

**Cracking the Glass Ceiling:  
Factors Influencing Women's Attainment  
of Senior Executive Positions**

by  
**Carole K. Adair**

ISBN: 1-58112-064-8

**DISSERTATION.COM**



1999

Copyright © Carole K. Adair  
All rights reserved.

published by  
Dissertation.com  
USA • 1999

ISBN: 1-58112-064-8

[www.Dissertation.com/library/1120648a.htm](http://www.Dissertation.com/library/1120648a.htm)

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

November 3, 1994

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE DISSERTATION PREPARED  
UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY CAROLE WALLACE ENTITLED CRACKING  
THE GLASS CEILING: FACTORS INFLUENCING WOMEN'S ATTAINMENT  
OF SENIOR EXECUTIVE POSITIONS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN  
PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.

Committee on Graduate Work

Barkun J. Nelson

Lee Carter

Charles F. Porter

William J. Jensen

Advisor

Cathleen J. Love

Department Head



DISSERTATION

CRACKING THE GLASS CEILING: FACTORS INFLUENCING WOMEN'S  
ATTAINMENT OF SENIOR EXECUTIVE POSITIONS

Submitted by

Carole Kadinger Adair

School of Occupational and Educational Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Fall, 1994



## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### CRACKING THE GLASS CEILING: FACTORS INFLUENCING WOMEN'S ATTAINMENT OF SENIOR EXECUTIVE POSITIONS

Barriers which hinder career advancement of women are complex and varied. They have become top agenda items for most corporations and the government. The "glass ceiling" is a term that symbolizes a variety of barriers that prevent qualified individuals from advancing higher in their organization. Although many women hold management positions, few have made the breakthrough to top-level positions.

To determine what conditions are required for women to attain top executive positions, an ethnographic study was conducted at a hospital. The study was limited to four women who held executive positions: one associate administrator, one interim associate administrator, one director and the CEO. An in-depth data gathering technique using observation, interviews and documentation was used to investigate factors such as education/skills, influences, support, barriers and corporate culture.

The findings revealed: (a) having opportunities to be participating, valued family members and to compete in activities while young helps girls to develop a sense of competence and mastery; (b) education, credential building experiences, certain competencies and being willing to take

risks are necessary for success; (c) having certain attitudes and philosophies are crucial factors in their success; (d) mentors, network involvement and relationships with peers does affect mobility; (e) the women did have a career plan, not in the sense of a linear career plan, but rather one in the form of the spiral career concept; (f) the hospital is a structure which provides opportunities to develop careers; (g) the women understand, accept and have learned to adapt to the culture of the society in which they live and work; (h) the women are savvy at expressing, affirming and communicating the substance of their culture to others; (i) the amount of prejudice a woman encountered depended upon several components; and (j) the barriers to advancement experienced by the women do not confirm those discussed in the review of literature.

Further research is recommended on the qualifications of male and female CEOs, educational programs most appropriate for female executives, how successful female executives learned to deal with their barriers and why certain organizations do not have top female executives.

Carole Wallace  
School of Occupational and  
Educational Studies  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, CO 80523  
Fall 1994



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The attainment of this degree has been such a long process that it is impossible for me to acknowledge all the assistance I received.

To my committee chairperson, Dr. Duane Jansen, I express my appreciation for his guidance, advice and encouragement. I am also grateful for the help and direction I received from my committee members, Dr. Charles Porter, Dr. Barbara Nelson and Dr. Lee Carter.

Special appreciation is extended to Dr. James Banning for sharing his knowledge in ethnographic studies.

I would like to express my deep and sincere appreciation to my special friends, Dianne Bruhin, Stephanie Cala, Mary Jo Larsen and Charles Larsen for their love, support and prayers.

My most loving thanks go to my special family members: my husband, Roy Adair, for his loving support and help; my children, Steve, Aaron and Rachael, for their love and encouragement; my sisters, Yvonne, Janet and Wanda for their endless loving support; and to my courageous, hard-working parents for their example, dedication and love.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Chapter</u>		<u>Page</u>
1	INTRODUCTION .....	13
	Need for the Study .....	13
	Problem Statement .....	15
	Research Questions .....	15
	Delimitations .....	15
	Definitions of Terms .....	16
	Significance of Study .....	18
2	RELATED LITERATURE .....	23
	Women in the Work Force .....	23
	Glass Ceiling .....	25
	Influencing Factors .....	30
	Prejudice: Treating Differences as Weaknesses .....	36
	Career Planning .....	42
	Success Factors .....	51
	Derailments .....	57
	Organizations/Culture .....	59
	Mentorship .....	66
	Networking .....	67
	Strategies .....	69
	Ethnographic Approach .....	77
	Summary .....	84
3	METHODOLOGY .....	86
	Introduction .....	86
	Population and Sample .....	86
	Research Design .....	88
	Location and Setting .....	92
	Data Gathering .....	94
	Observations .....	94
	Interviews .....	98
	Data Analysis .....	99
	The Ethnograph .....	100

<u>Chapter</u>		<u>Page</u>
4	ANALYSIS OF THE DATA.....	102
	Introduction.....	102
	Demographics.....	103
	Sample.....	103
	Setting.....	105
	Culture.....	107
	Hiring and Advancement Practices...	110
	Benefits.....	111
	Employment Status.....	111
	Training.....	113
	Recognition, Rewards, Social Events.....	113
	Communication.....	114
	Heroes.....	118
	Climate.....	119
	Intrinsic Factors.....	127
	Activities.....	128
	Traits, Skills, and Abilities.....	129
	Influential People.....	142
	Mentors.....	146
	Networking.....	148
	Problems.....	149
	Barriers.....	150
	Risks.....	151
	Isolation.....	153
	Prejudice.....	154
	Frustration.....	155
	Balancing.....	157
5	DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	164
	Discussion.....	164
	Family History.....	165
	Career Planning.....	166
	Working Environment.....	168
	Balancing Career and Family.....	170
	Prejudice.....	171

	<u>Page</u>
Conclusions .....	173
Implications .....	175
Women .....	177
Recommendations .....	179
REFERENCES .....	181
APPENDIX A - LETTER .....	199
APPENDIX B - INTERVIEW QUESTIONS .....	201

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Barriers to the mobility of women in the workforce have become a top agenda item for most corporations and the government. Barriers not only hinder individuals, but they deprive the economy and could cause legal problems. In order to remain competitive in these volatile times, organizations must utilize all sources of skilled labor.

#### Need for the Study

Research has indicated that barriers which hinder career advancement of women do exist and that they can be complex and varied (Catalyst, 1991; The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1992; U. S. Department of Labor, 1991).

The "glass ceiling" is a term that symbolizes a variety of barriers that prevent qualified individuals from advancing higher in their organizations. Although many women hold management positions, few have made the breakthrough to top-level positions. Estimates suggest that only one to five percent of the top executive officials are women (Womens' Bureau, 1989; Catalyst, 1990; Mueller, 1992).

All of the reasons why few women are found in upper management may not be immediately obvious, but several barriers have been repeatedly revealed in various forms and combinations in studies on career development and advancement (Andrew, Coderre, & Denis, 1990; Morrison,

1992). These barriers are prejudice, unsupportive working environment, lack of organizational savvy, poor career planning and difficulty in balancing career and family. An issue so full of complexities -- economic, cultural, psychological, sociological -- has no easy answers or quick fixes.

Most studies which have researched women's limited advancement in management have focused on either the intrinsic variables within the woman herself or the extrinsic variables such as situational and structural factors (Talley, 1988; Riger & Galligan, 1988; Grondin, 1990; Andrew, Coderre, & Denis, 1990; Olivier, 1993; Fagenson, 1990). Even though a better understanding is required of the intrinsic and extrinsic factors which exist, neither approach alone fully explains what women are experiencing. In order to determine what conditions are required for success, it has been suggested that researchers focus on both the individual and the organization (Gregory, 1990; Harlan & Weiss, 1981; Fagenson, 1990; Cullen, 1990).

Despite the existence of barriers, some women do move past the ceiling, but relatively little is known about these women (Stewart-Belle, 1992). Explanations for this "encouraging phenomenon" are needed (Bullard & Wright, 1993).

The 158 Governments present at the world conference that marked the close of the United Nations Decade for Women agreed that "timely and reliable statistics on the situation of women have an important role to play in the elimination

of stereotypes and the movement towards full equality" (United Nations, 1988).

#### Problem Statement

The attainment of top executive positions for females is complex and involves many variables. Determining what conditions are required for their success, especially identifying and discriminating between intrinsic and extrinsic variables, could be helpful to women themselves, educators and employers. Thus, the problem for this research is: What intrinsic and extrinsic factors influence womens' attainment of senior executive positions?

#### Research Questions

Because an ethnographic design was utilized in this study, research questions were not formulated. An in-depth data gathering technique using observation, interviews and documentation was used. According to previous studies, many factors are involved in a woman's career advancement. Some of the factors the researcher focused on were: education/skills, influences, support, barriers, balancing career and family, career planning, management style, company policies and practices, hiring and career development, company mission and goals, work climate and pay and benefits practices.

#### Delimitations

This study was limited to four women who have execu

tive positions at a hospital: one associate administrator, one interim associate administrator, one director and the CEO.

The study also included the culture of the hospital itself. The elements of culture are the business environment, the rites and rituals, values, cultural network and the heroes.

#### Definitions of Terms

The primary concepts utilized in this study are commonly known, however, for the purposes of this study, certain terms are defined as follows:

Chief Executive Officer or CEO - head of a corporation who also sometimes holds the title of "President". Makes all the final major decisions of the organization, and is, therefore, ultimately responsible for the total operations of the organization. Must answer to a Board of Directors, if one exists.

Culture - a system of attitudes, actions, and artifacts that endures over time and that operates to produce among its members a relatively unique common psychology (Vaill, 1989, p. 147).

Ethnography - a research strategy which attempts to describe events and behavior in some setting. Usually naturalistic, nonparticipant observation is combined with participant observation through observation and interviews.

Executive - executive and administrator used interchangeably to mean those individuals at any level of supervision who are classified as managers in reported studies.



Extrinsic barriers - barriers listed in the literature which are sociological rather than psychological in nature and which focus on the corporation or organizational environment the woman enters. These are under the control of the work environment.

Glass ceiling - symbolizes a variety of barriers that prevent qualified individuals from advancing higher in their organization.

Intrinsic barriers - barriers listed in the literature which are psychological in nature and which focus on the woman herself. These barriers are more under the control of the woman than are the extrinsic barriers and include various expectations about role behavior which women hold as a result of their socialization.

Leader - one who is able to creatively and effectively communicate the vision of the fundamental purpose of the organization to its members and motivate and inspire them to constructive action.

Manager - one who is highly task-oriented, primarily concerned with efficiency, and involved in the day-to-day operations of an organization.

Mentor - those persons in the organization who have the power and access to information vital to career advancement and are willing to be a role model, teacher, guide, counselor, sponsor, coach, or someone who is especially helpful to another's career.

Network - an information system to provide and receive the assistance, support and help to find the resources

needed.

Prejudice - the tendency to view people who are different from some reference group in terms of sex, ethnic background, or racial characteristics as being deficient.

Senior executive position - top officers which usually, but not necessarily, includes chief executive officers, group executives, "inside" board members, and chief financial officers, treasurers and manufacturing/operations (Insel, 1987, p. 106).

Stereotype - a relatively rigid and oversimplified conception of a group of people in which all individuals in the group are labeled with the so-called group characteristics (Wrightsman, 1977, p. 672).

#### Significance of Study

Research on women as executives, managers and administrators has received limited attention (Stewart-Belle, 1992). Compared to the investigations in management areas, women in management as a field of research endeavor, is relatively new (Sekaran, 1990). There are few in-depth studies of female executive officers. First of all, most of the CEO's of top corporations are male, and second, there seems to be an unwillingness to submit to a probing of what could be an intensely personal study of the person and of the organization.

There is a voluminous amount of research in the area of gender differences. Numerous studies have compared male and female leadership. Studies have confirmed that certain barriers exist, but, often the study of career barriers has

focused on the behavior and struggles of the individual woman rather than the structure and nature of the organization in which she is working (Cullen, 1990).

Although more women hold management positions than at any other time, very few have reached the top. The comprehension of all the dynamics involved in the success of women in organizations is still limited (Sekaran, 1990). It is clear that a better understanding of the internal and external factors involved in a woman's climb up the ladder is needed.

Are there organizational cultures that are more responsive to women? Why have certain women reached the top? Is it due to their characteristics or is it because of the organization? Are these two things related? How should we focus our efforts to achieve change?

More research is needed with this orientation because it adds a missing dimension to our understanding of the barriers women face and, also, because the structural variables the woman identifies may apply to the type of organization she is in (Cullen, 1990). Few studies have sought to analyze the relationship of gender to organizational behavior. "A variety of organizational studies have been pursued from a male-oriented perspective, which at best treat aspects of organizational behavior as typifying men and women alike and, at worst, treat women as periphery to organizational life" (Mills, 1988, p. 351). Many studies and surveys have cited corporate culture issues as major problems encountered by women (Smith, 1990; Poston,

1989; Mulder, 1983; Sayre, 1986; Blackhurst, 1990).

In her paper on the theoretical and methodological issues in women in management research, Sekaran (1990), concluded that women in management is an "extremely important" area for research investigation that, hopefully, would result in a better understanding of how organizations and their members make progress. She also noted that "women in management researchers have a unique advantage over researchers in other fields inasmuch as their findings have a high probability of being utilized for bringing about organizational change" (Sekaran, 1990, p. 253).

Due to Equal Employment Opportunity legislation, organizations are being forced to revamp their hiring and promotion practices. Companies are facing increasing numbers of law suits from women. All employers have an economic, demographic, social, moral and legal responsibility to ensure that no barriers to advancement of qualified women exist in their companies. It is essential for companies to have the most talented people whatever the gender or race.

Research which is conducted in the context-specific mode -- one which examines the phenomena that occur in specific settings such as university systems or hospitals -- "will examine many variables, acquire an in-depth understanding of the organizational settings such as universities and hospitals and are more likely to be applied" (Sekaran, 1990, p. 254). An understanding of a wider range of factors is essential in determining what

changes need to be made regarding policy, design and development in both the business and educational arenas.

Grondin (1990) warned that there may be serious repercussions on the development of educational programs for women managers if researchers fail to identify and discriminate between internal and external factors which act as barriers to the promotion of women into top management positions. "Unless our research, and the training that evolves from it gets to the root causes, and is based on a feminist perspective, the something new of more women in management will in reality be more of the something old that is already there" (Joyce, 1990, p. 414).

As we move from an industrial-based to an informational-based society, there is a renewed recognition of the interdependence between education and business. The private sector is spending an estimated \$60 billion a year on training employees with 75 percent of those efforts in white-collar and management training (Donnelly, 1987).

The problems women face vary according to various factors and different solutions that are required. "Yet, there are some problems that all women face collectively, regardless of these factors and these should concern us all" (Moore, 1986, p. 3).

The National Research Council (1994) reported that the conferees' of "Women Scientists and Engineers Employed in

Industry: Why so Few?" recommendations that will benefit women will also benefit men and "will be critical to the health of the corporate sector" (p. 2).

It is hoped that this research will add to the knowledge on women and leadership and fill a gap in the research on women in management. And, also, that this knowledge will assist: the corporate community to identify their own glass ceiling barriers and implement strategies to remove them, the people in education to develop the necessary programs for women managers and women to develop the personal and professional skills they need to succeed in a managerial career -- to acquire some "big stones" on their climb up the ladder.

## CHAPTER TWO

### RELATED LITERATURE

The following literature review will lay the foundation for an ethnographic study which examines the factors that influence women's attainment of senior executive positions. The review of literature is presented in four sections: (a) women in the work force, (b) glass ceiling, (c) influencing factors and (d) ethnographic approach.

#### Women in the Work Force

In 1935 Margaret Mead wrote, "If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities" (p. 322).

Due to the dramatic changes in the workforce demographics, we clearly have an increasing human resource dependence on women and minorities.

White male workers dominated the work force in 1960, but now they represent less than half of all workers. They are expected to account for just 45 percent of the work force by 2000. Over 80 percent of future labor force growth is expected to come from increasing numbers of women and minorities. White males will make up only 15 percent of the increase in the work force over the next ten years (Kanin-Lovers, 1990; Thomas, 1990; Population Reference Bureau, Inc., 1989).

In 1987, the Hudson Institute published Workforce 2000: Work and Workers in the 21st Century (Johnston) for the Department of Labor. The report predicted tight labor markets, mismatches between job requirements and available workers' skills and dramatic demographic changes. These changes, which included fewer younger workers and many more women, immigrants/minorities and older persons in the work force, would require employers to transform their human resource systems (Johnston, 1987).

In an extensive study to determine whether experts generally agree these changes will occur, the General Accounting Office (1992) found that "labor economists and other experts do not agree that labor shortages and skill gaps are likely to occur by the year 2000" (p. 3). The study did find, however, that the demographic composition of the labor force has changed and will continue to change in the future. The most dramatic change is the entry of women into the labor market since 1950. Since then, the female civilian labor force increased by nearly 1 million workers each year. By 1990, nearly 57 million women were working or looking for work, a more than 200 percent increase since 1950. David E. Bloom, Harvard Labor Economist, stated "the growth of women in the work force is probably the single most important change that has ever taken place in the American labor market. Their arrival at high executive levels will be the major development for working women over the next 20 years" ( Cited by Castro, 1985, p. 65). Another dramatic change in the labor force occurred among women with



children. In 1960, 18.6 percent of married women with children under 6 were in the labor force. By 1990, 60 percent of women with young children worked (GAO/General Government Division, 1992). More than 70 percent of all women between the ages of 25 and 54 are in the paid labor force. Women's participation in the work force will continue to grow. By 2000, 47 percent of the workforce will be women, and 61 percent of women will be employed (Kimmerling, 1989; Population Reference Bureau, Inc., 1989).

### Glass Ceiling

Though the past years have brought unprecedented change for American women, many agree that the rate of women's advancement to the top levels of management has not kept pace with their educational attainment and professional commitment. In 1986, the Wall Street Journal coined the phrase "glass ceiling" that has come to symbolize a variety of barriers faced by women and minorities as they seek to improve their employment status (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). In Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Can Women Reach the Top of America's Largest Corporations?, the authors asserted that "the glass ceiling is not simply a barrier for an individual, based on the person's inability to handle a higher-level job. Rather, the glass ceiling applies to women as a group who are kept from advancing higher because they are women" (Morrison, White & Van Velsor, 1987, p. 13).

The Department of Labor has concluded that "the glass ceiling is most clearly defined as those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent