

RESEARCH COLLOQUIUM

Organization & Management (Host: Jone Pearce)

Tuesday, November 10th, 2009

The Accumulation of Disadvantage: The Impact of Perceptual Diffusion on Career Advancement

SPEAKER: Barbara Lawrence

UNIVERSITY: University of California, Los Angeles

TIME: 3:30pm – 5:00pm

WHERE: SB 223

ABSTRACT: Why does it take so long to increase the proportion of women in leadership positions and what strategies accelerate this process? Increasing the proportion of women in leadership positions is an enduring organizational problem. Managers in public and private organizations have tried many tactics but progress is slow. The talk will report begins with a presentation of actual demographic data from a large organization, and then the results of a simulation testing the micro-dynamics of hiring, retention and promotion decisions, allowing us to explore which theories best explain this slow progress and which organizational interventions produce the most effective change. The simulation addresses three intellectual gaps. First, most studies on women's advancement examine discrete explanations, such as receiving insufficient mentoring, rather than studying incremental change. This may be a significant omission because the accumulation of disadvantage, the large negative effects of small gender differences collecting over time, plays an important role in impeding women's career success (Valian, 1999, p. 401). Second, studies typically examine advancement as resulting *either* from individual differences, such as family concerns and risk-taking, *or* from organizational attributes, such as human resource policies and organizational culture. Yet careers are inherently multi-level phenomena (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989a; Lawrence & Tolbert, 2007) and research involving more than one level is limited (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005). Third, and consistent with both previous gaps, most computational simulations of organizations model only individual-level behaviors, which may be too simple for realistic organization-level predictions. We address this gap by developing tools to test the connection between emergent properties and expected theory. The research can provide a tool for educational institutions, government agencies and private organizations to assess the cost-benefit tradeoffs of human resource policies that influence women's careers. Understanding these tradeoffs across multiple levels of analysis—individual actions, group dynamics, organizational strategies and societal factors—will help identify policies that benefit both individuals and society. The immediate beneficiaries are working women in careers with advancement opportunities.