WHY ARE THERE SO FEW WOMEN IN TOP MANAGEMENT POSITIONS?

The first female chief executive officer (CEO) of a Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE, or “Fotsie”) 100 company, consisting of the top 100 companies by market capitalization listed on the London Stock Exchange, was appointed in 1997. At the time of writing, there are six female CEOs in the FTSE 100 (Ball, 2019). What should be made of this trend? It depends on what statistic is used to describe it. On the one hand, there has been a 500% increase (from 1% to 6%) in the proportion of female CEOs of FTSE 100 companies over the last twenty-plus years, which may seem like a large increase. On the other hand, during the same period, the proportion of male FTSE 100 CEOs decreased from 99% to 94%, a 5% decline, which hardly seems large at all. There are currently more FTSE 100 CEOs named “Steve” than there are female CEOs, and there is a tie with the number of FTSE 100 CEOs named “Dave” (Ball, 2019).

Across the pond, there was one female CEO of a Fortune 500 company, consisting of the top 500 US companies by total revenue, in 1996 (Pew Research Center, 2015). Currently, 33 of the Fortune 500 CEOs are female (Zillman, 2019). Thus, the increase in the proportion of female CEOs of Fortune 500 corporations over a 20+-year period has been 32,000% (from 0.2% to 6.6%), certainly a large proportion. However, the decrease in the proportion of male Fortune 500 CEOs over about the same period of time has been only 6.4% (from 99.8% to 93.4%), or similar to the decrease in the proportion of male FTSE 100 CEOs.

What do these trends in the proportion of female CEOs in large companies really mean? Not surprisingly, there are different perspectives. For example, when the proportion of female Fortune 500 CEOs reached 4.0% for the first time, this achievement was heralded as signaling “the dawn of the age of
female CEOs” (Parker, 2013). However, others have argued that there are still not enough female CEOs (Brooke-Marciniak & Schreiber, 2015) and that views of increased gender parity in the top management ranks represent “delusions of progress” (Carter & Silva, 2010). My perspective is that these trends have not significantly changed the reality that there are still very few, in my opinion too few, women in top management positions.

The low proportion of women in top management positions has been attributed to what has been called the “glass ceiling” phenomenon (Davidson & Cooper, 1992; Powell, 1999; Powell & Butterfield, 1994, 2015b). The glass ceiling is defined as “a transparent barrier that (keeps) women from rising above a certain level” (Morrison et al., 1987, p. 13). The term is primarily used to refer to women’s restricted access to top management levels, although glass ceilings can exist at any managerial level. According to the glass ceiling metaphor, success consists of climbing to the peak of a mountain, and impediments to success consist of transparent, invisible ceilings that block or limit access to the peak for women as a group; as a result of glass ceilings, women can see the mountain peak, but they face greater obstacles than men as a group in attaining it (Sleek, 2015). Similar metaphors include a concrete ceiling (for women of color), a marble ceiling (for women in government), a sticky floor, glass chain, and labyrinth (Arifeen & Gatrell, 2020; Carli & Eagly, 2016; Piazza, 2016; Smith et al., 2012). In the book, I use the term “glass ceiling” because it has been the most popular term to refer to barriers to women’s attaining top management positions.

Glass ceilings are troubling and problematic. First, they are problematic from an organizational effectiveness perspective. It is not exactly a smart human resources practice for organizations to artificially restrict the candidate pool for promotions to top management on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or any other job-irrelevant personal characteristic. Organizations that do so would seem likely to be less effective at attracting and retaining managerial talent than organizations that take fuller advantage, and better care, of all of the human resources available to them (Powell & Butterfield, 2015b).

Second, glass ceilings are problematic from an organizational justice perspective. Organizational justice theories (Greenberg, 1990) suggest that employees are concerned with both procedural justice (i.e., whether the means by which personnel decisions such as promotion decisions and performance appraisals are made about them are fair) and distributive justice (i.e., whether the outcomes of personnel decisions made about them are fair). Regarding procedural justice, it is unjust for women as a
Why So Few Women in Top Management?

Why So Few Women in Top Management?

group to have their membership in this group taken into account to their disadvantage, whether consciously or unconsciously, in decision-making procedures involving promotions to top management positions. Regarding distributive justice, it is unjust for women as a group to have their managerial advancement restricted simply because of their membership in this group (Powell & Butterfield, 2015b).

Moreover, it is important for organizations to be seen as fair in their personnel procedures and outcomes. Women perceive the existence of a glass ceiling that restricts their advancement to top management to a greater extent than men do, with such perceptions contributing to lower perceptions of distributive justice and greater intentions to quit their job (Foley et al., 2002). Perceptions of a glass ceiling to women’s disadvantage may have a substantial negative impact on an organization’s success in attracting, engaging, and retaining female managerial talent, which in turn restricts its effectiveness (Powell & Butterfield, 2015b).

In this chapter, I first review person-centered, situation-centered, and social-system-centered theories that have been offered for why there are so few women in top management positions. Next, I revisit an empirical field study conducted with Tony Butterfield on the glass ceiling phenomenon (Powell & Butterfield, 1994), the results of which suggested actions that organizations may take to work towards shattering their glass ceilings and increasing the numbers of women in top management positions. Finally, I reconsider the merits of the study’s implications for practice almost three decades later. As we consider the question in the chapter title, one thing is clear. It is not simply a matter of time until women assume their fair share of these positions – something has to change.

THEORIES OF THE GLASS CEILING PHENOMENON

Person-centered theories

Horner (1972) proposed an early person-centered theory by advocating the existence of a fundamental personality characteristic, the “fear of success,” among women as a group. She argued that traits required for success in achieving career goals (e.g., independent, competitive, has leadership potential) are inconsistent with the feminine gender stereotype (i.e., traits associated with females) and more consistent with the masculine gender stereotype (i.e., traits associated with males; Ellemers, 2018; Kite et al., 2008). As a result, when women anticipate that the probability of their achieving a career goal such as attaining a top management position is high, they experience anxieties
activated by a motive to avoid success that keeps them from pursuing the goal. In contrast, men as a group experience no such anxieties and display no such motive. However, undermining the theory’s validity, Horner’s (1972) supporting research for the fear of success concept was found to have major methodological flaws (Levine & Crumrine, 1975). Further, a fear of success could be a response to situational or social system factors rather than an individual motive.

Another early person-centered theory proposed that men emerge from their childhood and adolescence as better prepared to be managers than women. Hennig & Jardim (1977, p. 63) argued that men “bring to the management setting a clearer, stronger and more definite understanding of where they see themselves going, what they will have to do, how they will have to act, and what they must take into account if they are to achieve the objectives they set for themselves.” They attributed the gender difference in preparation for managerial roles to males’ greater participation in competitive sports than that of girls during their formative years (Deaner & Smith, 2012). However, Hennig & Jardim (1977) argued that women managers may acquire the skills needed to advance in organizational hierarchies to top management positions.

Other early person-centered explanations reviewed by Marshall (1984) for why there are so few women in top management positions include that women have less motivation to manage than men, that women believe stereotypes about themselves as unfit to manage and act accordingly, and that women’s inclusion in the top management ranks causes societal harm because their children, husbands, and homes inevitably suffer. Marshall’s (1984, p. 40) exasperation upon reviewing the evidence for such theories, which she concluded were dubious as a whole, was clear: “I have had enough.” Overall, person-centered theories have been largely discredited by scholars since Riger and Galligan (1980) first classified them as such (Powell & Butterfield, 2015b). Nonetheless, they retain an enduring appeal for some observers.

For example, the “opt-out revolution” has become a well-known phenomenon in recent years, at least in the popular media (Belkin, 2003; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008). According to media reports, educated women are increasingly choosing to opt out of careers that place them on the fast track to top management because of parenthood or other personal reasons. Scholars have exhibited varying reactions to this media-driven, person-centered explanation for the low representation of women in top management positions.
Mainiero and Sullivan (2006) argued that rather than women lacking aspirations to top management, potential top executives’ choices to opt out may represent a reaction to extreme organizational expectations for their work hours and time. Managers are increasingly being pressured by their employers to work as much time as possible (Milliken & Dunn-Jensen, 2005). Because of improvements in electronic technologies, managers find it difficult or impossible to turn off work when they are technically “at home” but digitally tethered to work (Ferguson et al., 2016); in effect, they feel compelled to “sleep with their smartphone” (Perlow, 2012). Being available at all times is regarded as demonstrating high commitment to the organization and job, which is essential to being considered for a top-management position. An organizational culture that emphasizes long work hours and 24/7 availability represents a situation-centered explanation for what has been described as a person-centered phenomenon.

In the same vein, Kossek et al. (2017) questioned whether women were “opting out,” a person-centered explanation, or “pushed out,” a situation-centered explanation. Hoobler et al. (2014) suggested that when women do not aspire to managerial careers, it is because of managers’ biased evaluations of them as less career-motivated than men, which hinders their development and suppresses their aspirations for top management positions, also a situation-centered explanation. Harman & Sealy (2017) proposed that, rather than women opting out due to a lack of ambition, their self-efficacy or belief in their ability to achieve their goals (a personal factor) interacts with whether their organizational context is positive or negative (a situational factor) to influence their path forward, either to opt in and pursue their ambition within the organization or to leave to fulfill their ambition elsewhere.

Finally, Tony Butterfield and I (2013) found that female and male business students did not differ in aspirations to top management. Instead, those who described themselves as possessing a higher level of masculine traits were more likely to aspire (i.e., “opt in”) to top management. Thus, contrary to media accounts of an opt-out revolution for educated women, we offered an alternative person-centered explanation for why educated individuals would opt in or out of careers aimed at attaining top management positions (Powell & Butterfield, 2013).

Further, a small but growing genre of best-selling books has emerged by celebrity women executives and business owners (“female heroes;” Adamson & Kelan, 2019) such as Sheryl Sandberg (2013) and Karren Brady (2012). Such books typically offer accounts of how the authors have achieved success, despite all the challenges faced, in all facets of life and recommendations
for how other women may do the same. The books share common features: they are authored by women who became celebrities through their business activities, they are autobiographical, and they discuss how the authors have simultaneously experienced (and other women may experience) motherhood, business success, and work–family balance. Overall, such books have been argued to reflect a postfeminist sensibility by focusing on person-centered solutions to gender inequalities that women face; in other words, they are “calling on women to change themselves to succeed” (Adamson & Kelan, 2019, p. 981).

In particular, Sandberg’s Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead (2013) has been a best-seller since it was published and has inspired the creation of “Lean In Circles” in which women meet regularly to work on new skills, network, and support each other. The book offers many suggestions for women to keep from holding themselves back in their careers, some of which are supported by research evidence and others of which are not (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2019). Sandberg’s (2013) critics have accused her of perpetuating a “fix the women” focus (Metz & Kumra, 2019) or being naive by advocating that women should “lean in” to be successful in their careers (Newman, 2018); it might also be beneficial for women’s success in life if men were to “lean out” (Whippman, 2019).

In conclusion, it seems likely that person-centered theories and explanations for women’s low representation in the ranks of top management will continue to be popular among some observers, regarded as problematic by other observers, and subjected to critical examination by scholars on a lagged basis for the foreseeable future.

Situation-centered theories

Situation-centered theories and explanations for why there are so few women in top management positions primarily focus on the organizational contexts experienced by women who aspire to or may be considered for top management positions. These situations are influenced by decisions about exactly who is promoted to such positions when openings arise, and they are also influenced by the organizational contexts in which such decisions are made. In this section, we consider decision-makers’ cognitive processes as situational factors that may contribute to gender discrimination favoring male candidates for top management positions as well as the organizational contexts in which such discrimination occurs.

Decisions about who occupies top management positions are more likely to be influenced by decision-makers’ cognitive processes than decisions
about lower-level managerial positions. The higher the position within the managerial ranks, the less the importance of “objective” credentials such as education and training (Antal & Krebsbach-Gnath, 1988). As a result, women’s increased educational attainment over the last five decades (Powell, 2019) has had a greater effect on hiring and promotion into entry-level management positions than on promotions to top management. The effect of decision-makers’ biases and stereotypes is likely to be greater when there is less reliance on objective credentials and more reliance on “subjective” factors such as perceived fit.

Decision-makers’ endorsement of leader stereotypes is likely to influence the proportion of women in top management. If leader stereotypes are masculine (“think manager – think masculine”) and favor men for managerial positions in general (“think manager – think male”) as Chapter 2 demonstrated, stereotypes of top managers are also likely to emphasize masculinity and favor male candidates, thereby reinforcing the low proportion of women in top management.

Perry et al. (1994) noted that individual decision-makers develop a schema or mental model about the attributes of jobholders that influences their hiring and promotion decisions. A schema may be either gender-based, incorporating the gender of jobholders in some way, or gender-neutral, ignoring the gender of jobholders. Gender is most likely to be incorporated into decision-makers’ jobholder schemas when persons primarily of a particular gender occupy the job under consideration (Perry et al., 1994), which is certainly the case for top management positions. Thus, as the lack of fit model (Heilman, 1983, 2012) described in Chapter 2 would predict, women tend to be regarded as providing a lesser fit with the demands of top management positions than men do. In the same vein, as role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), also described in Chapter 2, would predict, the top manager role is seen as less congruent with the female than the male gender role, which of course benefits male candidates.

In a classic study, Kanter (1977, p. 63) characterized the results of such decision-making processes as “homosocial reproduction.” She argued that the primary motivation in organizational bureaucracies is to minimize uncertainty in decision-making. Uncertainty is present whenever individuals are relied upon, and the effects of such uncertainty are greatest when these individuals hold significant responsibility for the direction of the organization, such as top executives. One way to minimize uncertainty in the executive suite is to close top management positions to people who are regarded as “different.” Thus, women have a difficult time in entering top management positions because
they are seen as posing too much uncertainty by male decision-makers (Kanter, 1977). Theories of homophily, or the tendency and preference for people to associate with similar others (McPherson et al., 2001), provide a further explanation for why overwhelmingly male decision-makers overwhelmingly choose male candidates for top management positions.

Decision-makers’ perceptions of the effects of senior-level women’s versus senior-level men’s hormones is an example of a situation-centered explanation that focuses on biological forces. Decision-makers for promotions to top management may perceive senior-level women as governed by fluctuating hormones throughout and beyond their reproductive years, indicating their lack of competence to make rational decisions required of a top executive (Gatrell et al., 2017). In contrast, senior-level men’s hormones are assumed to be less problematic. The perceived linkage between “reproductivity and productivity” represents a barrier to women attaining top management positions that contributes to gender discrimination. It reflects a general discomfort with female bodies in the workplace (Gatrell, 2013), in this case in top management positions (Gatrell et al., 2017).

The existence of glass walls, which are the result of past decisions about who fills different types of lower-level managerial positions, may influence who is in the best position to rise to the top management ranks. Line functions (e.g., production, sales, research and development) are more central to the provision of organizational products and services, whereas staff functions (e.g., human resources, corporate communications, public relations) are more peripheral to the provision of products and services. As a result, managerial jobs in line functions confer higher status and provide greater developmental opportunities that prepare individuals to assume top management responsibilities than managerial jobs in staff functions (Baron et al., 1986). Reflecting the existence of glass walls, female managers tend to be concentrated in staff functions, whereas male managers tend to be concentrated in line functions. Further, within staff functions, female managers are less likely than male managers to move into line functions (Lyness & Schrader, 2006). Glass walls provide a further situation-centered explanation for glass ceilings: because middle- and lower-level female managers are concentrated in staff functions with limited developmental opportunities, they are less likely than male managers to attain top management positions.

Decision-makers may also take into account the nature of the top-management position they are filling. Theories of glass cliffs address the question, “When women attain top management positions, where do they find themselves?” The answer is, “They find themselves in precarious leader
positions” (Mulcahy & Linehan, 2014; Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Ryan et al., 2016). That is, the traditional “think manager – think male” association documented in Chapter 2 is weakened during times of poor organizational performance and replaced by a “think crisis – think female” association (Ryan et al., 2011). As a result, female CEOs experience greater pressures than their male counterparts from the onset of their terms. They come under greater threat from activist investors (Gupta et al., 2018), have shorter tenure in the position (Glass & Cook, 2016), and are more likely to be fired even when their firm is performing well (Gupta et al., 2020). Glass cliffs represent a second wave of gender discrimination that occurs as (some) women break through glass ceilings (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

Consistent with glass cliff theories, women and men of color as well as white women tend to be promoted to more precarious CEO positions than white men. Further, when firm performance declines during their tenure as CEO, they tend to be replaced by white men, which has been dubbed the “savior effect” (Cook & Glass, 2014, p. 1080). Thus, an intersectional perspective (Acker, 2006; Ridgeway & Kricheli-Katz, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2016; Rosette et al., 2018; Smooth, 2010) is necessary when considering glass cliffs and other situation-centered explanations for the status of women as well as racial and ethnic minorities in top management.

Finally, female decision-makers who have broken through glass ceilings may use particular cognitive processes and behaviors to hold back lower-level women who might be future candidates for top management positions. Mavin and her colleagues (e.g., Mavin, 2006a, 2006b; Mavin et al., 2014) have examined psychological “micro-violence” in women’s intra-gender relations. Women in top management may exhibit intra-gender micro-violence across organizational levels by distancing themselves from and hindering the advancement of lower-level women (Mavin et al., 2014). Whereas early, media-driven usage of the “queen bee” metaphor (Staines et al., 1973) blamed top-level women for blocking the advancement of lower-level women (Derks et al., 2016; Ellemers et al., 2012), Mavin et al. (2014, p. 441) blamed gendered social systems in which women in top management feel compelled to “ventriloquize patriarchal attitudes.” Thus, individual women’s rising above a glass ceiling may contribute to keeping other women below it, which also represents a second wave of gender discrimination.

Although the situation-centered theories and explanations reviewed disagree on the underlying rationale, they agree that women tend to be discriminated against when decisions are made for promotions to top management. However, gender discrimination is not necessarily intentional (Motowidlo, 1986);
decision-makers may be unaware of how their gender schemas (Bem, 1993) affect their decisions about top management positions. Unconscious cognitive processes, including decision-makers’ leader stereotypes, preferences for similar others, beliefs about hormonal influences, assignments of managers to line vs. staff functions, assessments of the fit of candidates for top management positions depending on the precariousness of the position, and other factors reflecting their gender schemas, may lead to their making biased judgments that result in gender discrimination favoring men.

Social-system-centered theories
Social-system-centered theories and explanations for why there are so few women in top management positions primarily focus on gendered processes at the social system or societal level. These processes may influence the organizational contexts in which decisions about who attains top management positions are made. They may also influence individuals’ aspirations to top management and supporting behaviors as well as decision-makers’ selection decisions about who attains top management positions. Overall, social-system-centered theories may at least partially explain both situation-centered and person-centered phenomena that contribute to there being few women in top management positions.

Social-system-centered theories have a common focus on the macro-level processes by which social systems become gendered (e.g., Acker, 1990; Calás & Smirich, 1996; Ely & Padavic, 2007; Lorber, 1994; Marshall, 1984; Ridgeway, 1991; Risman, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Feminist theories provide particularly rich theoretical perspectives on the gendering of social systems. There have been many classifications of feminist theories (e.g., Ahl, 2006; Calás & Smirich, 1996; Greer & Greene, 2003). For example, Calás & Smirich (1996) distinguished between liberal, radical, psychoanalytic, Marxist, socialist, poststructuralist, and Third World/(post)colonial feminist theories. However, a common theme of most social-system-centered theories, including feminist theories, is that male dominance is manifested throughout social systems, including in organizational hierarchies (Acker, 1990), and that this domination is problematic (Calás & Smirich, 1996).

West & Zimmerman (1987, p. 129), in one of the most cited and influential articles in the field of sociology and gender studies (Jurik & Siemsen, 2009), argued that “gender is not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings.” Doing gender is manifested in everyday social interactions that may seem natural but are actually scripted by gendered social systems. In turn, the gendering of social systems contributes to the establishment
of gender differences among people that would not otherwise exist. In a later commentary on their seminal article, West & Zimmerman (2009, p. 117) added that “the oppressive character of gender rests not just on difference but the inferences from and the consequences of those differences.” Applying West & Zimmerman’s (1987, 2009) perspective to the small numbers of women in top management, gendered social systems that result from doing gender foster gender differences in candidates for top management positions that influence decisions to the disadvantage of female candidates.

Risman (2004, 2009) argued that West & Zimmerman’s (1987) focus on doing gender was valuable but limited in its emphasis on an interactional level of analysis. In her view, gender represents a social structure equivalent in magnitude and impact to economics as a social structure; in other words, “Every society has a gender structure, in the same way that every society has an economic structure” (Risman, 2009, p. 83). Gender as a social structure has implications for phenomena at every level of analysis, not just the interactional level but also the individual, family, organizational, and societal levels. Applying Risman’s (2004, 2009) perspective to the low numbers of women in top management, the structures within which organizational decision-makers attain positions of power and authority over who attains top management positions, as well as the institutionalized processes by which these decisions are made, are a consequence of gendered social systems to female candidates’ disadvantage.

Acker (1990, 1998) offered a socialist feminist theory (Calás & Smircich, 1996) that focused explicitly on organizations as gendered institutions. She argued that organizations are not gender-neutral as commonly represented in the organization studies literature through the absence of any acknowledgment of gender. Instead, organizations represent combinations of divisions and categorizations, symbols and images, interactions, and logics within which the division of labor, the acceptability of some behaviors and not others, the assignment of power and authority, the assignment of physical space, the creation of part-time versus full-time jobs, and other structures and practices occur along gender lines. As a result, much of what transpires in organizations is a result of gendered processes that reflect the social systems in which work is organized and conducted. Applying Acker’s (1990, 1998) perspective to the paucity of women in top management, women are disadvantaged by gendered organizational processes in most aspects of their jobs prior to their being in a position to be considered for top management, which in turn restricts whether they become candidates for and are selected for such positions.
Marxist feminist theories (e.g., Hartmann, 1976; Lorber, 1994) incorporate consideration of class relations as well as gender relations in social systems. Traditional Marxism has been characterized as blind to the gendered nature of social systems, including the shared ideological foundations of patriarchy (which it ignores) and capitalism (which it deplores: Greer & Greene, 2003; Hartmann, 1976). In contrast, according to Marxist feminist theorists, “Even though a hierarchy exists among men through a system of class, men as a group dominate and control women as a group, through a system of gender” (Calás & Smircich, 1996, p. 232). These structural arrangements divide work both in heterosexual households (in which women perform the majority of unpaid domestic work: Breen & Cooke, 2005; Warren, 2011) and in workplaces (in which men equivalent in class to women dominate positions of power and authority: Lorber, 1994). Thus, women are exploited both as unpaid and paid workers. Applying Marxist feminist theories (Hartmann, 1976; Lorber, 1994) to the low numbers of women in top management, candidates for such positions bring different experiences and receive differential treatment on the basis of socioeconomic class as well as gender.

Marxist feminist theories offer an intersectional perspective (Acker, 2006; Ridgeway & Kricheli-Katz, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2016) by incorporating the influence of the intersection of gender and class on social systems. Other social-system-centered theories have extended an intersectional perspective by considering the intersection of gender, class, and race. For example, West & Fenstermaker’s (1995) theory of “doing difference” focuses on the intersection of gender, class, and race as the basis for interactional processes in social systems that serve as the basis for social inequalities. In the same vein, Acker’s (2006) theory of gender, class, and race in organizations focuses on how the intersection of these three social structures leads to “inequality regimes” in organizations that reflect inequalities at the societal level.

Social-system-centered theories that incorporate the intersection of gender and race have particular implications for the low numbers of women of color in top management. If women in general experience barriers to attaining top management positions, women of color experience even greater barriers (Parker & ogilvie, 1996; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Rosette et al., 2016; Sanchez-Huclés & Davis, 2010); the barriers faced by women of color are discussed in detail in Chapter 4. As a result of a “concrete ceiling” (Piazza, 2016), women of color are the most underrepresented group in the top management ranks. Because of the preponderance of white men in top management positions, women of color are two degrees removed from
what may be regarded as the white male top management prototype; in contrast, white women and men of color are one degree removed from this prototype. Intersectional social-system-centered theories that incorporate both race and gender (e.g., Acker, 2006; West & Fenstermaker, 1995) offer explanations for why there are especially small numbers of women of color in top management.

In summary, in this section of the chapter, I have briefly reviewed examples of person-centered, situation-centered, and social-system-centered theories, all of which offer explanations for why there are so few women in top management positions. There is an abundance of such theories, and a comprehensive review of all relevant theories is beyond the scope of this book. Next, I will revisit and review my personal research on the glass ceiling phenomenon conducted with Tony Butterfield, which yielded surprising results as well as implications for how glass ceilings may be shattered.

PERSONAL RESEARCH ON THE GLASS CEILING PHENOMENON

Tony and I were inspired in the late 1980s by the increased attention being devoted what was called the “glass ceiling.” Since the term had been popularized in the media (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986), it had taken on a life of its own and become prominent in scholarly discourse about the status of women in top management (e.g., Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990). However, no empirical field study had been conducted to date of the glass ceiling phenomenon. A fortuitous set of circumstances enabled us to fill this void in Powell & Butterfield (1994).

During a sabbatical leave, Tony held a job in the human resources office of a cabinet-level department of the US federal government. This office is responsible for keeping records of the decision-making process for all promotions in the department to and within the Senior Executive Service (SES), which consists of all nonmilitary top management positions in the US government except those reserved for political appointees; the top 1% of nonpolitical government positions are SES positions. By federal law, promotions to SES positions must be made systematically based on the same types of information across positions, and records of the decision process must be kept for at least two years. Tony’s former boss was interested in exploring the notion of a glass ceiling within the federal government, which was conducting a study of glass ceilings in the corporate world of its own (US Department of Labor, 1991). In 1989, we were granted access to files, with identifying information removed, on the department’s SES promotion decisions during the previous two years and were sent
files for the next three years (i.e., from 1987 to 1992). Data from these files, copies of which arrived in several large cartons with identifying information blocked out by black magic marker (these were pre-Internet days), were coded and analyzed.

We tested two hypotheses with these data. In Hypothesis 1, invoking several existing situation-centered and social-system-centered theories described earlier, we proposed a direct effect of applicant gender on promotion decisions for top management positions favoring male candidates. In Hypothesis 2, we proposed indirect effects of applicant gender on promotion decisions through its relationships with human capital variables favoring male candidates. The rationale for Hypothesis 2 was as follows.

Stumpf and London (1981) identified criteria that are typically used in decisions about management promotions, including human capital variables such as relevant work experience, education, seniority, past performance, and being a current member of the promoting organization. Human capital theory (Becker, 1971) suggests that individuals make choices regarding investment in their human capital. Organizations also make choices regarding investments in their employees’ human capital that may be subject to gender discrimination. If female applicants had accumulated less human capital over time than male applicants, their advancement to top management positions would be more restricted. Further, gender discrimination may have influenced evaluations of human capital, such that women were not given as much credit as men for the experience, education, and so on that they had accumulated. Female applicants whose human capital profiles were judged to be weaker than equivalent profiles of male applicants would be at a disadvantage, even if they were not directly discriminated against in promotion decisions to top management.

Powell & Butterfield (1994) describe the study methods. Briefly, when an SES position becomes open, a position announcement is circulated that specifies the criteria by which applicants will be judged. Interested individuals submit formal applications that provide background and career history data. The human resources office in the promoting department then screens out applicants that are considered obviously unqualified because they do not meet minimum eligibility criteria. The person who makes the final decision (“selecting official”) typically is the future manager of the person to be selected for the position. The selecting official asks a panel of senior individuals who are familiar with the demands of the position to review the credentials of remaining applicants. The review panel evaluates each applicant on each of the specified criteria on a three-point scale. It also decides which applicants to “refer”
to the selecting official, who then decides which of the referred applicants will be selected for the job.

Accordingly, we used three variables as measures of the outcomes of SES promotion decisions. The review panel’s evaluation of the applicant’s qualifications for the position was measured by the average of its ratings of the applicant on the specified criteria for the position. Whether the applicant was referred for the position by the review panel and, if referred, whether the applicant was selected for the position by the selecting official were the other two outcome measures. Overall, we received data on each of these outcome measures for 32 open SES positions that were filled within the department over a five-year period and for the 438 applicants, 88% of whom were male, who met minimum eligibility criteria for the position applied for. Six human capital variables were also measured for each applicant: whether the applicant was currently employed in the hiring department, the highest grade held in the federal government, years at the highest grade, years of full-time work experience, the highest degree obtained, and the most recent performance appraisal rating on a five-point scale.

Complete results are presented in Powell and Butterfield (1994); here, I provide a brief summary. First, applicant gender had a significant effect on review panel evaluations. However, contrary to Hypothesis 1, the direction of the effect favored female applicants rather than male applicants. Further, contrary to Hypothesis 2, indirect effects of applicant gender on review panel evaluations through human capital variables also favored female applicants.

Second, applicant gender had a significant effect on referral decisions. However, contrary to Hypothesis 1 as for review panel evaluations, the direction of the effect favored female applicants rather than male applicants. Further, contrary to Hypothesis 2 as for review panel evaluations, indirect effects of gender on referral decisions through human capital variables also favored female applicants.

Finally, contrary to Hypothesis 1, applicant gender did not have a significant effect on selection decisions for the referred applicants. However, contrary to Hypothesis 2, indirect effects of gender through human capital variables on selection decisions favored female applicants over male applicants as for review panel evaluations and referral decisions.

You undoubtedly have noticed a pattern in these results. Our two hypotheses, that applicant gender would directly and indirectly influence promotion decisions for top management positions to the advantage of male applicants, were resoundingly rejected. Instead, all of the significant direct and
indirect effects that were found favored female applicants. Tony and I were left with the challenge of how to interpret these unexpected findings. We did not view the results as refuting the existence of glass ceilings, as there was already a growing body of theory and evidence that glass ceilings operated to the disadvantage of women. Instead, we offered a situation-centered explanation for the results by considering the unique nature of the organization studied (Powell & Butterfield, 1994). The US federal government places a high degree of emphasis on procedural fairness (Greenberg, 1990) in making promotion decisions for SES positions. First, it requires that all open SES positions be posted publicly. Second, it requires that all SES promotion decisions be made using the same procedure. Third, it requires that records be kept of the entire decision-making process and retained for a two-year period. By providing structure to the decision-making process and enabling identification of decisions that are improperly made, these requirements put decision-makers on notice that they are accountable for their decision-making.

Further, the US government is particularly concerned with issues regarding equal employment opportunity. This concern was evident in its “glass ceiling initiative” (US Department of Labor, 1991) for private corporations as well as in established federal policies and practices. It may have led to women in the federal government benefitting more from promotion decisions for top management positions than in organizations with less of a concern for equal employment opportunity.

We also noted that the US government was highly unusual in granting researchers like us access to its promotion records. Tony and I could not imagine our approaching any business organization and receiving a favorable response to the question, “Would you be willing to give us access to your records for promotions to top management positions so we can analyze whether you have a glass ceiling?” Instead, we would be laughed out of the office if we ever got in. First, the existence of such records in corporate contexts seemed unlikely. As noted earlier, promotion decisions for top management positions tend to be based on subjective criteria (Antal & Krebsbach-Gnath, 1988) that are not easily codified. Second, the risks of corporate exposure about what these records might say would seem too high for them to be turned over to researchers for analysis; corporate lawyers would rule out that notion rather quickly.

Powell & Butterfield (1994) concluded that promotion decisions for top management positions that foster the glass ceiling phenomenon may be averted by organizational action, which in turn promotes organizational effectiveness and justice. Specifically, when procedures for promotion decisions
to top management positions are standardized to increase the accountability of decision-makers and impose uniformity on the decision-making process, when these procedures are made known to all potential applicants, and when criteria for decisions are well established, qualified female candidates may fare at least as well as qualified male candidates. In contrast, when procedures are not standardized, or when criteria for promotion decisions are unspecified or vague, there is greater opportunity for gender discrimination favoring men to affect the outcomes of the promotion process.

CONCLUSIONS

Ever since Powell & Butterfield (1994) was published almost three decades ago, theories and explanations for the glass ceiling phenomenon have been extended and expanded considerably. However, although the study has been widely cited and reprinted in a collection of classic studies on women and management (Gatrell et al., 2010), its results and implications have been largely ignored.

Nonetheless, I stand by the study’s implications for organizational effectiveness and justice as articulated in Powell & Butterfield (2015b). It identified specific practices that organizations may choose to adopt to minimize the existence of glass ceilings to women’s disadvantage. I do not believe that women being advantaged rather than disadvantaged when promotions to top management positions are made, as Powell & Butterfield (1994) found, is desirable. In other words, I do not advocate that gender discrimination that favors women be substituted for gender discrimination that favors men in promotions to top management. Instead, I suggest that the most appropriate goal is for gender discrimination in such decisions to be minimized as much as possible, which would be facilitated by organizations adopting promotion procedures such as those described in Powell & Butterfield (1994).

In conclusion, I believe that we do not need more scholarly theories and explanations of glass ceilings. As this chapter has demonstrated, scholars already have many person-centered, situation-centered, and social-system-centered theories and explanations for the glass ceiling phenomenon to choose from. However, despite all of the scholarly attention glass ceilings have received over the last three decades, the nature of glass ceilings has remained essentially stable and there are still too few women in top management positions. Instead, we need more scholarly examination of practices that contribute to shattering glass ceilings (e.g., Powell & Butterfield, 1994) and widespread implementation of such practices in organizations.
Note

1 In a later study of 300 applicants for SES positions for whom data on race were available (Powell & Butterfield, 1997), the small proportion and number of female applicants of color in the sample (3%, or nine applicants) rendered it inappropriate to reach a conclusion about the effect of the intersection of race and gender on promotion decision outcomes.