Social Perceptions, Gender Roles, and Female Leadership:
A Theoretical Grounding for Understanding the Underrepresentation of Women in Top-Level Management

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INTRODUCTION

A growing body of research indicates that high gender diversity in corporate senior management positions creates a significant and positive influence on business growth potential (Chiloane-Tsoka, 2012; Clarke, 2011; Grant Thornton, 2012). A recent study of Fortune 500 companies conducted by Catalyst (Carter &Wagener, 2011) found that those with maintained higher involvement of women on their board significantly outperformed those with lower involvement with regard to capital return investment (60% higher), return on equity (46% higher), and return on sales (60% higher). Higher female participation rates at the senior level supplies talent, addresses an aging workforce, provides role models for high-potential women, and attracts/retains the best fit people in leadership positions (Burke & Vinnicombe, 2005; Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger, & Meaney, 2008).

Nevertheless, women remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions, and women in lower and middle management increased (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Hoyt, 2010). In 2013, women filled 51.4% of all management and professional positions (Catalyst, 2014a) at Fortune 500 companies, but only 14.6% of executive officer positions were female occupied (Catalyst, 2014b). By 2014, of the Fortune 1000 companies documented, only 51 companies (5%) had female CEOs (Catalyst, 2014c).

These figures document a gap between women and executive positions (Cook & Glass, 2014; Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009), a phenomenon frequently described as a "glass ceiling," defined as a set of invisible upward mobility barriers that would diversify senior management positions (Baumgartner & Schneider 2010; Burke & Vinnicombe, 2005; Hoyt, 2010; Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009). This metaphor is often used to describe discrimination to higher leadership levels rather than entry level ones (Prasad, D'Abate, & Prasad, 2007).

Various strategies from organizational practices, career developmental programs/ training, and policy initiatives have been conducted to address the gender imbalance at higher leadership levels. Organizational practices implemented to achieve the advancement of women to more senior leadership levels include work-life balance (Dreher, 2003), e-mentoring (Headlam-Wells, Gosland, & Craig, 2005), and women-only developmental programs (Clarke, 2011). Policy initiatives include Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) legislation and affirmative action plans (Lockwood, 2004).

Vertical gender segregation at top levels of business organizations remains (Clarke, 2011; Cook & Glass, 2014; Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009) regardless of existing strategies and human resource efforts to rectify gender imbalance at higher leadership levels (Hoyt, 2010). This disparity needs to be addressed by identifying the underlying theories and embedded systems of this issue, which will facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the structural oppression faced by women in their ascension to senior management positions. This chapter presents a literature synthesis based on American literature and aims to identify theories related to social perceptions of gender roles and the theoretical relationships regarding women's relatively slow advancement to corporate senior management positions. Ultimately, this chapter offers strategies to benefit organizations and individuals by considering this disparity.

BACKGROUND

Social Perceptions of Gender Roles and Underrepresentation of Women at Top

Considering the fact that gender roles are socially constructed, women are primarily responsible for household responsibilities as caregivers while men provide financial support as breadwinners (Eagly, 1987; Metz & Kulik, 2014). Consequently, men are expected to behave in an agentic or pro-active manner (e.g., aggressive, ambitious, goal or task-oriented), and women behave in a communal manner (e.g., kind, caring, sympathetic, and people-oriented). The attributes of gender are not socially interchangeable with those of another gender (Caleo & Heilman, 2014; Carli & Eagly, 1999). Stereotyped gender roles are crucial for determining how and why a person behaves in a particular way. Given that men generally occupy the majority of senior management positions in organizations (Festing, Knappert, & Kornau, 2014), agentic behaviors are more likely to be perceived as appropriate attributes for advancement to senior management positions (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1993). Therefore, such "female" behaviors may hinder a person from organizational career advancement. Theories on this perspective include social-role theory, role-congruity theory, a lack of fit model, think manager-think male, feminine modesty, self-selection, long hours' work norm, and a double-edged sword (backlash).

Social-Role Theory

Social-role theory focuses on the differences among genders built by social influences (Eagly, 1987). Considering the social-assigned labors of women and men in society, women are more likely to be involved in domestic labor, resulting in increased acquisition of communal characteristics (Eagly, 1987; Metz & Kulik, 2014). In contrast, men are responsible for providing financially, requiring "masculine" or agentic behaviors (Heilman, 1997). These socially-built gender roles establish socially-agreed upon beliefs or expectations regarding the major attributes of men and women. Many of these expectations are based on the assumption that women's and men's behaviors or qualities are different, thus particular behaviors are ascribed to particular genders (Eagly, 1987). There are two types of stereotypical norms for gender's roles: descriptive gender role stereotypes and prescriptive gender role stereotypes (Caleo & Heilman, 2013; Carli & Eagly, 1999). Descriptive gender role stereotypes refer to people's beliefs regarding how women and men are different (Heilman, 2001). Men are perceived as agentic and women as communal (Caleo & Heilman, 2013). Prescriptive gender role stereotypes produce normative ex-

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