How the "Glass Ceiling" and Other Metaphors Shape Our Understanding of, and Reactions to, Workplace Gender Inequality

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FINAL REPORT

The metaphor of the “glass ceiling” has been drawn upon for more than 25 years to capture the subtle, yet very real, barriers that women face as they try to climb the organisational hierarchy. Since then, the metaphor has enjoyed immense popularity among academics, policy-makers, and the press and as it has inspired a range of additional metaphors describing challenges that women face in the workplace, such as “maternal walls”, “sticky floors”, and “glass cliffs” (see Bruckmüller, Ryan, Haslam, & Peters, 2013). However, metaphors are not only creative figures of speech, they are extremely powerful tools that shape our understanding of, and reactions to, complex social phenomena (Glucksberg, 2003). They lead to new meanings and interpretations of the phenomena they describe. For example, they highlight certain aspects of a problem, while they render others less salient or even invisible (Fauconnier & Turner, 1998).

The current project examined how metaphors such as the glass ceiling shape discourse about, the understanding of, and reactions to gender inequality. How do people use these metaphors when trying to make sense of gender inequality in the workplace? What kinds of questions, explanations, and interventions are inspired by such metaphors? This project combined qualitative and experimental methods to provide a critical perspective on the way we communicate about gender inequality.

Background and Rationale for the Study

While the glass ceiling metaphor has been successful in calling attention to gender inequality in the workplace and in inspiring research and interventions (for a compilation see Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009), inequality persists, especially in top-level positions. For example, in 2013, less than 6% of executive directorships within the FTSE 100 were held by women (Sealy & Vinnicombe, 2013). This continued unequal representation is a multiply-determined problem. Hence, understanding and addressing it requires an integration of multiple perspectives. The main goal of the present project was to provide a new perspective by examining how the way we talk about inequality might itself be part of the problem, and could be part of the solution.

Given the power of metaphors to shape our understanding of the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), describing gender inequality in the workplace via metaphors such as the glass ceiling is likely to influence how we perceive and explain inequality as well as the kinds of solutions we develop and support (see also Bruckmüller et al., 2013). One thing that many popular metaphors illustrating gender discrimination in the workplace have in common is that they conjure up images of individual women struggling with impersonal and very stable structural barriers such as ceilings or walls (i.e., structural barrier metaphors); other metaphors, such as the somewhat less metaphorical “old boys’ club” seem to enjoy much lower popularity – at least within the literature on gender inequality. One likely consequence of structural barrier metaphors is a focus on women; they lead us to ask questions about why women face these barriers, or what organisations can do to help women “break through” the glass ceiling. Men
and their experiences in the workplace remain in the background, or are even rendered invisible. As such, structural barrier metaphors implicitly present women as peculiar exceptions in leadership with peculiar experiences and career paths, and hence (re-) establish the experiences and career paths of men as an unquestioned background norm (see also Bruckmüller, Hegarty, & Abele, 2012). In other words, women-focused metaphors might enhance the “think manager-think male” association (Schein, 1973), one of the most important hurdles that women must overcome to succeed in management.

Study 1: Conversational Study

Methodology

To examine how metaphors – structural barrier metaphors like the glass ceiling in particular, shape lay discourse about gender inequality and play out in social interaction, we recruited members participants with at least two years of work experience for a ‘group discussion about gender in the workplace’. We ran a total of 8 discussion groups of 4-6 participants each. Two of these groups where women-only with a female moderator facilitating the discussion, two were men-only with a male moderator, and four groups were of mixed gender composition, two each with a female and a male moderator. Discussions lasted for approximately 1 hour (1.5 with preparations, debriefing, payment etc.) and participants were compensated with £20 each.

The key questions for this study were whether and how participants would use (structural barrier) metaphors while collectively trying to describe and explain gender inequality. To this end, group conversations started with a warm-up question on participants’ current or most recent place of work followed by the relatively broad question “how might gender matter at work”. While moderators generally tried to maintain a free flow of conversation, they occasionally used prompts to steer the discussion towards topics most relevant for the present research questions. For example, if the issue of gender (in)equality did not come up spontaneously, prompts were used, for instance, “so would you say that this affects promotions at work” or “in your opinion, what does gender inequality mean”. If participants spontaneously used a metaphor such as the glass ceiling or the old boys’ club, moderators first waited for other participants’ reactions but then asked participants to elaborate on what these metaphors meant to them. If none of these metaphors came up spontaneously, moderators specifically asked participants whether they had ever heard of the glass ceiling and what the metaphor meant to them.

Preliminary Findings

Despite its immense popularity among commentators and policy makers, only few of our discussion groups spontaneously mentioned the glass ceiling metaphor. Where they did, it was usually referred to as a thing of the past and was often accepted uncritically by the rest of the group (i.e., did not generate much discussion). Two examples are:

I remember my mother, back in the 60’s […] all women were hitting a ceiling because a ceiling would prevent them rising further up, it was almost like a glass ceiling was being enforced. (from group 1, mixed)

100 years ago, I did my MA on the subject of the glass ceiling (group 3, all female)

However, when we specifically raised questions about the glass ceiling as a metaphor and prompted participants to discuss it in more detail, groups engaged with the metaphor in various ways, ranging from fully endorsing it as an appropriate metaphor as in this example:
So, it’s exactly what we are talking about where females, the whole society’s boys’ club mentality that we’ve had in this country forever really, that’s the glass ceiling for a woman. (group 6, mixed)

to seeing the glass ceiling as an excuse for failure,

You know, people quite easily say, well, I’ve hit my glass ceiling, or the glass ceiling is there, therefore I’m not going to, I didn’t get that job, or whatever, but maybe you weren’t the best person for the job. (group 4, mixed)

to doubts whether the metaphor is accurate,

Well, it’s an unhelpful metaphor. I think that women bump up a ceiling effect all the time, at different levels. There isn’t rise rise rise, and then there’s a glass ceiling. It happens at every level of the organisation. (group 3, all female)

and questions about its implications

I worry it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy. (group 3 all female).

In some cases, discussions of the glass ceiling shifted the focus of the conversation more towards women. This includes general considerations of women’s attitudes and behaviour to explain gender inequality, as this quote illustrates:

*Do you think female perception of their own abilities can affect the glass ceiling effect?* (group 6, mixed)

…as well as using the metaphor to make sense of a particular (participating) woman’s experiences, as in the following exchange:

M: I was like, OK, you know what I’m never going to work for anyone ever again. I’m going to work for myself, so there won’t be any glass ceiling.

S: Well no there was, you’ve just kicked it through when you got your own business! You’ve got your own property and you’re running the show!

M: There was, and I’ve just kicked it through! Yeah, and I’ve got the biggest challenge – ‘cos I love a challenge! (group 6, mixed)

Although this report can only give a brief overview of some initial insights, one general observation is that different groups used the glass ceiling (and other metaphors) differently when making sense of gender inequality – suggesting that these metaphors can be used in multiple ways in discourse about inequality. To complement these rich but group-specific insights on implications of structural barrier metaphors, we also conducted a controlled experiment to test how these metaphors shape understanding of and reactions to gender inequality on the individual level.

**Study 2: Framing Experiment**

**Methodology**

Study 2 was an online experiment. Participants were recruited via two different websites, socialpsychology.org (20 participants) and maximiles.co.uk (223 participants). Excluding participants who failed simple control questions, the final sample comprised 104 female, 112 male and 16 participants who did not indicate their gender (mean age = 44.82 years; SD = 17.09).
Participants were randomly assigned to one of five conditions. The representation of men and women in leadership positions was described either without a metaphor and a focus on women ("women are underrepresented") or a focus on men ("men are overrepresented"), with one of two women-focused metaphors ("glass ceiling", "labyrinth") or with a men-focused metaphor ("old boys' club").

As central dependent variables we first asked participants to explain the different representation of men and women in leadership in their own words. Responses were later coded by two independent judges for explanations that focused on women (e.g., "Women are seen as emotional and less able to handle demanding roles") versus those that focused on men (e.g., "I suppose men like to be the dominant ones in society"). Participants then indicated their agreement with a number of given explanations that represented either internal (e.g., "Women are not as ambitious as men or do not try hard enough", 6 items, Cronbach’s α = .77) or external attributions (e.g., “Societal expectations encourage men more than women to invest in their careers”, 6 items, α = .77). Finally, participants indicated to what extent they would support different kinds of interventions. These comprised interventions that focused on women (e.g., mentoring programs, 4 items, α = .84) as well as interventions that focused on organisations and systemic changes (e.g., diversity training for senior managers; quotas, 6 items, α = .82).

**Key Findings**

**Participants' Own Explanations**

A 5 (framing) by 2 (participant gender) by 2 focus of participants' explanations (women vs. men) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor revealed that participants overall focused a higher percentage of their explanations on women than on men, $F(1, 203) = 15.29$, $p < .001$. This was qualified by an interaction with participant gender, $F(1, 203) = 5.63$, $p = .019$, indicating that female participants focused their explanations even more on women than male participants did, as well as by an interaction of framing and focus of explanations, $F(4, 203) = 4.92$, $p = .001$ (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Percentage of explanations focused on women vs. men by framing condition](image-url)

As illustrated in Figure 1, this three-way interaction was driven by an interaction between the focus of the description of inequality and the focus of participants' explanations, $F(1, 209)$
= 16.47, \( p < .001 \). While participants in the women-focused conditions (women are underrepresented, glass ceiling, labyrinth) focused their explanations more on women than on men, participants in the men-focused conditions (men overrepresented, old boys’ club) focused their explanations equally on men and women. There were no significant differences within the different women-focused or men-focused framing conditions, \( F_s < 1.16, ps > .31 \).

**Agreement With Given Explanations**

A 5 (framing) by 2 (participant gender) x 2 (attribution: internal, external) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor revealed a significant main effect of attribution, \( F(1, 206) = 168.67, p < .001 \), that was qualified by a two-way interaction of explanation and participant gender, \( F(1, 206) = 9.01, p = .003 \), as well as a three-way interaction of explanation, participant gender, and framing condition, \( F(4, 206) = 2.49, p = .044 \). As Figure 2 illustrates, this three-way interaction was driven by the women-focused framing conditions, where the respective three-way interaction was again significant, \( F(1, 125) = 4.23, p = .042 \). For female participants, the glass ceiling and the labyrinth led to lower agreement with internal and higher agreement with external attributions than a focus on women alone; the same metaphors, however, caused male participants to agree more with internal attributions than when the description simply said that women were underrepresented; male participants’ agreement with external attributions was unaffected by condition.

**Figure 2:** Agreement with internal vs. external attributions by participant gender and framing condition

Hence, structural barrier metaphors allowed women to construct gender inequality as something caused by external forces rather than by women themselves; however, the same metaphors caused male participants to understand inequality more as “women’s fault” than did a focus on women alone.

**Support for Interventions**

A 5 (framing) by 2 (participant gender) by 2 (focus of intervention: women, organisation) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor revealed a tendency for participants to endorse women-focused interventions more than organisation-based ones, \( F(1, 206) = 3.72, p = .055 \), and an non-significant, but theoretically interesting interaction of focus of
intervention and framing, $F(4, 206) = 1.94, p = .104$. Follow-up analyses indicated that this interaction was driven by a difference between the metaphor conditions and the no-metaphor conditions, $F(1, 208) = 3.66, p = .057$. While participants in the no metaphor conditions (women underrepresented, men overrepresented) endorsed women-focused interventions more than organisation-based ones ($M_s = 4.87$ and $4.60$, $SD_s = 1.45$ and $1.40$, respectively), $t(104) = 3.07, p = .003$, participants in the metaphor conditions supported both kinds of interventions equally, ($M_s = 5.04$ and $4.99$, $SD_s = 1.24$ and $1.18$, respectively), $t < 1$, mainly driven by higher support for organisation-based interventions in the metaphor conditions, $t(218) = 2.24, p = .026$.

### Summary and Implications

Together, the two studies showed that structural barrier metaphors for gender discrimination (such as the glass ceiling or the labyrinth) can be used in a number of different ways and can have a number of different effects on how we understand and react to gender inequality in the workplace. Both the conversational study and especially participants’ explanations of inequality in the experiment showed that when making sense of gender inequality in the workplace, structural barrier metaphors can imply a focus on women as the “effect to be explained” (see Bruckmüller et al., 2012). At the same time, however, we found that structural barrier metaphors can both increase or reduce “blame” for women, depending on the social situation (here, the different discussion groups) or social group membership (male vs. female participants in the experiment). We also found some first indications that metaphors can affect what kinds of diversity interventions people are willing to support.

In summary, the studies demonstrate that the how we frame inequality matters and that the use of metaphors has important consequences. However, they also demonstrate that the impact of (structural barrier) metaphors on how people understand and react to gender inequality is not a simply story, and that different effects are possible under different circumstances. Clearly, further research is needed to disentangle these different kinds of implications.

However, one implication of the present studies and a piece of evidence-based advice we can already give to researchers, commentators, diversity trainers, and everybody else who regularly discusses gender (in)equality in the workplace is to choose one’s metaphors carefully and to consider what kinds of images are conjured up by them. Rather than looking for the most “catchy” phrase or the most poignant image, consider what these metaphors imply about where inequality comes from, and what they suggest we do about it. And, equally important, consider what these metaphors leave out of the picture and what explanations and fruitful ways forward they might prevent us from seeing.

### (Plans for) Dissemination

So far, I have presented the results of the experimental study in two invited talks, one at the University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany in July 2014 and one at the University of Kansas, USA in September 2014. Currently, I am working on a more fine-grained analysis of the conversational study and a manuscript that we plan to submit to an international peer-reviewed journal. In addition, I plan to present the data at one academic conference at least in 2015. Once the manuscript is accepted for publication, I will work with the press office of the University of Koblenz-Landau (and potentially of the University of Exeter) to disseminate findings to relevant audiences outside of academia.

I will of course keep the Richard Benjamin Trust updated on conference presentations and publications resulting from this project.
References


