"Glass ceilings" and other metaphors we work by: An exploration of the impact of stereotype and metaphor on women's corporate leadership careers

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Abstract - Workplace gender equality issues and, specifically, women's corporate leadership careers have attracted significant attention and debate during the past fifty years [1]. Corporate leadership has a critical impact on the world we live in, both economically and socially, and, despite inconclusive research findings [2], the benefits of management and board diversity have been widely accepted [3]. Post et al. [4], amongst others, have highlighted the particular effectiveness of women's leadership qualities during crises, and I would suggest that women corporate leaders are probably more important than ever at this time of political and economic uncertainty, and that the gap in corporate female representation at leadership level is therefore a continuing cause for concern [5]. I believe that one reason for this gap is the persuasive impact of stereotypes of corporate leadership and of metaphors in reinforcing these stereotypes. This paper reviews how stereotype and metaphor may affect women's progress towards corporate leadership parity, focusing on the "Think manager – think male" stereotype [6] [7] and the metaphors that support this stereotype, in particular the "glass ceiling".

1   Introduction

There have been multiple scholarly examinations of gender disparity at work, examining the situation in different countries or different economic sectors, and considering the various social, cultural and individual elements that can combine to erect barriers to women as managers and leaders [1]. This paper considers a different aspect: the effect of language in communicating and reinforcing stereotypes, and specifically the use of metaphors such as the "glass ceiling" in supporting the stereotypical view that corporate leadership is (and should be) a male prerogative. The paper draws on academic literature in order to consider stereotype and metaphor in general, suggesting that a stereotype may become particularly persuasive when reinforced by metaphor. The paper then, more specifically, reviews Schein's [6] "Think manager – think male" (henceforth "TMTM") stereotype and its persistence, even in the face of contradictory evidence [6] [7]. It explores Lakoff and Johnson's [8] UP IS GOOD/DOWN IS BAD conceptual metaphor and its derivatives (in particular the "glass ceiling"), and how they support the "TMTM" stereotype. Because much of the primary research comes from the USA and Europe, the discussion assumes a Western cultural context.

2 General overview – stereotype and metaphor

Stereotypes are shared views, common to particular social groupings, and are primarily transmitted and shared through linguistic communication. As Beukeboom and Burgers [9] assert: "Language . . . is the main carrier of stereotypic information we come to associate with these groups. In often quite subtle ways, our language reflects, constructs and maintains beliefs about social categories". These "subtle ways" include linguistic bias in the use of abstractions to suggest universality, where abstract terms that are used to describe behavior are more likely to be seen as describing a permanent state ("dispositional") and concrete terms a temporary one ("situational"), for example "he is smart" compared with "she did well on the test" [10]. Similarly, the "TMTM" stereotype emphasizes universality through the use of generic terms and abstractions, "manager" and "male", rather than invoking the concrete, and therefore more specific and situational image of, say, "most managers are men".

Stereotypes usually create two groupings: the "in-group" which comprises the source group forming the stereotype and the "out-group" or target group of the stereotype, leading to classic "us and them" situations, polarizing attitudes, promoting in-group bias and adding to the stereotype's persuasiveness and persistence. Exploring this topic, Dovidio et al. [11] suggest that: "Cultural stereotypes tend to persevere for both cognitive and social reasons." Considering cognitive reasons first, stereotypes help us understand the world by simplifying it and making life easy for the perceiver. Their influence may even be maintained in the face of contrary evidence: cognitive dissonance theory suggests that evidence contrary to the stereotype creates a psychologically-disturbing dissonance that needs to be resolved, typically by discounting the evidence rather than by changing the stereotype [12]. As Dovidio et al. [11] argue: "Cognitively, people often discount stereotype-discrepant behaviors, attributing them to situational factors, while making dispositional (and stereotype-reinforcing) attributions for stereotype-consistent behaviors", accentuating this by the use of linguistic bias [10]. Counter-stereotypical attributes are therefore typically described in concrete terms and are more easily discounted as being situational, isolated incidents.

The influence of stereotypes is further increased by their impact on the target group. Dovidio et al. continue: "Socially, people behave in ways that elicit stereotype confirming reactions, creating self-fulfilling prophecies" [11]. Additionally, for the target group, the impact of stereotype threat on behavior and performance may lead members of this group to avoid situations where stereotypical judgments might be made, for example women not even applying for managerial roles through fear of rejection [13]. Taken together, these five factors (simplifying understanding, dismissing contradictory evidence to resolve cognitive dissonance, linguistic bias, self-fulfilling prophecies and stereotype threat) go a long way towards explaining the persistence of stereotypes. However, a further factor may also be relevant.

As observed above, language is critical to the development and spread of stereotypes because of its communicative function [9], but, additionally, the use of metaphor may contribute to the impact and persuasiveness of the language, and therefore of the stereotype. Borelli and Cacciari [14] argue that: "Since metaphors provide a more vivid, condensed and image-evoking medium than plain literal language, a metaphoric framing of social stereotypes can potentially be of greater impact than a literal one." For example the images invoked by the "glass ceiling" metaphor are much more powerful than its definition: "artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upwards in their organization into management level positions" [15].

Changing the metaphoric frame by changing the metaphor can have dramatic effect in changing people's view of the world and mindset. A powerful example of this is the research

into different metaphors used to describe cancer, where "battle" and "journey" metaphors potentially produce significantly different mindsets [16]. Both stereotypes and metaphors persuade by painting a picture and telling a story. Schreiner, Appel, Isberner and Richter [17] discuss how "since ancient times, religious leaders, politicians and marketers have relied on stories to change people's attitudes, beliefs and behavior." Metaphors have the signal capacity to activate stories [18] – as Hazel [19] clarifies, "a narrative is re-presentation of reality from a particular perspective: reality reconfigured to express meaning", which is the very nature of metaphor.

Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) has revolutionized our understanding of metaphor as being more than a linguistic tool but ingrained in how we think and act (1980/2003). It postulates the mapping of a known, usually concrete, reality (source domain) onto a less well-understood, often abstract, target domain, in order to increase understanding of the target, helping us grasp abstract concepts by associating them with material ones. By arguing that metaphor is not a "rhetorical flourish" but "is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action", and that "the system of conceptual metaphors . . . is shaped to a significant extent by . . . the shared ways that we all function in the everyday world", Lakoff and Johnson suggest an ideological universality to conceptual metaphors, similar to that of stereotypes.

3 "Think manager – think male"

Moving from the general to the specific, this exploration will now focus on the "TMTM" paradigm and the metaphors articulating it. Research on male and female leadership behavior [6] [7] [20] indicates that men, typically and stereotypically, display more "agentic" characteristics (e.g. aggression, independence, decisiveness) and women more "communal" ones (e.g. helpfulness, cooperativeness). Similar studies suggest that men are more "task-oriented" and women more "people-oriented" in their leadership style [21].

As discussed above, because of the cognitive and social functions that they perform, stereotypes are typically persistent, and the "TMTM" stereotype has proved to be remarkably so (Schein, 2007), potentially leading to bias and discrimination at work. To illustrate, numerous studies, e.g. [22] [23], exist where CVs, identical except for name, were rated more or less positively depending on whether the name was male or female. An interesting further development in organization gender stereotype research has been the concept of "Think manager—think male, think follower—think female" [24]. This study shows "that the role of an ideal follower is more strongly associated with the female gender role . . . This effect might contribute to the under-representation of women in leadership positions as they are perceived to be an ideal fit for followership positions; but it may also push men away from being followers and into leadership positions" [24]. These research findings suggest self-fulfilling prophecy situations that serve to reinforce the "TMTM" stereotype, with obvious implications for women's corporate careers – this despite extensive action designed to counteract the stereotype's impact, including the promotion of new models of leadership that advocate characteristics such as people-centricity, willingness to change and emotional intelligence that do not conform to stereotypical male-manager behavior [25].

4 UP/DOWN metaphors

The persistence of the "TMTM" stereotype, even in the face of contrary evidence about desirable leadership behavior may be influenced by the particularly powerful metaphors and narratives reinforcing the stereotype. The fundamental metaphor expressing the "TMTM" stereotype is UP/DOWN, one of Lakoff and Johnson's original orientational metaphors, derived from our physical experience. Lakoff and Johnson [8] consider various metaphorical

concepts arising from this spatial orientation e.g. HAPPY IS UP: SAD IS DOWN, MORE IS UP: LESS IS DOWN, and the all-encompassing GOOD IS UP: BAD IS DOWN. Lakoff and Johnson explore the systematicity between the UP/DOWN concepts, explaining that: "GOOD IS UP gives an UP orientation to general well-being, and this orientation is coherent with special cases like . . . CONTROL IS UP. STATUS IS UP is coherent with CONTROL IS UP".

Although the "glass ceiling" is a well-recognized and studied metaphor [26], Lakoff and Johnson's UP/DOWN conceptual metaphor does not appear to have been substantially examined in a workplace context. The "glass ceiling" comprises two separate metaphors – PREVENTION OF UPWARD PROGRESS IS A CEILING and INVISIBLE AND IMPENE-TRABLE ARE GLASS – that combine to form a composite image. It is difficult to establish just how pervasive this metaphor is. However, as indicators: the term is included in all standard dictionaries and googling "glass ceiling" produces over 440 million hits many of which are media articles. The metaphor has also spawned a number of derivatives [27], including "concrete ceiling", "sticky floor", "glass cliff" (women being promoted to leadership roles where failure is likely i.e. falling off a cliff) and "glass escalator" (fast promotion tracks for men in fields that were previously dominated by women). Obviously, these are only superficial indications, but it is nevertheless clear that the term "glass ceiling" is well-established in normal language use. It therefore seems valid to conclude that the frequent use of this metaphor in everyday, media and official communication is likely to reinforce the stereotypical view of leadership being a male, and not a female, field of activity.

There are multiple other examples of UP/DOWN metaphors in the workplace, many of the most common relating to organizational concepts. Verbal organizational examples that come to mind include "top management", "top-down" versus "bottom-up management", "downsizing", "high performance/potential" and "head of" a department or function. These are so commonly used that, even more than "glass ceiling", they have passed into everyday language and are not even perceived as metaphors. Two career development examples of organizational UP/DOWN metaphors are career "plateau" and the use of career "ladders" for developmental progression paths.

A further obvious example of UP/DOWN is the ubiquitous organization chart, which is a visual statement of HIGH STATUS IS UP. There is no logical reason why organization charts should have the highest status jobs at the top of the chart and the lowest status ones at the bottom. Indeed, decision tree charts, which also move from a small to a larger number of variables, typically tend to progress from left to right. But the organization chart faithfully reflects CONTROL IS UP and STATUS IS UP. As a visual rather than a verbal example of these metaphors, the organization chart, like other images, is potentially even more persuasive and influential in its impact than verbal language [28]. So it is likely that the visual UP/DOWN structure of organization charts increases our acceptance of "high status" roles being at the top of the page, and hence the "top" of the organization.

Despite the lack of investigation of UP/DOWN metaphors in the workplace, it can certainly be argued that the overall effect of this pervasive view of corporate life is to reinforce Lakoff and Johnson's association of UP with status and power. They argue that: "In some cases spatialization is so essential part of a concept that it is difficult for us to imagine any alternative metaphor that might structure the concept. In our society 'high status' is such a concept" [8]. Interesting research [29] [30] investigates gender implications of HIGH STATUS IS UP, examining the effect job titles and of male or female names displayed in a visually UP or DOWN position on computer screens and asking respondents to indicate which they considered the more powerful. As predicted, the investigation results suggest that men are considered more powerful than women, and that there is an association between this and

men being in a physically higher position. Although these experiments examine social gender categorizations, their conclusions can be expressed as POWER IS UP and MALENESS IS UP, giving a blended metaphor: "POWERFUL MEN ARE UP".

As there are so many organizational metaphors reflecting the "TMTM" stereotype, it may be helpful to examine how they interrelate. The diagram below suggests that the "TMTM" stereotype can be reinforced and supported by UP/DOWN metaphors like "glass ceiling", "POWERFUL MEN ARE UP", and others such as "career ladders" (Figure 1). "POWERFUL MEN ARE UP" is included here as, although it is not itself a linguistic metaphor in common use, it reflects the reality of current corporate leadership and can be seen as an example of HIGH STATUS IS UP. These three metaphors can additionally combine to form a narrative that, it will be argued, further strengthens the "TMTM" stereotype.
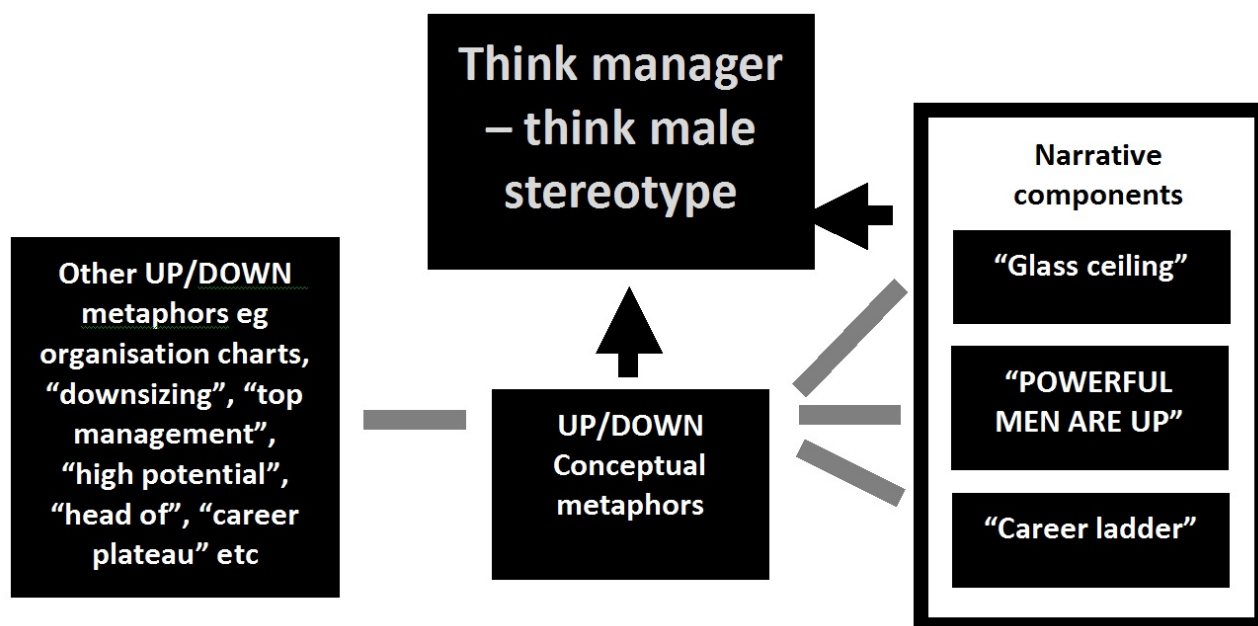

Figure 1: Relationships between the "TMTM" stereotype, UP/DOWN metaphors and their narrative elements.

5   "Glass ceiling" story lines

By combining the "glass ceiling", "POWERFUL MEN ARE UP" and "career ladder" images, it is easy to visualize a scenario where a group of powerful men sit around a table in a boardroom at the top of an office building. Under their feet is a strong but transparent floor, through which they can see women arduously climbing their career ladders, armed with weapons to smash through that glass ceiling/floor. This potential narrative does not need to be expressed as a complete story to be influential. In this case, the narrative is already implicit in the separate metaphors, with their underlying concepts of a male board of directors, of boardrooms often being located at the top of a building, of a glass ceiling (that could equally be the boardroom floor) which may be "smashed", and of career ladders.

However, this implicit story could easily be extended into an action thriller. Do the women race up their career ladders, and hurl their computer mice at the ceiling, smashing and shattering it? Or do the boardroom men successfully resist the attack? The "smashing" and "shattering" extensions of the "glass ceiling" metaphor are particularly popular with the media: at time of writing, googling "smash glass ceiling" produced over seven and a half million hits and "shatter glass ceiling" over two and a half million, with the vast majority (at least of those appearing on the first few Google pages) being media articles, and it is worth noting that the extent of media dissemination may then itself further reinforce the stereotype.

This media popularity may in part be because of the violent action suggested – interrogation of the English web corpus 2021 has identified that forty out of the first fifty common verb collocations with "glass ceiling" as the object refer to getting through the barrier forcibly – and in part be because the counter-stereotypical nature of the image, women displaying such fierce and forceful behavior, attracts attention.

However, one can hypothesize that the counter-stereotypical element of this ending could in fact cause it to be disregarded by the in-group of male managers in favor of alternative story lines where the glass ceiling and male resistance hold firm. As for women managers, the counter-stereotypical behavior of the first version of the story may well be motivating, but counter-stereotypical behavior tends to be punished socially [20], which might cause some women to hesitate and back down because of stereotype threat, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy and thus reinforcing the stereotype. In all cases, the story line essentially glorifies the type of agentic behavior associated with the "TMTM" stereotype through a vivid narrative that will encourage "transportation", and therefore be persuasive and potentially influential on behavior [19], and this narrative potential may be one reason for the persistence of the "TMTM" stereotype over the years.

6   Conclusion - another metaphor?

This paper has examined a range of factors that create persuasiveness and persistence in stereotypes, and considered how these can be supported and reinforced by metaphors, particularly when developed into narrative story lines, discussing specifically the "TMTM" stereotype and UP/DOWN conceptual metaphors, including the "glass ceiling". Although it is difficult to establish the precise effect of these metaphors on the persistence of the "TMTM" stereotype, it can be concluded that the "glass ceiling" is so pervasive that it is likely to reinforce the stereotypical view, especially when combined with "POWERFUL MEN ARE UP" and "career ladder" to form a composite, implicit narrative.

However, as observed previously, changing the frame by changing the metaphor can have an important impact on mindset, as shown by the research into different metaphors used to describe cancer [16]. It can therefore be hypothesized that a different metaphor, rather than reinforcing the "TMTM" stereotype, might serve to counteract it. I agree with Eagly and Carli [31] that: "Metaphors matter because they are part of the storytelling that can compel change... If we want to make better progress, it's time to rename the challenge". Alternative metaphors to the "glass ceiling" have been proposed in the past, for example Eagly and Carli's suggestion that "a better metaphor for what confronts women in their professional endeavors is the labyrinth" [31]. This is an interesting image, telling a compelling narrative and re-framing the concept of women's career progression, whilst eschewing the UP/DOWN paradigm and the violence associated with the "glass ceiling" metaphor. However, it still offers a negative view of female corporate progression, framing it as a problem, and it does not seem to have replaced the "glass ceiling" in popular awareness.

Another metaphor that has attracted significant attention is Sandberg's [32] "lean in", popularized by her book of the same name. This metaphor is derived from the behavior of men in meetings, who lean forward where women may sit back, and Sandberg advocates that, to be successful, women should adapt their behavior to display more agentic characteristics. Although this proposition developed into a global movement and, at the time, aroused debate in much the same way as the "glass ceiling", it still suggests that corporate success for women may only be achieved by using stereotypically masculine behavior, and does not consider whether women can be successful when displaying other, more typically female, characteristics.

In particular in these times of global uncertainty, it may be important to step back from agentic confrontation, and capitalize on the more cooperative skills for which women are known, and which are especially critical in crisis situations. And this should be reflected in the metaphors and narratives promoting women's corporate progress. According to Steen [33], "deliberate metaphor concerns the intentional use of metaphors as metaphors between sender and addressee". Ervas [34] then argues: "a deliberate metaphor succeeds when people realize that another metaphor, with another associated system of commonplaces, structures of beliefs and stereotypes, is possible". Maybe we need a new "deliberate metaphor" as an alternative to the "glass ceiling".

So, a suggestion: women corporate leaders are no longer the "new girls" in class [35], and now may be the time to recognize their "coming of age" with the "key to the boardroom door". This metaphor avoids the negative UP/DOWN power implications and the counter-stereotypical violence of "smashing the glass ceiling", whilst evoking a positive, celebratory and vivid narrative. Social media is known to influence our behavior in all areas of life, often confirming stereotypes, but also having the power to create new movements [36], so perhaps #keytotheboardroomdoor could become the next #metoo.

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