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17. Making the case for addressing second-generation gender bias in public administration

Helisse Levine, Maria J. D'Agostino and Meghna Sabharwal

INTRODUCTION

Women have come a long way since first gaining voting rights in the early part of the twentieth century. However, we live in interesting times, and challenges remain for gender equity. Women continue to be stereotyped as unfit for certain jobs for biological reasons. Women remain subject to issues of the glass ceiling and glass cliffs, and inequities persist as women earn 82 cents to a dollar when compared with their male counterparts. Despite women working longer hours, pursuing higher education in greater numbers, and gender equity legislation aimed at practices and prohibitive of advancing women's opportunities (e.g., the Equal Pay Act of 1963) significant wage and other workplace gaps between men and women persist, particularly for women of color (Bleiweis, 2020).

In 1993, Stivers's work on gender images in public administration laid the foundation for assumptions of gender-weighted masculine meanings. These "dilemmas of gender" mark a pervasive and ongoing problem in public administration and the society at large – that "these images present expectations and impose implicit performance standards that are culturally masculine and that therefore women have greater difficulty meeting than do men" (Stivers, 1993, p. 7). These images, we argue, promote both gender bias in employment decisions and women's self-limiting behaviors, leading to differences in women's career advancement (Correll, 2001; Heilman, 1983). Furthering this premise, Ely, Ibarra and Kolb (2011) suggest failure to gain workforce gender equity results from more than overt gender-based discrimination. Rather, stereotypical ideas and assumptions are the result of second-generation gender bias (SGGB), which is oftentimes unintentional.

In contrast to first-generation gender bias, which is intentional (e.g., individual bias, overt discrimination), SGGB refers to a more subtle, less visible form of discrimination, wherein employed women are treated unfairly compared to men in ways that are subtle and hard to detect (Batara et al., 2018). Clearly, we have not achieved gender parity in the workplace and workplaces in the public sector remain gendered (Connell, 2006; Guy and Newman, 2004; Riccucci, 2009; Sabharwal, 2015) challenging the neutrality of public administration. Without an understanding of SGGB, stereotypes are left to explain why women as a group have failed to achieve parity with men. In other words, if women can't reach the top, it is because they "don't ask," are "too nice" or simply "opt out" (Ibarra, Ely and Kolb, 2013).

This chapter discusses how SGGB contributes to workplace inequities in public sector organizations. In recent years, public administration scholars who take account of gender in management identify several barriers for women's career advancement (Alkadry and

Tower, 2014; Hill et al., 2016; Riccucci, 2009; Sabharwal, Levine and D'Agostino, 2018). Nonetheless, inequities still persist. In 2020, 127 women held seats in the United States Congress, comprising 23.7 percent of the 535 members; 26 women (26 percent) serve in the U.S. Senate, and 101 women (23.2 percent) serve in the U.S. House of Representatives (Center for American Women in Politics, 2020). Other fields, including psychology (Carli and Eagly, 2016), business management (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011) and higher education (Main, Wang and Tan, 2021) have established the negative impact of SGGB on career progression in the workplace. With few exceptions (D'Agostino, Levine and Sabharwal, 2020; Schachter, 2017), SGGB research in public administration is lacking which leads us to consider moving beyond the already identified barriers, as a critical step in addressing long-standing workplace inequities.

First, we explain the impediments women face in career progression using Diehl and Dzubinski's (2016) model of barriers to leadership positions. Next, we discuss prior gendered organizational literature across disciplines, introduce second-generation forms of gender bias, and distinguish SGGB from overt bias and stereotypes to explain why women fail to achieve equality with men. We then make the case for advancing research on SGGB in order to further women's career advancement in the public sector.

BARRIERS ENCOUNTERED BY WOMEN IN REACHING LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

We adopt Diehl and Dzubinski's (2016) three level barriers classification – macro, meso and micro – to examine leadership impediments faced by women. Macro factors are societal, meso are organizational or group level and micro are individual barriers that prevent women from rising to leadership positions. We add (1) occupational segregation, (2) microaggression, and (3) second-generation bias as important contributions (Basford, Offerman and Behrend, 2014; Holder, Jackson and Ponterotto, 2015; Sabharwal, 2015). Additionally, we modify workplace harassment to include bullying. It is important to note that these factors can also be present at multiple group levels. For example, occupational segregation, while a meso factor, can be considered a macro factor as well since societal norms might continue to pigeonhole women and men into certain occupations (e.g., we see women in mostly care-taking kinds of jobs such as teaching, nursing, social worker, childcare). The next sections focus on well-established indicators in the literature across the three levels.

Women in Leadership Barriers: Macro Level

While examining gender within the workplace, it is important to consider how gender stereotypes may contribute to a selection bias during the hiring or promotion process. Both genders are associated with stereotypical expectations, assumptions and associations. Whether women express leadership styles in congruence with their gender depends heavily on the societal norms and the perceptions of gendered nature that exist within organizations. Social role theory purports that there is an expectation for women to be more sympathetic, compassionate, sensitive and nurturing than their male counterparts – termed communal behaviors – while men are expected to exhibit agentic behaviors that are assertive, ambitious, controlling, confident and independent (Eagly, 1987).

When incongruence exists within these expected sex roles, it results in differing organizational outcomes (e.g., evaluations, promotion, turnover) (Eagly, Wood and Diekmann, 2000; Heilman, 2001; Johnson et al., 2008; Sabharwal, 2015; Sabharwal, Levine and D'Agostino, 2018). Since stereotypical male characteristics are similar to the stereotypical characteristics of strong leaders (Ryan et al., 2016), a selection bias could prove to be beneficial to men and detrimental to women. The “think-manager-think-male” association suggests that male employees are viewed more favorably than women for leadership positions and considered superior leaders based on male stereotypes (Braun et al., 2017; Sabharwa, 2015). Thus, men and women inherently take on stereotypical leadership styles in most leadership positions; these leadership positions can range from managerial to elected positions in local, state and federal government.

Women in Leadership Barriers: Meso Level

The most researched and written about aspect of gender and leadership is glass ceiling, a term that describes the invisible social barriers that women and minorities experience which prevents them from reaching leadership positions (Bullard and Wright, 1993; Cornwell and Kellough, 1994; Crum and Naff, 1997; Newman, 1994; Reid, Kerr and Miller, 2003; Wilson, 2002). Glass ceiling, while a term popularized in the private sector, is also commonly used in the public and nonprofit sectors. Given the prominence this issue garnered in the government sector, President Bush appointed a 21-member Federal Glass Ceiling Commission to investigate the barriers women and minorities confront while advancing to senior positions. The report further confirmed the presence of a ceiling and noted several of the aforementioned challenges.

Since the Glass Ceiling Act was established 1991, the government has put together several committees and reports addressing these challenges (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005). Most recently, the Merit Systems Protection Board (2011) in their report *Women in the Federal Government: Ambitions and Achievements* reported the changes and developments that women in the federal workforce have witnessed since 1992. In 2009, women held 44 percent of the positions in professional and administrative ranks and 30 percent of the Senior Executive Service (SES), reflecting a threefold increase from 1992. The report finds that the glass ceiling has been fractured but not completely shattered. Additionally, the report finds that discrimination and stereotypes have less to contribute to the ceiling when compared with factors such as past experiences and assignments, type of occupation, geographic mobility, work/life responsibilities, and willingness to serve in supervisory roles.

While much is written on glass ceiling and related concepts (glass walls, sticky floors, glass elevator and glass labyrinth) there is no denying that some women break through this invisible barrier and those who do are now faced with a *glass cliff* (Ryan and Haslam, 2005; Sabharwal, 2015). While glass cliffs are specific challenges that women face when in leadership positions, there is no consensus on the challenges that cause the leadership gap in the first place. Only a few studies in the public sector have examined glass cliffs (e.g., Sabharwal, 2015; Smith, 2015). Glass cliff is defined as a phenomenon wherein “women may be preferentially placed in leadership roles that are associated with an increased risk of negative consequences. As a result, to the extent that they are achieving leadership roles, these may be more precarious than those occupied by men” (Ryan and Haslam, 2005, p. 83).

Women in Leadership Barriers: Micro Level

Work–life harmony is in conflict with the changing roles of women in the workplace. Traditionally, men were the “breadwinners” and women the “homemaker” or the “caregiver.” However, these roles are changing and while men continue to be the primary source of household income, the percentage of women contributing to the household income is rising. In 1960, 11 percent of women (with children under the age of 18) were the primary source of income for their families; this percentage has risen to 40 percent in 2014 (Geiger and Parker, 2018). These changing roles have triggered many to question the “balance” that women are expected to display between their work and home lives (Tower and Alkadry, 2008). Women often choose to not take up leadership positions or put their career on hold as they are faced with a motherhood penalty at work. Women, despite having career jobs, are often the caretakers of their children and parents, and when confronted with a choice between career and family, most choose the latter (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Hewlett, Luce and West, 2005).

The social costs related to women and men working in similar fields and positions are different by gender. Women as compared to men are more likely to get divorced, spend more time than men working on household chores, and are more likely to delay marriage or having children (Tower and Alkadry, 2008). Male married directors spend 2.05 hours/week less than female married directors on housework; similarly, female married supervisors spend 3.6 hours/week more than male married supervisors on household work (Tower and Alkadry, 2008). The majority of men are not faced with a choice between their careers and family. Women are often told they cannot “have it all” or they have to go on the “mommy track” to slow their career progress in exchange for spending more time with their children. Despite the fact that women constitute approximately 50 percent of the workforce today, most organizations are designed for male workers, cascading the challenges women face in “balancing” work and family lives.

Second-Generation Gender Bias

As a precursor to SGGB, in 1990, sociologist Joan Acker argued against the traditional assumption that organizations were gender neutral and “disembodied organizational structures” (p. 139). Rather, she maintained that gender inequity persists because gender is embedded in organizations, which perpetuates workplace inequities. Based on Acker’s gendered organizational theory, Ely, Ibarra and Kolb (2011) depict the concept of gender not as an individual characteristic or basis of discrimination, but as a “set of social relations enacted across a range of social practices that exist within and outside of formal organizations” (p. 113). These social practices range from formal policies and procedures to informal patterns of everyday interaction within formal organizations that have predominantly been created for and by men (Bailyn, 1993). Although these social practices may also appear gender neutral, as the *sine qua non* of organizational life (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011), they represent a gendered social order, where masculinity dominates, reflecting the existing social relations. Therefore, these gendered social practices tend to favor men in subtle ways (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011; Schachter, 2017).

Therefore, based on what has been called gendered organizations, we introduce SGGB as a multi-dimensional concept. First, SGGB is a powerful yet oftentimes invisible barrier to women’s advancement that arises from cultural beliefs about gender (Calás and Smircich, 2009; Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Kolb and McGinn, 2009; Sturm, 2001). Second, we consider

workplace structures, practices and patterns of interaction that inadvertently favor men. These organizational aspects have replaced first-generation gender bias (e.g., overt discrimination) with a more subtle, less visible and oftentimes unintentional form of prejudice. These organizational practices appear neutral on the surface, yet reflect masculine values and life situations of men who have been dominant in traditional work settings (Trefalt et al., 2011). This phenomenon, according to Batara et al. (2018), impacts women, who are treated unfairly compared to men in ways that are subtle and hard to detect.

There are several prominent studies that identify how SGGB practices impact women in the workforce. One important area of study is negotiation in the workplace. For instance, Ely and Meyerson (2000) emphasize that SGGB may extend to and shape negotiations in organizations, including how jobs are formally defined, evaluation and performance reviews, and informal patterns of work. These practices reflect cultural narratives that define basic assumptions about how things get done in a particular organization. Similarly, Bear and Babcock (2012) argue that gender differences in negotiation performance depend on the nature of the negotiation topic itself. When women are placed in gender-incongruent situations, such as when a woman occupies a masculine, agentic role (e.g., a top managerial position) they tend to behave in a counter-stereotypical way. These types of gender-incongruent situations, Bear and Babcock (2012) argue, may lead to anxiety and role conflict and tend to elicit more negative evaluation. Similarly, King and Jones (2016) propose that opportunities for biases that infect decisions should be limited. They recommend structured interviews (e.g., fixed format with a fixed set of questions to be answered based on the job in question), which are better predictors of potential employee performance than unstructured interviews because less structure leads to more opportunities for bias to creep in. This includes the non-job related interactions between interviewer and applicant before an interview begins; in other words, subtle behaviors in the informal part of the interview can affect the employment offer. At the very least, understanding this type of tacit thinking begins to neutralize gender differences in the workplace and cultivates a better understanding and appreciation for SGGB (King and Jones, 2016).

SECOND-GENERATION GENDER BIAS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

In public administration, there has only been a handful of studies on the topic of SGGB in organizations, and how it impacts women's career progression to leadership roles (Schachter 2017; D'Agostino, Levine and Sabharwal, 2020). From a theoretical perspective, public administration studies examining women's career progression have relied on Acker's (1990, 1992) gendered organization theory. For example, Mastracci and Bowman (2015) point to Britton's (2000) workplace typology who applies Acker's gendered organizational theory around three perspectives: (1) inherently gendered, (2) gendered expectations and (3) gender as social practices. Emphasizing inherently gendered organizations, Britton (2000) maintains that hierarchies will sustain and reproduce gender inequities. Public administration research that applies this perspective proposes that bureaucratic practices can reduce bias, but questions whether gender balanced bureaucracy contributes to increasing empowerment (Baron et al., 2007; DeHart-Davis, 2009; Kmec, 2005). Britton (2005) also proposes that the extent to which organizations are male- or female-dominated will persist unless men and women are distributed throughout the organization in all areas of the organizational chart. For example,

public administration scholars focus on the number of women in various leadership positions across different organizations to explain the gender gap (e.g., Rubin, 2000) and pay inequities (Alkadry and Tower, 2011; Choi and Kim, 2018).

Recently, Williamson and Foley (2018) examined how implicit bias training has unintended negative consequences for gender equity in the Australian public sector workforce as well as the effect of implicit biases on merit-based employment practices on gender equity. Whereas, similarly, Hale (1999) examines how public sector employees perceive the relationship between gender and their “lived” work experiences and how these behaviors maintain gender inequity in the workplace. She concludes that progress toward gender equity requires understanding and discussing the gender dynamics in the workplace in order to make organizational changes. Connell (2006) examines how the gender complexities in public organizations contribute to gender equity outcomes. He emphasizes the need to move beyond the “glass ceiling” and the “gendered organizations” and to understand gendered practices and the processes that produce gender equity (inequity) outcomes. Although public administration research supports the concept that organizations are not gender neutral (Burnier, 2005; Guy, 2011; Stivers, 1993), these studies have not kept pace with other disciplines, such as organizational behavior. Specifically, Ely and Meyerson (2000) developed a conceptual framework targeting “practices and norms,” seeking to understand how organizations are gendered. However, as argued by Schachter (2017), Connell (2006) and Mastracci and Bowman (2015), it stands to reason that public administration researchers should take a greater role in studying how public organizations are gendered given that public administrators are key agents in making changes that create equitable and inclusive workplaces.

CONCLUSION

Although the progression of women has been widely explored in public administration, SGGB remains a significant barrier to career advancement in the public sector. Even though Stivers (1993) indirectly referred to SGGB, and others since (e.g., Mastracci and Bowman, 2015) have acknowledged the concept, we have yet to empirically determine its impact as a barrier to career progression or as a significant area in public administration research. Ely, Ibarra and Kolb (2011) made the case for recognizing SGGB in the workplace in order to put an end to the underlying and faulty assumption that organizations are gender neutral, and to further the understanding that gender biases are more than visible acts of discrimination. In this chapter, we advance Ely, Ibarra and Kolb’s (2011) work, and advocate for further research into SGGB, the invisible and oftentimes unintentional barriers that women face and which perpetuate workplace inequities.

While the examination of SGGB research can be found in disciplines outside public administration, as we have pointed out, empirical research is limited. We recommend that future public administration research focus on empirically examining SGGB. This should include developing quantitative and qualitative approaches, such as experimental design, to further explain, measure and analyze how SGGB impacts women’s career advancement in the public sector. The potential research findings could provide practical insights useful in developing and revising workplace practices and policies. This includes developing workplace training, hiring practices and work–life policies. Also, existing workplace practices and policies should be reviewed with the assumption that SGGB exists – and then revised accordingly. A first step

may be to assess unconscious gender bias by measuring its impact on staff through a variety of methods including perceptions surveys, language analysis, and analysis of gender gaps in pay and career advancement (International Labour Organization, 2017).

Furthermore, we highly advise that SGGB research should be incorporated into Master of Public Administration program curricula. Our next generation of public servants should have the cultural competence to identify SGGB and then address and change long-standing entrenched cultural, structural and organizational biases that we have come to take for granted. This lends itself to making the case to further explore how SGGB impacts women's career advancement in the public sector.¹

NOTE

1. Part of this chapter is reproduced from chapter 12, "Characterization of women and leadership in public administration and beyond" in *Public Affairs Practicum*, edited by D. Slagle and A. Williams, with permission from Birkdale Publishers © 2020; and Maria D'Agostino, Helisse Levine and Meghna Sabharwal (2020), "Gender in negotiation: preparing public administrators for the 21st-century workplace," *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 26(1), 96–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15236803.2019.1579594>.

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