Risky Business: A Theoretical Model Applied to the Advancement of Executive Women

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ABSTRACT

In order to explain the sparse representation of women in leadership positions across U.S. society, we propose a theoretical model delineating the processes underlying executive advancement. Central to this model are assessments of risk made by organizational gatekeepers in the context of hiring and promotion decisions. Using the model, we consider how candidate gender affects these risk assessments, and how gender contributes across careers to who advances to the executive suite.
Numerous explanations have been offered for why there are so few women in leadership position across U.S. society. While some researchers have pointed to a “glass ceiling” supported through prejudice and discrimination (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990), others have argued that there is a “pipeline” problem; there simply are not enough women that are qualified to fill positions of such importance (Carli & Eagly, 2001; Helfat, Harris, & Wolfson, 2006). In our view, both proponents are correct. A system of gender beliefs that disadvantages women continues to pervade virtually every aspect of American society, resulting in conscious and unconscious discrimination against women (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Ridgeway, 2001).

Another outcome of the gender system is that there is a pipeline problem, at least at the top of organizations where the leaders of our society are chosen. Every pipeline has both a flow and a pipe. With women now representing 46% of the U.S. workforce (U.S. Department of Labor, 2005), 37% of managers, 57% of college graduates, 35% of new MBAs (Catalyst, 2006), and 45% of new PhDs (Hoffer et al., 2005), the initial flow of trained women into the pipe appears healthy. However, the paltry representation of women at the top of U.S. society, in fields as varied as business, law, government, and education suggests that somewhere along its course to the top, as the pipe naturally narrows for both men and women, the flow of women is disproportionately filtered or diverted relative to that of men. As a result of this funneling effect in which women are apparently filtered out at higher rates than men, there is, in fact, a “pipeline” problem – there are simply fewer women than men being considered for the most senior executive positions. Recently, a comprehensive study of the gender composition of executive officers of Fortune 1000 companies starkly demonstrated this fact (Helfat et al., 2006).

According to the study, in 2000, women made up only 8.25% of Fortune 1000 senior executives; even more startling, 48% of the companies had no women executives, 29% had only one woman
executive, and only 23% of the total had more than one women executive. So, what dynamics are underlying this filtering effect? Are women simply less competent to advance in the workplace? Do they “not fit” in the executive suite? Are they less committed to their careers than men? Do women have less access to networks providing support and sponsorship? Are employers systematically discriminating against women throughout their careers?

In this article, we attempt to address these questions by first proposing a risk assessment model which delineates the cognitive processes undertaken by gatekeepers who make hiring and promotion decisions within organizations. We then consider how these decisions accumulate across a career to determine whether any individual man or woman reaches the level of senior executive. Finally, we extend the model to explicitly consider the different ways in which the gender of a job candidate affects assessments of risk and in turn, hiring and promotion decisions.

A RISK ASSESSMENT MODEL

The career path of any individual is marked with multiple decision points in which the individual is considered for hire or promotion. Each of these hiring or promotion decisions includes a complex set of processes undertaken by an organizational gatekeeper such as an HR manager, a CEO or even a board of directors. Herein, we consider the hiring process from the perspective of the organizational gatekeeper. When presented with the task of hiring a new employee, this decision maker is likely to consider many variables. At a fundamental level, however, just as individuals within organizations make risk assessments as they engage in decisions regarding products, services, adoption of new technologies, or strategies (Cho & Lee, 2006), we argue that individuals tasked with making hiring decisions are also engaging in a risk assessment process. As in many other decisions, the risk is that a “correct” decision, or at least
one that brings the most benefit to the organization, will fail to be made, as well as the risk that such an incorrect decision will bring serious consequences (Cox, 1967; J. W. Taylor, 1974).

In adopting a risk framework, we acknowledge the work of many decision making theorists who have argued that risk behavior is influenced by 1) the larger culture or organization in which decision making is taking place; 2) the particular situational factors associated with the decision, i.e., candidate suitability and 3) the characteristics of the decision maker (Conchar, Zinkhan, Peters, & Olavarrieta, 2004; Cox, 1967; Sitkin & Pablo, 1992). Specifically, we suggest that the hiring decision process includes assessment of two key categories of risk: those risks that are external to the particular candidate being evaluated (termed *exogenous risk*) and those risks associated with the individual characteristics of the candidate (termed *candidate risk*). Further, we argue that assessments of both exogenous risk and candidate risk will be influenced by the particular characteristics and perspective of the decision maker. In the following discussion, we elaborate on each of these elements in more detail, including how assessments of one set of risks may influence assessments of the other set.

**Exogenous Risk**

We suggest that decision makers begin the hiring process by first assessing the exogenous risk associated with the particular position being filled. Herein, we define exogenous risk as the degree to which any given hiring decision will be scrutinized and will impact important organizational outcomes. As is true of other decision making contexts, the importance of making a “correct” choice is not constant across decisions (Bettman, 1973). Within the context of hiring decisions, it is also likely that some decisions will be scrutinized more and the expectation or pressure to hire the “right” person will be greater than for other decisions. Further, decision scrutiny can heighten both process and outcome accountability, which in turn
can drive hiring outcomes (Brtek & Motowidlo, 2002). Whereas process accountability has been found to increase the predictive validity of interview assessments (Brtek & Motowidlo, 2002) and evaluation accuracy (Foschi, 1996), outcome accountability or evaluative pressure (Thomke, 2001) can decrease interview validity as well as reduce the likelihood of making non-normative decisions even when they provide the best outcome (Lee, Edmondson, Thomke, & Worline, 2004). Thus, assessments of exogenous risk can play an important role in influencing hiring decisions.

Assessments of exogenous risk will likely be influenced both by the nature and importance of the position to be filled and by the normative decision making culture of the organization. Hiring decisions for positions that are more critical to the viability of the organization are likely to receive more scrutiny than decisions for those positions deemed to be of peripheral importance. This might be the case when the position is extremely senior in the organization, or when there is only one of that given position (such as a CEO) and therefore, the organization cannot spread its risk of making a bad decision across positions. Likewise, hiring for newly created positions, or those whose permanence or importance has yet to be established may be subject to greater scrutiny than hiring for those that are established. Additionally, the degree to which the hire is viewed as creating an opportunity or minimizing a threat can also impact the risk associated with it (Jackson & Dutton, 1988; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Sitkin & Weingart, 1995).

Culture establishes normative values and influences individuals’ behavior (Hackman, 1992). Consequently, normative values help determine the level and type of scrutiny to which organizational decisions are subjected. Research by Rynes & Gerhardt (1990) confirms that there is greater congruence in assessments of candidates by recruiters from the same firm than
between those from different firms. Presumably a culturally-driven standard exists within organizations, which dictates the qualifications desired of successful candidates for a particular position. The prescriptions of normative values are not limited to decision scrutiny; inherent in such normative values is also the degree to which experimentation or non-normative decision making is encouraged and “incorrect” decisions are tolerated. When individuals are not fearful of reprisal for failure, they are less afraid to discuss mistakes (Edmondson, 1996) and more likely to undertake new tasks (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), both of which may contribute to individuals making decisions that carry higher levels of uncertainty or perceived risk.

In summary, we argue that implicit in any hiring or promotion decision is an assessment of exogenous risk which reflects the nature and importance of the position to be filled, the degree to which the decision will be scrutinized, and the normative culture of the organization. Further, this assessment will have an important influence on the ultimate outcome of the decision process.

**Candidate Risk**

Aided by at least a preliminary assessment of exogenous risk, the decision maker can begin to formulate a standard of “suitability” for the position to be used in assessing candidate risk. While particular employers may consider many different criteria, we suggest that this process would likely involve 1) some type of job analysis to determine the knowledge, skills and abilities required to carry out the job successfully (termed here as *competence*) (Edwards, 1991; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005); 2) an evaluation of the particular values and characteristics that are consistent with the employing organization and previous position holders (termed here as *congruence*) (Chatman, 1991; Kristof-Brown, 2000; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005); and 3) a determination of the required level of affective commitment to the organization (termed here as *commitment*) (Shore, Barksdale, & Shore, 1995). Finally, we argue that after devising
specific standards for competence, congruence and commitment, decision makers’ final assessment of “suitability” will be determined based on the degree to which a candidate meets the specific standards and evokes more generalized feelings of trust, expertise, and liking (termed here as _credibility_) (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1982).

Based upon the initial assessment of exogenous risk and development of a standard of suitability for assessing candidate risk, a group of appropriate candidates can be sought. Depending on the position, this may involve a wide variety of recruitment strategies and sources. A discussion of the recruitment literature is beyond the scope of this article; however, several researchers have written thorough reviews on the topic (Barber, 1998; Breaugh & Starke, 2000). Importantly, all three elements of the process so far – assessment of exogenous risk, development of a standard for suitability, and the actual method used for recruitment – will substantially influence the type of candidates actually considered. Further, the characteristics of the initial candidates identified may also act in the manner of a feedback loop to influence the standard for suitability, such as when an HR manager identifies a “favorite” candidate, or when a position is created for a particular individual. Those individuals that are best positioned with respect to all elements will be most likely to be given the opportunity to be considered for the position. Other individuals who may know about the job opening but do not appear to meet the standards for the position; or individuals who are clearly qualified for the position but do not know about it, may never have the opportunity to be considered for the job. Thus, we refer to the universe of positions which an individual is aware of, is actually qualified for, and is also perceived to be qualified for as the _opportunity structure_ within which an individual is positioned.
Once the decision maker has identified an initial group of candidates for consideration, he or she will evaluate the candidate risk - specifically, the competence, congruence, commitment and credibility – of each person being considered. The processes by which these evaluations are conducted are varied. In some instances candidates are evaluated relative to one another. In others the candidates are, at least ostensibly, compared to an objective standard, although in reality, it is likely that the assessments of any one candidate would be anchored by the perceived qualities of another (Highhouse & Gallo, 1997; Jagacinski, 1991; Slaughter, Bagger, & Li, 2006). Further, the weighting of the component criteria in assessments of suitability will vary depending on the organizational context in which the hiring is being conducted. Research on risky decision making suggests that the more uncertainty there is about a candidate’s suitability, the “riskier” a hire the candidate will be perceived to be, independent of the exogenous risk associated with the hiring decision (Cox, 1967; Thaler, 1991). In this way, candidate risk mediates the relationship between assessments of suitability and the decision to hire any particular individual. Further, assessments of exogenous risk act as a moderator on the relationship between the level of candidate risk and the decision to hire; when the exogenous risk is higher, an individual with a certain level of candidate risk will be less likely to be hired and vice versa. Thus, as illustrated in Figure 1 below, the determination to hire results from the decision maker’s assessment of candidate risk within the context of the perceived exogenous risk associated with the decision.

- Insert Figure 1 about here –

**Decision Maker Characteristics**
Finally, we argue that one last element of the hiring decision process must be considered. For a more entry level position, the decision maker referred to above may be an HR manager or perhaps a middle manager within a division of the company; for a more senior position, the decision maker may be another senior executive, a CEO or even a member or members of the board of directors. Whatever the specific attributes and attitudes of this person, the key point is that the particular constellation of characteristics that define an individual does affect the hiring decisions that they make. No two individuals will perceive the same decision as carrying the exact same level of risk; in other words, risk is perceptual and depends upon the vantage point of the decision maker (Cox, 1967). This suggests that individual decision makers will diverge in their perception of both exogenous risk and candidate risk. First, individuals diverge in their desire to make the “best” decision versus any reasonable decision (Staw, Bell, & Clausen, 1986). Some individuals are driven to deliver the best outcomes given the time and resources available; others are content to settle upon the first reasonable solution that emerges. Beyond personal motivation, individuals diverge in the amount of risk they perceive in any situation (i.e., risk perception), their willingness to assume risk in general (i.e., risk affinity), and their willingness to assume risk in specific instances (i.e., risk propensity). Researchers have found that individuals’ risk tolerance is affected by their personality characteristics (Nicholson, Soane, Fenton-O'Creevy, & Willman, 2005), gender (Arch, 1993), personal experience with risky decisions (Forlani, Mullins, & Walker, 2002; Sitkin & Weingart, 1995; L. A. Taylor, Hall, Cosier, & Goodwin, 1996); as well as their sense of self-efficacy regarding the current decision outcome (Krueger & Dickinson, 1994; Locander & Hermann, 1979) and the degree to which they expect to regret their decision (Thaler, 1991).
Furthermore, individuals consider how others will evaluate their risk-related behaviors. Individuals with higher status and power are often less concerned about the perceptions of others (Depret & Fiske, 1999) and are afforded more idiosyncratic credit to deviate from decision making norms (E. P. Hollander, 1958). Consequently, one might imagine that the higher the status of an individual the more willing they might be to act on their own preferences, assuming the risk of making non-traditional decisions and unafraid of being perceived as biased toward similar others (Loyd, 2006). Finally, the number of people responsible for making the hiring decision will affect the amount of risk assumed. Specifically, groups have been found to assume levels of risk in their decision making that individual decision makers are unwilling undertake (Neale, Bazerman, Northcraft, & Alperson, 1986).

In summary, we argue that the specific combination of characteristics, personality, desires and perceptions of any given decision maker will interact with the particular characteristics of the candidate and the position at hand to have a potentially important influence on the decision outcome. In this way, the particular characteristics of the decision maker act as a moderator on assessments of both candidate risk and exogenous risk.

**PATH TO THE TOP**

Having delineated the key elements of the hiring decision process, we now shift perspective to that of the individual professional attempting to reach the level of senior executive. For any such professional, the hiring and promotion decision making process described above is likely to occur repeatedly throughout the span of a career. We argue that it is the accumulated effects of these key decisions that ultimately determine whether an individual makes it “to the top”. Specifically, each hiring or promotion decision individually affects the set of future opportunities open to the individual. These include the chance to develop greater
human capital, credibility, network contacts and sponsors; to demonstrate commitment to company and career; and to attain the characteristics and skills of a successful executive, all of which will be required to move further up the corporate ladder. When an individual fails to be hired, these same opportunities may either be delayed or ultimately, closed off. Further, those individuals that are repeatedly denied advancement may become discouraged and as a result, opt to invest in areas in which they receive positive reinforcement, rather than struggling to succeed in areas in which they are made to feel deficient (Fels, 2004). Additionally, the pattern of historical hiring decisions in any one organization or industry is likely to influence hiring norms and impact the assessments of exogenous risk associated with future hiring decisions. Thus, we argue that it is this larger career-spanning process that ultimately determines who makes it to the top.

**DIFFERENCES IN THE DECISION PROCESS: MEN VS. WOMEN**

With the proposed model for executive advancement in mind, we now turn to consider how some of the processes underlying the model may operate differently for women and men, resulting in substantially different outcomes. First, we make a few comments on gender. Ridgeway and Correll (2004: 510) describe gender as “an institutionalized system of social practices for constituting people as two significantly different categories, men and women, and organizing social relations of inequality on the basis of that difference”. For example, according to status characteristics theory, individuals hold the diffuse belief that women are less competent than men, and as a result, assign women to a lower status position than men (Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977). Importantly, while this system of gender beliefs is always at work as a “background identity in social relational contexts” (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004: 516), its influence will vary depending on the salience of gender in any given situation. For example,
contexts in which the tasks are particularly gender-typed, or where there is a predominance of individuals of one gender (such as in many professional contexts), might result in gender being particularly salient, while in situations in which groups are comprised of one gender, are carrying out a gender-neutral task, or are gender balanced in composition, gender may slip into the background and have no impact (Mullen, 1991; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004b; S. E. Taylor, 1981). When activated, however, these institutionalized gender beliefs can have a powerful influence, biasing “the extent to which a woman, compared to a similar man, asserts herself in the situation, the attention she receives, her influence, the quality of her performances, the way she is evaluated, and her own and others’ inferences about her abilities at the tasks that are central to the context” (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004: 519).

We emphasize these dynamics for two reasons. First, as the dominant basis for categorization across virtually all social contexts (Zemore, Fiske, & Kim, 2000), gender is ubiquitous as at least a background identity in virtually all contexts and all interactions. As such, as we consider the processes occurring within any given organization or to any particular individual, we must always recognize that those organizations and individuals (and their particular cultures and identities) are operating within a broader social context that is rife with powerful, institutionalized gender beliefs. Second, because women are in the minority in most professional contexts, gender is nearly always salient in interactions and therefore strongly or subtly influencing behavior, expectations, and outcomes.

**Decision Maker Characteristics – Considering Gender**

We argued above that the specific combination of characteristics, personality, desires and perceptions of any given decision maker will interact with the particular characteristics of the candidate and the position at hand to have a potentially important influence on the decision
outcome. We believe that several characteristics of decision makers will be of particular importance in determining their assessments of exogenous risk, willingness to assume risk, and the relative evaluations of male and female candidates; specifically, the gender of the decision maker; their status, perception of self-efficacy and tolerance for making risky decisions within the context of the organization; and the particular gender beliefs that they hold (Loyd, 2006). Further, as discussed in more detail below, several studies have demonstrated that women’s lack of similarity to organizational decision-makers who are often male tends to disadvantage them in selection and evaluation decisions (Graves & Powell, 1996; Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989; Westphal & Zajac, 1995). Even when decision makers are female and thus may feel more similar to female candidates and thus evaluate them more favorably than would male decision makers, their own tenuous positions may make them less likely to advocate for non-traditional hires. First, these female decision makers may themselves be subjected to doubts about their competence, fit, commitment or overall credibility. Second, since they are often token representatives of their gender, their decisions may be subject to a higher level of scrutiny (Kanter, 1977), thus dampening their willingness to take on the risk of sponsoring another “unusual” female hire.

Proposition 1. Decision maker gender will affect the assessments of both candidate risk and the exogenous risk perceived to be associated with a position.

Candidate Risk – Considering Gender

In considering the impact of gender on assessments of candidate risk, we draw heavily upon existing research which has identified many “small inequalities” between the evaluation of men and women in the workplace. While the size of these differences may be small enough so as to individually seem trivial, because these inequalities are embedded in the decision processes that occur time and again throughout a career, they gradually compound to create the large
differences in observed outcomes discussed above. This process, known in the field of sociology as the “accumulation of advantage and disadvantage,” highlights the importance of identifying even small incidents of bias, “because they add up to major inequalities” (Valian, 1998).

As discussed above, at least four key elements are considered when assessing an individual’s suitability for employment or promotion: the individual’s likely competence at meeting the requirements of the job; their congruence with the industry type, job type, decision-maker and subordinates associated with the position; the degree of commitment that the individual is expected to have to the employer and job; and their overall credibility. In this section, we will look at the gender dynamics associated with each of the four elements and how a gendered view of risk interacts with this gendered assessment of suitability to ultimately affect hiring decisions.

**Competence.** Most evaluations of an individual for hire or promotion include an assessment of that person’s likely competence at performing the position in question. Thus, examining the way in which competence is evaluated and attributed differently for men and women is crucial to understanding their divergent career paths and outcomes.

With regard to the evaluation of competence, the disadvantaged position of women is both empirically well-established and many fold. Status characteristics theory is an important extension of expectations-states theory, which predicts that status within a group is determined by the relative competence-based performance expectations of the members of the group (Berger et al., 1977). According to the theory, certain attributes (known as “status characteristics”) such as gender, race, age or social class are associated with varying levels of task competence, such that individuals possessing one level of the attribute (i.e. men) are considered to be more competent and of higher status than individuals possessing the other level.
of the attribute (i.e. women). When individuals within a group differ on some status characteristic, they use this difference as the basis for assigning expectations about future performance to each individual. As a result of these different performance expectations, individuals with higher status and expectations are given more opportunities to contribute to the group, their contributions are considered more and evaluated more highly and they are able to exert greater influence (Berger et al., 1977). In this way, the interaction of status characteristics, expectations and opportunities serves to create a “self-fulfilling prophecy” in which the initial low performance expectations for lower status group members such as women, become reality (Ridgeway, 2001). As discussed above, importantly, these expectations and associated assessments of status are formed around status characteristics only when the characteristics are differentiating attributes of group members and therefore, are salient. Consistent with status characteristics theory, substantial empirical research has demonstrated that women are believed to be less competent than men, both with respect to tasks in general but even more so with respect to tasks that are typically male-typed (Carli & Eagly, 1999; Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill, 1977; Wood & Karten, 1986). Importantly, these beliefs are held by both men and women, suggesting that they influence external evaluations of women by both men and women, as well as men’s and women’s own self-evaluations.

Adding to the assumption of lower competence with which women must contend, research has shown that the same level of performance by a woman is often evaluated more negatively than that of a man (Heilman, 1983; Nieva & Gutek, 1980). This is particularly true when evaluators are provided with ambiguous or insufficient information about the quality of performance (Heilman, 1995, 2001; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; Nieva & Gutek, 1980; Tosi & Einbender, 1985) or in situations such as hiring decisions, where the evaluators are
required to make inferences about future performance from past behavior (Nieva & Gutek, 1980). In these instances, faced with uncertainty, individuals tend to fall back on stereotypes in making evaluations – stereotypes that typically disadvantage women. It is also particularly true with respect to evaluation of women’s performance at male-typed tasks (Swim, Borgida, Maruyama, & Myers, 1989) and when women are significantly in the minority (Heilman, 1980; Sackett, Dubois, & Noe, 1991; Valian, 1998). In both of these instances, gender is especially salient, triggering low-status beliefs about women and highlighting the inconsistency of their task-role with the role prescribed for women.

Beliefs about the lesser competence of women can also affect actual performance, both as a result of external limitations on women’s opportunities and due to women’s own negative self-perceptions. In task groups, women are given fewer opportunities to contribute, are listened to less, and are evaluated less favorably, all of which create a self-fulfilling prophecy in which women actually demonstrate poorer performance (Ridgeway, 2001). Similarly, several field studies have shown that women are less likely to be offered challenging positions (Ohlott, Ruderman, & McCauley, 1994), less likely to hold line positions (Olson, Frieze, & Good, 1987), and less likely to be promoted into positions with unfamiliar responsibilities (Ruderman, Ohlott, & Kram, 1996). One explanation provided for these findings is that employers are cautious about taking risks on women and therefore, less likely to give them “stretch” assignments (Lyness & Thompson, 2000; Ruderman et al., 1996). Furthermore, research indicates that women are more likely than men to temporarily step off of the career path in order to meet family needs, either as the result of children or due to geographical moves that favor their spouses’ careers (Gallese, 1985; Powell & Mainiero, 1992; Strober, 1982). Both of these events can result in women garnering less experience in the workforce and fewer opportunities for
advancement, particularly as women must newly re-establish their credibility each time they move into a new position or company. Whatever the reason, the long-term effect of these differences in opportunities is that women are less likely to develop human capital – capital that is crucial to reaching the highest executive levels.

In addition to the effects on performance from external factors, the negative status beliefs that women hold about themselves can also decrease performance. Steele and Aronson’s (1995) work on stereotype threat accounts for this phenomenon, explaining that when individuals are aware of broadly held negative stereotypes about their group’s intelligence, they may experience self-threat due to fear of confirming or being evaluated by this negative stereotype. This self-evaluative threat in turn may cause arousal, self-consciousness, frustration, or divert attention away from the task at hand, thus resulting in poorer performance on the task. Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated the effects of stereotype threat. In one study, female subjects who were told that women score poorly on a math test performed worse than male subjects on the test, while female subjects who were told that there were no gender differences on the test scored the same as the male subjects (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999). Another study by Shih, Pittinsky and Ambady (1999) showed that when Asian women were threatened with negative stereotypes about women’s poor math ability, they under-performed on a math test, while when the same group was primed with positive stereotypes about Asian’s excellent math ability, they outperformed on the same test.

In addition to lower expectations and evaluations of women’s performance, Foschi (2000) and Foddy & Smithson (1999) each have proposed that a “double standard” is applied to women when assessing the presence or lack of ability at a task. According to these empirically well-established theories (Foschi, 1996; Foschi, Lai, & Sigerson, 1994; Foschi, Sigerson, &
Lembesis, 1995), because women are expected to be less competent than men, their performance is subject to greater scrutiny and they are required to provide more evidence in order to be deemed competent. Conversely, when women demonstrate poor performance, they are more quickly deemed to be incompetent than a man who, presumed competent, might be given the “benefit of the doubt”. Further, they argue that double standards are only activated when gender becomes associated with the task at hand and is therefore salient (Foschi, 2000).

Finally, once women have demonstrated success, they face yet one more obstacle – the tendency of both observers and women themselves to attribute causality for successful performance to factors other than ability. Since ability attributions are important indicators of future job performance and thus useful to supervisors in making both hiring decisions and determining promotions, they may represent an important additional factor that limits the career advancement of women (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1993; Pazy, 1986). Several studies have found that women’s success on male-typed tasks was attributed to luck (Cash, Gillen, & Burns, 1977; Deaux & Emswiller, 1974) or to effort (Etaugh & Brown, 1975; Feldman & Kiesler, 1974) while men’s success was attributed to ability. Similarly, in the case of unsuccessful performance, attributions of lack of ability were more likely to be made for women than for men (Cash et al., 1977; Deaux & Emswiller, 1974).

In summary, women are believed to be less competent than men and thus are given fewer opportunities to disprove this belief and develop greater human capital; their actual performance is evaluated less favorably than men’s; they are held to a higher standard for proving their competence such that the same level of competence that proves ability for a man may not prove ability for a women; and their success is more likely to be attributed to unstable or external factors such as luck and ease of task.
Proposition 2. *In hiring decisions, at a given objective level of competence, men will be deemed more competent than women.*

**Congruence.** The impact of congruence between individuals and their work environments on employee attitudes and behavior and organizational outcomes has been the subject of study for more than 100 years (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Lewin, 1935; Murray, 1938; Parsons, 1909; Pervin, 1968). Initially, “person-environment” fit was broadly defined as “the compatibility between an individual and a work environment that occurs when their characteristics are well matched” (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005: 281). Over the last few decades, however, the multidimensional nature of fit has now been clearly acknowledged and variously includes the study of person-organization fit, person-group fit, person-job fit and person-supervisor fit (Law, Wong, & Mobley, 1998). In their extensive meta-analysis of the field, Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson (2005: 325) found “conclusive evidence that fit matters to applicants, recruiters and employees. It influences their attitudes, decisions and behaviors in the work domain” including effects on performance, turnover, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, satisfaction with coworkers and satisfaction with supervisors. Disconcertingly, however, they also found that while recruiters’ employment decisions are heavily influenced by perceptions of fit, “these perceptions have little, if any, connection to reality” and that instead, “they are more likely to reflect the ‘similar-to-me’ bias than true fit with the organization’s culture” (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005: 319). It is against this backdrop that we consider how considerations of congruence - both actual and even more importantly, *perceived* congruence - with organization, job, employee group, supervisor and recruiter affect the relative likelihood of career advancement for men and women.
Even after accounting for different assessments of the competence of men and women, perceptions of congruence (or the lack thereof) can influence the likelihood of a woman being hired. For example, even when a decision maker has determined that an individual is perfectly competent, that decision maker still may have concerns about whether the individual “feels right” for the job. Consistent with Byrne’s (1971) similarity-attraction paradigm, this lack of “comfort” is more likely to arise when the individual has different characteristics or beliefs than the decision maker. Simply put, people are more attracted to those that are like themselves.

Similarly, research on intergroup attitudes and behavior has demonstrated that individuals tend to favor “in-group” members, i.e. people who they perceive to be like themselves, over “out-group” members (Brewer & Kramer, 1985).

Both of these research paradigms – similarity attraction and intergroup research – suggest that women will often be disadvantaged in hiring and promotion due to their lack of congruence and out-group status relative to decision makers. This should be particularly true in highly male-dominated fields and at the most senior levels of those fields, as the individuals making hiring decisions are likely to be disproportionately male and therefore, more likely to unconsciously favor males over females. Empirical research with respect to this prediction has been mixed. Tsui and O’Reilly (1989), in their study of performance evaluation in superior/subordinate dyads, found that subordinates were rated more poorly and less liked when they were a different gender from their superior; and a field study by Graves and Powell (1996) found that female recruiters favored female applicants over male applicants. Further, in allocating power at the highest levels of the corporate world – board of director selection – Westphal and Zajac (1995) found that CEOs and existing directors were more likely to select new directors demographically similar to them, thus perpetuating the preponderance of older white males in the board room. In
contrast, Davison & Burke’s (2000) meta-analysis found that although males received higher ratings when the evaluator was male, they also received higher ratings when the evaluator was female; therefore, they concluded that the predictions could not be confirmed. However, an alternative interpretation might suggest that gender based in-group bias was present, but for females, was masked by other effects such as generalized beliefs about women’s lower competence and status that affect assessments of women by both males and females.

Another example of how women’s perceived lack of fit serves to disadvantage women in management is provided by research on the “manager-as-male” stereotype. Since the 1970’s numerous studies have demonstrated that individuals do not perceive women as possessing the characteristics of a typical manager (Schein, 1973, 1975; Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996). Further, Heilman, Block, Martell and Simon (1989) showed that even when comparing the category of “female successful middle manager” to the typical “successful middle manager”, participants still differentiated between men and women, with successful female middle managers rated significantly less likely to possess “leadership abilities” than a comparable male. In addition, introducing the qualities “successful” and “manager” to describe women, while increasing their correspondence with successful middle managers, also caused participants to rate them as more likely to possess certain negative qualities such “bitter, quarrelsome and selfish” (Heilman et al., 1989).

Proposition 3. In hiring decisions in male-dominated contexts, women will be perceived as less congruent with industry/job type, subordinates and decision makers than men, resulting in a lower assessment of fit.

Commitment. Affective organizational commitment has been linked to many key individual outcomes (Hunt & Morgan, 1994; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002;
Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982; Shore et al., 1995). In particular, those individuals who are highly committed perform better (Meyer et al., 2002), are more likely to be promoted (Cannings & Montmarquette, 1991), exhibit more prosocial behavior, and are less likely to harbor intentions to quit (Hunt & Morgan, 1994). Moreover, managers’ assessments of employees’ affective commitment has been shown to be positively related to evaluations of those employees’ future potential and likelihood of promotion (Shore et al., 1995).

Recently, there has been increasingly vocal skepticism regarding women’s commitment to paid work (Belkin, 2003; Mero & Sellers, 2003; Wallis, 2004). Several factors seem to underlie this perception, including the direct conflict between social conceptions of the ideal worker and social conceptions of a good wife and mother; the increasing tendency of professional women to exit the labor force in order to meet family needs; and the fact that individuals’ commitment to their workplace tends to decrease when they are less demographically similar to their co-workers. According to traditional social norms, mothers are expected to be the primary caretaker of children and thus, are held to higher standards of involvement and commitment to parenting than men (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997). In other words, the “good mother” is expected to always be available to her children, prioritizing their needs above all other endeavors (Hays, 1996). These expectations of the mother role are in direct conflict with idealized notions of the ideal worker, who is thought to be disembodied and unencumbered by the burden of anything other than work (Acker, 1990); in other words, always available to the employer and its needs. As a result of these social norms, regardless of the actual productivity and effort expended in their jobs, mothers are often perceived as being less committed employees. In addition to the perception that mothers expend less effort at work than fathers, recent experimental research has shown that mothers are also assumed to be less
competent than non-mothers (Correll, Benard, & Paik, In press; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004) and a survey study of potential future employers supported these findings by demonstrating that mothers were significantly less likely to be called back for an interview than non-mothers (Correll et al., in press). In both studies, fathers were not similarly disadvantaged and in some instances, were advantaged by their status as parents. Of course, not all women in the workforce are or will eventually become mothers. However, it has been suggested that because of the very close association between traditional stereotypes of women and those of mothers, even women who are not mothers may be associated with or suspected of becoming mothers in the future, thus, tainting them with the motherhood stereotype of being less committed and less competent (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004a).

A second dynamic contributing to the perception of women as less committed is the fact that despite the greater educational and career opportunities that women have today, some women, challenged by the complexities of balancing work and family, “opt out” and choose to focus exclusively on managing their family. By some accounts, this “proves” that women are less committed; further, this interpretation has often been generalized to cast suspicion on all women, regardless of their individual desires and circumstances. However, behind this somewhat simplistic explanation is a quite complex set of processes. While men face similar challenges of balancing career and family, the gender system operates differently on men and women. First, as discussed above, women are likely to experience a greater level of conflict between work demands and family demands, whether they arise from children, other caretaking responsibilities such as for aging parents, or due to the simple existence of strong social norms about what women should be like. Second, for women, divestment of their career and work role is regarded by society as a tenable – perhaps preferable – option, while for men withdrawal from
paid work is regarded as largely unacceptable and likely to be met with substantial negative consequences. In other words, underlying the opt-out phenomenon is a dynamic in which women are pulled toward familial roles by positive feedback and the social glorification of motherhood and simultaneously pushed away from paid work by being derided for being ambitious (Fels, 2004), through (realistically) lower expectations of being promoted (Cannings, 1988; Cannings & Montmarquette, 1991), and as a result of the lower monetary value they assign to their work-related efforts (Major & Konar, 1984). Likewise, men are told that their sense of worth should be derived from their work or career related accomplishments and are therefore pulled to remain at work (Fels, 2004). Despite the many factors contributing to the exit of some professional women from the workplace, this trend has often been simplistically attributed to women’s lack of commitment, ambition, and desire for power (Belkin, 2003; Mero & Sellers, 2003; Wallis, 2004).

Although women’s higher levels of withdrawal from the job market as compared with men has contributed to a perception that women are less committed to their careers (Hewlett & Luce, 2005), several studies suggest that working women are frequently no less committed to their jobs than men (Cannings & Montmarquette, 1991; Hymnowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). Potentially helpful in explaining these inconsistencies is research showing that the gender composition of the workplace impacts individuals’ commitment, with women being more committed than men in predominantly female organizations (Hrebinia & Alutto, 1972) and men more committed than females in male dominated organizations (Aranya, Kushnir, & Valency, 1986). These findings are consistent with later research showing that individuals’ demographic fit within their immediate work group affects organizational attachment as measured by number of absences, psychological commitment and intent to stay with the organization (Jackson, Brett,
Sessa, Cooper, Julin, & Peyronnin, 1991; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992). Given that many organizations are predominantly male and the number of women further diminishes at higher levels of the organizational hierarchy, it seems plausible that as women advance in their organizations and become more and more demographically isolated, this isolation may contribute to a diminishment in their level of commitment.

**Proposition 4. In hiring decisions, female candidates will be perceived as less committed to their work than male candidates.**

**Credibility.** We extend to the hiring context Hovland et al.'s (1982) construal of credibility as the trust, perceived expertise, and liking of an individual, by specifically defining candidate credibility as the believability and legitimacy of an individual’s credentials and future potential. Consequently, we suggest that credibility is both a function of perceptions of an individual’s competence, congruence and commitment, and a contributing factor to those perceptions. For example, an individual that is assessed to be highly competent, a strong fit, and clearly committed to career and organization is more likely to be seen as a credible and legitimate contender for corporate advancement than someone lacking in those qualities. Conversely, if an individual is seen as credible, perhaps due to the support of an external sponsor, assessments of their competence, congruence and commitment may benefit from a positive bias. Credibility has been identified by many researchers as both crucial to the advancement of women, and at the same time, a quality which women often are lacking (Burt, 1998; Carli, 2001; E. Hollander, 1992; Ridgeway, 2001; Valian, 1998; Yoder, 2001; Yoder, Schleicher, & McDonald, 1998). According to status characteristics theory, this credibility gap results from generalized beliefs about the lower competence and status of women (Ridgeway & Berger, 1986). Because low status individuals lack credibility, when they attempt to assert
authority over others – a necessary function of any high level executive - instead of being viewed as competent, their behavior is seen as an illegitimate attempt to gain influence or power (Carli, 2001). Social role theory similarly predicts that women will be seen as illegitimate in leadership roles because behavior required of a leader is seen as inconsistent with the behavior prescribed for the female gender role (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Several empirical studies have demonstrated women’s credibility problem in asserting authority over others and assuming leadership positions. One study found that women were less persuasive when using assertive speech (Carli, 1990), while another study found that women are liked less when they behave competently, and as a result, are also less influential (Carli, Loeber, & Lafleur, 1995). With respect to leadership, meta-analyses by Eagly and colleagues found that female leaders were evaluated less favorably than equivalent male leaders, particularly when they used an autocratic leadership style (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992); and that female leaders were rated as less effective than male leaders, particularly in male-dominated fields (Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995).

Sponsorship by a high-status third party is one important method of achieving credibility and legitimacy within an organization. Although sponsorship has been shown to be effective for both men and women (Brown & Geis, 1984), we argue that it is particularly vital to women due to their built-in credibility gap. As Valian argued, “Males tend to be perceived as the norm against which females are measured” (Valian, 1998: 111). Men, then, are in most contexts by definition credible; because they are expected to be credible, the default for evaluating their qualifications is to take them at face value. Women do not benefit from this automatic “benefit of the doubt”. Several experimental studies support the view that external legitimation aids evaluations and effectiveness of female leaders more than male leaders (DeMatteo, Dobbins,
Myers, & Facteau, 1996; Hogue, Yoder, & Ludwig, 2002). In one study, low evaluations of females’ leadership traits, effectiveness, and whether to replace or retain the leader were significantly improved when the leader’s performance was externally legitimated by the experimenter (DeMatteo et al., 1996). In two other studies, Yoder and colleagues found women leaders were effective in influencing their all-male groups only after being legitimated by a male experimenter (Yoder et al., 1998); and that when no reason was given for the appointment of a woman leader, subjects sought out additional justification for the appointment, while for a man’s appointment they did not, suggesting that women are more in need of sponsorship and legitimization than men (Hogue et al., 2002).

Additional research has shown that legitimacy may be derived from unequivocal demonstrations of performance ability (Pugh & Wahrman, 1983). Within the domain of hiring decisions the clearest evidence of ability to perform is provided by success in a position similar to the one for which the candidate is being considered. Not surprisingly, research on the evaluation of faculty job candidates revealed that female candidates were evaluated less favorably than similarly accomplished male candidates for tenured positions when they did not already hold tenure at their current institution, but this difference disappeared when candidates had already been promoted to tenure (Steinpreis, Anders, & Ritzke, 1999). One might argue that possession of tenure (i.e., having been legitimated) served as an indicator of organizational sponsorship. In the absence of such legitimation, respected organizational members may need to vouch for candidates.

There is also some suggestive empirical support from a field context. First, in a study of the networks of high- and low-performing male and female managers, Ibarra (1997) found that high-performing women relied more heavily on strong ties (ties that are generally closer, more
stable and reciprocal, such as those with a sponsor or mentor) than all men and non-high-performing women. To explain this finding, Ibarra suggested that for women, strong ties are more instrumentally effective than weak ties because they “help women to counteract the effect of bias, gender-typed expectations, and contested legitimacy” (Ibarra, 1997: 99). In another study, Burt (1998) found that women who built their social networks around a high-status organizational sponsor were promoted earlier than women who built their networks directly. In contrast, men were able to successfully rely on self-constructed networks. Like Ibarra, Burt concluded that the most plausible explanation for his finding was women’s lack of legitimacy within the focal organization of his study.

Proposition 5. In hiring decisions, at a given objective level of competence, congruence, and commitment, men will be deemed more credible than women.

Proposition 6. In hiring decisions, sponsorship or having previously occupied a comparable position will increase perceived candidate credibility more for female candidates than for male candidates.

Against this backdrop of subtle but pervasive bias in the evaluation of women’s competence, congruence, commitment and credibility, it is no great leap to suggest that an individual decision maker considering hiring two candidates of equal objective caliber – one a woman and one a man – would conclude, based solely on the individual characteristics of the two candidates, that the woman is subjectively less qualified. And, because there is greater uncertainty about a less qualified individual’s ability to “get the job done,” hiring this “less qualified” woman is a riskier proposition for the organization and the decision maker (Cox, 1967; Dowling & Staelin, 1994; J. W. Taylor, 1974).
Proposition 7. In hiring decisions, female candidates will be perceived as carrying higher risk than male candidates.

Proposition 8. In hiring decisions, female candidates will be less likely to be hired than male candidates.

Exogenous Risk – Considering Gender

After assessing a candidate’s risk, the decision maker must return to his or her initial assessment of the exogenous risk associated with the position, considering the larger organizational context in which the hiring decision is embedded. As discussed above, the degree of scrutiny and pressure to hire the “right” person will likely be influenced both by the normative decision making culture of the organization and by the position to be filled. Given that women typically represent a small minority of executives in most business contexts, they often will be considered “non-traditional” hires by most organizational gatekeepers. Thus, the organizational norms around making non-traditional hires may be an important determinant of whether or not women will be disadvantaged in the hiring process.

In assessing the exogenous risk associated with filling an executive position, the decision maker might consider the views of other members of management, members of the board of directors, shareholders, employees and even the media – all people, who as members of society, are likely to hold gender beliefs about the way that men and women are and should be. Collectively, some or all of these constituencies might wonder whether the women candidates are ever sufficiently competent and appropriate for such a senior position when so few other women have been in the past. Since making a non-traditional hire will generate less scrutiny when norms are tolerant of experimentation or at the very least, lenient in punishing failure (Gittell, 2000; Thomke, 2001), we expect that women will be less disadvantaged in organizations
with such norms. Further, even when firms lack cultural norms that encourage experimentation, organizational decision makers may be discouraged from perpetuating traditional practices as old ways become obsolete, new types of human capital are demanded, lawsuits are brought forth, regulatory pressures demand adherence to governmental standards, and internal pressure is received from vocal organizational constituents lobbying for candidates with particular characteristics (Paulin & Mellor, 1996). Conversely, in the absence of these other pressures, in organizations with cultures that do not reward experimentation and which exhibit high levels of evaluative pressure, decisions to hire non-traditional candidates will be subjected to a greater level of scrutiny than decisions to hire traditional candidates.

Proposition 9. The effects of perceived candidate risk on hiring decisions will be moderated by the amount of exogenous risk associated with the hiring decision.

It Only Gets Worse…

Substantial evidence suggests that with respect to both assessments of candidate risk and exogenous risk, the many biases discussed above become magnified as women move up the career ladder and attempt to enter the executive suite. First, as positions become broader in nature and thus more poorly defined, hiring and promotion decisions necessarily become more subjective and greater inference is required to predict future performance (Nieva & Gutek, 1980). In these instances, women tend to be disadvantaged as in the absence of clear indicators, individuals fall back on tried and true stereotypes. Second, as women progress through the management ranks, the incongruence between their gender and the stereotypical requirements of the positions for which they are being considered tends to increase (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1993; Lyness & Thompson, 1997). Third, as women advance, they become more and more of a statistical rarity. Since multiple studies have found that women are
evaluated less favorably than men when they are significantly in the minority, the simple fact of numbers may work to exacerbate bias against women as they achieve higher degrees of success (Heilman, 1980; Sackett et al., 1991; Valian, 1998). Fourth, the exogenous risk associated with a hiring decision should also increase as the importance of the position increases. We would expect this heightened exogenous risk to further exacerbate the perception of candidate risk associated with women versus men.

Proposition 10. In hiring decisions, as the seniority of the executive position increases, the disadvantages of female versus male candidates with respect to both assessments of candidate and exogenous risk will increase.

EFFECTS ACROSS A CAREER

Differences in the Opportunity Structure: Men vs. Women

As outlined in our model, hiring and promotion decisions made in the past influence the opportunities available for future jobs and promotions; in order to be considered for a position as a managing director, an individual must first have served and proved successful as a vice president. Over a lifetime, this process can compound to create very different opportunity structures for men and women. Other factors also contribute to this disparity, including differences in the development and composition of men’s and women’s social networks (Cannings & Montmarquette, 1991; Ibarra, 1993; Cabrera & Thomas-Hunt, in press); social prescriptions which encourage men to negotiate on their own behalf and actively promote themselves while discouraging women from doing so (Babcock & Laschever, 2003); the fact that women are more likely than men to temporarily step off the career path in order to meet family needs (Gallese, 1985; Powell & Mainiero, 1992; Strober, 1982); and self-selection processes in which women either initially choose to pursue different careers than men (Correll, 2004) or later
choose to “opt-out” of further career advancement or paid labor altogether (Hewlett & Luce, 2005). In addition, the many biases at work during the hiring decision process described above should also work to disadvantage women as they compete to be considered for a position in the first place; in other words, gatekeepers such as headhunters and individuals in referral networks will likely share the same biases that are exhibited by decision makers at actual employers.

**Recap: The Accumulation of Small Differences**

Having taken a closer look at how each of the processes underlying our model operates differently for men and women as they attempt to access the executive suite, we can now take a broader perspective to understand how what appear to be small biases and differences can accumulate to create large inequities in the representation of women in leadership positions across U.S. society. What may begin as a similar opportunity structure for men and women leads into a decision process that is biased against women, both in how individual candidate suitability is assessed and with respect to the risks ascribed to hiring a woman. As a result of this bias, a slight difference in the opportunity structure of men and women is created, leading to a small difference in who is considered for the next opportunity. When that next hiring or promotion decision is made, perhaps again reflecting small biases, we are now well on our way to large, systemic inequities which perhaps seem to arise out of nowhere. Insidiously, as women gradually sense that their opportunities are narrowing, some may elect to opt-out entirely, while others rein in their ambitions and aspirations – further limiting the pool of women who are qualified for upward advancement. And so it goes. Until finally, the flow of women toward the executive suite, hampered by a complex, implicit, interactional system of gender beliefs, is gradually slowed to a trickle.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**
Using our proposed model and drawing extensively upon existing gender research, we have suggested a series of propositions that may help to explicate the processes contributing to the under-representation of women in leadership positions across U.S. society. Some of these propositions are solidly grounded in well-established theory and empirical research while others are more speculative in nature and clearly require further evidence. Areas in particular need of empirical research include examination of the congruence between women’s perceived and actual commitment, the relative impact of credibility on perceptions of male and female candidates, and the broader assessment and differential ascription of risk to female candidates for hire.

A common theme throughout both academic literature and the popular press is that professional women have a credibility problem; their accomplishments and abilities are suspect and they are often taken less seriously than their male counterparts. As discussed previously, one solution frequently proffered to combat this problem is for women to actively develop influential “sponsors” that can lend both legitimacy and access to their informal social networks. Whereas both the existence of this credibility gap and the suggested solution seem plausible, much of the work in this area has focused solely on the benefit of sponsorship to women without considering as a comparison, the benefits of sponsorship to men (Burt, 1998; Hogue et al., 2002; Yoder, 2001). Since sponsorship should also accrue to the benefit of men, future research investigating the relative benefit of such relationships for men versus women would be of particular use. Similarly, while recently a number of researchers have conducted empirical work exploring women’s commitment to their careers (Fels, 2004; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005), clearly additional research is needed to disentangle what is simply mass perception of women’s commitment and what is reality. Further, we need to gain a better
understanding of the factors that push women away from the workplace and pull them elsewhere, removing talented, ambitious women from the path of executive advancement.

Finally, given the interactive and cumulative nature of the processes we have elaborated herein, it is crucial that future research explores the dynamics between processes; we welcome research, for example, that attempts to understand how decision makers’ separate evaluations of candidate risk and exogenous risk combine to influence one another; how assessments of an individual’s credibility affects assessments of their competence and commitment and vice versa; and how all of these processes cumulatively and differently affect the perceptions, aspirations, and decisions of men and women. While research investigating individual aspects of our model have been and will continue to be valuable for improving our understanding of why there are so few women at the top, we believe that even more vital is research that explicitly acknowledges and explores the risk associated with these component processes considering them as part of one larger system in which accumulated disadvantages are promoted by each and compounding effects are derived from their simultaneous interactions.
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FIGURE 1
An Illustration of the Risk Model of Executive Advancement

Decision Process

Opportunity Structure
Yes
No

Assessment of Suitability
-Competence
-Congruence
-Commitment
-Credibility

Candidate Risk (mediator)
(-)

Decision Maker Characteristics (moderator)

Exogenous Risk (moderator)
(-)

Decision to Hire
Yes
No