THE MEXICAN GLASS CEILING AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES: NARRATIVES OF WOMEN MANAGERS

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ABSTRACT

Equal opportunity discourses in magazines targeted toward professionally employed women and men in Mexico were examined to explore the intersection of cultural dimensions of gender (machista and marianista) and the Anglo-American discourses of diversity management, including affirmative action. Women constructed the discourse of equal opportunity for other women's careers primarily by drawing on essentialist views on the nature of men and women, most specifically the sameness perspective—to penetrate the glass ceiling, one must "be like a man." The difference approach was considered in more subtle ways as women endorsed the diversity discourse for instrumental reasons. The postequity view was only superficially employed; women professionals did not challenge the less tangible barriers of the glass ceiling in Mexico, adopting instead the essentialist views on women and men as well as the masculine and feminine characteristics attributed to each biological sex.

THE GLASS CEILING

The literature on women in management is still bringing to the forefront the lack of women's representation in upper managerial ranks in North America. These

"glass ceilings" and "glass walls" are described as "those invisible, culturally embedded assumptions and beliefs about the skills and competencies of women that prevent their advancement into top management positions" (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008: 135-136). This body of literature focuses on identifying the barriers that women face in getting to the top and the strategies needed to overcome those visible and invisible barriers (e.g., Morrison, White, Van Velsor, & Leadership, 1992; O'Neil, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2008; Oakley, 2000; Powell, 1988). For example, Oakley's (2000) study of gender-based barriers contends that corporate practices and cultural stereotypes prevent women from getting to the top. The first type of barrier, corporate practices, may involve objective structural aspects that disadvantage women during the recruitment, retention, and promotion processes. The second type, more difficult to eradicate, is composed of those cultural aspects and stereotypes that favor men over women. Similarly, a review of the literature on women's careers (O'Neil et al., 2008) underscores the multifaceted aspects of women's careers and lives, suggesting that organizational practices are not only male dominated but also one-dimensional and, therefore, disconnected from women's larger-life contexts.

While these literatures have been useful in identifying the various structural barriers to women's advancement, we argue here for a feminist approach that goes beyond the apparent concrete and essentialist barriers to women's advancement to include poststructuralist feminist theorizing, in which the emphasis is on "the cultural production of [female and male managers'] subjectivities and the material production of their social lives" (Calás, Smircich, & Bourne, 2009: 555).

Feminist researchers, who endorse the social construction of subjectivities, have noted that the use of male models of research privilege rationality and essentialisms, ignoring women's subjectivities and experiences (see: Calás & Smircich, 2006; Martin, 2000; Mumby & Putnam, 1992). At the same time, the notion of "the other" has implications for the assumptions responsible for the "glass ceiling" and "glass wall" (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008). In consequence, when studying these barriers and/or women's careers, it is important to note that both organizational and research practices can be enriched by other perspectives outside the dominant literature, which pinpoints individuals' attribution of essentialist differences about the other (Butler, 1990), producing some of the assumptions and beliefs that create the "glass." In order to avoid this, feminist scholars have suggested some models of intervention designed to overcome some of the barriers already mentioned (e.g., Billing, 2011; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008; Martin, 2003; Meyerson & Kolb, 2000; Nentwich, 2006; van den Brink, Benschop, & Jansen, 2010). A common thread in these feminist studies is that they draw on liberal feminist perspectives at some level but also go further, drawing on poststructuralist feminist perspectives in order to reveal the theoretical and practical implications for the promotion of women's careers of how "gender equity" and "equal opportunities" are constructed according to specific gender assumptions.

Drawing on the feminist poststructuralist approach, this article is structured as follows. First, we discuss three perspectives on advancing gender equity based on Meyerson and colleagues, as well as the discursive constructions with regard to intervention programs designed to change inequality (e.g., Billing, 2011; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008; Meyerson & Kolb, 2000). Second, we offer a contextualization of the development of equality and the glass ceiling in Mexico. Third, we discuss our method of using written narratives appearing in magazines. Finally, we analyze the narrations of equality in Mexican organizations as well as presenting our theoretical and practical conclusions.

GENDER EQUITY FOR WOMEN
IN TOP POSITIONS

Here, we discuss the theoretical framework, which consists of three perspectives: sameness, difference, and postequity. Each of these perspectives has its own gender-based assumptions and beliefs and, therefore, each has a different discursive construction of what "equal opportunities" means and how it should be achieved.

The first, the "sameness" or "equal opportunities" perspective (Nentwich, 2006; van den Brink et al., 2010), is based on the "liberal individualism" and "liberal structuralism" theories, in which men and women are considered equal, but on the one hand, it is perceived that women have been socialized differently, and on the other, it is perceived that sex-differentiated structures create asymmetries of power in favor of men (Calás & Smircich, 2006; Kanter, 1977; Nentwich, 2006). In consequence, if the socialization of individuals is responsible for the differentiation in power, liberal individualism recommends training women to overcome their weaknesses, giving room for the expression "fix the women" (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Martin, 2003). It is also suggested, from the liberal structuralist perspective, that all the structural barriers preventing women from succeeding should be eliminated (Meyerson & Kolb, 2000) by changing organizational policies, offering flexible schedules, allowing working from home, providing less hierarchical career paths, and implementing other programs to reduce discriminatory practices and some gender-based stereotypes. However, it has been noted that treating men and women as equals will work only if they are the same (Nentwich, 2006). At the same time, there is always the risk of trying to "normalize" women according to the male norm (Martin, 2003), and this has implications not only for women managers, who might display a variety of complex and contradictory identities, but also for men, due to the assumption of a "hegemonic masculinity" rather than a variety of "masculinities" (Hearn, 2004). In summary, Billing's (2011) assertion that women may not be overshadowed by the phantom of the male norm, which is a social construction rather than a fact, resonates with us.

The second perspective, the "difference" or "value difference" perspective, emerges from the standpoint feminist theory (Harding, 1986; Meyerson & Kolb, 2000; Nentwich, 2006) in which difference is recognized and celebrated along with essentialist views on women and men and the different ways in which they behave. There is some return to valuing some "characteristics that are traditionally seen as "feminine," such as being empathetic, sympathetic, nurturing, non-competitive, deferential and having good listening skills" (Martin, 2003: 73). According to this view, gender equity is constructed by treating individuals differently according to their gender and offering training to expose and exploit those differences. As part of this re-valuation, it is expected that the asymmetries of power will be removed. Nevertheless, this strategy may reinforce the traditional stereotypes and dichotomies of masculinity and femininity attached to men and to women.

The third, "postequity," perspective (Meyerson & Kolb, 2000) rests on post-structuralist feminist theorizing (Butler, 1990; Weedon, 1987) and social constructionist feminism (West & Zimmerman, 1987). According to this view, essentialist notions of individuals' identities and subjectivities, which can be seen in the previous two perspectives, are challenged. While in the sameness and difference approaches, biological sex is used to attribute specific characteristics to men and women (West & Zimmerman, 1987), in the postequity approach, a distinction between sex and gender is made. Biological sex is determined by reproductive organs, while "[g]ender, in contrast, refers to a classification that societies construct to exaggerate the differences between females and males and to maintain sex inequality" (Reskin & Padavic, 1994). This process of constructing differences occurs through gender practices such as the use of accepted forms of language and expressions (West & Zimmerman, 1987), among other practices. Thus, practicing gender refers to "literally saying or doing gender" (Martin, 2006: 258), which has implications for gender identity, creating some of the cultural and gender-based stereotypes promoting the glass ceiling. Individuals' identities and the characteristics associated with them are considered to be discursive constructions (Foucault, 1977). According to this approach, identity is not treated as an essential collection of the unique traits of an individual. Rather, it is conceptualized as a social construction and a relational concept (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2001) characterized by asymmetries of power. In other words, men and women, when constructing their identities, are to some degree objects and subjects of external social conditions (Kanter, 1977). Consequently, gender identities are constructed by what Acker (1992: 250) "refers to [as] patterned, socially produced, distinctions between female and male, feminine and masculine." Going further, "doing" or "saying" gender means that socially constructed distinctions are reproduced within organizations and institutions. Specifically, the rules of what is accepted and what is not stem from organizational cultures, having "implications for the construction and reproduction of gendered relationships" (Mills, 1988: 366). Some of these rules marginalize the "feminine"

and favor the "masculine" (Ferguson, 1984; Mumby & Putnam, 1992). Similarly, organizational structures (such as the bureaucratic structure) favor men over women (Ferguson, 1984; Kanter, 1977). These gendered structures and gendered divisions of labor "produce gendered components of individual identity" (Acker, 1990: 147). In other words, these structures have "normalized" women's identities and behaviors (Foucault, 1977). In such a situation, women may have to adopt the image of the "ideal worker," which marginalizes them because it means "to become like a man" (Acker, 1990: 150). In summary, the postequity perspective challenges the dilemmas created by the sameness and difference perspectives by exposing the social constructions of gender and equal opportunities (Nentwich, 2006).

All these perspectives may be adopted by change agents to challenge gender inequity in organizations, and they may not be mutually exclusive in organizations (van den Brink et al., 2010). However, the postequity perspective has rarely been used as an intervention perspective (Hearn, 2000). The way in which change agents discursively construct gender equity, along with the advancement of women managers, has implications for the reduction of inequality (Nentwich, 2006). These constructions are historically and culturally located (Alvesson & Billing, 1997), and, to demonstrate this, we turn to the Mexican context to show that they provide different lenses with which to study the construction of equal opportunities for women managers. It has been noted that the intersection between global and local in the construction of what it means to be a woman or a man should not be ignored (Calás & Smireich, 2006).

WOMEN MANAGERS AND
THE GLASS CEILING IN MEXICO

Both historical and cultural aspects of the formation of Mexican society have had implications for the sense of self of individuals and the way they perceive equal opportunities. The family has been a very important institution in society. After the conquest by the Spaniards more than 400 years ago, Mexico became a Catholic country, in which family "devotion" and traditions were dominant values (Stevens, 1973). Some contend that gender roles such as those of machismo and marianismo were prescribed for men and women, respectively. Machismo prescribes an exaggerated form of masculinity and responsibility toward the family (Diaz-Guerrero, 1975; Stevens, 1973) and has been described as men's domination of other men and women (Pablos, 1999); marianismo constructs an ideal template for womanhood, which is counterposed to machismo in Latin culture (Stevens, 1973). Marianismo presents the image of the submissive and saintly woman devoted to her family as an ideal for other women to emulate. The family has been a traditional and important cultural institution for society and especially for women. The role of the woman as a submissive wife and a self-sacrificing mother has been reinforced by machismo and marianismo, and it

continues even today. But while many families still have an expectation of male dominance where the supremacy of the father is unquestioned, and so is the self-sacrifice of the mother (Pablos, 1999), social class, as an important axis of identification, mediates these gendered beliefs. For instance, a study of Mexican mothers in urban Mexico contends that while middle- and working-class mothers still see motherhood as an important source of identification, middle-class women have added alternative sources of feminine identity such as work (García & de Oliveira, 1997).

The gender roles attached to Mexican culture (Gutmann, 2007), have been evolving historically, especially in terms of women's rights to equal opportunities. Following the Revolution of 1910, women were not allowed to vote for fear of their alliance with the Catholic Church, which was seen as an enemy of the ideals of the revolution (Craske, 205). It was not until 1953 that women acquired the right to vote (La-Jornada, 2002), 27 years later than in the United States. Similarly, women were excluded from holding public office and were officially excluded from working in traditionally men's jobs until 1974 (Fernandez-Poncela, 1995), when an amendment to the Constitution provided for equal opportunities for women and men.

Globalization is in part responsible for creating new discourses of human rights and equal opportunities, including affirmative action. The signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), for example, gave rise to the North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation (NAALC), designed to protect workers' rights in the United States and Mexico (Kelson, 2000). In addition, transnational corporations have brought in equity programs and practices for the development of women at work, and some local Mexican companies have adopted these practices (Zabludovsky, 2001). The incorporation of Mexico into NAFTA has increased women's participation in the Mexican labor force (Valdes & Gomariz, 1995) and has increased their movement into managerial positions (Zabludovsky, 2001). Today, women hold close to 40% of the total jobs (Mack, 2010).

Nonetheless, by 2007 just 1% of the working women in Mexico held a position at the highest managerial level and just 3% held a top managerial position (Delaunay, 2007). Putting these numbers into global perspective, we see that Mexico ranks 98th out of 134 countries on the World Economic Forum's Corporate Gender Gap Index, while the United States ranks 31st (World-Economic-Forum, 2010). Another study reports that Mexican employees perceive less discrimination than do American employees; to be exact, the proportions of perception of discrimination were 10% and 45%, respectively (Bennington, Wagman, & Stallone, 2005). In comparison with other Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia), Mexico showed the least egalitarian attitudes toward women in a survey conducted among undergraduate university students (Olivas-Luján et al., 2009). These cultural perceptions and attitudes intersect with discourses of equal opportunities. Change agents, especially women

in positions of power, make sense of both social context and organizational rules to extract gendered cues (Helms Mills, 2003; Helms Mills, 2005), and this process has implications for promoting change to further other women's careers.

The affirmative action and Anglo-American discourses of diversity management are rooted in the business case: business accepts that diversity enhances organizational performance (for a review: Meriläinen, Tienari, Katila, & Benschop, 2009; Prasad, Mills, Elmes, & Prasad, 1997; Tienari, Holgersson, Meriläinen, & Höök, 2009). Therefore, many multinational enterprises (MNEs) are introducing these discourses into local contexts for instrumental reasons. Locating this study in Mexico makes it possible to understand how equal opportunities are conceptualized and the consequences this process has for the Mexican glass ceiling. In addition, "relations of difference vary across societies," and it is necessary to study how discourses of equality are translated into local contexts (Meriläinen et al., 2009: 240). The research questions that will be addressed are as follows:

(1) How do women managers in Mexico construct the equal opportunities discourse for other women's careers?
(2) In what sense do these constructions come from the adoption of the sameness, difference, and/or postequity perspectives?

METHOD

This study takes into account the narrative "turn," which "self-consciously opposed a social science thought to be excessively analytic" with causal relations between "reified constructs" (Abbott, 2007: 69). This has been the case in traditional career theory, in which the dominant "dispositional discourse" has been challenged, inviting researchers to consider less essentialist views, with a more constructivist focus (Young & Collin, 2004). Accordingly, the importance of using narratives has been pointed out, and story-based research has been declared to be a legitimate way to produce knowledge (Boje, 1991; Czarniawska, 1997; Gabriel, 2000). The use of written narratives, such as autobiographies and life stories, is considered to be well fitted for identity work and for the construction of others (Czarniawska & Gagliardi, 2003; Reissman, 2008). We use written narratives of women managers in Mexico collected in magazines; we note that the use of written managerial narratives is still underdeveloped (McKenna, 2010; Watson, 2009). In addition, the use of business magazines is important as a source of identity cues for managers. Watson and Bargiela-Ciappini (1998) suggest that management magazines are discursive resources that managers can draw upon to make sense of their roles. Nowadays, it is not unusual to find covers of business magazines that advertise success stories of women managers who have broken through the glass ceiling in North America, including Mexico. Hence, the analysis of narratives of women in managerial positions, contained in

business magazines, provides a window into the discursive identities of these managers, and the possibility of revealing which perspectives, sameness, difference, and/or postequity, these managers, as change agents, adopt to challenge inequity in Mexico. The views they endorse will shape the views of others who read these sources in search for ways to break through the glass ceiling.

Collection of Narratives

The criterion for the selection of narratives was variety in the accounts of women managers (Kelan, 2009). First, the narratives were selected from three magazines that have different orientations in terms of ideology and audience but whose readership in all cases includes professionals and managers. Second, we searched for written narratives of women managers working for different types of organizations (public and private; national and multinational) and in different managerial positions (top and divisional managers; executives and entrepreneurs). Third, all of the narratives had to address the topic of gender equity in Mexico. Finally, we purposefully chose six narratives from three different magazines (see Table 1 for information on these women, their companies, and the magazines). The purpose of the selection was not to enable us to make generalizations with regard to top managers, organizations, or magazines, but to enable us to develop an argument in relation to the discursive equal opportunity practices endorsed by some women managers.

Analysis of Narratives and Discourse Analysis

The analysis involved two steps. First, each of these narratives was analyzed individually using discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992), in order to reveal some of the discursive practices on which these women draw to evoke their careers and the discourse of equal opportunities that they use in relation to the careers of other women.

Second, we set out to reveal the link between the equal opportunity discourse that these women comment on and the sameness, difference, and/or post equity perspectives. Here we focused on the taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs that, through the effects of language on the construction of masculine and/or feminine attributes, have come to be attached to men and/or women managers as well as to their managerial careers. Finally, we examined how these assumptions lead to the adoption of specific ways to tackle the barriers for women in their efforts to break through the glass ceiling.

All the narratives were written in Spanish. The first author conducted the first analysis. This was initially done in Spanish, in order to capture the contextual aspects of the language in constructing women's identities and their approach to equal opportunities for other women. Then the narratives were translated into English. The other two coauthors read the narratives in English, as well as the first analysis. Finally, they provided their own input into the uncovering of the discourses.

Table 1. Women Managers, Organizations, and Magazines

Name/Position	Organization	Magazine/Orientation
Carpinteyro, Purification General Manager	**Mexican Postal Service (SEPOMEX)** State-owned decentralized agency. Competes with private industry. 11,000 postal workers (100 are women). Both men and women ride 60-kg motor bicycles.	**MILENIO** Political and journalistic orientation. Usually covers leaders in the political arena. Critical tone.
Carrillo, Maria T. Manager of the Corporate Communications Division	**Hewlett-Packard Mexico (HP)** Foreign-owned IT corporation operating since 1966 in Mexico.	**MUJER EJECUTIVA** **[Executive Women]** Oriented to women managers. Part of Mundo Ejecutivo [Executive World] Group, which edits another magazine using the group's name. The magazine presents profiles of top women in multinational enterprises and large Mexican corporations.
Fuentes, Angélica CEO of the Group	**Omnilife** Dedicated to the nutritional supplement industry in Mexico and in 22 other countries. One of the 200 leading companies in Mexico.	
Garcia, Adriana Founder and Business Unit Director	**PRAXIS** Services: consultancy and systems development. Offices in Mexico, the United States, Canada, and Panama. One of the best companies to work for in Mexico, 2007.	**ISTMO** Edited by the IPADE Business School, an AACSB-accredited top Mexican business school with a Catholic and conservative orientation. The magazine has published a special issue for women executives, from which we obtained these three accounts.
Clave, Catalina Head of Information and Statistical Products	**Mexican Stock Exchange (BMV)** State-owned financial entity that supervises and regulates the stock exchange in Mexico.	
Blok, Liliana General Manager	**Back to Business** Human resources firm focusing on issues of outplacement, coaching, and change management.	

NARRATING EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES DISCOURSE

In general, the women in this study talk about the traditional and still machista culture of Mexican business: "The performance of women in the work's sphere is still marked by a traditional culture"; "In spite of the years that have passed . . . in Mexico [those aspects] have not been eradicated"; "There is still too much to do"; "[C]ompanies need to take some risks [with women]"; . . . "[I]t is the men who are not used to working with women"; "[W]hy male executives have problems in listening to women executives? This is a challenge in the Mexican business society"; and "The financial sector is generally male dominated."

At the same time, when they refer to their own experiences as top managers, they bring into their narrative a managerial discourse of identification with their positions and the hard work they have done: "Continuing to work on this is a passion for me"; "Work, work, work, there has always been too much work. . . . It has been too much work, constancy and discipline"; "I can achieve something positive not only for me, but also for the company and what it generates"; "this is a formula [with which] to feel satisfied and happy, because you know that you are contributing to the advancement of the organization"; "I started this company five years ago, and it has generated good financial results in addition to the social role we perform."

Some have made personal sacrifices and rejected, implicitly, the traditional role of marianismo for developing a professional career or they have questioned other women for not making the same sacrifices: "One of my decisions was to focus all my energies and efforts on my professional development and not to have a family"; "I feel I am satisfied with my roles. . . . The only role I wasn't able to fulfill with success was as a partner. I was married twice"; "this is the most challenging thing for successful women in businesses. . . . children are tolerant, but [the problem is] with your partner"; "I have witnessed the desertion of women whose careers were in full ascendance, but when . . . marriage and pregnancy arrived, . . . these women never returned to their profession." In the same vein, they also see themselves as role models helping other women to succeed at work: "Those of us [who have succeeded] have the obligation to be a role model and to help those who come behind"; "[w]e have a responsibility toward the women of today and those who will come, to show that we can compete strongly"; "Changing this . . . is my contribution to the organization"; "I had come to this world . . . along with other women, to open the road to many others who were behind me."

After talking about the business society, how much work they have done, and their identification with their roles as managers, they also narrate explicitly what they consider to constitute equal opportunity for other women in Mexico and what is needed to reduce the barriers that create the glass ceiling and the glass walls for colleagues at work. Implicitly, they also express their views on how gender equity should be accomplished in Mexican organizations, in the

course of describing their careers and those of other women. In so doing, they draw on the three perspective of sameness, difference, and/or postequity. They seem to endorse more than one perspective at the same time, even though the "postequity" perspective is not explicitly endorsed or even visible in their accounts. In general, they tend to adopt the sameness or the difference perspective, as shown by the assumptions they made with regard to other women.

The Sameness Perspective

In their use of the repertoire of the sameness perspective, the narratives of some of the women seem to invite other women to behave "like men" by adopting behaviors that are attributed to them. Therefore, one of their assumptions is that women may be different in terms of socialization. Consequently, they have to overcome "their weaknesses." For example, in order for a woman to be a manager in Mexico, it is necessary for her to commit herself just as a man would:

> I am not the best example of making a personal life compatible with a professional life. One of my decisions was to focus all my energies and efforts on my professional development and not to have a family. It was because in order to really compete in a world dominated by men, it was necessary to have total availability . . . 24 hours and seven days a week. (Carpinteyro, 2008)

Carpinteyro has this expectation not only for herself but also for women who aspire to enter the lower echelons of the postal industry. These women need to adapt to a male environment, where it is necessary to be physically strong in order to ride a motor bicycle. Carpinteyro also endorses an equal opportunities discourse of sameness, where equal rights are equated with equal conditions. Hence, there is no comment on removing barriers for women other than with reference to their own internal barriers:

> if we want equal rights, we have to be determined to perform under equal conditions. For instance, if a woman is hired as a postal worker, when she receives a motorbike, she may say, "Not for me, because it is too heavy." In this case, if the woman is afraid of having "broken nails," definitely she is not the right fit for that position. (Carpinteyro, 2008)

By evoking the Mexican saying with regard to "broken nails," she adopts the Mexican machista discourse commonly used when a man challenges the manhood of another. Later on, she offers examples of women who have achieved success by adopting what she considers the male attributes of the ideal postal worker, whom women should emulate: "there are 100 women who ride 60-kg motorbikes, among [whom] you can find stories of competitiveness, strength, and high performance."

Similarly, Carrillo evokes the characteristics that a woman manager should have. Again, in this description, these characteristics are those associated with men, and women need to adopt them in order to reduce their weaknesses:

> Women need to be more audacious and aggressive. At the other end, companies need to take some risks and say: "OK, I'll bet on her." . . . Few women dare to dream of this position; it seems that they say, "That is too much"; we have to overcome this [attitude], and ask ourselves "Why not?" (Carillo, 2009)

Carrillo suggests that organizations should bet on women's careers. Hence, she is touching on the argument of reducing structural barriers for women. However, the way in which she uses the word 'bet' seems to assume that this is an action based on luck rather than on calculated risk. Carillo's underlying assumption rests on the socialization of women in Mexico:

> It is necessary to have both an ambition and a vision to make a career. We prepare for it, but there is a lack [of the] self-assurance [necessary] to get to the highest levels. I have witnessed the desertion of women whose careers were in full ascendance, but when . . . marriage and pregnancy arrived, and sometimes [there was a] lack of companies' openness for this, then, these women never returned to their profession. (Carillo, 2009)

Blok and Fuentes also agree with the idea of strengthening a woman's self-assurance. Blok sees victimism (i.e., marianismo) as a cultural problem affecting women's self-esteem:

> Another relevant issue refers to self-esteem, a very difficult cultural problem at the level of gender. We have to ask ourselves which methods are there to raise the voice: women have to leave behind the victimism, fight to get educated and trained more and more. (Blok, 2009)

Fuentes makes specific reference to the energy sector, which is male dominated (i.e., exhibits a glass wall), and she notes that women have what it takes to be there. She reinforces this idea by using the metaphor of "working arm in arm" in this sector, which seems to mean inviting women to be "like men":

> The most important part [for a woman in business] is to believe in oneself, to have self-esteem, and to know that you have all the elements in yourself to be able to succeed. Never to compete against men or women. . . . I learned not to compete with men in the energy sector, because at the end of the day, I understood that the best thing was to work arm in arm. (Fuentes, 2009)

In this connection, Carpinteyro brings forward the fact that men are surprised when a woman reveals that she is capable of making decisions and having "a strong hand." In her experience, men attribute these forms of "masculinity" and "rationality" to men (Mumby & Putnam, 1992), but in her view, they are not the exclusive property of men. On the contrary, she considers that women have to acquire them to succeed in a male world:

> Yet, being a woman has the advantage of the "surprise factor" . . . those who think that belonging to the feminine gender means that they do not have either the strong hand or the capacity to make decisions. I know that those

> women who are taking managerial positions, we have a responsibility toward the women of today and those who will come, to show that we can compete strongly. (Carpinteyro, 2008)

Clave is the only one of these executives who is specific about structural barriers outside the organization. She compares the schedules of schools in Europe, which fit in with working women's careers, with those in Mexico, which do not. She comments on the fact that Mexico is not ready to support a high number of working women in terms of schedules and laws:

> In Europe, the schools offer schedules up to 5:00 pm and the parents can pick their children up after work. In Mexico, in spite of the high percentage of working mothers, the schedules and the laws do not provide clear support for the professional development of those workers. (Clave, 2007)

Finally, Garcia challenges Mexican society and calls on business schools to learn to understand why women executives are ignored by their male colleagues, and she also talks about the process followed by her own company to overcome the cultural and socialization barriers:

> Business schools should make contributions with regard to how to improve the labor relations of the teams led by women. We need to understand why male executives have problems in listening to women executives. This is a challenge in Mexican business society. For Praxis, this has been a process, but I think we have overcome it. (Garcia, 2007)

In all these constructions with regard to the ways to achieve equal opportunities, the majority of the arguments seem to draw on liberal individualism by working on women's weaknesses. There are a few arguments drawn from the liberal structural viewpoint, according to which organizations and society should be changed. From this repertoire of sameness, it seems that training women will be useful in overcoming gender socialization. Similarly, training men will be effective in showing that there are no "surprise factors" in terms of women's ability to make decisions, be competitive, be strong, and be committed to work. At the end, the women in this study call on women to be "like men" in order to compete in the male world of business.

The Difference Perspective

These women also endorse the difference perspective, but only one of them explicitly refers to valuing the feminine traits attached to women. Garcia clearly utilizes the discourse of difference when she points out that women are "naturally" better equipped "to attend clients":

> My company is composed of eight managers, of which five of us are women. I have pushed feminine development very much, because I consider that we have the capacity, by nature, to attend to more than one activity at the time. . . . This has been an influence on Praxis to have the majority of the positions with

> responsibility occupied by women. . . . my experience is that women know better how to attend to the needs of the client. (Garcia, 2007)

Garcia not only attaches these feminine characteristics to women, but she also values them because they are assets for the service industry: "In the service industry, it is very easy to determine who gets the position, the one who produces better results. In this context, I don't see obstacles [for women]." She does comment, on the one hand, on sexual harassment as a barrier for women, but on the other, she notes that women fit the service industry because customers want attractive women:

> I see [obstacles for women] with the problem of sexual harassment. Men in positions of power can turn a personal issue into a professional one. . . . It is difficult for a woman to confront this problem due to fear of being misunderstood or fear of risking her job. . . . We have some clients who require from us attractive consultants. I have already become used to not saying anything in this regard, but in reality it shouldn't be. We should be measured according to talent and capability. (Garcia, 2007)

The other women use a more implicit way of supporting this view when they present the business case for diversity. In other words, one issue that emerged in these accounts is the assumption that differences between men and women are beneficial to the organization. Therefore, involving women provides different views and skills for decision making: "Currently, my teamwork is mixed and that enriches everybody. The diversity allows us to find different points of view and it generates alternatives" (Clave, 2007). Difference also provides appropriate lenses through which to understand the needs of women consumers. In consequence, it provides another reason to incorporate women at work, according to some of the women managers:

> There is still too much to do . . . but organizations [in Mexico] are aware of diversity. Today, women play an important role from the economic point of view, and for that [reason] it is important to include them in organizations. In this way, from the inside, they can analyze what products they want from the outside, now that they have purchasing power. (Carrillo, 2009)

Allowing diversity, as a form of difference, is also seen as a good means of attracting talent and in consequence as an organizational asset in terms of competitiveness. Training and development of the difference is also suggested:

> I think that what is more fair is that the companies be a competition venue for all the diversity, of which gender is only one part. The idea is to compete and to highlight talents. The business position should [be to] aim to train and provide development opportunities regardless of the difference.
> If half or more of the world's population is female and companies hire only men, we lose at least half the talent. (Blok, 2009)

In summary, the difference perspective has different connotations, such as valuing feminine characteristics, training the workforce to accept and benefit from diversity, and being a way to attract a different type of talent. Refusing to accept the difference will not benefit the organization. It seems that the women in these narratives endorse in a greater degree the advantages of diversity than the advantages of equal opportunities. While the former is clearly convenient for the organization, the latter may hinder its effectiveness and is not clearly supported.

The Postequity Perspective

This view did not surface clearly among the women in this study. There were a few instances in which the assumptions of fixed identities or specific attributes for women and men were challenged. For instance, Garcia challenges the assumption that women should stay at home. On the contrary, she sees women as the ones who are the breadwinners of the family rather than the nurturers:

> In my professional career, I have realized that a number of women are the ones [who] sustain the economy of the family. And many times it is the men who are not used to working with women. Changing this assumption is my contribution to the organization. (Garcia, 2007)

She also contends that cultural aspects of a particular society may shape the assumptions of roles that are to be attached to the public and the private sectors and to women and men. She narrates her experience in negotiating with an Indian company, which expressed even more extreme gender assumptions:

> In 2000, an Indian company tried to acquire our company. For them, it was shocking to see a board of directors meeting with the general manager and the women executives. For them, a man with a certain purchasing power is responsible for "taking" his wife "out of work." This is clearly an example of the cultural differences and mentality on which the differences in gender depend. (Garcia, 2007)

Another example of this view comes from Carpinteyro, who draws on the postequity approach to show how essentialist characteristics associated with women and men in terms of performance and career development constitute a barrier at the level of the glass ceiling. She provides some perspective on how women managers were considered by men managers in the past and how they are considered in the present, if they achieve promotion:

> During the early stages of my professional career, being a woman put me in a group of people who did not see the woman as an effective alternative. In spite of the years that have passed since then, in Mexico [those attitudes] have not been eradicated. There are prejudices with regard to how women achieve top executive positions. There is a tendency to attribute those achievements to other factors, but [not to] women's capabilities. When a man is assigned to a top position, his competence is assumed, while in the case

> of a woman it is attributed to any other reason, especially if she is pretty
> or attractive . . . [and this] can be an obstacle to her professional development
> rather than an asset. (Carpinteyro, 2008)

In this account, Carpinteyro challenges prejudices with regard to women's advancement to managerial positions. It is believed that if the women are attractive, their performance may not be the reason for their advancement. However, she also questions the belief that men acquire those positions due to their talent and performance.

Clave seems to be discussing the sameness-difference dilemma when she starts to problematize the gendered assumptions found in the discussion of labor issues:

> I would like to support those situations that seem to benefit the woman, but in
> fact, it is the whole society that is favored. In my teamwork, the majority of
> my [women] collaborators are young and the first newborns start to appear. I
> believe that we should rethink the labor issues without thinking if [an issue] is
> related to a woman or to a man. (Clave, 2007)

However, she draws on family discourse in Mexico when she states that family is the key issue and not gender equality. The problem is that she does not specify equality of responsibility in the private sphere (i.e., in motherhood and fatherhood) when she compares the "professional development" of a woman with the "disintegration of the family":

> we should support a society firmly based on the family. . . . I try to put
> [myself] in the shoes of those women. I consider that we, the women, need
> to develop professionally, but in order for the country to improve itself,
> a solid platform based on the family is necessary. We cannot risk the
> disintegration of the family for professional development. How can we have
> a better society, if we do not take care of it in an integral way, regardless of
> gender? (Clave, 2007)

In summary, the sameness-difference dilemma is sometimes questioned by women in this study. However, they do not fully assume a postequity view in their narrations, when they are constructing the equal opportunities discourse. There are some challenges to traditional women's roles in the assertion that many women sustain the family economically, and, hence, society should become aware of this fact and break with traditional roles. At the same time, the reasons given for why men and women advance in the organization are also challenged, by the assertion that prejudices favor men's performance over women's. Nevertheless, in these accounts there is no clear endorsement of the postequity view as the root of the solution to the glass ceiling.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have used a theoretical framework with regard to advancing gender equity that is based on the work of Meyerson and colleagues (Ely &

Meyerson, 2000; Meyerson & Kolb, 2000) and the discursive constructions placed on the intervention programs that are to be used to remove inequality (Billing, 2011; Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008; Martin, 2003; Nentwich, 2006; van den Brink et al., 2010). This framework elaborates three different perspectives to conceptualize gender equity, perspectives based on different assumptions and beliefs with regard to the nature of gender. Each of these positions responds to different feminist theoretical views. The first two approaches present the dilemma of "sameness-difference," based on essentialist views of the nature of men and women, while the third approach, "postequity," offers a deconstructive way to understand the dilemmas posed by the previous two views (Nentwich, 2006). Using this framework makes it possible to see how each of these views constructs in different ways the means to achieve equal opportunities, and it offers the possibility of understanding the barriers that create the "glass ceiling" in alternative ways. Despite the fact that the mainstream literature on the glass ceiling and barriers for women trying to get to leadership positions (e.g., Morrison et al., 1992; O'Neil et al., 2008; Oakley, 2000; Powell, 1988) asserts that gender stereotypes are one of the nontangible barriers, it does not elaborate in detail the role of language not only in mirroring what is out there but also in constructing it. For example, see Acker's (1990) and Gherardi's (1994) contention that the symbolic images contained in those constructions legitimate inequalities between men and women by re-producing the hegemony of the "old boys club." We located this study in Mexico, which offers a combination of gendered local and global discourses shaping individuals' subjective positions and processes of identity construction (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Calás & Smireich, 1993, 2006), such as the construction of equality in organizations based on sex and gender.

Our reading on these narratives is that the women in this study construct the discourse of equality drawing on the three perspectives. However, we argue that the sameness perspective was used in most depth and most extensively in their accounts. It seems that women who aspire to managerial positions appear to need to address their "weaknesses," whether these are due to their nature or to the Mexican society and business culture in which they have been socialized. In other words, they have "to be like men" in a machista society, in the sense that they have to be more aggressive, audacious, and self-assured, they have to abandon their victimism and low self-esteem; and they have to prove they can make decisions and be tough. Even if they are confronted with the marianismo discourse of family responsibilities, they should not abandon their careers, and some of the narrators see themselves as role models to show that it is possible for women to have a managerial career. The difference perspective was less explicitly endorsed in the sense of women's characteristics having to be re-valued and celebrated. The difference approach was considered in more subtle ways, by the women's endorsement of the diversity discourse for instrumental reasons. Women in organizations bring diversity, which means providing different points of view, enabling organizations to understand women as consumers, and providing a

source of talent. Therefore, the women in this study seem to make a business case for accepting difference, which improves organizational performance and competitiveness (Meriläinen et al., 2009; Prasad & Mills, 1997; Tienari et al., 2009). Finally, the postequity view was commented on very superficially. This can be read on two different levels. The first is to look at it from the point of view of the women in this study, who just scratched the surface when challenging some behaviors attributed to women and some to men, such as the behaviors leading to managerial advancement in organizations. However, the second level of analysis is our own reading as scholars endorsing a poststructuralist or constructivist view of the women's narratives. We contend that these women still endorse essentialist views on women and men as well as on the masculine and feminine characteristics attributed to each biological sex. Therefore, they are not challenging the less tangible barriers contributing to the glass ceiling in Mexico. As change agents, women who have struggled to get to the top, and who have the possibility of promoting gender equity in organizations in Mexico, are still prey to some extent to cultural constructions of what equity means. Consequently, one contribution of this article is to examine the three perspectives framework on a contextual basis and in a specific culture to see how equity discourses are translated to the local (Meriläinen et al., 2009). In addition, by adopting this epistemological and methodological perspective, we are able to challenge the limitations of the mainstream literature on the glass ceiling and career development, which is reductionistic in its establishment of essentialisms and its non-allowance for a plurality of voices (Collin & Young, 2000; Young & Collin, 2004).

After discussing these theoretical considerations, we move from the "armchair" feminist theories to "the real world" of practical implications (Meyerson & Kolb, 2000) in order to break through the glass ceiling in Mexico. First, it is interesting to note that the women in this study who did not touch on the postequity perspective (Carrillo, Fuentes, and Blok) work in private industry (for Hewlett-Packard, Omnilife, and Back to Business, respectively), while the ones who did raise the postequity view (Carpinteyro, Clave, and Garcia) either work for a state-controlled organization (Carpinteyro for SEPOMEX, Clave for BMV) or do a great deal of consulting for governmental agencies (Garcia for PRAXIS). What is intriguing is that it seems that women in private industry, in this study, may endorse the business case for diversity as a means to remove the glass ceiling in Mexico. In the short term, this may be the way to start cracking the glass, by first endorsing an instrumental view of why women have to be incorporated in the upper echelons. In endorsing this strategy, organizations will have to provide training and career planning opportunities to women in order to enable them to compete in this men's business world; provide child care to facilitate parenthood when needed; and provide specific training for men, especially those in the "old boys club," to raise awareness of the advantages associated with opening the door to women. On the other hand, the women involved in the public sector can be

approached through affirmative action programs challenging not only the number of women in top positions but also the patriarchal conception of women and men that seems to favor the latter through the use of binary conceptions (Knights & Kerfoot, 2004) pointing to the postequity view, of which women in the public sector are more aware. Nevertheless, more research needs to be done to understand this possible divide in the construction of equal opportunities. Second, in the long term, it is necessary to go beyond the business case for diversity. The focus has to be especially on the nontangible barriers, such as gender-based stereotypes that are culturally and locally situated. Two strategies are suggested here: *programs for the promotion of equality*; and *intervention programs* with change agents. The former can start with the "reflective" aspects of how equality is understood, drawing on the postequity approach, as in the approaches promoted in the European Union (e.g., for women in top positions: Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008) involving politicians, scholars, industry representatives, and women-specific interest groups. The latter strategy is based on intervention with change agents, women in managerial positions, who participate in diverse forums and in media, for example, providing interviews and narratives with regard to their stories. The emphasis here has to be on building awareness that the stories they tell can either reproduce or challenge societal gender-based stereotypes. For example, their narratives, as presented in this article, are "social practices that are constitutive of social context" if they do not challenge the specific assumptions of the social construction of gender, and, therefore, "[they] bear the imprint of dominant cultural meanings and relations of power" (Ely & Meyerson, 2000: 604). An interesting forum through which to build this awareness could be the Mexican Association of Female Managers and Directors (Asociación Mexicana de Mujeres Ejecutivas AMME), along with media representatives.

One methodological contribution of this article is precisely to build this awareness in terms of the role of the written narratives of women managers in Mexico. These stories appeared in various magazines targeting well-educated members of the population, many of whom hold middle and top leadership positions. In general, we add to the body of work that offers alternate ways of producing knowledge from the points of view of the participants studied and their narratives (Boje, 1991; Czarniawska, 1997; Gabriel, 2000). In particular, it contributes to the literature that uses narratives written by managers to understand identity construction (McKenna, 2010; Watson, 2009). The example of the use of magazines is relevant as well as the narratives presented in them. According to Watson and Bargiela-Ciappini (1998), business magazines provide "story boards" for their readers, who search for (identity) cues to make sense of their managerial roles. This process of searching for identity cues has implications for the identity of those managers (Helms Mills, 2003; Helms Mills, 2005). We contend that the narratives of "successful" women managers influence, re-produce, and/or challenge specific constructions of what gender equity means and how it should

be achieved. At the same time, these accounts draw specific identities available for women in management from societal and organizational discourses. In this way, the traditional (i.e., machista and marianista discourses) and global (managerial, diversity, and equality discourses) repertoires compete in the narrations of the women in this study.

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