
Riflessioni sul soffitto di cristallo: barriere e strategie per le donne nella costruzione di carriera

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Sommario

Questo contributo si propone di offrire riflessioni sul soffitto di cristallo per le donne. Si concentra sul concetto di soffitto di cristallo e sulla sindrome del soffitto di cristallo, proponendo un quadro concettuale complessivo relativo agli effetti del soffitto di cristallo, agli effetti della sindrome del soffitto di cristallo sul *career planning* per le donne, oltre a delineare le implicazioni per la pratica e le future direzioni di ricerca su questi temi. Inoltre questo contributo passa in rassegna le barriere e le strategie per le donne nella costruzione della carriera, riflettendo su progetti e carriere sostenibili per *decent work*, *decent lives* e *healthy lives*.

Parole chiave

Soffitto di cristallo, Sindrome del soffitto di cristallo, Barriere, Strategie, Costruzione della carriera, Donne.

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Reflections on the Glass Ceiling: Barriers and Strategies for Women in Career Construction

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Abstract

This contribution aims to offer reflections on the glass ceiling for women. It is focused on the glass ceiling concept and glass ceiling syndrome, proposing a comprehensive conceptual framework on the glass ceiling effect and the effect of glass ceiling syndrome on career planning for women, as well as delineating implications for practice and future research directions about these themes. This contribution also reviews barriers and strategies for women in career construction, reflecting on sustainable projects and careers for decent work, decent lives and healthy lives.

Keywords

Glass ceiling, Glass ceiling syndrome, Barriers, Strategies, Career construction, Women.

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The glass ceiling and glass ceiling syndrome

When attempting to move up the corporate ladder, women encounter a number of obstacles (Enid & Maniraj Singh, 2013) and the glass ceiling has been used frequently to describe these difficulties. The term «glass ceiling» was first used in 1984 by Gay Bryant in an interview with the US magazine *Adweek*. The glass ceiling is an invisible barrier that keeps qualified women from moving up the corporate ladder, according to Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986) in a *Wall Street Journal* article. The definition given by the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission in 1995 is the following: a hidden, unbreakable barrier that, in spite of credentials and accomplishments, prevents minorities and women from advancing to the top ranks of the corporate ladder. The term «glass ceiling» can be also used to describe impediments that impede the advancement of competent individuals within their organizations due to behavioural and organizational biases (Wirth, 2001). Women are excluded from the traditional corporate hierarchy at an early stage of their careers due to the simultaneous operation of behavioural and organizational biases (Dambrin & Lambert, 2008). Furthermore, women also face a range of challenges throughout their careers that lead to constrained choices (Lupu, 2012).

Glass ceiling syndrome is a gender-based issue that leads to discrimination against women. As a result, glass ceiling syndrome is defined as an invisible barrier that exists within organizations (Burcu, 2018), preventing female employees from advancing in their careers after they began in the same career steps and made equal progress up to a predetermined point. So, female employees' individual career planning is negatively impacted by glass ceiling syndrome (Göktaş, 2018).

Taparia and Lenka (2022, p. 375) developed an integrated conceptual framework regarding the glass ceiling effect. They tried to answer the following four questions: «RQ1. What are the key research trends pertaining to the domain of glass ceiling? RQ2. What are the various factors that create a glass ceiling for female employees? RQ3. What are the various variables that influence the perceptions towards the role of different factors in creating the glass ceiling? RQ4. What are the consequences of the presence of glass ceiling for female employees and organizations?».

Their answers are the following (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Regarding the first question RQ1 (What are the key research trends pertaining to the domain of glass ceiling?), a significant number of publications on the theme are relative to gender and management. Furthermore, we have to underline that a large number of studies are published in the context of the USA. Concerning the second question RQ2 (What are the various factors that create a glass ceiling for female employees?), the antecedents of the glass ceiling effect regard individual factors (person-centred factors), organizational factors (structural factors or situation centred factors), policy-related factors, and societal and cultural fac-

tors. Individual factors include gender disparity in educational attainment, low self-efficacy and confidence, a lack of managerial ambitions, and work-family conflict. Organizational factors include the existence of old boys' networks, the glass ceiling (horizontal segregation), queen bee syndrome, discrimination in HR procedures, hostile and benign sexism, and a lack of mentors and role models. The poor implementation of laws passed and the inadequate publicizing of issues pertaining to gender diversity and the glass ceiling are policy-related factors. Stereotypes of gender roles and the inferior status of women in society are societal and cultural factors. Regarding the third question RQ3 (What are the various variables that influence the perceptions towards the role of different factors in creating the glass ceiling?), the contextual factors influencing perceptions towards antecedents of the glass ceiling are: level of education, marital status, motherhood status, social class and age. With respect to the fourth question RQ4 (What are the consequences of the presence of glass ceiling for female employees and organizations?), the consequences of the glass ceiling are individual level outcomes and organizational level outcomes. Individual level outcomes are relative to job dissatisfaction and burnout, occupational stress, low productivity and poor organizational commitment. Organizational level outcomes are relative to lesser desirability as an employer, lower levels of firm performance and high employee turnover. Organizational level outcomes include low firm performance, high employee turnover, and a less desirable workplace reputation. These authors (Taparia & Lenka, 2022) also delineated implications for practice. It is important that top management express their unwavering support and dedication towards establishing gender-neutral workplaces. Through unconscious bias training, HR managers can help reorient employees' attitudes toward their female co-workers. This training should be provided to all employees. It is recommended that female employees prioritize enhancing their career opportunities by pursuing advanced degrees and engaging in both formal and informal networking events. It is worthy for policy makers to uphold a robust monitoring framework to guarantee that laws designed to promote women's professional advancement are genuinely applied in the workplace. Further research directions included the following: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's careers, the identification of additional variables influencing perceptions of various aspects of the glass ceiling, the quantitative evaluation of the significance of various barriers, the assessment of the degree of interrelationship between different barriers, the quantitative evaluation of the impact of the presence of the glass ceiling on organizational variables, and the development of a comprehensive scale to measure various aspects of the glass ceiling.

In relation to how career planning is impacted by glass ceiling syndrome (Bulgur & Bal, 2020), this syndrome hinders women from pursuing their career goals, leading to job dissatisfaction and difficulty integrating into the organization. It

also results in female employees being passive in decision-making, reaching a career plateau, and lacking good relationships with senior management.

Thus, the glass ceiling can be seen as an invisible barrier to women's success (Yadav & Yadav, 2021). A country's ability to grow economically depends on the size and skill of its labour force, the rate at which people move from low-to high-productivity activities, and the amount of money invested in the education and skill-building of future generations, all of which are made possible by the entry of women into the workforce.

Women and sustainable careers for decent work, decent lives and healthy lives

Starting from the psychology of working framework (Blustein, 2006), it is recognized that work is a means for survival and power (power: actual exchange of work for money or goods and services allowing an individual to sustain his/her life; social status: enhancement of prestige and power). Work serves as a medium for social interaction as well. It links individuals to both their interpersonal and social environments. Finally, work is seen also as a means of self-determination, extrinsically motivating activities may become internalized and part of a broader set of values, behaviours, and overall life goals (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Furthermore, in 2011, Blustein introduced the relational theory of working. Within this theory, working is conceptualized as an inherently relational act: «each decision, experience, and interaction with the working world is understood, influenced, and shaped by relationships» (Blustein, 2011, p. 1). The framework outlines the ways in which working is embedded in both internal and external relational contexts, providing the best conditions for the growth of flexible relationships between co-workers and superiors in the workplace. In this framework, the passage from career project to life project as an inherently relational act (Di Fabio, 2014c) is understandable. Venturing into career and life construction processes, we refer to career construction theory (Savickas, 2005), self-constructing theory (Guichard, 2005) and life-constructing theory (Guichard, 2013). Regarding career construction theory (Savickas, 2005), the fundamental questions are: «What is the meaning of my professional career in my life?» «How can I use the work role to manifest and advance my life story?». This theory emphasizes the ways in which individuals shape their lives by creating a career narrative identity, aiming to bring together the present and shape the future by revisiting and rearranging the past (Savickas, 2013). Instead, the question for the self-constructing theory (Guichard, 2005) is «What should give meaning to my life?». This theory does not focus on career construction — because its scope is more general. Life-constructing theory (Guichard, 2013), an evolution of self-constructing theory (Guichard, 2005), highlights the relationship between various experiences by

narrating future events, giving life purpose to multiple identities, and attempting to bring the present together by creating future possibilities (Guichard, 2013). In the career literature, we can observe the following passages, from career and career project (Savickas, 2011), including careers (Osipow, 1999; Super, 1957, 1980) and career management (Savickas, 2011) to life project (Guichard, 2013; Savickas, 2013) and life management (Guichard, 2013; Savickas, 2013). Furthermore, starting from the previously stated consideration that working is an inherently relational act (Blustein, 2011), also the professional project can be considered as an inherently relational act (Di Fabio, 2014c), including both external and internal relational contexts (Blustein, 2011; Di Fabio, 2014c). Furthermore, a perspective is affirmed that considers career and life management (Blustein, 2013; Guichard, 2013; Savickas, 2011, 2013) through (Di Fabio, 2014a) positive self and relational management (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2016).

In the framework of the psychology of sustainability and sustainable development (Di Fabio, 2017a, 2017b; Di Fabio & Rosen, 2018, 2020; Di Fabio & Cooper, 2023; Di Fabio & Peiró, 2018, 2023; Peiró et al., 2023; Rosen & Di Fabio, 2023), it is also possible to recently emphasize a new coordinate as attention to a sustainable project (Di Fabio, 2017b, 2023). Sustainability of a project calls for uniqueness, authenticity, purposefulness, and meaning (Di Fabio, 2019), essential coordinates for sustainability processes in the Anthropocene era (Guichard, 2022; Maree, 2024).

A crucial ingredient for this is purposeful identitarian awareness (Di Fabio, 2014c), «being in contact with the most authentic aspects of one's own Self and one's professional life and lives' deepest purposes is an aid in the construction of life meaningfulness» (Di Fabio, 2014c, p. 158). It permits individuals to shape their lives in a responsible and independent manner, unifying them in the process of life construction and the re-construction of their individual identities, which in the current context always appear less stable and more fluctuating (Guichard, 2013) and therefore could be defined as scattered and often confusing (Di Fabio, 2014c). Self-attunement represents a crucial element to nurturing and advancing talent (Di Fabio, 2014c, 2022), based on objective talent/s and potential talent/s differently comprehended from the traditional perspective as self-evaluation of «What am I capable of?» (Di Fabio, 2014c, 2016, 2022) and subjective talent/s and potential talent/s differently comprehended from the traditional perspective as self-evaluation of «What energizes me? What motivates me?» (Di Fabio, 2014c, 2016, 2022), bearing in mind the process of «go between the concepts» (Guichard, 2013) for best performance through meaningful goals (Di Fabio, 2014c). Purposeful identitarian awareness (Di Fabio, 2014c) is thus an essential concept in this perspective, referring to authenticity, purposefulness, and meaningfulness. For a successful construction of the new purposeful post-modern identitarian awareness (Di Fabio, 2014c, 2023), the value of authentic self is recognized (Di Fabio, 2014c). This authentic self refers to goals of intrinsic interest, in line with who we

are and what we really want to do in our lives (Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001) to construct meaningful goals (Di Fabio & Blustein, 2016; Di Fabio, 2023), self-attunement (Di Fabio, 2014c), and life meaning (Bernaud, 2013). It is essential to help people in being engaged in finding their talents (Di Fabio, 2016), knowing «How to become» (Savickas, 2011), recognizing their talents and details of talents (Di Fabio, 2014c, 2016, 2022), and constructing their talents anchored to meaning based on «Who I want to become» (aspired subjective identity form) (Guichard, 2013) as it has meaning for me (Di Fabio & Blustein, 2016). The need for a crucial shift from motivational paradigm to meaning paradigm (Di Fabio & Blustein, 2016) is also recognized. In this framework, it is essential to also reflect on well-being outcomes. In the literature, it is possible to distinguish between hedonic well-being (Diener, 1984) that includes positive and negative affect (affective evaluation) and life satisfaction (cognitive evaluation), and eudaimonic well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001) in terms of positive/full functioning, life meaning, purposefulness and self-realization. Hedonic and eudaimonic well-being can be considered in work and in life and in specific contexts such as at study and at work.

The reflection about sustainable careers for decent work, decent lives and healthy lives moves on to define these concepts. The psychology of working theory (PWT; Duffy et al., 2016), an elaboration of the psychology of working framework (PWF; Blustein, 2006) acknowledges the significance of decent work in addressing the needs of human survival, social interaction, and self-determination. Decent work is a key factor in determining job satisfaction as well as the well-being of the individual and the community. Decent lives (Di Fabio & Blustein, 2016; Di Fabio et al., 2023) encompass meaning, social purpose and authentic values realization of eudaimonic well-being for self and others. Recent suggestions by the American Public Health Association incorporate the International Labour Organization (ILO) Decent Work Agenda into their policy statements, considering decent work as a public health goal (Pratap et al., 2022). It means to link the concept of decent work with healthy work and paves the way to link decent lives to healthy lives (Kenny & Di Fabio, 2023). In the 21st century, decent work (Blustein et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2017; Guichard, 2022), decent lives and decent work as a public health goal, contribute to realizing healthy lives (Kenny & Di Fabio, 2023).

Conclusions

It is possible to draw some conclusions, starting from the reflections proposed by Di Fabio (2024), during the event titled «Women and work 2024: Is the glass ceiling truly broken?» organized by the Chamber of Commerce of Florence on May 8th, 2024, using the metaphor of carnivorous plants. There are carnivorous plants with snap traps, carnivorous plants with adhesive traps and carnivorous

plants with pitfall traps. Carnivorous plants with snaps traps are plants with toothed leaves that open wide and then close again in a repentant manner as soon as an insect settles there. Carnivorous plants with adhesive traps secrete a mucilaginous substance, similar to glue, that attracts and imprisons the prey. Carnivorous plants with pitfall traps are plants where the capture occurs via rolled leaves, with the features of a jug, to which insects are attracted (plants secrete a sugary substance) and then fall into the trap. Carnivorous plants metaphorically remind us of the challenging, cultural, conjunctural, strategic risks which women in every career transition, from the beginning of its planning to its realization as well as progression, are forced to face. So, we have to consider the irrepressible and impeccable seduction of carnivorous plants for unaware insects (Di Fabio, 2024) as a useful metaphor. In conclusion, and following this cruel but natural metaphor, we have to consider and to support the pro-active challenge of awareness and proactive identity awareness and self-attunement of women, as well as of interventions and support services for the person, in organizations, in education, in culture, and in policies for the flourishing of the talents of the person, of systems, of communities, and of the country system. It also means reinforcing the constructive concept of adaptive hope (Di Fabio, 2014b; Snyder et al., 1991) as goal-directed thinking with its two dimensions of agency thinking in terms of the motivation, energy and self-determination necessary to undertake the paths to achieve your goals; and pathways thinking in terms of identifying alternative paths to pursue your goals. Hope is configured as a positive individual variable for facing the insecurity and challenges of the 21st century and we can consider it an adaptive direction and concrete actions to ameliorate and finally support women in definitively breaking the glass ceiling.

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