UNLOCKING AN UNBIASED, TALENT-DRIVEN RACE TO THE TOP:
INCREASING ACCESS TO SENIOR-EXECUTIVE-LEVEL POSITIONS
FOR WOMEN OF COLOR
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Digna Saad
Dedication

If I am everything the ground did not bury, then I must be everything that bloomed. I must be what survived, what remains. If I am everything the ground did not bury, then I must be air. I must be what allowed the revolution to breathe. I must be the one having to pursue this topic. I must ensure that this work brings equity, and activism, and hope.

Jonathan Mendoza (2017), Spoken Artist.

-To all those before me who had to sacrifice their dreams while unwaveringly fighting to ensure opportunity and possibilities for others to achieve. I thank you!

-To all those Women of Color who, despite organizational barriers of racism, discrimination, and oppression, continue on their steadfast path toward the corner suite. You inspire this work!
Acknowledgements

-To my husband, Anthony—who lightens my load, enabling me to pursue my dreams—for his love and support, which have encouraged me never to stop reaching. I love you!

-To my son, Gabriel, whose genuine unconditional love is the fuel of my existence.

-To my daughter, Leandra, for inspiring me to work toward eliminating barriers; she deserves the opportunity to compete in a world free from discriminatory hurdles that hinder the professional success of women everywhere.

-To my distinguished classmates, for providing a nurturing and invigorating workspace—a community of learners—that ignited my thinking and creativity.

-To Mom and Dad—who are accomplished in their own right and laid the path for my academic success—along with my sisters, brothers, and cousins whose love, support, and example as role models have paved the way for who I am and will continue to be.
To the 30 amazing women who participated in this research; without their commitment and desire to make the workplace a better environment for all women, this study would not have been possible.

To my committee chair, Dr. Caroline Watts, for her invaluable guidance and support.

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To Matilde Betancourt, Michelle Dow, Charlotte Golar-Richie, Fran Harfouche, and Lauren Thorman for being phenomenal thought partners and my personal editors in chief.

Special thanks to Teita, my mother-in-law, for her immeasurable love for and commitment to my toddler son; her efforts allowed me the necessary uninterrupted time to pursue this degree.
ABSTRACT

UNLOCKING AN UNBIASED, TALENT-DRIVEN RACE TO THE TOP: INCREASING ACCESS TO SENIOR-EXECUTIVE-LEVEL POSITIONS FOR WOMEN OF COLOR

Digna Saad

Caroline Watts

There is a prevalent under-representation of Women of Color (WOC) at the senior-executive level and above in large organizations in the United States. As long as race and gender continue to predict professional achievement or failure, the competition to the top will never be genuinely talent-driven. This thesis employs theories of leadership, social interaction, and Critical Race Theory to analyze the disparity – not from the perspective of why it persists, but how it can be resolved. Some outlier WOC are prevailing against the odds and accomplishing more than everyone else under the same workplace constraints. This study investigates the lived experiences of 30 of those WOC who have transcended the implicit organizational barriers laced with racism, discrimination, and oppression to attain senior executive roles. Employing a positive-deviance lens, non-normative behaviors, and factors that allowed those outlier WOC to thrive are identified. The study participants’ stories reveal a multifaceted internal dissonance. By positively reframing negative experiences, by leading differently, and by disassociating from other WOC, participants have been able to circumvent systemic barriers.
However, the complex - at times even contradictory - interplay inhibits the distinct identification of a singular internal factor or an overall formula for professional triumph. Other findings support the undeniable influence of external factors in forecasting individual achievement, the necessity to remove gender biases in the workplace, the importance of augmenting sponsorship opportunities, and the essential role of sustaining robust support systems to aid the career progression of WOC.

Keywords: C-suite, Fortune 1000 companies, Large Organizations, Leadership Theories, Organizational Context, Senior Executive Level Positions, S&P 500 companies and Women of Color.
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CHAPTER 1: Keeping Senior Executive Level Roles Male and Pale

Women are a leading interest group, as they comprise 52% of the population and nearly half of the entire workforce in the U.S. (Catalyst, 2015b). Despite their vast representation, only four percent of CEOs within S&P 500 companies were women in 2015, and fewer than one percent were Women of Color (Catalyst, 2015a; Rhode, 2016). Women—both WOC and White—occupy 22% of executive level positions and 16% of board seats (Catalyst, 2015b). While men—both White and Men of Color—occupy 78% of executive level positions. Similarly to S&P 500 corporations, White men account for 72% of corporate leadership at Fortune 500 companies (Jones, 2017). The race and gender distribution of those in power, coupled with race and gender being accurate predictors of how far one can advance in corporate America (Chin, 2010; Dobbins & Platz, 1986; Eagly & Carli, 2003) suggest that the “male and pale” reality in senior executive level roles is inescapable.

This study examines the disproportion regarding race and gender in large organizations by investigating the lived experiences of 30 outlier WOC who have reached senior level executive positions. Its purpose is to uncover how these WOC have been able to attain what appears, numerically, unattainable, presupposing that those outliers have already solved the inequality problem confounding other WOC. Until 1990, scholarly research largely neglected the topic of race and gender inequality in senior executive level roles, despite current and historical disparities (Eagly, Eaton, Rose, Riger, & McHugh, 2012; Elliott & Stead, 2008; Fletcher, 1999, 2004).

The assumption that gender or racial makeup of individuals did not influence
competition to the top overshadowed any intentions to research strategies to close the gap (Powell & Ansic, 1997). Since the 1990s, a plethora of research has addressed the gender disparity phenomenon and the hindrances that women face on their path to the “C-suite,” or better said, their path to the highest leadership levels in corporate America, roles whose titles start with the letter C: chief executive officer (CEO), chief operating officer (COO) and chief financial officer (CFO) (Bell & Nkomo, 1992; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Sanchez-Hucles, 1997). As a result of this wave of research, considerable advancement has been made in understanding the gender disparity problem and in suggesting ways to address it. Many organizations have implemented some of the recommended solutions to advance women, such as embracing mentoring, sponsoring, and coaching programs while also designing specific leadership training to provide women tools and strategies to accelerate their careers.

The results of these efforts over the past three decades have been mixed (Kim, Kalev, & Dobbin, 2012; Robinson, 2016). Although some of the efforts have been beneficial, others have not had a measurable impact, and none have significantly increased the proportion of women who reach the C-suite (Blake-Beard, 2001; Robinson, 2016; Sturman, 2007; Travis, Doty, & Howitzer, 2013). Moreover, most interventions that address gender disparity and organizational change efforts target overt and obvious aspects of gender bias and ignore the more subtle gender dynamics deeply embedded in an organization’s culture and in work norms, the ones that genuinely shape women’s pathways to leadership (Holvino, 2008; Rhode, 2016).

Most importantly, the majority of leadership research presupposes women as a
monolithic group without accounting for the unique barriers faced by women who are also persons of color (Bell & Nkomo, 1992; Fletcher, 2004). There is a paucity of mainstream research focused exclusively on Women of Color. That is, WOC tend to be an ignored or under-researched group. Studies looking at gender organize around what it means to be a White woman, and studies about race center around the experiences of Black men (Crenshaw, 1989). Even among studies of women, WOC that are not Black are often under-researched; Latinas are a good example. The very category Latina fuses the identities of gender, race, and ethnicity (Holvino, 2010). This multifaceted identity, of being a woman neither Black nor White in the U.S., create unaccounted-for barriers in their careers (Holvino, 2010; Rhode, 2016). White women’s narratives tend to privilege gender over race, and Black women’s accounts tend to privilege race over gender (Kim, 2001). As a result, most non-Black WOC are left in a gray area, overlooked by both race and gender studies. An expected consequence is that renowned and mainstream researchers have either disregarded or, insufficiently or even negligently researched the challenges at the intersection of leading while being both a woman and a person of color (Crenshaw, 1989; Fletcher, 2004).

Intersectional feminist scholars have critiqued the lack of attention to the relevance and effects of the intersection of gender, race, and other social conditions in all aspects of life, including leading (Elliott & Stead, 2008; Salmiya & Erhart, 2015; Fletcher, 2004; Holvino, 2010; Kim, 2001). These scholars have attempted to bring attention to the challenges faced by individuals who want to lead but do not carry the right social conditions, such as power, White race or the male gender. They have made
considerable progress incorporating gender into leadership theory and accounting for the gender differences in traits, privileges, and advantages (Ingo’s, Roove, Shapiro, & Tyson, 2015). Nevertheless, their scholarly contributions have not genuinely addressed race or the effects of both race and gender while leading, nor have their contributions resulted in the creation of a new or revised mainstream leadership theory that intentionally accounts for the impact of both race and gender in someone’s real or perceived ability to lead (Fletcher, 2004; Eslen-Ziya & Erhart, 2015; Holvino, 2008; Ingols et al., 2015).

Moreover, an epistemological battle has been going on between leadership mainstream researchers in leadership theory and intersectional feminist scholars. Mainstream theories continue to be dominant, preventing the findings of feminist scholars that show how gender and race mediate one’s ability to be a successful leader from going “viral,” and becoming widely respected and accepted (Holvino, 2008). Even with some advances, a dispiriting distance remains to solve the persistent gender and racial inequality at senior executive level roles in the U.S. (Bell, Edmondson, & Nkomo, 2001; Salmiya & Erhart, 2015).

The main research question that guides this study is: “What are the internal and external success factors that enable Women of Color to be considered for senior-executive-level roles in Fortune 1000 companies and other large organizations? To answer this question, the study focuses on outliers - WOC who have succeeded in advancing to senior leadership - to determine what personal and environmental conditions they perceive to have supported them achieve success. At the outset of this study, it was expected that winning strategies might be uncovered that could support the
production of solutions to transform the C-suite from being “pale and male” to a place
where the talent and experiences of diverse individuals can be recognized. The exclusion
of women is not just inequitable; it is also unproductive. Companies with female CEOs
outperform those with male CEOs in the stock market and other indexes, and companies
with the best financial performance have more women on their boards (Catalyst, 1999,
2015b; Elmer, 2015; Linwood, 2015). Putting more women in the mix correlates with
crafting decisions that protect value and performance while deterring scandals and fraud
(Liswood, 2015; Olson, 2016). Consequently, a proportionate representation of WOC at
the highest levels of organizational leadership, specifically the C-suite, seems to be a
business imperative that would not only have a social impact in this large interest group
but is likely to result in an increase of their bottom line.
Operational Definitions

Table 1 indicates the definitions of frequent terms used in this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C-suite</td>
<td>Refers to top senior leaders whose titles tend to start with the letter C (e.g., Chief Executive Office or CEO and Chief Operating Officer or COO)</td>
<td>Yukl, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors</td>
<td>An influence that contributes to the production of a result. Internal factors are the influences an individual can control (e.g., personal attributes and competencies). External factors reside outside of the individual or are innate (e.g., environment, race and gender)</td>
<td>Factor, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortune 1000 Companies</td>
<td>1000 largest U.S. incorporated companies, ranked by publicly available revenues</td>
<td>Moles &amp; Terry, 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large Organizations</td>
<td>Businesses that employ 500 or more individuals, or those that do not manufacture goods and have an average of $7 million in annual receipts</td>
<td>U.S. Bureau of Labor, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Theories</td>
<td>Mainstream schools of thought used to define what constitutes a leader. In this paper, it refers to the following theories: trait, behaviorist, situational and humanistic.</td>
<td>Northouse, 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1
Operational Definitions (Part 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Context</td>
<td>Refers to a firm’s operating environment. A firm’s organizational context includes its internal environment—such as the firm’s culture, policies, company experience, systems, capabilities, structure, and, assets—and its external environments such as the firm’s markets, economic conditions, customers, regulatory conditions, and suppliers.</td>
<td>Miller, Wilson &amp; Hickson, 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Executive Level</td>
<td>Refers to C-level leaders and leaders three reporting levels or less from the CEO (e.g., Business unit presidents and senior-level, directors/vice presidents within a firm’s executive population)</td>
<td>Yukl, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S&amp;P 500</td>
<td>An annual list of the 500 largest companies in the United States as compiled by Standard and Poor's Index.</td>
<td>Moles &amp; Terry, 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women of Color (WOC)</td>
<td>An umbrella term for all women that are not White (Hispanic/Latina/Chicana, Black, Native American, Asian American, Indigenous and women of multiracial backgrounds).</td>
<td>American Bar Association, 2006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Framing the Problem

The absence of women at all senior executive levels is pronounced within corporations and other large organizations in the U.S. (Rhode, 2016). The under-representation of women at the top occurs across occupations and industries and regardless of how many women occupy management positions within the organization (Catalyst, 2007). The situation is even more acute for WOC. The severity of the problem tends to be unknown because studies involving women very seldom disaggregate data to analyze the specific impact for WOC. For instance, Catalyst—a leading non-profit
organization whose mission is to accelerate progress for all women—only provides superficial disaggregation of data by reporting percentages for White and WOC. Moreover, since its inception in 1962, Catalyst has only conducted one comprehensive study that substantially analyzes the roles and positions of WOC in senior level roles; Catalyst has not dedicated any significant resources to examining the compound effects of being both a woman and a person of color (Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

The impact of disaggregating data is often underestimated. Table 2 stresses how showing data for all women without disaggregating for WOC masks the gravity of the under-representation of WOC. Table 2 was developed using data published by Catalyst (2015b) and Rhode (2016). The second column displays the low percentage of all women (White and WOC) in the C-suite level in S&P 500 companies in 2014. This column illustrates the typical way in which data are presented and how Catalyst presented it on its website (Catalyst, 2015b). Using data from both sources, I disaggregated the data from the second column to demonstrate the significant impact of the disparity for WOC. It is evident that without the last two columns of the table, the real under-representation of WOC cannot be appreciated. In essence, Table 2 indicates that although women (both White and WOC) constitute 45% of the workforce, the C-suite continues to be dominated by males at 96%, with White women being modestly represented at 3.6% and WOC being represented at 0.4%, becoming rarer the farther up the ladder one is situated.
Table 2
The Disparity between WOC, White Women, and Men in S&P 500 companies in 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corporate Ladder</th>
<th>Percentage of Women (WOC &amp; White)</th>
<th>Percentage of Women of Color</th>
<th>Percentage of Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C-suite</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.2% Black, 0.2% Asian)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Board Seats</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2% Black, 1% Latina, 1% Asian)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Level</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1% Black, 1% Latina, 1% Asian)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management Level</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(4% Black, 3% Latina, 3% Asian)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Women Labor Force</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>Total Men Labor Force</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Catalyst, 2015a, 2015b; Rhode, 2016)

As the data from Catalyst (2015a) suggests, not only is the gender and race gap alarming, it is also persistent because the numbers were not much different almost a decade ago. For instance, in 2005, women (regardless of race/ethnicity) represented forty-four percent of the workforce, thirty percent of managerial positions, and only three percent of company CEOs (Catalyst, 2007). These numbers are comparable to the ones for 2014 presented in Table 2. In almost a decade (from 2005 to 2014), women’s representation in the C-suite has shifted just one percent, from 3% to 4%.

Many researchers and scholar-practitioners have attempted to craft solutions to increase the number of women (both White and WOC) in the corridors of power in
corporate America and other large organizations in the U.S. Organizations have invested millions of dollars in designing gender-sensitive leadership programs tailored specifically for women (Auricchio, 2014). Formal and informal mentorship programs have been implemented. When mentorship lost its effectiveness, companies created new interventions such as sponsorships (Racioppi, 2013). The intent behind sponsorship programs has been to pair women with influential sponsors who would advocate for them and propel them to the highest levels of the organizational ladder (Racioppi, 2013). As stated earlier, the results of these efforts undertaken over the past three decades have been mixed (Kim et al., 2012; Robinson, 2016).

A myriad of economic and social justice frameworks could rationalize conducting this research with the purpose of identifying real and sustainable ways to close the gender and race disparity. From a social justice standpoint, equity for all human beings is the foundation and responsibility of any civilized society (King Jr., 1963). From an economic angle, it can be argued that the growth rate for minority populations in the U.S. indicates that continuing to deny these individuals real opportunities for financial success could constitute a form of economic suicide for the entire country because it diminishes the national tax base. As baby boomers retire in massive numbers and the birth rate of White (non-minority) children declines, the United States needs to engage every facet of its diverse population to keep contributing to the tax base and to maintain the social benefits provided to its citizens and aging population (Guillen & Baez, 2016).

However, this research is grounded in neither a social nor a societal macro-
economic standpoint. Instead, a talent development framework is employed here as a supporting justification for examining the disparity between men and women, specifically WOC, in the C-suite. This framework is aligned with the profit-driven core objectives of Fortune 1000 and other large companies. Organizations can no longer afford not to capitalize on the entire talent pool to be competitive and productive. Consequently, by unlocking the formula to advance WOC, organizations could scale those solutions and potentially identify ways to promote everyone (Sanchez-Hucles, 1997).

There is some evidence that WOC are the most disenfranchised members of organizations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). If this is true, then an organization that can successfully develop WOC—those least likely to reach the top—to attain the C-level could probably advance any of its members regardless of race and gender. Therefore, it behooves companies to construct talent development initiatives that are no longer benefiting only specific groups. The result could be the creation of an organization that is genuinely talent-driven and people-centric. Those talent strategies could maximize output, increase employee engagement, and result in a significant market advantage. An organization that can generate an environment where gender and race are no longer predictors of success, allowing unrigged and fair access to senior level positions, is genuinely a talent-driven organization (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Fortunately, the utility of a talent development framework can be substantiated by the fact that despite barriers and failed solutions to advance WOC; some WOC are breaking through the glass ceiling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012;
Morrison & Glinow, 1990; O’Leary, & Ickovics, 1992) and climbing over the concrete wall (Bell & Nkomo, 1992). The outlier WOC have been assuming positions of power and authority in dominant culture organizations (Brown, Robinson, Alleyne, Carbon, & McRae, 2006). Two compelling examples are Indra K. Noori, CEO of Pepsi Corp, and Ursula Burns, CEO of Xerox (Catalyst, 2015b). What has yet to become apparent is how strategies applied by those Women of Color who have broken through the glass ceiling and climbed the concrete wall can be duplicated, packaged, and taught to other women. A talent development framework might spark interest in organizations to discover and implement those strategies that allow not some but all of their employees to be their best selves, which will translate into higher returns and business impact for those organizations. Some studies have found that in Fortune 500 companies, there seems to be a correlation between having more women in top management and more significant market revenue (Rhode, 2016). In closing, a talent development rationale is the driver of this research because it will drive revenue, which is the primary concern of for-profit institutions.

Organization of this Study

Chapter 1 explains the background, purpose, and relevance of the study as well as some of the limitations of available research about the topic. Chapter 2 provides an extensive review of existing literature within leadership and social theories. The combined view of these theories constitutes the conceptual framework to understand and analyze the current challenges and barriers faced by WOC within Fortune 1000
companies and other large organizations. Chapter 2 also includes non-scholarly organizational research that delivers empirical insight into the gender and race disparity. It contains recommendations that have been explored in an attempt to solve the disproportion of WOC in the C-suite level in Fortune 1000 companies and other large organizations.

Chapter 3 presents the research questions and methods used to conduct the field research for this study. This chapter consists of the research design in its entirety. It offers a description of the study participants and an overview of the data collection, analysis, and study validation processes, as well as limitations in the methodology of the study. Chapter 4 presents study findings; and finally, Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the results, conclusions, study implications for research and practice, and recommendations for additional research.
CHAPTER 2: Intellectual Heritage

The deficiency in the current mainstream and broadly acknowledged literature around WOC is being addressed in this study by deliberately separating WOC from White women, thereby, giving WOC a laser-focused attention with regard to how the literature has or has not incorporated the nuances of being both a woman and a person of color. The literature analysis draws from mainstream leadership theories, post-heroic leadership theories, and human social relations theories to build a lens through which an intersectional view of WOC and leadership arises. The amalgam of these sets of theories provides the theoretical and conceptual framework necessary to understand the intricacies of human behavior as it relates to the art of leading and being commanded by others. This framework explains the vicissitudes that WOC face in their path to executive level roles in U.S.-based large companies.

The literature review elucidates how the four predominant leadership theories, (namely, trait, behaviorist, situational, and humanistic) have shaped the who, how, and what of leadership. These theories maintain that race and gender are not variables in leading. However, they seemed skewed to promote male and White characteristics as part of the ideal profile of a leader. Since the preponderance of mainstream leadership theories obscures other theories, it is essential to juxtapose them with other social and leadership theories that do recognize the influence of race or gender in human relations. Post-heroic leadership theories, social theories, and Critical Race Theory (CRT) are presented to illustrate the aforementioned influences.
Post-heroic leadership theories emphasize leadership as a “collaborative and relational process, dependent on social networks of influence” (Fletcher, 2004, p. 648). Their nucleus is women’s experiences of leadership, including embracing and discussing the advantages of feminine characteristics (Elliott & Stead, 2008). These novel theories demonstrate how gender, power, and other social conditions have a direct impact on the process of leading others, including rendering positive or negative outcomes based on the combination of social variables.

Social theories hold that human behaviors within institutions are affected by social relations (Watson, 2003). They demonstrate the production of in-group favoritism and marginalization of minority groups. Critical Race Theory, a specific social theory, transforms the understanding of racism from isolated incidences to an intrinsic part of all American institutions (Bell, 1989). Views of internalized racism and Panopticism—defined as a way to normalize common societal accepted behaviors—are also explored in this section to examine how people of color might inadvertently collude in their own oppression (Foucault, 1977; Taylor, 1990). Analyzing leadership theories in conjunction with social theories and CRT provides an indirect but accurate and holistic approach to examining the challenges that WOC face in the workplace.

The literature review also scrutinizes organizational research and practice directly related to the topic of gender and race disparity in the C-suite. It explores several organizational research and empirical studies that have sought to identify possible solutions to the under-representation of women, and particularly WOC, at senior levels in
large organizations in the U.S. The practical research confirms the existence of systemic barriers to career advancement for WOC and suggests that solutions to the disparity have not yet been identified.

The literature analysis for this study concludes with the premise that a positive-deviance approach may lead to the discovery of effective strategies to decrease the gender and race disparity at senior level positions and the C-suite. These theories postulate that at least one person in a community, working with the same resources as everyone else, has already resolved the problem that confounds others (Sternin, Sternin, & Marsh, 1997). This individual is an outlier in the statistical sense—an exception—someone whose outcome deviates positively from the norm (Spritzer & Rosenshein, 2003). This positive-deviance lens was utilized in the data gathering and analysis of the study to detect how these women have been successful and possibly allow for the understanding of how those strategies could be replicated to enable more WOC to attain senior executive level roles.

Evolution and Impact of Leadership Theories on Women’s Careers

Leadership can be defined in multiple ways, and distinct theories of leadership have emerged based on those definitions. In fact, there are as many definitions of leadership as there are scholars who have attempted to describe it (Stogdill, 1974). For this literature review, leadership is defined as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2007, p. 3). If to lead is to influence, then theories of leadership can be used to build part of the
conceptual framework to analyze the path of Women of Color to positions of leadership. That is because the mainstream leadership theories have defined the profile of the best type of leaders. The emergence and evolution of leadership theories have shaped and re-shaped the profile of those leaders that should be accelerated to the C-suite.

From an epistemological perspective, leadership theories have distilled four predominant categories: trait, behavioral, situational, and humanistic theories (Hossain, 2006). There are hundreds of other individual theories of leadership (Stogdill, 1974), and some of them even acknowledge leadership as a social process embedded in networks of influence. The theories that recognize the gender and power dynamics that affect the ability to lead are very relevant to this study (Fletcher, 2004). However, the conceptual framework of this study does not concentrate on those theories but mainly concentrates on the predominant or mainstream theories for several reasons. One, the novel theories—those that recognize gender and power—have yet to achieve widespread adoption at the level of everyday practice, and some remain practically unknown (Fletcher, 2004; Holvino, 2008). Two, the four significant subdivisions of leadership theories selected for the conceptual framework are the practices most commonly utilized within the field of leadership. They are the ones that have permeated the workplace and continue to shape the ideals of leadership. Fortunately, one of the mainstream theories that are part of the conceptual framework—humanistic theory—has incorporated gender as a variable that affects leading.
Table 3 provides a summary of the basic tenets of those four mainstream theories that establish part of the conceptual framework of this study. As the table suggests, the recipe for effective leadership has changed with the development of different, and at times contradicting, theories of leadership. The definition of what a leader is, how leadership should be exercised and experienced, and most importantly, whether leaders are born or made is rather theory-dependent.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Theories</th>
<th>Basic Tenets</th>
<th>Assumptions about Leaders</th>
<th>Seminal Proponents</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Trait Theories</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Great Man Theory</td>
<td>Individuals are either born or not born with the qualities that predispose them to success in leadership roles. Certain inherited qualities, such as personality and cognitive ability, are what underlie effective leadership.</td>
<td>Leaders are born.</td>
<td>Carlyle, 1869; McCaulley, 2000; Stogdill, 1974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behaviorist Theories</strong></td>
<td>Concentrates on what leaders do rather than on their qualities. Different patterns of behaviors are observed and categorized as 'styles of leadership.' There is one consistently sound style for exercising leadership across different situations.</td>
<td>Specific behaviors determine who is a good leader.</td>
<td>Blake &amp; Mouton, 1964; McGregor, 1960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Situational Theories</strong></td>
<td>Different situations require different styles of leadership. Ability to adapt or adjust one's style to the circumstances of the situation defines outstanding leadership.</td>
<td>Leaders adjust to the context.</td>
<td>Fiedler, 1964; Hersey &amp; Blanchard, 1969</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Contingency</td>
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<td>- Situational</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Humanistic Theories</strong></td>
<td>Focus on the process by which a leader engages with others. Being able to create a connection that results in increased motivation and morality in both followers and leaders is effective leadership.</td>
<td>Leaders are taught, and followership is paramount.</td>
<td>Burns, 1978; Greenleaf, 1977</td>
</tr>
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</table>
To provide additional clarity about the evolution of those four main theories of leadership, Figure 1 illustrates the transformation of those theories as they moved their focus over time. Presently, the field is in an inflection point; its emphasis is on systems-focused leadership, which brings predominance to humanistic theories such as transformational and servant leadership (Burns, 1978). Since humanistic theories are post-heroic theories, it appears that the field is moving toward recognizing and repairing its indifference to the effects of social variables (e.g., gender, status, race) in the act of leading.

**Figure 1. Evolving Focus of Leadership Theories**

Despite the constant evolution in focus, leadership principles (for the most part) have remained persistent on a masculine ideal (Kezar, 2000). From their inception, models of leadership have centered on heroic male subjects who were described by male researchers (Elliott & Stead, 2008; Eslen-Ziya & Erhart, 2015; Fletcher, 2004; Kampel, 2006; Kezar, 2000). Leaders were considered to be heroes, individuals with unique characteristics that distinguished them from the rest (Kampel, 2006).
These theories were also based on American principles and tended to be aligned with Whiteness (Chin, 2010). The implications of leading when one is not a male, White, heterosexual, or American-born have not been meaningfully analyzed nor incorporated into any of the major leadership theories currently in use (Chin, 2010). More recently, intersectional feminist scholars have provided many contributions to the literature to illustrate how race, gender, class, and other social conditions mediate every aspect of life. Post-heroic leadership theories are the best examples of the contributions of these scholars to the leadership field to highlight how gender and power (not race) influence the act of leading. Transformational and situational leadership (humanistic) theories are part of the umbrella covered by post-heroic theories. What has emerged from these theories is a less individualistic, more relational concept of leadership, one that concentrates on dynamic, interactive processes of influence and learning intended to transform organizational structures, norms, and work practices (Pearce & Conger, 2003).

Post-heroic leadership theories have explored how gender and power mediate leading, but they have not focused on how race also intercedes. Thus, despite all the research by these intersectional scholars, there is not a single mainstream, well known and well-implemented leadership theory or practice today that has utterly incorporated how one must lead differently when accounting for the intersection of both one’s gender and race (Elliott & Stead, 2008; Eslen-Ziya & Erhart, 2015; Fletcher, 2004).

In short, since its inception and for decades, the idea of leadership was intrinsically associated with being a male. Over time, some leadership theories have
evolved to introduce gender and other variables. Some even sustain a female advantage, especially when leading is associated with collaboration and transformation. However, most of the well-known and widely implemented leadership styles continue proclaiming to be race and gender neutral, whereas, in fact, they emerged from and benefited White men. As a consequence, mainstream theories are far from neutral; they are heavily skewed to promote male and White characteristics as intrinsic to remarkable leadership.

The Origin of Leadership as a Theory “Created by Men for Men”

The classical Greek philosopher Plato helped lay the foundation for leadership theory around 500 B.C. In his book The Republic, Plato conceived a leader as a shepherd of his flock (Plato, 400 BC/1971). However, in a later work, Statesman, he retracted his earlier position and observed that leaders are not at all like shepherds (Day & Antonakis, 2012). Plato stated that shepherds are obviously entirely different from their flock, whereas human leaders are not so different from their followers (Plato, 400 BC/1971). He noted that people are not sheep; some are cooperative, while others are quite stubborn.

Plato's revised view of leadership described leaders more like weavers (Day & Antonakis, 2012). Their core task was to weave together different kinds of people like the meek, the self-controlled, the brave and the impetuous into the fabric of society (Plato, 400 BC/1971). Today, more than 2,500 years later, unifying distinct people is still considered one of the most daunting tasks of leaders. Alternatively, in the words of O’Toole (1995), “leadership is more like being a shepherd to a herd of cats or like pushing a wheelbarrow full of frogs” (p. 56).
According to scholars, the first studies of leadership began in ancient times with Plato and with investigations by other authors such as Caesar and Plutarch (Bass, 1990). However, the word “leader” appeared first in the English language in 1300, while whereas the word “leadership” did not appear until the early 1900s (Bass, 1990). In that context, the leader was often perceived as a focal person, the individual who could and did “exercise intentional influence over followers” (Yukl, 2006, p. 67). Furthermore, leadership was assumed inseparable from formal authority and was viewed as operating in hierarchical relationships in which official authority was inherent. Leadership was centered on expertise and implied rational decision making based on empirical evidence (Blackmore, 1993). Implicit and at times explicit, and due to the fact that most of the people in positions of power were men during those times, leadership was considered a masculine role.

Kellerman, Rhode, and O’Connor (2007) argue that lingering effects of the origins of leadership theory are still latent in our culture. They posit that “current notions of leadership are still wrapped up in the idea of masculinity, where dominance, authority, and ambition are valued over interpersonal qualities often considered more feminine, such as cooperation and collaboration” (p. 95). Conceivably, the idea that virtuous leadership is male leadership has been an insurmountable obstacle to the advancement of women, and particularly WOC, to the highest levels of leadership in corporations in the U.S.
In what follows, the four predominant leadership theories will be analyzed and explored. When the theory permits, the negative impact of those theories upon the ability of WOC to climb to the C-suite will be discussed.

Trait Leadership Theories

Trait theories were the first modern attempt to formally study leadership; they suggest that leaders are born with certain biological traits and thus possess superior attributes that enable them to become and succeed as leaders (Northouse, 2018). In the late 19th century, historian Thomas Carlyle pioneered one stepping stone of trait theory by introducing the “great man” theory. Carlyle (1869) believed that “the history of the world is but the biography of great men” (p. 34). As the name implies, this leadership theory emphasizes the innate qualities and characteristics with which a leader is born. These great leaders possess special power over others, their followers, which makes them capable of accomplishing their goals, for better or worse (Brooks-Halas, 2011). Not surprisingly, the theory was appropriately coined the "great man" theory, as the goal was to identify qualities and characteristics possessed by great male leaders such as Napoleon, Abraham Lincoln, and Mahatma Gandhi (Northouse, 2018). Historians applied stereotypical traits associated with effective male leaders, such as independence, objectivity, assertiveness, and un-emotionality, to those who could accomplish organizational goals (Eisenstein, 2004). Leadership was considered heroic and was exercised only by heroes or very accomplished men (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Blake & Mouton, 1985; Burns, 1978).
Within great man theory, mythical leaders—heroes—were born, which has led to the assumption that competent leadership is inherently masculine (Blackmore, 1993; Curry, 2000). Only a few men were presumed to possess these qualities, and women were not taken into consideration at all as possible leaders (Bass, 1990). Traits were typically referred to as masculine, and they included intelligence, knowledge, persistence, self-assurance, and the ability to get along with others (Kellerman et al., 2007). Women were not credited with the same characteristics; in fact, Brown (1979) stipulated that trait studies consistently support the traditional attitude that women lack adequate leadership characteristics.

Therefore, as White women entered the workforce in the 1900s, it was assumed that they were best suited to fill helping roles and were primarily seen to fill caregiver, assistant, and other secondary or support positions (Jogulu & Wood, 2006). Similarly, since WOC in the U.S. were already part of the workforce before the 1900s, Black women had already been subjected only to caregiver or support roles either by force during slavery or as their only option after the abolition of slavery (Crenshaw, 1995).

The obsession with traits constituted the demise of the theory. Trait theory posits that a leader encompasses “unique and exceptional features and qualities that [distinguish] him from his followers” (Jogulu & Wood, 2006, p. 237). It was believed that through this lens, critical leadership traits could be isolated and that people with such traits could then be recruited, selected, and installed into leadership positions.
A chief problem with the trait approach lies in the fact that the number of traits identified almost equals the number of studies conducted on the topic (Bolden, Gosling, Marturano, & Dennison, 2003). According to Bolden (et al., 2003), after several years of research, it became apparent that no consistent traits could be identified. Granted, some traits were found in multiple studies, but the results were inconclusive. Some leaders might have possessed particular traits, but the absence of them did not necessarily mean that the person was not a leader (Bolden et al., 2003).

As described above, according to the trait theories, foundations of leadership necessarily entailed being male, a thread that became inseparable from the concept of leadership even as it evolved. The great male historical figures that inspired the crafting of the theory were for the most part White male. Trait theories equate leadership with being not only male but White and male. This may have laid the seeds for historical under-representation of WOC at the highest leadership levels in organizations across the U.S. (Chemers, 1997; Crenshaw, 1995; Rhode, 2016). Dr. Warren Bennis (as cited in Hunter, 2004), a widely-known leadership scholar, directly counters the great man theory, stating:

The most dangerous leadership myth is that leaders are born—that there is a genetic factor to leadership. This myth asserts that people basically either have certain charismatic qualities or not. That is nonsense; in fact, the opposite is true. Leaders are made rather than born. (p. 42)
Behaviorist Leadership Theories

The failure of the trait theory necessitated that another approach to the study of leadership be found. Blake and Mouton (1964, 1978, 1985) and Blake and McCanse (1991) developed the behaviorist theory as applied to leadership. The theory focuses on behaviors rather than characteristics of leaders. The basic premise of this theory is that leadership is a learned behavior; leadership skills can be acquired through reinforcement, conditioning, and training. Unlike trait theory, the behaviorist approach takes into account both leaders and followers. It highlights the role of a leader in relation to concerns for production and people. A behavioral theory of leadership also incorporates B.F. Skinner's theory of behavior modification, which takes into account the effect of reward and punishment on changing behavior (Blake & McCanse, 1991). An example of this theory in action is a manager or leader who motivates desired behavior by scolding employees who arrive late to meetings and showing appreciation when they are early or on time.

Behaviorist theory postulates that there is one consistently sound style for exercising leadership across different situations, and that style is characterized by high concern for results and people (Argyris, 1970, 1976; Blake & Mouton, 1964, 1978; Likert, 1967; Likert & Likert, 1976; McGregor, 1960, 1967). This style produces positive outcomes, including increased productivity, improved morale, job success and satisfaction, and even physical and mental health (Blake & Mouton, 1985). However, Bryman (1992) and Yukl (2006) have criticized this model for its inability to show how leaders’ styles affect
performance outcomes despite its focus on results. Moreover, Mycroft (2012) argues that its recommended style of high concern for results and high concern for people may not be applicable in most situations.

The behaviorist theory also does not address issues of diversity, instead advocating for a one size fits all approach. This tactic may have translated into one size fits no one. Last, McKee (2018), one of the authors of the book Resonant Leadership, argues that despite advances in thinking and research methods, when compared with trait theory studies, the behaviorist theories still overtly favored abilities often associated with men, and White men in particular (A. McKee, personal communication, February 23, 2018). Moreover, implicit and embedded in behaviorist theories are assumptions about the higher value of stereotypical male abilities, attitudes, and characteristics. McKee further maintains that evidence for this exists in the fact that many behaviorist leadership models include traits and characteristics, rather than observable, explainable behaviors. Therefore, behaviorist theories continue to disadvantage women, and WOC in particular (A. McKee, personal communication, February 23, 2018).

Situational Leadership Theories

The popularity of trait theories was not only interrupted by behaviorist theory, but it was also further discredited by the development of personal-situational theory (Stogdill, 1974). New research shifted the prominence from the leader per se and concluded that “leaders’ traits must bear some relevant relationship to the characteristics of the
followers” (Bass, 1998, p. 174). Based on this perspective, an impactful leader is one who adjusts his or her style to fit a particular situation. This position contradicts the trait leadership theory tenet that leaders are born and not made.

Hersey and Blanchard (1993) developed the situational leadership theory, which takes into consideration, as the name implies, situations as well as followers. The theory focuses on leadership in particular situations. Thus, different situations and people demand different leadership styles (Bass & Riggio, 2006). As explained by Hossain (2006), an example of situational theory includes “a combination of guidance and supportive orientations to create four different styles of leadership: telling, selling (coaching), participating (supporting) and delegating” (p. 46). These various styles of leading ought to be aligned with the developmental level of employees in a situation, and the manager should adjust his or her leadership style accordingly.

Situational leadership provided the flexibility that other models might have lacked in those times (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). However, despite the strengths of the situational leadership model, this model has its own limitations, which include a lack of empirical evidence to support its reliability and validity (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969, 1993). The lack of experimental data results in limited model depth, especially in the area of follower development (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The model is ambiguous regarding the level of commitment and competence that followers bring to the team and does not address diversity within members of a team or within corporate leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969, 1993).
Humanistic Leadership Theories: Transformational and Servant Leadership

A fourth re-visioning of leadership theories resulted in humanistic theories, which redefined the concept of leading as the ability to move entire systems toward previously determined goals. Humanistic theories stress developing the individual organizational member as the primary concern of leadership. They challenge the conventional command-and-control model, shifting from a heroic to a post-heroic approach to the art of leading (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Blake & Mouton, 1985; Burns, 1978). Heroic models of leadership, as explained earlier, subscribe to traits closely aligned to masculinity (assertiveness, dominance) and identify a single person as the leader. In a post-heroic model, emphasis is not on individuals but on collaboration, with leaders exhibiting traits such as empathy and relational ability that are typically assigned to women (Ingols et al., 2015).

The most popular of the humanistic theories are servant and transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Greenleaf, 1977). Many researchers cluster servant and transformational leadership styles as part of the post-heroic leadership theories because they share very similar tenets (Fletcher, 2004). Albeit, some scholars have differentiated between transformational and servant leadership styles, but most often, researchers have applied the terms synonymously (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Findings from researching both leadership styles have indicated that servant and transformational theories incorporate similar frameworks (Feinberg, Ostroff, & Burke, 2005). It is important to note that, in this research study, the terms will be used interchangeably.
As proposed by Burns (1978) and Greenleaf (1977), the primary component of transformational and servant leadership is a relationship between the leader and the constituent, which demonstrates a leader’s ability to inspire constituents to perform tasks beyond the expected outcomes. In essence, the leader and constituent partake in a relationship that enables partnership. According to many researchers (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Burns, 1978; House, 1976; Lowe & Gardner, 2001), transformational leaders possess four essential characteristics: (a) charisma, (b) the ability to inspire, (c) the ability to intellectually stimulate others, and (d) the ability to be considerate of others. Two critical characteristics of transformational leadership (charisma and individualized consideration) have been rated by male and female subordinates and superiors as more closely linked to women leaders than male leaders (Bass, Avolio & Atwater, 1996; Fletcher, 2004; Maher, 1997). Therefore, the perception of a compelling transformational leader may be characterized as a female leader. This belief could create a theoretical advantage for women. However, the debate continues, reinforced by results from studies concerning gender differences in leadership and the perceptions they produce (Eagly et al., 2012; Eagly & Karau, 2002). For example, due to gender stereotypes, people accept men in leadership positions more easily than they accept women (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Rhode, 2016).

The perception of a compelling transformational or servant leader may be more readily equated with being a female leader.
Unfortunately, any female advantage in leadership style might be offset by the disadvantage that flows from prejudice, bias, and discrimination directed against women in general and specifically against women in leadership roles (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Holvino, 2008). A meta-analysis of research on the topic of gender bias conducted by Eagly, Makhijani, and Klonsky (1992) concluded that female leaders were evaluated slightly more negatively than male leaders.

This meta-analysis discussed how men and women were perceived as equally effective in their leadership; however, men were assessed as more effective when roles were defined in masculine terms and women in roles defined as more feminine. Examples of gendered attributes for males included characteristics such as being independent, goal-oriented, objective, and assertive. For women, their gendered attributes included the constructs of emotionality, nurturance, and sensitivity to others. Findings from the meta-analysis study are in agreement with role congruity theory in the sense that people are expected to engage in activities that are consistent with their gender roles, and that violations of these gender stereotypes may lead to lower performance evaluations for women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Therefore, gender bias decreases women’s ability to be perceived as impactful leaders. The emphasis on women’s experiences of leadership, while embracing and discussing the advantages of feminine characteristics, nevertheless accepts that leadership is defined by male norms and values (Elliott & Stead, 2008).
Post-heroic Leadership Theories

Some scholars consider humanistic theories as part of a bigger umbrella called post-heroic leadership theories (Holvino, 2008). Although most of the post-heroic theories are not mainstream, these theories are the closest to situating leadership and quotidian behaviors within the context of racial, gender, and class oppression (Counts, 2012). Post-heroic leadership theories can better explain the intersecting oppressions of race and gender that tint WOC’s leadership experiences by employing frameworks and images that acknowledge the interdependencies inherent in leadership. According to Fletcher,

Post-heroic theory is defined as leadership models that focus “less on the heroic actions of a few individuals at the top of organizations” and more on “collaborative…relational” aspects of leadership interspersed through entire knowledge-based environments through dynamic, interactive processes of learning and influence. (Fletcher, 2004, p. 648)

Huey and Sookdeo (1994) have been credited by some researchers with developing the theory that they dubbed “virtual leadership” (Huey & Sookdeo, 1994, p. 2), or shared leadership. They argue that rather than having a single heroically visionary leader at its helm, an organization may consist of multiple layers of leadership:

Post-heroic leaders do not expect to solve all the problems themselves. They realize no one person can deal with the emerging and colliding tyrannies of speed, quality, customer satisfaction, innovation, diversity, and technology. Virtual leaders objectively say no to their egos. They are confident enough in their vision to delegate true responsibility, both for the tedium of process and for the sweep of strategic planning. (Huey & Sookdeo, 1994, p. 2)
This approach to leadership is intended to transform stodgy, top-down organizational structures into flexible, knowledge-based entities able to meet the demands of the information age and global economy of the 21st century (Elliott & Stead, 2008). In essence, as Fletcher (2004) contends, post-heroic leadership is a paradigm shift in what it means to be a leader. It re-envisions the who, what, and how of leadership: the who of leadership by challenging the primacy of individual achievement, the what of leadership by focusing on collective learning and mutual influence, and the how by requiring a more egalitarian approach embedded in emotional intelligence.

A post-heroic leader has a social obligation to be concerned with the “have-nots” (as cited in Northouse, 2018, p. 309), placing some attention on WOC as the most disenfranchised within organizations (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). Significant in this shift is a blurring of the distinction between the skills of leadership and what some have called “followership” (Huey & Sookdeo, 1994; Kellerman et al., 2007). That is, although tasks and responsibilities differ depending on organizational position, the notion of shared leadership practices suggests that leading and following are two sides of the same set of relational skills that everyone in an organization needs in order to work in a context of interdependence. According to some who research this interdependence, one can explain how race and gender play a pivotal role in leading (Counts, 2012; Holvino, 2008; Lindsay-Dennis, 2015), making post-heroic leadership the closest of all the theories to incorporate race and gender (Fletcher, 2004).
One of the tenets and observable behaviors characteristic of this leadership theory are a shift of authority to followers. Leaders demonstrate caring by building trust and enabling cooperation (Counts, 2012). Some empirical studies of Black women leaders suggest that when leadership means cooperation, Black women can excel as leaders (Counts, 2012). Moreover, post-heroic leadership inherently values a diverse culture, and the leader who models this theory embodies fundamental values such as respect, service, and equity; demonstrates respect for cultural differences; and develops strategies to attain leadership diversity (Page, 2003).

In general, post-heroic leadership models give women, including WOC, an advantage over men (as also noted above in the section of humanistic theories). Paradoxically, the opposite appears to be true. According to Fletcher (2004), viewed through the gender-power dynamic lens, women who exhibit post-heroic leadership traits (stereotypically feminine traits) are primarily seen as merely functioning the way women or mothers would behave. Thus, their behaviors are not viewed as leadership behaviors. Men who embrace these feminine traits in their roles as post-heroic leaders, on the other hand, are perceived more positively for being able to think outside the box and do something new. Therefore, even a leadership model based on stereotypically feminine traits that (at least in theory) prefers women as leaders continues to advance men over women (Counts, 2012).

Scholars such as Fletcher (2004) argue that the female advantage cannot be
realized because post-heroic and humanistic leadership theories challenge current power dynamics. For many leaders, the heroic approach is the only mental model they know. It takes courage for leaders to question the style that has gotten them to where they are now. Furthermore, post-heroic leadership threatens the myth of individual achievement and related beliefs about meritocracy. It highlights the collaborative subtext of life that people have all been taught to ignore. Without explicit recognition of these complicated dynamics, the transformational potential of this new model of leadership is unlikely to be realized. The idea of meritocracy will efficiently continue to silence any challenge to the old system of the single, preferably male, leader. More importantly, it will continue to prevent post-heroic leadership theories from becoming mainstream and well respected.

Finally, given the propensity of leadership researchers to either meld the experiences of Black women and other WOC with those of White women or with those of Black men, it is logical and fitting that more Black, Latina, Asian and intersectional feminist researchers continue telling their own stories and articulating their leadership experiences, which will re-shape the perception of leadership (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). As a result, post-heroic leadership theories will continue to mediate the narrative around how compelling and formidable leading is contingent on the race, gender, and other identities of the person doing the leading.

**Closing Remarks about Leadership Theories**

As illustrated in this chapter, a view of leadership as a sophisticated social experience has generated a widespread body of research that identifies attributes,
characteristics, styles, and qualities of leadership, but not a universally accepted
definition (Yukl, 2006). Over the years, the four predominant leadership theories, namely
trait, behaviorist, situational, and humanistic, have dominated the discourse. These
mainstream theories have shaped the who, how, and what of leadership, sometimes
obscuring other theories. Subsequently, the mainstream theories are the ones that have
been principally tested, adapted, and utilized by leaders throughout most corporations,
business schools, and organizations in the U.S. Trait, behavioral, and situational
leadership theories persist in failing to address issues of diversity and equity (Mycroft,
2012). The humanistic theories are the only mainstream leadership theory that
recognizes the effects of gender while leading, even suggesting female advantage (Fletcher, 2004;
Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). Using frameworks and images that acknowledge the
interdependencies inherent in leadership, post-heroic theories are the closest to situate
leadership and ordinary behaviors within the context of racial, gender, and class
oppression (Counts, 2012).

Under these novel leadership theories—which also confront current gender and
power dynamics—women and WOC should have realized significant advancement.
Instead, women who exhibit post-heroic leadership traits such as caring, concern for
others, or collaboration (stereotypically feminine traits) are seen as merely functioning
the way women or mothers would behave, not as exceptional leaders. The opposite being true, men that exhibit the same traits are considered exceptional leaders, as society does
not expect those behaviors from males. This bias and many others continue to impede
women from realizing a leadership advantage. The pervasive myth of individual achievement and meritocracy continues to silence any challenge to the old system of the single, preferably male, leader.

Chin (2010), along with other scholars, believes that leadership theories will continue to benefit immensely from considering and evaluating leaders who are not Caucasian, Western, or upper-class men. This dissertation contributes to the literature by exposing the importance of understanding how tacit assumptions that exceptional leaders are White and male may hinder WOC’s access to leadership positions, blocking organizations from receiving the highest return from their employees. Last, the lack of clarity around which behaviors would make WOC successful leaders forms an ambiguous profile for WOC themselves (Ingols et al., 2015). This makes it challenging for them to ascertain how to perform best to be seen as leaders and to reach the C-suite.

Women’s Advancement in the Workplace

For a large part of history, most of the studies about women’s lives appear to have been conducted by other women researchers (Bell et al., 2001; Bell & Nkomo, 1992; Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Browne & Misra, 2003; Friedan, 1963; Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996). Since 2009, there has been a steady increase in information about African American women and other WOC in research and other spheres. However, culturally relevant leadership theories and research methodology to study WOC have lagged behind other studies in this area (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). Much of the well-known knowledge on the topic of women in the workplace is a result of practical research. For example, the
widely used “glass ceiling” metaphor, utilized to describe the invisible barrier that caps the path of women toward the pinnacle of corporate America, was born of practical research. Gary Bryant coined the term “glass ceiling” in 1984 in his book The Working Report: Succeeding in Business in the 80s (Bryant, 1984; Frenkiel, 1984). The term has become a synonym for the struggle women face in the pursuit of professional advancement.

Nevertheless, scholars Eagly and Carli (2007) argue that the widely-used glass ceiling metaphor no longer fits to describe the path of women to the C-suite. The glass ceiling implies that the difficulties women have traversing leadership pipelines only occur at the top of the organization. Moreover, the glass ceiling metaphor posits that once the ceiling is broken, it is shattered for all time, which Eagly and Carli assert is not the case. It also does not deal with the fact that so many women—including many WOC—are stuck in low-wage jobs and never even get into the pipeline that may lead to the C-suite. Additionally, this metaphor also fails to account for the fact that female leaders have different experiences in their leadership journeys. Instead, Eagly and Carli offer “the labyrinth” as a more fitting metaphor to describe the female leadership journey, because the path to the C-suite is full of uncertainty and complicated turns. They contend that the challenges are also different for each woman at all levels of the journey, not only at the top.

In a similar vein, out of empirical research, Ryan and Haslam (2005) coined another term to describe the path of women to senior executive level roles, called the
“glass cliff.” They studied the top 100 companies in the London Stock Exchange that appointed women to their boards as opposed to men. The researchers found that companies were more likely to appoint women to their boards when stock performance was deficient, whereas companies were more likely to elect men when stock performance was exceptional. Inherently, this made it riskier for women to succeed, because they were leading companies with a higher risk of failure. Hence, the glass cliff metaphor emerged as companies tended to appoint women to roles that headed their careers off the edge of a cliff.

Another example of empirical research is the book Our Separate Ways; it captured women leaders’ accounts and perceptions of the barriers and successes they experienced in their respective career journeys (Bell et al., 2001). Based on interviews they conducted, the authors crafted a series of recommendations to afford women a higher probability of ascending to senior executive roles. Some of those strategies suggested that women need to identify suitable mentors and seek to be mentored. The book also encouraged women to have a balanced leadership style that is not too brash or too soft (Bell et al., 2001; Harris, 2009).

Likewise, other studies have supported the preponderance of mentoring to advance women in the workplace. The presumed benefits of mentoring for career success have led many companies to institute formal mentoring programs (Allen, Lentz & Day, 2006). Pompper and Adams (2006) described the formal mentoring approach as usually lasting for a defined period, six months to a year, which is much shorter than informal
relationships that can last for years. In their view, despite the assumed benefit of mentoring, the required artificial nature of the relationship could sometimes generate an adverse reaction in the protégé if the individual felt that the relationship was superficial. Furthermore, research showed that formal mentoring programs were not as effective as initially suggested, and they tended to benefit the person providing the mentoring more than the protégé (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). Companies seemed to pay more attention to promoting the mentors, whereas protégés did not realize high returns on the mentorship relationship (Blake-Beard, 2001).

Thomas (2001) examined the impact of race and gender on mentoring relationships and found that Black women and the White males in positions to help advance their careers often face obstacles shaped by cross-race and cross-gender taboos. Black women were reluctant to establish close relationships with White men because of their concern with a lingering image of the Black woman as a concubine—an image rooted in the history of slavery—where their bodies were used for sexual pleasures and physical labor (Lovejoy, 1995; Thomas, 2001). White men, according to Thomas, are uncomfortable forming these relationships for similar reasons. For mentors and their protégés to have a productive and satisfying relationship, they must identify emotionally in some way with each other. So, rather than confront the anxieties and paradoxes of their alliance, high-potential Black females and the White men who might mentor them tend to avoid those mentoring relationships (Thomas, 2001). As a consequence, Black women perceive significantly higher levels of exclusion in mentoring relationships and the work
environment than White women who have a different history with White men (Blake-Beard, O’Neill, Ingols & Shapiro, 2010; Blake-Beard & Roberts, 2004; Catalyst, 2006). Given that mentorship is considered one of the best strategies for women’s career advancement, this phenomenon is particularly detrimental to the career success of WOC.

The limited progress of mentorship programs necessitated new solutions, so sponsorship programs were created. Sponsorships can be defined as mentorship coupled with significant action, influence, and power (Single & Donald, 2013). Sponsorship is a visible initiative within the organization in which sponsors actively and intentionally promote their protégés. Studies have shown that the level of influence of the sponsor and their political power within the organization are predictors of how far the protégé advances in the organization (Single & Donald, 2013). Because sponsors are not all created equal, protégés must strategically find sponsors who are also senior executives and powerful influencers in the organization. Historically, a more significant number of White males have traditionally been in positions of power and influence, so having White men as sponsors produces the highest returns for protégés. Nevertheless, due to the issues mentioned above, WOC are at a disadvantage forming relationships with White men, which in turn lessens their chances to access the corridors of power in Fortune 1000 companies.

Despite the well-intended efforts, neither mentorship nor sponsorship solutions have solved the gender and race disparity. A survey conducted by Harvard Business School (HBS) faculty provided great insight into persistent gender inequality.
HBS professors Ely and Meyerson (2000) spearheaded a survey of 12,000 male and female graduates of HBS. The analysis demonstrated a persistently lower rate of advancement of women in comparison to men even when hailed from the same renowned Ivy League graduate school. According to the data, women had unequivocally not advanced at the same rate and were not nearly as satisfied as men. It is important to note that these women had implemented some of the recommended strategies to accelerate their careers (such as finding a mentor and a sponsor), and no significant gender difference as a result of the use of those strategies was identified. This study also found that the gender achievement discrepancy was not due to women deciding to exit the workforce to stay at home and raise children. This finding is relevant because it served to refute the premises of other controversial studies suggesting that women have not been as successful as men because they willingly opted out of careers to stay at home raising children (Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

Moreover, gender issues such as the one described above permeate workplaces in both overt and covert ways. They are not limited to only the hiring of women but are intimately connected with the way production and capitalism are understood at large. There is a definite divide in what is recognized as work life and what constitutes personal life. It is commonly unstated that a respectable and committed professional is one who knows how to keep these two areas separate. Work falls within the economic realm, and personal or home falls within the social realm. The former is the market economy, with the latter being the care economy. However, in reality, it is not so. The home, where
family members cook, clean, and care for each other, ultimately ensures that the workplace has the human resources it needs to function. Home and work cannot be separated (Gilman, 2016).

According to Steinem (1995), the feminist movement incorporated women into the workforce without unconditionally relinquishing them from the personal and social realm of household chores and child-raising obligations. As a consequence, women were allowed to work full-time out of the home, only to have to come home to continue to do all the chores that were traditionally considered a woman’s job. Steinem (1995) eloquently asserted, “Women will not get equity in the workplace until they get equity at home” (p. 45). She underscored that profound change for women in the workplace would only begin when men raise children as much as—or more than—women do. In most organizations, women using flexible work arrangements to raise children or do other household chores have long translated into questions about their commitment to work (Ingols et al., 2015); men do not experience the same backlash.

In 1995, Steinem (1995) argued the existence of this gender bias. Twenty years later, in 2015, researchers are still supporting its prevalence (Ingols et al., 2015). There are many ways of supporting women to eradicate this bias. For one, at a macro level, perceptions of what is economic and what is social should shift to include cooking, cleaning, and caring as economic activities even when they are unpaid because if they were monetized, they would significantly boost the Gross Domestic Product (Steinem, 1995).
Steinem (1995) further sustained that from a micro level, something as simple as paid maternity leave and flexible work hours could make the corporate world more supportive of women participating in the workforce with less stress. Most notably, assumptions that domestic work is the responsibility of women must be eliminated. Some progress has been made in this realm, as indicated by the notion of stay-at-home dads becoming increasingly socially acceptable in U.S. culture (Steinem, 1995). Thus, the biases toward women being the primary persons accountable for the domestic part of the home front have been eroding for quite some time. However, the workplace continues to be inundated with double standards for women. Working from home often to care for home responsibilities and taking time off to care for children and other kinds of domestic activities continue to place women in dreadful positions in their professional careers. Interestingly, men are not castigated if they want to take care of the domestic front, but instead, they are commended if they would like to have a bigger footprint at home (Ingols et al., 2015).

In recent years, research around unconscious or hidden bias has come to the forefront to identify, explain, and solve some of the gender issues pervasive in the workplace (Chu, 2014). This body of work provides new insight into factors that continue to deter all women systematically from reaching the C-suite. The literature describes bias as thought patterns, assumptions, and interpretations based on beliefs usually learned at an early age or from others who are looked up to (Chu, 2014). Moreover, Chu argues that these assumptions, whether positive or negative, are often ingrained and inflexible.
When the bias presents itself in an unconscious manner, it results in judgment without question. Unconscious patterns can play out in ways that are so subtle they are hard to spot (Chu, 2014). Unaddressed, unconscious biases deter women’s opportunities to advance professionally. For instance, promotions that require relocation and are time sensitive tend to be offered to men more often than women, even if they are married with children (Catalyst, 1999; 2015b). There is an implicit biased assumption that men are more suitable for a swift move, as they tend to be thought as not carrying as many responsibilities for the children or the home as women.

According to Ross (2008), the traditional paradigm has generally assumed that patterns of discriminatory behavior in organizations are conscious and individual. Hence, a reasonable person—who knows better—does the right thing and does not demonstrate bias. As a result, people developed a paradigm of diversity: a belief that good people are not biased, but inclusive, and that bad people are the opposite. This approach places responsibility on the individual to overcome their biases. The problem is that unconscious behavior is not just individual; it influences organizational culture as well (Ross, 2008). This explains why so often the best attempts at creating change in corporate culture with diversity efforts seem to fall frustratingly short and fail to deliver on the promise they intended. Organizational culture is more or less an enduring collection of underlying assumptions and ways of interpreting artifacts that a given organization has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its internal and external influences. Unconscious organizational patterns, or “norms” of behavior, exert an enormous
influence over organizational decisions, choices, and behaviors. For instance, these norms mandate how organizations get structured around who are the best candidates to be developed and promoted. Based on the low historical representation of WOC in senior roles, one could argue that there might be an organizational bias against WOC.

The power of context theory (Gladwell, 2006) also supports that human beings are a lot more sensitive to their environment than they may seem or would like to admit. It argues that individuals are acutely sensitive to present environment and situational pressures, assuming that certain situations can be so powerful that they can overwhelm inherent predispositions (Gladwell, 2006). Therefore, an organizational context in which bias against WOC is pervasive might become an epidemic, very contagious and hard to eradicate.

In his book The Tipping Point, Gladwell (2006) provides several compelling examples to illustrate how context can determine someone’s actions. Gladwell discusses the Stanford Prison Experiment in which a group of scientists at Stanford University in the 1970s decided to create a mock prison in the basement of the university's psychology building. Twenty-one volunteers were chosen to participate in a prison simulation; all the individuals chosen considered themselves pacifists and law-abiding citizens. Half of the group was selected at random to be guards, and the rest were told that they were prisoners. Those selected to be guards changed their behavior and became brutal. The prisoners started acting as criminals, thus showing that the criminal is someone acutely sensitive to the environment and who is prompted to commit crimes based on the self-
perceptions of the world. Criminality is not an innate predisposition but context dependent. This experiment revealed the influence that context exerted over how individuals act.

The essence of the power of context is that someone’s inner states are the result of outer circumstances. Similarly, the broken windows theory is another theory that argues how something external like committing a crime or littering in the streets, which appears to be a personal choice, is the inevitable result of social, economic, or political disorder in the context (Gladwell, 2006). Broken windows theory indicates that crime is less of a personal choice and more of a context-driven consequence (Harcourt, 1998). Moreover, both the power of context and the broken windows theory suggest that the context creates the conditions for contagiousness. They both utilized crime as an example of this contagion. One could argue that bias in the workplace toward WOC might be infectious as well. These deep-seated company characteristics that often favor men over women are the reason that efforts to change organizational behavior fail. Regardless of the best intentional efforts, the organizational unconscious perpetuates the status quo and keeps old patterns, values, and behavioral norms firmly rooted. Slowly, unconscious bias, with its assumption that leadership is not for women, inevitably corrodes the workplace, creating a hostile environment that denies White women and WOC a fair opportunity to advance professionally (Ely et al., 2011).

Aside from external factors such as context and organizational biases, internal factors also impact the ability of men and Women of Color to reach the top senior levels
in corporations in the U.S. In a study of Black female and male employees, evidence was found of an “emotional tax” levied on Black men and women as they tried to navigate successfully through their careers. Emotional tax was defined as the impact of the heightened experience of being different from peers at work because of someone’s gender, race, or ethnicity. The levy of an emotional tax is associated with detrimental effects on health, well-being, and the ability of people of color to thrive in the workplace (Travis, Thorpe-Moscon & McCluney, 2016). Data from that study showed that the emotional tax could deplete Black employees’ sense of well-being by making them feel that they have to be on guard, which disrupts their sleep patterns, reduces their sense of psychological safety, and diminishes their ability to contribute at work. The emotional tax they were levied decreased their success. Correspondingly, Black women and men who did not feel different were not subject to the emotional tax and subsequently were able to contribute more at work, enhancing their prospects for professional achievement.

Practical research has been instrumental in explaining the race and gender disparity problem from a pragmatic standpoint, but it also reports that the current solutions to decrease the gap in career achievement have not been fruitful. However, similar to leadership theories, these practical solutions assumed that for the most part, women constitute a monolithic group. And, they do not account for the additional barriers WOC face when layers of identity aside from gender are added to the mix. As a consequence, there continues to be a need for scholarly research to complement the practical research. Theory and practice must converge to build robust solutions to the
disparity of women, particularly of WOC, in positions of power and influence in C-suites in corporate America. Therefore, the study presented here will expand understanding around these issues.

Leading at the Intersection of Race and Gender

As illustrated in the previous sections, the complexity of gender in shaping leadership experiences for women has been somewhat identified, explored, and incorporated into some leadership practices. These efforts have benefited White women but have not significantly explained the singular path of WOC to executive roles (Eslen-Ziya & Erhart, 2015). The multiplex in which gender and race—together—shape the identities and work experiences of women in organizations still necessitates more data to be fully understood, because even among intersectional scholars, much disagreement exists about what intersectionality is and what it is not (Blake-Beard & Roberts, 2004; Holvino, 2010).

The challenges found at the intersection of leading while being both a woman and a person of color have been named distinctly by different scholars: “double discrimination” (Burleigh, 1988, p. 64), “two-headed dragon” (Pinder, 1993, p. 1053), “double impairment” (Morello, 1986, p.143), and “double jeopardy” (Beale, 1970, p. 200). Furthermore, double jeopardy may become multiple jeopardy (Fassinger & Richie, 1994; King, 1988; Sanchez-Hucles, 1997), that is, a panoply of multiple forms of discrimination for WOC if they face class oppression or heterosexism in addition to sexism and racism (Sparks, 1993).
Contemporary intersectional feminist, Womanist, and Black feminist scholars disagree with the nomenclature stated above, which presupposes an additive variable. They sustain that the intersection is substantively more multifaceted. Intersectionality, so defined, is distinct from a dichotomous or binary approach in which gender, race, and other social categories are taken as singular factors along independent axes. Intersectional scholars do not think that race, gender, and other social categories are derivative (one does not follow the other) or additive (they do not produce a compound effect) (Lindsay, 2009). Instead, these scholars maintain that the oppression of Black women and other WOC is mutually constructed, interlocking, impossible to separate, and relational (Crenshaw, 1995).

Moreover, these social scientists sustain that being at the intersection of race, class, and gender do not produce equivalent results for all groups. In its place, one must recognize that intersecting axes of differentiation are “hierarchically organized” in ways that oppress some more than others. For example, Asian and Latina women do not experience organizations in a similar way as Black women due to language barriers and being an immigration group less established in the U.S. (Brown et al., 2006; Collins, 1993; Crenshaw, 1995; Hooks, 1989; King, 1988). This intersectionality or simultaneity that occurs within and among WOC is often ignored by most mainstream leadership theories and organizational practices (Holvino, 2010; Lindsay, 2009).

Similarly, most diversity change efforts in organizations ignore the complexity in which gender, race, class, sexuality, and ethnicity, among other dimensions of difference,
together as mutually constructed variables, form the identities and work experiences of WOC in organizations (Holvino, 2008). Instead, diversity efforts are based on dominant models of identity that treat differences as essential, innate, fixed, and independent. One example is employee resource groups. Many times, there is a heated debate in organizations about whether employee groups such as a women’s network or an African American caucus are right for the organization (Holvino, 2010). For a Woman of Color, these models of resource groups force her to choose between dimensions of her identity such as her gender and her race/ethnicity: “I am a woman” or “I am Mexican” rather than “I am a Mexican woman.” Having to make this choice creates a high level of dissonance, and in many cases, a Woman of Color has to deny a substantial part of her life experience. The choice of which part of her identity to privilege often varies by context, adding to the problematic dynamic, argues Holvino (2010). This confusion, at times, does not enable organizations to deploy these women’s talents and gain their full commitment.

Other dilemmas that WOC face within diversity initiatives stem from the way in which dominant values and work practices also have a cultural dimension born at the intersection of race, gender, and ethnicity. WOC, predominantly first and second generation Asian Americans and Latinas, may have different cultural scripts than dominant racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. As immigrants, there innate cultural ties tend to be predominant in their behaviors. Cultural scripts are commonly held assumptions about social interactions and communication—ways of thinking about what one can and cannot do or say—that are particular to a cultural group (Rodriguez, 2007).
Cultural scripts provide an interpretive background for self and others but do not predict or determine behavior. In contrast to stereotypes, which are beliefs toward a group based on over-generalizations and prejudgments that apply to all its members, cultural scripts serve to express values and beliefs one holds about how to be in the world (Rodriguez, 2007; Tannen, 1990).

Cultural scripts are learned patterns of framing and interpreting one’s own and others’ behaviors. Holvino (2010) shared an example of how cultural scripts can be detrimental to WOC’s advancement. For instance, the practice of tooting one’s horn to make one’s accomplishments visible to be noticed and to advance in an organization is not something many Latinas or Asian American women feel comfortable doing based on their cultural values. Mental models of leadership favor decisive, aggressive, independent, and individualistic behaviors (Holvino, 2010). When Asians or Latinas enact the cultural script of being humble by not tooting their own horn, they demonstrate the exact opposite of these preferred leadership behaviors. As a consequence, Latinas and Asians may be assessed as unfit for leadership roles. They could be viewed as lacking in leadership potential or needing training and development so they can assimilate or fit into the organization (Holvino, 2010). Unless more diversity models incorporate the intersectionality lens, WOC will continue to be seen as less qualified leaders, thus impeding organizations from hiring, retaining, or promoting talented WOC.

Some practical disadvantages faced by WOC in the workplace include both invisibility and hyper-visibility, assumptions of incompetence, stigmas of preferential
treatment, and lack of access to networks of influence (Blake-Beard & Roberts, 2004). Timberlake (2005) submits a thought-provoking aspect of the struggle faced by WOC in the workplace; she believes the culprit for this group's low rate of advancement presents both a human and social capital problem. Human capital theory dates back over 40 years and asserts that one's skills and education should lead to a higher value and, therefore, success in the workplace market (Becker, 1964). According to Timberlake, it is important to note that even though men and women may enter an organization with similar levels of intelligence, education, skills, and experience, human capital is not enough to determine their success in the workplace. The Harvard Business School study mentioned demonstrated this by confirming a persistently lower rate of advancement of women in comparison to men even when hailed from the same renowned Ivy League graduate school (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Timberlake (2005) discovered that "the returns on abilities, knowledge, and other resources possessed by individuals in the workplace are strengthened or weakened by the surrounding social network and contextual condition" (p. 37).

Social capital theory is the conception of any aspect of social structure that creates value and facilitates the actions of the individuals within that social structure. Those with more social capital tend to be part of majority groups and, therefore, have greater opportunities to succeed in the workplace (Coleman, 1990; Lin, 2001). Smith (2005) declares that this is especially so for African-American individuals, who tend to have less social capital, in part because their social-capital credentials receive much more scrutiny.
than those of Whites. WOC, and specifically Black females, have educated themselves, acquired career experience, and done all the prescriptive activities human and social-capital scholars suggest should enable their career advancement (Bell et al., 2001). And, yet, as corroborated by Smith (2005), WOC have generally reached a glass ceiling at the middle-management stage, where they tend to be stuck (Combs, 2003; Rodriguez, 2007). The phenomenon of getting stuck in middle management is not unfamiliar to White women as well (Metz & Tharenou, 2001; Wentling, 2003). The double marginalization, however, that comes with the intersection of race and gender might explain why WOC, in particular, are challenged when building the social capital commonly associated with career advancement (Bell et al., 2001; Catalyst, 2004, 2006).

Double marginalization also helps explain why WOC reach a glass ceiling at lower levels than White women and men (Combs, 2003; Giscombe & Mattis, 2003; Hite, 2004). As pointed out previously, WOC tend to experience barriers that are more formidable than glass would imply. Thomas (2001) offered additional insight as to why WOC have not been able to build social capital and reach the C-suite and other senior executive roles by examining the impact of race and gender on mentoring relationships. As explained in the preceding section, WOC’s mentorship opportunities often face obstacles shaped by cross-race and cross-gender taboos.

Congruent with this vicissitude, when WOC succeed in corporations, they do so without being accepted as insiders (Catalyst, 2006). This finding is consistent with another Catalyst report (Catalyst, 2004) that asserts that the barriers to career
advancement were particularly difficult for African American women to penetrate. The race and gender of WOC establish them as double outsiders in corporate settings. WOC should take a sticking together approach to managing their social capital challenges. They should seek out other WOC with which to network and build alliances (Catalyst, 2006). However, the small representation of WOC at the top levels means that it might prove difficult for WOC to form the necessary partnerships to strengthen their social network (Catalyst, 2006, 2015a). In short, despite its prominent role in women's career advancement, a focus on human capital could not ameliorate the impact of structural barriers such as the lack of mentor support, inability to build social capital, and other forms of gender discrimination that continue to hinder women's efforts to succeed.

Despite the multiple obstacles detailed above, Women of Color do not necessarily view their racial, gender, and class stratification as insurmountable obstacles (Hooks, 1989). WOC also enjoy some advantages (Epstein, 1973; Nkomo & Cox, 1990), such as being remembered since they are likely to be visually distinctive (the flip side of being invisible); having a community of support based on being a Woman of Color; having racial, ethnic, and gendered insight into how things work; and being underestimated (Hooks, 1989). Being undervalued, at times, allows WOC to make a significant good impression even when working at their minimum capacity. Women professionals of color may view their own multiple jeopardies as a test but also as a trial that they are prepared to handle. WOC may assess the socially constructed negatives of female gender and non-White racial identity as a positive (Epstein, 1973; Rodriguez, 2007).
In closing, sexism and racism are strong forces in American society, penetrating all areas, both public and private (Holvino, 2010; Rodriguez, 2007; Steinem, 1995). WOC are not minorities first and women second. Nor are they women first and minorities second. They are individuals who have incorporated a whole constellation of roles, characteristics, and experiences into their self-concepts. Yet, sex and race are primary statuses, channeling WOC into specific functions and impinging on their lives at every turn.

Introduction to Social Theory and Organizations

This literature review commenced by demonstrating through scholarly research that the four mainstream leadership theories have not accounted for the challenges and advantages that someone’s race and gender imposes on their ability to lead others. It followed with an examination of a series of practical research studies that emphasized the various vicissitudes and barriers that women and WOC continue to experience in the workplace. Those obstacles have delayed and, in many cases, stopped women and WOC from attaining senior level roles at the same rate as their male counterparts.

This section expands the practical knowledge with scholarly explorations that also support the negative impact of one’s race and gender to their ability—perceived or real—to lead. In what follows, a series of scholarly research studies about social interaction is presented, explaining Panopticism, Critical Race Theory, and internalized racism. These theories solidify the recognition that race and gender are two variables that mediate people’s ability to lead, relate to, and influence others. This acknowledgment posits that a solution to the race and gender disparity in the C-suite necessitates too many variables
within complex systems, thus decreasing hope in the ability for crafting a speedy solution to the disproportion. However, the next and last sections of this literature review affirm that the solution for the disparity has already been identified. The problem is that it has not been documented. A positive-deviance lens is explained to suggest that the few WOC that have ascended to senior level roles have already solved the problem that confounds others. Therefore, all that is needed to solve the race and gender disparity in the C-suite is to examine those WOC, document how they did it, and replicate it to increase the number of WOC in the corridors of power in large institutions in the U. S.

Social Theory and Organizations

Construing human behavior and human institutions as independent variables is a grievous misunderstanding (Granovetter, 1985). Social theory holds that social relations affect behavior and institutions (Merton, 1968). Society is nothing more than the coordinated actions of all its members (Hewitt, 1988). The results of these coordinated actions take the form of social structure, which shapes the behavior of individuals and therefore the dynamics within an organization. Dornbusch, Glasgow, and Lin (1996) define social structure as a relatively enduring pattern of social arrangement or interrelations within a particular society, organization, or social group. As Hewitt (1988) points out (in Griffin, 2011), much of social life is routine. Within a given society, people perform the same tasks over and over, the situations in which they find themselves are pretty much the same from one day to the next, and their culture mostly provides ready-made ways of behaving.
Correspondingly, organizations are moderately stable patterns of group interaction committed to some purpose (Watson, 2003). Organizations are repeated forms of social interface to accomplish a particular goal using their culture’s ready-made ways of behaving. Hence, they may take on the characteristics (e.g., race and gender) of the founders, their leaders, or their desired clients or constituents, often by active recruitment of their participants (Emerson et al., 2001; Stinchcombe & March, 1965; Rhode, 2016). Therefore, organizations may be thought of as having racial or gender characteristics based on their norms or their demographics (Acker, 1990; Kanter, 1977). They may have an implicit code about what an organizational participant should look like as well as what the participant should be capable of doing to fit correctly and advance in the organization (Acker, 1990; Emerson et al., 2001; Kanter, 1977). Such codes culminate in an organizational culture, which consists of the symbols, beliefs, and patterns of behavior learned, produced, and created by the people who devote their energies and labor to the life of an organization (Emerson et al., 2001).

These codes are expressed in the design of the organization and of its work, in the artifacts and services that the organization produces, in the architecture of its premises, in the technologies that it employs, in its ceremonies of encounter and meeting, in the temporal structuring of organizational courses of action, in the quality and conditions of its working life, in the ideologies of work, in the corporate philosophy, and in the jargon, lifestyle and physical appearance of the organization's members. (Strati, as quoted in Gherardi, 1992, p. 579)

In the organizational cultural context, gender and race are master statuses, and therefore they condition all social interactions of the individual. They are implicitly embedded in most of the symbols within organizations (Laws, 1975). “Individuals also
have achieved status, which they earned through their social behaviors within society, whether good, bad or neutral” (Hewitt, 1988, p. 123).

Race and gender can be performed like roles on the stage within the context of a particular organization or practice setting. For a person to perform race and gender roles in an organization, these social characteristics tend to have regular patterns of meaning and interact with a particular context, scene, or setting. Gender is something we think, something we do, and something that makes us accountable to others (Gherardi, 1994). Race is equally something we think, do, and make. The numerical representation of people who are usually organizational outsiders, such as women or people of color, affects how those outsiders are viewed within the organization (Kanter, 1977). To clarify the impact of being in the minority, Kanter (1977) constructed the theory of relative numbers, which postulates that women’s success in the workplace depends significantly on their corresponding representation within the company. She stated that token women in predominantly male workplaces suffer interactional disadvantages such as isolation and increased performance pressure as a result of their proportional rarity.

By looking at a large organization, Kanter defined how organizational structure shapes the behavior and personalities of the people who work in it. Analyzing three roles—manager, secretary, and wife—Kanter emphasized that the dilemmas and choices inherent to each role and the images developed from the role constrain the individuals in those roles. Those positions come to serve an organizational function and make change difficult. The images of masculine and feminine embedded in the roles are neither
inherent to the tasks themselves nor in the characteristics of men and women; they are
developed instead by a response to the problems incumbents face in trying to live their
organizational lives within these roles. Thus, a person’s location in an organizational
structure, even if it is in a dead-end, invisible, or anonymous position, has more impact
on productivity, self-esteem, and competence than background factors or early
socialization.

If there are very few women or people of color within an organization, they are
less likely to have power and are more likely to be stereotyped. It is also more probable
that they will remain silent in the face of their obstacles. WOC lack a critical mass to
push for change and to resist deeply embedded organizational structures and societal
attitudes (Bell et al., 2001; Rodriguez, 2007; Wilkins, 1999). Due to their low numbers of
representation at senior level roles, WOC in corporate America are evidently outsiders
within the corporate environment (Catalyst, 2015a, 2015b). The outsider status may be
one of the significant culprits in their slow acceleration to reaching the corridors of power
within the C-suite.

Outsider Theory & "In Group Favoritism"

In 1906, Sumner, a renowned sociologist, posited that humans as a sui generis
mammal are predisposed to join together in groups and therefore have an innate tendency
to favor their own group over others, proclaiming how "each group nourishes its own
pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exists in its own divinities, and looks with
contempt on outsiders" (Sumner, 2002, p. 13). This phenomenon is seen at the group
level as in-group favoritism, also known as in-group-out-group bias, or intergroup bias.
According to Sumner, in-group favoritism can be defined as a pattern of favoring members of one’s in-group over out-group members. This can be expressed in the evaluation of others, in the allocation of resources, and in many other ways (Sumner, 2002).

A social system may use group characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, physical disability, social class, ethnicity, race, age, or religion to make individuals insiders or outsiders based on the socially-created value of these characteristics (Matsuda, 1988). Individuals tend to become outsiders if they have fewer culturally valued attributes than other individuals, as determined by the norms of the society or social system. Outsiders, as compared to insiders, tend to lack social resources or social acceptability (MacLeod, 2009; Matsuda, 1988; Wilkins & Gulati, 1996). They may also differ from insiders concerning their perspectives on or interpretations of the social world and their place in it. Outsiders may exist on the periphery of a social system or the margins between two or more social networks (MacLeod, 2009).

Members of the power elite often use markers of race, ethnicity, gender, and class to limit access to social power similar to current power holders (Kanter, 1977; Mills, 1956). Outsider status has subjective and objective components. Observers can count and measure objective components such as a lack of inclusion in socially prestigious institutions, high representation in socially devalued institutions (such as prisons), or physical segregation from the rest of the population (Park, 1928). Subjective components are not as clearly defined, for they tend to operate at an unconscious level.
According to social identity theory, one of the critical determinants of group biases is the need to improve self-esteem. The desire to view one's self positively is transferred to the group, creating a tendency to see one's own group in a positive light, and by comparison, to see outside groups in a negative light (Emerson et al., 2001). That is, individuals will find a reason, no matter how insignificant, to prove to themselves why their own group is superior.

Social marginality describes the condition of people who exist near or at the borders of cultures, norms, social systems, or institutions that are central to or prominent in society (Kanter, 1977; Mills, 1956). Park (1928) developed the notion of a marginal man who was alienated from his native social world due to immigration, or a disruption of his social order, and who could not readily assimilate into a new social order. The inability for the marginal man to settle into either his native or his adoptive social world caused an unsettling internal psychological conflict, almost as though it were a split personality disorder. Historical, religious, and cultural differences along with xenophobia and differences in physical appearance have prevented the assimilation of marginal persons. The notion of being marginal resonates with Latinas and Asian women, especially if they are first-generation immigrants.

Another study conducted by Green and Mitchell (1979) found that if leaders felt a close psychological bond to their subordinates, they evaluated their subordinates as being motivated by the same factors as the leaders were. Moreover, the emotional connection allowed leaders to attribute success and failure of their direct reports accurately.
“Women of Color, as minorities, tend to have the most considerable psychological social distance from their predominately White and male superiors and thus are more likely to suffer from inaccurate attributions of their success or failure” (Sanchez-Hucles, 1997, p. 5). These women are commonly considered outsiders or are marginalized as the "others" in the White male-dominated high-prestige professional world (Bell, 1989; Bell et al., 2001; Emerson et al., 2001; Epstein, 1973; Sanchez-Hucles, 1997). As outsiders, Women of Color lack the contacts, networks, and connections with decision makers and employers, which tends to restrain their access to promotions (Sanchez-Hucles, 1997). Their inability to build strong social capital at the same rate as their peers might be another factor hindering their chances of reaching the C-suite.

Panopticism: “Normalizing Society’s Norms”

Jeremy Bentham designed the Panopticon as an ideal structure for a prison; the building constituted a circle of individual cells with a guard tower in the middle (Foucault, 1977). The guard could see into the cells at all times, whereas the prisoners in the cells would never be able to see each other or the guard. Those in the cells never knew whether there was a guard present, but they were always under the assumption and fear that someone was watching them. As a result, the inmates restrained themselves and behaved well, because they feared the power of the guard, who would punish them if they misbehaved.

Foucault (1977) described the feeling of being watched in his book Discipline and Punish. He argued: “The major effect of the Panopticon is to induce in the inmate a state
of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (p. 35). This architectural apparatus arranges items so that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action. It fosters a perfection of power, which in turn renders its actual exercise unnecessary. Foucault (1997) described his interest as aimed at how the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practices of the self. “These practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group” (p. 291). In short, the inmates are caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers.

Used as a metaphor, Foucault theorized that ours is a society of surveillance and self-observation (to the extent of self-oppression) much like the Panopticon, sustaining that the Panopticon principle is not limited only to the application of prison design. De facto, he contended that the system that Bentham was striving to perfect was an apt allegory for many different types of social organizations and structures. The Panopticon may no longer exist structurally in today’s society, yet its remnants are evident in various forms. For instance, it is evident if there is an injustice in the community that has been upheld for a long time and made ordinary, such as not embracing same-sex marriage (Bradley-Volz, 2015). The unjust structures and power relationships in the society at large are upheld—even by those affected by the injustice—because Panopticism fosters normalization of behaviors. It promotes the status quo. It is so sturdy that the oppressed
tend to collude in its own oppression and demise, thus making it possible that a gay or lesbian will act in ways that help support those against same-sex marriage.

Foucault conceptualized power as institutionalized and embedded within social relationships rather than as a tool that is consciously exercised by its holder (McGinn, 2006). People adhere to the norms, rules, and laws of society even if the police or other authorities are not present or visible. Punishment and the exercise of power are internalized, and as a result, this force is mostly invisible (Bradley-Volz, 2015).

Panopticism as a system of normalization and power compels individuals to remain within the culture’s gender and leadership roles, which retains its hold on the ‘normalcy’ of a series of behaviors accepted in society, such as being heterosexual and women taking the lead in the domestic work at home (Bradley-Volz, 2015). When people step out of the societal norms, the level of punishment can range from dirty looks and under-the-breath comments to extreme irrational or violent behaviors, such as being fired or not promoted (Bradley-Volz, 2015).

WOC are burdened by the invisible power of Panopticism (Crenshaw, 1995; McGinn, 2006). According to data by Catalyst (2015a), the few women and WOC that have become CEOs in Fortune 500 companies retained most of their executive teams, fostering the White, pale, and male syndrome in the C-suite within these organizations. In theory, these women could have potentially changed the racial and gender composition of their executive team and the entire organization they commanded. The women CEOs could have orchestrated a policy of hiring people of color and women as the majority in
senior executive roles. However, these women did not significantly change the racial and gender composition of the companies they controlled. Using a Panopticism lens solely, it suggests that in effect, these women CEOs kept the normalcy in their organizations, including the low representation of women and WOC at the highest level of the organization.

Panopticism exercises a kind of power that operates without regard to individuals who occupy positions within the structures. The power resides in the established structures (explicit and implicit), such as norms and hierarchical relationships (McGinn, 2006). According to Foucault (1977), under conditions of hierarchical power, those subject to the authority often police their own behavior and that of others to ensure that they follow established norms. For instance, accountability and diversity policies function as a set of rules that are enacted in a hierarchical, top-down structure. The expectations or normalcy that only a low percentage of diverse people should be represented within an organization is in a way monitored by a society or a board that is observing. Observation changes behavior, as does the possibility of observation. Considering the example above, women CEOs could fear being accused of discriminatory behaviors if they hire more women. Therefore, they may have policed themselves and with inaction contributed to a system that has oppressed them for centuries (Browne & Misra, 2003). Male CEOs have historically appointed more men than women to senior executive roles, and they do not appear to have any distress in keeping the majority of their team members male and White. Panopticism theorists would sustain that those male CEOs are also normalizing.
Foucault (1977) refers to those behaviors as “normalizing judgment” (p. 85). Foucault predicts that under conditions of constant surveillance and normalizing judgment, the capacity of individuals to behave in a novel or unexpected way is suppressed. Foucault goes further to claim that through the discipline of schooling, a society of Panopticism has been created. People are taught early, while socialized in school, to watch each other and ensure homogenization. McGinn (2006) posits that through homogenization, individuals are assigned value by measuring and then sorting hierarchically to identify both skills and gaps they possess. Homogenizing techniques are applied to both reward skill and punish gaps, resulting in a system of conformity. Homogenization also identifies both normal and abnormal. Through these techniques of normalization, individuals are reinforced as normal or pathologized as abnormal, and those who are abnormal become targets for remediation and treatment. Efforts at remediation are designed to eliminate the gaps identified in the quantitative measurement of the abnormal character or behavior and encourage normalization.

According to Foucault (1977), citizens in society and employees in corporations become normalized into a society of Panopticism through schooling or mainstream leadership theories and then become the guards that may be watching other people. At the same time, they also fear being watched and judged by others, thus forcing themselves to remain normalized (Foucault, 1977). Therefore, they maintain popular and mainstream organizational structures and executive ratios. In a sense, the oppressed (WOC) not only have the oppressor (organizations, people, and structures) to deal with, but they also
contribute to their own oppression (Ingols et al., 2015). WOC that do not conform to the behaviors expected as leaders tend to be normalized by themselves or by the organizational culture in which they work.

Critical Race Theory: "Discrimination Happens Without Effort"

More than a century ago, one of the most influential African American scholars of his time, W. E. B. Du Bois spoke of the racial divide that existed within U.S. society, the color line (Crenshaw, 1995). Subsequently, historian and scholar John Hope Franklin (1993) stated that by the middle of the twentieth century, the color line was as well defined and as firmly entrenched as any institution in the land. After all, the color line was older than most institutions, including the federal government itself. Moreover, “the color line informed the content of those organizations and the lives of the people who lived under them” (p. 36). Correspondingly, Critical Race Theory (CRT) recognizes that racism is ingrained in the fabric and system of American society (Crenshaw, 1995). Derrick Bell, an African American professor of law at Harvard Law School, and Alan Freeman, a White scholar teaching at SUNY-Buffalo Law School, laid the foundations of CRT, which would go on to transform our understanding of the relationship between race, racism, and official power (Bell, 1989). Most Americans believe that their society is fair and just, and the legal system frames anti-discrimination law and doctrine with this presupposition in mind. Most critical race theorists posit the opposite is true; in their view, racism is ordinary, routine, and deeply embedded in everyday life and institutions (Bell, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).
The idea that the individual racist need not exist to note that institutional racism is pervasive in the dominant culture is an analytical lens that CRT utilizes. This theory examines the power structures based on White privilege and White supremacy, which perpetuate the marginalization of people of color in all areas of life, especially at the highest levels of organizational ladders (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

For critical race scholars, the marginalization of people of color has been preserved by the consistent use of racial divides among individuals in society (Andreasen, 2000). Hetherington and Reid (2010), supported by scientific findings, argue that individuals of different races share a considerable majority of their genes (perhaps as much as 99.9%) and that the few genes that do account for minor differences such as hair texture and skin color cannot possibly influence distinctively human traits such as intelligence, personality, or propensity for moral or immoral behavior. Critical race theorists examine how people nevertheless come to believe in the reality of race. Scholars wonder what keeps the social construction of race in place even with irrefutable evidence that shows that there is only one race: that is, the human race (Hetherington & Reid, 2010).

The development of Critical Race Theory applied to Women of Color's slow pace of advancement in corporations within the U.S. has coincided with empirical social science paying more attention to WOC in the professional labor market (Bell et al., 2001; Browne, 1999; Browne & Misra, 2003; Nkomo & Cox, 1990; Reskin & Padavic, 1994; Simpson, 1984). This had led to an understanding that African American women may
have multiple consciousnesses (King, 1988) due to their experiences with racism and sexism, which give them a distinct perspective about how they are oppressed due to their unearned disadvantages (Hooks, 1989). Latinas and Asian American women have contributed to CRT by expanding the concepts of multiple consciousnesses and multiple jeopardies to include discussions of stratification based on immigration, nationality, intra-racial ethnic division, language, and citizenship status (Anzaldúa, 1987; Moran & Lu, 2001). They have broadened the conversation from the race/gender/class axis upon which Black women commentators have focused (Chew, 1987; Glenn, 2002; Matsuda, 1988; Sircar, 2000).

Critical race theorists have argued that the low number of WOC in the C-suite reflects not poor quality of work, low productivity, or WOC failure to work hard enough. Instead, these scholars maintain that corporations in America, like other places of power, reflect and reinforce traditional hierarchies of racial power (Bell, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Thus, as in the era of slavery, White men continue to be at the pinnacle of the vast majority of corporations. Critics of the theory state that supporters of CRT may have made undocumented assertions and substituted personal experience and anecdote for a provable fact (Fletcher, 1997). Other critics have focused on the movement's critique of merit and other Eurocentric mainstays. For example, Farber and Sherry (1997) ask, what will replace merit as a basis for distributing jobs, places in a law school class, and other scarce social goods? Moreover, what are we to make of the current distribution of wealth and influence? If it was improperly gained, as the critics
suggest, through a series of rigged competitions, what of minority groups such as Asians and Jews who have done well under the current regime? Perhaps, the critique of merit is implicitly anti-Semitic and anti-Asian (Farber & Sherry, 1997). It is precisely some of those critiques that fuel CRT scholars to continue to study, polish, and refine the theory. CRT is one of the few robust theories that might help dispel the deeply seeded racism and sexism that plagues the U.S. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Internalized Racism

If racism is not rare, as critical race theorists argue, then it is plausible that people of color cannot escape racism themselves, and therefore, they internalize its effects. A great deal of the research on internalized racism must be attributed to Jerome Taylor, who has written about the topic in detail (Taylor, 1990; Thomas, 1992). For communities of color, internalized racism can be defined as the acceptance of stereotypes and discriminatory notions that cast one’s own racial community as subhuman, inferior, incapable, or a burden on society (Taylor, 1990). Internalized racism has also been described as the inverse of ethnic identity development (Taylor, 1990; Thomas, 1992).

Some theorists say that internalized racism is believing, adopting, accepting and incorporating the negative beliefs provided by the oppressor as truth (Frankenberg, 1993; Freire, 1970; Gainor, 1992). Furthermore, in addition to believing the messages and images, those negative beliefs are acted out or manifested toward the self, toward others who share the individual’s racial identity, and toward those from other groups of color in very hurtful ways (Hill, 1995). Hill defines it as “the act of turning upon ourselves, upon
our families and upon our own people.” (p. 72). As a result of internalization, African Americans, for example, often learn to loathe themselves rather than understand that these negative beliefs are products of a racist society designed to emotionally, economically, and spiritually oppress groups of people (Freire, 1970; Gainor, 1992). To make sense of how internalized racism operates within the affected individual, Giroux (1996) coined the term fugitive identity. He suggested that when what someone is as a human being is made negative on a grand scale, the tendency is to run away from oneself, to disassociate oneself from one’s organic history and culture, and to, in essence, develop a fugitive identity. In constructing this identity, people of color create “images of whiteness” in their “person of color imagination” (Giroux, 1996, p. 68). In other words, the internalized oppression is so profound, deeply rooted, and robust that people of color no longer have to run away from who they are. Deep in their psyche, White supremacy has permeated to such extent that an authentic sense of who they are, who they were, or who could they be apart from that dominance may no longer exist, not even in their souls (Giroux, 1996). People of color entrenched deeply in internalized racism, and extreme fugitive identity have a parallel identity conflict. At times, they do not even consider themselves as people of color, nor do they identify with them (Giroux, 1996).

Hardiman, Jackson, and Griffin (2007) also discussed the interrelatedness of internalized racism with collusion and introduced the terminology of internalized subordination. The idea of collusion is that as people of color are victimized by racism, they develop ideas and behaviors that support or collude with racism. People of color
start taking action against their own racial group, which in turn helps keep oppression in place (Hardiman et al., 2007).

Although the process of internalization of racism has yet to be studied in detail, there are various hypotheses regarding the conditions that lead people to internalize racism. These conditions include historical antecedents and living in a racist environment. Examination of these conditions suggests why racism is internalized. The presence of racism in a given population’s history is a condition that might lead to the internalization of racism. Some scholars link the internalization of racism in Black communities in the U.S. to the African slave trade because African slaves were viewed as mentally defective, physically gifted, and more akin to an animal than a human (Butler, Tull, Chambers & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Gundy, 1996). Butler et al. (2002) hypothesized that after centuries of exposure to racist propaganda, Blacks in the western hemisphere had internalized this racism. These theorists seem to be indicating that exposure to racist propaganda and a history of enslavement leads African Americans to believe that they are not as mentally competent as their White counterparts. Furthermore, African Americans may be confident that they are more gifted physically than mentally and, hence, should aspire to participate in activities that highlight their physical gifts.

A similar history of racism can be found in the communities of Latin America. The Spanish conquerors that colonized much of Latin America developed a caste system based on racial lineage (Gutierrez, 1999). In the caste system, Spaniards were given the most status and esteem, followed by Native populations, and Africans were considered
the lowest class. The various racial combinations of these fundamental elements, known as mestizaje, led to a very elaborate system of names (Gutierrez, 1999). An individual’s status within the caste system was based on the amount of Spanish versus the amount of Native and African ancestry, with more Spanish being considered superior (Gutierrez, 1999). Today, skin color and physical features are still regarded as a vital part of the socio-political power. Preference for light skin and degradation of Native populations is an example of their internalization of racism. Therefore, historical racism might lead to the internalization of racism in communities of color (Gutierrez, 1999).

Racism in the environment is another condition that has been linked to internalized racism, in that living in an atmosphere that is racist leads those affected to internalize it deeply (Asanti, 1996; Taylor, 1990). However, these authors have different explanations for why people eventually internalize racism. Taylor suggests that individuals are at considerable risk of internalizing racism when they are estranged from their culture. When a person is in a racist environment and lacks cultural validation, that person is more likely to internalize racism (Taylor, 1990). Thus, lack of cultural identity coupled with living in a racist environment leads to the internalization of racism.

Another theory on the internalization of racism relates to a person’s coping mechanisms. Asanti (1996) argues that to avoid cognitive dissonance, an African American living in a racist environment must “suppress their blackness” (p. 51) in an effort to be like the majority. Furthermore, the individual will begin to imitate the culture of the oppressor, adopting values and preferences that are more consistent with White
society and culture. The internalization may become so complete that a person of color is likely to believe that anything associated with the ethnic culture is unattractive.

In conclusion, CRT indicates that racism is so pervasive that it cannot be eliminated even from the hearts of the same people who are victims of its wrath. This theory presents little to no hope in the eradication of the race and gender disparity at the top of organizations in the U.S. However impossible, this literature review concludes with an examination of a theory that brings optimism. Positive-deviance theory, affirms that the solution for the disparity has already been identified. The problem is that it has not been formally captured and documented. The next section presents how a positive-deviance lens suggests that a deep examination of how a few outlier WOC have attained senior executive level roles—despite all systemic barriers—is all that is required to solve the race and gender gap. In what follows, positive-deviance theory is comprehensively explained.

Positive-Deviance Theory

Positive-deviance theory is founded on the premise that at least one person in a community, working with the same resources as everyone else, has already solved the problem that confounds others (Pascale & Sternin, 2005). This individual is an outlier in the statistical sense—an exception—someone whose outcome deviates in a positive way from the norm. In most cases, the outlier does not know he or she is doing anything unusual (Dorsey, 2000; Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010). The positive deviance process is appropriate “when behavioral and attitudinal changes are called for—that is, when
there is no apparent off-the-shelf remedy, and successful coping strategies remain isolated and concealed” (Pascale & Sternin, 2005, p. 55). This perspective seems to be very appropriate to identify what the few outlier Women of Color who have made it to the C-suite did differently than other WOC. Perhaps the study of those outliers may lead to solutions to the pronounced race and gender disparity within the C-suites in corporations in the U.S.

The term positive deviance refers to the collective acts of individuals within organizations, whereas positive deviant refers exclusively to individuals (Allio, 2011). Both terms denote behavior and results that are extreme positives on a normal distribution curve (Seidman & McCauley, 2008). Positive-deviance theory was postulated more than 25 years ago as a behavioral change process to deal with health-related challenges in the developing world, such as childhood malnutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention, and maternal and neonatal mortality (Peters, Hartke & Pohlman, 1985; Zeitlan, 1991; Zeitlan, Ghasse, & Mansour, 1990). Outliers were observed, and their actions were replicated to solve health problems in those communities.

As positive-deviance is increasingly recognized, there needs to be vigilance regarding assumptions about cross-cultural interpretations and applicability of the concept. Kim and Markus (1999) point out that cultural values and attitudes toward some notions can differ; what is considered positively deviant within one setting or group of people may be insulting or inappropriate for a different situation. Using the examples of the U.S. and East Asia, they showed that deviance does not have positive connotations in
East Asian cultures, where conformity is valued and emphasized. Alternately, in the U.S., deviance can be viewed positively as uniqueness, and “conformity to group norms is associated with relinquishing of one’s autonomy, not being in control, and being pushed around. Consequently, people in the U.S. follow the norm not to follow norms” (Kim & Markus, 1999, p. 787). Similarly, within corporations, particular behaviors can be considered positively deviant for one gender and negatively deviant for the other. One example is assertiveness, which when exercised by a White male is considered a trait of a good leader. However, when exercised by WOC, assertiveness tends to be regarded as detrimental and equated with brashness (Allio, 2011).

The concept of positive-deviance as it emerges is thus lacking uniform cohesion in how it is perceived and theorized. The extensive range and number of theories about deviance is a reflection of the complexity of the phenomenon. Research on the emerging concept of positive deviants as exceptional performers in organizations is scant; however, the insights of deviants have been useful in understanding the impact they have on organizations. For example, Pascale and Sternin (2005) suggest that some groups are prevailing against the odds and doing better than everyone else under the same constraints, and these individuals represent the potential of positive deviance in organizational settings. They further explain that positive deviance is a process for problem-solving and can be used to implement change in organizations.
Analysis of the Conceptual Framework

An integration of leadership and social theories, as applied to the advancement of WOC, deciphers the multifaceted systemic barriers that continue to keep WOC from ascending to senior-executive-level roles in large organizations in the U.S. However, understanding the why of this phenomenon has not led to sustainable solutions. Clear evidence is the stagnant and persistent low number of WOC leading organizations. In almost a decade (from 2005 to 2014), women’s representation in the C-suite has shifted only one percent, from 3% to 4% (Catalyst 2015a, 2017b; Rhode, 2016). Most statistics do not distinguish between White women and Women of Color. Thus, without disaggregating for WOC, data mask the gravity of the under-representation of WOC. For example, Table 2, shown earlier, was created to demonstrate that, of the 4% of women in the C-suite, only 0.4% are WOC.

This dissertation contends that, to expand further knowledge that leads to understanding and practical solutions, qualitative studies should shift from analyzing the reasons for the race and gender disparity and, instead, explore how some WOC have attained a seat in the C-suite. To this end, CRT and positive-deviance theories can be applied to understand from the people who know best—WOC themselves—what strategies, capabilities, internal and external factors have enabled them to succeed. CRT supports this approach in that racism is so pervasive that it may be impossible to eradicate. Positive-deviance theory also supports this approach in that the few outlier WOC who have successfully entered the C-suite have done so without dismantling
racism or sexism, but by circumventing, the system that is stacked against their professional success. Hence, it is reasonable to presume that those outlier WOC have cracked the code and found the solutions for closing the race and gender gap.

The urgency for scholarly studies turning their focus on how some WOC succeed is also supported by the failure of studies situated at the intersection of academic disciplines related to race and gender and those related to leadership theories. These studies have attempted to lessen the negative impact on WOC by mainstream scholars who do not recognize how race and gender mediate all aspects of life. Mainstream leadership tenets have shaped the definition of the who, what and how of workplace leadership. Their epistemological hegemony implicitly suggests that a great leader must be a male leader (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Burns, 1978; Carlyle, 1869; Greenleaf, 1977; Hersey & Blanchard, 1993; Northouse, 2007, 2018). However, by positioning leadership within the context of racial and gender oppression, humanistic and post-heroic leadership models redefine leadership. Those models postulate that leading is a collaborative and relational process dependent on social networks of influence (Fletcher, 2004; Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). They further affirm that caring, concern for others, and collaboration are the chief elements exhibited by remarkable leaders. Biases in society help women by assuming that those traits are inherently feminine. Therefore, humanistic leadership theorists claim that women—not men—are better equipped to lead (Holvino, 2010; Rodriguez, 2007; Rhode, 2016).

Yet, the same gender societal bias that benefits women also harms them. This is
because female leaders who exhibit post-heroic leadership traits such as caring (stereotypically feminine traits) are perceived as merely functioning the way women or mothers would behave, rather than as compelling leaders (Counts, 2012). In contrast, male leaders, not usually expected to exhibit those same qualities, are considered to have exemplary leadership skills when they display care or concern for others. Thus, even leadership theories that are gender sensitive—created primarily to advance women—end up continuing to elevate men to senior-executive-level roles. This example illustrates that, even at the convergence of these disciplines, the female advantage in leadership will not be realized rapidly (Chin, 2010; Eagly & Carli, 2003).

The variables within the systemic barriers that prevent WOC from attaining senior roles are not independent of each other. In fact, the variables are mutually constructed. By feeding each other, they make the system sturdier and harder for WOC to overcome its barriers to achieve professional advancement. The system is so robust that even WOC get caught in its web. Inadvertently, WOC also collude in their inability to climb the professional ladder. Social theorists explain this self-sabotage by showing how social relations affect institutional structures (Dornbusch et al., 1996; Granovetter, 1985; Hewitt, 1988; Merton, 1968). In-group favoritism explains the innate pattern of favoring members of one’s in-group over out-group members (Matsuda, 1988; Sumner, 2002). That is, Whites tend to prefer to hire Whites, while men will opt to hire men (Wilkins & Gulati, 1996). Now, since White women share race with most men in power in the U.S., and Black men share the same gender; Black men and White women could be considered
in-group members. Therefore, in-group favoritism suggest that men and White women in power will support each other. However, WOC, who share neither race nor gender with those typically in power, are subject to the detrimental effects of in-group bias. It is thus sensible to interpret that the low number of WOC in the C-suite is mutually constructed with in-group favoritism. Both variables build on each other to prevent WOC from attaining senior executive roles in large organizations in the U.S. (Bell & Nkomo, 1992; Bell et al., 2001; Rodriguez, 2007; Wilkins, 1999).

Nevertheless, in-group favoritism does little to inform how even large organizations led by WOC also report having significantly fewer WOC than men in higher-level roles (Blake-Beard & Roberts, 2004; Blake-Beard et al., 2010; Catalyst, 2015b). The conceptual framework of this study explains the self-sabotage by relating other variables and using the lenses of Critical Race Theory, internalized racism, and Panopticism. The interrelations of all those theories suggest that even WOC may have come to believe that men are better leaders than women, thus contributing to their own disadvantage.

Critical Race Theory holds that, if racism is not rare but ordinary, and is deeply embedded in everyday life and institutions, then, one can presuppose that people of color are trapped and themselves unable to escape racism. WOC are then left to internalize the effects of a racist society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). For communities of color, internalized racism can be defined as the acceptance of stereotypes and discriminatory notions that cast one’s own racial community as subhuman, inferior, incapable or a
burden on society (Taylor, 1990). One effect is that WOC are somewhat incapable of actively, intentionally, and aggressively recruiting, retaining, or promoting more WOC than any other group. In contrast with other racial groups that do prefer their own, WOC do not exercise in-group favoritism bias, thereby contributing to the under-representation of their own racial and gender groups even in WOC-led institutions.

Looking at this issue through a Panopticism frame similarly explains why WOC feel constrained by powerful invisible forces that help support a system that advances men and not WOC to the top. Panopticism amplifies the tendency for people to act in accordance with what is normal, thus disinclining individuals from executing radical changes (Foucault, 1977). In the U.S., where White men account for 72% of corporate leadership in Fortune 500 companies (Jones, 2017), “the male and pale” reality appear to be the norm. Thus, everyone in the system, men, and women alike tends to maintain the status quo by supporting men to climb to the top of the organizational ladder. This attitude continues the cycle of exclusion and lack of diversity.

Internalized racism also debilitates WOC’s resiliency; it does not allow WOC to acknowledge the high emotional tax they (along with other WOC) have had levied on them on their lonely path to senior executive-level roles (Travis et al., 2016). Further, it does not enable WOC to realize how they have cultural scripts that deviate from majority group’s; scripts that interfere with their ability to sustain professional success and realize their full potential (Rodriguez, 2007; Tannen, 1990). WOC could be viewed by others or by themselves as lacking in leadership potential or needing training and development in
order to assimilate and fit into the organizational culture (Holvino, 2010).

In essence, WOC have to contend not only with an outside world and organizational structure which are not always equitable and welcoming, they also have to deal with their own limitations, whether, self-created, perceived or real. The problem is so nuanced that the several solutions implemented in attempts to close the gap, such as mentoring, sponsoring, and leadership programs, have failed to significantly increase the proportion of WOC who reach the C-suite (Blake-Beard, 2001; Robinson, 2016; Starman, 2007; Travis et al., 2013).

Many scholars have described the why of the low ascension of WOC, and some have even named it (e.g., glass ceiling). Understanding the why has not led to the how. Consequently, finding solutions to elevate more WOC to senior-level roles demands further exploration. The purpose of this study is to contribute to discovering how more WOC can climb the institutional ladder by employing a positive-deviance approach. Positive-deviance theory is founded on the premise that at least one person in a community, working with the same resources as everyone else, has already solved the problem that confounds others (Pascale et al., 2010). This theory proposes that there are individuals who are prevailing against the odds and doing better than everyone else under the same constraints. The few outlier Women of Color who have ascended to the top should continue to be studied, in order to identify the non-normative behaviors or factors that enabled them to climb despite external challenges and internal, self-imposed obstacles.
Once the strategies they have employed are formally analyzed and captured in scholarly work, solutions to the pervasive inequities regarding who gets to the C-suite might be identified and, subsequently, sustainably implemented. The intersectionality of leadership, race and gender studies has proven that the deep-seated race and gender biases in society will continue. And, that further study is needed to create solutions to the disproportionate number of WOC in positions of power that do not require the removal of structural, organizational, and cultural barriers faced by WOC.
CHAPTER 3: Research Methodology

A clear understanding of the questions that guide this research is critical before presenting the research methodology applied in this study. According to Maxwell (2013), initial research questions are provisional at best; he argues that no research can arrive at the final research questions until much data has been gathered and after an exhaustive iterative process. After a prolonged process and much data collection, the final research questions emerged.

Research Questions

The primary research question guiding this study is, “Based on the perspective of Women of Color, what are the success factors that enable Women of Color to be considered for senior executive level roles in Fortune 1000 companies and other large organizations?” Two secondary research questions will guide a closer examination of this phenomenon:

a. What external factors and organizational contexts do Women of Color believe have contributed to their ability to obtain a senior executive level role in Fortune 1000 companies and similar large organizations?

b. What personal attributes, characteristics, and competencies do Women of Color believe have enabled them to be selected for a senior executive level role in Fortune 1000 companies and similar large organizations?

It is important to clarify that the purpose of this study is not to describe further the challenges that WOC continue to face in their career path or the reasons why they continue to be underrepresented in executive-level roles when compared to their non-
WOC peers. The goal is to identify how some WOC, despite all the challenges, have made it to the C-suite or are on the path to the C-suite within Fortune 1000 companies and other major large organizations in the U.S. The rationale of the study is that by analyzing these outliers using a positive deviance lens, the strategies these WOC employed could be recognized. Once identified, those success factors could be duplicated by other women to allow them similar access to senior executive level roles. As a consequence, more WOC could enter the corridors of power within Fortune 1000 companies. In what follows, the research design is comprehensively detailed.

Research Design

A qualitative research method was applied in this research. A qualitative method is most appropriate for this study because answering the research questions requires eliciting a description of the phenomenon from those who have experienced it personally (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). The strengths of a qualitative study are derived primarily from its inductive approach, its focus on specific situations or people, and its emphasis on words rather than numbers (Maxwell, 2013). Qualitative studies permit discovery of central themes without destroying complexity and context. This research approach is ideal to present a detailed view of the topic and to emphasize the researcher’s role as an active learner who tells the story from the study participant's viewpoint rather than as an expert (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

In conjunction with a qualitative position, answering the research questions of this study requires a phenomenological research approach. According to Ravitch and Carl
phenomenology is both a research method and a philosophy. The purpose of phenomenological research is to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation (Lester, 1999). This approach allowed me as a researcher to describe the shared meaning that WOC have about the phenomenon of gaining access and being selected to senior executive level roles within Fortune 1000 companies for several Women of Color.

To understand individuals’ lived experiences, phenomenological researchers often employ the process of bracketing. The bracketing process necessitates that a researcher bracket, or set aside, their ordinary and usual assumptions (Gearing, 2004). Given my connection with this topic and my identity of being a Woman of Color, the process of bracketing my assumptions proved invaluable in this study. As a Woman of Color, I have very personal and deeply rooted beliefs about the race and gender disparity at the highest levels of leadership within Fortune 1000 companies. Thus, I implemented a very intentional bracketing technique that included regular memos at many intervals during the study. The constant bracketing of my ideas was critical to the unbiased and accurate nature of the production of findings within this study. After each interview, I wrote a memo to capture my feelings and thoughts about the participant, her views, and how I felt about our conversation. These memos allowed me to identify my feelings so that they were not interfering with the ideas expressed by the participants. The memos varied in length from a simple paragraph to pages.
Congruent with a phenomenological approach, and as a mainstay of qualitative data collection, this study utilizes in-depth interviews as the instrument to gather data. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), the primary goals of qualitative interviews are to gain focused insight into an individual’s lived experiences and to understand how participants make sense of and construct reality in relation to a phenomenon. As Patton (2002) argues, a researcher cannot observe all behaviors, and therefore people should be interviewed so they can report those intangibles that cannot be observed. Therefore, the selection of in-depth interviews as the data collection instrument of this study was a natural and logical choice.

Qualitative interviews do not typically seek uniformity in questioning but rather pursue customized replication (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). That is, although research participants share vital questions, the interviewer seeks the customization of each conversation through individualizing follow-up questions and probes for specific information within each interview. To this end, a semi-structured, qualitative interview process was used during the interviews. The structured portion of the interview protocol ensures the comparability of data across individuals, times, and settings (Maxwell, 2013). The predetermined nature of structured interviewing seeks to minimize errors (Fontana, 1994). In this study, the unstructured part of the interview helped make meaning from the structured data by informing particular themes, nuances, and perspectives through contextualizing experiences (Maxwell, 2013). Relevant life and work experiences of the participants were recognized, and at times, I was able to connect those findings to the participants’ career path and impact.
The questionnaire employed in the study was vetted, rehearsed, and piloted. As Ravitch and Carl (2016) argued, these steps are paramount to ensure that the instruments used in a study collect the right data. In their view, the vetting occurs when the questions are still a rough draft; then, a rehearsal should take place to finalize all the questions. Finally, a pilot interview should be conducted with a member of the participants' group for the study. They recommend that during all these steps, the researcher should modify the instrument in an iterative process. I made many modifications to the questionnaire urging the vetting and rehearsing processes.

Research Sample

The unit of analysis in this research is a Woman of Color who currently holds a senior executive level role in a Fortune 1000 company or a similar large organization or has held such a job less than a year from November 2016. A person that held a senior executive level role is defined as being part of any of the three categories below:

1. The woman is a CEO.

2. The woman reports directly to the CEO. Typically, these roles are reserved for those within the C-suite, such as Chief Operation Officer (COO), Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Chief Learning Officer (CLO), and Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO), among others.

3. The woman reports to someone that was no more than two reporting levels from the CEO. In other words, the woman is no more than three reporting levels from the CEO.

To determine the composition of the sample for the participants in research
studies of this nature, a purposeful selection of the sample is suggested (Maxwell, 2013); this means that the participants should be deliberately selected. Emulating Thomas Kuhn’s concept (1970) of exemplars, the WOC study participants were identified in a purposeful manner by selecting women occupying two unique positions—one related to gender and the other related to ethnicity—that are underrepresented both in research and in leadership positions. Also, 80 percent of these Women of Color came from a Fortune 1000 company. The other 20 percent were selected from large organizations with more than 500 individuals or companies that do not manufacture goods and have an average of $7 million in annual receipts. The WOC are current or past executives in the C-suite or have held leadership positions no more than three levels below the CEO.

Table 4 contains the demographics of the research sample, showing the diversity of the participants. To include as many distinct WOC as possible and not assume that WOC are a monolithic group, a series of purposeful considerations were taken to select the participants. The racial makeup is critical, and much effort was invested in ensuring a very diverse sample. Therefore, the sample is 50% Black, 27% Hispanic, 20% Asian, and 3% Native American. These percentages ensured that the sample was not predominately one race among WOC. This study did not record multi-racial or Middle-Eastern heritage.
Table 4

Demographics of the Research Participants (Part 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA/Black</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Degree Completed</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate/Bachelors</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s/MBA</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD/Doctoral</td>
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<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced in a long-term relationship</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President/CEO</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EVP/VP</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Director</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COO</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFO</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Table 4
Demographics of the Research Participants (Part 2)

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<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td><strong>Industry</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care/Medical</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial/Investment</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemical</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beverage</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications/Telecommunication</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Services</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Levels from CEO</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-suite</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years in Position</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than a year</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-6 years</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 years or more</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent’s Socioeconomic Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As Reported by Participants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Middle</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealthy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent’s Marital Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>93.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To represent socio-economic status, the variable selected was not the income of the participants but the income of their parents when the WOC were growing up. It was determined that this variable was going to yield more diversity than self-reporting current socio-economic positions of the participants. Because the study participants are no more
than three levels from CEO in very large organizations, they themselves are probably in an upper middle class and above socio-economic level. Therefore, their parents’ incomes seemed, in my opinion, a better indicator of diverse upbringing and exposure to opportunities during the research participants’ formative years.

The 2016 federal income guidelines were the base to develop the income categories of this study sample: low income is defined as having a total household income of less than $35,000 a year; middle-class income between $35,001-$65,000; upper middle class between $65,001 and $200,000; and wealthy over $200,001. Therefore, using the categories above, 20% of the sample grew up in homes considered low income, 50% middle class, 20% upper middle class, and 6% wealthy. It is important to highlight that 93% of participants come from two-parent households, and on average, their parents were married for 46 years until the first parent’s death or divorce. To clarify the mean of 46 years, 98% of those marriages lasted for over 40 years.

The literature suggests that most women at senior level roles are in limited roles, such as Chief Diversity Officers and other pink jobs (roles typically assigned to women, such as HR jobs), not in profit and loss roles. So, to ensure a broad and diverse range, the sample is composed of 19 different industries and many distinct functions. Twenty-three percent of the sample are CEOs or a direct report of the CEO. It would have been ideal to have at least half of the sample in this category. However, due to time constraints, accessibility, and low number of WOC in these roles, it proved very challenging to have a higher number of women at CEO level or as a direct report. On average, women were in the role 4.5 years and with the company eight years.
It should be noted that 67 percent of the sample are married and that all but two women have children. The mean for the number of children was 1.6 kids. This characteristic of the sample is important because it demonstrates how these incredibly accomplished women have chosen to have a career in addition to being mothers and wives. Seventy-three percent of the sample hold a Master’s degree, and most of them have a Master of Business Administration (MBA). About birthdays, it is quite curious—although not relevant to this study—that all of the participants except four women (eighty-seven percent) were born in the second half of the year, or in other words, July to December.

On the topic of sample size, a qualitative inquiry is rife with ambiguities, and there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002). The sample size depends on what the researcher wants to know, what is at stake, what will be useful, and other variables. Patton argues that Piaget contributed a significant breakthrough in our understanding of how children think and learn by studying his own two children in a very comprehensive manner. Similarly, Freud established an entire field of psychoanalysis based on only ten client cases. Qualitative studies are interested in understanding a phenomenon, not necessarily in generalization (Patton, 2002).

Also, I considered the evidence that Women of Color only occupied less than 12% of senior executive level roles in Fortune 1000 companies and 0.4% of C-suite seats in S&P 500 organizations (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016). That is 120 seats out of 1000 seats. Therefore, a sample size of 30 WOC was selected for the enclosed research study. This sample size supports the chief goal of the study; this work is less about
generalizing and more about shedding light on perspectives and experiences that are not documented very well already. Therefore, an extensive sample is not necessary. Moreover, a sample of 30 participants allows for a more in-depth analysis that can lead to the construction of a series of recommendations as to how some WOC can gain access to the C-suite.

**Interviewing Approach**

All the interviews from this study were conducted with an appreciative inquiry methodology. According to many scholars, appreciative inquiry is a method that can be used to effect change in an organization or a community (Burke, 2011, Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000; Cuyvers, 2010). From its introduction, appreciative inquiry has been applied in numerous domains beyond the area of organizational development: healthcare (Hirunwat, 2011), evaluation (Cojocaru, 2008), therapy (Sandu & Ciuchi, 2010), education (Kumar & Chacko, 2010), research methodology (Cojocaru, 2005), and human resources development (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). The researcher with an appreciative inquiry approach ought to ensure asking questions in a positive frame so the interviewees can discover and understand the organization and themselves. The knowledge, in turn, will lead to the appreciative discovery of successful experiences, interpreted as successes by the organization’s members (Bushe, 1995).

The appreciative inquiry-based questionnaire utilized for this study is in Appendix A. It shows both semi-structured and open-ended questions. In the structured part of the interview, each respondent is exposed to the same stimuli (Bernard & Ryan, 2009). In this case, the stimuli are a series of similar questions within the questionnaire used in the
interviews. The idea is to control the input that triggers people’s responses so their output can be reliably compared (Bernard & Bernard, 2012). Therefore, the same interview without any modification is applied to every participant to ensure consistency in the structured part of the interview.

During the interview, the exercise of active probing was implemented to individualize the experience, produce richer data, and create a customized replication (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). According to Bernard and Bernard (2012), probing is a suitable technique within an interview, as it allows respondents to produce more information. It is imperative to probe in a way that the respondent is stimulated without the interviewer injecting oneself so much into the interaction that the interviewer’s bias takes over the data collection. Most pronouncedly, as a WOC myself, to bracket my opinions I utilized two primary probes described by Ravitch and Carl: the silent probe and the Tell-Me-More approach probe (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). These two probes created a space between the participants and me; I either stayed silent as I was actively listening to them, or I asked them to tell me more to elaborate on their comments. These probes enable some level of neutrality to ensure that my personal views did not taint the perspectives of the participants. Also, I made a conscious effort to reduce my emotions and reactions while conducting the interviews. I appeared as neutral as possible to prevent my reactions from influencing how the participant responded.

The interviews were scheduled face to face or remotely. All interviews were conducted between November 2016 and January 2017. Participants signed an informed consent document (see Appendix B) before the interview to acknowledge any risks
associated with the research. Individual interviews lasted approximately one hour each. With the participants’ consent, all interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed.

Data Analysis

As stated, a qualitative approach was chosen as the research method for this study. Qualitative research involves coding, which is a process of assigning meaning to data. A code can be a word or phrase that describes what is going on in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015); codes can also represent analytical ideas (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). “Coding organizes and breaks down data into manageable segments and identifies or names those segments” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 30). There are various modes of coding; I chose a process known as inductive or open coding. This form of coding is similar to what Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) call first-level coding. The idea of inductive coding is to collect data related to a particular area, and from these data, the researcher can construct different theories and concepts. As such, the coding phase of this study did not rely on any pre-existing theoretical constructs or pre-determined codes. Instead, it relied on an approximation of theories that relate to the topic and can help explain the phenomenon. This topic has not been comprehensively studied in this way before, so no pre-existing codes are available.

This inductive process was supported with a grounded-theory approach, which is also an inductive methodology. Grounded theory is a systematic methodology in the social sciences involving the construction of theory through the analysis of data (Glaser, Strauss & Beer, 1968). This approach allowed more opportunity to uncover meaningful,
in-depth individual experiences, beliefs, and feelings of these Women of Color and their respective journeys into executive-level roles. The data itself was the driver of the formation of codes. All research is grounded in data, but few studies produce a grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Aligned with grounded theory and inductive methodology, all live interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. The data analysis phase of this study was as follows. After reading the transcripts, coders identified potential analytic categories, or codes, that emerged inductively based on the data collected. The codes applied were keywords utilized to categorize text, and these keywords are considered an essential part of qualitative research (Bernard & Ryan, 2009).

In this research, there were two additional coders (purposely neither of them a WOC) that facilitated validity and objectivity during the coding process. One is a White female, a very seasoned cancer researcher who is an expert in NVivo and SPSS software. She was instrumental in providing guidance about best practices in coding and data analysis. The other coder is a White male classmate who was influential in ensuring a male perspective. Those two coders and I coded responses to identify and organize the data into themes. Also, key points or illustrations made by the participants were identified and captured.

After the initial review, each coder created an individual summary of themes. All three individual summaries were then compared to verify agreement and detect any differences. The three coders discussed their final categories and came to a consensus on the dominant themes/codes. This final list constituted the first level of the coding set.
That first round of codes produced seven categories and 65 sub-themes (see Appendix C). It is important to highlight that during the coding, we not only looked for patterns but also for gaps in the coding set. We also identified meaningful quotations that did not fit into any of the categories we created. Furthermore, we looked for negative cases or disconfirming evidence that challenged or contradicted some patterns we saw in the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In essence, we engaged in what Ravitch and Carl (2016) called dialogic engagement, which is the collaborative analysis of the data. This exercise was particularly important because the purpose of this research was to faithfully represent participants’ experiences, and my positionality as a Woman of Color could have hindered the data analysis and therefore the findings. Since this research was confidential, extra attention was placed on the act of sharing any information. Participants’ interview transcripts were assigned a numerical identification, and only I knew the identity of the participant. We shared content, but the identity was never revealed.

The transcripts and all open-ended questions were entered into the QSR NVIVO 8 qualitative software (QSR International, Victoria, Australia). NVivo is a well-known qualitative software utilized to analyze and organize data to gain a deeper insight. Some analyses were run to identify inductive codes. Modifications were made based on the output of NVivo. All coders reviewed the initial codes and compared them with those generated, creating a second level coding list. This final code set was employed to analyze the research data. Appendix D contains the final code set utilized. This new list produced four categories or themes and 16 sub-themes, a significant reduction in the initial first level coding list that contained seven categories and 65 sub-themes.
Although coding is essential to data analysis and some researchers equate coding to data analysis (Miles et al., 2014), coding is only a part of data analysis. After finalizing the coding, the next stage involved interpreting the data by identifying recurring themes and highlighting the similarities and differences within and between cases. I tried to understand every case and story in its own terms, yet I hungered for the understanding that can be achieved by comparing cases. As the categories emerged, we pulled all the data from the categories together and compared them aggregately (cross-case analysis). The themes and categories, and most importantly their meanings, were compared with the conceptual framework presented in chapter 2 to determine if they were in congruence with the known data about the topic. This process led to the emergence of the five findings that will be examined in the coming chapter.

The final stage of the qualitative analysis process is data verification. This is when a researcher checks the transcripts against the final codes, allowing the researcher to verify or modify the data for validity purposes (Bernard & Ryan, 2009). Many modifications were made based on congruence within the data and the concluding codes.

Lastly, quantitative data collected during the interviews were also entered and analyzed using SPSS (Version 16.0, SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL), and demographic data were summarized applying descriptive statistics.

Validity

Member checks and multiple coding are the main validation strategies employed in this study. Guba and Lincoln (1989) describe member checks as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314) in a study. Member checking consists of
taking data and interpretations back to the research participants of the study so that they can determine the accuracy of the narrative account. Through the lens of the participants, the researcher asked each study participant to establish whether the recorded version of their story was accurate, and moreover, whether the conclusions I drew during analysis were truthful. The participants’ feedback and reactions were then incorporated back into the final narrative, adding further to the trustworthiness of the data analysis (Lincoln, 1995). Based on the need to clarify the data and time constraints, member checking was used in almost all of the in-depth interviews. Also, as the data analysis phase began, member checks were utilized to confirm with the participants if the findings that emerged from the examination accurately captured their lived experiences regarding how they were able to attain senior level roles in large organizations. This technique proved instrumental to untangle the findings of this study, specifically those regarding the internal dissonance that participants expressed about their race and gender identities.

Multiple coding was defined by Barbour (2001) as having multiple researchers coding the same data to look for shared understanding and to check the validity of the codes as they developed. I engaged two other individuals in the coding stage of this research. One of them is a seasoned cancer researcher, and the other is a fellow classmate. We not only coded once, but we went back and forth, having multifaceted conversations with regard to themes and patterns throughout the analysis phase of this research. This particular step was vital because, in qualitative analysis, there is no set rule about how often a concept must appear in the data to become a theme (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Therefore, it was essential to engage with the data in multiple ways in an iterative
Triangulation was a validation technique considered for this study and later rejected due to time constraints. Fielding and Fielding (1986) define triangulation as a process of using different sources of data from different methods to see if all the data support a single conclusion. In their opinion, it enhances credibility and validity of the research findings. Greene (2007) states that triangulation allows the researcher to use different methods to gain a deeper understanding of the data; it can provide divergent perspectives to create a more sophisticated understanding of the phenomena studied. He also believes that the use of triangulation to confirm a conclusion is overstated in most qualitative studies. He argues that triangulation is more relevant in quantitative studies, as they aimed to generalize. Qualitative research is interested in understanding or describing a phenomenon, not in generalization. Due to Greene’s critical view of triangulation and time constraints to complete this qualitative research, I concluded that triangulating the WOC’s perspectives for accuracy was not going to add significant value to the findings. Therefore, I chose not to use triangulation as a validation technique in this study. However, lack of triangulation is also a limitation of this research and will be explored in greater detail in later sections.

**Ethical Considerations**

All participants in the study were adequately informed of the purpose of the study. A copy of the consent form executed by the participants before participating in the study is included in Appendix B. The difference between anonymous and confidential was visible and articulated on the consent form to ensure that participants understood that the
study was confidential but not anonymous. Since only anonymous studies can assure complete confidentiality of a participant’s identity and the content of their comments, participants were cognizant of the potential risks of being identified. Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis and were informed that they were free to leave the interview at any time, and withdrawal from the study would have no adverse ramifications.

Study risks were assessed to be minimal. However, various techniques were employed to ensure the protection and confidentiality of the participants. All identifiable information was removed from the interview transcripts, and a numerical code was assigned to every interview. Only one file exists that connects the participants’ identity with the numerical codes assigned. That file is kept securely in a password-protected spreadsheet on my password-protected computer.

Limitations of the Study

This study tried not to treat all WOC as a monolithic group. Therefore, during the purposeful sampling phase, many variables were deliberately included to cover a vast majority of layers or dimensions within WOC, such as ensuring multiple racial backgrounds, various economic and marital statuses, and many more distinctions. However, one of the chief limitations of this study is that the analysis phase of this research did treat WOC as a monolithic group. The data were not disaggregated to examine and account for differences within Women of Color. Themes were only identified across the entire sample and not within specific race and ethnic groups. For instance, a Black woman may have, for the most part, fewer or different barriers to
succeed within corporate America than a first-generation Latina woman who also has to face the challenges of not being a native English speaker. Also, sometimes Black women’s language practices are not native to the context they work in either. Their home language might be somewhat different from what they use to communicate in the work setting. The lack of exploration of the many layers of complexities within the categories of WOC due to limited data or no disaggregation of the data presents a noteworthy limitation of this study. In the same vein, this research did not include a sample of White women that were matched in every way except being a WOC to provide a comparison for validity purposes.

Also, due to time constraints, on average the interviews lasted an hour. It can be challenging to obtain someone’s full story of success in a short period. As one participant put it during the interview, “You cannot get to the essence of who I am in an hour interview. I am the amalgamation of too many things and the environment. I cannot separate what is mine and what is not, at the end of the day it is all me.” (Participant 20, personal communication, December 23, 2016). Furthermore, within an hour interview, not much can be documented about the context of their workplace. The environment might be shaping their experiences and their perceptions of reality. This research is limited, as it did not connect how the culture in which these women operate influence outcomes and their perceptions. This time limitation is also a principal constraint of the study.

Likewise, due to constrictions, this study only collected the self-reported perceptions of Women of Color. Perceptions are socially constructed and therefore subjective. It would have been interesting to analyze not only the perspective of the WOC
that participated in the study but also the views from other people close to the specific woman. For instance, I could have interviewed some of the WOC’s peers to gauge their insight as to why and how she was selected for the leadership role. Alternatively, as another means to triangulate, it would have been valuable to have some observations of the WOC at work to gain insight as to how they behaved to then compare those verifiable behaviors with their stated opinions.

Moreover, it would have been thought-provoking to conduct a series of comparative analyses to refine and confirm the findings of this study. An examination of differences and similarities between WOC versus White women who have not reached senior level roles would have provided another data point to solidify the results of the study. In short, the absence of triangulation presents a noteworthy limitation of this study.

Additionally, the participants of the study are in senior executive level roles, and access to them was limited due to their demanding schedules. It would have been advantageous to employ more member check methods than the amount performed. The level of complexity and contradiction in the data could have been unraveled with more clarity if I had been able to contact every participant to confirm some of the interpretations of their comments.

Positionality Statement

A researcher's role is to adopt a stance of neutrality concerning the phenomenon under study, not to prove a particular hypothesis but to understand a phenomenon as it unfolds and to be faithful to the complexities and multiple perspectives as they emerge (Patton, 2002). Maxwell (2013) argues that in qualitative research, it is vital to
understand how “a researcher's values and expectations may influence the conduct and conclusions of the study” (p. 108). This chief commitment to neutrality can be hard to execute if a researcher is not aware of his or her own bias.

I am a Woman of Color. Thus, I am intrinsically close to the phenomenon and have deeply rooted ideas as to why a woman's career does not have the same traction or acceleration as that of her peers. Due to my racial identity, during the study, I kept reminding myself that there is usually an inseparability of research and findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Hence, as a researcher, I was the primary instrument of my own research, and my ideas could collude data collection and analysis (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). Moreover, even the questions I asked and the way in which they were asked could induce participants to provide answers that mirrored my own perspectives.

Consequently, I applied an inductive or emic approach to coding. This means that I stayed as close to the data as possible. Moreover, I employed other rigorous methods to ensure that my positionality did not affect the integrity of the findings. In this study, I wrote numerous memos—at key intervals—to make sure that my biases were captured, explored, limited, and more importantly separated from the findings as much as possible. I particularly wrote after each interview to ensure my views were not comingled with the participant’s opinions. In addition, I wrote many memos during the coding and data analysis phases.

Furthermore, during the coding and analyzing processes, I engaged two other coders to add validity to the data. Neither of the other coders were WOC, so they served as an excellent way to calibrate the data and to ensure that my biases were bracketed
accordingly. Finally, everyone involved in the scrutiny of the data engaged in a constant iterative process of identifying and analyzing the discrepant data and negative cases as a part of testing for validity (Maxwell, 2013).

Summary of Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method with a phenomenological qualitative approach. The research questions are as follows: 1) Based on the perspective of Women of Color, what are the success factors that enable Women of Color to be considered for senior executive level roles in Fortune 1000 companies and other large organizations?

1a. What external factors and organizational contexts do Women of Color believe have contributed to their ability to obtain a senior executive level role?

1b. What personal attributes, characteristics, and competencies do Women of Color believe have enabled them to be selected for a senior executive level role?

The data were collected using in-depth interviews. The purposeful sample consisted of 30 Women of Color who held a senior executive level position in a Fortune 1000 company (80%) or a large organization (20%). The interviews lasted one hour on average. Qualitative inductive thematic analysis, grounded theory, and appreciative inquiry were utilized for data collection and analysis. Member checking, the utilization of multiple coders, dialogic engagement, and memos completed in an iterative process were employed to decrease biases and ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Last, NVivo and SPSS software were utilized to provide more rigorous ways to organize and analyze data.
CHAPTER 4: Overview of Research Findings

According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), “The critical task in qualitative research is not to accumulate all the data you can, but to can (i.e., get rid of) much of the data you accumulate” (p. 273). The canning of the data of this research required a continual examination and recalibration of content, to differentiate between essential and non-essential data. This process of winnowing the data was facilitated by comparing this study to the bestseller Outliers, written by prominent author Malcolm Gladwell. In his book, Gladwell (2008) opens by defining an outlier as “something that is situated away from or classed differently from a main or related body” (p. 3). Women of Color in the C-suite level indeed meet that definition. Gladwell listed a series of examples to enliven the reader’s understanding of success by identifying how an outlier becomes an outlier.

Similarly, I engaged in this research on a quest to determine how the participants have achieved rare professional status and what allowed them to positively deviate from the standard of being trapped at the lower levels of the professional ladder.

In Outliers, Gladwell (2008) unveiled that the rationale behind the production of an outlier or deviation was the result of non-complex and rather trivial factors. He argued that the culprit for producing the outlier was often subtle and hidden in plain view, and the “how” was buried behind layers of conventional knowledge.

Gladwell (2008) shared a particular example of a small town in Pennsylvania, founded by Italian immigrants, called Roseto. The town was an outlier because, during the 1950s, when the leading cause of death in the United States was heart disease,
Roseto’s residents were not affected by heart attacks and were instead dying of old age. Roseto was an outlier, and the answer was not the legitimate medical ones; it was not due to the residents’ diet, or their genes, or their exercise routines. It was the town itself. In Roseto, the Italians created a tight-knit community with a particular egalitarian ethos; folks protected each other and were nurtured emotionally. The affectionate nature of the community was healing its residents and protecting them from heart attacks and other diseases. The justification for the advent of Roseto as an outlier was found behind layers of traditional knowledge. Hugs, care, and love had healing powers, according to Gladwell (2008).

Comparable to Gladwell’s work, I found, in this study, that the internal and external factors that have allowed WOC to ascend to the C-suite are not earth-shattering. The rationale for the positive deviance of the participants of the study was hidden in plain sight. Using Gladwell’s approach to “can the data” in this study, four of the five findings of this research demonstrate that their grandiosity lies within their simplicity. For instance, the findings that WOC need support from family and mentors, that eliminating gender bias is critical for women’s success, and that external factors are crucial for career advancement are, indeed, quite simplistic. The only complex finding of this study is the internal dissonance identified within successful WOC. Although simple internal factors emergence in the dissonance, the multifaceted interplay made it impossible to isolate a single factor as the primary contributor of professional achievement in the participants, nor could the relationships among factors be woven in a logical form to inform how WOC are becoming outliers.
For the sake of clarity and impact, all five findings of this study are reported individually. Within each finding, a series of themes and sub-themes were scrutinized within and across participants’ interview data. An analysis of aggregated and disaggregated data is presented in this chapter, to show how the overarching themes took shape to produce the findings. The themes and sub-themes are the direct results of the inductive analysis of the transcripts. At times, those themes and sub-themes were very much congruent with the literature review presented in chapter 2, whereas at other times, they were in perfect contradiction and disconfirming in stance. The duality of being both congruent and incongruent with previous research provided an opportunity for a comprehensive and more-rigorous analysis.

As suggested by scholars (Holliday, 2007; Ravitch & Carl, 2016), a series of quotations from the participants is presented throughout this chapter, to support and enliven the findings of this study.

First Finding

The first finding of this study is that WOC experience an internal dissonance that leads to contradictions in the interplay of their behaviors and mindset. Participants demonstrated to be engaging with a myriad of internal factors, multifaceted, and at times contradictory. Thus, a singlemost internal factor that contributed to the extraordinary professional achievements the participants demonstrated in their career progression could not be successfully identified or isolated. The data identified three predominant themes that illustrate the complexity. The first theme was participants’ disconnect from other WOC. The data showed a lack of sisterhood among WOC. The second theme was
participants’ usage of positive frames to process traditional negative viewpoints on how their race and gender interfere with their professional success. The last theme was participants’ distinct practice of ordinary leadership competencies. Data indicate that WOC relate, exercise and experience several leadership competencies, such as self-efficacy, resiliency, confidence, and empathy differently than mainstream groups.

At times, themes seemed to integrate to form a sui generis way of thinking and experiencing their gender and social identities in the workplace. Themes appeared to complement each other logically to produce a unique way of thinking that seemed intelligible and aligned with the literature. At other times, the themes/factors contradicted one another not only within themes, but also across themes. The contradiction was profound to a degree that made it difficult to unambiguously connect or weave the themes to form a uniform factor or a coherent mindset. In what follows, this study will present those themes with their coherence and incongruencies.

Evidence of Disassociation

Participants reported not having a meaningful connection with other WOC. To set the stage, Table 5 provides a sample of the participants’ reported comments that illustrates a lack sisterhood or support for other WOC.
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<th>Themes</th>
<th>Quotations</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disassociation</td>
<td>“I certainly have been able to thrive without any special treatment; other women should stop complaining and get it done!” (Participant 26, personal communication, December 28, 2016).</td>
<td>Does not recognize the significant barriers to success for WOC</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I shy away from attending corporate events to promote women; it makes me uncomfortable. It feels as if I made it because I was helped due to my race or gender. Enough with the race and gender promotion” (Participant 23, personal communication, December 27, 2016).</td>
<td>Not willing to help other WOC</td>
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The quotations below are representative of various degrees of disassociation the participants described with regard to their relationship with other WOC. Participant 1, an accomplished Black executive with 12 years in the C-suite, conveyed a sense of feeling different than most WOC: “I am not like most Black women, I know how to dress and speak. I have executive presence. It is a shame, but some sisters are just not it. My race and gender have served me just fine” (personal communication, November 20, 2016).

In a similar vein, Participant 2, a Black woman and a very successful managing partner stated:

People experience reality differently, and so everyone needs different things. I have chosen not to let my race bring me down. It is a choice! A comment to me that is neutral may be offensive to others, for instance: being off the reservation
can be offensive only to Native Americans. Same end game but not the same road. I stay away from other Black women that are always speaking about inequality and our disadvantages. I worry about being better every day, and it has helped me tremendously. (personal communication, November 21, 2016)

Participant 29 (Hispanic and vice president) also expressed:

I am used to always being the only woman in many circles. Even in high school, I was with the guys more. In general, I feel very comfortable with men and the guys. I still had girlfriends, but I always saw myself more as a guy’s girl. I had fewer girlfriends than male friends, and I spent more time with my male friends. I have always felt more comfortable with men. (personal communication, December 29, 2016)

Likewise, Participant 4—a very accomplished Asian American and vice president—shared, “Being an engineer, understanding that there were not that many WOC in chemical engineering, motivated me. I liked being the only one. I have never felt different than any men or were ever treated differently” (personal communication, November 25, 2016). The comments of Participant 4 and Participant 29 could be interpreted in a number of ways. A plausible interpretation is that both participants have seen that men are more influential than women and they want to align themselves with men—hang out with men—as a way to chart a path to being powerful themselves (A. Bookman, personal communication, August 22, 2017). Moreover, since these WOC have been quite successful professionally, a positive-deviance lens indicates that associating with men had been beneficial for participants. Nonetheless, the context of the interview and later comments revealed how these women not only prefer to associate with men but also felt disconnected from or did not meaningfully relate to other WOC. As they stated, the participants’ preference was not only the product of an intentional strategy based on an acute sensitivity to race and gender issues, but also was based on a need to distance
themselves from other WOC. For instance, Participant 29 expressed a strong preference for working with and reporting to men, while expressing genuine dislike of other WOC. During the interview, she showed no connection or identification with race and gender issues, giving a different meaning to her comments.

Moreover, Participant 4—a very successful vice president—later in the interview added:

A good thing is to see if your organization is doing anything to address the gender disparity. More, if they have something in place, the other question is if it is effective. In my organization, there is nothing in place to address gender disparity; the person leading this in my company wants more women and people of color, but she does not have anything formal in place to support the change. There is a risk in only selecting people based on gender or race, and I am watching the person in my organization leading this effort to ensure that she does not only hire women or WOC for the sake to diversifying and not based on competencies. (personal communication, November 25, 2016)

It became apparent, as the interview progressed, that this participant is actively taking a vigilant stand and professing that hiring women or WOC just for the sake of hiring them could be troublesome. The implicit idea behind Participant 4’s comment is that WOC or women may be sub-par or untalented compared to other groups. Consider how often organizations wonder whether, if their hires are primarily White or males, they may have ended up hiring sub-par talent. WOC having the position of not wanting to hire more WOC can be construed as a form of disassociation from their own race/gender group. Similar to Participant 4’s comment, Participant 13, a senior director at a Fortune 1000 company, made the following statement: “You have to be careful that you are not biased toward women; you should be developing your entire leadership team” (personal communication, December 9, 2016). The participant was describing how WOC had to
keep a certain detachment from other WOC, so as to avoid the impression of giving preferential treatment. Again, White males are not faced with this challenge, as they are not judged if they mainly develop and promote their own (Ross, 2008), what has contributed to the current racial and gender disparity at the senior-executive level. Hence, the stance of WOC having to detach from other WOC to establish their professional image may not be shared by other racial groups.

Eight other participants expressed that they did not want to have programs in place that could be perceived as providing support to advance WOC. Other participants were uncompromising in believing that hiring should be based only on qualifications, and they did not feel responsible for helping other WOC. Participants’ primary concern was not to be seen as a woman who achieved her status by obtaining preferential treatment, but on her own merits. So, this disassociation enhances the participant self-esteem while lessening her load. She does not have to scale the organizational ladder with the weight of her entire racial and gender group on her back. One could argue that there is nothing wrong with wanting to be neutral in one's approach, since a respectable leader must be impartial in the treatment of their team. However, the literature documents that it is rare not to prefer to hire, promote, and develop people similar to oneself. Scholars contend that people tend to prefer selecting from their in-group network. That is, Whites tend to prefer hiring Whites, men will opt to hire men, and so on (Wilkins & Gulati, 1996). The detachment exhibited by the study participants, whether deliberate or inadvertent, may deny the entrance of other WOC to senior-executive roles by indicating an intentional effort not to favor other WOC. In contrast, other racial groups do prefer their own, and by
doing so, they advance their own race and gender.

The participants’ intentional rejection or lack of favoritism for fellow WOC stands in contradiction with the in-group favoritism theory and is a form of disassociation. The in-group favoritism theory states that a social system may use group characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, physical disability, social class, ethnicity, race, age, or religion to make individuals insiders or outsiders, based on the socially created value of these characteristics (Matsuda, 1988). Groups tend to become outsiders if they have fewer socially valued characteristics than other groups, as determined by the norms of the society or social system. Outsiders, as compared to insiders, tend to lack social resources or social acceptability (MacLeod, 2009; Matsuda, 1988; Wilkins & Gulati, 1996). Women of Color in this study, as outsiders and minorities in senior-level roles in Fortune 1000 companies, appear not to recognize that they are not insiders. They therefore show no interest in bringing more WOC into their circles to increase their number and possibly stop being outsiders. Participants are not hiring more WOC than other racial groups, thus not demonstrating the expected preference for their in-group kind. Some participants confirmed the existence of this kind of disassociation.

For example, Participant 7 expressed

In corporate America, there is much pulling, and people tend to pull folks that look like themselves. I see that people of color do not have access to those networks and it keeps us down. It is worst if the person at the top is a person of color. They do not want to be cataloged as biased, so they hire fewer people of color. (Participant 7, personal communication, December 15, 2016)

Participant 21, a director-level executive with four years in the position, added information on how this lack of support of WOC by WOC is the opposite of what men do
for each other in the workplace, “White men do not look around their entire White men executives hires and worry about being biased toward hiring White males. Why do people of color, and more, WOC are worried [sic] about hiring their own?” (personal communication, December 22, 2016). Also, Participant 2 commented, “Other cultures are very close and help each other. “Crossover” is the term that I heard when people make it to the top and do not help others. We have too many crossover WOC” (personal communication, November 9, 2012). This depleting effect continues to slow acceleration for all WOC at the hands of WOC. These women might themselves be holding back the group.

Furthermore, if someone is fighting against oneself, winning would be challenging. Participant 6, a highly accomplished young Black woman, eloquently spoke about how people try to assimilate and hide. She articulated:

I cannot hide when I walk into a room that I am a Black woman. I think that many minorities situated from another country or this country, have been socialized to believe that it is better to assimilate, and I believe that Latinos and light-skin blacks have used it the most. They think that they cannot solve the problems for all other folks of color. If they can hide their roots, they do, and it has served them well. I think even many African Americans have done better by disassociating with their own. (Participant 6, personal communication, December 15, 2016)

Accordingly, for WOC, the adoption of the viewpoint of refusing to be the crusader for the optimization of their own race and gender demonstrates examples of the canons of Panopticism (Foucault, 1977), internalized subordination, and oppression. Internalized subordination refers to ways in which people of color collude with their own oppression. Individuals who have been socialized in an oppressive environment may accept a definition of themselves that is hurtful and limiting (Hardiman et al., 2007). This
concept also resonates with Panopticism theory that argues how individuals tend to normalize themselves to conform to society’s mainstream values and norms (Bradley-Volz, 2015). It is widely accepted, based on the numbers, that men lead most large organizations; in some instance, for example in Fortune 1000 companies, top leaders are predominantly both male and White (Catalyst, 2015b). Thus, from this perspective, WOC may try to maintain that order in organizational norms even if it conflicts with their own growth, as seen in these examples.

Moreover, participants’ over-developed sense of being impartial toward one’s own race and gender in their hiring and promotion practices is not a benign type of disassociation. This behavior could be contributing to perpetuating the gender and race biases that saturate the corporate world. The active disassociation is not impartial; it might lead to less hiring or promotion of WOC. If those WOC who reach the top do not send the elevator back down to lift other WOC, then one could contend that it is conceivable that WOC themselves become a barrier to other WOC’s ability to be successful. This idea was supported by several comments that were shared. Participant 24 articulated this theme best by saying:

It is unfortunate, but the hardest times I had in my professional career have been due to other Women of Color not being supportive of me. In fact, based on my experience, most WOC prefer not to report to another WOC, they feel not supported and feel as if the other WOC are trying to bring them down instead of helping. It is very sad for our communities; we tear each other apart. (Personal communication, December 27, 2016)

What’s more, the way in which participants are disassociating and refusing to support other WOC could also be argued as internalized racism. Asanti (1996) contends that, to avoid cognitive dissonance, an African American living in a racist environment
must “suppress their blackness” (p. 51). Furthermore, the individual will begin to imitate the culture of the oppressor by adopting values and preferences that are more consistent with White society and culture. The internalization is so complete that the person is likely to believe that anything associated with the original ethnic culture is unattractive.

The data was not completely aligned under the disassociation theme. One participant’s comment captured evidence of contradiction within the theme. Participant 13 provided great insight as to why a lack of sisterhood appears prevalent among WOC. She stated:

When we are typically hired as WOC, we come into organizations that need much work. They hired us because they wanted change and they wanted it fast. So, when we are leading, diversity and inclusion is not the most relevant issue to tackle, and we put it on the back burner. Also, part of us feel like we are extraordinary and if we made it to the top, so should other women. Sadly, we appeared as if we do not care about helping other WOC when it is just not a priority for the organization. (personal communication, December 9, 2016)

The comment of Participant 13 reflects, in part, why WOC leaders may not appear to be connecting with fellow WOC. Her comment does not reflect the study-sample majority. Nevertheless, her comment plants research curiosity to explore the topic further and, with any luck, untangle the incongruencies.

Evidence of Reframing

The concept of reframing is defined as a way of viewing and experiencing events, ideas, concepts, and emotions, to find more positive alternatives (Beck, 1997). The essential idea behind is that a person's point of view and perspective depend on the frame through which they are observed and the specific way they examine and understand it. When the frame is shifted, the meaning changes. Then, thoughts and behaviors often
change along with it (Beck, 1997). According to the literature, the majority of Women of Color hold a frame of thought which assert that their race and gender identities have produced negative biases that block or interfere with their ability to sustain professional success or reach their full potential (Giroux, 1996; Taylor, 1990). The study data presented in the previous section around the theme of disassociation also support this. It suggests that the negative race and gender influence is so ubiquitous that, at times, even Women of Color themselves cannot escape having those biases against other WOC.

Additionally, due to the homogenous sample of this study—successful WOC in the C-suite or within three levels of reporting from the CEO—there was a reasonable expectation that participants were going to demonstrate similar frames and viewpoints on the topic of race and gender disparity. Therefore, the presumption was that participants were going to upheld mainstream knowledge about undebatable facts of the adverse effects of race and gender in workplace dynamics. Most of the participants in this study, however, rejected the mainstream negative frames typically used to view their race and gender as a deterrent to professional success for themselves and among WOC. In its place, participants appear to be using positive or somewhat neutral lenses to assess the impact of their race and gender, contradicting both the disassociation theme and mainstream viewpoints.

This incongruity across the themes of disassociation and reframing is part of the support for this first finding around dissonance in the way WOC behave and think. The complexity of the reframing is augmented by the fact that not all participants used the same frames or with the same intensity. Therefore, under some kinds of reframing the
findings of disassociation and reframing were not contradictory but, in fact, complementary. And therefore, there was a contradiction to the contradiction: for example, when participants positively reframe themselves and not others, to the extent of some participants even suggesting a sort of advantage in being a WOC. It made logical sense that those participants expressed feeling disconnected from WOC that held the race card or complaint about being excluded. This logical thought process illustrates how dissociation and reframing could complement each other.

However, when the participants suggested moderate reframing or stated that they simply did not see race and gender, it therefore did not affect them. This idea reverses the behavior of dissociation, because one cannot deliberately disconnect from something they cannot see or claim that it does not even exist, hence the paradox explained above. In what follows, the theme of reframing will be presented, with both its congruencies and inconsistencies. Figure 2 illustrates participants’ positions around different kinds of reframing. Participants reported hopeful views as to how their race and gender do not interfere with their ability to lead or with their success in the workplace. Sixty percent of participants articulated a positive reframing, whereas only 6% of participants mentioned negative impact of their race and gender in a significant way; therefore, no definite positive reframing was identified.
Table 6 shows, at a glance the kinds of comments salient under the positive reframing theme. It provides a good overview to set the stage for the following significant explanation of how the reframing theme was recognized in the data.
Table 6
Representative Quotations of Reframing

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<th>Themes</th>
<th>Quotations</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
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<tr>
<td>Reframing</td>
<td>“Some women use the race card too much, and it affects them. A great leader can lead, period” (Participant 6, personal communication, December 15, 2016).</td>
<td>Race and gender do not interfere with someone’s ability to lead; it is only an excuse.</td>
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<td>“To lead is to lead, leaders are not gender or racial beings. My race and gender had no relevancy in my efficiency as a leader” (Participant 1, personal communication, December 21, 2016).</td>
<td>Race and gender do not interfere with one’s efficiency as a leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I do not discount color because your ethnicity can impact roles you can get. But, it has not impacted me” (Participant 17, personal communication, December 7, 2016).</td>
<td>Race and gender may affect others but not me.</td>
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</table>

The following quotations provide descriptive examples of reframing. Participant 1 stated:

I was pitted against the most accomplished lawyers; I had to earn my lunch, I dealt with attorneys that were not Americans, I traveled the world. I had to carry less mental baggage; I had to leave my expectations and assumptions at home because the other lawyers had a different view of what it meant to be an attorney. I lost all my prejudices and biases. I have never seen color or race. I am color blind. I think my race and gender have helped me advance because I do not let them interfere; it does not affect me. (personal communication, November 20, 2016)

Participant 22 (a rising star) provided another reframing example:

I know that there is a glass ceiling, and I may be experiencing the glass ceiling, but I never feel that I cannot do something. I do not think that I will not be a CEO because of the glass ceiling. I have not and will not limit my potential. (personal communication, December 22, 2016)

In Participant 22’s comment, the existence of the “glass ceiling” could be
construed as a demonstration of a high level of gender analysis (A. Bookman, personal communication, August 22, 2017) or as believing in herself, and not as reframing.

However, what Participant 22 was referring to can also be seen as a hopeful and positive reframing of a traditional barrier. She acknowledged the glass ceiling as not being a deterrent to her rapid professional achievement. Moreover, she later mentioned that she might not be experiencing it. In fact, Participant 22 is the youngest woman in the research sample; her rapid ascent on the organization ladder could be an indicator of the usefulness of not feeling limited by a glass ceiling. The literature shows that, typically, WOC lean towards being categorically angry about being the victims of the glass ceiling, and there is no ambivalence around whether the glass ceiling is an obstacle to their career success (Rodriguez, 2007). The reframing of Participant 22 is how she is able to perceive the opposite of what the literature posits. Based on her professional success, positive reframing seems to be working for her.

This comment by Participant 30 shows elements of both reframing and disassociation:

There may or may not be differences in the way in which a man is perceived as a leader as opposed to a woman. I am not exactly sure; it is just my gut feeling. I experienced the more defined difference between me as a woman and men and not many differences between White women and me as a Woman of Color. But, even then, I was the only woman on the leadership team, I did not feel different than men. It made me feel empowered. I felt important; there are not that many women in the field. The more I think about it; I do not believe there are any differences in the way WOC, White Women, Black men and White men are treated at the workplace. (personal communication, December 29, 2016)

Participant 30 felt notable and empowered by being the only woman at the C-level. She reported a very positive relationship between her race and gender with her career
trajectory. As explained above, most of the literature argues WOC perceive that their race and gender hold them back. Being the only one and the outsider creates negative feelings and a sense of exclusion. Outsiders, as compared to insiders, tend to lack social resources and social acceptability (MacLeod, 2009; Matsuda, 1988; Wilkins & Gulati, 1996).

However, Participant 30 reported constructive emotions in being the only woman. These comments are exemplars of how some participants related differently than other women with their race and gender identities.

Additionally, Participant 30 has 15 years of experience at the C-suite level in large organizations. She is not an entry-level employee or recent graduate with limited knowledge of the workplace dynamics. Participant 30’s comments about not being so sure of differences between men and women in the workplace and concluding that there are no differences between men, WOC, and White women contradict normal convention and hence appear to be a reframing effort to either see these circumstances positively or not to see them. A reasonable expectation is that a woman with the level of exposure of Participant 30 will at least know, or at least be acutely aware, of differences between men and women in the workplace (Counts, 2012).

However, that is not what Participant 30 stated; she just had a gut feeling. She managed to shelter herself from the abundant literature, empirical work, and statistics that confirm drastic differences between males and females at work. She was not alone in this stance. Participant 11 shared a similar sentiment: “There is definitely a difference between what men and women need to be successful leaders;
I do not know what it is, it is just my gut” (personal communication, December 16, 2016). In her view as a seasoned senior level executive, Participant 11 expressed that she has not personally experienced any differences between men and women at work. She went on to express that she is not sensitive and even enjoys male locker-room talk. I followed her comment with a question about whether she thought other women experience different treatment and biases in organizations when leading. Reluctantly, she said that she believed so, but she was not so sure.

In a similar vein, another foundation for optimistic reframing was the concept of leading as an internal function, unencumbered by all external factors, including race and gender. This study defines race and gender as innate and, therefore, external factors to the success or failure of Women of Color. As illustrated in chapter 2, the posture of leading being not affected by race and gender is also embedded in most mainstream leadership theories. The idea is that a person elects to be a leader and then chooses to adopt a particular range of behaviors that are widely believed to be leadership characteristic qualities, thereby creating a leader. Participant 8 shared, “I had been very cognizant of my leadership approach because only I can control and affect how I lead; nothing external has an impact” (personal communication, December 29, 2016). Participant 7 expressed, “Being a good leader is very simple. It is a personal choice. I followed the theory, and I succeeded” (personal communication, December 15, 2016). This idea of neutrality around any identity in the act of leading is one of the departing notions that underlie this specific frame adopted by the participants.
Post-heroic leadership theories and other research available so far have concluded that external factors (e.g., race and gender) do impact a leader’s perceived or real effectiveness and, therefore, contradict the assumptions and accounts articulated above by the participants (Eslen-Ziya & Erhart, 2015; Fletcher, 2004; Holvino, 2008; Holvino & Scully, 2001; Ingols et al., 2015). Hence, participants’ views are somewhat reframed to dismiss any outside influence on their ability to lead effectively. Another proper example of this reframing was provided by Participant 6, the CEO of a large organization for 12 years, who said: “Some women use the race card too much, and it affects them. A great leader can lead, period” (personal communication, December 15, 2016). Also, Participant 17 shared:

I do not look at my leadership experiences at work in regards to color; it is too stereotypical. It depends on the person; you can be White and have no network. It is more socioeconomic, class and environmental upbringing and not color. I do not discount color because your ethnicity can impact roles you can get. But, it has not impacted me. (Participant 17, personal communication, December 7, 2016)

Five other participants shared similar views in which they, in general, experienced no differences between themselves as WOC leaders and the men or White women with whom they work.

It is important to note that only two of the 30 participants in the study unequivocally articulated that their race and gender indeed negatively influenced their ability to lead, thereby negating that they positively reframe. This kind of within-theme contradiction supports the overall finding of the internal complexity WOC demonstrate. Participant 9 and Participant 10 were the two who made strong and negative statements
about how their race and gender have hindered their opportunities at work. Participant 9 stated, “People are uncomfortable taking direction from me because I am a WOC. My leadership skills are excellent, but my race, gender, and age get in the way of how others see me” (personal communication, December 20, 2016). Participant 10 shared:

I am constantly overlooked for new opportunities. My colleagues that do not contribute as much tend to get the attention and the push. The only palpable difference is that I am the only Latina in the department. I do think and know that my race and gender are keeping me from moving up. It is hard to see people less qualified, that work less than me and contribute less than me, get promotions that I have earned with my impeccable work ethics. (personal communication, December 20, 2016)

Participants 9 and 10 were the negative cases in the analysis, as they were two of the few who spoke very openly about the adverse impact of both their race and gender in the workplace and their leadership trajectory. Some participants did explain biases they experienced due to their gender. In fact, those comments led to the second finding of this study. However, the comments presented by Participants 9 and 10 are not solely about gender but the mixture of both race and gender. The silence or positive comments provided by the other 28 participants are enormously relevant to support the emergence of the positive reframing theme. For instance, the research questionnaire had a specific question that asked participants: “If you could develop or transform your organization or corporate America in any way you wished, what three things would you do to heighten its vitality and overall health in the area of leadership development for women to ensure women can accelerate their careers?” The purpose of this question was to elicit specific strategies to decrease how both race and gender have traditionally been barriers to
success, without leading the participants. Still, even with such a specific question, some participants were voiceless about any race and gender issues, whereas others used this question to show a positive reframing of those identities. For example, Participant 26 provided the following answer to the question above:

I have not given this much thought; I image that women will be comfortable with gender differences. Men, women, married, single it should be about attempting to make everyone as part of a whole. I certainly have been able to thrive without any special treatment; other women should stop complaining and get it done! (personal communication, December 28, 2016)

Based on all the research available regarding the race and gender disparity, it was practical to expect more than only two women to consider transformative solutions to advance women that involved overcoming systemic institutional barriers that are laced with sexism and racism. Participant 19 provided a comment that can help explain the silence. She stated:

The fact that some women did not comment on how they have been impacted by race and gender does not make them race and gender neutral. Some of us are just so sad, tired and burnt that we chose not to continue to speak about a problem that we see no solution for. So, the silence was just a way to avoid speaking about things that hurt us. Oppression only changes its form over time, but we have been and will continue to be oppressed. (personal communication, December 5, 2016)

The explanation provided by Participant 19 not only represents a contradiction within the reframing theme. It also contends that WOC may not be reframing but simply tired of not being heard. One can argue that the in-theme contradiction supports the overall finding of this chapter. However, it also minimizes the impact of the reframing theme as it uncovers additional complexities WOC experience in the workplace.

Nonetheless, participants’ distinct and optimistic way of thinking and reframing
was empowering. This positive reframing seems to have shielded participants—at least in their minds—from the race and gender biases that permeate the workplace. As the data in the next section will show, the participants reached senior-executive-level roles and even the C-suite in an environment no different from other women. They, too, encountered the same institutional barriers and constraints to success. Most of the study participants, however, will not admit this negative impact. Research participants did not participate in a unique program or have a godfather or an executive that held their hands to bring them to the promised land in the C-suite. No, these women changed themselves by adopting a different way of thinking about what other women consider obstacles to accomplishment. These WOC are not only surviving and fitting in, but they are also thriving.

Because of this reframing, it is possible that the emotional tax that people of color are levied in the workplace may not affect women who adopt the reframing mindset. The fact that most participants in this study are successful senior-level employees that appear to positively reframe could be considered an indicator. The emotional-tax theory posits that minorities are not able to contribute fully at work because they feel isolated, judged, and watched (Travis et al., 2016). As a result, minority groups internalize some fears that get in the way of their performance. The research data indicates that most participants articulated that they do not feel any different or less than individuals that are not WOC. The majority reported feeling exempt from the traditional race and gender biases and barriers. Consequently, they do not contend with feelings of inadequacy and relentless judgment, enabling them to bring their best selves to work, to have more emotional
resources, and be exempted from the payment of emotional tax.

The liberation that is realized by being exempt from the emotional tax and the re-framing approach were described by Participant 27 and Participant 25. Participant 27 described a manifestation of this issue in the following excerpt, “Some WOC carry a chip on their shoulder; they become angry and bitter, this slows down progress. They do it to themselves” (personal communication, December 28, 2016). Participant 25 also shared a comparable comment:

When I got my first sales job in my sales territory, it was a good old boy network. Back in the 70s, I had a big afro, and I was asked, “How are you going to deal with people that do not look like you?” I used to answer that I do not have any issues; people are people. They were trying to be prepared me for what others may do or treat me as a woman of color. I did not allow them to make me feel any different; people were people. (personal communication, December 28, 2016)

In this quote, Participant 25 understood discrimination, but she refused to let comments bother her. She deliberately refused to consider that she was different and that people were potentially going to react to her because she was Black. An Afro in the 1970s was a big statement about being Black and proud. This woman made a choice about self-presentation that asserted that she was a proud Black woman. She was not going to let being Black and proud get in the way of her advancement. Even if people do not like her, she can do both: wear an Afro and advance in her job (A. Bookman, personal communication, August 22, 2017). For her, as for most people of color, being treated differently is being treated as lesser. Participant 25 said that she could not control other people’s responses, allowing her to defuse any negative thoughts that could affect her performance. A positive reframing approach explains Participant 25’s stance as a result
of visualizing race and gender as favorable, as opposed to a deficit; she saw it as a credit, not a debit.

To summarize, participants demonstrated dissociation and positive reframing behaviors and viewpoints. The data exhibited multiple contradictions about participants’ beliefs and behaviors within these two themes and across them. Some data support one or two themes, but not all. The incongruencies presented challenges to link reframing and disassociation behaviors and thoughts coherently. At the same time, there were some areas in which the terms appear to be aligned and complementary, thereby adding to the evidence that the dissonance was so prevalent that one might argue that the finding of this study should be the dissonance itself and nothing more. The following section will continue to add to the multifaceted range of emotions, perceptions, and behavior of the participants.

Evidence of Dissonance in Leadership Behaviors and Competencies

In this section, I examine the third salient theme that composes the first finding of this study. As the participants described how they lead, the primary leadership competencies they mentioned—confidence, self-efficacy, resilience, and empathy—revealed more incongruencies than alignments with participants’ self-perceptions, behaviors, and reality. In comparison to mainstream literature, the competencies identified do not fit neatly into a particular leadership model. More importantly, the competencies, individually and together, make a difference in WOC professional achievement.
An aggregate analysis of some leadership competencies mentioned revealed that the participants had been exposed to racism and sexism. However, some of the comments shared in the previous sections about disassociation and reframing behaviors suggest otherwise. The contradiction in the data suggests that the idea shared by most participants around not being severely affected by racism or sexism may be a perception, not a reality. In what follows, the leadership competencies will be explained to reveal their intricate multilayered nature. Contradiction across all three themes and within this particular theme will be exposed.

The most common leadership competencies mentioned by the participants as pertinent to their professional accomplishments were their mastery of confidence, resilience, self-efficacy, and empathy. For the purpose of this study, these leadership competencies were coded using the following definitions: confidence is a certain boldness and firm faith in one’s abilities to do things (Kay & Shipman, 2014); resilience is a person’s ability to successfully adapt to life tasks in the face of social disadvantage or highly adverse conditions (Pęciłło, 2016); self-efficacy is a belief in one’s ability to succeed at something (Bandura, 1977); and empathy is a genuine concern for the well-being of others (Yarrow, Scott & Waxler, 1973). There is a strong relationship between the definitions of confidence, self-efficacy, and resiliency. However close for clarity, this study reports the competencies individually. The interviews were coded based on participants mentioning the competency itself by its name or based on taking the comments and translating them according to the definitions explained above.
Table 7 displays how many women out of the 30 participants mentioned these competencies as one of their strengths as leaders. Note that the number of participants is illustrated as a total percentage of the sample size to better show frequency of the competency. Table 7 demonstrates empathy or exercising genuine care for others as the most popular and germane competency mentioned. Twenty-seven participants out of the 30 WOC interviewed—or 90% of the sample—expressed caring for others as a critical competency.

Table 7
Leadership Competencies Mentioned and Percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Competency</th>
<th>Number of Participants/Sample Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empathy/Caring for Others</td>
<td>27 participants/90% of the sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>25 participants/83% of the sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resiliency</td>
<td>24 participants/80% of the sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>23 participants/77% of the sample</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A detailed description of how each competency was defined for the purpose of this study is contained in Table 8, along with sample quotes extracted from participants’ interview transcripts as demonstrating each competency. In order to highlight the pervasiveness of the competencies, the frequency in which these themes were found present in interviewees’ comments is included in the table as well.
It is noteworthy to clarify that a single participant may have mentioned the competency multiple times during the interview. Hence, the frequency reported indicates how many times the competency was coded in the data across all interview transcripts.

Table 8
Leadership Competencies and Frequency (Part 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competencies</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Sample Quotes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confidence</strong></td>
<td>Certain boldness and firm faith in one’s abilities to do things, self-assurance (Kay &amp; Shipman, 2014).</td>
<td>“My best experiences leading are when I am confident and with full autonomy. No immediate person pressing on me as to how I am organizing the work as long as I am leading the team to outcomes” (Participant 6, personal communication, December 15, 2016).</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“In general, I am most excited when I am fully confident in my expertise” (Participant 4, personal communication, November 25, 2016).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“I was in charge of the whole process; I was so self-assured and confident. It was my area of expertise, and that is what made it special, I orchestrated the entire initiative. Press releases, all TV stations were present; we did have a very cool day” (Participant 18, personal communication, December 5, 2016).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resiliency</strong></td>
<td>A person’s ability to successfully adapt to life tasks in the face of social disadvantage or highly adverse conditions (Pęciłło, 2016).</td>
<td>“I will not be told ‘no’ easily, I am very, very resilient and persistent. I always try to find a way” (Participant 8, personal communication, December 16, 2016).</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“My persistence and resiliency are the keys to my success” (Participant 29, personal communication, December 29, 2016).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“I have exercised grit, which is courage plus a learning mindset, but more importantly I am resilient” (Participant 17, personal communication, December 7, 2016).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8  
Leadership Competencies and Frequency (Part 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competencies</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Sample Quotes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>Belief in one’s ability to succeed at something, sense of self (Bandura, 1977).</td>
<td>“I have always been a problem solver. I immediately gravitate to how can I make something better than it was before, how can I get results is the driver of my success” (Participant 5, December 20, 2016).</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“I always brought value to the table, I always worked extremely hard and got the job done well” (Participant 16, personal communication, December 21, 2016).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Genuine concern for the well-being of others (Yarrow, Scott, &amp; Waxler, 1973).</td>
<td>“If I have to use three words that mean the most to me as a leader, those words will be persistence, people, and people. I have much empathy. I believe in collaborating and caring for people” (Participant 28, personal communication, December 29, 2016).</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“I always considered the secret sauce to my success in terms of leadership style that I care extremely about my team, but I do hold them accountable. I expect great things from them” (Participant 3, personal communication, December 22, 2016).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most immediate and most straightforward reaction to Table 8 is that those competencies are present in many leaders without regard to race and gender. One might argue that mastery of confidence, resiliency, self-efficacy and caring for others are minimum requirements for anyone to be considered a leader. So, at first glance, one might be tempted to concede the neutrality of race and gender proclaimed by many mainstream leadership theorists.
Nevertheless, after rigorously analyzing the participants’ transcripts, a subtle and yet profound conglomerate of differences in how WOC—due to their identities of race and gender—described, exercised, and experienced those competencies soon emerged. One example is how participants’ descriptions exposed how WOC had to work not hard, as any leader would, but harder, better, and smarter than their peers. Therefore, an acknowledgment of these differences in both WOC themselves and mainstream leadership scholars might decrease the damage that is being done by alleging race and gender objectivity in leadership ability and preparedness, a concept that has been perpetuated by the tenets of mainstream leadership theories.

This finding of how WOC relate and experience differently those mainstream competencies is quite telling and a finding in itself. In this section, it is detailed to provide an anchor to confirm and deny some of the reframing and disassociation behaviors and mindset.

Moreover, the leadership competencies described by the participants appeared to rarely stand alone; they merged to support and build on each other. There was a level of intersectionality among the competencies that do not tend to be the same for non-WOC (Ross, 2008) s. To illustrate the above points, I share a series of quotes that captured the subtle differences I recognized in WOC’s reported experiences with regard to the aforementioned leadership competencies.
Confidence

Under the theme of confidence, or being self-assured (Kay & Shipman, 2014), participants described having confidence while also feeling like impostors. These feelings were expressed by several of the most successful women and CEOs within the sample. Participant 8 shared:

Early in my career, I learned about myself that I needed injections of confidence. People may not think that Women of Color are able and competent. I remembered when I got a huge promotion and I called my husband to tell him about the promotion, and he said: “Oh, my God, you are in trouble, I am coming home.” Even though he loves me, his answer matched my own fear and my lack of confidence. He thought I was not going to be able to do the job; and, so did I. (personal communication, December 16, 2016)

This experience demonstrates what scholars articulate about women’s self-doubt within a world that is continually telling them that they are not good enough (Robinson, 2016). This same participant spoke about not feeling affected by her nature of being a WOC. Two interpretations can be made of the contradiction: during the early stages of her career, perhaps she felt concerned. That either no longer holds true or she is in a form of denial and exercising a positive reframing now, later in her career. I did not ask her a follow-up question to assert the reasoning behind the contradictions concretely.

Participant 13, a very accomplished CEO, also shared how her confidence was always under attack. In her opinion, being confident enough is not sufficient, because the corporate world tends to tell WOC otherwise. She relayed the following perspective:

If you are an African-American woman from a low-income background from the South, like myself, when you add the organizational barriers, that woman has three layers of garbage to deal with daily. Most Whites have only one layer or no
layers to combat. As a CEO, I am often hesitant to make inter-racial firing decisions or some other decisions that could be controversial. Because, as a person of color, there is a multitude of layers that creates more challenges for me and makes me timid to step up to the ledge. There is a razor-focused on my performance to scrutinize my every move, and that affects my levels of confidence. (personal communication, December 9, 2016)

This statement seems to convey a strong sense of how awareness of race, class, gender, and region shaped this woman’s identity and understanding of the world. At the same time, this participant also proudly expressed that as a CEO she has not supported or recruited WOC any more than other groups so as to not appear biased toward helping WOC. This kind of dissonance between her low confidence, her understanding of her own barriers as a WOC, while purposely not helping other WOC, is problematic to organize and process rationally. This level of incongruency creates challenges to answer the research of this study as to how outlier WOC have been able to attain senior-executive-level roles.

Both comments, above, come from highly accomplished women. The intuitive assumption is that levels of confidence are tied to the degree of accomplishments. However, the literature continues to report that women’s confidence tends to be lower when compared to that of men (Kay & Shipman, 2014). A KPMG study conducted in 2015 noted this issue; the authors determined that, whereas men will often place excessive or inflated value on their strengths, women (White and WOC alike) will often undervalue their strengths. This difference in valuation standards is described as a “confidence gap” (KPMG, 2015). Women’s lack of confidence can lead them to underestimate their ability to advance professionally by overestimating the requirements
of a job, and they therefore disqualify themselves from the race. Alternatively, being hesitant about making decisions and taking risks can also undermine WOC’s chances of acquiring C-Suite posts. Thus, these “confidence gaps” place women at a disadvantage when competing for jobs with men. And yet, confidence as a competency has not been visibly integrated into mainstream leadership models.

Self-Efficacy

Under the theme of self-efficacy, or belief in one’s ability to succeed at something (Bandura, 1977), participants experienced this concept differently than the essential definition presented above. Based on their comments, for the participants, self-efficacy is not about working hard and getting a task done. Instead, self-efficacy is about working harder in comparison to various other expectations (e.g., harder than men, harder than society’s expectations, and harder than their own idea of personal potential). Excerpts from the interview transcripts of Participants 5 and 16 spoke to self-efficacy meaning working harder than men do. Participant 5 articulated, “I work hard, I go above and beyond. I have to be smarter and work harder than men; I had to be opportunistic and go after opportunities that made sense. I did not have mentors in my career” (personal communication, December 20, 2016). Additionally, Participant 16 exclaimed, “I got ahead by making sure to work harder than any man at my level. I worked longer hours than any of them. I brought more value to the table, I always work extremely hard and got the job done better than any man or White woman” (personal communication, December 21, 2016).
Among the participants, self-efficacy was also about first showing themselves that they could do the work and then proving it to the world. Taking the road less traveled to prove to themselves their own potential or doing the work no one wanted to do in order to be noticed were ways in which WOC demonstrated a slightly different interpretation of self-efficacy. Participant 23 alluded to this in the following way:

I ignored what people might have thought of me, but it was very hard. I knew deep inside that they were going to recognize that I could deliver and that I was going to make a difference. I knew that if I had strong work ethics, and did the work that no one wanted to do, that was going to make me noticeable. Men and White women hardly experience this. (Participant 23, personal communication, December 27, 2016)

On the same topic, Participant 3 shared the following observation:

People did not dare to do what I did that set me apart. I chose more aggressive paths and goals than typical men. At a certain level, it made sense, such as entering a new industry. But overall, I think I always took the road less traveled; I took the most difficult roads. When people said that I was crazy, I took it as an accolade because what that meant is that I was doing things that no one else was doing. So, at the end of the day, I ended up with things that no one else had. (personal communication, November 22, 2016)

Another participant added her perspective about her inner controversy with self-efficacy by noting the following self-observation:

I practiced, and when I was sure, I asked to be allowed to demonstrate my abilities, and that showed myself that I could do it. I found the courage after convincing myself. Before I used to question myself. Now, I challenge myself in order to grow, the fact that I speak Spanish is no longer a barrier. (Participant 18, personal communication, December 5, 2016)

These comments exemplify how self-efficacy, as experienced by these WOC, is not the same as the textbook version described by scholars in which self-efficacy is merely the ability to get it done (Bandura, 1977). WOC reported a delicate, stressful,
superlative intention and obligation to get it done while being better, faster, and smarter than the rest.

Resiliency

Under the theme of resiliency, or a person’s ability to successfully adapt to life tasks in the face of social disadvantage or highly adverse conditions (Pęciłło, 2016), excerpts from the interviews demonstrate some overlap between self-efficacy and resiliency. Specifically, when participants discussed how they had to work hard, the quotes exhibited different emphasis for the same construct. Participants defined having to work extra as a means of ability to get it done (self-efficacy). Also, working hard was described as necessary to overcome adverse conditions (resiliency). Participants reported the necessity to work tougher than men and White women to stay in the game and overcome the multitude of barriers. Participant 21 asserted, “I tried to have a positive attitude in the midst of adversity, and I faked it until I made it.” (personal communication, December 22, 2016). In this comment, Participant 21 was explaining how her resiliency was constantly tested. She felt attacked and undermined more often than folks who were not WOC. Nevertheless, she always chose a positive attitude. Also, her self-confidence was typically under self-attack. Better yet, it was ruled by unattainable demands from the world. Despite these challenges, she consciously elected to fake comfort and hide feelings of hurt until she made it to the top. She never gave up.

Notably, I discovered that the intersection of resiliency, confidence, and self-efficacy materialized in what participants described as a continuous struggle to establish
their autonomy while demanding their right to be women, to be different, and not to feel pressured to be like men. Participant 12 said it nicely, “I can be confident when I am able to be my authentic self. It is refreshing to be in an environment, such as this one, where it is uncompromising, and my differences are celebrated, I can be me” (personal communication, December 3, 2016).

This quote aptly depicts an inner struggle in which WOC are longing for a space in which they can honestly be themselves, so they no longer feel that they have to conform. Participant 7 added another example of this multifaceted struggle:

Within corporate America, there are not enough women around to serve as role models. The women that make it, they have to be less feminine and act like a man. We should not try to fit into a man’s world. There should be the space for women to be themselves. I think there should be room for a woman not to have to conform. I have seen many women conform, especially in the military. I wanted to be respected as a woman. In the military, I proved my physical ability. I did not have to look like a man. (personal communication, December 15, 2016)

Racioppi (personal communication, January 4, 2016), an expert on gender disparity, states that the literature sustains that not only do differences exist between men and women in the workplace; the main problem with WOC is their inability to identify with those in power. That is because 90% of those in power are White men. So, a Black man shares his gender with a White man, whereas a White woman shares her race. A Woman of Color shares neither race nor gender. The literature supports Racioppi’s comments and affirms that WOC face many challenges finding their identity in the corporate world in order to fit in (Holvino & Scully, 2001). The efforts to fit in and be part of the culture while being true to themselves require a high level of stamina and resiliency
that can be tiring and discouraging for WOC.

In this study, most participants reported fighting this battle. Participant 13 said: “We Women of Color get along to stay along” (personal communication, December 9, 2016), implying that WOC have to leave part of who they are at the table in order to be similar to people in power who have very few similarities with them. She felt that at times, she played along, whether in agreement or not. Her resiliency kept her on track to success. This view is an example of dissonance. It demonstrates a high degree of sensitivity to racial and gender differences, not neutrality or being exempt from race and gender adverse effects.

An aggregate analysis of both resiliency and self-efficacy shows how the participants highlighted their recognition of being a WOC. As such, like most WOC, they illustrated how they had to adjust their behaviors to circumvent being affected by race and gender biases in the workplace. However, when the participants exhibited elements of disassociation from other WOC and the positive reframing of themselves, their comments showed that participants claimed not to have been affected but by race and gender.

Applying the available literature, it appears that the main difference between the study participants and other WOC is their perceptions as to why they had to change their behaviors. The women from the study mainly utilized a disassociation-reframing lens to recognize their behaviors as changes any leader must make to be effective, irrespective of their race and gender. The previous statement is not to suggest that none of the
participants had a sensitivity or a profound understanding of the real challenges WOC must surmount to excel. In fact, some of the comments that will be presented in this analysis show a great deal of knowledge and sensitivity. The point, as explained in the three themes of this finding, is that most of the participants have been able to downplay and dilute the importance and direct correlation of these barriers to their accomplishments or failures.

During the interviews, it appeared that, at the mention of race and gender, the participants were inclined to raise their guards and demonstrate positive reframing and disassociation behaviors. However, using neutral terms in leadership such as confidence and self-efficacy, the internal dissonance experienced by the participants became salient. A robust understanding of their gender and racial challenges emerged that was palpable and evident. Participants mentioned how they had to do things differently than their non-WOC peers while also being affected by unconscious biases from which others appear to be exempt. For example, participants felt that their work had to be flawless; they felt held to a higher standard of others. Their errors could be fatal, while the mistakes of others were minimized or excused.

Empathy: Caring for Others

Under the theme of empathy, or genuine concern for the well-being of others (Yarrow, Scott, & Waxler, 1973), participants prodigiously mentioned this competency as essential to their leadership style. As discussed earlier in this section, according to these study’s data, the leadership competency that occurred with the most frequency was
WOC’s genuine desire to care for and help others, particularly their team members. Some participants went as far as to utter that their life’s mission was to help others. For instance, Participant 13 shared the following perspective: “Helping people to grow and help them advance their careers is one of my personal and professional goals. I like to get people to the next professional ladder by encouraging them” (personal communication, December 9, 2016). Participant 25, Participant 2, and Participant 1 also provided similar statements. Participant 25 said:

I can see the gift other people have and bring to the team. As a leader, I hold a platform to allow them to be their better self. I helped them guide themselves and see their strength, and by doing so, I increased their confidence, engagement, and productivity. (personal communication, December 28, 2016)

Participant 1 added:

The other primary leadership skill I have is that I care about other people. I identify opportunities for other people to be their better self. I lead them to identify things they could not even identify within themselves. Plus, I lead by example. I walk the walk and not only talk the talk. I am a more thoughtful leader than most men I know. (personal communication, November 20, 2016)

Participant 2 also stated, “I genuinely care about my team, I care about them as human beings, not as co-workers. I have a lot of empathy. Other leaders are thinkers; I treat people as more than a co-worker” (personal communication, November 21, 2016). In the study, there were numerous comments similar to the ones above, denoting real and authentic happiness when participants described that they fiercely wanted to be of service to others. These observations are also very congruent with the literature about humanistic leadership theories. Those theories stressed that developing the individual organizational member was the primary concern of leadership.
(Blake & Mouton, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006). This study supports that notion in four ways: (a) participants believed that they exercised more consideration to others; (b) participants perceived themselves as thriving when serving as a platform to help their team and others; (c) participants overwhelmingly believed to be better transformational and servant leaders than males, and (d) participants articulated a desire to be altruistic. This last point arises in several comments about participants’ core value of showing respect to all. For instance, Participant 7 expressed:

I respect everyone and their limitations. I encourage people to be the best version of themselves. I am great at making people better. It is hard to identify what motivates people, I love to tap into that, and it is hard because people come from different backgrounds. (personal communication, November 21, 2016)

Participant 27 added, “I respect everyone from the janitor to the CEO. I do not care if the person has many titles, I do not kiss rings. That usually pays off; I say what others are afraid to say” (personal communication, December 28, 2016).

While the overwhelming majority of women in this study considered themselves extremely caring, many participants also shared a strong sense of despair with the lack of support and kindness they have received from their WOC peers in the workplace.

Participant 24 articulated this theme best by stating that the hardest times she has had in her career progression have been due to other Women of Color not being supportive of her (personal communication, December 27, 2016). Participant 30 further explained:

WOC need to support other women, and we do not do much of that. We need real fellowship around women. We need women helping each other, and they need to be there for each other. It would create more opportunity for women to mentor and coach other women. We, as WOC in power, do not spend enough time building a
Participant 2 shared a similar sentiment:

Women of Color should support other women. WOC tend to want and enjoy being a token within organizations; they want to be the only ones. Instead, we should enhance opportunities for other women. We do not extend the pie to sister WOC. We keep it for ourselves. (personal communication, November 21, 2016)

These types of comments constitute negative cases, as the vast majority of the participants spoke about being empathetic to people. Negative cases provide an opportunity for a more in-depth analysis of the data. In this case, they uncover how empathy is experienced and exercised differently when it is from a WOC to another WOC. It appeared as if the participants’ honest, caring, collaborative and helping nature had some limits, as these behaviors were not extended to their fellow WOC colleagues. Examining these comments with a disassociation lens, they confirm the lack of sisterhood among WOC. At the same time, when participants expressed disappointment from WOC not supporting each other, it contradicts the disassociation theme, as the assumption is that they would like WOC to relate better to each other. Alternatively, it might be that participants want to stay away from WOC themselves but want other WOC to help them individually. The data analysis cannot reconcile the incongruencies; it can only report them. Hence, this kind of inconsistency supports the first finding of this study with regard to how WOC experience an internal dissonance that leads to contradictions in the interplay of their behaviors and mindset.
Last, using the available literature about social capital, I hypothesize that participants might have dedicated themselves to helping those whom they saw as being positioned to assist them later (men and White women) as a means of building capital. After all, social capital provides the opportunity to succeed in the workplace (Lin, 2001). The increased human capital would have helped the individual woman and would account for her ability to ascend the corporate ladder. This study did not ask questions that can confirm or deny my theory, so it needs to be examined further.

In conclusion, research participants conveyed a series of contradictions within their leadership identities in the areas of empathy, confidence, self-efficacy, and resiliency. Women’s uncertainty about how they relate to the mainstream accepted leadership competencies seemed to create a multi-layered struggle regarding the development of their leader identity (Racioppi, 2013). As the literature suggests, how a woman views herself as a leader evolves as a result of work experiences and her internalized view of her leader identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). To stay afloat and succeed, participants reported the internal dissonance of a constant balancing act and inner struggle. In essence, the high level of dissonance presented in this finding around the principal themes of disassociation, reframing and leadership behaviors generates acute challenges to answering the research question of how remarkable WOC climb the organizational ladder and which internal factors are responsible for their professional achievement.
Second Finding

The second finding of this study is that fixing the organizational context to eliminate gender biases is critical to enabling WOC to attain senior-executive-level roles. Gender bias as an impediment to professional success was the answer with the highest mode to the only question in the research’s questionnaire that could have addressed WOC’s development. The purpose of the question was to elicit, without probing or influence, the main areas of development for advancing WOC from the participants’ viewpoint. The question was as follows: “If you could develop or transform your organization or corporate America in any way you wished, what three things would you do to heighten its vitality and overall health in the area of leadership development for women to ensure women can accelerate their careers?” It is important to clarify that the answers to this question provided a number of distinct ideas. A holistic approach to the data analysis revealed that most of the solutions mentioned by the participants are mutually constructed and cannot be separated (some examples will be provided later in this section). That is, there was not a bulletproof solution acknowledged to accelerate women’s careers. Nevertheless, some patterns and modes were identified, with the elimination of gender bias being a critical option mentioned by the participants.

The fact that 24 participants (out of the 30) reported gender bias as one of the primary barriers that all women (not only WOC) encounter on their path to the top levels within Fortune 1000 companies and other large organizations is quite telling. Superficially this finding indicates a level of incongruency with the
theme in which WOC disassociate from other WOC. After all, a WOC is both a woman and a person of color. Moreover, if participants recognize gender bias, then they are connecting with other women. The reason why there is no contradiction is that participants did not significantly report both race and gender biases, mostly gender. Participants, thereby, seem to relate to gender issues without having to embrace the intersection of race and gender matters. In what follows, quotations from several research participants about gender biases demonstrate this finding. Participant 14 shared her insight:

The work-life balance is a myth because a woman or any leader has to be present to be a leader. She cannot be at home and be a leader. There should be more placement of women and more tangible movement of women into leadership roles. There should be training on the basis of how women are perceived in the workplace versus how men are perceived. I read in the book Lean In that with women, the work-life burden is still on them. (personal communication, November 24, 2016)

Participant 4 expressed, “People say that you have to keep up with the man; why not the other way? There is an inherent unconscious bias” (personal communication, November 25, 2016). Similarly, Participant 3 stated, “It will be great to ensure flexible opportunities for women. Long days in the office should be a time of the past. There are double standards if women take time off to care for children” (personal communication, November 22, 2016). Participant 20 added:

I think that by nature we are all biased. There is no way to exist without having a bias. If you have no bias, then someone failed to tell you that you are dead. The largest gaps in gender disparity are due to women getting in the way of their own biases. Some women contribute to biases by also being biased to their female peers. And, of course, the biases of others toward women is also a problem. (personal communication, December 23, 2016)
Participant 11 further said, “I will have childcare for women at no cost, there are biases in the workplace impeding organizations to offer women a friendlier environment.” (personal communication, December 16, 2016). Participant 8 shared her opinion about gender bias and success for women, “The pervasive gender biases in organizations must be addressed to allow women to become their better selves. There is an inundation of double standards” (personal communication, December 16, 2016). Participant 1 expressed:

The only real need I see is that women need profit and loss experience. I have been in functional roles; if I wanted to be considered for COO or CEO, it would have required me to gain more operational experiences. So, women early in their career should consider being in an operational. There are barriers since there are biases that do not help women advance and we were socialized differently. People need to be exposed more to P&L roles, and this will lead to success. I have not been affected because I took a different position. I am not using my race or gender as a crutch. (personal communication, November 20, 2016)

Finally, Participant 9 shared:

Women need to support other women, and we do not do much of that, we need real fellowship around women. We are part of the biases in the workplace against us because we do not stick together. We need women helping each other, and they need to be there for each other. I would create more opportunity for women to mentor and coach other women. We do not spend enough time building a pipeline to allow access to women. All the gender biases and our weak pipeline are detrimental to our success. (personal communication, December 20, 2016)

The many other commentaries provided by participants are comparable to the examples above. Within the diversity of the observations, some patterns came into focus. First, participants primarily concentrated on gender biases, not racial biases or racial and gender biases combined. Participants’ perspectives seemed to be very well aligned with all women, hence the gender bias concentration. However, study after study shows that
WOC are distinct from White women in many areas (Bradley-Volz, 2015). Disassociation and positive reframing lenses could be used to analyze the participants’ pattern of omission about the uniqueness of being a WOC and the reality that, when describing biases, they did not speak about race or the intersection of race and gender in a meaningful way. The absence of recognition could be construed as a form of disassociation with other WOC. A similar pattern of disassociation was observed in the previous finding, when women described their assets as leaders. Participants reported being incredibly empathetic and caring in the workplace, except with their fellow WOC.

Moreover, some remarks of the participants around gender bias called for organizations to take an active role in dismantling the biases that affect all employees, not only WOC. For those women, eradicating bias is the panacea to removing barriers for all women, not specifically WOC. Participants expressed resolve that organizations should stop admiring, describing, naming, and analyzing gender biases. Participant 12 voiced, “I would create unconscious-bias programs to ensure that organizations can dismantle it” (personal communication, December 3, 2016). Similarly, Participant 25 was adamant when she stated:

Organizations need to own that they are complicit in creating an environment that can be hostile to women. The programs to address unconscious biases are well intended but very often lack substance or a sturdy implementation. Organizations should align their reward system with the behaviors they wish to obtain, and biases should not be tolerated. (personal communication, December 28, 2016)

Participant 12 shared:

I will create unconscious bias programs to ensure that organizations can eradicate them. It starts at the top with the CEO; we need to flag bias behaviors that have been perpetuated in organizations, this should be done until those behaviors stop
and disappear from the fabric and the organizational culture. People need to be empowered to understand that we all have a bias but those unconscious ones have to be addressed so they can bring their best selves. (personal communication, December 3, 2016)

Participant 30’s remarks are an optimal example of the perspective shared by many of the participants. She said:

I would like organizations to have bias interrupter; you cannot spot all your biases. So, what do you do when confronted with biases? Let’s stop admiring the problem. Most training accessible today do not provide tools to decrease biases. The advantage of talent management strategies is that they want to advance everyone. So, organizations should own the fact that biases are part of the organization’s culture and context. Women have their own baggage, but organizations are not the space for women to attend the culture that gets in the way of success, and organizations have allowed those cultures, full of biases, to exist. There is a difference between what companies allow and become enhancer of bias [sic], versus the symptoms of biases. Current training solutions tend to address symptoms of biases, opposed to ways to mitigate biases and bring about solutions. (personal communications, December 29, 2016)

Various nuances around the dismantling of bias were uncovered. For instance, even though the participants in this study are executives in senior-level roles and can personally create or lead organizational efforts to eradicate gender biases; they did not have, or otherwise voice, an interest in doing anything about decreasing the biases. Only a handful felt responsible for taking an active role in eliminating the biases that affect WOC. On the one hand, participants felt exempt from biases and not responsible for fixing them. On the other hand, participants called for organizations to dismantle biases that affect everyone, including WOC. The contradictory mindset exhibited by the study’s participants is more evidence of the dissonance identified in the first finding. Participants stated feeling disconnected and not responsible for carving the path for other WOC, yet
they advocate for the elimination of gender bias.

Several participants shared that the fastest path to eliminating biases in the workplace is to implement quotas to increase the number of WOC in senior-executive-level roles. Participant 3 stated, “I know things will be different if the company had a woman as the CEO. I believe it is important to have some mandatory quotas; for example, ensuring that 50% of every executive team is comprised of women and that 50% are WOC” (personal communication, November 22, 2016). Participant 17 explained how, until all the bias-prevention programs are in place and people have been educated to stop being biased, it is vital to assign quotas now, within organizations, to fast-track the process of giving access to WOC for executive roles. Furthermore, Participant 17 specified that executive compensation should be tied to meeting these quotas, and punitive measures should be put in place by organizations if the quotas are not achieved. She explained, “Until the education programs for those leaders are completed, I would mandate quotas for all divisions. I will hold people accountable for not meeting the quota” (personal communication, December 7, 2016).

The research around the sustainability of creating quotas is inconclusive. Some argue that it will not solve the gender disparity, while others—using examples mainly from European countries—postulate how quotas can play a relevant role in achieving gender parity (Sowell, 2004). This study is not advocating for the creation - or not - of quotas; it is merely sharing how some participants mentioned them as useful tools to bring about gender parity.
Furthermore, in the data, the way in which bias was mentioned varied, sometimes being implicit and other times explicit. However, most of the participants referred to unconscious bias, not overt bias. Only a few participants spoke about biases triggered by being both a woman and a person of color. Nonetheless, the existence of overt bias is real for some participants. Participant 1 shared the following experience she had with overt bias:

One of the biggest challenges is that people have many biases. The message I got once I was hired at this company, even after 30 years of experience in the field, was that all my peers said that I only got the job because I was a Black woman. (personal communication, November 20, 2016)

This participant felt that the biases in the workplace can be overt and offensive, such as in the anecdote she shared about her current role. The participant was distressed and unsettled by how explicitly her peers had discriminated and minimized her accomplishments.

Participant 27 also shared, “There are inherent biases in most organizations. Even though the ideas around the biases are not the truth, at times, general perception becomes the truth because, sadly, perception is a reality” (personal communication, December 28, 2016). She was alluding to how biases become engrained in the organizational culture. She also mentioned overt forms of bias that preclude women from fast-tracking their careers. Additionally, Participant 20 stated:

In law firms and companies, there are not many women in the C-suite. They say the leaky pipeline is the culprit. The reality is that when people see no progress, people pack their backpack and go where they know that they can have a shot. WOC have to improve their executive presence, but organizations need to think about what they need to do to stop systemic barriers against women.

Women are treated as less than men. (personal communication, December 23,
As stated, most of the solutions participants cited as critical to gender parity were very much related. It was not an either/or solution. Participant 6 captured this interrelation when she articulated,

> I think for sure gender, ethnicity, affirmative action, and its ineffectiveness have affected me in my ability to excel. Also, the geography in which I have worked is a factor, I have been working in the South and NYC, and people see me differently from one geography to the next. In the South, as a Black woman, it is quite harder to progress. How people see each other in the workplace also determines who gets groomed. (personal communication, December 15, 2016)

Her remarks link biases with how organizations determine who gets groomed or sponsored. The participant is inter-relating the existence of gender biases with the low levels of sponsorships for women. Therefore, it is not one solution or the other, but a set of interacting interventions that might be fruitful for increasing the number of WOC in senior-executive-level roles. The next finding will explore the concept of intersecting and complementary solutions by exploring the need for sponsorship for WOC.

Another interrelation of potential solutions was expressed by Participant 30 related to the need for people to be trained tangibly to understand how diversity is beneficial to us all. Participant 30 uttered,

> How does one effectively evaluate others’ skill sets and attributes? People need to actually know something about recognizing talent—especially talent that may not register as valuable due to the evaluators’ own cultural limitations. There are biases inherent in what the profile of a great leader should be, how it is packaged and experienced. (personal communications, December 29, 2016)

To summarize, this finding mainly suggests that most participants believe that eliminating gender biases in the workplace would be beneficial for increasing access to
senior-executive-roles for all women. As a scholar-practitioner, a holistic look at all the data from this research led me to assert that the necessity to remove biases could be equated with fixing the system, not the women. There is a prevailing concept that women, in particular, need more content-based training and knowledge in developing leadership traits to increase their confidence, assertiveness, and other so-called soft skills that can accelerate their advancement to the C-Suite (Nelson & Levesque, 2007). My research, however, suggests otherwise. For example, as mentioned earlier, not a single participant expressed that a particular content-based training or learning intervention had been instrumental to their career success. Hence, continuing to embrace the false idea that fixing the women is the panacea for increasing their representation in the workplace may be one of the chief causes for the slower progression of WOC’s careers. Organizations must stop concentrating their resources on trying to fix the women by teaching knowledge. Instead, this study joins previous research in affirming that a better solution can be found in mediating the external factors that are creating systemic barriers for all women, and mostly WOC (Morrissey & Schmidt, 2008; Easterly & Ricard, 2011). One of the utmost topics that requires attention, according to my findings, is the unattended conscious and unconscious biases in the workplace. Finally, this finding needs to be supported by the intrinsic inter-relation of all the winning techniques reported by the participants. It is not just an organizational solution or a resolution that rests with women; rather, it is incumbent on everyone to understand how they contribute to evolving the corporate culture (R. Racioppi, personal communication, May 21, 2017).
Third Finding

The third finding of this study is that self-directed determination to access developmental relationships is paramount for the advancement of WOC. To set the context, a distinction between sponsorship and mentorship is necessary. According to the literature, sponsorship is about power and influence, whereas mentorship is fundamentally about development (Burke, 2011). Sponsorship is the ability of a sponsor to use their organizational power and influence to provide opportunities to protégés that would enable him or her to scale the organizational ladder. In contrast, mentorship is about helping mentees develop and grow; corporate influence is not required (R. Racioppi, personal communication, May 21, 2017).

Extensive literature confirms the relevance of sponsorship and mentorship in accelerating the careers of all women (Burke, 2011). Most scholars maintain that sponsorship has been identified as being better for women, since it leads to tangible results (Kim et al., 2012; Single & Donald, 2013). The study’s interview did not have any specific questions about participating in sponsorship or mentoring programs. Nevertheless, not surprisingly, 87% of the participants in the study mentioned sponsorship or mentoring as an essential strategy they employed to gain access to senior-executive roles. Figure 3 illustrates the participants’ perceptions with regards to their participation in any of those programs.
Participation in Sponsorship or Mentorship Programs

Reported participating in sponsorship or mentoring: 13%

Did not report participating in sponsorship or mentoring: 87%

Figure 3. Perceptions of Participation in Sponsorship and Mentorship

The nuance and contributions of this study are how WOC view, name, and experience what they considered sponsorship, including how the participants succeeded in creating relationships that resembled for substituted formal sponsorships. For instance, while 87% reported participation in mentorship or sponsorship, only 20% participated in formal sponsorship programs; i.e., access to sponsorships led and supported at an institutional level, and that resulted in professional advancement. Figure 4 shows not the perceived, but the real percentage of participants’ participation in mentorship, sponsorship and other relationships. After analyzing and organizing the data, I found that participants were referring to the relationship inaccurately. For example, they will say that they had a sponsor but will describe the role of a mentor. Thus, Figure 4 captures the true nature of the relationships the participants engaged in climbing the organizational ladder.
The data analysis demonstrated that participants seemed to create other relationships in lieu of sponsorships. These relationships were intentional, self-directed, and strategic. In other words, they were not selected out of a pool of applicants for a formal sponsorship. Most of the relationships were developmental in nature and, therefore, included informal mentors and sponsors, as well as networks.

The analysis of this finding will differentiate between how some participants experienced formal organization-led sponsorships, to distinguish between how the rest of the participants experienced informal sponsorship and mentorship. This contrast will allow the emergence of how the participants used mainly mentors, and not sponsors, to be successful.
Only six of the 30 participants in the study were confirmed to have had access to formally structured, organization-led sponsorships programs. These sponsorships provided access to interventions led by the organization to pair protégés and sponsors formally, with the intention both to advise and significantly promote protégés (Single & Donald, 2013). Participants 3, 7, and 24 were recipients of such organization-led sponsorships programs. Expectedly, during the interviews, they reported some of the benefits the literature attributes to having a sponsor. Participant 7 expressed the benefits of formal sponsorship programs to her career advancement as follows:

I had a GM that was a woman. She was my formal sponsor, and she pulled me twice to help me get promoted. I am only 38, and without her pulling, I could not be where I am today. It matters whom you know. She went to bat to promote me. I worked with her before, and she brought me with her as she ascended. (personal communication, December 15, 2016)

This participant explained how she worked primarily in other sectors, not in corporations. Thus, she felt at a disadvantage in her ability to fast-track her career rapidly within the corporation. However, after being assigned to a sponsor and having the opportunity to demonstrate her capacity, her sponsor saw potential, took an interest, and subsequently used her corporate influence to promote the participant. Participant 7 (personal communication, December 15, 2016), expressed that, without her sponsor’s help, she was not going to be selected for the type of opportunities she was exposed to, opportunities that ultimately led to a significant promotion. Participant 7’s sponsor later left the company, and when she was established as Senior Vice President of another company, she recruited and hired Participant 7 as Director of the new company.
The formal organization-led sponsorship survived even the departure from the original company where the sponsor and the participant had met and established the formal sponsorship. According to Participant 7, the sponsor has continued to advocate for her to this day.

Similarly, Participant 3 shared the benefits of participating in a formal sponsorship program, “Getting assigned to a White male supporter in the traditional finance industry has been life-changing for me. White men are the ones heard and the ones in senior roles. They elevated me and placed me” (personal communication, November 22, 2016).

Participant 24 provided another compelling example of how sponsorship changed her professional trajectory:

I think having a White male sponsor is critical. A White male is important because in my industry they are the ones in the most senior roles. They are the ones that have influence, and when they say that someone is right, then their voices have weight! If they say that a woman is good, then she must be good! White men have elevated me. In the current role that I have, a White man placed me. He saw leadership skills in me and hired me. He thought that I was going to succeed. Research suggests that sometimes WOC feel uncomfortable with a White man in a relationship of mentorship, that was not my case. (personal communication, December 27, 2016)

About the gender of the sponsor, only one of the six participants (17%) who expressed having a formal sponsor mentioned that the sponsor was another female. In this study, participants explained that their sponsors were, for the most part, White males. This study shows that this type sponsorship between WOC and White men is providing positive results for WOC.
This is relevant because some literature suggests the challenges inherent in inter-racial and cross-gender sponsorship. Therefore, more research is needed to understand and enhance inter-racial sponsorships, as they are instrumental in WOC’s advancement.

The next quotations by several participants illustrate how the participants used the words sponsor and sponsorship to describe a relationship that was more aligned with mentorship. Participant 5 explained, “I have identified great sponsors to provide advice and professional support. I owe much to my sponsors” (personal communication, December 20, 2016). Similarly, Participant 19 shared, “Some of my most relevant sponsors are outside of the organizational structure” (personal communication, December 5, 2016). Participant 27 also averred, “I have many great friends that have been my sponsors for many years, guiding my thought process” (personal communication, December 28, 2016). As explained in chapter 2, what the women are describing, above, are mentors, of sorts - not sponsors. By definition, a sponsor has to be part of the organizational structure and must have employed influence and power to help the protégé advance. A person who provides guidance and support is a mentor, not a sponsor.

Most of the participants did not experience sponsorship in the formal manner the literature has mainly explored; that is, equating it with the sponsor’s power and organizational support. Instead, the participants seemed to have identified the key people in their network with whom they needed to connect and build relationships to advance professionally. The relationships were relatively informal and often external to the organization.
During the interviews, the participants inadequately used the term sponsorship to refer to these informal relationships they had created, when, in fact, those relationships appeared related more to mentorship than sponsorship.

Additionally, to support the incorrect use of the word sponsor, Participant 28’s below statement is appropriate:

For me, yes, I had many sponsors. They were not provided to me. I intentionally found them. Any time that I was afforded an opportunity that was not linear, it came from a White male stamping the table and putting me in that role. As an individual, I have been fearless forming relationships with White men. I find ways to connect with people that I did not have anything in common. I found people that garden as much as I did. People need to find connections with people and organizations should task executives with sponsoring people that are not from their alma mater, across gender and race and does not live in their neighborhood, I think. (personal communication, December 29, 2016)

Participant 10 provided insightful reflections on the subject as well:

Sponsorships well done and intentional can move the needle and change the organizational culture to advance people of color. Sponsorship is about promoting and influencing outcomes for folks. At the same time, Latinos need to add to their toolbox by being more active. As a Latina, I used to think that if I work hard I was going to be promoted and it does not work that way. Many women that are successful had to renegotiate with their family, so they will understand that they had the right to be more than mothers. They probably had to renegotiate that two nights a week their children would have to make their own dinner. They had to adjust their internal bias about what a career woman looks like. This kind of work is what a sponsor does for people. My sponsors helped me expand my mindset and prosper. My career success is built on social capital, support from sponsors and reciprocal networking. It is all in the network! (personal communication, December 20, 2016)

The intentionally sponsorships and mentorships mentioned by the participants are particularly interesting, because the literature shows that even formal sponsorship programs do not work unless women take an active role and prepare themselves for the sponsorship program (Racioppi, 2013).
The female protégé must be intentional about how to manage the sponsor or mentor relationship. Subsequently, analogous to Racioppi’s work, this study shows that intentional engagement with their selected sponsors and mentors created the conditions necessary for enabling several of the participants in this study to receive the guidance they needed for advancing to more-senior-level roles. The key was their disposition to making things happen—i.e., assuming the responsibility for their own successful trajectory—which occurred despite not having access to formally organized sponsorship programs.

The challenge with the concept of aggressively seeking sponsorship is that existing research fails to address the role women can actively take in developing sponsoring relationships that support their career successes or avoid failures, including how the relationship is formed, the organizational influence of the sponsor, and the length of the sponsoring relationships (Allen et al., 2006; Burke, 2011). Furthermore, implications of cross-racial and cross-gender sponsorship biases are not well understood.

Participant 14 spoke about some of those implications in the following manner:

I cannot network with men the same way as a man networks with another man. People may think that I am sleeping with them. So, if more opportunities were there to socialize with men, then it will not feel uncomfortable and look like it is about having sex. (personal communication, November 24, 2016)

Participant 23 also expressed her concerns with the implicit biases that are associated with a young Latina, Asian, or African-American woman networking with an older White man.
She explained:

Sometimes if I am having dinner with my sponsor, it feels uncomfortable. It is not like I can look like his daughter or niece; I am not White. Hence, I must be his lover or something of sorts. It is hard to explain; it feels uncomfortable the way people stare sometimes. (Participant 23, personal communication, December 27, 2016)

Black women and the White males in positions to help advance Black women's careers often face obstacles shaped by cross-race and cross-gender taboos (Lovejoy, 1995). Black women were found to be reluctant to establish close relationships with White men, because of their concern with a lingering image of the Black woman as a concubine, wherein their bodies were used for sexual pleasures and physical labor (Lovejoy, 1995). Rather than confront the anxieties and paradoxes of their alliance, high-potential Black females and the White men who might mentor them tend to avoid those relationships (Thomas, 2001). None of the participants in the study dwelled on these paradoxes and anxieties, but it would be interesting to have more research exploring this topic.

A practical way to fix this problem is having more WOC or White women sponsoring WOC. Still, as explained before, this study has found that WOC in positions of power are not particularly eager to support their fellow WOC. Some participants have expressed being distressed over WOC not helping their own, yet, with the disassociation mentality, these same women are not willing to step up to the plate to be that one WOC who helps other WOC. Pairing that with the small numbers of White women and WOC in senior-executive-level roles, it seems very unlikely that women sponsoring women can resolve the matter.
This presents a conundrum, as what is needed to advance WOC is also what holds them back. Participant 7 alluded to this unfortunate predicament in the below excerpt:

Then, within corporate America, there are not enough women around to serve as role models. More women that make it, they want to try not to be seen as “a woman.” We should not try to fit into a man’s world. There should be the space for women to be themselves. I think there should be more mentors that are women because there are not too many women at the top. Women need to guide the ship. I have been the only woman at the table, being an engineer, and being in the military. I am tired of not having other women help their own. (personal communication, December 15, 2016)

A notable observation I make about the comments presented above about having access to formal sponsorship opportunities is that they were not recurrent among the sample. In fact, they were the negative cases in this research. The majority of participants in the study expressed not having access to any formal or structured work-related sponsorship programs. Some even shared that the lack of sponsorship had distressed them and afforded them an unfair disadvantage since their counterparts—White women and men—had visibly received sponsorship through informal networks based on affinity group membership. This supports the in-group theory and the propensity of sponsors to want to sponsor within their race and gender, as mentioned in the conceptual framework in chapter 2. Participant 6 remarked:

All minorities suffer from lack of sponsorship, from someone willing to champion you, almost with blind faith. Someone to put you out front, put their reputation on the line for you. We did not get the job because our parents were golf buddies with the executive. (personal communication, December 15, 2016)

Participant 9 had a view similar to the one expressed above, but with a sense of pride.
She stated:

I do not have or had any sponsors or coaches in this role. But, I know of many White folks that had and have sponsors. It has been very tough for me to ascend. But, regardless, I am the first Latina they ever hired for this role. I did it on my own. (personal communication, December 20, 2016)

For Participant 9, the lack of a formal sponsor is a source of pride because it indicates that she has done it on her own, making her progress all the more noteworthy.

In contrast to not having had access to formal sponsorship programs, 26 out of the 30 women did report having informal sponsorship relationships, mainly outside of work. Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, the majority of those relationships were mentorships, in nature, and not real sponsorships. The participants used the term sponsorship and mentorship interchangeably during the interviews. Mostly, they used the word sponsorship. However, as they described the relationship during the interview, it was clear that it was a mentoring relationship, as opposed to sponsorship. Knowing the clear distinction between mentorship and sponsorship is significant in this study, because, if WOC are not actively pursuing sponsorships but settling for mentorship, they are not maximizing their career opportunities.

As presented, participants reported being able to ascend the organizational ladder without formal sponsors, but certainly not without support. These women have intentionally identified mentors to provide them guidance and support. This finding can be interpreted as stated above, but the opposite is also true. Perhaps one of the culprits for the low number of WOC in senior-executive roles is that they are not engaging in more sponsorships.
The absence of research on the ways WOC experience mentoring and sponsorship has resulted in both organizations and WOC being ill-prepared to adequately employ mentoring or sponsoring relationships as a chief strategy to women’s leadership development (Racioppi, 2013). More research is necessary to continue building the framework for enabling successful sponsorships that can lead to a higher level of advancement for all women, but particularly WOC, as they have the lowest representation in senior-executive-level roles.

Fourth Finding

The fourth finding of this study is that WOC with strong family support and partners who lead the domestic front have considerably more opportunities to be career focused. Steinem (1995) eloquently asserted that “women will not get equity in the workplace until they get equity at home” (p. 45). Affirming that having strong family support is a reliable indicator of how far a WOC can advance in a corporation within the U.S. may sound inconsequential. One may argue that family support is essential for all leaders regardless of race and gender. Yet, this finding is as subtle as it is substantial, since - for all women, and primarily for Women of Color -s family support is more important than one might suspect. Gender issues permeate workplaces in both overt and covert ways.

As discussed in Chapter 2, according to Steinem (1995), the feminist movement incorporated women into the workforce without unconditionally relinquishing them from the personal and social realms of household chores and child-rearing obligations.
She underscored that the most deep-rooted change for women in the workplace begins with men raising children as much as women do. Participant 25 accentuated how detrimental the biases could be for some WOC, in particular. “When a woman has no home support, they appear less devoted to the work. Her man should be as responsible for the housework to give her time to excel in the office” (personal communication, December 28, 2016). This participant communicated how having no support from her male partner had been a source of stress at work, because she felt penalized at work if she had to take time away to care for domestic duties. Additionally, the lack of balance between who does what at home was creating tension in her marriage.

Similarly, Participant 14 explained, “As a single parent, I cannot have more children, or it will be career suicide” (personal communication, November 24, 2016). She was referring to the fact that she could not afford to have to divide her time between being a mother and being an executive. Therefore, if Participant 14 had another child, she was confident that it was going to slow-track her career. This participant also shared an experience in which her best friend, another African-American woman, was not even considered for a job that required a relocation, because she had four children, and management simply assumed (without even first asking her) that she would not be interested in moving with her four children. She shared that men do not experience those biases at work. There is no implicit assumption that men cannot relocate their families.

The above comments contradict the idea that these WOC do not feel affected by gender bias.
These women also are conscious of the need for family support, and they do not want to have the traditional gendered division of labor in the home. Therefore, this finding does not align with a positive reframing and disassociation. Again, these apparent contradictions support the first finding about the profound internal dissonance successful WOC in senior-executive-level roles experience.

It is worth mentioning that, according to some participants in the study, some of those biases are self-imposed and promulgated by women themselves. It is in the disassociation from and the inability to relate to other WOC that some elements of an impenetrable disassociation can be appreciated. Participant 26 voiced her disgust with the fact that, typically, other women maintain some of the biases at work. For instance, she commented that it is always a woman who asks another woman executive how she is managing to balance home and work responsibilities. She stated, “I cannot understand why women do not ask male executives the same question about work-life balance. It is as if women cannot permit themselves to be relieved from having to be everything for everyone” (Participant 26, personal communication, December 28, 2016).

Based on the data from this study, those biases are one of the predominant reasons why having strong family support is instrumental for WOC. According to the perspectives of my research participants, the fact that they have enjoyed such significant support from their families and their partners has made a real difference in their career development. It has protected them from those adverse implications of being perceived as not being committed to work, simultaneously enabling them to intensely concentrate on career
mobility. Some of the comments about the significant support most of the participants have received are elaborated below. Participant 19 shared,

> After becoming a mature woman, I got lucky and married a man that supported my career aspirations. He supported me and never felt intimidated. He respects women and their quest for power because he comes from a very successful mother. I always underestimated the influence that it had on my husband that his mother had a higher degree and was quite successful. My husband is the secret weapon of my career success. (personal communication, December 5, 2016)

An interesting nuance of having robust family support was shared by Participant 27. She spoke about how having support at home not only helped her overcome challenges at work, but it also allowed her not to feel guilty about society’s impositions on the woman being the one responsible for the household. Participant 27 stated,

> I have a strong support system. My husband does not travel, and he keeps a great part of the responsibilities at the home. Balance is a personal equation. I keep myself out of guilt for not being at home by understanding why I do what I do. (personal communication, December 28, 2016)

Participant 9 also shared her ability to depend wholly on her husband:

> My husband takes the lead domestically when I am traveling, but I cook most of the dinners. I do most of the cleaning. He picks up the girls from schools. For the most part, I still do the traditional mom/wife stuff when I am at home. I travel a week a month or not more than 50% of the time. However, if need be, he would gladly do all the work I do at home. (personal communication, December 20, 2016)

The amount of unconditional support reported by most participants was overwhelming and very positively correlated with their emotional well-being. Seventy-three percent (73%) of the participants are married women, and 70% have children. Therefore, having a resilient, consistent, and thoughtful support system may be a substantial external factor that has allowed the participants to ascend the corporate ladder.
It would be interesting to understand if the women negotiated this support or if it just happened; participants did not clarify this point. Thus, this area requires more research.

Finally, a peculiar element in this sample includes similar demographic data about the participants’ family constitution and structure. The data shows that over 93% of the participants come from a two-parent household; with divorce prevalent in current times, this number seemed an outlier in itself. The parents of 73% of the participants had been married for more than 45 years. Not only did participants grow up in two-parent households, but they also often reported coming from very emotionally healthy and close-knit families. Hence, the participants’ remarks about having robust support from their families extended to include support from their parents since childhood and through the present.

Fifth Finding

The fifth finding of this study is that external factors have a robust impact on career achievement of WOC. This finding could be stated differently: One could claim that the finding is that external factors are the only ones that can visibly answer the research question and explain how WOC have obtained professional success. Based on the first finding of this study, the level of internal dissonance among participants is such that no single internal factor can unequivocally be isolated to explain how WOC become outliers and attain senior-executive-level roles. For clarification, this study defined that internal factors are pertinent to the individual and controllable to some degree (e.g., personal attributes and competencies).
Whether external factors reside outside the individual or are innate, they tend to be outside one’s personal control of (e.g., environment, race and gender).

The preponderance of external factors is also supported by the inductive data-analysis approach executed in this study. In other words, instead of applying a preconceived set of codes, the data itself was allowed to determine the codes used in producing this study’s findings. The purpose of using this technique was to permit factors that have been responsible for aiding successful WOC reach executive-level roles to rise to the forefront of the data analysis. It was not the intention of the study to force data into pre-determined categories. Another reason for not forcing data into predetermined categories is that these women are outliers, so they probably do not fall into a preconceived set of categories. Trying to force them into already-determined categories would defeat the purpose of the study. As a result of the inductive nature of the data analysis, the kind of data that emerged as a finding is a finding in itself.

Therefore, the fact that three of the four findings in these study - namely eliminating gender biases in the environment, the need for family support and more institutional support for WOC - are evidently related to external factors supports the stated finding of external factors having a profound impact. Or, in other words, if one internal factor was relevant or strong enough, the inductive data analysis would have recognized it. To corroborate the power of external factors, not one participant claimed to possess any particular singular innate ability that placed them as visible outliers when compared with other WOC.
According to the participants, it was not so much about a particular internal way of being; it was a set of factors. Participants did speak about preparation being essential, but not any distinct manner of preparation or any particular degree or education. And although 67% of the sample had a master-level degree, only two out of the 30 study participants held a doctoral degree.

It is imperative to elucidate that this study is not implying that external factors alone will propel WOC to the top. The intention is to highlight that external factors seem of chief importance. This intention is validated by the literature review that distilled a series of external barriers with which WOC are confronted in their quest for executive-level roles. In accordance with the literature review presented in chapter 2, WOC have a myriad of external factors impeding their progress:

1) Mainstream mindsets about the profile of a leader promulgated by leadership theories such as Situational, Trait, and Behaviorist theories have permeated the workplace and established in most people’s minds that a good leader is generally a male leader (Blake, 1964; Carlyle, 1869; Hersey & Blanchard, 1993).

2) Only one mainstream theory postulates that women are superior leaders compared to men, but due to biases, the female advantage erodes when women act as great leaders showing concern, care, and collaboration. Their behaviors are dismissed and interpreted as women behaving as society expects them to behave (Fletcher, 1999, 2004; Holvino, 2008; Lindsay-Dennis, 2015; Page, 2003).
3) A series of social theories such as in-group favoritism and CRT sustain how WOC will have to overcome tremendous biases to climb the corporate ladder. In-group favoritism explicates how those at the top (in large organizations, typically men) will continue to hire and promote their own (Sumner, 2002). Because WOC are under-represented, the hegemony of other groups might continue. Similarly, CRT portrays racism as ordinary and omnipresent in many organizational structures and people’s unconscious minds (Bell, 1989). As shown, there is an abundance of external obstacles a WOC most overcome to reach professional success. Hence, this finding of the relevance of external factors is well aligned with the literature on the topic. Moreover, this finding indicates agreement with the power of context theory (Gladwell, 2006) and other bodies of work that place the context and external factors as primary contributors in determining success or failure in someone’s life.

It is vital to clarify that it is ambiguous to characterize a factor as binary, being solely internal or purely external. It is more accurate to argue that every factor sits at some level on the intersection between externality and internality. For instance, this study claims that access to sponsorship is an external factor that is a good indicator of career success for WOC. However, participating in a sponsorship program is not an entirely external endeavor, as it requires internal commitment, purpose, intentionality, and other internal characteristics to make the sponsorship engagement successful. Therefore, stating that access to sponsorship is solely an external factor may not be precise. The same is correct about mentorships and the informal sponsorships that are pursued and
initiated by the individual. Nevertheless, despite this reality, this study indicates that the majority of the findings are more significantly associated with external factors. Hence, the power of the context and external factors in the development, acceleration, and progression of the career of WOC in Fortune 1000 companies and large organizations is inescapable, undeniable, and worthy of a separate category among the findings.

The relevance of uncovering such importance in the power of external factors is that, in part, it places the ability to rise to the top outside of the individual. It proposes that the path to the corner suite is not determined by some innate trait, specific path, or choice that someone individually implements. Instead, external factors are primarily responsible for individual achievement. This provides hope that organizations can reproduce—if they want to—the external conditions that may allow WOC to attain senior-executive-level roles, thereby decreasing the race and gender disparity at the top level of most large organization in the U.S.

This study joins other research and theories that indicate the relevance of external factors and context by arguing that external forces may be more a predictor of success or failure than personal attributes, innate tendencies, or individual preparation. The power of context theory, for instance, states that human beings are a lot more sensitive to their environment than they may seem or would like to admit (Gladwell, 2006). It contends that individuals are acutely sensitive to the present environment and situational pressures. According to the theory, certain situations can be so powerful that they can overwhelm and overshadow inherent human predispositions (Gladwell, 2006).
Someone’s behavior then becomes less about an inner state and more the result of outer circumstances.

**Summary of Research Findings**

This research was produced to distinguish, based on the perspective of very accomplished Women of Color, which internal and external factors have enabled them, as WOC, to be considered for senior-executive-level roles in large organizations, primarily Fortune 1000 companies. Many factors were shared by the participants to account for their advancement. An analysis of the aggregate data did not uncover a single distinct element as definite or causal. Although some factors identified appear to be mutually constructed and intimately related, other factors stood in stark opposition to each other. Similar to other qualitative studies, participants narrated multifaceted and particular paths that involved an individual’s initiatives and responses to their circumstances on a host of issues. Analogous to Robinson’s findings, the cause of the progression appears to be the woman herself. Every woman had a unique manner by which she combined, controlled and, in some cases, created the factors that propelled her to the top (Robinson, 2016).

Nevertheless, four core commonalities among the participants emerged from the data that demonstrate how WOC have been able to rise above the social and structural limitations that are reportedly pervasive in large organizations across the U.S. One commonality was a mix of intricate internal factors recognized as a significant contributor to their professional achievement. The internal factors came together in such a complex form - at times well aligned and other times in sharp contradiction - that the main finding
of this study constitutes an internal dissonance among the internal factors responsible for success. Participants demonstrated contrasting way of thought and behavior that enabled them to negotiate external and internal factors in order to deliberately select which issues to fight, avoid, or use to their advantage. The internal dissonance was revealed in the complicated interplay of three main factors: disassociation from other WOC, positive reframing of traditional barriers associated with race and gender, and distinct leadership competencies that revealed how WOC lead differently than non-WOC peers.

The internal dissonance demonstrated by the participants holds two primary opposing ideas. It acknowledges the participant's earnest conviction of being exempt from the adverse effects of race and gender biases (reflected in part in the disassociation and reframing themes) while demonstrating that they were not exempt and had to change their behaviors to overcome race and gender biases that are inescapable for all WOC (confirmed in the leadership competencies). The primary contribution of this study has been to identify the internal dissonance. Additional research is essential for further exploration, hopefully isolating single factors or better explaining the inconsistencies.

Another contribution of this study is a finding that somewhat contradicts the majority of current literature about the significance of sponsorship in the career evolution for all women. Most of the participants did not experience sponsorship in the formal manner that research has mainly explored; i.e., equating it with a sponsor’s power and organizational support. Instead, the participants seemed to have identified the key people in their network with whom they needed to connect and build relationships for
professional advancement. The relationships evolved naturally, were relatively informal, and were often external to the organization, thus more aligned with mentorship than sponsorship.

Participants in the study reported being able to climb the organizational ladder without formal sponsors, but undoubtedly not without support. This finding presupposes that sponsors are not critical, but the opposite may also be true. Conceivably, one of the “culprits” responsible for the low number of WOC in senior-executive roles could be precisely that they are not engaging in more sponsorships. Because of the paucity of research into the ways WOC experience mentoring and sponsorship, both organizations and WOC are possibly ill-prepared to efficaciously utilize mentoring or sponsoring relationships as a prime strategy for enhancing women’s leadership development.

This conclusion, in turn, supports the continuations of sponsorship programs to improve the representation of talented WOC in senior-executive-level roles. However, the nuance and contribution of this study are how WOC view and experience what they consider sponsorship. Participants thrived without formal sponsorship. They created developmental relationships that resembled and substituted for formal sponsorship. Relationships that were intentional, self-directed and strategic aligned more with mentorship than sponsorship.

The remaining three findings mainly corroborate current literature and do not add any significant contributions beyond confirmation of established knowledge and research. One finding revealed that organizations should fix the system rather than women.
This inference advocates the dismantling of gender biases inside the corporate and organizational worlds. Another conclusion uncovered in this study is that WOC with strong family support and a partner who leads on the domestic front have more significant opportunities to fast-track their careers by amplifying focus on their work, thereby enhancing probabilities for ascending to higher ranks.

The fifth and final finding of this study is that, of the four factors identified as potential predictors of achievement for WOC, three are external. This highlights the power of the context and external factors in predicting outcomes in one’s professional life. The relevance of external factors proposes that organizations have more control in resolving the race and gender inequity than they would like to admit on their own. Thus, potential solutions do not have to be individualized; they can be conceived at an organizational level.

The five research findings are interrelated and build on each other to provide an intricate profile of what some brilliant WOC within large U.S. organizations reported to have employed for hastening their careers and becoming outliers. Based on this study, the method for high professional accomplishment for WOC is not prescriptive or objective. This research has not been able to uncover the entire equation, but it has uncovered some indispensable elements of the formula.
CHAPTER 5: Discussion and Implications

This study intended to identify internal and external factors that can predict career success for WOC, based on the self-reported experiences of 30 remarkable WOC executives. The goal was to use the research findings as a foundation for informing and building sustainable solutions to the race and gender disparity at senior-executive levels in most organizations in the U.S. Thus, a solution-based approach necessitates an in-depth analysis of how current theories, practices, policies, and research around accelerating the careers of WOC are affected by the findings. Most importantly, the discovery of the reframing and disassociation mindset and behaviors represents an opportunity for the identification of innovative solutions. In what follows, implications of this study are presented, along with its limitations.

Implications for Theory and Research

The presence of disassociation and positive reframing necessitates vigorous scrutiny. When the data was congruent, it appeared that participants might be experiencing a sui generis way of thinking that could potentially link disassociation and reframing viewpoints and behaviors. I theorize that, when reframing and disassociation were in harmony, participants exhibited a frame of mind in which WOC, by positive reframing, disassociate from their own racial and gender groups to heighten their individual career growth while climbing the organizational ladder. This mental state demands both disassociation and reframing to be effective, and it might be limited only to the workplace.
Part of my theory is that the mindset is a diluted form of internalized racism. Table 9 illustrates how I perceive the difference.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Internalized Racism</th>
<th>Probable Mindset</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>Outward driven, trying to change others, educate</td>
<td>Inward driven, about self-development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact and perspective of Race and gender identities</td>
<td>Intense negative feelings about the impact of race in one’s life. Acknowledges and feels the impact. May experience a sense of inferiority or alter appearance to look “White.”</td>
<td>Positive or neutral feelings about the impact of race and gender. May acknowledge negative impacts but feels exempt from it. May experience a sense of being equal to or better than others. Proud of being a WOC. Celebrate “Blackness,” “Womaness” and other “ness.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kind of disassociation</td>
<td>Applies to disassociation to own’s race within all spheres of life. Product of negative frames</td>
<td>Limited to the workplace and professional spheres. Based on positive reframing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collusion</td>
<td>Seen as deplorable and colludes in one’s own oppression and others in one’s group</td>
<td>Seen as positive to individual success. Colludes to the oppression of others in the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>Action driven, intense feelings. Deep connection with others within one’s own group and oppressors</td>
<td>Inaction driven, benign negligence and denial. Cannot meaningfully relate with one’s own group. Not an agent of change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I postulate that the suspected mindset is to internalized racism as overt bias is to unconscious bias.
The adaptation of a more palatable, softer, and less aggressive concept—such as the use of the word unconscious to refer to bias—has allowed organizations to address and tackle the pervasiveness of biases in the workplace. Therefore, an implication for research is to identify whether the linkage I suspect is real. More in-depth research is essential to legitimize or negate the existence of this mindset. Furthermore, if this unique way of thinking does exist, based on my theory, it will need a new term to be coined. A new term to describe and capture this probable new way of thinking presents additional implications to research and practice. A new term promises, at the very least, an opportunity to invite meaningful conversations around internalized racism in the workplace in a non-threatening manner. It might produce the phenomenal results that the creation of the term unconscious bias has inflicted on discussing plain, everyday racism, sexism and a plethora of other isms.

Some comments expressed by the participants support my theory of this unique way of thinking. Based on the comments, it also appears that the mindset could be operating as a type of blindfold (Blindfold, 2017). Wearing a blindfold does not render the user blind; a properly fitted blindfold blocks vision only temporarily and may even let the wearer see around or through it. It is reasonable to equate the use of positive reframing or resistance to seeing the negative effects of race and gender in WOC as a type of blindfold the participants are wearing. In other words, the participants have their eyes wide open while, as if wearing a fitted blindfold, they seem unable to unequivocally see, experience, or be affected by what 98% of women and WOC in the workplace
encounter. The mindset can be equated to a blindfold because, as blindfolds do, they block external cues to create sensory deprivation. A blindfold may be allowing participants not to be the distracted by sexist and racist environments, thereby enabling a Woman of Color to concentrate on herself, to think inward, and work to better herself, without interruptions. Participant 27 described a manifestation of how she is concentrating on herself and her development in the following excerpt, “Some WOC carry a chip on their shoulder, they become angry and bitter, this slows down progress. They do it to themselves” (Participant 27, personal communication, December 28, 2016). She continued sharing how she does not think or believe she is any different because of her race and gender. Furthermore, she has not allowed anything to get in the way to her success, especially not her race or gender. She worries only about being better and ignores the outside noise.

In law, the blindfold is seen being worn by Lady Justice to represent objectivity and impartiality (Blindfold, 2018). Study participants, while using reframing viewpoints, praised themselves for being impartial about race and gender in their leadership practice, approach, recruiting, and promotion policies. They were firm supporters of meritocracy and believed that being partial toward WOC was a disservice to all of them. Those positions proved how the participants deviated from in-group favoritism, among other theories. The participants agreed with most mainstream leadership theories about the impartially of race and gender while leading. If my theory is correct, a type of blindfold—similar to the one lady justice wears—disguises participants’ internalized
racism as neutrality and impartiality; it rationalizes their behaviors. Most participants unambiguously stated that they were not going to spearhead special training for WOC, nor were they interested in decreasing biases for WOC in the workplace. Some participants recognized that barriers for WOC existed, but the majority considered that their lived experience in the workplace had been one of impartial and unbiased treatment of people, irrespective of their race and gender. Participant 17 shared a comment that illustrates this concept:

I do not look at my leadership experiences at work in regards to color; it is too stereotypical. It depends on the person; you can be White and have no network. It is more socioeconomic, class and environmental upbringing and not color. I do not discount color because your ethnicity can impact roles you can get. But, it has not impacted me. Why should we have affirmative action for WOC? I think it does more harm than good. (personal communication, December 7, 2016)

A blindfold is also used to keep a kidnapping victim, hostage, or prisoner from being able to identify locations or people. The themes of disassociation from other WOC and positive reframing, when working logically, appear to effect in the participants a kind of kidnapping. It appears that participants were abducted by racism and sexism, rendering them unable to locate their own racial and gender roots. Participants seemed unwilling or incapable of finding a way to connect to their cores, thus triggering a tangible disassociation. Their approach to the detachment has elements of Panopticism and internalized racism, but is gentler—conscious, but also not deliberate. Participants perhaps disassociated from other WOC mainly by inaction or by adopting an attitude of benign neglect. They had a sort of blindfold blocking them—not from relating to other WOC, but from relating in a significant and meaningful way.
If they saw bias in the organization, they did not feel responsible for fixing it. However, they did see the prejudices and knew they existed. During the interviews, the leadership competencies presented showed evidence of how participants were loosening their blindfolds to appreciate race and gender as barriers to WOC advancement, but they quickly put the blindfolds back on and continued the interview—rejecting any adverse impact of race and gender. Participant 26 provided an example when asked about her ideas related to designing a workplace where women can excel:

I have not given this much thought; I imagine that women will be comfortable with gender differences. Men, women, married, single - it should be about attempting to make everyone as part of a whole. I certainly have been able to thrive without any special treatment; other women should stop complaining and just get it done! (personal communication, December 28, 2016)

She talked about needing to be part of a whole and started loosening the blindfold, but Participant 26 then abruptly put the blindfold back on and sounded even a bit insensitive about the challenges women face on a daily basis. My theory of the possible existence of a sui generis mindset that enables WOC to be resilient and thrive in the workplace merits further exploration.

Similarly, a more-comprehensive research study will inform the apparent self-collusion of WOC in their own success that is evident in the finding of the internal dissonance, particularly when disassociating from other WOC. One can argue that the internal dissonance, however contradictory, works, because it has enabled WOC to attain senior-executive-level roles. Most critically, more research can help determine how the internal dissonance can be resolved.
As it stands, WOC not only have to confront some external factors such as the lack of formal sponsorship, gender bias, and low family support, they must also contend with themselves. Without the formal recognition of how the dissonance might be helping the individual woman but hurting the collective, the disparity of WOC in the C-suite will continue to be an enigma.

My study’s literature review shows how the lack of comprehensive research in the area of the leadership of WOC, among many consequences, has placed WOC in an impossible position, with a limited understanding of who they are as leaders. As a result, their views of leadership are skewed to favor men, damaging women’s self-image as a leader to the extent that they inadvertently stop helping other WOC attain senior-executive-level roles via the adoption of disassociation behaviors. My study revealed copious traces of internalized racism and Panopticism even among successful WOC, traces that, left unresolved, could continue to deter WOC from reaching the pinnacle of the corporate structure. The implication for research is that the need for further research about this topic is time sensitive, as generations of WOC could be affected if research is delayed.

Further research could identify appropriate ways for organizing the incongruencies to still allow WOC to ascend organizational ladders (even using the current internal factors identified), without harming other WOC in the process. This follow-up study must have a series of considerations. Future research should overcome the limitations of this exploratory study.
For instance, a more diverse sample of WOC is vital. The sample used for this study was fairly homogeneous for many of the demographics. Therefore, the findings inevitably embed presuppositions that might apply only to a very specific type of corporate Woman of Color, such as the ones who were purposefully selected for this study. The similarity for the demographics was evident. For instance, 80% of the participants currently work for a Fortune 1000 company. Most participants share similar academic backgrounds, since many hold an MBA, have extensive experience in Human Resources, and are married with children. Naturally, as a result of this homogeneity, some weaknesses are present in the findings. For example, data could be skewed. A more-extensive, random, and less-homogenous sample will permit a reflective exploration of different perspectives and enhance the breadth and depth of the findings in this research. It might prove very useful to expand the knowledge around the perils of leading while being part of a minority group.

Additionally, this study focused exclusively on the individual self-reported perspectives of Women of Color, without the insight of any other person who works with the women. This narrow point of view is a limitation of this study. A follow-up study that incorporates perspectives of other stakeholders would be extremely valuable; it would also provide validation of the study’s data through triangulation (Miles, et al., 2014). In particular, I believe knowledge about the point of view of other colleagues who interact with the participants on a daily basis is crucial for a better understanding of the phenomenon.
Their accounts and perspectives as to which factors have enabled those WOC to be selected for senior-level roles in Fortune 1000 companies would have been invaluable to this study. Some of the other stakeholders who should be considered are the women’s bosses, because they made the promotion and could explain why the women were chosen for senior-executive roles. In addition, the voices of peers and direct reports of the women are necessary for building an accurate picture of how WOC attain senior-executive-level roles. Ideally, a study that includes observations of the WOC in action in the workplace is optimal. Hence, a clear implication for future research is collecting data from the peers and managers of the WOC and including observations to create a holistic picture of the main factors that genuinely account for the success of Women of Color.

Moreover, the duration of the interviews in this study was, on average, an hour. Future research should consider a lengthier conversation or an ethnographic approach via which the researcher can spend meaningful time with the participants. Most meaningfully, a more comprehensive or ethnographic study could capture the environment in which these WOC operate, to identify how the context shapes them and those people the WOC lead. It could clarify the role of followership in enabling WOC to be robust leaders. Does something have to change in followers to accept and welcome direction and guidance from WOC? Is this something that the followers do on their own, or is it a direct result of behaviors adopted by WOC? The importance of context and followership in determining how individuals lead has been highlighted by many scholars (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Burns, 1978; Feinberg et al., 2005; Gladwell, 2008;
Greenleaf, 1977) and will be instrumental into producing a deeper understanding of the low representation of WOC. Likewise, insight on context and external factors might identify new reasons as to why WOC are not advancing at the same rate as their peers, and could lead to solutions for the disparity.

This work intended to assess which factors or strategies have permitted the outlier WOC to reach the highest levels of leadership. The attention was on the how. Since most of the findings were external factors (three external factors, one internal), additional data is needed to determine whether and in what manner organizations can contribute to implementing those external factors. The factors that appear more relevant are removing gender biases and providing more robust opportunities for sponsorships.

Another of the contributions of this scholarly dissertation is that it bridges some of the known research about leadership theories with the empirical research conducted primarily by intersectional feminist scholars. This bridge is built by this study’s conclusion that race and gender do influence WOC’s behaviors and leadership identity in sometimes understated ways, as in the case of the themes with which the internal-dissonance participants are confronted. As mentioned in chapter 2, theories of leadership have created most, if not all, of the knowledge around what leading should be and how it should be experienced. Although most mainstream leadership theories have remained silent with regard to how race and gender advance or deter someone’s ability to lead (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), empirical research and post-heroic leadership theories have shown that race and gender do negatively affect how a WOC is seen as a leader and how
she leads (Eagly & Carli, 2007). This dissertation bridges theories of leading with empirical research. It does so by concluding that mainstream leadership theories’ silence and neutrality around the impact of race and gender in someone’s ability to lead successfully is harming WOC. It appears that WOC are grounding their leadership experiences without a recognition of the unique struggles their race and gender present to their advancement.

Moreover, additional research should be conducted to continue amending theories of leadership and their implementation to capture, monitor, and enhance leadership opportunities for all. Ideally, such study and additional research should highlight the contributions of post-heroic leadership theories, so their tenets become viral, widely accepted, and respected. These theories are the closest at situating leading in the context of gender, power, and other social conditions. Thus, once they become more popular, it is plausible to believe that the female disadvantage while leading will be better understood; and second, the idea of men being better leaders will slowly fade.

Finally, this study was limited to understanding how women gain access to roles and not in measuring retention, the happiness of the WOC, or the sustainability of senior-executive-level roles. Therefore, a core implication of this study is to conduct additional research identifying how WOC can retain positions of influence and power in large organizations in the U.S. It is entirely possible that the skill set needed to obtain a job might be different from what is necessary for retaining the role. More research should concentrate on how WOC can sustain senior-leadership roles for
more extended periods and be more efficient and productive leaders. In summary, more extensive research is required to incorporate different perspectives of how WOC obtain senior-level roles. Triangulating the data will enable the emergence of innovative approaches to understanding the impact of the external context and the internal dissonance faced by WOC on their climb to senior-executive-level roles. New data will, indeed, build an even more precise representation of the internal and external factors that can propel WOC to the highest levels of leadership in large organizations.

Implications for Practice and Policy

This research suggests that current practices and policies for advancing and retaining WOC may not be suitable. Most leadership interventions and development programs are not advancing WOC at the same rate as men and White women (Robinson, 2016). This study revealed that standard practices, such as the creation of sponsorship opportunities, should be meaningfully modified to provide WOC a fair opportunity to advance their careers genuinely. This study also highlighted the importance of family support and other external factors in the development of a diverse talent pool.

In the competition for talent, organizations literally can no longer afford to pass over talented people in their hiring and retention processes. That is why, whether considering someone for a job or a promotion, this study affirms that it is essential to find ways to recognize and push back against potential biases. Yet, across the globe, women are woefully underrepresented in government, business, and the entrepreneurial world (Gilman, 2016). Moreover, the World Economic Forum’s ninth Global Gender Gap
Report predicts that women will not achieve real gender parity with men until 2095 (Gilman, 2016). Therefore, it seems that significant modifications in practices and innovative policies should continue to be explored to close the race and gender disparity in the corridors of power within all companies, and specifically in Fortune 1000 companies.

A noteworthy implication of this study for practice and policy is to re-envision the content and purpose of leadership-development opportunities for Women of Color. Concerning content, evidence-based leadership programs should be the ideal development instrument, and leadership learning interventions must stop concentrating on fixing the women. Instead, the focus should be on the external environment in which these women lead; the emphasis should be on fixing the system. For instance, the emphasis of leadership programs emphasis could be on educating the men within the organization. The programs must become the vehicle for substantive discussions that motivate both men and women to dismantle their gender and race biases. All who are in power positions need to understand that dismantling biases should be a corporate responsibility and that unconscious biases lead to excluding behaviors (Chu, 2014). Moreover, if left unattended, those exclusions limit creativity, possibilities and, more importantly, profits. Those having the power, men and women alike, should come to appreciate that, to transform consciousness, compelling conversations and interactions are necessary (Easterly & Ricard, 2011). The implicit assumptions and values that their biased actions perpetuate are the chief culprits in continually impeding talented
WOC from growing their careers. The ultimate goal of programs to develop WOC must be to produce a race and gender bias-free organizational context. This environment will allow for a real talent-based competition to the top. The idea should be to build a space where race and gender no longer predict success or failure. Therefore, this study suggests changing the practice and focus of leadership programs.

The problem with discovering a sustainable and pioneering practice such as the one stated above is that, for decades, Fortune 1000 companies have relied mainly on traditional formal leadership programs as the antidote to all their leadership struggles (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016). Confidence in these programs to resolve the racial and gender divide continues to prevail and is sustained by a largely ineffective, multi-million-dollar leadership-development industry. Unfortunately, a broad range of on-and-off-the-shelf solutions has inundated the corporate world for far too long, exacerbating the challenges WOC already face in climbing the corporate ladder (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016). To a large extent, this pervasive leadership-development practice gives the perception that the issue lies within the women themselves, as opposed to considering the social and contextual factors at work in obstructing WOC’s progress. The behaviors and perspective expressed by the participants under the themes of disassociation from WOC and positive reframing are a product of the context; it is an internal perspective, but it is the result of external factors, especially decades of exposure to racism and sexism.

Additionally, the manner in which the leadership programs are customized for the different organizations varies only to a negligible degree, for the similarities exceed the
differences among them. In essence, most companies select a particular framework for
talent and leadership pipeline development, and they then craft a portfolio of activities to
develop leadership in each layer of their organization. To do so, organizations have
typically started with defining the different skills required for each level and then
assessing where their organizations are concerning these skills. The gap between the
current state and the desired state regarding the capabilities required to achieve the
organization's business objectives is what has been the focus of most learning leaders’
organization-wide leadership development agendas (Charan, Drotter & Noel, 2007).
Therefore, most leadership programs are relatively similar in the way they are crafted and
in the content of the classes.

Moreover, in the rare cases that companies do attempt to customize programs to
advance White women or WOC, they typically only insert a few elements on the subject
of cultural competency. These few insertions, although very well intended, tend to be
insufficient, because they barely scratch the surface of the profound challenges that WOC
face while leading within Fortune 1000 companies (Holvino & Scully, 2001). The under-
estimation of the critical impact of race and gender precludes companies from
incorporating the appropriate interventions and content into the traditional leadership
programs, to ensure that everyone - not only males - is being developed meaningfully.

Another barrier to implementing new practices around leadership programs is that
historically, formal leadership-development programs have been used as a way to
develop the required capabilities of a particular cohort of executives.
The goal of these programs, in the minds of learning leaders, has characteristically been twofold. First, they allow the learner to acquire concepts and sharpen skills. Second, they help the learner apply these concepts and skills in a real-world context. As a result, these programs are valued if they deliver behavioral changes (Auricchio, 2014). A new solution-based approach first necessitates a shift in the primary goal of formal leadership programs. These learning interventions must become premier tools for fast-tracking talent while offering substantial career progression for all employees. To ensure equity, it might prove fruitful to identify ways to advance qualified individuals, regardless of race or gender, ensuring equal consideration for WOC as for other genders and races. Once identified, significant variations in the programs should be introduced to ensure that WOC are not left behind.

A key component for accomplishing this, based on this study, would be to acknowledge that the real goal of executive development should be to strengthen a learners’ network from which particular and profound organizational benefits are expected. Then, leadership programs might be more closely related to well-thought-out and targeted sponsorship programs than traditional content-based programs. A rich environment of sponsorship opportunities embedded in leadership programs might prove influential in encouraging WOC and strengthening their abilities to demonstrate their skills. The revised leadership programs will organically lead WOC to career progression and promotion.
Not surprisingly, this research found that traditional and ubiquitous gender-and race-neutral leadership programs to advance WOC are mediocre at best. This conclusion is corroborated by the fact that, within this study, not one of the 30 participants mentioned any type of leadership program as a significant developmental experience that allowed them to sharpen or gain any skills responsible for the acceleration of their careers. The silence around this issue is notable and should not go unnoticed. This is not to conclude that leadership programs had no impact in developing WOC leaders, but rather to submit that their focus and deployment are not moving the needle to advance WOC in a significant manner. This study shows that there are untapped opportunities for exploring more effective leadership programs to accelerate WOC’s careers. Shifts to practice must be incorporated, and the traditional programs ought to be refurbished to discover a sustainable solution to the race and gender disparity in senior-executive-level roles in large organizations and specifically within Fortune 1000 companies.

With that said, the only part of any leadership program that should be focused on the Woman of Color herself should be educating the woman to understand how her own internal dissonance - laced with traces of internalized racism, sexism, and oppression - are creating in her an urge to detach from her roots in order to climb to the top. This intervention necessitates an exercise of fixing the woman and not the system. Although it is a practice this study discourages, it is important to recognize that no solution to a human condition is absolute. Thus, some internal fixing may be necessary; if women are to have the opportunity to confront their inner struggles, they can relieve themselves of
the emotional tax levied on them, which, in turn, will enable them to be more productive. This is apt to produce a higher number of WOC at the top of corporations. In short, use of traditional leadership programs should not be considered as the cure-all for increasing leadership opportunities for WOC.

Concerning policy, it was evident among the few participants who shared ideas to fix the disparity among WOC in the C-suite that establishing race and gender quotas in the strategy to hire and retain talent should be considered. They also expressed that the quotas were necessary only until the education systems are in place for people to change themselves. Although the implementation of quotas is controversial in the U.S., participants expressed that many organizations, including IBM, have made considerable strides in the area of parity by implementing aggressive race and gender quotas to be met by each executive, based on a particular demographic. Aggressive quotas could practically solve the low number of WOC in the C-suite overnight, according to research participants. One might argue that this may not be sustainable. However, Participant 20 shared an interesting analogy comparing Women of Color with the vegetable kale. In her depiction, organizations neglect to admit that there is a surplus of talented WOC and Men of Color. She mentioned that thinking of WOC as kale might help organizations be motivated to foster the in-house talent that they are merely wasting. She stated:

I think about People of Color, and the phrase that comes to mind is: “Looking for kale: for instance, people think of folks like President Obama, and they are amazed as to how special he is and I think, there are a lot of us that are special. We are like kale. Now that everyone found out about all the amino acids and nutrients of the vegetable kale, now everyone wants to eat it and add to his or her diet. However, before, kale was only used in salads as decorations. The kale has not changed, it has
always been around, but people just did not see it or its value. They used to throw it away. The kale with the trash and now kale is essential. Nonsense! In my opinion, finding people of color is like looking for kale. We are everywhere; people chose not to see us! (personal communication, December 23, 2016)

A final question remains, at the conclusion of this research, as to whether companies will start looking for their kale employees or continue to dispose of such powerful and potent nutrients with the non-recyclable garbage.
Appendix A: Interview Protocol

(Appreciative Inquiry Approach)

The purpose of the study is to explore your perspective as to how Women of Color can gain access to the C-suite in Fortune 1000 Companies and Large Organizations in the U.S. The goal is to create a genuine talent-driven organization by identifying which strategies WOC have implemented that have allowed them to gain such success. Once identified, such strategies could be duplicated to allow other women similar career access and success.

Information collected will be kept strictly confidential, except as may be required by law. All responses are held in the strictest confidence and are only being held for the purposes of this dissertation study. At no time will any reference be made to identify you specifically or your company. Any reference to your information through this research study will be by an arbitrary number to protect your confidentiality.

Do you have any questions before we begin? If not, I will turn the tape recorder on now.

Before we start the interview, I would like to ask you the following demographics questions:

On a personal level:
What is your racial identity, marital status? Do you have children? Were your parents married when you were growing up, between birth and 18 years old? If so, for how long?
What would you say was your socioeconomic level during the time from birth to 18 years old? Low income is defined as less than $35,000 a year, Middle income between $35,001-$65,000, Upper middle class between $65,001 and $200,000; Wealthy over $200,001. What is your highest level of education? Which month is your birthday and what is your age (optional)?

With regard to your profession:

What is your title? Which industry is your company in? How many levels are you from the CEO? How long have you been in this role and how long with the company?

Thanks for sharing that. Now, on to the interview.

1) During your entire career, can you recall a time when you felt most alive, most involved, or most excited about being in a leadership role? What made it an exciting experience? What gave it energy? What was it about you—unique qualities you have—that contributed to the exchange? What were the most important factors in your organization that helped to make it a meaningful experience (e.g. leadership qualities, structure, rewards, systems, skills, strategy, relationships)?

2) Consider for a moment the things you value deeply in the area of being a leader.

Without being humble, what do you value the most about yourself? When you are feeling best about your leadership skills, what do you value about the task itself? What is the single most important thing the organization has contributed to
your leadership journey?

3) If you could develop or transform your organization or corporate America in any way you wished, what three things would you do to heighten its vitality and overall health in the area of leadership development for women to ensure women can accelerate their careers?

4) Describe your personal experiences as a woman in corporate America. What have you done well to allow you to be where you are today? If you could attribute your career success to one or two things, what would those things be and why?

5) Among the things you mentioned above that allowed you to be successful, could any of those things be taught or learned? If so, how?

6) Thinking of your own experiences and comparing it to others: When you think about other women (non-WOC) and men; do you think they need the same things to be successful or different things, and why?

7) Let’s think context: Do you believe the context played a part in your success? If so, how?

CONCLUSION

Are there any questions you think I should have asked to identify successful strategies for WOC to access the C-suite and two levels below that I did not ask? If so, what are they?

This concludes our interview. Thank you so much for your time.
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA RESEARCH SUBJECT CONSENT FORM

Research Title: How can Women of Color gain access to the C-suite and two levels below at large organizations and Fortune 1000 companies

Principal Investigator: Dr. Caroline Watts; (215) 746-4584. wattsc@upenn.edu

Researcher: Digna Saad; (617) 904-8880. Dignasaad@yahoo.com

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you agree, the investigator must explain the following things to you:

• The purpose of the study is to explore how WOC have gained access to the highest leadership levels in Fortune 1000 companies and very large organizations in the U.S.

• 30 participants will be part of the study.

• Your participation will require one 60-90-minute interview that will be conducted either in person or by phone, depending on location and participant preference. All interviews will be tape recorded.

• Information collected will be kept strictly confidential, except as may be required by law. All responses are held in the strictest confidence and are only being used for this dissertation study. At no time will any reference be made to identify you specifically or your company. Any reference to your information through this research study will be through a number in order to protect your confidentiality. Note that the study is not anonymous, and hence there is a risk of your identity being exposed.

• Potential study risks are minimal. That is, the risks associated with participation in this study are no greater than those associated with daily life.

• Potential study benefits are expected to enhance the knowledge of how to build a truly talent driven organization in which race and gender are no longer a predictor of success or failure in corporate America.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. If you decide not to participate, you
are free to leave the study at any time. Withdrawal will not have any adverse ramifications. If you have questions about your participation in this research study or about your rights as a research subject, please discuss them with the study investigator. You may also call the Office of Regulatory Affairs at the University of Pennsylvania at (215) 898-2614 to talk about your rights as a research subject.

You will be asked to sign this form (or authorize via e-mail) to show that the research study and the information above have been discussed with you and that you agree to participate in the study.

Upon request, you will receive a copy of this signed form and the summary of the study that will be discussed with you.

_______________________________________
Subject's Name [print] Subject's Signature Date
Appendix C: First Level Coding Set

1. Personal experiences that allowed success
   a. Family life
   b. Background of work experiences
   c. Support system
   d. Academic preparation
   e. Grew up comfortable with man/played sports/male-dominated degree
   f. Confidence/feeling competent
   g. Taking risksgoing above/doing more than counterparts
   h. OTHERS

2. Organizational/contextual/environmental factors that allowed success
   a. Decrease of bias
   b. Used to being the only women in the room
   c. Support system-flexible hours-daycare at work
   d. Exposure to international assignments
   e. Mentorship at work
   f. Sponsorship at work
   g. Challenging assignments that allowed demonstration of skills
   h. Autonomous/able to be free to produce and create
   i. Able to be themselves-authentic-acceptance
   j. OTHERS

3. Leadership abilities/characteristics/attributes/values
   a. Self-motivation
   b. Helping others/be part of their success
   c. Caring for others/enabling them to see their gifts
   d. Self-aware
   e. Lead by example
   f. Innate ability to lead
   g. Collaboration
   h. Had a mentor/sponsor outside of work
   i. WOC strong women figures
   j. Being a good listener
   k. Building relationships
   l. Respecting everyone
   m. Earning respect and trust
   n. Building and sustaining strong networks
   o. OTHERS
4. Specific leadership qualities-competencies
   a. Passion
   b. Commitment
   c. Communication styles
   d. Intelligence
   e. Ambition
   f. Tenacity
   g. Resilience
   h. Being authentic
   i. OTHERS

5. Challenges/barriers experienced
   a. Environment hostile to women
   b. Biases
   c. Race-racism
   d. Gender-sexism
   e. Lack of training/education
   f. Risk adverse/not able to make tough decisions
   g. OTHERS

6. Success approaches for overcoming obstacles in the workplace
   a. Open dialogue
   b. Communication
   c. Addressing issues/biases directly
   d. Acknowledgment of differences and experiences
   e. Self-determination, not seeing themselves as women
   f. Emotional intelligence
   g. Work harder than men
   h. OTHERS

7. Strategies for leadership development of WOC
   a. Institutional policies-having quotas
   b. Strong support system-day care at work-flexible hours
   c. Experiential learning/training
   d. Education
   e. Diversified staff
   f. Training
   g. Mentorship/advocacy
   h. Teaming up with powerful male figures-sponsorship
i. Tailored programs for WOC to increase confidence, negotiate, ask and nurture themselves
j. Having a woman as a CEO-more women presence
k. De-sexualize the exercise of mentorship-sponsorship
l. Educate the men
m. Early programs for young women
n. OTHERS
## Appendix D: Final Data Analysis Coding Set

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CODE NAME</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
<th>ABBREVIATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>External Support:</strong>&lt;br&gt; 1- Mentorship&lt;br&gt; 2- Sponsorship&lt;br&gt; 3- Family support</td>
<td>The external supports and practices that WOC believe have aided them to be professionally successful.</td>
<td>ES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Attributes:</strong>&lt;br&gt; 1- Career focus&lt;br&gt; 2- Race-neutral behaviors and thoughts&lt;br&gt; 3- Gender-neutral behaviors and thoughts&lt;br&gt; 4- Professional preparation</td>
<td>The internal attributes, competencies, supports, and practices that assist and enable WOC to be professionally successful.</td>
<td>PA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overcoming Obstacles at Work:</strong>&lt;br&gt; 1- Embrace race and gender identities&lt;br&gt; 2- Avoidance of race and gender identities&lt;br&gt; 3- Produce Results&lt;br&gt; 4- Deal with race bias&lt;br&gt; 5- Deal with gender bias</td>
<td>Strategies used by WOC to overcome barriers and ascend the professional ladder.</td>
<td>OW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership Values:</strong>&lt;br&gt; 1- Empathy/caring for others&lt;br&gt; 2- Confidence&lt;br&gt; 3- Resiliency&lt;br&gt; 4- Self-efficacy</td>
<td>Leadership competencies, characteristics, mindset, values or behaviors that WOC utilize to excel at work.</td>
<td>LV</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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