Who is the Real Gatekeeper? Uncertainty on Both Sides of the Glass Ceiling

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have long explored demand-side and supply-side explanations for the proverbial glass ceiling concerning the promotion of women. I propose uncertainty as an important moderator factor on both sides. On the demand side, environmental uncertainty in higher-level positions leads employers to value quick, decisive action, with a tendency to believe men are better suited for such environments. On the supply side, women tend to experience uncertainty not only about their abilities and qualifications fit for higher-level positions but also biased perceptions of uncertainty in consideration of the riskiness of the effort and lingering effects of previous experiences that they perceive to be discriminatory.

INTRODUCTION

To examine the root cause of the "glass ceiling," researchers have long explored possible explanations from both the supply- and demand-side perspectives. In terms of women's promotability, demand-side explanations regarding discrimination have suggested the source of this phenomenon as employees' differential positions in organizational structure (Cassirer & Reskin, 2000), stereotype-based discrimination by employers (Hobbler et al., 2009), gender sorting in the process of hiring (Fernandez & Campero, 2012), and task segregation (Chan & Anteby, 2015).

On the other hand, supply-side accounts have provided different insights into the factors affecting women's advancement, such as women's own gendered attitudes and career aspirations due to cultural socialization (Okamoto & England,1999), level of willingness to sacrifice for social status (Kennedy & Kray, 2014), gender in views regarding promotion and family-work conflict (Gino et al., 2015), and women's self-steering behavior when offered senior-level positions (Fernandez-Mateo & Fernandez, 2016).

However, it is hard to judge which of these two sides based on different perspectives more clearly explains the underrepresentation of women managers because promotion (like hiring) is "a dual process matching the supply side (employees) with the demand side (employers)" (Lin et al., 2008, p.125). Fernandez-Mateo and Roberto (2016) also point out, "the problem of determining how supply-side choices might be affected in anticipation of gender-biased treatment on the demand-side" (p.2). And considering the fact that we are embedded in a social structure and socially constructed, contextual factors inevitably impact employees' decisions, interacting with individual differences in the dual process

(i.e., promotion) but differentially influence the way employers and employees interpret the structure and context regarding promotion, leading to gender inequality in organizations.

This paper examines two types of uncertainty as one of the contextual factors impacting female promotion. On the demand side, management in organizations value employees who are capable of dealing with environmental uncertainty in promotion decisions because handling uncertainty has been considered one of the major skills required for managers to have in various situations (Knight, 1948; Mintzberg, 1990). Gorman (2006) found that uncertainty as a job characteristic in professional jobs is negatively associated with promotability, leading management to doubt and feel less comfortable promoting female employees. While the research focused on exploring the role of work uncertainty in female lawyers' promotions, I extend the scope of research targets from professionals to general managers in organizations.

On the supply side, employees identify psychological "uncertainty" issues but may have different interpretations about context and process of promotion because gender is one of ascriptive status and provides a "primary cultural frame" (Ridgeway, 2009) as well as an individual difference, so it biases women and men differently in shaping perceptions of promotion to management positions (Liff & Ward, 2001), career aspirations and self-assessment (Correll, 2004). The findings raise the question such that women are more likely than men to experience "uncertainty" when considering a higher-level job application, perceiving it as risky because of past discrimination due to their different status in society (Kraus et al., 2009; Keltner et al., 2011).

While uncertainty may lead an organization's decision makers to doubt women's abilities to deal with uncertain situations in a business environment and therefore, discriminate against them, female candidates also may have a biased perception about uncertainty in the process of promotion, resulting in self-steering behaviors (Fernandez-Mateo and Fernandez, 2016). Thus, stereotype-based discrimination may function as a "self-fulfilling prophecy" for female employees in organizations (Becker, 1957; Glover et al., 2015).

In this present paper, I explore how different kinds of uncertainty can have a glass ceiling effect on both sides' decisions in terms of promotion by examining the moderating role of uncertainty in the relationship between gender and female promotion.

DEMAND-SIDE PERSPECTIVE: THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

Environmental Uncertainty and Women Promotion

With rapid technological development, increased global competition, and diverse client needs, current organizations face highly uncertain environments. The rapidly changing environment makes a manager's decision-making ability more important in organizations. In this vein, Mintzberg (1973) argues one important aspect of a managerial role is the decisional one because managers should be able to initiate many decisions in an uncertain environment. They are involved in deciding the distribution/allocation of resources, managing conflicts, and handling diverse *unknown* situations.

However, a candidate's sex may interact with the presence of uncertainty in managerial roles, preventing business organizations from promoting women candidates with interacting candidates' sex. Management's ability to deal with uncertainty and risk is hard to measure accurately based on past performance because it is not easy to evaluate candidates' soft skills vs. technical skills. In this situation, organizational decision makers are likely to credit candidates' other social dimensions, such as gender, when making promotion decisions because of limited information (Gorman, 2006; Ridgeway, 2009). Also, the presence of uncertainty may count against female candidates because "discretion under the limited information about candidates' competence invites unconscious and conscious biases to influence their decisions" (Reskin, 2003; Grusky, 2014, p.855).

> *Proposition 1. The effect of a candidate's sex on promotability will be moderated by environmental uncertainty. The more uncertainty the firm faces, the less likely women are to be promoted, while the promotion of men will show no such effect.*

Expectation states theory suggests how socially significant characteristics (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003) influence managers' perceptions about employees' performance. Thus, society

has different performance expectations for male and female employees based on their different status, leading to differentiation in the opportunities that people are offered (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003; Berger et al., 2014; Howell et al., 2015). Based on expectation states theory, in an organizational setting, women may be evaluated less favorably in terms of competence because of low expectations, while men can benefit from expectations of high performance given the same working conditions. Thus, gender as one of the significant status indicators, can impact management's expectation of candidates' performance interacting with contextual factors.

Previous studies provide ample evidence of the negative impact of subconscious stereotyping on the promotion of the minorities in business organizations. Women generally have been considered less competent than men in organizational settings (Lockheed & Hall, 1976; Crawford, 2000; Gorman, 2006; Rosette & Tost, 2010) and men are presumed to be better suited to managerial positions than women in the workplace (Schein, 1973; Hoobler et al., 2009; Rosette & Tost, 2010; Gadiesh & Coffman, 2015). Because this kind of stereotype has been activated automatically (Hoobler et al., 2009), it gives decision-makers a biased perception about female candidates' competence compared to that of male candidates (Heilman, Block & Martell, 1995), resulting in gender disparity in promotion outcomes. Based on the research reviewed, I predict decision makers will have a more negative perception about women's management ability versus that of male candidates when the importance of ability to handle uncertainty increases. Consequently, organizations are less likely to promote women candidates *under these circumstances* (i.e., the presence of uncertainty). Therefore, I propose the following (See Figure 1).

Proposition 2: Decision-makers' perceptions of candidates' management ability will mediate the interactive effect of candidate's sex and uncertainty on promotability.

FIGURE 1.
DEMAND-SIDE MODEL: THE ROLE OF ENVIRONMENTAL UNCERTAINTY IN PROMOTABILITY
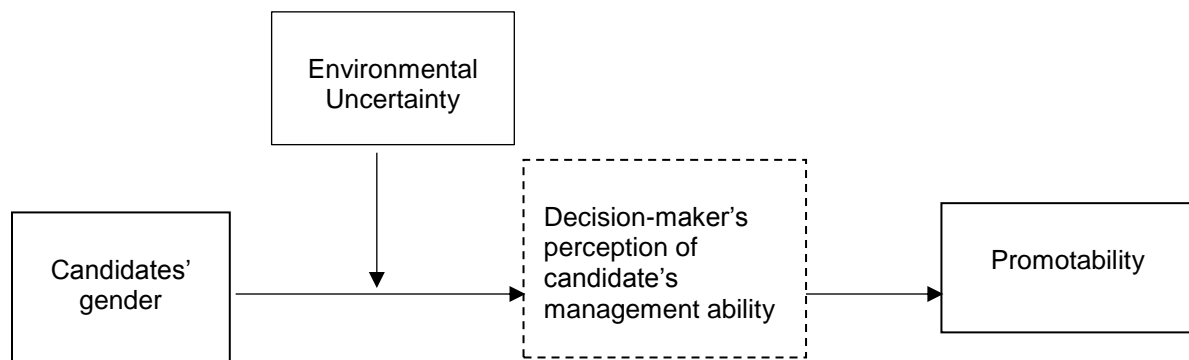
SUPPLY-SIDE PERSPECTIVE: THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

Gender as a Social Status and Subjective Uncertainty

With regard to persistence of the glass ceiling, Fernandez-Mateo and Fernandez (2016) argue that both supply-side and demand-side actors influence women's and men's upward mobility in organizations. The researchers found the evidence, from a demand-side perspective, that consultants in an executive search firm were less likely to interview women candidates, but also showed a contrasting finding such that qualified female employees themselves refused to be considered as candidates for top management jobs (Brands & Fernandez-Mateo, 2016). Obviously, the latter finding shows that one reason for women's low possibility of promotion may be their own self-steering behavior (Fernandez-Mateo & Fernandez, 2016) but they did not specify what factors led to female employees' decisions not to pursue higher-level management positions. In this paper, I examine the effect of psychological uncertainty on gender-based, self-steering behavior and address how the women candidates' choices are induced in organizational structures.

The Effect of Gender on Women's promotions

As Ridgeway (2009) points out, gender should be considered as one of the primary cultural frames because people's location in social structures has a great impact on their life outcomes (Kanter, 1977; Reskin & Bielby, 2005). In this paper, I define an individual's location in social structure as status and discuss how gender, as a primary social status, influences an individual's choices and decision-making by shaping their perception.

In this regard, Correll (2004) examines how gender as a status characteristic can influence men and women's self-assessment differently, thereby leading to gender inequality in society. According to the study, male college students evaluated their specific task ability (i.e., math) higher than did women students based on the stereotypic views. The research suggests that different assessments about ability based on status greatly impact people's career aspirations. Thus, Correll (2004) proved that status (i.e., people's location in society) has a *constraining effect* on individuals' choices. The study showed that women evaluated their task ability based on their gender status belief (e.g., women are not as good at math as men), rather than on their competence and thus fell into the trap of "self-stereotyping" (Hirsh & Kang, 2015).

For another example of self-stereotyping, Bain & Company conducted a survey about why women lose their career aspirations to reach top jobs by their mid-career and give up pursuing work opportunities related to future promotions more often than men do (Gadiesh & Coffman, 2015). According to the study, women's aspirations and confidence about promotion drops sharply because organizational culture does not support women in leadership roles (Eagly, 1987). Thus, the pervasive stereotypic view of ideal managers in organizations make experienced women employees feel doubt about their own person-organizational fit such that "I am not cut out for managerial work" or "I will never be able to make it if I need to act/work like senior male executives," thereby leading to passive behaviors when it comes to seeking or accepting promotions.

Applying these findings to my research, I find that gender as social status can shape people's belief regarding the general competence of men and women in the workplace (Ridgeway, 2013), thereby inducing different attitudes and choices in men and women in terms of promotion. Thus, gender itself as a status characteristic may negatively influence a female candidate's perception of future events (i.e., promotion in this context), thereby leading to a risk-aversive attitude for promotion (Correll, 2004; Reskin & Bielby, 2005, Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Fernandez-Mateo & Fernandez, 2016), while it has no such effect on building men's perceptions in terms of seeking or accepting promotions. Thus, I predict:

Proposition 3: There will be a main effect of gender on optimism related to future careers such that women are less likely to be optimistic for getting promotions than men.

Interaction between Gender and Uncertainty

In this paper, I predict that women are more likely to experience "uncertainty" regarding higher level job applications, viewing them as riskier than men do as a result of past rejections based on their lower social status. Therefore, women anticipate unfair treatment in the process of getting a promotion. According to the Approach-Inhibition behavioral mechanism (Keltner et al., 2003), minority status determined by ethnicity or gender is associated with reduced power, and it can provide female employees with a lower level of control over resources as compared to male employees. In this section, I discuss how gender interacts with psychological uncertainty, resulting in different attitudes from men and women in terms of promotion.

As Kanter (1977) observed, "women's performance is less visible and they have fewer resources and *less access to power*" (Reskin & Bielby, 2005, p.79). Based on this finding, status can play a role in determining an "individual's power" (Keltner et al., 2003, p.268) and can shape different perceptions of power for people from low and high-status groups, thereby shaping people's behaviors *systematically*. While the behavioral approach system is related to reward, allowing people in the system to pursue their goals, the behavioral inhibition system is associated with *uncertainty* and punishment as *evocative stimuli*, thereby constraining less powerful individuals (Keltner et al., 2003; Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). Thus, people from low-status groups are associated with a sense of reduced power, while people from high-status groups are more likely to have senses of elevated power.

Taken together, as Anderson and Galinsky (2006) found, employees who have senses of elevated power (i.e., men in this context) are "more optimistic of their chances of winning (p.514)" and are more risk-taking compared to employees who have senses of reduced power. Taken together, I can infer that women may have senses of reduced power more than men in organizational settings. On the other hand, men are more likely than women to have a sense of elevated power in the workplace. The Approach-Inhibition mechanism (Keltner et al., 2003) suggests that a sense of reduced power increases behavioral inhibition. Taken together, I can infer that men and women may have a different assessments/senses of power.

Therefore, the difference in sense of power based on status shapes male and female candidates' different perceptions of psychological uncertainty in the process of promotion. Previous studies showed that people who have experienced past rejections and failures are more likely to consider uncertainty as risk, while people who have experienced past successes are more optimistic for their future and show lower-level perceptions of uncertainty (Thaler & Johnson, 1990; Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). Regarding this, Mohr (2014) wrote an interesting article titled, "Why Women Don't Apply for Jobs Unless They're 100% Qualified," criticizing biased interpretations about the results of Hewlett Packard's internal report such that "Men apply for a job when they meet only 60% of the qualifications, but women apply only if they meet 100% of them." In the article, Mohr explored the reasons why women are less likely to apply for the job than men. One top reason for this phenomenon is that women in the survey considered applying as a risk of failure (22% of women) but only 13% of men perceived applying behavior as a risk. Thus, Mohr (2014) showed that women are more sensitive to potential failure in organizations. My proposition is consistent with the previous findings that female candidates are more likely to be risk averse for applying for higher-level jobs or getting promotions than male candidates (See Figure 2). Therefore, I propose:

Proposition 4: There will be an interactive effect of gender and psychological uncertainty on promotion such that the more uncertain female candidates' feel, the less optimistic they are in terms of future promotion.

FIGURE 2.
SUPPLY-SIDE MODEL: THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL UNCERTAINTY IN PROMOTABILITY
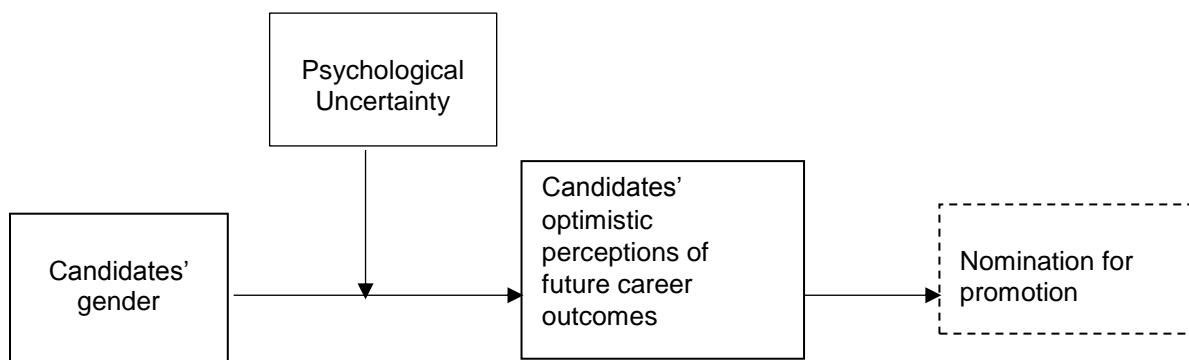
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