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The Glass Ceiling Metaphor

TOWARDS A THEORY OF MANAGERIAL INEQUITY

Andrew Hede*

The term "glass ceiling" in relation to management is only now gaining currency in the Australian media and in the professional and academic literature. The "glass ceiling" was imported from America where it has been used in numerous publications since 1987 including more than 80 journal articles in the past three years. It even provides the name for an American federal statutory authority, the Glass Ceiling Commission. However, any benefits the term provides in terms of simplicity and rhetorical appeal may eventually be outweighed by the costs in terms of confusion about its meaning — like that other Americanism, "affirmative action"^{**} — and also in terms of misunderstanding about the problem of managerial inequity.

THE "GLASS CEILING" AS METAPHOR

As a metaphor the "glass ceiling" seems crystal clear. It was introduced in the book, *Breaking the Glass Ceiling*, where it is identified as "a transparent barrier that kept women from rising above a certain level in corporations ... [it] applies to women as a group who are kept from advancing higher because they are women" (Morrison et al., 1987: 13). The US Merit Systems Protection Board observes in a recent report that: "women face real, yet very subtle barriers that men do not ... the term 'glass ceiling' was coined to describe these barriers; women can see their way to the top of the career ladder, but bump into an invisible barricade when they try to make the climb" (MSPB, 1992: 2).

But, it is possible to get carried away with metaphors. In an article entitled "From a glass slipper to a glass house", Taber (1992) identifies the "glass ceiling" as the ultimate barrier to women's vertical career progression, other barriers being the "glass door" which restricts women to certain occupational categories, and the "glass wall" which prevents their lateral mobility. Some Australian commentators on employment equity prefer metaphors other than the "glass ceiling" to explain women's under-representation in management, for example, the "greasy pole" (Carmody, 1992) and the "protective shield" (Burton, 1992). A quite different but equally graphic metaphor is

the "sticky floor" which "keeps women from getting their careers off the ground" (Laabs, 1993: 35). The question is whether such metaphors assist understanding about managerial inequity or just grab attention and stimulate imagination.

METAPHOR AS THEORY

If the "glass ceiling" metaphor is to have more than just rhetorical and publicity value, it should provide the basis for a theory about women's under-representation in management. There is consensus on two theoretical elements in the "glass ceiling" metaphor, namely, the notion of a barrier and the idea that it is invisible. The latter element means that the barrier cannot be directly observed but only inferred from its imputed effects on women's career progression. There is no consensus, however, on where the barrier is located or what it comprises. Most writers use the term as implying an ultimate barrier located at a single management level (Schwartz, 1993; Dell, 1992; Lewis, 1992; Still, 1992), but there is divergence of opinion over how high this level is, some placing it above middle management (Betts, 1993; Kalish, 1992) and others above senior management (Martin, 1992; van Oldenborgh, 1992; Esposito, 1991). The originators of the concept also see it as denoting a single-level barrier, but suggest the "the glass ceiling may exist at different levels in different companies or industries" (Morrison et al., 1987: 13).

On the other hand, some writers see the "glass ceiling" as operating at more than one level in the one organisation (Schneider, 1993; Zachariasiewicz, 1993). In fact, Schneider (1993) describes the "glass ceiling" as restricting women's promotion at *all grades* in the US public service. Such a use of the metaphor may at first seem to rob it of any conceptual precision for it implies separate barriers at every level — in what sense do these constitute a "ceiling"? However, as will be shown later, there is strong empirical support for this multi-level interpretation over the single-level concept, a fact which calls into question the validity of the "glass ceiling" metaphor.

Schwartz (1989: 68) rejects the "glass ceiling" metaphor as misleading and argues that: "a more appropriate metaphor, I believe, is the kind of cross-sectional diagram used in geology. The barriers to women's leadership occur when potentially counterproductive layers of influence on women — maternity, tradition, socialisation — meet management strata pervaded by the largely unconscious preconceptions, stereotypes, and expectations of men". Whatever the faults of the "glass ceiling" metaphor, it does not suffer the opaqueness of this geological alternative. McKeen & Richardson (1992: 26) claim that the "glass ceiling" metaphor may be misleading because women do not suddenly "bump into" a single barrier, but rather the cumulative effects of processes that operate over a protracted period often cause them to experience a career plateau. Although it is slick and evocative, the "glass

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** The American term "affirmative action" is widely misunderstood in Australia to denote positive discrimination and to violate the merit principle. In a recent survey of managers, for example, almost half the males and one-in-five females agreed with the statement "affirmative action legislation in Australia encourages positive discrimination in favour of women" (Hede & Dingsdag, 1994). I even recently had the Director of Equal Employment Opportunity for one Australian public service organisation explain to me that women's managerial progression was "based on merit rather than affirmative action".

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EVIDENCE FOR A "GLASS CEILING"

Disparities in representation

Most advocates of the existence of a "glass ceiling" point to the severe under-representation of women in management (Kottis, 1993; Wentling, 1993; Morrison, 1992; Dominguez, 1990). However, Lewis (1992) questions whether there are any special barriers near the top which could constitute a "glass ceiling", and notes that in the US federal civil service, women's representation decreases steadily from 77 per cent at the GS-6 level to 12 per cent at the SES level. A similar pattern is evident in the Canadian public service with a steady decrease from 70 per cent at AS-1 to 12 per cent at senior management level (Canadian Government, 1990), and also in the Australian public service where the proportion of women decreases steadily from 72 per cent at ASO2 to 13 per cent at SES level (see Figure 1) (PSC, 1992). Data for women's representation in Australian academe also displays this pattern of a steady decrease from 52 per cent at tutor level to 7 per cent at professor level (Cribb, 1992). In none of these cases is there the sudden drop in representation which would be expected if the "glass ceiling" metaphor is taken as denoting a single-level ultimate barrier.

In all three countries, however, there is clear evidence that women are increasingly under-represented at higher managerial levels, their representation dropping about 7-9 per cent with each grade. Indeed, the decreasing step-like function relating women's representation to level (see Figure 1) is consistent with Schneider's (1993) suggestion that there is a "glass ceiling" at every level. Perhaps, the metaphor could be interpreted in the plural as a series of barriers which women encounter as they move up the

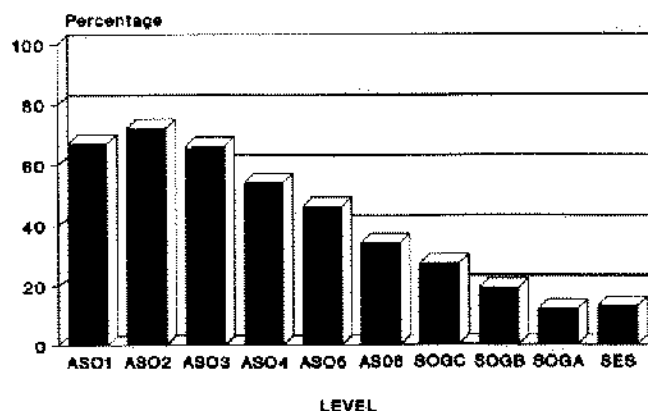
hierarchy from the ground-floor of base grade through the first-floor of first-line supervision, to the second-floor of middle management and eventually arrive in greatly reduced numbers at executive management on the top floor of the employment building. We must resist the temptation to extend this building metaphor to include such notions as men having more access to the fast-tracking lift while women must struggle up the stairs, and women who make it to the top becoming marginalised on the balcony of the executive suite!

The important point is that if the "glass ceiling" metaphor is to match the facts about gender representation in management, it must be interpreted not as a single-level barrier at the top, but rather in multi-level terms to denote a series of invisible barriers that limit women's progression up each step in the managerial hierarchy. However, there is another element in the concept which is at variance with the facts about women's experience once they break through the promotional barriers. The single-level concept of the "glass ceiling" implies that once a woman has "broken through" (Morrison et al., 1987) or "circumvented" (Bullard & Wright, 1993) the ultimate barrier, her career will be unimpeded. However, many women find that the subtle attitudes and stereotypes that impeded their promotion still adversely affect them in performing the job once they are promoted (LaPlante, 1992).

Career progression

Naff (1992) cites as evidence for a "glass ceiling" in the US federal civil service the fact that women in professional occupations have lower promotional rates than men at the middle grades which form a "gateway" to the managerial level, even though there are no discrepancies at other grades either higher or lower. A recent study of the Australian public service, however, indicates that the rates for promotion from senior to executive positions are comparable for women and men, with no evidence of a barrier or ceiling but only of smaller numbers of women at more senior levels and a "time lag" in the equalisation process (Moore, 1993: 6). Some support for the idea of a single-level barrier comes from studies which indicate that many women seem to reach a plateau in their career progression and get stuck after successfully mounting the

Figure 1: WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION AS A FUNCTION OF LEVEL IN THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE — 1992



Source: PSC, 1992, p. 174)

first few steps in the hierarchy (Dominguez, 1992; McKeen & Richardson, 1992). But the career plateau (that is, "ceiling") would have to come at different managerial levels for different women to be consistent with the data showing a step-like function in representation (see Figure 1). The key issue is whether women are more likely than men to reach such a plateau, or whether women have to overcome barriers all the way up the hierarchy.

FACTORS RESTRICTING MANAGERIAL PROGRESSION

Perceived barriers

Interestingly, women are no more likely than men to perceive barriers at work. A survey of 477 managers in 1992 asked respondents to rate the extent to which a range of factors had been a barrier to their past career progression. There was no gender difference in the overall percentages reporting that at least one of the factors had been a serious barrier (Hede & Ralston, 1993). Similarly, more than half of both male and female managers expected that their future career would be hampered by one or more barriers. These results suggest that most women under-estimate the effects of the invisible barriers they will encounter, for the future trends indicate that it will take another seventy years before women achieve equal representation in managerial occupations (Hede, 1993).

Women encounter unseen barriers at every level as they climb the corporate steps. Morrison (1992) identifies twenty-one different barriers, though she suggests that only six have a significant effect in blocking advancement. The composition of the barriers may differ across levels, across organisations, across sectors and across countries, though they invariably comprise negative attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices.

Let us focus on the differences across levels. At the lower management levels, women frequently meet resistance in the form of stereotypes about their commitment and career objectives (Stuart, 1992); at middle management levels, the lack of access to networks becomes an additional barrier (Kottis, 1993), and prejudices about experience and competence are common (Still, 1992); at senior management levels, women become highly visible because of their very low representation (Kottis, 1993), and another subtle barrier is added in the form of a tendency towards homosocial cloning whereby the predominantly male executives seek to recruit "someone like us" (Morrison, 1992).

The Paula principle

One factor that contributes to the under-representation of women in management is what we may term the "Paula principle". This is the long-lost sister of the well-known Peter principle which states that in a hierarchy people are promoted to their level of incompetence (Peter & Hull, 1969). According to the Peter principle, organisations assume that if a manager is performing competently at one level they will be competent at a higher level. As a result, all managers are eventually promoted to a level at which they are incompetent. The Paula principle, by contrast, comprises two propositions:

1. *The Peter principle applies mainly to men, and*
2. *Women tend to be promoted only to the level of their proven competence.*

Thus, whereas men are typically assumed to be capable of performing at a level higher than that of their proven competence, women tend to be promoted only *after* they have demonstrated their capacity to perform at the higher level. The Paula principle highlights one of the discriminatory barriers which restrict the managerial progression of women, namely, that performance standards are often higher for women than for men (Morrison, 1992; Solomon, 1990).

Laurence Peter seems to have originally conceded the first proposition of the Paula principle by expressing the Peter principle in sexist terms as "*every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence*" (Peter & Hull, 1969: 25), emphasis added, though he later used a non-sexist form of words (Peter, 1985: 11). As empirical support for the existence of the Paula principle, consider how many cases you can cite of managers who exemplify the operation of the Peter principle. I suggest that the incidence will be higher for males than for females which is consistent with the Paula principle. In this context, it is appropriate to cite a statement by Geraldine Doogue: "We will have achieved equity in employment when mediocre women do as well as mediocre men" (Doogue, 1993).

Attitudinal barriers: political correctness

The incidence of cases involving overt, specific, and direct sex discrimination might have decreased in the two decades since the *Sex Discrimination Act 1975*. However, it would be naive to think that the persistence of gross disproportionalities in the workforce is entirely due to non-discriminatory factors. Equity programs may readily change procedures and even overt behaviours, but underlying attitudes are highly resistant to change and constitute the major ongoing barriers to women in management. As the US Merit Systems Protection Board points out: "These barriers take the form of subtle assumptions, attitudes, and stereotypes which affect how managers sometimes view women's potential for advancement and, in some cases, their effectiveness on the job" (MSPB, 1992: x).

Discrimination against women at work has not been eliminated, but rather has gone underground and is still flourishing beneath a veneer of political correctness. There is now a clear disparity between the rhetoric and the reality at the workplace. Male managers know the "correct" answers to researchers' attitudinal questions these days. Many are quick to pay lip-service to equity and merit values while still practising subtle forms of sex discrimination, particularly in job selection and promotion to ensure that the "right man" gets the job. A 1990 survey of 486 managers found that while almost three-quarters of males claimed to be "firmly committed to implementing policies on equal employment opportunity", more than half of them also approved the practice of "appointing men and women to jobs that are most suited to their gender", many evidently not realising the latter commits them to a sexist stereotype about work (Hede & Dingsdag, 1993). Further, one-in-three of these managers admitted that non-merit factors were "important" in their most recent job selection decision (viz, age, good looks, and no

physical disability), again apparently not realising that such behaviour is inconsistent with equity.

Many people see the push for non-sexist language as little more than a hobby-horse for rabid feminists and pedants. As well as reinforcing gender stereotypes, sexist language can often be indicative of stereotypical thinking. For example, the persistent use of masculine singular personal pronouns "he/him/his" to refer generically to managers may betray sexist attitudes. Of course, many chauvinist men have now mastered non-sexist language in order to conceal their gender-biased attitudes. According to one writer: "The explanation for the persistence of the glass ceiling lies in gendered social relations which are masked under the guise of a gender-neutral organisational logic and language" (Symons, 1992: 18).

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Internal factors: patriarchal conditioning

As well as the barriers around them, women managers have to contend with internal factors relating to their own attitudes and beliefs. As Schwartz expresses it: "For decades, even women themselves have harbored an unspoken belief that they couldn't make it because they couldn't be just like men, and nothing else would do" (1989: 75). According to the former Director of the Affirmative Action Agency: "Sometimes the glass ceiling existed only in the form of a woman's perception of herself as a manager and her priorities at the time" (Pratt, cited by Knuckey, 1991:6). Also, Still suggests that women may have played a role "consciously or unconsciously" in sustaining the existence of the glass ceiling (1992:3). Continual exposure to the "masculine" rules and structures that predominate in organisations (Burton, 1992) may lead some women to experience obscure doubts about their own suitability for senior management. Certainly, being the only female executive in the patriarchal inner sanctum at the top of an organisation results in a non-too-subtle exclusion from the strong informal networks that operate

in any homosocially-cloned group, and again may reinforce lingering doubts.

The feminist call for women to "stand in their power" may not completely eradicate the deeply ingrained inferiority beliefs that many of today's female managers would have absorbed during a lifetime of what may be called "patriarchal conditioning". Most women over 35 in the Australian workforce would have grown up in a society that generally accepted such sexist beliefs as "a woman's place is in the home" and "only men can run a large organisation". Although women can readily reject such beliefs at the conscious rational level, they may still experience doubts at an unconscious irrational level. According to some psychologists, this patriarchal conditioning may be manifested in the form of overly strong self-criticism by some women (Stone & Stone, 1993). It may reveal itself for other women managers in the unconscious taking on of "masculine" attitudes and behaviours (for example, aggression) which are inconsistent with their normal behaviour (Kottis, 1993; Korabik & Ayman, 1989).

Gender in organisations

Another factor contributing to women's under-representation in hierarchies is the fact that the prevailing culture in many organisations embodies values that are not gender-neutral. According to Burton: "The perspectives which dominate in organisations reflect ways of being in the world which are 'masculine'." (1992:4). Some writers assert that the central masculine value at work is the domination of women in subordinate roles by men in managerial roles, and that there is pressure on women who do progress in management to adopt this masculine value system: "Managerial women must accept values which include those of their own subordination!" (Symons, 1992: 21). This writer continues: "Managerial women expose the fundamentally problematic nature of the opposition between male and female, based on a structure of male dominance and female submission" (Symons, 1992: 22). But this view of male-female work relations is losing its relevance as an explanation of the dynamics of modern Western organisations which are experiencing a breakdown in the nexus between sex and gender.

Whereas sex is biologically determined, "gender defines social relations between the sexes, including culturally determined roles for men and women" (Symons, 1992: 19). These culturally determined gender roles are rapidly changing at work as women increase their representation. In fact, the classification of attitudes and behaviours in terms of gender is becoming less accurate because of a decrease in the proportions of men and women engaging exclusively in so-called "masculine" and "feminine" behaviours respectively. Both men and women are breaking away from the traditional gender stereotypes of masculinity *versus* femininity, variously depicted as: "logical, analytic and instrumental [*versus*] intuitive, nurturing and emotional" (Burton, 1992: 5); or "high control, strategic, unemotional and analytical [*versus*] low control, empathetic, collaborative and high performance" (Segal, 1991: 117); or "dominance, independence, a direct achievement style [*versus*] concern for relationships, a valuing of expressive behaviour" (Sargent & Stupak, 1989:30); or task-oriented and competitive *versus* people-oriented and co-operative (Korabik & Ayman, 1989).

There was a tendency in the past for organisations to equate "masculine" characteristics with "effective" leadership. But, some predict a shift from "masculine" to "feminine" qualities as defining effective leaders in organisations of the future (Robbins, 1993). Most now recognise that a balanced and flexible leadership style is necessary, the most effective style being contingent on the situation (Korabik & Ayman, 1989). However, although it is more than ten years since Sargent (1981) first extolled the virtues of "androgynous manager", this notion of blending so-called masculine and feminine characteristics has not been widely adopted.

Gender stereotypes are now undermining attempts to promote employment equity. Why should a woman who is task-centred and assertive be regarded as exhibiting "masculine" behaviour, and risk being branded a "dragon lady" or "bitch" (Korabik & Ayman, 1989; 29)? Why should a man who is people-centred and nurturing in his behaviour be classified as effeminate or "new age"? Attitudes and behaviours at work which were once virtually sex-specific are no longer exclusive to either sex. A recent review of studies on gender differences indicates that male and female leaders do not differ in their levels of task-centred versus people-centred behaviour, nor indeed in their needs and values (Powell, 1990). It has become counter-productive for equity advocates to talk as though gender stereotypes have validity in modern organisations. Is not gender neutrality the ultimate goal for employment equity? Are we not aiming for a world where employment opportunity is based solely on a fair assessment of job-relevant competencies and where people are not presumed to have stereotypical characteristics because of their sex, race, religion etc? It is admittedly difficult, if not impossible, to have gender neutrality while there is grossly disproportionate gender representation in the workforce both across occupational categories and across managerial levels.

Minorities in management

Although originally applied only to women, the current trend overseas is to extend the "glass ceiling" concept to include minority groups also (for example, Schwartz, 1993; Morrison, 1992; Gunas, 1991). The US Glass Ceiling Commission is targeting minorities as well as women (Martin, 1992). It is important to remember that employment equity is not just about women's rights but rather about the broader issues of social justice and equitable treatment for all employees. The subtle barriers experienced by women also serve to slow the managerial progression of other demographic groups who are in the minority in the workforce. In Australia, the main disadvantaged minority groups are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with disabilities, and people of non-English speaking backgrounds. These groups have been specifically targeted in the EEO strategic plans of several public services including the Commonwealth (PSC, 1993). Women in these groups experience double inequity.

TOWARDS A NEW METAPHOR-BASED THEORY

We have seen that the "glass ceiling" metaphor gives rise to misleading theorising about managerial inequity for a number of reasons. First, it implies that there is a single-

level ultimate barrier when employment statistics reveal no sudden drop in women's representation consistent with such a barrier, but rather a step-like decrease indicative of barriers at every level. Second, the "glass ceiling" metaphor inaccurately implies that once a woman "breaks through" to senior management she is clear of the barriers which restricted her progression. On the contrary, the very same attitudinal and behavioural factors that make it difficult for women to move up in the hierarchy continue to make it harder for them to perform as managers than their male counterparts at each successive level.

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As an alternative metaphor-based theory, Carmody's (1992) notion of the "greasy pole" suggests that the path for women to senior management is slippery all the way up. Thus, it accurately reflects the fact that women's representation decreases steadily rather than abruptly. However, as well as being quite inelegant, this metaphor has an implication that is questionable, namely, that women are in danger of slipping down the managerial "pole". Further, it fails to point to the existence of specific barriers which make both progression and performance more difficult for women in management.

Another possible metaphor-based theory is given by Burton's concept of the "protective shield". According to Burton (1992: 6), "rules in the organisational field of activity operate in such a way that, overwhelmingly, masculine values are activated, masculine interests supported and protected". The implication is that male managers set up structural and cultural barriers in organisations to keep women out of their "boys' own" executive domain thereby preserving its masculinity. The underlying motivation for such "masculinity protection" is posited to be "men's fear of contagious effeminacy" (Burton, 1992: 14). The protective shield may well provide an accurate explanation for one of the major barriers to women, but it does not allow for other possible attitudinal

and behavioural barriers that women encounter in organisations. This metaphor also seems to imply a single-level barrier at the top rather than a series of barriers at every managerial level.

A more accurate theory but less glamorous metaphor than the "glass ceiling" is provided by the concept of "sticky steps" which lead from the ground floor to the executive suite. This metaphor extends the "sticky floor" notion suggested by Laabs (1993). The *sticky steps* are attitudinal and behavioural impediments which women and members of minorities encounter at every level as they progress in management. The "sticky steps" not only restrict progression to each successive managerial level, but also restrict performance once a woman or minority group member moves up to the next step in the hierarchy.

The "sticky steps" metaphor can readily accommodate factors such as "masculinity protection" (Burton, 1992) and "patriarchal conditioning" (see above) which impose impediments on women in management. Although it does not highlight the invisibility of the impediments/barriers as vividly as the "glass ceiling" metaphor, the "sticky steps" metaphor also allows for the impediments to be unseen. In fact, the "sticky steps" metaphor covers the notion of the impediments being completely undetectable — whereas a glass ceiling is unseen but clearly felt when it is "bumped up against" (McKeen & Richardson, 1992), the "sticky steps" constitute burdens underfoot which are often undetected even when they restrict progression and performance. The precise nature of the "sticky steps" impediments may vary across levels, organisations, sectors and countries. The achievement of employment equity in each case requires the identification and removal of the specific attitudinal and behavioural factors which restrict both managerial progression and managerial performance of affected groups, namely, women and minority group members.

CONCLUSION

The metaphor of the "glass ceiling" has served its purpose well in attracting attention to the problems facing women in management. However, this metaphor is now contributing to a widespread misunderstanding about the nature of the problems women encounter in hierarchies. The "glass ceiling" metaphor incorrectly implies that there is only a single-level barrier in organisations and also that women encounter no further serious problems once they have broken through this ultimate barrier. An alternative theory of managerial inequity is provided by the "sticky steps" metaphor which proposes that:

1. women and other minority group members encounter attitudinal and behavioural impediments in hierarchies;
2. these impediments exist at every level in management;
3. their effect is to restrict managerial performance as well as progression;
4. they are not only invisible in advance but are also often completely undetectable afterwards;
5. they may vary in nature across levels, organisations, sectors, and countries.

The "sticky steps" metaphor is clearly not as glamorous as the "glass ceiling" metaphor and is not a serious contender as a replacement in the popular literature. However, the "sticky steps" metaphor will have achieved its purpose if it stimulates more accurate theoretical analysis of the problem of managerial inequity experienced by women and also by members of minority groups. An accurate theory is important not just as an academic exercise, but to ensure that misunderstanding about managerial inequity does not lead to ineffective policies for addressing the problem.

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