule. Itfocuses on men's faster advancement to leadership positions in contexts in which women aremore prototypical, so that again, the less prototypical group becomes the effect to beexplained.

Implications of Asymmetric Metaphors and Explanations

Importantly, metaphors that are focused on women (and other 'atypical' groups inleadership) are not only a symptom of this explanatory focus on women, they are also likely toreproduce it. Although research on workplace gender inequality has repeatedly demonstrated theimportance of think manager–think male associations (Eagly & Szcesny, 2009) and ofmale-centered norms for career progression (Crosby et al., 2004), the metaphors reviewed abovegenerally prompt us to focus our understanding of gender discrimination on women. Accordingly, weask why women are not 'breaking through' the glass ceiling (or what they need to do inorder to break through), why women are put on glass cliffs, why they 'leak' out of thepipeline, and why they are held back by walls, or have to take extra turns and detours in alabyrinth. 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'saspirations to leadership.

We could just as well ask why men are more likely to be appointed to leadership positions andunder more promising circumstances, why men stay in the pipeline, or why their career paths includemore shortcuts and fewer dead ends. However, these questions seem to require an extra mental step.Indeed, while writing this chapter we not only observedourselves slipping into the habit of focusing more on women than on men despite our best intentionto avoid doing so; in many places it seemed simply impossible to describe these metaphors with anequal 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 iswhether 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 ininspiring research and interventions. However, since metaphors shape our understanding of socialconcepts and phenomena as well as the way we react to them (Landau et al., 2010), the benefits ofcommunicating gender inequality in the workplace by means of these metaphors very likely come at acost. One obvious consequence is that by highlighting women's experiences and the barriersthey face, discussions of gender inequality are likely to focus on women's attributes and onstereotypes about them (Eagly & Karau, 2002), on women's career and family planningchoices (Shambaugh, 2008), and so on. In doing so, such metaphors might render other importantaspects of gender inequality less visible (cf. Morgan, 1997), such as stereotypes about men (e.g.,Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010), or organizational practices and culture, likeinformal networks within the 'old boys' club' (Moore, 1988). Moreover, focusingexplanations of gender differences on women can imply that they, rather than men, need to changetheir 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 thanmen. It implies that it is something about women that causes gender inequality and that it is womenwho will have to change to reduce this inequality, for example by breaking through metaphoricalceilings and walls. In this way, women-focused metaphors avoid confronting men with uncomfortabletruths about their own privilege and advantage (Branscombe, 1998). Indeed, even the metaphor of theglass escalator, despite its focus on men, fits this general pattern. It specifically directs ourattention to men in stereotypically female professions, thereby implying that men are only, or atleast particularly, advantaged in these specific contexts. This obscures the fact that men enjoyfaster promotion through career ranks in most other professions as well (Blau & De Varo,2007). In other words, by contextually limiting the discussion of gender inequality to certainoccupations, the glass escalator metaphor distracts us from the pervasiveness of male

advantagedespite its explanatory focus on men's career paths.

As the research we have summarized demonstrates, researchers who concern themselves withworkplace 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 toascriptions of higher status and power to this group, and to the attribution of stereotypic traitsthat 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 ofgreater status differences between women and men, stronger belief in the legitimacy of such statusdifferences, 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 stereotypesabout 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 menand 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 stereotypesabout men, straight people, or whites) to explain observed differences.

Moreover, members of lower-status or atypical groups who must explain why their own group differsfrom a higher-status or more typical group (rather than vice versa) feel stigmatized and lesspositive about their group membership. In a recent set of studies, both single participants (Studies1 and 2) and left-handed participants (Study 3) indicated lower collective self-esteem after readingor writing about how their own group differs from the respective outgroup of coupled people orright-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) wereunaffected 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 andhabits of framing group comparisons mutually reinforce one another. Group status and prototypicalityinfluence who becomes the effect to be explained and this framing in turn stigmatizes atypicalgroups (Bruckmüller, 2013) and communicates their lower status and power (Bruckmülleret al., 2012). Transferred to the context of metaphors for gender discrimination, these findingssuggest that a focus on women when illustrating and explaining gender inequality will implicitlyreinforce and legitimize men's higher status and normativity in leadership and will causewomen 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 contextsand on different organizational levels, there are some dominant themes that emerge from research onthe phenomena that they are meant to describe. Below, we summarize some of the practicalimplications for organizational policy and practice and for research on workplace genderdiscrimination 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, Sabbintini, & Aizawa, 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 isthe stigmatizing effect of using these programs (Crosby & Sabattini, 2009). Organizationalwork norms often portray 'face time' (i.e., actual time spent in the workplace) as themost important and most reliable indicator of productivity (Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness,1999). As a consequence, employees – both men and women – often fear that takingadvantage of work–life balance opportunities such as flexible or part-time work will beperceived as an indication of low job commitment and will therefore negatively impact on theircareer (e.g., Bagilhole, 2006; Eaton, 2003). Accordingly, work–life programs that are framedas a response to women's unique needs create additional challenges for women, especiallymothers, 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 canhelp individual women to juggle the different demands of work and family to the problematic worknorms that unnecessarily require employees to be constantly available or that reward hours on thejob rather than actual performance on measurable outcomes (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In line withthis point, work–life balance policies, such as flexible work arrangements, that are aimed atboth women and men, not only increase employees' productivity, organizational commitment, andjob satisfaction (Thompson et al., 1999), they also appear to have the highest chance of reducingworkplace gender inequality (see Crosby & Sabattini, 2009).

Implications for Research and Dissemination

The present analysis of metaphors also has important implications for researchers examiningworkplace gender discrimination. Indeed, we are conscious that as researchers we are not immune tothe allure of a women-focused metaphor and we do not intend to argue that we should abstain from theuse of metaphors altogether. Conceptual metaphors are essential for understanding abstract orcomplex (social) constructs (Landau et al., 2010) and therefore play an integral role in thecreation and communication of scientific knowledge (Bicchieri, 1988). Nonetheless, there is a needto be more conscious of the metaphors we select and the implications that they may have. Thisincludes, but is not limited to, the need for greater reflexivity about the focus of ourexplanations, keeping in mind that there are many different ways to frame a question and differentperspectives from which we can examine any given phenomenon. Considering the power of metaphors toshape the way we think about the world, we should exercise caution when using common metaphors andwhen coining new ones to communicate our findings to stakeholders in organizations and to the publicat large. The 'catchy' metaphor that comes to us most easily might often be one thatrenders women the effect to be explained and thereby implicitly reinforces men as the norm inleadership.

Perhaps, then, it is time to move away from the myriad of women-focused glass-metaphors and toinstead turn our attention to the privileges and advantages that men often enjoy, and the reasonsfor 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 arestructured around men's lives and bodies, and to untangle the informal networks within theold boys' club that underlie gender inequality in the workplace.

Conclusion

The multitude of metaphors that have been invoked to illustrate workplace gender discriminationhave proven extremely powerful in drawing attention to the challenges that women face inorganizations and in raising awareness for the sometimes very subtle workings of genderdiscrimination. 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 counterproductivein the long run. They implicitly suggest that gender discrimination in the workplace ispredominantly a problem for women. They may thus not only carry the danger of creating detrimentalblind spots in our endeavors to understand workplace gender discrimination and in the interventionswe develop to redress it. They may also implicitly strengthen gender stereotypes and subtly reifystatus differences between women and men.

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

but to see through it.

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- gender in the workplace
- glass ceiling
- gender inequalities
- metaphor
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- glass escalator
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