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# BUSINESS EDUCATION AND GENDER BIAS AT THE 'C-LEVEL'

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*Women in business are perceived to have been successful; however, the numbers of women in 'C-level' positions (e.g., CEO, CFO, CIO, etc.) provide evidence to the contrary. This paper examines obstacles to women rising to 'C-level' positions and how business education contributes to, but may ultimately help resolve these problems by identifying ways to increase the effectiveness of business education and educators regarding gender bias. Barriers that prevent women from advancement and contributing factors in business education are identified. Recommendations for strategies in business education to reduce, manage, and create awareness of gender bias in the classroom are presented. For educators in business schools, these findings suggest the importance of acknowledging that gender bias still exists and revising business curricula to address this problem, thus better preparing business graduates of both genders to identify and develop strategies for reducing gender bias in the workplace.*

*Keywords: business, education, gender bias, glass ceiling*

It is the 21st century. Women comprise a growing percentage of the students in business schools globally, but when these same women enter the workplace, their ability to advance beyond middle level management has been both disappointing and unremarkable (Reuteman, 2011). In fact, Carter and Silva (2010) found that "women continue to lag men at every single career stage, right from their first professional jobs" (p. 19). This phenomenon is not confined to one country or culture. The few women who do occupy executive leadership or 'C-level' positions (e.g., CEO, CFO, CIO, etc.) are often members of families who own the business or who succeed their spouses in their positions of authority.

The public sector (including public office as well as elected officials) is also amazingly parallel in this regard. Catalyst Inc. (2009) reports that only 3% of chief executive officers and 13.5% of executive officer positions within Fortune 500 corporations are women. This number represents an increase from 2007 data, which showed 2.5% of chief executive officer positions in *Fortune 500* firms being occupied by women (Jordan, Clark, & Waldron, 2007), up from 2% in 2003 (Weyer, 2007). This is in sharp contrast to the percentage of women who are graduates of business programs and who hold managerial positions in the firm. When this information is coupled with wage disparity, the discussion is more problematic. Although females earn 57% of master's degrees and 42% of doctoral degrees, those with graduate degrees, on average, presently earn only slightly more than males with no college and only a high school diploma—\$41,995 for women versus \$40,882 for men (Business and Professional Women's Foundation, 2007).

The reason for this discrepancy between education attainment and executive accomplishment as well as wages is complex and requires careful analysis. Despite years of recognition of this issue, there persists a bias which prevents women from advancing to the top. A recent repeat study (Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002) using the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) of perceived masculine versus feminine characteristics for effective management confirms the hypothesis that a good manager exhibits "masculine" traits. The study also confirms that "feminine" traits are considered to be ineffective. Asexual or "androgynous" characteristics are preferable to feminine characteristics. This perception is particularly problematic for corporate performance in that recent research of managerial styles confirms that a feminine/inclusive leadership style is actually associated with greater firm performance (Luis-Carnicer, Martinez-Sanchez, Perez-Perez, & Jose Vela-Jimenez, 2008).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

We conducted a review of the seminal literature in two areas. The first centered on explaining the barriers to women in business and indicating potential areas in which academic intervention and education could remove these ob-

stacles for women graduates. The areas include 1) socialization and gender traits, 2) gender stereotypes as they influence working styles, firm performance, and leadership attributes, and 3) women versus men in management and employee interactions.

The second area centered on interventions to date that have been recommended and implemented by business school faculty. These interventions include 1) female role modeling (e.g., recognition of gender bias through video demonstration, or cross gender academic course teams) and gender issue inclusion in course curriculum to ameliorate the bias for the benefit of female graduates, 2) faculty diversity, 3) awareness of gender biased student interaction, and 4) recognition of the cultural dominance of “macho” or male characteristics in course delivery.

## Barriers to Women in the Workplace

A review of the literature reveals that the glass ceiling has not yet been shattered (Carter & Silva, 2010; Insch, McIntyre, & Napier, 2008; Jordan et al., 2007; Pichler, Simpson, & Stroh, 2008; Weyer, 2007). Burnsed (2011) states, “The data suggests that a glass ceiling is still firmly in place in America’s workforce. Across all industries, on average, women have to attain a Ph.D to earn more in their lifetimes (\$2.86 million) than men who have only attained a bachelor’s degree (\$2.60 million).” This circumstance is a result of a number of different factors that have impeded women’s ability to move into upper level management positions. While many of these factors have been recognized and their related discriminatory behaviors banned through legislation over the last thirty years or addressed through increased access to higher education, the problems still exist. Gender discrimination has simply moved from overt to covert. This gender discrimination, as with many other forms of discrimination, has not been eliminated, but has gone “underground” (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2002). Society in general still tends to reinforce gender stereotypes, and women in particular tend to unconsciously conform to these frequently unquestioned norms of what constitutes being female.

### Socialization and Gender Traits

Social role theory (Eagly, 1987) is the one of the major underpinnings of perceptions of women’s place in society and societal groupings (Weyer, 2007). A study of 1,200 women in *Fortune 1000* companies concluded that the obstacles and ceiling on advancement is not intentional (Townsend, 1997). Rather, this obstacle is the structure of social systems and arrangements that result in the “channeling” of women into careers. It is this socialization that is reinforced both through school (formal education) and work life and plays out not only in the corporate arena, but in higher education as well (Guth & Wright, 2009; Probert, 2005), perhaps contributing to the presence of gender bias in the business school classroom.

For example, Fels (2004) demonstrates that one key socialization factor of success in the workplace is ambition. While both women and men have ambition, which is tied to mastering a special skill and being recognized for it, women create and realize their ambitions differently as they move into adulthood and into the workplace. This difference is a result of cultural ideas of femininity. While women openly compete with other women, when in the presence of men, they must provide or relinquish scarce resources to appear feminine, since femininity is defined by giving and exists only in the context of a relationship. Recognition/visibility is one of these scarce resources; thus loss or suppression of ambition is typically one of the first casualties imposed upon women in the workplace and one they have been conditioned to accept easily (Rigg & Sparrow, 1994). This trait is further reinforced by the traditional masculine corporate culture that incorporates systemic gender bias (Carter & Silva, 2010) by providing fewer avenues for recognition in the workplace for women versus men.

Interestingly, the death of ambition and other characteristics associated with business success comes not only from society/corporate culture, but also from women themselves. In fact, women often perceive their own ambition in a negative fashion, classifying it as being unfeminine and therefore undesirable, and tending to attribute any successes to luck, rather than acknowledging them as results of their own accomplishments or efforts. Ambition is further thwarted by the traditional female role model of women as caregivers and homemakers, which presents further challenges, such as time availability (Devetter, 2009), since women must make choices between family and their career advancement in the critical years of their 20s and 30s (Fels, 2004; Probert, 2005).

This self-limiting notion is developed a bit farther with the concept of the “sticky floor”—self-defeating and unrecognized beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors that hold women back from achieving their career goals or advancing to



the executive suite" (Shambaugh, 2008, p. 39). Interestingly, the very characteristics (perfectionism, risk avoidance, failure to build strategic relationships, staying in one place too long, not making your words count and not asking for what you want) that took women to the head of the class, typically won't get them to the 'C-level' (Shambaugh, 2008).

Perhaps it is this ready acceptance of stereotypical gender characteristics, by both women and men, which contributes to the common misperception that the glass ceiling has been shattered. Consequently, it should not come as a surprise that the perception of the "lack of barriers" to women in business is not limited to men. Bain & Company's survey (Needleman, 2010) of 1,834 business professionals reported that 90% of men and 85% of women believe that qualified applicants have an equal opportunity of advancement. But, 81% of men as compared to 52% of women believe that advancement to middle management is gender neutral. This gap widens when pertaining to the executive suite. Sixty-six percent of men, but only 33% of women, report that promotion to the executive level is gender neutral. This study was international in scope and not limited to one specific culture or industry. The study validates the importance of social role theory in setting expectations concerning women and business advancement.

Another consideration in the perceived lack of bias is the advancement that women have made in business. Similar to the attitude exhibited toward other minorities in society, the perception that women have "come so far" and that, therefore, bias in promotion is no longer an obstacle, further legitimizes the lack of promotion for women to executive positions.

### **Gender Stereotypes: Working Styles, Firm Performance, and Leadership**

There is no question that gender diversity lends itself to working styles and such diversity is beneficial to firms (Luis-Carnicer et al., 2008). However, the common belief is that masculine characteristics result in better performance for firms (i.e., masculine approaches are the norm) and are indicative of leaders, at least when such characteristics are exhibited by men (Atwater, Carey, & Waldman, 2001; Gmür 2006; Powell et al., 2002; Reuvers, Engen, Vinkenburg, & Wilson-Evered, 2008). Feminine styles of management are typically evaluated as deficient. Yet, the reality is that both masculine and feminine styles can be strengths (Rigg & Sparrow, 1994), and feminine styles frequently are correlated with stronger firm performance (Luis-Carnicer et al., 2008).

Additionally, women are underrepresented on corporate boards, and when they do participate, they are marginalized, as are other minority representatives, because their perspectives are not recognized as relevant or significant. Gender stereotypes play a role here as well (Pesonen, Tienari, & Vanhala, 2009). An article by Schor (1995) examines this phenomenon and reports the findings of Bilimoria & Piderit (1994), which showed that men were appointed to membership on committees related to compensation, executive and finance; whereas women were only favored for the public relations committee.

Perhaps then it is no surprise that, due to the gender bias and lack of validity attributed to feminine management styles and work-life balance issues, many women are choosing to abandon corporations to become CEOs of their own entrepreneurial ventures (Eisner & Harvey, 2009; Winn, 2004). Women's success in this arena is demonstrated by the fact that women-owned businesses, in aggregate, employ more people than all the *Fortune 500* companies in America combined (Winn 2004). Such success lends credence to the premise that women are not promoted to 'C-level' positions within corporations due to lack of ability, drive, or education, but due to invisible barriers (i.e., the glass ceiling) that exist in these environments. However, even entrepreneurship is not an easy path to the top for women, due to obstacles they experience as a result of their self-imposed "sticky floor" or as a result of gender bias in the external environment (e.g., clients, suppliers, financing).

Looking at the barrier of financing, Endres, Chowdhury, & Alam (2008) demonstrated that while both women and men were under-confident in making complex financial decisions, women were more under-confident, which has a cascading impact on women entrepreneurs. Tangentially, Becker-Blease & Sohl (2008) also found that women angel investors have lower confidence levels than men. This has a deleterious effect on the financing of women-owned entrepreneurial ventures, since not only do the women CEOs in general have less confidence in complex financial decision making than their male counterparts, but they are also more likely to seek funding from women angels, who are less confident than men, resulting in more restricted access to early-stage capital than that of male business owners.

## Women Versus Men in Management

Another stream of research dealing with barriers to women in business is that of the perceived effectiveness of women in the workplace and managerial skill. The pioneering works in this area include Schein in the 1970s. Schein's (1973; 1975; 2001) work on gender stereotyping and the subsequent development of the BSRI (Bem, 1974), which identifies masculine and feminine attributes and links them to business acumen and influence, is important to examine. In addition, other researchers have found that, when identical circumstances are described to subjects about business professional qualities, perceptions are widely disparate if the examples are attributed to male rather than female managers—with male managers viewed more favorably (Atwater et al., 2001; Gmür, 2006; Hoyt, Simon, & Reid, 2009; Powell et al., 2002; Reuvers et al., 2008).

For example, more innovative leadership is reported by subjects (both male and female) when the manager is male than when the manager is female (Reuvers et al., 2008). Regarding employee communication and interaction effectiveness, women and men are perceived very differently, with men supervisors preferred by women (Warning & Buchanan, 2009), especially regarding discipline and feedback. Even though the communication content and approach are identical, women are perceived as punitive and negative, whereas men are perceived as direct and honest (Atwater et al., 2001). Women are also more likely to receive less professional respect than male counterparts (Hans-Joachim, Mohr, & Schyns, 2007).

Within corporate cultures, it is common practice for companies to select top performers for managerial development, but a number of firms do not track the number of women versus men who are selected for these career advancing opportunities. Studies conducted by groups such as Development Dimensions International, DDI (Marquez, 2009) found that gender discrimination is present from the very beginning of women's careers. One of the primary ways such discrimination begins is the lack of development opportunities presented to women, such as being invited to participate in a company's high potential program.

The DDI study (Marquez, 2009), based on responses of 12,800 leaders in 76 countries, found that, at the first level of management, there were 28% more men than women in high potential programs. The number increased to 50% more men at the executive level. This discrepancy does not appear to be intentional; however, it might be explained by the reality that many of these programs do not have a standardized procedure for selecting candidates. Subsequently, candidates are selected by managers, who are predominantly male, and male candidates tend to come to mind first because future executives are frequently perceived as being men, due to the traditional masculine corporate culture.

Additionally, this lack of opportunity also manifests itself in corporate expatriate discrepancies, which prevents women from receiving foreign management assignments that are often crucial for promotion (Connerley, Mecham, & Strauss, 2008; Harris, 2002; Insch et al., 2008; Rigg & Sparrow, 1994; Shortland, 2009; Vance & Paik, 2001). Women are often precluded from consideration for expatriate positions due to gender related issues such as being part of a dual career family, beliefs that women cannot handle such assignments due to misperceptions that arise as a part of gender stereotyping, or concerns about host country acceptance due to culture, all of which require companies to re-examine their policies for expatriate assignments. As a result of lack of such key opportunities in companies, succession planning to the most executive levels in corporations is exclusive of women.

## Business School Barriers and Interventions

Unfortunately, gender disparity is not only evident in the workplace; it extends to the classroom and is demonstrated in business schools. In the sections below, we present some obstacles to gender neutrality in the business school classroom and identify possible avenues for overcoming these obstacles.

### Female Role Modeling

One major deficiency frequently found in business education is the lack of feminine role models and examples. By the use of specific examples, through female executive guest speakers (Butler, 1997) and teaming of male and female faculty, some business schools have attempted to illustrate the significance of women in business and education. In order to sensitize faculty to the importance of women in the workplace, Catherine Smith of Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia, has created a video to be used by educators for illuminating the gender inequities in



management education (Smith, 1998; 1997). Butler (1997) has developed an assignment specific to addressing and reducing gender bias in the classroom through the use of a female executive guest speaker. Ensuring that cross gender academic teams are formed for class assignments also helps provide positive female role modeling.

### **Faculty Diversity**

Of course one way to encourage gender neutrality in the classroom is to have female professors, which is a challenge, since business faculties tend to be predominately male. It is also key for students to see women in administrative roles (e.g., dean, associate dean, and program director) within the business school and in the university at large. The good news is that there is evidence that more women are occupying business school dean roles (Damast, 2009). This provides business students not only the opportunity to observe women in roles of authority and power, leading to reduced gender bias (Butler, 1997), but also to have role models and develop mentoring relationships with other successful women. In addition, it also provides an opportunity to incorporate more gender bias awareness (as discussed later in this paper) into the curriculum and classroom.

### **Awareness of Gender Bias**

Although the glass ceiling persists, due to the perception that it has been shattered, many employees and students remain unaware of gender bias in the workplace and classroom. In fact, they frequently deny its existence, even when it is brought to their attention (Kelan & Jones, 2010; Sipe, Johnson, & Fisher, 2009). This misperception is perhaps because this barrier is frequently hidden (Eisner & Harvey, 2009; Pillis, Kernochan, Meilich, Prosser, & Whiting, 2008; Tai & Sims, 2005). A large part of this denial stems from socialization and the lack of preparation (and even discrimination) experienced by women in education and the gender discrimination they are likely to encounter professionally (Carr, Ash, Friedman, Szalacha, Barnett, & Palepu, 2000; Carr, Szalacha, Barnett, Caswell, & Inui, 2003; Kelan & Jones, 2010; Van Den Brink & Stobbe, 2009).

Unfortunately many faculty members, especially business faculty, deliver education in a fundamentally masculine style (MacLellan & Dobson, 1997; Smith, 1997; 1998). Consequently, they do little to draw attention to this bias, frequently not even recognizing gender as a salient factor, even though it continues to be significant (Kelan & Jones, 2010).

Through providing students with education about gender bias, discrimination can be reduced in the workplace through training, enforcement, and human resource planning. Students, both male and female, should also be exposed to the impact of gender bias in the workplace on self-confidence, job satisfaction, and career commitment, and they should be educated about how to avoid missed opportunities for advancement. At the college level, this should result in courses from student affairs and other relevant university departments, as well as in discipline-specific curricula, such as business law and human resource courses for business majors (Sipe et al., 2009).

We concur with the above recommendations but believe gender issues should also be incorporated throughout business curricula. For example, important tools to reduce gender bias, such as reciprocal accommodation communication could be taught in a core or introductory course and reinforced throughout the curriculum. This strategy aids women in avoiding "sticky floors" by practicing empowering communication strategies and emphasizing the importance of top level management recognizing women's rights to use such strategies (Baker, 1991). In other words, corporate culture and women's communication strategies should change (Sheridan, 2007) to not only encourage women to reveal natural assertiveness, but also to recognize and reward such assertiveness on the part of women, rather than categorizing it as unfeminine or undesirable.

### **The Macho Course Culture**

Female business students report bias in professor interaction and the credence given to men by business school professors (Smith, 1998). They report a "macho" environment and see little or no credit attributed to the positive attributes of female characteristics. Although many collaborative qualities inherent in female personalities are inferred as important in contemporary work environments, they are rarely attributed as preferentially exhibited by women executives and are not recognized as connected to firm performance. Consequently, although *Fortune* annually reports on the best companies to work for, which generally exhibit not only benefits but also cultures of inclusiveness and familial cohesion, the effect of feminine traits and employees on these cultures is not illuminated.

Further, the masculine bias in business education (Simpson, 2006) has led to “reinforcing the notion that women in management are invisible...and...may discourage managers from capitalizing on gender diversity in the workplace” (Mavin & Bryans, 1999, p.99). Thus, this bias harms both male and female students (Kelan & Jones, 2010; Mavin & Bryans, 1999; Simpson, 2006, Smith, 1998 & 1997).

Kelan & Jones (2010, p. 39) note that as a result of the masculine nature of business education, “MBA students have limited access to a critical discourse through which they might identify and challenge the systemic factors that are operating to maintain the normative masculine culture of the business school environment.” Further they and other authors (Mavin & Bryans, 1999; Smith, 1997; 1998) espouse the belief that if business schools are to create leaders, they must provide them with knowledge of how gender shapes the workplace and modify the MBA curriculum to incorporate gender awareness throughout.

Examples of men and women in non-traditional roles can be embedded in all courses, making gender awareness and lack of bias perceived by students as a condition for doing business not just as a special case. Other options are women’s scholarships, all-women recruiting events, having women students share gender bias workplace experiences with the class, introducing research on women in management into the classroom, and unmasking and examining the processes in the workplace that support the status quo (Kelan & Jones, 2010; Mavin & Bryans, 1999). Adopting gender neutral terms (Sheridan, 2007) in business courses, educating students about the problems with sex stereotyping (including hiring, promotion, opportunities, evaluation and legal liability issues), helping them identify signs of diversity problems in the workplace, emphasizing the importance of documenting employment decisions, and helping them learn how to create policies that are family friendly and create a fair work environment are also key (Kelly, Young, & Clark, 1993).

## CONTRIBUTIONS

Women in business are perceived to have been successful; however, the numbers of women in ‘C-level’ positions provide evidence to the contrary. Business education as a contributing factor to gender bias in the workplace and, conversely, as a potential remedy to such bias is not sufficiently explored in the literature. Therefore, we thought it important to explore the reasons why an insufficient number of women are in ‘C-level’ positions by creating an overview of the major factors in gender bias in the workplace as identified by the existing literature. Understanding the impediments to women trying to advance to ‘C-level’ positions provides a means to examine how business education should be restructured to equip individuals with greater awareness of this issue and strategies to identify, address, and reduce such biases in the workplace. Therefore, we examine obstacles to women rising to ‘C-level’ positions and begin to look at how business education contributes to, but may ultimately help resolve these problems by identifying ways to increase the effectiveness of business education and educators regarding gender bias.

Barriers that prevent women from advancement and contributing factors in business education can be grouped into several key areas as presented earlier in this paper (see Table 1 for summary). Gender barriers to advancement can be mitigated through improved business education practices. For educators in business schools, these findings suggest the importance of acknowledging that gender bias still exists and revising business curricula to address this problem, thus better preparing business graduates of both genders to identify and develop strategies for reducing gender bias in the workplace.

Further, based on the evidence presented in this paper, we suggest that future research in this area should focus on developing a series of additional educational interventions which center on strategies for change including, internal and external professional skill development, firm gender bias awareness and executive development, as well as recognition of enhanced performance through acknowledgement of the positive impact of feminine characteristics on firm performance.

We hope that by bringing more attention to gender bias in the workplace and the responsibility of business educators to help reduce and eliminate such bias, progress can be made toward true gender neutrality at the ‘C-level’ within organizations. Finally, we call on our fellow business educators to perform more research in this area to aid in closing this unacceptable gender gap in the workplace.

**Table 1***Barriers to Advancement and Contributing Factors in Business Education*

Subject	References
<b>Disparity at the 'C-level'</b>	Reuteman, 2011; Carter & Silva, 2010; Catalyst, 2009; Jordan et al., 2007; Weyer, 2007; Business and Professional Women's Foundation, 2007; Powell et al., 2002; Luis-Carnicer et al., 2008
<b>Barriers in the workplace</b>	Carter & Silva, 2010; Insch et al., 2008; Jordan et al., 2007; Pichler et al., 2008; Weyer, 2007; Burnsed, 2011; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2002
Socialization and gender traits	Eagly, 1987; Weyer, 2007; Townsend, 1997; Probert, 2005; Guth & Wright, 2009; Rigg & Sparrow, 1994; Devetter, 2009; Fels, 2004; Shambaugh, 2008; Needleman, 2010
Gender stereotypes: working styles, firm performance and leadership	Luis-Carnicer et al., 2008; Atwater et al., 2001; Gmür 2006; Powell et al., 2002; Reuvers et al., 2008; Rigg & Sparrow, 1994; Eisner & Harvey, 2009; Winn, 2004; Winn 2004; Endres et al., 2008; Becker-Blease & Sohl, 2008; Pesonen et al., 2009; Bilimoria & Piderit, 1994; Schor, 1995
Women versus men in management	Schein 2001, 1975, 1973; Bem, 1974; Atwater et al., 2001; Gmür, 2006; Hoyt et al., 2009; Powell et al., 2002; Reuvers et al., 2008; Marquez, 2009; Harris, 2002; Insch et al., 2008; Rigg & Sparrow, 1994; Vance & Paik, 2001; Hans-Joachim et al., 2007; Warning & Buchanan, 2009; Connerley et al., 2008; Shortland, 2009
<b>Business school barriers and interventions</b>	
Female role modeling	Butler, 1997; Smith, 1997 & 1998
Faculty diversity	Butler, 1997; Damast, 2009
Awareness of gender bias	Eisner & Harvey, 2009; Pillis et al., 2008; Tai & Sims, 2005; Carr et al., 2003 & 2000; Kelan & Jones, 2010; Van Den Brink & Stobbe, 2009; MacLellan & Dobson, 1997; Smith, 1997 & 1998; Sipe et al., 2009; Baker, 1991; Sheridan, 2007
The macho course culture	Simpson, 2006; Smith, 1997 & 1998; Mavin & Bryans, 1999; Kelan & Jones, 2010; Kelly et al., 1993; Sheridan, 2007

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