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The Trouble with the Glass Ceiling
Critical reflections on a famous concept

Yvonne Benschop & Margo Brouns
Radboud University & Groningen University

Contact: Dr. Y. Benschop
Nijmegen School of Management
Radboud University
P.O. Box 9108
6500 HK Nijmegen
The Netherlands
Tel: 31 24 3613007

Y.Benschop@fm.ru.nl; M.L.M.BROUNS@ppsw.rug.nl

Introduction

The glass ceiling has become a central notion in the field of gender in organizations. It is part of organizational practice in the sense that organizations wanting to increase the number of women in higher functions have formulated remedies against the glass ceiling. It is embraced as a metaphor in the popular business/management press to account for the lack of women in top positions, and it also frequently appears in the scientific literature where it refers to 'invisible or artificial barriers that prevent women (and people of color) from advancing past a certain level' (Morrison et al., 1987). According to this concept, the glass ceiling is not simply a barrier for an individual, based on the person's inability to handle a higher-level job. Rather, the glass ceiling applies to women as a group who are kept from advancing higher because they are women (Morrison et al., 1987: 13).

The glass ceiling obviously is a powerful and influential image, and has been for over 25 years now. It has connected scholarship, policy strategies and practices. It is easily mobilized in political rhetoric. It is striking that there is little critical reflection on the

glass ceiling and that this metaphor has come to live a life of its own. To our knowledge, Calás and Smircich's (Calás & Smircich, 1996) overview of feminist approaches to organization studies is the only piece critically questioning the concept, its meaning and its importance. Below, we elaborate on this critique, but here, we first need to stress that despite this critique, the glass ceiling has been used continuously since. The effect of this notion on the (production of) knowledge on gender in organizations has seldom been addressed anymore. It seems that advocates use it and adversaries do not mention it, but the pros and cons of the glass ceiling concept are not subject to debate. We think that such a powerful concept deserves this debate. Hence, in this paper, we take a critical stance towards the glass ceiling in order to reflect on its influence in theory and practice both.

In terms of the intersection between critical management studies and practice, the glass ceiling is an interesting case. It is typically a notion that features in mainstream scholarly work on women in management and as such is in the line of fire of the more critically oriented feminist perspectives that are part of the critical management studies approach. In practice, however, the glass ceiling already has some sort of critical ring to it: it problematizes the slow upward mobility of women which is not always conceived as a problem in organizational practice. On the other hand, in practice, the glass ceiling is not so much a critical concept, as one that is embedded in an economical discourse of human capital and unfulfilled potential. In other words, the glass ceiling is employed in practice to optimize the machinery, not to question and change the machinery itself. The insights developed from a critical management studies perspective do exactly that: they propose feminist interventions in organizational practice that question the machinery and contribute to change.

This paper examines the effects that the notion of the glass ceiling has had on the production of knowledge on gender in organizations. We start by reviewing several types of texts, from academic literature to business press publications and organizational practices that call upon the glass ceiling. Then, we turn to critical organization theory and derive the two distinct lenses of management fashions and metaphor that we apply to illuminate different aspects of the glass ceiling concept. After that, the effects of the glass ceiling concept are examined through the comparison of practical instruments that do and do not invoke the concept. We end with some concluding remarks on the pros and cons of the glass ceiling and on the intersection of theory and practice.

Of 'glass' and 'ceilings': the glass ceiling in theory and practice

The glass ceiling as a term first appeared in a 1986 article in the Wall Street Journal entitled 'The glass ceiling: why women can't break the invisible barrier that blocks them

from top jobs' (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). It entered academia and gained its capital G and C in the before-mentioned study by Morrison et.al (1987) 'Breaking the Glass Ceiling'. It took a few years for the term to gain momentum: a search in the university library's Picarta-database (search conducted April 12, 2005) revealed that eleven publications on the glass ceiling appeared between 1987 and 1991 and thirteen in 1992. The year 1993 saw 26 publications and since, speed has picked up to a steady 30 to 40 publications each year. There are no signs of decline in the number of these print-media traces, indicating that the concept remains newsworthy (Benders & Van Veen, 2001) A steady flow of authors inside and outside of academia have drawn and are continuing to draw on the term. In this section, we examine how they use the glass ceiling, what the underlying arguments are and what is silenced through the use of the glass ceiling.

Academic literature

To start with the academic literature, there are roughly three ways in which authors use the glass ceiling. A first category of research uses the glass ceiling to account for the scarcity of women in the higher echelons of organizations, examining glass ceiling effects in management positions (Blum et al., 1994), in top management positions (Powell, 1994) in authority hierarchies (Baxter & Wright, 2000) and in the wage distribution (Albrecht et al., 2003) Some even speak of 'glass ceiling theory', making it a full-fledged concept by building a conceptual framework around the notion and substantiate that with systematic research rather than casual observation. Perhaps the most articulate attempt of this can be found in the study of Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia and Vanneman (2001), who set out to review the literature and provide 'clear content to the glass ceiling concept' (p.656). They develop four criteria to define the glass ceiling and differentiate it from other types of inequality (p.657-661):

"a glass ceiling inequality represents a gender or racial difference

1. that is not explained by other job-relevant characteristics of the employee (implying discrimination),
2. that is greater at higher levels of an outcome than at lower levels of an outcome,
3. in the chances of advancement into higher levels, not merely the proportion currently there,
4. that increases over the course of a career".

This study focuses on glass ceiling effects, the essence of which is described as 'the greater disadvantages for moving into higher outcome (e.g. earnings, authority) levels at later stages in one's work' (2001, 671). They use data from an USA panel study of income dynamics, subdivide the earning distribution (using percentiles of white male earnings), examine inequalities in those subdivisions between men on the one hand and

women and Blacks on the other and demonstrate that inequalities for women accelerate. Cotter et. al assert that the term the glass ceiling should be reserved for those situations where discrimination of women increases with their movement up the ladder. Maume (2004) applies these criteria to the analysis of managerial attainment. He argues that a glass ceiling test should consider the staffing of management positions that have an impact on the firm's profitability, as paying high salaries is not the same as entrusting women and minorities with control over a firm's human and financial resources.

There are a couple of comments to make on this attempt to come to a clear definition of the glass ceiling. First, it implies the existence of multiple ceilings: all levels, high and low, seem to have ceilings. While these multiple ceilings do justice to practices of gender discrimination and inequality that are not confined to the upper levels of organizations, it is difficult to see how these multiple ceilings relate to the plea to reserve the 'glass ceiling' for the higher levels. Second, the criteria entail that the resistance that women encounter increases when they climb up the ladder; breaking through becomes harder with every ceiling they encounter. It is not clear why a glass ceiling metaphor is deemed appropriate when increasing resistance and obstruction are at stake; it's not a property of glass to intensify resistance, it's either broken or not. Third, measurements of glass ceiling effects in terms of differential earnings that compare female earnings against male ones reinforce the male norm, and produce gender inequality in the very attempt to address it. Fourth, the focus on glass ceiling *effects*, rather than glass ceiling *causes* results in an examination of individual level outcomes, and shies away from the organizational factors that produce, or at least co-produce, differences. Finally, while ceilings are very much part of this conceptualization, the 'glass' bit is not, as the nature of barriers is nowhere an issue. Morrison et.al. (1987) interpreted the glass part as 'invisible or artificial barriers'. Artificial barriers are included in Cotter et al.'s definition; their first criterion of discrimination pertains to this artificiality. Yet, the invisibility of barriers is not and can not be elaborated in glass ceiling theories, when they intend to produce hard evidence of this phenomenon. Moreover, 'glass' refers to the invisible character of the barriers, but at the same time it suggests transparency, a clear view of what is going on above the ceiling, which in fact is not the case. This paradox on the (in)visibility is not addressed properly. Therefore, we conclude that only one element of the two constituting the glass ceiling is elaborated in the theoretical framework.

A second way that the glass ceiling is used in academic research is in the studies that examine perceptions of the glass ceiling. These studies are not so much interested in identifying or localizing a glass ceiling, but look at people's beliefs about the existence of a glass ceiling. Powell and Butterfield (1994, 82) state that besides actual promotion decisions, perceptions of gender-based biases in such promotion decisions are likely to influence the pool of applicants for a promotion. They expect that women who believe

that a glass ceiling may hold them back will restrict their applications. Their expectations are confirmed in a study of the reactions of Hispanic law associates to promotion decisions (Foley et al., 2002). That study finds that a perceived glass ceiling does exist and that individuals may adjust their work-related attitudes accordingly, because belief in a glass ceiling decreases perceptions of promotion fairness.

This type of glass ceiling research entails an ambiguous message: on the one hand it problematizes representations of organizational promotion processes, but it does so by introducing self-selection as producer of gender inequality. While success is a function of both applause and ambition, this focus on perceptions runs the risk of emphasizing the ambition over the applause, and plays into a repertoire of blaming women and their choices for gender inequalities in the workplace. However, Liff and Ward (2001) stress the importance of the broader context of organization culture and the interpretation of and response to equality policies for the understanding of career choices of male and female managers. But this particular study fits better in the next category of loose reference to the glass ceiling, rather than in this second category that substantiates the glass ceiling even as an imaginary barrier.

The third category of academic glass ceiling research is the most sizeable and authors in it strategically use the glass ceiling as a catchphrase, often in titles and conclusions only. For example, Davies-Netzey's (1998) qualitative study builds on sociological and feminist theories on women in management. It compares the perceptions of corporate mobility and strategies for success of sixteen male and female, American CEO's. While it locates the glass ceiling beneath these women, it reports gender differences in access to networks and peer similarities just the same. Corsun & Corsten (2001) use Bourdieu's notions of habitus and field to assert that it takes a White male habitus to break through the glass ceiling. And Hultin's (2003) quantitative study on the effect that occupational sex segregation has on the career opportunities of female and male workers in the Swedish context speaks of glass ceilings and glass escalators. Evidence of the former is not found for women in male-dominated occupations; Hultin concludes that women in her study do not meet obstacles to career growth in male dominated fields of work. She does find glass escalators that speed men up into an internal career in female dominated occupations.

The fact that the glass ceiling features in titles relatively often suggests that it represents some sort of social capital that authors invoke to catch the attention. The examples discussed above illustrate that it is not only employed by authors with liberal feminist perspectives. Calás and Smircich (1996) argue that the glass ceiling, with its concerns for barriers preventing fair access to managerial positions, is typically a liberal feminist notion and problematize this notion, its meanings and importance using different feminist theories. Their critique ranges from the acceptance of the hierarchical status

quo of organizational 'top' and 'bottom' to the disregard of the sexual division of labor. They also highlight complex power/knowledge networks and the discursive practices in organizations and in research that involve the glass ceiling, Western constructions of career advancement and the production of subjectivities as 'career women'. Calás and Smircich criticize glass ceiling research for its concentration on the luxury problems of a limited amount of privileged white, middle-class women with managerial aspirations. Likewise, Baxter and Wright (2000, 290) issue a warning against over-zealous use of the glass ceiling metaphor stating that the rhetoric of the glass ceiling may deflect attention away from struggles over opportunities at lower levels of the organization, which will affect the lives of many more people.

Summarizing, we observe three categories that represent the glass veiling differently in research. The rather fundamental critique raised by Calás and Smircich apparently has not hindered its popularity in either of those categories. We build on that critique and extend it through our discussion of the development and differentiation of the concept over time. Furthermore, we take up the more practical angle of the reception and representation of the glass ceiling in organizational practice through our analyses of the popular management press and of instruments that have been developed over the years to address the glass ceiling.

The popular business press

The popularity of a concept depends to large extent on how it can be used in practice, especially as a tool to frame actual issues and problems. Popular management journals fulfill an important role in linking scientific knowledge and management practice. They translate, reflect and rework concepts and as such are key players in constructing the dominant discourse. News and mass media function as important cultural carriers that reinforce certain images and constructions of social order (Krefting, 2002, 104). In order to understand the popularity and conceptual strength of the glass ceiling we need to reflect on the way this notion has been used and still is used in these popular written media. A quick scan of one of the most popular management journals - BusinessWeek - will shed some light on the role of this metaphor in the management discourse. We have chosen BusinessWeek because of its popularity, international appeal and availability, and because of its numerous references to the glass ceiling.

The website of BusinessWeek Online shows 213 titles on 'glass ceiling' published between 1991 and May 2005 (search Friday, May 13 2005). Here, the number of articles is not stable over the years: there are years with only one (2001) and years with 18 publications (2003). This variation in numbers is very much a result from events such as the nomination or resignation of a female CEO, or new figures or reports on the

low numbers of female managers. In other words, articles on the glass ceiling are to a large extent news reports and event histories.

Against this background we can expect some differences compared to the scientific publications. Many of the very short articles describe one case: one nation or one company. In May 2005, for instance, Hiroko Tashiro reports from Tokyo on the glass ceiling in Asian business. The article was published after nomination of a woman as CEO in Sanyo Electric. *'Are women in Corporate Japan finally breaking through the glass ceiling? Don't bet on it...'*. In October 2004 an article on the MIT was published after nomination of a new female president, under the heading 'A Breakthrough For MIT'. William C. Symonds reports on the changes that have taken place 'five years after conceding rampant sexism'. In these case depictions, the notion of the glass ceiling is used descriptively, and the power of the metaphor is even stretched by using related words like 'breaking', 'shattering', 'throwing stones' and 'the height of the glass ceiling'.

A second category refers to those articles that give voice to female (top)managers, who are reported talking about their careers and the barriers they meet. These are individual stories that clearly picture the ambivalence of being a woman at the top. In March 2005, for instance, a female CEO from Xerox was interviewed. She (...) *yearns for the day when the hiring or firing of a female CEO isn't a big story. She would love to read a description of her that doesn't automatically point out that she's a woman. Yet (...)she is also acutely aware that she's in a distinct minority, one of only nine women leading the country's largest 500 corporations.*

The third wave in BusinessWeek publications is tightly bound to policy making, measurements and (un)successful stories on how to change the slow upward mobility of women. Some of these articles refer to Catalyst – the professional American organization promoting women in higher positions in corporations and professionals firms – and the annual Catalyst award for outstanding corporations. New action plans and interventions are also reported.

These three categories – state of the art, personal experiences of women and policy measures - share a positive attitude towards a gender balance at all business levels. The lack of upward mobility of women is depicted not only as a waste of talents and human capital, but it is also linked to a specific construction of modernity. Only outdated countries and companies resist a stronger representation of women in the highest ranks – .. *Japan finally breaking through ..* – and truly modern companies do succeed in attracting and appointing more women at all levels of the organization. Women leaders are expected to contribute to a changing global business. The implicit and rather unreflected position taken up by the editors is that the glass ceiling has to be shattered, broken or otherwise destroyed.

What these articles do not address is the question why progress is so slow and what kind of resistances prevent women from moving more quickly to prestigious

positions. General notions as 'discrimination' and 'lack of support' are used to account for the blockades, but that these blockades are a business concern is silenced. As a result, these texts fail to analyze or even point at the organizational dimension underlying the facts; they do not address the gate keeping mechanisms that privilege men, nor the power processes at stake. The issue is 'women', never 'men or masculinity'. If masculinity is mentioned, it serves as a status quo that women find problematic– women don't have a feeling of belonging. This leads to the somewhat paradoxical representation of women as change agents and as the ones who have to adapt and change to a top culture that is not problematized itself.

Organizational practice

The paper reflects our double identities in the field of gender, work and organization where we work as academics, but also as consultants concerned with policy development in this particular area. What policy strategies follow from the notion of the glass ceiling, from this framing of the issue, and what are the consequences of those strategies?

One of the most prominent instruments in the Dutch context is 'The Ambassadors Network' launched in 2002 to 'break the glass ceiling' in Dutch organizations. The Network consists of prominent leaders in business, government and the non-profit sector, who serve one year as an 'ambassador' for this issue, both in their own company and in public debate. Each of them formulates a set of goals, primarily oriented towards their own organization, such as 'agenda setting' or 'developing a diversity framework'. These rather abstract aims are often accompanied by concrete actions targeting corporate women. Popular measures are the organization of events, such as lunch meetings and mentoring programs, where women and top managers get a chance to meet each other. The aim is to enhance women's visibility and to organize specific support for them. The organizational ambitions are, compared to this, sometimes rather vague ('raising awareness among key players', 'improvement of selection procedures') or they lack concrete action plans ('30% women among high potentials', 'better statistics', 'retaining mothers').

More instruments are reported in the booklet of good practices regarding the 'glass walls' between female and male occupations, published by the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. It promotes several good practices in the field of de-gendering those occupations that are labeled masculine. Most instruments are geared towards mentoring, training, and the provision of better information for young women. Primarily oriented at women, the actions set out to conquer women's lack of motivation for male occupations and to repair the deficiencies in skills and knowledge that women supposedly have with regard to technical jobs.

These actions are clear examples of 'doctoring on women': they do not address the structural dimension of the slow career advancement of women, nor the gate keeping processes involved, but implicate that women and their choices are primarily responsible for the current situation and hence for its solution. Well intended action plans end up implicitly blaming women. Friezing the issue in a glass ceiling conception apparently does not stimulate reflection on the attitudes and behavior of top management.

Now that we have seen how the glass ceiling is being used in several types of texts and policies, and what has been silenced through this notion of the glass ceiling, we apply two different lenses from organization theory to this concept to illuminate some different aspects of it.

Glass ceiling as management fashion

Is the glass ceiling a fashionable concept as Krefting (2002, 107) puts it? The literature on management fashions may shed some light on this matter, and presents an alternative framing of the glass ceiling that allows for further reflection on the concept. In the management fashion literature, it is argued that each fashion has its own specific pattern, although bell-shaped curves suggesting rapid growth of popularity followed by an equally rapid decline are a common pattern in the literature (Benders et al., 2005). There is no such bell-shaped curve for the glass ceiling in the academic literature: it had a rather slow start, but continues to go ahead at a strong and steady pace. In our selection of the popular management press, we observe a different, more wavy pattern relating to new appointments of female CEO's or new interventions in organizations, but there too, the waves keep coming. Furthermore, it has been noted that a distinction should be made between publications and the diffusion of a concept in the practice of organizations (Clark, 2004; (Heusinkveld, 2004). That is why we have examined the use of the glass ceiling in academic and popular press publications on the one hand, and in organizational practices on the other hand.

It should be noted that the glass ceiling is a somewhat different concept than the ones usually under scrutiny in management fashion research, as it is not an organization concept or a management technique (such as business process redesign, quality circles, lean production or socio-technical work systems) but rather a framing of an issue. Yet, we think that there are enough similarities with management fashions to make this a fruitful frame to examine the glass ceiling. The glass ceiling does not explicitly promise performance enhancement (although it is regularly suggested that more women in management ranks does just that, see (Catalyst, 2004), nor does it threaten the

organization with bankruptcy in the case of non-adoption. But it is an easily understood artifact, supposedly universally applicable and, perhaps most importantly, there is plenty of interpretative viability (Benders & Van Veen, 2001). Interpretative viability is a key characteristic of management fashions and means that there is room for interpretation and enough ambiguity for different constituencies to recognize their situation in the description. Benders and van Veen (Benders & Van Veen, 2001, 37-38) argue that it is precisely this ambiguity that makes a concept more attractive, because potential users can eclectically select the elements of their choice, or the elements that they see as the core idea, or those that fit their purposes best. Furthermore, different users are likely to select different elements and the fashion can hence unite parties because each is in favor of the concept to further its own particular interests (Ortmann, 1995).

This notion of interpretative viability may well account for the popularity of the glass ceiling. Managers may embrace it because of its suggestion that the barriers that women encounter are invisible ('glass') and they can not be held responsible for invisible forces. Women may be attracted to the notion because of it recognizes that there are barriers (the 'ceiling') holding them back from top positions, so that they are not responsible for their lack of advancement either. And business press journalists and academics alike may be attracted to the catchy title, whereas there is also a group of academics attracted to the notion because to them it presents an opportunity to define it in rigorous research. All parties favor the conceptual ambiguity of the glass ceiling, even the latter group who is presented with the opportunity to eradicate precisely that conceptual ambiguity.

In conclusion, looking at the glass ceiling through the lens of management fashion theories illustrates how the interpretative viability of this concept might play into the cards of many different constituencies. Furthermore, from the glass ceiling's remarkable and distinct pattern of popularity, we may conclude that it is a basic organizational accessory, one that does not go out of style easily, to continue in the fashion metaphor. This reference to metaphor brings us to the second lens we want to invoke to examine the meaning of the glass ceiling from a different angle

Glass ceiling as metaphor

Often, reference is made in different types of writing to the metaphorical nature of the glass ceiling, but what constitutes this metaphor is not examined. Therefore, in this section, we take a closer look to this metaphor as metaphor. What frame of meaning is produced through the use of this particular metaphor?

In his influential work on metaphors in organization theory, Morgan (1980, 612) states that 'different metaphors can constitute and capture the nature of organizational

life in different ways, each generating powerful, distinctive, but essentially partial kinds of insight'. The glass ceiling is one of the basic metaphors in the field of gender, work and organization. The insights it generates in the field are indeed powerful, literally, because of its focus on the most powerful positions in organizations, but also because of its popularity and the way it represents the absence of women in the upper echelons as the central question in this field. The partiality of that insight has been stressed several times above. But we think there is something more to say on the metaphor. Leonard (2002) uses a critical, postmodern feminist perspective to revise metaphors of space, time and sexual bodies in texts on gender and organization. For our purposes, her analysis of the space metaphor is most useful as the glass ceiling is arguably a spatial metaphor. In the words of (Baxter & Wright, 2000, 276) the metaphor of the glass ceiling 'implies the existence of an impermeable barrier that blocks the vertical mobility of women'. This means that the glass ceiling refers to hierarchies, to layers with tops and bottoms, it suggests structures, barriers, locations, and movements up and down the ladder. Women are above or under the glass ceiling, or they are breaking through. Power, the power of exclusion included, is located firmly in the top of the hierarchy, above the glass ceiling. Although the ceiling presents an impermeable barrier, the fact that it is made of glass suggests it does pass down the lights shining at the top. Leonard asserts that this metaphor of space frames organizations and organizational behavior as logical, neutral, structured and straightforward.

A different conceptualization of space, however, may suggest that one is simultaneously above, through, in and under the glass ceiling, as accounts from women in positions of alleged power illustrate. These women have typically broken through that glass ceiling, but the tales of their encounters with the special effects of their otherness show that the problems do not stop after their breakthrough (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998). Such an alternative conceptualization of space acknowledges that space is logical nor neutral, but filled with politics and ideology. This resonates with the critique of Calás and Smircich (1996) mentioned earlier, who also problematize the hierarchical organizational status quo implied in the notion of the glass ceiling.

Hence, the frame of meaning produced by this metaphor is a bounded one, bounded to the barriers that have lost their metaphorical meaning and are presented as real, inescapable entities. We now turn to the effects that this metaphor has on the production of knowledge on gender in organizations.

Effects of the metaphor

Since the linguistic or discursive turn made its marks in organization studies, words are not considered simply nouns or verbs, but they frame our understanding of reality and

therefore constitute a certain reality. Words can make a difference. From this point of view, it is interesting to examine the difference that the glass ceiling makes. In this section, we invoke the method of comparison to do so. What different aspects are articulated in practice and in analysis when the notion is and is not used? What are the effects on knowledge construction? We compare two benchmarking instruments designed to diagnose organizational barriers to the upward mobility of women, one that does and one that does not use the concept.

Instruments compared

One instrument that is explicitly named after the glass ceiling is the Dutch Glass Ceiling Index, an instrument commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. This Glass Ceiling Index (hereafter GCI) is designed to calculate the “thickness” of the glass ceiling in organizations. It is a web-based benchmark instrument and essentially a user friendly, easy to handle piece of software that uses quantitative data. It requests that amounts of women and men in the two highest organizational levels are filled in. The GCI then analyses these data, comparing the participation of women in each of these levels. Secondly, the user has to present data on the number of women among the 10% highest incomes, and among the 10% immediately below that first group. If the participation of women at the highest level is lower compared to the level just below, a glass ceiling is present, its ‘thickness’ depending on the discrepancy between the two levels. If the gender balance at both levels is similar, the GCI finds no evidence of a glass ceiling.

This last statement evoked some confusion when we used the GCI as a tool to compare and rank 20 police departments in The Netherlands. Some departments had little participation of women in all levels which resulted in a rather ‘thin glass ceiling’, whereas organizations that combined similar low figures in top positions with a critical mass of women just below the top, were assessed as having a ‘thick glass ceiling’. There is some logic to this – women’s potential in the sub-top is not fully realized – but it does not reckon with the importance of this potential for future job-openings and nominations. Moreover, when the number of top positions is low (in this case of the police, there are two or three commissioners maximum) the participation of one sole woman could disturb the whole analysis, as almost no department had 33% or 50% women in the sub-top. This implied that the representation of women at the top was even better than at the other levels and, indeed, the system came to the conclusion that no glass ceiling existed.

In the GCI, the metaphor of the glass ceiling has been taken literally; the barriers have indeed materialized and have become something to be measured. The metaphor has shaped and reduced reality rather than improved our understanding. One could also say that the metaphor went off and got a life of its own, when the thickness of the glass

ceiling was calculated. The fact that are also references to 'glass walls' and 'glass elevators' supports that interpretation, but we want to stress here that the possibilities for measurement were already built into the original metaphor. This is a perhaps unintended, but nevertheless actual effect of the glass ceiling. In any case, we consider this a problematic development, most importantly because it reduces complex issues regarding the representation of women in management and the interrelation of gender and organizations to flat and static figures.

Recently, we were commissioned in an ESF project to develop a web-based self-assessment instrument for organizations to diagnose their barriers and opportunities for the advancement of women. We jumped at this opportunity to bridge theory and practice. Our aim with this instrument was to do justice to the complexity of gender in organizations by acknowledging the duality of structure and action and by incorporating both structural and cultural dimensions of organizational practices and processes in the instrument. The challenge was to develop a user-friendly, comprehensible questionnaire with a sophisticated analysis and to present the participating organizations with meaningful, yet simply, easy to read results. Furthermore, we made it an explicit goal to focus on the organizational contribution to the (re)production of gender inequalities, rather than problematizing women and their career choices. The result is named FemPowerment, a qualitative instrument that contains three modules. Firstly, in 'facts and policy', the instrument assesses the current representation and distribution of women and men in the workforce and the organizational efforts undertaken to influence this in specific emancipation policies. Secondly, the module Talent management identifies if and how the organization invests in its female employees and what is done to retain and stimulate them. This module especially builds on critical insights on the social and gendered construction of 'quality' and 'talent'. It examines processes concerning the allocation of crucial, high-profile tasks and investigates how a social category like 'high potentials' is produced. Lastly, the module Organization culture focuses on more intangible aspects, such as informal networks, the masculine culture, the appreciation of visible and less visible qualities and their confrontation with images of ideal managers and workers. With its three modules, nineteen blocks to be scored and its requirement that four participants per organization fill in the questionnaire, we think that FemPowerment has become the critical bridge between theory and practice that we designed it to be.

While the emphasis on women, careers and possible barriers is close to the core of the notion of the glass ceiling, we have refrained from that notion in the development of FemPowerment. The apparent transparency of the concept sells short of the complexity of the issue. We argue that the glass ceiling sets course for strategies that have the doctoring on women at heart: women are equipped with mentoring and

coaching so that they can successfully shatter the glass ceiling. One result of this overly individualistic approach is that the organizational responsibility to break down 'the glass ceiling' remains underexposed. Amazingly, as we have noted above, this contributes to the success of the glass ceiling: for the existence of the glass ceiling is no one responsible, and the shattering of it is the responsibility of individual women.

When comparing these two instruments, we notice similarities too. Both instruments allow for benchmarking; for comparison with other organizations. And even though FemPowerment is a much more extensive and qualitative oriented instrument, it could not avoid presenting its results in flat figures and using a measure rod to facilitate both the interpretation of results and comparison between organizations. By staying away from the glass ceiling and emphasizing the organizational contribution to the career development of its employees, however, FemPowerment's diagnosis of opportunities and barriers resonates the sophisticated feminist analyses that visualize the social pressures exercised by social structures and institutions, and at the same time, leave enough room for women's agency and their capacity to operate strategically in any situation (Acker, 1992; Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998)

Conclusion: the glass ceiling revisited

These reflections on the glass ceiling as a concept result in the following overview. An outline of the pros of this concept shows that it is clearly catchy, inspiring and encouraging. It focuses on a prominent problem: the lack of upward mobility for women and the homogeneous composition of top level management. It has helped putting the issue on the agenda of public and private organizations. Due to this concept, people tend to understand that women, even if they have considerable cultural and social capital, experience 'invisible' blockades preventing them to enter the high positions. Such an analysis is appealing to individual women, for it presents the glass ceiling as breakable and the problem as solvable. The concept is closely related to a diagnosis in terms of wasted talents and resources and regretted losses of competencies, and so fits in with a business case rhetoric. From a strategic point of view, this is a major achievement as it has introduced and implanted (liberal) feminist notions in organizational practice and discourse.

However, while it may seem lucrative to adhere to business goals in order to get the point across, we doubt if the point can be made through the glass ceiling. The glass ceiling frames that 'point' as the slow career advancement of women. Yet, feminist organization theories have made it abundantly clear that the point of gender in organizations can not be reduced to women's positions in management, as gender is a

deep-seated organizing principle (see for overviews (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004) A major argument against the glass ceiling is that it produces and reproduces the same reality over and over again, even to the extent that the knowledge on gender in organizations becomes an artifact of this concept. The glass ceiling reifies itself, as it has become something that can be measured and calculated in centimeters. The concept is theoretically empty and remains so, despite the scholarly attempts to substantiate it. Feminism has found ways to theorize the complex interaction between structure and agency (Acker, 1992), whereas the glass ceiling essentially still emphasizes the individual level. Furthermore, our analysis has demonstrated that only the 'ceiling' is elaborated, the 'glass' character is certainly underexposed. Last but not least, the concept is not attentive towards gate keeping processes at the entry of the highest positions and overlooks resistance, masculine culture and constructions of excellence. In other words, it lacks an analysis of the underlying power processes.

From our excursion into the management fashion literature, we have learned that the popularity of the concept stems from its simplicity and catchy character, in other words, from its interpretative viability. Conceptions drawing on more sophisticated analyses can never gain such popularity and impact. The trouble with the glass ceiling is that its popularity attracts and seduces scholars to substantiate the concept with rigorous research, and we have argued above that that is exactly what can not be done with it. The glass ceiling can not but underestimate the resistance to change, the power effects of masculine culture, the complex relationship between discursive power and materiality, and the diversity among women and their strategies ; that is inherent to its catchy framing of reality.

What this entails for the relation between theory and practice is that the concepts with the function to alert us to certain organizational practices should not be conflated with the concepts that ground our critical analyses of those practices. As many critics of the feminist kind, we recognize and have experienced the dilemma's that follow from the sometimes divergent demands of practice and theory. To jump into practice requires an adjustment from feminist scholars who face the challenge to develop interventions that retain enough sophistication and complexity to induce material and discursive changes in organizational machineries , without losing the cooperation of practioners. Connecting theory and practice thus involves fine tuning, negotiation and translation. The glass ceiling can play a role there, as it may help to catch the attention and open the way for more complex notions that adequately capture the subtleties and underlying mechanisms of gender inequality.

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