Exploring Gender-Leader Implicit Bias in Women Leaders: A System Justification Approach to Women Leaders' Gender and Leader Identities

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE OPUS COLLEGE OF BUSINESS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

By:
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

December 2020

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to two women who embodied leadership in their own unique ways and left an indelible mark on the lives they touched. To my friend, cohort colleague, and dissertation buddy, Kate, whose untimely death left a great hole in her community. Her drive and passion were surpassed only by her compassion. She is deeply missed.

And to the memory of my beloved mother-in-law, Annette, whose love, selflessness, and courage taught me much about being a woman and a leader.
Acknowledgments

It is with deep gratitude that I acknowledge those who supported me through this process. First, to my dissertation advisor, Dr. Robert Barnett. He provided countless hours of consultation, advising, and guidance and did so with unwavering patience and commitment to excellence throughout. Thank you, Dr. Bob.

I am also grateful to my committee members, Jean Davidson and Ana Patricia Núñez Cervera. Their perspectives on qualitative research, leadership, and women’s identity have challenged me to question my assumptions and to think broadly about these topics. They are two women leaders who embody greatness and I am honored to have them as teachers.

It is with immense gratitude that I acknowledge my husband and best friend, Kurt, who adeptly and selflessly played the roles of cheerleader, therapist, devil’s advocate, and patient listener. His unwavering support grounded me, gave me confidence, and motivated me. I wish to extend my heartfelt appreciation to the many friends and family who have supported me in this journey and provided encouragement, sometimes by simply asking, “are you done yet?”

Finally, I am grateful to the ten women leaders who participated in my research, some of whom did so in the middle of a global pandemic. They each represent strength, courage, compassion, and dedication in their roles, and I have learned much from each of them about my own identity. They were gracious and generous in sharing their stories and I am deeply honored to have shared this experience with them.
Abstract

The purpose of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of women leaders’ gender and leader identities when they hold implicit biases that favor men or women in leadership. Data was collected via one-on-one interviews with ten women leaders and interviews were structured in two parts. First, participants provided insights into the thoughts, beliefs, and experiences that influenced their gender and leader identities. Second, participants took the gender-leadership implicit association test and described their thoughts and feelings about the results. Existential hermeneutic phenomenology was chosen as the methodology for the study because it allowed for exploration of the lived experiences of participants while remaining sensitive to the potentially disorienting nature of implicit bias. Interview data was analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Analysis resulted in four superordinate and twelve major themes related to women leaders’ gender and leader identities. The four superordinate themes were: influence of developmental environment; self in relation to gender; self in relation to leadership; and influence of industry and workplace. The twelve major themes were: gender norms in early environment; school experiences; influence of female role models; ingroup attitudes; gender stereotypes; gender and ethnic identity; agentic and communal leadership traits; gender relevance to leadership; affective views of leadership; workplace demographics; relationships with women leaders; and behavioral norms in workplace. Interview data further revealed five themes related to participants’ implicit bias attributions: developmental environment; explicit views on gender and leadership; experiences in the workplace; age; and the test itself.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in.


It's not always enough to lean in because that sh*t doesn't work.

—Michelle Obama, Barclays Center Interview, 2018

The above quotes from two prominent women in early 21st century American society illustrate the challenges that women in the workplace continue to face and the complex ways in which they perceive these challenges. Many decades of work to transform gender stereotypes and overcome workplace discrimination has provided women with unprecedented opportunities, but inequities persist. Women are underrepresented in leadership roles (Becker, 2017; Brown, 2017; Graf et al., 2019; Leith, 2014), often paid less than men (Newcomb, 2018), and bear a disproportionate burden of responsibility for caregiving (Parker, 2015; Sharma et al., 2016). The literature is replete with theories about why these inequities exist (ex. AAUW, 2018; Evers & Sieverding, 2014; Leith, 2014) and much work is being done to close these gaps for women in the workplace. At the same time, there is a growing body of research that seeks to understand the impact that workplace inequities have on women’s well-being (Borrell et al., 2010; Schmader et al., 2008; Schmitt et al., 2002).

One ongoing area of research examines how stereotypical expectations regarding women’s roles in society conflict with stereotypical expectations of leaders. The convergence of these stereotypes often results in a paradoxical ‘double-bind’ for women leaders in which they are expected to display both agentic (i.e. leader-like) and communal
(i.e. woman-like) characteristics. Eagly and Karau’s (2002) role congruity theory described the ways that these stereotypes manifest in prejudice against women leaders:

Because the communal characteristics ascribed to women are different from the predominantly agentic characteristics ascribed to leaders, this combining [of roles] would produce disadvantage for women, especially in leadership roles given more masculine definitions. Yet, to the extent that strong and consistent evidence might cause perceivers to recognize that a woman adheres to the agentic requirements of a leader role, she would likely fall short of the injunctive requirements of the female role. (p. 586)

The identity conflict that the double-bind poses for women leaders has implications for their psychological well-being. While holding multiple identities can contribute to a healthy sense of self (Brook et al., 2008; Kyprianides et al., 2019), conflicting identities can impede well-being (Brook et al., 2008; Rabinovich & Morton, 2016) and negatively impact self-esteem (Rabinovich & Morton, 2016). Understanding the ways that women leaders experience identity conflicts and how these conflicts can be mitigated is an important—and growing—body of research.

**Gender and Leader Identity**

Nascent research has explored the ways in which women leaders’ views about their roles help or hinder the development of positive identities. In one study, Zheng, Kark & Meister (2018) proposed that women can overcome the negative psychological consequences of the agency-communion dilemma by adopting a ‘paradox mindset’ in which the tension between the two is accepted and managed. Allowing for the co-existence of seemingly disparate identities enables women leaders to “generate
constructive responses to the tensions, by allowing women to explore and embrace both
the contradictions and interrelations of agency and communion, and thus to develop
creative strategies to meet their incongruent dual role demands” (Zheng et al., 2018, p.
592). One significant challenge to this approach acknowledged by the authors is that the
onus is placed disproportionately on women to resolve this dilemma for themselves
instead of focusing on the systemic power structures that created it in the first place.

In another study, Karelaia and Guillén (2014) explored women leaders’ views of
their gender and leader identities through the lens of social identity theory, which anchors
identity development to social categorization (Hammack, 2015). They contended that
incongruity between gender and leader roles can be overcome by resolving the identity
conflict at the root of the dilemma, namely the views that women hold about their
membership in both the gender and leader groups to which they belong:

Women with a more positive gender identity reported less identity conflict, which
consequently improved their psychological well-being and made it more likely
that they construe leadership as a pleasant activity (i.e. affective motivation to
lead) as opposed to a duty (i.e. social-normative motivation to lead). (Karelaia &
Guillén, 2014, p. 215)

While an arguably worthwhile endeavor, holding a positive view of one’s gender
may be difficult to achieve if it is perceived by self or others as socially irreconcilable
with one’s leader identity. Again, the crux of the issue lies in the conflict that creates
dissonance for women as they work to integrate their gender and leader identities. For
some women, this dissonance can create psychological distress in the form of a
diminished sense of self and may lead to dissatisfaction with their leadership role. If the
conflict is strong enough, women may decide to rid themselves of one of the conflicting identities in an effort to realize psychological harmony. Because it is easier to abandon the acquired identity of ‘leader’ than the ascribed identity of ‘woman’, women leaders may be prompted to exit their roles as leaders altogether (Karelaia & Guillén, 2014), further perpetuating women’s underrepresentation in leadership.

While much of the prevailing research has explored the explicit stereotypes that women leaders must navigate, there is a complementary and growing body of research that examines how implicit beliefs and attitudes impact women leaders’ outcomes. Latu et al. (2011) measured both the conscious (explicit) and unconscious (implicit) attitudes that men and women hold about women as managers. Both genders held positive explicit impressions of women managers, but an implicit association test (Successful Manager IAT) revealed a significant bias amongst men participants that associated male managers with successful traits and female managers with unsuccessful traits. The opposite was true for women participants, but the effect size was significantly smaller, suggesting that traditional role stereotypes still influence women’s unconscious attitudes about gender roles. Further, the authors found that the distribution of rewards was influenced by these biases, demonstrating the real-world implications of stereotypes.

In another study, Rudman and Kilianski (2000) measured explicit and implicit beliefs regarding gender stereotypes and attitudes about women in authority. Explicit attitudes differed between men and women, with male participants demonstrating a higher association of men with authority than female participants. However, both male and female participants demonstrated more negative implicit attitudes toward women in high-authority positions than for men in high-authority or women in low-authority
positions (Rudman & Kilianski, 2000). These results illustrate the differences that may be found when using explicit versus implicit instruments in revealing negative stereotypes.

Arguably, the path to solving the role incongruities that women leaders face is not in navigating the paradox, but in breaking down the beliefs and attitudes about leadership that perpetuate them. Yet, when these beliefs and attitudes reside at an implicit level of cognition that is inaccessible to the illuminating effect of conscious awareness, it becomes significantly more challenging to address them. Women leaders are caught in yet another bind that pits their aspirations and identities against other people’s invisible biases.

Yet, perhaps the largest identity threat that women leaders face may be their own implicit biases that favor men as leaders and women as subordinates, creating a personally held, irreconcilable paradox between a woman’s gender and leader identities that unconsciously perpetuates inequality. The theoretical basis for this paradox—system justification theory—holds that people of low-status groups (e.g. non-dominant race, gender, sexual orientation) sometimes “internalize a sense of inferiority” and “consciously and unconsciously perpetuate the dominant social arrangements” (Jost et al., 2002, p. 587). Holding themselves less favorably relative to one group (that of leaders) because of their membership in another group (that of women) raises questions about how women leaders negotiate the incompatibility between these two identities and is the focus of the current research.

**Statement of the Problem**

Significant progress has been made to overcome the gender stereotypes that inhibit women’s leadership advancement. However, there is a persistent bias in
organizations and society that associates men with leadership and women with support roles (Koenig et al., 2011). Further, this bias often resides at an implicit level of cognition (AAUW, 2016) and can be present in both men and women (Rudman & Kilianski, 2000). For women leaders, a bias that associates men with leadership and women with support roles can create dissonance between their gender identity and leader identity (Meister et al., 2014). This has consequences for both the individual and the organization. For women leaders, asymmetry between important identities can result in “psychological tension, stress, and declines in individual well-being” (Dunkel et al., 2011, p. 492). For organizations, identity incongruence in women leaders can lead them to feel less identified with the organization, resulting in “higher turnover intentions, more burn-out symptoms, less extra role behavior…and lower work motivation” (Veldman et al., 2017, p. 1), driving some women leaders to opt out of leadership altogether (Karelaia & Guillén, 2014). Therefore, working to realize harmony between women leaders’ gender and leader identities is a worthwhile pursuit for researchers, organizations, and societies.

**Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of the current study is to gain a deeper understanding of women leaders’ gender and leader identity narratives when they hold implicit biases that favor men or women in leadership. Therefore, the research question that will be explored is: How do women leaders experience their gender and leader identities? Implied by this question is a related issue of understanding the impact on women leaders when they hold an implicit bias that associates men with leadership roles, and how they reconcile or find a sense of harmony with holding multiple and potentially conflicting identities.
As stated by Rossman and Rallis (2017), “research should have the goal of contributing to improving the human condition” (p. 3). Toward this end, the current study provides a unique lens through which to better understand the construct of identity and intends to contribute to the existing research on women leaders’ identity so that progress toward equality may continue. Further, by engaging women leaders in a discussion of their gender and leader identities and creating a safe space for them to explore their implicit bias, it provides an opportunity for participants to “collaboratively [produce] knowledge to improve their work and lives” (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 17), perhaps even creating a “pedagogy of discomfort” from which participants might embark on a “critical investigation of the ‘Self’” (Nadan & Stark, 2017, p. 694).

**Definition of Leadership**

While there are many ways to define the concept of leadership (Antonakis & Day, 2018), the current research is interested in the ways that women navigate their roles as formal leaders in organizations. As such, leadership in the context of the current study is defined as assigned, meaning that the individual holds a formal position of influence in relation to others within an organization (Northouse, 2016). Further, the current study will restrict eligibility to leaders who have direct supervisory responsibility for one or more individuals.

**Significance of the Study**

An expanding body of research maintains that how leaders perceive the leadership role as part of their identity and subsequently integrate that identity into one’s overall self-concept is vital to one’s professional development (e.g., Ibarra et al., 2010; Miscenko et al., 2017). For many women leaders, the integration of their leader identity happens at
the intersection of their gender identity, and research continues to examine how women negotiate stereotypes and build positive gender and leader identities (Karelaia & Guillén, 2014; Meister et al., 2017; Veldman et al., 2017). Previous research has demonstrated the importance of understanding the gender-leader identity paradox (e.g. Zheng et al., 2018). However, a cohesive, integrated, and complete view of how these operate in women leaders is lacking. The current study seeks to add to the existing body of research on gender and leader identity by exploring the construct through the lens of implicit intergroup bias.

Limitations of the Current Research

The current study was limited by several factors. First, participants were recruited and selected from a geographically limited area (Midwest, United States). Therefore, it is constrained by the cultural and demographic characteristics of that region. Second, it explored the construct of gender identity through a traditionally cisgender lens and did not include participants for whom their gender identity is different from their birth sex. Finally, the nature of the current study inherently excluded quantitative methodologies and relied on the interviews of a small sample of women. Therefore, the results of the current research were not intended to be generalizable.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following literature review presents the existing research on leadership and gender; introduces social identity as the theoretical basis for researching gender and leader identity; and reviews intergroup bias and system justification theory’s implications for identity.

Leadership and Gender

Leaders and leadership have been the subject of a considerable amount of research, especially during the seven decades following WWII (see Antonakis & Day, 2018). In a recent review, as many as 64 separate established and emerging leadership theories, approaches, and processes were identified and categorized (Dinh et al., 2014). In an effort to organize and understand the considerable work the topic of leadership has spawned, similar models are often categorized together in broad theoretical approaches (Antonakis & Day, 2018; Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Dinh et al., 2014; Northouse, 2016). Among the most frequently grouped approaches are:

1. Trait approach. Theories regarding the characteristics that make for good leaders goes back to the earliest days of leadership research and is the only approach that focuses exclusively on the leader while dismissing other factors such as the situation in which one leads. Traits such as cognitive intelligence, extraversion, conscientiousness, and emotional intelligence have been demonstrated to relate positively with effective leadership (Judge et al., 2002; Levy-Shankman et al., 2015; Zaccaro et al., 2004). While the trait approach can be useful in identifying the qualities that leaders might strive to possess, it
fails to factor the nuances of the situation or the characteristics of those being led.

2. **Skills approach.** Katz (1974) viewed leadership as a skill-based endeavor and proposed three skills that are indicative of effective leaders: technical, human, and conceptual. Technical skills are those that enable a leader to demonstrate a certain level of proficiency in the work, such as the ability to use certain types of tools or effectively conduct data analysis. Human skills relate to a leader’s ability to interact with others to accomplish certain goals. Conceptual skills enable a leader to think abstractly about the business, allowing for the articulation of important ideas, such as vision and strategy. Following on Katz, Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, and Marks (2000) defined a skill-based model that emphasized how a leader’s competencies (i.e. problem-solving skills, social judgment skills, and knowledge) are influenced by their individual attributes and affect leadership outcomes via effective problem solving and performance.

3. **Behavioral approach.** In contrast to approaches that emphasize a leader’s personality or skills, the behavioral approach “focuses exclusively on what leaders do and how they act” (Northouse, 2016, p. 71). One model for conceptualizing leader behaviors was Blake and Mouton’s (1964, 1978, 1985) ‘Leadership Grid’, which plotted leadership behaviors across a 9-point grid that measured degrees of concern for people on one axis and degrees of concern for organizational results on the other. At the extremes, leaders may demonstrate “impoverished management,” in which they “exert minimum
effort to get required work done” or “team management” behaviors, which emphasize “interdependence through a common stake in organization purpose” and “relationships of trust and respect” (Northouse, 2016, p. 76).

4. **Situational approach.** The situational approach focuses on the ways that leaders must adapt to the needs of the situation in which they are leading. Blanchard, Zigarmi, and Zigarmi’s (2013) situational leadership model categorized leadership into four styles based on a directive-supportive continuum of leader behaviors and the development level of the followers, as expressed by followers’ competence to perform the work and the commitment to get it done. The *directing* style emphasizes goal achievement through direction and is most effective with followers who possess low competence, but high commitment. A *coaching* style displays high directive and high supportive behaviors from the leader within a context of minimal competence and low commitment from followers. The *supporting* style operates with high supportive and low directive leader behavior, expressed as “listening, praising, asking for input, and giving feedback” (Northouse, 2016, p. 95) in an effort to motivate followers with moderate competency and variable levels of commitment. Finally, the *delegating* approach utilizes both low directive and low supportive leadership behavior, as followers operate with high competency and commitment, and are encouraged to act with autonomy.

Other well-regarded situational or contingency models include the Path-Goal Theory (House, 1971) and Adaptive Leadership (Heifetz, 1994).
5. **New-genre approaches.** New-genre leadership models emphasize charisma and charismatic leader behavior; vision and inspiration, and ideological and moral values (Avolio et al., 2009). These approaches attempt to explain how leaders influence followers’ behavior with whom they may have only an indirect relationship. Common new-genre leadership theories include (a) Transformational Leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), (b) Servant Leadership (Liden et al., 2014), and (c) Authentic Leadership (Luthans & Avolio, 2003), among others.

While there are many ways to examine and conceptualize leadership effectiveness, leadership is ultimately “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2016, p. 6). Arguably, it is the outcome of a leader’s efforts directed at people and organizational goals that matters most, so it is important to understand how current and prospective leaders might develop personal awareness and hone their skills, abilities, and behaviors to best lead in a given situation.

**Attitudes Toward Women Leaders**

For women, the complex nature of leadership effectiveness may be further complicated by their gender. Social norms and attitudes have evolved significantly from the days when women were expected to prioritize marriage and family over work, and for most women, “their identities…were not found in their occupations” (Goldin, 2006, p. 2). Today in America, women make up 46.9% of the workforce (Catalyst, 2019), although they disproportionately represent part-time workers (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). Further, women acquire over half of all higher education degrees (Catalyst, 2019).
However, there are still significant gender disparities at every level of leadership. A recent report by Leanin.org and McKinsey & Company (2019) discussed evidence of a ‘broken rung’ on the career ladder in which women are less likely than men to be promoted into low-level manager positions. As discussed by the authors, failing to realize promotional opportunities early in a woman’s career has implications for her future success and has long-term effects on gender diversity within organizations:

For every 100 men promoted and hired to manager, only 72 women are promoted and hired. This broken rung results in more women getting stuck at the entry level and fewer women becoming managers. Not surprisingly, men end up holding 62 percent of manager-level positions, while women hold just 38 percent.

This early inequality has a long-term impact on the talent pipeline. Since men significantly outnumber women at the manager level, there are significantly fewer women to hire or promote to senior managers. The number of women decreases at every subsequent level. So even as hiring and promotion rates improve for women at senior levels, women as a whole can never catch up. There are simply too few women to advance. (Leanin.org & McKinsey & Co., 2019, p. 8)

There are multiple factors to consider when attempting to understand gender inequality in leadership. Women disproportionately leave careers or work reduced hours in order to care for children (Lyonette, 2015) and often lack career mentors and role-models who can guide them in their career aspirations (Edmunds et al., 2016). However, these problems may be symptomatic of the larger challenges that women face in overcoming complex cultural attitudes and gender stereotypes.
In a Pew Research (2018) study that examined attitudes toward women in top political and executive leadership positions, most people agreed that women and men have equally effective leadership styles. However, 57% of respondents believed styles differ based on gender. Among respondents who believed men and women have different leadership styles, women were viewed as having better nurturing and valuing behaviors, such as creating a safe workplace, valuing diverse backgrounds, considering societal impacts of business, mentoring young employees, and advocating for fair pay and benefits. Yet, respondents also believed that men were more capable of negotiating profitable business deals. The majority of those polled believed that there are too few women in top leadership positions within the United States, but opinions varied significantly based on gender and political affiliation, with far more women and democrats believing there should be more women in top positions. Americans tend to agree unanimously that it is harder for women to obtain top leadership roles than men, with the majority pointing to issues of perceived credibility as the major barrier.

Respondents to the Pew Research (2018) study also responded to questions regarding personality traits and their effectiveness based on gender. Ambition and assertiveness were believed to help men to a much larger extent than women, while compassion and attractiveness were viewed to favor women. Displaying emotion was viewed as more harmful than helpful for either gender.

Academic research largely concurs with people’s attitudes about women leaders. Van Engen and Willemsen’s (2004) meta-analysis of sex and leadership styles revealed no significant gender differences when analyzing interpersonal and task-oriented styles. However, a small but significant difference was found for democratic and transformative
approaches, with women leaders favoring these “more gender role-congruent” styles (Van Engen & Willemsen, 2004, p. 13). Further, Eagly et al.’s (2003) meta-analysis comparing transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire styles between men and women found small but significant evidence that women tend to display a more transformational leadership style, which emphasizes “gaining the trust and confidence of followers” and “encouraging [followers] to develop their full potential” (p. 571). They also found that women who displayed more transactional styles tended to utilize contingent rewards as a motivator for desired behaviors (e.g. positive reinforcement) as compared with managing by exception to discourage unwanted behaviors (e.g. punishment).

Despite evidence that women are equally able to lead, and in some situations perhaps even better suited for leadership roles, they continue to be disadvantaged in both position and pay. In recent years there has been a proliferation of research to understand why these disadvantages persist. One large body of research, first presented by Eagly and Karau (2002), examined how expectations regarding women’s social roles create prejudice against women leaders and negatively impacts their experiences in the workplace:

The potential for prejudice against female leaders that is inherent in the female gender role follows from its dissimilarity to the expectations that people typically have about leaders. Prejudice can arise when perceivers judge women as actual or potential occupants of leader roles because of inconsistency between the predominantly communal qualities that perceivers associate with women and the predominantly agentic qualities they believe are required to succeed as a leader.
People thus tend to have dissimilar beliefs about leaders and women and similar beliefs about leaders and men. (p. 575)

Thus, role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) emphasizes how social norms and expectations about women influence how women are perceived as leaders in organizations. As previously discussed, the explicit attitudes people hold regarding women’s leadership ability relative to men are generally positive (although social desirability bias should not be discounted), but within those attitudes lies a persistent belief that women lead—or are expected to lead—differently than men. In accordance with role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), women leaders are expected to be more communal versus agentic and to display behaviors that are “affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturant, and gentle” (p. 574). If society naturally associated these traits with leaders, then women would not experience incongruity, and we may instead be discussing ways that male leaders can overcome stereotypes. However, there is evidence that people still associate stereotypically male traits and behaviors (i.e. agentic) with leadership.

Koenig et al.’s (2011) meta-analysis examined leader stereotypes across three gender-leader paradigms: a) think manager–think male (Schein, 1973); b) agency–communion (Power & Butterfield, 1979); and c) masculinity–femininity (Shinar, 1975). Their research, which included published and unpublished articles ranging from the mid-1970’s to 2007, examined the extent to which masculine stereotypes held up over time and how moderating factors, such as organizational sector, affected these stereotypes. They found that leader stereotypes have become less male-centric over time as
conceptions about leaders have shifted to accommodate stereotypically female qualities. However, the overall tendency was to associate leaders with masculine stereotypes:

All three paradigms showed that stereotypes of leaders are decidedly masculine. Specifically, people viewed leaders as quite similar to men but not very similar to women, as more agentic than communal, and as more masculine than feminine. (Koenig et al., 2011, p. 634)

In a study by Vial and Napier (2018), the authors examined people’s preferences for communality versus agency in leadership. The authors found that when people were tasked with imagining the traits that they would need to possess in either leader or assistant roles, they rated agentic traits as being significantly more important than communal traits:

We found that men and women were largely in agreement; both indicated that it would be more important for them to possess agentic rather than communal traits in order to be a good leader. These results underscore women’s internalization of stereotypically masculine leader role expectations, which could discourage women from pursuing leadership roles…Furthermore, if women tend to internalize a stereotypically masculine view of leadership, it follows that women who have an interest in and attain leadership roles might have a strong tendency to behave in line with those role expectations. (Vial & Napier, 2018, p. 10)

**Women Leaders’ Gender Bias**

Despite evidence that gender plays a minimal role in leadership outcomes (Van Engen & Willemsen, 2004), and that women may even have a slight advantage in some leadership styles (e.g. transformative) (Eagly et al., 2003), women often hold biases that
favor stereotypically male traits in leaders (Vial & Napier, 2018). The mechanism by which women hold these beliefs may be an internalization of the long-standing social norms and stereotypes that have consistently favored men in leadership roles. Lyness and Grotto (2018) discussed how the internalization of these beliefs can manifest in biases that work against women’s best interests:

[I]f women internalize incongruence perceptions linking leadership with men and masculine characteristics, these perceptions could undermine women’s perceptions of themselves as leaders. (p. 239)

The authors further discussed the risk of women leaders internalizing systemic biases as personal shortcomings:

[W]omen’s development as leaders may be undermined by their organizational experiences, especially in organizations with male-dominated leadership, and women may internalize various forms of gender bias from their experiences and exposure to institutionalized gender bias within their organization. As some or all of these effects may occur on an unconscious level, the subtle gender bias is particularly difficult to counteract. In fact, if as a result of these experiences, women in male-dominated organizations exhibit less interest than their male counterparts in becoming leaders, other people’s perceptions of these gender differences in leadership aspirations could operate as an additional bottom-up process to strengthen the organizational assumptions that men are better suited for leadership roles and more motivated to become leaders. (Lyness & Grotto, 2018, p. 241)
In an ongoing effort to understand and break down the barriers that inhibit women leaders’ career outcomes, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) (2016) examined people’s implicit attitudes regarding women and men in leadership roles. Using an implicit association test (IAT) developed in partnership with Harvard University’s Project Implicit (Project Implicit, n.d.), AAUW’s gender and leadership IAT exposes the unconscious biases that people hold regarding women in leadership. In an early examination of responses \( n = 4,000 \), AAUW grouped participants by gender (83% women; 17% men) and by feminist identification (86% feminist; 14% not feminist) and found that all groups, on average, associated men with leadership and women with support roles. While it may be surprising that women who identified as feminists held biases that favored men in leadership, the results speak to the power of unconsciously held stereotypes and attitudes.

For women leaders, a bias that favors male leaders can have implications for her well-being by creating inconsistencies between her identity as a woman and her identity as a leader. The degree of salience of this bias may influence the extent to which women leaders experience identity inconsistencies (Eaton et al., 2017); however, exploring one’s implicit attitudes and beliefs can help individuals more effectively negotiate their identities and navigate unresolvable asymmetries.

**Social Identity**

Identity is a complex and multi-faceted “concept of study in philosophy, history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, gender and sexuality studies, politics, economics, literature” (Hammack, 2015, p. 12), so to choose a theoretical basis on which to research identity requires great deliberation. The current study explored
women’s gender and leader identities, each of which entail membership in social
categories. Further, the study intended to better understand how women experience these
identities—in other words, the thoughts, meanings, attitudes, and experiences that shape
how the women see themselves as women and as leaders. The theoretical foundation for
this exploration must, therefore, address the social, cognitive, and affective influences on
identity.

Social identity theory was chosen as the theoretical basis for the current study
because it addresses how membership in groups informs an individual’s self-concept and
what “value or emotional significance [is] attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). Individual identity is significantly influenced by the social groups to which one
belongs. These groups can be ascribed at birth, such as one’s sex or race, or they can be
acquired at various points in one’s life, as is the case with leadership. The psychological
processes that inform one’s social identity are social categorization and social
comparison (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019), and these have important implications for
one’s self-esteem.

**Social Categorization**

Social categories are made up of individuals who possess some real or perceived
common feature, such as gender, and view themselves as belonging to a group (one’s
ingroup) that is different from others (outgroups). Categorization begins in infancy and
children are able to make intergroup evaluations by the time they begin school (Liberman
et al., 2017). Further, children develop expectations early in life that their social groups
share and adhere to anticipated norms (Kalish & Kalish, 2012). A study by Schmidt,
Rakoczy, and Tomasello (2012) examined pre-school children’s enforcement of moral
and conventional (i.e. rule-following) norms and determined that children as young as three-years-old expected both ingroup and outgroup members to adhere to moral norms, but they held their ingroup to a higher standard of behavior when enforcing conventional norms. According to Schmidt and Tomasello (2012), moral norms motivate people to help others while avoiding harm and are an inherent function of human nature. Conventional norms, however, are more “arbitrary” in that they involve “no direct harm or victimization” (p. 232) and serve merely to reinforce historically established rules of behavior. There are two primary factors behind the human tendency to adhere to conventional norms: “not wanting to be disapproved of, or punished, by others” and “our desire to belong (to the group), and to conform and do things the ‘right’ way” (Schmidt et al., 2012, p. 232).

Norms play an important part in establishing and reinforcing social identification. Individuals who uphold the social norms of their ingroups are rewarded with feelings of belongingness while those who defy group norms may be subjected to feelings of shame and guilt (Bierbrauer, 1992), or exclusion from the group and social isolation (Heinze & Horn, 2014). Asch’s (1956) famous study on conformity, in which individuals betrayed their own (correct) observations for those of a group of (deliberately incorrect) confederates demonstrated the power of normative influence—the desire to fit in—on individual behavior.

**Social Comparison**

Individuals make comparisons between their group and others, and these comparisons typically favor the group to which the individual belongs (ingroup favoritism), even if that group represents minimal characteristics of belonging for the
individual. In one study, Tajfel (1970) assigned students to one of two groups based on “flimsy and unimportant criteria” (p. 101) and then asked them to make monetary decisions for the groups. He found that participants were motivated to discriminate in favor of their ingroup, even when other available options would have resulted in equitable outcomes for both groups.

How one experiences their group’s relative position in society has both affective and behavioral consequences. Members of socially disadvantaged groups often have weaker levels of identification with their group than members of advantaged groups. This weaker level of identification can help mitigate “negative emotions that may ensue from membership in a lower status group” (Ellemers & Barreto, 2008, p. 327).

Social Identity and Self-Esteem

Social categorization and intergroup comparisons inform one’s social identification. Social identification, which is “the process by which information about social groups is related to the self” (Ellemers et al., 2004, p. 462), provides the individual with a reference point for ingroup belonging and has important implications for one’s self-concept. Positive associations to one’s ingroup reinforce individual self-esteem, certainty regarding one’s place in society, and the meaning that one attaches to that place (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019).

The human need to feel valuable and valued by others is expressed through one’s self-esteem. As a “global (self-) evaluation of one’s self and self-worth” (Heppner & Kernis, 2011, p. 330), self-esteem affects mental health and well-being (Macdonald et al., 2003), relationships with others (Brown & Brown, 2015), and professional outcomes (Bradley-Geist et al., 2015). Self-esteem is derived, in part, by one’s association with
their ingroup (Abrams & Hogg, 1988), and the social standing of the group plays an important role in how one perceives themselves in relation to others (Cartwright, 1950). Comparing oneself to a higher status group (upward comparison) can provide motivation for improvement (Ellemers & Barreto, 2008), but also tends to result in lower self-esteem whereas comparison to a lower status group (downward comparison) results in enhanced self-esteem (Wills, 1981). For high status groups, their relative standing provides positive psychological benefits in the form of higher levels of satisfaction with the group and one’s membership in it (Ellemers & Barreto, 2008). However, when an individual is associated with a group that holds a lower social standing, the relative group status can threaten one’s self-esteem and induce lower levels of satisfaction with group membership.

Scheepers and Ellemers (2019) argued that members of low-status groups can engage strategies that will allow them to shift to a more positive social identity. First, they may engage in collective action, in which they work with other group members to improve the relative status of the group. This assumes that status differences are viewed by group members as either not legitimate or able to be improved. Another option is for a group member to exercise individual mobility and seek membership in another group that can offer a more positive social identity. For this to happen, however, groups must be permeable, allowing for people to move in and out of them with relative ease. Arguably, this is rarely the case for gender. Finally, negative social identity can be overcome when a group is socially creative and redefines the criteria by which they are being evaluated. For example, women leaders might emphasize the benefits of communal traits in leadership and de-emphasize the value of agentic traits.
Ellemers and Barreto (2008) argued that individuals can also mitigate the negative consequences of membership in a low status group by minimizing the extent to which they identify with the group. By distancing themselves from a disadvantaged group, individuals realize “decreased ingroup identification” (p. 330).

**Stereotypes and Discrimination**

While social identification aids in building positive self-esteem, the mechanism that contributes to self-esteem can also create the basis for discrimination against others (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Perceptions of outgroups are often reinforced by views that outgroup members are more similar than they may be in reality (Judd & Park, 1988). These views make groups susceptible to stereotypes, which are “an over-simplified mental image of (usually) some category of person, institution or event which is shared, in essential features, by large numbers of people” (Stallybrass, 1977, p. 601). Stereotypes allow us to make sense of a complex world and to process information quickly, but they fail to recognize the myriad unique traits of individuals. When stereotypes represent less desirable characteristics for one group versus another, they devalue the individual and create pernicious obstacles for social advancement.

**Gender Identity**

Gender identity is “the extent to which a person experiences oneself to be like others of one gender” (Stevensma et al., 2013, p. 289). Gender identity becomes generally constant between the ages of 5 and 7 (Bussey, 2011) and persists into adulthood (Zemore et al., 2012). As a component of identity, gender contributes to one’s evolving narrative of the self and begins to form early in life based on exposure to stereotyped roles, social norms, and internalized cultural values (Cadsby, Servátka, & Song, 2013; McAdams,
2013). Cultural constructions of ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ manifest in various ways, including the clothes we put on children and our expectations of how they play (Kane, 2012). Children segregate into same-sex groups from an early age and use different strategies to assert themselves within these groups. Young girls, for example, tend to influence others through language while boys use more physical means, such as “playfully shoving and pushing” (Geary, 2010, p. 322). Segregation into same-sex groups results, in part, from children’s unwillingness to conform to the social styles of the other sex (Maccoby, 1998). The social context, therefore, plays an important role in informing identity, and, concurrent with social identity theory, gender is one of many social categories that inform the larger concept of the self (Bussey, 2011).

The developmental environment influences gender identity by providing information on the attitudes and behaviors associated with gender. Parents and siblings are often the earliest models for behavior and therefore provide critical information regarding gender identity. Mothers who reinforce traditional gender roles often have children who can label gender categories at an earlier age than those whose families demonstrate more flexible parental responsibilities (Halim & Ruble, 2010). This has important implications for identity, as gender constancy (i.e. how rigid or fluid gender is viewed as being) has been associated with children’s attention to gender norms (Ruble et al., 2007). Siblings also provide reference points for gender identity, particularly for children with older siblings. In a study by McHale (2001), children’s gender role orientation—that is, their “attitudes, personality qualities, and leisure activities” (p. 122)—were “powerful predictors of second-borns’ gender role attitudes, sex-typed personality qualities, and masculine leisure activities” (p. 123).
Early research on gender identity demonstrated that gender stereotypes begin to embed in children’s minds as early as age two (Albert & Porter, 1983). For girls and young women, internalized gender stereotypes that are learned in the early environment can create trajectories for self-esteem and future success. Bian et al. (2017) posited that girls as young as six accept negative stereotypes about their gender ingroup’s intellectual ability and subsequently avoid activities for which they do not feel intellectually capable. As the authors discussed, these beliefs have significant consequences for their future outcomes:

The stereotypes associating men but not women with brilliance and genius may take a toll on women’s careers; fields whose members place a great deal of value on sheer brilliance (e.g., mathematics, physics, philosophy) have lower proportions of women earning bachelor’s and doctoral degrees…Cultural messages about the presumed cognitive abilities of males and females are likely to be influential throughout development. If children absorb and act on these ideas, then many capable girls are likely to have already veered away from certain fields by the time they reach college. (Bian et al., 2017, p. 389)

Conversely, there is evidence that girls who are exposed to counter-stereotypical role models are more likely to have career aspirations that are non-gender congruent (Olsson & Martiny, 2018).

Emergence into adolescence and adulthood brings changes to the nature of relationships with both sexes, but “certain interpersonal styles developed and consolidated within peer groups carry over into cross-sex adult relationships” (Maccoby, 1995, p. 357). To what degree psychosocial gender differences are innate versus socially
constructed has been the subject of considerable debate (e.g., Beblo & Görges, 2018; Eagly & Wood, 2013; Hoffman et al., 2011), but the resulting influence on identity has been well established (Bussey, 2011). By the time women enter the workforce, gender has become an important part of their narrative, and subsequently, their identity.

How women view their gender identity has significant implications for their careers and their workplaces. Views that uphold socially prescribed behaviors regarding women’s communality may result in women having a difficult time negotiating on their own behalf (Bear & Babcock, 2016), but may also lend itself to positive leadership behaviors that give voice to and empower followers, as is evidenced in participative leadership styles (Northouse, 2016). Conversely, if women choose behaviors that challenge gender stereotypes, they may be able to better advocate for their careers, but unwittingly be viewed by others as autocratic and selfish. The paradoxical confluence of these two styles is the double-bind that women leaders often face (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

**Leader and Organizational Identity**

Ashforth and Schinoff (2016), reviewed how individuals construct identity in organizations. Using an interpretivist orientation, the authors posited that situated identity (e.g. who one perceives one is in a situational context) is constructed from the interaction of the individual, who is motivated toward or away from identity states, and input from the organization regarding what is or is not desirable in an identity. Identity construction is motivated by certain need states, such as belonging, a sense of understanding one-self (self-knowledge) and being perceived favorably by others (self-presentation). Organizations are influential environments for identity motives as individuals are “accountable to others and subject to rewards/punishments and other social controls”
Further, individuals are strongly motivated toward self-verification, the “desire to confirm one’s sense of self” (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016, p. 117), which has a powerful influence on one’s identity construction. North and Swann (2009) posited that individuals seek verification of their self-views—even when those views are negative—in an effort to realize psychological coherence and reduce anxiety related to non-verifying feedback. While outside the scope of the current study, self-verification presents interesting implications for women leaders’ identity construction.

Organizations provide feedback that further influences one’s identity within situational contexts. Ashforth and Schinoff (2016) described two mechanisms by which this occurs: sensebreaking and sensegiving. Sensebreaking is the intentional divestiture of an individual’s personal characteristics that conflict with the organization’s values and expectations for behavior. Conversely, sensegiving provides individuals with information about the organization’s values and expectations so that they might adopt “prototypical (and perhaps aspirational) role attributes” (p. 118). Along with individual identity motives, organizational feedback in the form of sensebreaking and sensegiving allows individuals to make sense of the situation and “to endure and thrive under conditions of ambiguity, equivocality, and dynamism” (p. 119).

Swann, Johnson, and Bosson (2009) discussed the role that identity congruence has in negotiating identities in the workplace. Following on the theory of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), the authors proposed that individuals in workplaces derive their identities, in part, from the knowledge they gain through interaction with others and the environment. The negotiation of one’s identity occurs as a “[reconciliation] of two competing processes in dyadic interactions” (Swann et al., 2009, p. 83). This dyad is
constructed of the “perceiver,” who assumes behavioral expectancies, and consequently seeks confirmation of these expectancies from the “target,” who, in turn, seeks verification of his or her self-view from the perceiver. The expectancies from the perceiver may conflict with the self-view of the target, resulting in incongruence for either party. This incongruence is resolved when the target realigns and internalizes his or her self-view to match the perceiver’s expectancy, when the perceiver’s behavior limits the target in ways that promote “behavioral confirmation of the expectancy” (Swann et al., 2009, p. 83), or when the target is certain enough of his or her self-view that the perceiver realigns expectancies. Regardless of the mechanism by which incongruence is resolved, resolution is imperative to the well-being of the individual and the organization.

Resolving incongruence can have implications for one’s identity, particularly if resolution requires a renegotiation of one’s self-view in order to align with the perceptions of others. For women leaders who face the double bind expectation of being both communal and agentic, resolution may come by renegotiating one of their identities to better enable psychological congruence, otherwise they must either endure the incongruence or leave the situation that causes it (Meister et al., 2017).

Identity incongruity for women leaders results from a dissonance between their identities as women and their identities as leaders. According to Gwaronski and Brannon (2019), dissonance follows from the activation of a belief pertaining to some inconsistency that is overtly present in one’s thinking. If the dissonance is not salient, or if the inconsistency is rejected as being erroneous, then it fails to create the negative effect otherwise associated with cognitive inconsistencies. However, when stereotypes
and biases are weaved deeply into the cultural fabric, their inherently implicit nature can inhibit the awareness that is necessary to challenge their legitimacy.

**Intergroup Bias and System Justification**

Intergroup bias describes the tendency for people to view their own social groups favorably (ingroup bias) while viewing other social groups less favorably (outgroup derogation) (Hewstone et al., 2002). The implications of intergroup bias on the individual and society are far-reaching. Ingroup norms influence the individual beliefs, values, and behaviors of the group’s members (Cialdini et al., 1990) and deviating from these norms can have negative consequences for individual well-being (Sassenberg et al., 2011). Ingroup membership entails “the extension of trust, positive regard, cooperation, and empathy” to fellow ingroup members (Hewstone et al., 2002, p. 578), and one’s personal identity becomes attached to their ingroup through the “assimilation of the self to the ingroup category prototype” (Hewstone et al., 2002, p. 578). Ingroup favoritism is viewed as so pervasive that it is practically an axiom of social psychology (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004).

Yet, research has revealed a phenomenon by which low-status group members show an absence of favoritism for their ingroups, and, in some cases, favoritism for high-status outgroups. The theoretical consequence is a reinforcement of the existing system by those who are least positioned to benefit from it. Accordingly, system justification theory is “the process by which existing social arrangements are legitimized, even at the expense of personal and group interest” (Jost et al., 2004, p. 4). This phenomenon is particularly evident when observed using implicit measures (Axt et al., 2018; Dasgupta, 2004; Jost, 2018).
In one study, Newheiser et al. (2014) measured the implicit attitudes of low-status children in South Africa, a country with a high race-based status differential. They found that Black children—members of a low-status group in the South African context—displayed a pro-White implicit bias that favored the White outgroup. These results were consistent with another study by Newheiser and Olson (2012) that examined the implicit attitudes of Black American children in relation to their ingroups. In that study, Black children, in contrast with White children, showed no implicit bias for their ingroups, and Black children with a high-status preference showed implicit outgroup favoritism.

Biases that favor outgroups can have consequences for people’s economic outcomes and psychological well-being. In a study by Ashburn-Nardo and Johnson (2008), participants of low-status groups expressed doubts about an ingroup partner’s competence when tasks stereotypically favored an outgroup, and the effect was stronger when participants held implicit biases that favored the outgroup. The authors discuss the implications of these results for social justice issues:

When one considers that the contexts in which high-status groups are stereotypically advantaged generally have a bigger impact on the status quo (i.e., they afford greater social mobility to those who succeed in them) than do contexts in which low-status groups are stereotypically advantaged, our results have disquieting social justice implications. They suggest that, to the extent that stigmatized group members have implicit biases that favor higher status outgroups, they make choices that may unwittingly promote their own disadvantage. For example, they may endorse members of high-status outgroups
for positions of power and relegate ingroup members to less valuable positions.

(Ashburn-Nardo & Johnson, 2008, p. 504)

While it is arguably counterproductive for low-status group members to endorse self-defeating stereotypes that uphold the existing system, there are motivating reasons to do so. Kay and Friesen (2011) identified four contexts in which this happens: when the system is threatened; when people feel a heightened dependence on the system; when the system appears to be inescapable; and when people feel a low level of personal control. As an example, in a recent study by Bonnot and Krauth-Gruber (2018), when women were primed to feel heightened dependence on the existing system (in this case, the French government), they were more likely to recall memories associated with stereotypes typical for their gender (i.e. high language proficiency) versus those that were not stereotypical for their gender (i.e. high math proficiency). The implications for identity are significant, as memories play an important role in the autobiographical reasoning process that connects an individual’s past to the self (Habermas & Köber, 2015).

Jost, Sapolsky, and Nam (2018) speculated that system justification may be explained from an evolutionary perspective at both the individual and group level. For groups, the motivation to uphold the existing social order by those who are disadvantaged by it comes from a tendency to minimize social disorder and system conflict and to maximize overall system stability. The authors argued that, while this approach may have disadvantaged certain individuals, the group-level effect would have offset negative individual effects. They further proposed that the individual motivation to uphold hegemonic systems is biologically adaptive. Conforming to the existing social order
would provide the individual with “ways of coping with—and perhaps preventing—feelings of uncertainty, threat, and social isolation” (Jost et al., 2018, p. 5).

As discussed by Bonnot and Karuth-Gruber (2018), perceived inescapability from the existing system provides a compelling explanation for system justification. When people feel that inequities are an inherent part of a system, there is a tendency to accept them as unchangeable and to then rationalize their existence. This rationalization has a ‘palliative’ effect for low-status group members, resulting in a motivation to uphold the status quo. Toward that end, “…stereotypes are especially helpful to preserve the status quo and to perceive the system as just and fair…” (Bonnot & Krauth-Gruber, 2018, p. 126). Consequently, people may internalize stereotypes that further the interests of the system, even at the expense of their own interests.

**System Justification Implications for Identity**

Ingroup membership is a significant component of one’s identity and people have a psychological motivation to favor their ingroups (Hewstone et al., 2002). Outgroup favoritism, therefore, raises questions about the implications for one’s identity. Further, it challenges the prevailing positions about identity and intergroup bias set forth by social identity theorists:

Theories of social identity and social dominance fail to account for the degree to which psychological responses to the social and political status quo are characterized by active bolstering and system justification, especially among members of disadvantaged groups. That is, hierarchy is maintained not only through mechanisms of ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation exercised by members of dominant groups, but also by the complicity of members of
subordinated groups, many of whom perpetuate inequality through mechanisms such as outgroup favoritism. (Jost et al., 2004, p. 7)

Jost, et al. (2004) posited that non-dominant group members strive for social change only when their motivation is bolstered by a desire to justify and legitimize their self-image or their ingroup. However, the mechanisms by which system justification operates often lie outside conscious awareness via implicit biases, while the explicit motivation to protect one’s self-image and defend one’s ingroup necessarily comes from the rejection of outgroup favoritism. Jost et al. (2004) stated:

Few observers of contemporary American society would draw the conclusion that African Americans (and other racial and ethnic minorities) generally accept that unequal race relations are legitimate and stable at an explicit, conscious level of awareness. Nevertheless, many recent studies…reveal that when intergroup biases are measured at an implicit level, members of low status minority groups (including African Americans) commonly fail to exhibit ingroup bias and show preferences for higher status outgroups—even when these preferences are soundly rejected at an explicit, conscious level. (p. 18)

As previously discussed, individuals are motivated to resolve incongruence between their self-views and the system in which they exist (Swann et al., 2009). For dominant group members, there is general harmony between the individual’s ego, his or her ingroup, and the prevailing system. However, non-dominant group members may face a conflict that pits one’s ego and ingroup against the system. Proponents of system justification theory argue that this conflict may be assuaged by a motivated
“internalization of favorable attitudes toward the system (and the outgroup)” (Jost et al., 2012, p. 318), resulting in a more amiable attitude toward the system overall.

The internalization of system justifying beliefs does not happen without a cost. Outgroup favoritism can negatively impact non-dominant group member’s self-views and real-world outcomes. Jost et al. (2004) discussed the psychological consequences of system justification for advantaged and disadvantaged adults:

In four studies, economic system justification and generalized opposition to equality were associated with decreased self-esteem and ingroup favoritism among African American respondents, as well as with increased neuroticism and depression. These same variables were associated with increased self-esteem and ingroup favoritism and decreased neuroticism and depression among European Americans…This evidence suggests that conflicts exist among ego, group, and system justification variables for members of low but not high status groups. (p. 33)

While most research on system justification has focused on adults, researchers are just beginning to understand how system justification affects identity development and outcomes for children and adolescents who are members of disadvantaged groups. In a recent longitudinal study of sixth to eighth-grade minority youth, Godfrey, Santos, and Burson (2019) found that sixth-graders with system-justifying beliefs had greater self-esteem than those who questioned the fairness of the system, but saw greater declines in self-esteem as they entered early adolescence. The authors attribute this early positive outcome to an immature understanding of “status differences or identity as a member of a marginalized group” (Godfrey et al., 2019, p. 190) and the palliative effects of system-
Justifying beliefs when inequities are not salient (Jost et al., 2002). The subsequent decline in self-esteem during a critical developmental phase raises concerns about the long-term implications of system-justifying beliefs on members of disadvantaged groups:

In the midst of this move toward a more adult-like cognition and understanding, believing the system is fair implies that one deserves one’s disadvantaged place in society, which can result in worsening trajectories of self-esteem, classroom behavior, and deviant behavior. By the end of early adolescence, we see the negative consequences of system-justifying ideologies found for marginalized youth in late adolescence and early adulthood. (Godfrey et al., 2019, p. 190)

In another study, Blanton, George, and Crocker (2001) found that women participants, when presented with a pay rate for past work, avoided comparing their pay with that of men, assumed that the pay was fair, and had lower pay expectations than men. Yet, when they were offered pay for future work (e.g. a system they had not yet entered), the inequities disappeared, suggesting a system-justifying bias that perpetuated wage disparities. Blanton et al. (2001) concluded:

…these findings suggest that even the slightest participation in a system can lead those who have been disadvantaged in the past to lower their expectations, to avoid the detection of discrimination, and to remain content in the face of discrimination. This second pattern of results seems to indicate that women will mostly accept their current situations. Thus, any tendency to question a new system of rewards may disappear quickly once a person has chosen to participate in it. (p. 133)
Jost and Kay (2005) examined the effect of exposure to gender stereotypes on women’s system-justifying beliefs. Following on research showing that people associate agentic traits with high-status groups and communal traits with low-status groups (e.g. Geis et al., 1984), the authors found that women who were exposed to complementary gender stereotypes (women are communal, men are agentic), increased their support of the status quo. Further, they found that confirmation of the prevailing system resulted from mere exposure to gender stereotypes and did not require explicit endorsement of them, demonstrating the power of “cultural availability” on stereotype endorsement (Jost & Kay, 2005, p. 507).

**Challenges to System Justification Theory**

System justification theory presents arguments regarding the nature of social systems and their implications for individual health and well-being. Given the gravity of these implications, it is, perhaps, necessarily provocative, and therefore raises questions about its legitimacy. Brandt (2013) called into question system justification theory’s ‘status-legitimacy’ hypothesis that low-status groups are psychologically motivated to preserve the status quo. In his study, three large data sets were used to examine confidence in social systems by high and low status groups, as measured on income, education, gender, race, and social class. It was found that education was the only significant predictor of system confidence. Further, the author recognized the contrast between explicit and implicit measures of system justification, but suggested that implicit outgroup favoritism may instead be the result of “low-status groups’ recognition of [their] devalued social status” (Brandt, 2013, p. 778) versus an unconsciously held preference for the existing system.
Other researchers have argued that system justification theory has failed to contribute anything beyond the prevailing theories, such as social identity theory (Reicher, 2004). Jost (2011) disputes this assertion by calling out that system justification theory complements and expands on social identity theory, for example by addressing the effects of implicit cognition:

[T]he nonconscious effects of belonging to a given social, economic, or political system (e.g., Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2003; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost et al., 2002; Lane et al., 2005; Rudman et al., 2002; Uhlmann et al., 2002) are not fully captured by a theory [i.e. social identity theory] that emphasizes the salience of levels of self-categorization as the key explanatory variable, because salient self-categorizations are by definition conscious, explicit, and subjectively acknowledged. (p. 239)

Conclusion

Koenig et al.’s (2011) meta-analysis on stereotypes of leaders as being primarily masculine showed that these stereotypes continue to persist, as “people viewed leaders as quite similar to men but not very similar to women, as more agentic than communal, and as more masculine than feminine” (p. 634). For women leaders, these stereotypes can create conflict between their gender identity and leader identity, leaving them to navigate paradoxical expectations that they might never fully resolve. Further, their own implicit biases may endorse the systemic inequalities that inhibit their leadership outcomes. If American organizations hope to make progress toward achieving full acceptance of and equal treatment for women leaders, it is important to understand both the conscious and unconscious mechanisms that impede it. The present study intends to contribute to this
work by exploring the thoughts, beliefs, and experiences that have influenced women leaders’ gender and leader identities within the context of an implicit gender-leadership bias.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of the current study was to explore how women leaders experience their gender and leader identities within the context of gender-leadership implicit bias. Women leaders from diverse industries provided data via semi-structured interviews on the thoughts, beliefs, and experiences that have influenced their gender and leader identities. This research is important because it provides timely and relevant insights into the ways that women leaders navigate their gender and leader identities and how these identities are experienced when holding implicit biases that may or may not favor their gender ingroup.

The Qualitative Research Paradigm

The choice of qualitative research for understanding a phenomenon requires an exploration of one’s axiology, ontology, and epistemology (Terrell, 2016). The axiological question of what is “ethical and valuable” (Terrell, 2016, p. 154) is answered at the intersection of the time and context in which the research is being conducted. At the time of this research, women’s issues were taking center stage in the social dialogue. The #metoo movement drove awareness of the global issue of sexual violence against women by giving previously silenced voices an opportunity to be heard, and social media created new platforms on which women could affect social change (UN Women, 2018).

Following on several decades of discussions about gender equality in the workplace, women continue to challenge norms regarding their roles, rights, and responsibilities within the larger context of organizations. Yet, fifty-six years after the Equal Pay Act was signed into law, women continue to fight gender disparities related to opportunity and pay (Brown, 2017; Graf et al., 2019). These issues have received
increased attention by the media and lawmakers in recent years, driven in large part by
the role of social media (Noguchi, 2019). This unique time in the history of women’s
rights and empowerment provides a compelling backdrop for research on women’s
gender identities, particularly within the context of shifting social norms and behaviors.

Qualitative research, as viewed through an interpretivist lens, allows for multiple
truths, and a core tenet of this paradigm is that people construct their realities. In other
words, knowledge is not something ‘out there’ to be discovered, but acquired through a
process of co-construction with the researcher (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Researching
identity requires an ontology that creates space for individual experience. Interpretivism
seeks to learn from people within the context of their lived experiences and recognizes
that these contexts are dynamic, often unorganized, and complicated. As such, the
epistemological approach to research requires flexibility and “sophisticated reasoning
that is multifaceted and iterative” (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 9).

**Existential-Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Phenomenological research seeks to explore how people experience their life
worlds, and hermeneutic phenomenology deals with interpreting the meaning behind
these lived experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Rossman & Rallis, 2017).
Participants are selected not because they represent a generalizable sample, but because
they have experienced a phenomenon and are willing to share their story so as to
illuminate how they make meaning of the world in which they live (Slife & Williams,
1995).

The present study utilized an existential-hermeneutic phenomenological (EHP)
approach to explore the meaning that women leaders place on their gender and leader
identities. The confluence of existentialism, hermeneutics, and phenomenology provided a holistic philosophical approach by allowing for the interpretation of texts as defined by hermeneutic phenomenology along with a research axiology that is “ideally suited to address questions about what it is like to traverse existential challenges and how people make life meaningful and how they experience their world as a result” (Willig & Billin, 2011, p. 119). In support of EHP, Todres and Wheeler (2001) argued for a three-pronged approach to qualitative inquiry that incorporates a grounding in the life-world with reflexivity of the researcher’s positional knowledge and assumptions plus a humanization of the research methodology that acknowledges one’s being-in-the-world:

[We] believe that phenomenology, hermeneutics, and existentialism are natural bed-fellows and lose something if any of these emphases are left out. In pointing to the lifeworld, phenomenology grounds our research inquiries, turning us to the concrete happenings of living situations, the what of our reflections. Without this emphasis our explorations may be compromised by over-generality and theoretical abstraction.

In acknowledging the positionality of knowledge, hermeneutics adds reflexivity to our research inquiries, turning us to meaningful questions and concerns that are culturally and historically relevant. Without this emphasis our explorations may lack depth and significance in our current world…In articulating the ontological dimension, existentialism humanizes our research inquiries, turning us to a language that can express the qualitative dimensions of what it means to be.

Without this emphasis, our explorations become technical and utilitarian and we
may lose something non-specialized in this age of specialization. (Todres & Wheeler, 2001, p. 6) Exploring how women leaders experience their gender and leader identities within the context of implicit bias, particularly when those biases may challenge their roles as leaders, brings with it a special sensitivity to the methodological approach and one that maximizes humanization of the experience for both participants and researcher. It is not enough to explore lived experiences through the phenomenological lens or to interpret the meaning of these experiences through hermeneutics. The researcher must honor the human aspect of the experience through her preparation, interaction, and closure with participants and with the language that she chooses for her interpretations of the co-constructed texts that result. Exploring a topic as intimate as identity presents the opportunity for participants to uncover thoughts and feelings that they may not have otherwise and can be a “rare and enriching experience for the subject, who may obtain new insights into his or her life situation” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 35). However, the interviewer must be sensitive to “potential ethical transgressions of the subject’s personal boundaries” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 35). Existentialism brings a humanistic focus to these concerns.

**Sampling and Participant Selection**

The present study used a purposeful sampling strategy, which provided “information-rich cases [that yielded] insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations” (Patton, 2002, p. 273). A convenience sample was selected based on four criteria: a) they self-identified as women, b) they met the definition of leader as described previously, c) they were willing to participate in one-on-one
interviews regarding their experiences as women leaders, and d) they were willing to take
the gender-leadership implicit association test and share their thoughts on their results.
Participation was open to women leaders across organizations and industries, allowing
for a rich exploration of women’s lived experiences within diverse situational contexts.
An invitation to participate was sent to ten women leaders (see Appendix A). All ten who
were formally invited elected to participate in the study.

Phenomenological research is typically conducted on small sample sizes given the
“elaborate and time-consuming” nature of the required analysis (Smith et al., 2012, p. 75).
Therefore, the current study consisted of ten participants so as to maximize the
quality of the data and “honor the individual’s life experience” (Rossman & Rallis, 2017,
p. 123).

Gender-Leadership IAT

The goal of the present research was to explore how women leaders experience
their gender and leader identities within the context of gender-leader implicit bias.
Therefore, an important aspect of the research was identifying the existence of a gender-
leadership implicit bias. Implicit measurement carries benefits over explicit measures in
two important ways: a) self-reporting can motivate individuals to respond in ways that
bolster self-presentation, but are incomplete representations of attitudes and b) biases that
have been shaped by social forces over time may not be cognitively available
(Wittenbrink & Schwarz, 2007).

Implicit attitudes can be uncovered through different means, including
physiological feedback, priming, and implicit association (Fazio & Olson, 2003). For the
current study, these various implicit measurement modalities were considered. The
invasive nature of physiological feedback (e.g. MRI) made it infeasible for the present study and was rejected. Priming measures were then considered in relation to implicit association measures. A review by Nosek et al. (2011) identified the most commonly cited procedures used to measure implicit bias and found that the Implicit Association Test comprised over 40% of citations ($N = 2,740$), far more than any other implicit measure. As such, the IAT has also been the subject of more research “scrutiny” of its validity than other measures of implicit attitudes (Steffens & Jonas, 2010, p. 2). Further, the IAT’s effect size was found to be twice that of evaluative priming (Greenwald et al., 1998) and its reliability was found to exceed that of other measures (Teige-Mocigemba & Klauer, 2015). Finally, the mere availability of the gender-leadership IAT via Project Implicit (n.d.) made it a preferable option for identifying participants’ implicit bias in the current study.

Developed by Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz (1998), the IAT measures the time it takes participants to associate a target word (e.g. male or female) with an attribute (e.g. leader or supporter). A faster response time in pairing a target word with an attribute (leader-male) versus another word pairing (leader-female) suggests a relatively stronger association between the target word and the attribute (Lane et al., 2007). This association infers an automatic “attitude, stereotype, or disposition” favoring the more strongly associated word pair (Teige-Mocigemba & Klauer, 2015, p. 703).

The IAT has been subject to criticism regarding its validity and reliability (Nadan & Stark, 2017). One challenge to its construct validity has to do with whether the source of the associations being measured are the result of unconscious attitudes or extrapersonal (e.g. cultural) associations (Olson & Fazio, 2004). Consequently, some researchers have
proposed modifications to the IAT in order to better reflect personal versus socially shared associations (Bardin et al., 2014; Olson & Fazio, 2004). In addition, Blanton and Jaccard (2008) challenge the notion that implicit measures are better predictors of attitudes compared to explicit measures, and they further assert that the IAT’s predictive ability is limited due to “the many moderating factors” on the “effects of the IAT…across research studies” (p. 286). Some research has also criticized the IAT for having low test-retest reliability (Grumm & von Collani, 2007).

In contrast to criticisms regarding the IAT’s validity and reliability, researchers have found evidence that the test reliably measures implicit bias based on its relationship to behavior. In a multi-study test on aggressiveness, Parmač Kovačić, Galić, and Ružojčić (2018) found that the IAT reliably predicted aggressive behavior to a greater degree than self-reported measures and that the IAT was less susceptible to the effects of social desirability responding than explicit measures of aggressiveness. Further, in a meta-analysis of the IAT’s predictive validity, Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, and Banaji, (2009) examined self-report measures in contrast with the IAT and found that for “[socially sensitive topics], the predictive validity of IAT measures significantly exceeded the predictive validity of self-report measures” (p. 32).

In the current study participants were asked to take the gender-leadership IAT by accessing the test online. In the test, they were presented with word-stimuli located in the center of the screen and then asked to quickly sort these words into one of two categories located on opposite sides of the screen by pressing one of two associated letters on their keyboard. The test was conducted in seven rounds. The first asked participants to associate common male and female names (e.g. Lisa, David) with one category, ‘male’ or
‘female’. In the second round, they were asked to associate career and caregiving words (e.g. manager, homemaker) with one category, ‘leader’ or ‘follower’. Subsequent rounds paired categories together, such as ‘male-leader’ and ‘female-supporter’, and asked participants to associate word-stimuli to these paired categories. Rounds varied so as to pair male/female and leader/follower alternatively.

**Interview Structure and Questions**

In following the EHP approach to qualitative research, which aims to explore how people “traverse existential challenges and how people make life meaningful and how they experience their world as a result” (Willig & Billin, 2011, p. 119), the interview questions were open-ended so as to encourage participants to freely explore their gender and leader identities as a narrative exercise and then consider its meaning in relation to their lived experiences as women leaders. Rossman and Rallis (2017), in describing ways to “elicit the participant’s worldview” recommended that the researcher “identifies a few broad topics” that can be posed as “open-ended questions followed by requests for elaboration” (p. 155). Elaboration then happens through follow-up questions that explore “deeper meanings” or provide “more concrete examples” (p. 159). Accordingly, the current study utilized four open-ended questions to explore participants’ meaning regarding their identity. These questions were a) what thoughts, beliefs, and experiences have influenced your identity as a woman?; b) how have work and leadership experiences formed how you see yourself as a leader?; and c) how do you think about your gender and leader identities in relation to each other? Sub-questions were used as needed to help participants expound on the central questions (see Appendix B).
Prior to interviews, participants were sent an email confirming the interview along with a copy of the informed consent form (see Appendix C) so that they could review its contents ahead of time. They were also provided the three central questions related to their gender and leader identities and some subquestions that they could contemplate prior to the interview (see Appendix D). The first part of the interview entailed exploring participant’s backgrounds and experiences as women and as leaders. In alignment with the phenomenological approach, which “eschew[s] explanations, opinions, or other postinterpretations about an experience, and instead focus[es] attention on the lived meaning of the experiential moment itself” (Adams & van Manen, 2017, p. 782), participants were asked open-ended questions about the thoughts, beliefs, and experiences that influenced their gender and leader identities, respectively. They were then asked how they thought about these identities in relation to each other. This flexible, self-narrative approach encouraged the women to share the “sacred stories” of their personal myths as a way of expressing and giving meaning to their identity (McAdams, 1993, p. 34).

Next, participants were asked to take the gender-leadership implicit association test. Before commencing the test, they were provided a brief introduction to the IAT (see Appendix E) and encouraged to ask questions if they did not understand the purpose or procedure. I remained within close proximity of participants during the first round of the IAT to ensure participants did not experience any technical issues and to answer questions if needed. After completing the first round, they were then given privacy to complete the remainder of the test. Upon completion, participants were provided the results of the test, which suggested that they had a slight, moderate, or strong association
of female with supporter and male with leader; a slight, moderate, or strong association of male with supporter and female with leader; or no automatic preference between male and female.

Exposure to one’s implicit biases can be disorienting and uncomfortable, particularly when they suggest an attitude that is dissonant with one’s explicit attitudes or beliefs (Nadan & Stark, 2017). Researcher reflexivity was key to navigating these responses alongside the participants, particularly for women leaders whose IAT scores associated men with leadership. My ability to “[look at myself] making sense of how someone else makes sense of her world” (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 37) influenced the experience for the women. As such, each participant’s reaction to the IAT was carefully assessed and time was provided for them to contemplate the results or express any initial reactions they had prior to moving into the last portion of the interview.

Finally, participants were asked to share their thoughts and feelings regarding the results of the IAT. Qualitative research as a means of learning through the co-construction of knowledge (Rossman & Rallis, 2017) becomes particularly salient once participants are made aware of potential implicit biases. Regardless of their reaction, the consciousness-raising that happens with the IAT can provide opportunities for learning (Hillard et al., 2013), and may even inspire a critical reflectivity that inspires “the conscious and active adoption of a more multifaceted and flexible conception of ‘Self’” (Nadan & Stark, 2017, p. 695). As previously stated, the EHP methodology requires an open-ended approach that allows participants to explore the meaning of their lived experience. Toward that end, participants were asked the open-ended question, “will you please describe your thoughts and feelings about the IAT and the score you received?”
Research Setting

The first four interviews were conducted in-person at private locations of the participant’s choice. These locations included private homes, university conference rooms, and workplaces. After completing the fourth interview, the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread across the United States. People and businesses were forced into lockdown as physical distancing and stay-at-home orders were implemented in most states. Consequently, in-person interviews were no longer tenable. Given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, alternative options were considered, including postponement. The decision to continue was largely dependent on two factors: a) the ability to conduct ethical and quality research in a virtual environment and b) the participants’ willingness and desire to continue with interviews. First, it was determined that the available technology would adequately accommodate interviews and provide for quality data collection. Next, ethical considerations were discussed with university personnel and it was determined that the nature of the research did not preclude virtual interviews. An amendment to the IRB was submitted and approved (see Appendix F). The fifth and sixth participants, who had already been scheduled for interviews prior to the pandemic, were contacted via email and given options to continue with the interview using video conference, delay the interview until the pandemic passed, or opt out of the study altogether (see Appendix G). Both decided to continue with the interview via video conference. The remaining four participants were recruited and interviewed under the revised protocol.
Data Collection

Individual interviews were conducted with ten women leaders and took place between February and May 2020. Interviews lasted between 90 and 135 minutes each. Prior to beginning interviews, participants were asked to review and sign the informed consent form (see Appendices E and F) and given an opportunity to ask questions about the study. Demographic data was then collected and is recorded in Table 1. Participants represented various industries and levels of leadership. Most of the participants were over 40 and had at least 10 years of leadership experience. 90% of participants have college degrees and 60% have graduate degrees.

Interviews were conducted using an open-ended approach that allowed for each of the women to tell her story in her own way while narrowing the focus on those experiences that were relevant to their gender and leader identities. An interview protocol (see Appendix A) provided a roadmap and prompts for the interviews. All the participants expressed a deep interest in the topic of gender and leadership and each of them was open and gracious about sharing their experiences. The complexity and uniqueness of individual identity makes it a challenging topic to explore. However, participants were encouraged to share those elements of her story that she felt were most important to her gender and leader identity narrative, and they were supported in sharing only the information they felt comfortable and motivated to share.

Following the portion of the interview that explored participants’ gender and leader identities, participants took the gender-leadership implicit bias test online. Upon completing the test, participants read their results and the supplemental information from AAUW (see Appendix H). Participants were then asked to share their thoughts and
feelings regarding their individual IAT scores. The portion of the interview pertaining to gender and leader identification was conducted prior to participants taking the implicit association test so that interview data would not be contaminated by the IAT results.

A journal was kept throughout the interviewing process and a bracketing exercise occurred before each interview to illuminate presuppositions and to open space for understanding. Interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. During transcription, notes were kept that captured initial thoughts and comments regarding the content. Transcripts were then sent to each participant and they were invited to make corrections, deletions, or additions as they desired. Although the interpretive nature of the methodology may preclude transcription review by participants, and the spontaneity of in-the-moment story-telling versus contemplative narrative writing may result in different information being shared, given the complexity of the topic, it was deemed preferential to the data collection process to allow participants the opportunity to expound on their experiences. Some of the participants made minor changes to their transcripts, but none made substantial contextual changes. The revised transcripts were then incorporated into the final record.

Existential-hermeneutic phenomenology does not take a descriptive approach to exploring phenomena, as advocated by other qualitative research methodologies. Instead, EHP takes an interpretive approach that requires the researcher to assume the position of ‘meaning-maker’ as opposed to strictly ‘describer’ (Willig & Billin, 2011). As such, the current study did not seek interpretation from participants, but instead the researcher uncovered meaning in the texts by following the hermeneutic circle of “inter-relating one
part of a text to another part of the same text, or to the text as a whole” (Morgan, 2011, p. 28) through a cycle of reading, reflecting, and writing.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Participant count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building products</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food service</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional services</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of leadership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VP/SVP</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive/Owner</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in leadership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20+</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
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<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
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<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest level of education</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
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<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ethical Considerations

As recommended by Bachiochi and Weiner (2008), the current study paid particular care to the following matters: a) participant protection from harm, b) informed consent, c) participant understanding of the voluntary nature of their participation, and d) data anonymity and confidentiality. First, all practical measures were taken to ensure participants came to no harm through their participation in the study. The primary concern in this regard was that participants might feel emotional distress when presented with the results of the IAT. As discussed by Nadan and Stark (2017), the IAT can create emotional discomfort that can act as a powerful educational tool, facilitated by participants “leav[ing] their comfort zone and engag[ing] in a critical investigation of the ‘Self’” (p.694). However, the potential for learning should not overshadow the real emotional discomfort that participants may experience, and any negative affect associated with the IAT should be addressed. Prior to engaging with the test, participants were given information regarding the nature of the IAT and what it measures (see Appendix E). Further, the test’s limitations and academic challenges regarding validity and reliability were disclosed (e.g., Blanton & Jaccard, 2008; Karpinski & Hilton, 2001; Olson & Fazio, 2004; Rezaei, 2011). Participants were encouraged to present questions or concerns regarding the IAT.

Second, participants signed an informed consent letter (see Appendices C and F) that disclosed the purpose of the study and its audience, what was required of them for participation, how their data was stored and protected, how their identities were protected, potential risks involved with their participation, how the results from the
research might be used, and their right to withdraw from any part of the study at any time (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

Third, and in addition to signing the informed consent letter, participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw at any time.

Fourth, aliases and pseudonyms were used in place of identifying information to ensure participants’ confidentiality. Data was stored in a secure location and password protected to prevent intentional or unintentional intrusion. In accordance with IRB recommendations, data will be held in a secured location for three years and then destroyed.

**Data Analysis**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed as a rigorous, methodological approach for guiding analysis of the interview texts. Smith and Shinebourne (2012) provided a roadmap for analysis via distinct stages:

1. **Immersion and Initial Comments.** At this stage, the researcher may note observations and reflections about the interview experience or any other thoughts and comments of potential significance. Notes and comments may focus on content, language use (features such as metaphors and other figures of speech, repetition, pauses), context, and initial interpretative comments. It is useful to highlight distinctive phrases and emotional responses. (p.77)

2. **Emerging Themes.** Although still grounded in the particular detail of the participant’s account, the researcher aims to formulate a concise phrase at a slightly higher level of abstraction that may refer to a more psychological conceptualization. At this stage, the researcher will inevitably also be
influenced by having already annotated the transcript as a whole. It is an iterative process and, in the movement of the hermeneutic circle, the part is interpreted in relation to the whole and the whole is interpreted in relation to the part. (p.77)

3. **Connections and Initial Clustering of Themes.** The next stage consists of looking for connections between the emerging themes, grouping them together according to conceptual similarities and providing a label for each cluster. Sometimes some themes act like a magnet pulling other themes toward them…The process is iterative because it is necessary to ensure that the clusters make sense in relation to the original transcript. (pp.77-78)

4. **Thematic Relationships and Table of Themes.** Following this, the thematic relationship is presented graphically in a table of themes. [This table provides] the structure of major themes, themes, and subthemes and, for each theme or subtheme, it also includes a relevant short extract from the transcript, followed by the line number, so that it is possible to return to the transcript and check the extract in context. (p.78)

5. **Final Thematic Table.** Finally, a table of themes for the study as a whole is constructed. In this process, the individual tables are reviewed and checked again with the transcripts. At this stage, it may be possible to combine some themes or to reduce the data, making decisions based not only on the prevalence of data but also on the pertinence of the themes and their capacity to illuminate the account as a whole. (pp.79-80)
In accordance with this approach, a multi-step process was followed to identify themes. First, field and transcription notes were reviewed and finalized transcripts were read through twice in order to become immersed in the data. Pertinent information was highlighted, and exploratory comments were entered in the margin. Next, emerging themes were developed by taking initial coding to a “higher level of abstraction” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 77). Emerging themes and their corresponding script from the original text were organized into a table. Emerging themes were then clustered based on “conceptual similarities” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 77) and each cluster was labeled as a major theme for the individual case. Emerging and major themes were defined and recorded in a coding journal throughout the process so that they could be referenced as part of the analysis across cases. Major themes were then clustered into a table of superordinate themes that included the respective major and emerging themes as well as illustrative extracts for each. This process was performed on each individual case in its entirety and then repeated for subsequent cases, allowing for new information to emerge while also moving back and forth between cases so as to realize a “hermeneutic circle of understanding” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 79). Finally, a table of superordinate and major themes was developed across all participants and is presented in Table 2.

While the current study sought to understand how women experience their gender and leader identities in relation to a specific phenomenon—gender and leadership implicit bias—it does not “aim to uncover a unitary, totalizing interpretive Truth” (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 247). Each woman’s experience and identities are uniquely her own and the analysis presented is intended to shed light on the experience of being a woman leader without moving into “a more empiricist frame of reference” (Larkin et al.,
2019, p. 195), including that which determines cause or attempts to predict. Assuming causality would be dishonoring of the women’s individual life stories, the meaning behind them, and the complex nature of one’s identity.

At the same time, the study intended to illuminate how women leaders experience their gender and leader identities within the context of gender-leadership implicit bias. As such, the phenomenon must be included in the data collection and analysis process, but in a way that honors the methodology. Of particular concern was the risk of applying a positivist approach to understanding the women’s experiences when considered alongside implicit bias, so it was important to collect and analyze data in a way that remained true to qualitative research. Two strategies were utilized to accommodate this goal. First, the women did not take the IAT until after the portion of the interview that explored their gender and leader identities had been completed. This approach removed the possibility that interview data might be contaminated by knowledge of an implicit bias by either the participant or the researcher. Second, following the IAT, participants were asked to share their thoughts and feelings on the IAT and how their experiences may have influenced their results. This allowed each of the women to explore their reactions to the IAT and to provide their own interpretation of the results by using the preceding interview as a reflective and reflexive exercise for informing that interpretation. Their interpretations then informed discussion of the interview data and became part of the final report.

**Researcher Reflexivity**

As part of the reflexive process, Morgan (2011) recommended asking oneself questions that serve to uncover the researcher’s personal feelings about the topic. These include questions about one’s motivation to conduct the research and experience with the
phenomenon. Toward this end, and prior to engaging with interviewees, I spent time reflecting on my own experiences as a woman leader and my feelings about my gender-leadership implicit bias. Reflecting on my own journey as a woman and as a leader provided me an opportunity to “look at [myself] making sense of how someone else makes sense of her world” (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 37).

My motivation for conducting research on women leaders’ gender and leader identities within the context of implicit bias was spurred by a deep curiosity about the meaning that women leaders place on their identity, particularly when faced with a potential conflict between important identities. My own experiences have taught me the importance of feeling secure in one’s identity and I wonder how I might have experienced my leader identity differently if my experiences with my gender had been different. Understanding that leadership is still viewed as a primarily agentic endeavor, I believe that we have an opportunity to redefine leadership as opposed to simply finding ways for women to conform to existing norms, some of which are not healthy for men, women, or business. The double-bind that creates conflict between women leaders’ gender and leader identities results in large part from beliefs about leadership that are arguably outdated in a complex and diverse global society.

My experience of being a woman was influenced by my early family experiences and the cultural narrative that existed at that time. The youngest of four children and the only girl, I learned at an early age that boys and girls were treated differently in society. My brothers played like ‘boys’ and formed solidarity and friendship around their common interests. I played like a ‘girl’ and spent a lot of time alone playing with stuffed animals or reading. I was a sensitive and emotional child, but I learned that being
emotional was a sign of weakness, so I tried very hard to contain my emotions or to express them only at ‘appropriate’ times.

My family was traditional for that era in that my father worked outside of the home and my mother stayed at home with the children. They divorced when I was four years old and it was at that time that the significance of gender roles first showed up in my life. When my father left, our quality of life declined rapidly. My mother had worked outside of the home years before as a secretary for an insurance agency. However, the low wages associated with that work could not provide stability for a single mother with four children, so she relied on government support. My father was largely absent and, at the time, it seemed natural that my mother would raise us, even if it meant that she did so by herself.

There were underlying assumptions in my family about the types of careers that were suitable for women. When I was a young girl, I had aspirations of being a writer or musician. However, my mother suggested that nursing might be more appropriate, even though I had no interest in it.

Gender differences became most apparent to me when I was nineteen and faced with an unplanned pregnancy. I had been in a long-term relationship, but it ended when I became pregnant and I was left on my own to face the consequences. I was fortunate to live in an era when women had more options than their predecessors, but I was still forced to make a choice. The father of my child did not have to face that dilemma and I was left to bear the stigma, shame, and responsibility alone.

Those early years were difficult as I worked to combat negative stereotypes about single mothers and establish myself in society. I worked hard to realize the markers of
success and did everything within my power to provide my son with the same quality of life that any child in a traditional two-parent home would enjoy. However, I constantly struggled with my self-esteem. In addition, the burden of managing a demanding job, school, a house, and a child took its toll over the years. There were many times that I longed for more freedom, but I felt a deep sense of responsibility to my son and that narrative drove me forward. I saw my role as a mother—and by extension as a woman—as being the ‘protector’ and ‘provider’. How I viewed my gender eventually influenced how I viewed myself as a leader.

My leadership journey started when I was in my early thirties. I had worked for my employer for several years as a data analyst in the retail trade. My first boss was the owner of the company and second-generation heir to the family-owned business. He was a successful salesman, but disliked managing people and took a laissez-faire approach to leadership. I received little formal training or mentoring, so much of my learning came through trial and error. I assumed my first manager role early in my career and had a young woman reporting to me. She had had some retail experience, so I expected her to learn on her own, just as I had. I had adopted my boss’s laissez-faire style of leadership and my new report, who had come from a larger company, struggled to navigate her role. She lasted just a few months before she quit, and I felt terrible that I had failed her as a manager. I knew she deserved more from me and from the company, but I did not know how to lead, and my organization did little to help me acquire that skill. I decided that formal education was my best option for gaining this knowledge, so I went back to school and received my master’s degree in organizational leadership.
I later pioneered the formation of a new division within the company and took on a leadership position managing a small group of analysts. In contrast to my first leadership position, I felt that I was successful in this role. I attribute this to the fact that my team was comprised of a tight-knit group of highly skilled, self-directed individuals, but also because I felt empowered by my education. We worked hard and established the new team as a viable and important resource for the company. I retained many of my responsibilities as an individual contributor while simultaneously setting strategy for the team, clearing roadblocks, and advocating for the team with key decision makers.

I was then asked by executive leadership to take over leading another analytics team within the company. The team was in crisis as they had suffered significant turnover during the incumbent leader’s tenure and morale amongst the remaining team members was low. The existing manager was removed, and I was promoted into a new position overseeing all of analytics along with a new director. The first objective in my new role was to stem any further attrition, so I worked with the new director to transform the team’s culture and create a more positive environment. The executive team was supportive of our efforts but was also pressuring us to establish new sources of revenue and to evolve the company’s existing data reporting system. Our leadership team—myself and two female directors—took on these challenges and bolstered each other throughout. Within three years, we turned the flailing team around and were attracting high-quality personnel based on our reputation. We quadrupled the team’s revenue and made significant progress toward the development of a proprietary reporting system. I was very proud of the work that we had done.
I had an opportunity to define my leader identity during those years as head of the analytics teams and I learned much about what makes for good leadership. I worked hard to earn my team’s trust and harder to maintain it by being transparent whenever possible and admitting my mistakes. There was a lot of ambiguity regarding expectations from key decision makers, and through that I learned the importance of consistency and commitment to goals.

My leadership style has also been shaped by a recognition of the inherent value of the individual. I learned that it is incumbent upon leaders to recruit, hire, and develop people based on their individual strengths and passion, and when a person does not fit with his or her role, a leader with integrity will work with the person to either find a new role or gracefully exit the company instead of forcing them to conform. In considering the inherent value of the individual, I also believe that leaders have a responsibility to treat people with care and respect, and to express their emotions in a respectful, productive way. As a leader, I have had relationships with team members that grew into enduring friendships and while it was wonderful to have that deeper relationship, I think it is also important to consider the inherent power differential in those relationships and take particular care with one’s words and behavior.

In contemplating my gender and leader identities in relation to each other, I recognize that my leadership style was deeply influenced by my early experiences as a young woman and single mother. I developed the courage to stand up for what was best for my teams despite the prevailing cultural norms, and I felt a sense of obligation to my teams that would inform my actions many times during my career. As a leader, I worked with my teams to develop a culture that was inclusive and encouraged people to share
their voices. We established team policies through collective action even though these policies were unpopular with some of the leaders in the company. I knew that they were right for my teams and I stood up for our culture of flexibility and team building. We were delivering exceptional service and customers were happy, so it was easy to defend our atypical culture. However, the CEO and COO differed drastically regarding their financial expectations, and they provided little direction in measuring financial performance. This ambiguity constantly overshadowed the teams’ good work. It was an unnecessary burden and that experience has reinforced in me how ethically important it is for leaders to set clear financial objectives.

Over the course of this study, I have taken the gender-leadership implicit association test three times. Each time my score suggested a strong association of female with supporter and male with leader. I recognize that I am a product of my experiences as well as the historical and cultural context in which I live. At the time of this writing, the United States has never had a woman president and relatively few women hold top roles at major corporations. Throughout my career, I had only male managers and executive leaders. Further, men overwhelmingly dominate my intellectual resources, representing views on the various subjects that occupy my bookshelves. I am now starting to take a more critical view of my personal preferences and how my unconscious attitudes influence me.

**Summary**

The goal of this study was to explore how women leaders experience their gender and leader identities within the context of implicit bias. The use of qualitative research was preferred in that it allowed the researcher to “describe and interpret rather than
measure and predict” the human experience (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 8). Further, existential-hermeneutic phenomenology provided a preferred method for exploring “what it means to live as an embodied being in a particular physical and social world” and “deepen our understanding of the quality, texture and meaning of a particular experience for those who undergo that experience” (Willig & Billin, 2011, p. 118). This research adhered to rigorous ethical protocols for protecting the rights of human subjects and engaged appropriate methods of data collection and analysis to enrich the current understanding of women leaders’ lived experiences.
Chapter 4: Individual Narratives

The individual narratives that follow are a summary of the key elements of each woman’s story as I interpreted them and as they related to the research question of how women leaders experience their gender and leader identities within the context of an implicit gender-leadership bias. It is impossible to know, let alone convey, all the nuances, complexities, and occasional contradictions related to individual identity. Certainly, there are countless additional pieces of information that the women may have chosen to share as it related to their experiences as women and as leaders. Therefore, each of the individual stories represent but “hints concerning the truth” (McAdams, 1993, p. 32) that reveal an aspect of a larger internal narrative.

Amber’s Story

Amber is a senior-level leader in a large healthcare organization and has spent her career in nursing. She is married and has grown children. I met Amber four years ago and know her to be a kind, compassionate woman who is committed to lifelong learning and personal development. She has a warm, gentle nature that is complemented by a strong sense of self and conviction to her values. Amber described herself as a “very bold leader with high empathy,” and her story reflected the deep truth in that statement.

Amber grew up on a farm where she was the youngest of eight children comprised of four boys and four girls, and she saw her household as having “pretty set gender roles.” Her father maintained the outdoor aspects of farm life, such as tending livestock and repairing fences, while her mother was primarily responsible for indoor tasks. Amber’s mother helped with the outdoor chores and worked in a factory to help
finance the farm. Amber shared that she thought her mother was mostly content with her life but sometimes sensed that she longed for more:

I felt like my mom was always just stuck. In a way she was always waiting until the next paycheck. And she seemed like she was confined to her means in a way where she always talked about not having money to do things or wishing she’d gone to college.

Amber and her siblings all had responsibilities around the farm and Amber was tasked with preparing the family meal, cleaning the house, and ensuring that the “coffee was always going.” Amber’s early life as the daughter of hard-working parents instilled in her a tenacity and work ethic that has followed her through her life.

Amber’s community—and particularly her church—was quite conservative in their attitudes toward women. She described her church as being “very male driven.” She illustrated this point with a story about voting rights within the congregation:

When it was time to vote, the men stayed in the sanctuary and voted, and all the women went to the fellowship hall. So, it was very conservative…We weren’t allowed to vote, and we weren’t allowed to hear the conversation that was happening in the sanctuary.

These early experiences motivated Amber’s ambitions to move away from her small town and experience the world in a different way. Amber’s experience of small-town life, where many people were “kind of in their own world,” fueled Amber’s yearning for a career and independence:

School shaped me in that small town in that women kept assuming that female position in the household and not many of my classmates were aspiring to go on and do more…and it was pretty gossipy…My class was really small, so that also impressed upon me the importance to get out of that small town and come to [larger city] and go to school and see things differently.

Amber’s older sisters played a significant role in shaping her desire for independence, and they looked after her, or as Amber explains, they “swooped in and
took care of me.” One sister, who is several years older than her, was a significant female role model and significantly influenced Amber’s career aspirations. Amber described how, as a young girl, she would explore her sister’s anatomy textbooks to learn about how the human body worked. She found inspiration watching her sister’s journey into the nursing profession and decided that she would follow in her footsteps. Her sisters also played a significant role in modeling the value of empathy that is deeply instilled in Amber and showed up repeatedly in her story.

In high school, Amber had a college prep teacher who helped her see the world differently and encouraged her to develop inner confidence. As an early role model, this “very strong woman” encouraged Amber to explore her talents, to “come out of her shell,” and to view the world in a broader manner than provincial life had allowed.

Amber left home right after high school to attend a private, all-women’s urban university. Her experiences there expanded her views of the world and shaped how she came to see herself as a woman. She described her experience at college as “refreshing” and “liberating.” “I could be myself,” she explained. She also described the independence that living away from home brought, as it offered an escape from the spotlight of small-town life where “everybody knew everything about everyone.”

Amber found additional female role models in professors who were “very progressive in their thinking,” but it was the school’s patron saint who initially inspired her to join the school. Amber shared that she had been attracted to the university because of the saint’s story of martyrdom, as she had been burned at the stake for her outspoken and progressive views:

She was a woman who was before her time, and very outspoken, and so much so that they burned her. They burned her on a wheel….And I thought, ‘yup. This is
the place I want to be.’ I named my first born after her because of what she stood for and because of her influence with women’s rights.

Amber began her career in healthcare right after college and assumed her first leadership role under a woman who had served as a mentor to her and challenged Amber to realize her potential. She was groomed to take on informal leadership responsibilities prior to her first formal leader role, and she stated that having a strong woman as an advocate and mentor positively impacted her career. Amber described this mentor as having “pulled [her] in” to her first formal leadership role and she was a model for Amber’s values of relationship-building and goal-achievement. She encouraged Amber to move out of her comfort zone and take on new opportunities that would empower her to succeed:

I think she [first manager] saw leadership qualities in me that I didn’t necessarily see. But when she put me in these different positions and places, I was able to achieve success in them and do well...she just kept moving me around and positioning me in the hospital as well...for visibility and for me to take credit for some of the work that I was doing.

When Amber talked about beginning her career as a healthcare practitioner, she stated that she “didn’t expect to become a leader.” She shared that she had always had a natural inclination to take on leadership responsibilities, but “never saw herself as a leader.” Amber used the metaphor of women in her life “swooping in” or “pulling” her in several times through our conversation. This act of being ‘taken under another woman’s wing’ helped Amber see her own individual value and strength.

Amber’s decision to pursue a career in healthcare aligned with her personal values of empathy and caregiving, and the values of courage and determination in leadership. She shared a powerful story of a young woman with a serious illness who had been cared for by her team. The illness was one which her team had not experienced previously, and
Amber described the challenge that she faced as a leader in trying to secure the appropriate care for a seriously ill patient while navigating significant uncertainty:

…we had to do things on the unit that we’d never done before because no one had taken care of people who were this sick…so we needed equipment that we didn’t have. So, I would say that we did things differently for the staff and for the family that helped them to care for them in different ways and we accommodated the family in different ways because they’re an extension of the patient. And we did that and kept her alive for much longer than we probably would have otherwise by bringing in special equipment and ventilators and kind of figuring out how we can provide training just in the moment with these staff.

Amber’s value of “leading with relationship” helped her secure the care that her patient needed, even beyond the capabilities of her own staff. She coordinated care amongst different hospital teams both within her own organization and that of another hospital system, and by doing so she helped extend the life of a critically ill young woman. At the end of the crisis, Amber recognized the significance of what everyone had achieved and credited her team with pulling together in a very difficult situation. She likened herself to a “proud mama” as she spoke about her staff’s efforts:

This is really why I went into healthcare. And I was just so proud of the team, the physicians, everybody in the moment…that to me it just kind of impressed upon the fact that as a leader my job isn’t to lead and take the credit, but it’s to really equip them [the staff] and to serve those that we’re there to serve.

Amber described herself as “a very bold leader with high empathy.” She shared that relationships are key to her leadership approach and that her success has been tied to the success of others. She shared that “connecting with people” is particularly important in her work and she said that she tries to create an environment where her direct reports feel heard and supported. She attributed her team’s success to the relationships that have been built and the openness that is inherent in those relationships.
Amber also described her leadership style as “goal-oriented and very driven” with “high expectations.” As her career has grown, she has had to push herself to be more assertive and make herself heard, but she also shared that complex situations require different approaches:

You can’t always go with the flow if you want to get things done… but there’s times when I choose to kind of sit back and listen and observe, because if it’s not the right time to jump in and assert yourself, you just don’t want to do it because it’s like throwing a grenade on the table. And then there’s times like, no I’m gonna stand up for what I think I believe is right and share my perspective even if it’s different from others. And that’s something that…there’s a time and a place to do that and I choose when I’m going to do that or not.

Amber tries to balance her investment in relationships with her need to be assertive as a leader. She described herself as “clear, articulate, and matter-of-fact” when faced with a challenge and she is able to demonstrate an assertive, respectful style with a focus on “moving things forward.”

Amber was exposed to positive women role models who influenced the values that inform her leadership style today, and they motivated her to advocate and develop other women leaders. Amber stated that part of her role as a leader is to encourage and empower her direct reports to see themselves as leaders, regardless of their formal role in the organization. The metaphor of ‘having a seat at the table,’ which Amber used several times through our interview, is something that she facilitates for her team members:

As a leader and as a woman, I always talk about being courageous in leadership and being…bold in our thinking, while also having empathy for others. And a sensitivity for thinking that, as we are woman leaders and we are kind of blazing our own trail in a way, our job is to make sure that those we are leading are turning into leaders as well. So, we are not just creating followers but also leaders. I am somebody who feels that women should have a voice and not only have a seat at the table, but a voice at the table that’s going to be able to influence and which will be heard.
Amber stated that she believes strongly in women’s empowerment and she was unequivocal about her views on women’s ability to achieve success:

I just think that as a woman you can do anything you set your heart to. And I don’t feel that women should let any societal norms get in their way if there’s something they want to do and feel passionate about.

Yet, she acknowledged that there have been times as a leader when she has had to overcome doubts about her own ability. She talked about suffering from “imposter syndrome” when she took on her first highly visible leadership position, but she ultimately found the courage and tenacity to “pull up [her] big girl pants and go and do it.”

Amber stated that being a woman and working in a caregiving field has influenced her leadership style significantly. Within that context, she described herself as “very caring in a lot of ways” and “wanting her team to achieve consensus.” She sees her gender as being complementary to her work as a leader in healthcare because she can use empathy and the power of relationships to do good work. However, she said that her gender has, at times, prevented her from receiving recognition for her work. She described the challenge of women being “pretty humble” and not “taking as much credit” for their achievements and contributions. She shared that some of the challenges that she has faced in receiving recognition for her work is likely conflated with her role in the organization and the larger perception of nurses as having less credibility than other functions:

I think as a woman and as a nurse…in a healthcare organization, I think that you’re not necessarily given the kind of credibility that you are if you’re a male from operations that is managing or leading finance and operations…
The perceived unequal status between roles in her profession was illustrated in a story Amber shared of a time when a physician colleague admonished her in front of her nursing team. She described how she stood up for herself as a woman leader:

…it was a stressful day in the unit. I was torn between a couple different things happening and [a physician] chewed me out in the middle of the hallway in front of all of my nurses. He literally yelled at me… I left and I thought, ‘what just happened?’… I asked him to meet and I said, “I would never ever speak to you that way in front of your physicians. Why did you talk to me like that in front of the nurses? You had no idea what I was working on and I was working on your behalf.” It was a pretty direct conversation with him and just sharing, ”this is how I felt in the moment and this is what I was doing to help you out, that you did not know, but instead you took it upon yourself to yell at me in the middle of the unit.” I said, “we can’t have that happening on our unit. We can’t have that happening between you and me because you’re the leader of the medical group in the hospital and I’m the leader of the nurses on this unit.”

In addition to directly asserting herself as a leader, Amber has also employed more subtle ways of commanding respect when facing difficult situations that challenge her credibility. She shared a story about how she would supplement her tall stature with high heels if she was facing a “contentious meeting with a man” because being “the tall girl” helped secure respect. Amber made it clear that she has had to “work harder,” assert herself, and “perform and achieve success” in order to prove herself as a woman leader. She has had experiences that exposed a double standard for men and women in her organization, but she has confronted them with her signature assertiveness:

I’ve also had a male leader—my direct manager—tell me it wasn’t ok for me to assert myself in a meeting and be more bold and confrontational, but it would be ok for ‘Joe’ for example, because he’s just being ‘Joe.’ So, to me that is something I also push back on to say, “no, a woman, myself, I can speak my truth at the table, and I can say it in a very respectful and effective way.”

If Amber could go back and give her younger self advice it would be “to go easy on yourself” and “don’t worry about what other people are going to think so much.” She
would recommend that young women leaders learn to advocate for themselves and take credit for their work:

Don’t be a person doing the work behind the curtain and letting other people take the credit for your work. That you are doing the work, you’re supporting teams if you have teams, but you’re also positioning yourself or asking your leader to position you at tables where you can share the work that you’ve done so that you make that visible and you get credit for it. Because too many women do work…are leaders—women leaders especially—do work behind the scenes just to keep the wheels going on the bus so to speak because they’re helping out or they just need to keep things moving and they’re not given credit for it because it’s not visible.

Amber’s implicit association test score suggested a slight association of male with supporter and female with leader. She stated that working in an organization with a significant number of women leaders, including the CEO, and working in a profession that is inclusive of women (i.e. nursing) created an “environment” where she has been “surrounded by women leaders.” Amber also shared that she was a bit surprised by the results because she “thought it would be a little stronger.”

Susan’s Story

Susan is a successful entrepreneur in the nonprofit sector, married with older children, and an active member of her community. Susan places high importance on education and is pursuing a doctorate degree. I met Susan four years ago and I know her to be a deeply caring woman whose values shine through in her work. She is a passionate and tireless advocate for underrepresented people and has dedicated much of her time to social causes.

Susan was raised in a nontraditional household by her single mother, a divorced woman who valued education and independence, and by her aunt, who was a free-spirited
and liberated woman. Susan shared that her early life was deeply influenced by strong
women:

My mother was a divorced mom but did not receive any child support or any
support whatsoever from my biological father. So, she truly was stand alone on
her own two feet...There was a lack of male figures in my life.

Susan’s aunt also modeled female independence and displayed “less conventional”
behaviors for that time, such as traveling alone to foreign countries.

Susan came of age in a time when women were pushing the boundaries of
society’s norms. She described her high school and college years as a “very, very frothy”
time in the women’s movement, and she was influenced by the many social reformers of
her day, such as Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan. Susan was inspired by artists like
Helen Reddy and Aretha Franklin who sang about women’s empowerment, and she saw
sports stars like Billie Jean King and Chrissy Everett as exemplars for what women could
achieve. Susan, who is a marathon runner, described with passion the impact that women
athletes made on society and how they transformed the way she saw herself:

You had Switzer breaking the prohibition of women in the Boston marathon and
running and completing the Boston marathon when women had been told they
weren’t strong enough to do that...so there were all these examples coming forth
of women who had achieved and were achieving at levels comparable to noted
men. And it was a very, very profound time to say, “I can do this. I have the
means. I have the education. I have the experience. I can be just like them.
Independent and make up my own mind and not have to depend upon a male.”

Susan’s early family life saw many instances where women challenged cultural
norms and lived in nontraditional ways. She was raised by a mother who was a single
parent, worked outside the home, and attended college later in life, providing Susan with
a model for women’s empowerment. However, Susan’s family held strong religious
beliefs that contrasted with her single-parent upbringing, and she was raised in a conservative community whose views often conflicted with her family’s lifestyle:

We lived in a very Catholic community because my family were very, very strong Catholics… a single divorced mom was not the norm because Catholics at that time were very judgmental about divorce. In many cases my peers’ families did not want their daughters to play with me because they felt as if there was something wrong morally or they were concerned with what might go on in the household with women living alone. There was this non-acceptance, to a certain extent, of our family.

Owing to her own struggles, Susan’s mother instilled in her the importance of education and financial independence. Education has been a core value of Susan’s throughout her life and she has instilled this value in her children. She views education as a means to self-sufficiency and a way to overcome adversity caused by the barriers that women may face within the current social system:

…education is very important to me. I think because of my mom’s situation early on, I just learned that we don’t have much in life as women except our intellect. And so I felt that it was very, very important to invest in education and to invest in the right experiences so that one could always be independent…I have spoken with both of my daughters very explicitly about choosing careers and obtaining as much education as possible to always remain independent. And should they marry, if the marriage does not work out for any reason, they will always have the opportunity to be independent and they will never have to feel that they have to stay in the relationship for economic reasons

Susan went away to college directly following high school and this was a time when Susan started to assert her own tenacity and independence as a young woman. When Susan’s mother told her that she would fail in college, she viewed this as a challenge:

Sometimes when people say, “you’re going to fail” or “you’re not going to be able to do this,” you dig in – and creating conviction that ‘yes, I am. I will do this. And I can do this.’ And that’s what it created in me. So, when I got to college, it was very important to me that I succeeded at all costs and I was going to do anything possible to succeed.
College provided Susan an environment where she could explore her interests and start to shape her professional aspirations as well as her individual identity. She described the academic environment as “extremely stimulating” and a place where she “learned a lot about life.” However, it was also a time when she started to witness gender inequality in the workplace, and she became skeptical of the value that business leaders and others in positions of power placed on women:

There is a lot of sexism in business and men are drawn to highly attractive women, but they don’t necessarily respect women intellectually…I learned early on that women faced a lot of discrimination and could be taken advantage of. Women had to be extremely vigilant and careful. Women needed to make sure that they were hired into an environment where they were respected for their skills, would be given opportunities to further develop, and had opportunities to advance.

After Susan completed college, she joined a large professional services firm where she worked in a team environment that required a significant amount of collaboration in order to successfully complete projects. One of her first managers was a woman and partner in the firm who demonstrated advanced interpersonal skills as well as a keen business acumen. This early experience influenced Susan’s leadership values:

She took a very analytical approach to everything and that was extremely insightful, because often times you can’t argue with analytics. So, there’s generally a rationale and evidence that is laid down that is more easily acceptable than other things. So, early on I learned from her that you have to be very methodical, very analytical, provide lots of evidence, lots of rationale, lots of proof. And you need to have very good collaborative working relationships, interpersonal skills, and a great sense of humor. She asked for opinions and perspectives. That was a little bit in contrast to some of the other males within the firm who were much more directive and authoritarian and kind of asserted things without evidence—but were accepted. So, she was a good role model.

Susan’s early leadership roles influenced her enduring belief in collaboration and in creating an environment where people’s voices are heard so that differing opinions might be considered. Her first leadership role provided her opportunities to develop
“good teamwork” skills and she learned how to influence others “without being overbearing” and “provide opportunity for input and collaboration.” She contrasted this style to some of her male colleagues who could be “autocratic.”

As her career progressed and she took on more responsibility, Susan experienced gender discrimination that undermined her success as she worked to realize her career aspirations. She sometimes faced gender disparities that made reaching her goals more difficult and put undue stress on her personal life. She described being assigned housekeeping tasks that “nobody else wanted.” She shared that there is often a perception that women are “good household managers,” so they are given non-revenue generating responsibilities. While working for a large consulting firm, Susan was held to the same development goals as her male colleagues but was also given additional responsibility for running a recruitment program. She stepped up to the challenge, partly because she “didn’t want to make waves” and partly because she wanted to prove herself, but the added responsibility took a toll on her personally. She also faced biases that challenged her innate ability to lead:

I felt in many ways often times that men could be uncomfortable being managed by a woman. And that there was a need to demonstrate and prove that it was appropriate, that I should be managing them.

Susan’s data-driven approach to business gave her an objectivity that would inform her decision-making capability. She was once tasked with examining the viability of a potential business acquisition and subsequently decided that the data did not support moving forward. She recommended to a key decision-maker that he terminate the deal, but instead of being commended for saving the firm from an imprudent investment, she was castigated for challenging a superior:
His approach was to undermine me as a woman and a manager of this project because my opinion was different than his own. What ended up happening was…I did get moved out from that assignment…He really made my life miserable.

Susan worked in a “very male-dominated environment” that required her to “go the extra step of appearing tougher” so that she would be viewed as a legitimate leader in her organization. She stated that social stereotypes make it harder for women leaders to assert themselves, so they must work harder to overcome those perceptions. Susan stated that she faced challenges as a leader that she felt men mostly did not, and she shared that women must often expend unnecessary energy proving their ability to lead. She shared that these “biases against women” create an “unfair burden” on women that hinders their potential.

Susan experienced gender discrimination multiple times throughout her career, and these experiences shaped her perspective on how her gender could influence her professional outcomes. She described a time when she took the foreign service exam so that she could enter the diplomatic corps, but Susan, along with most of the other women in her program, did not pass the exam. Several years later a class-action suit was brought against the government and it was revealed that Susan and many other women had passed. By the time Susan found out, however, she had already moved on to another career. These experiences of discrimination created in Susan a strong belief that women must support each other in order to break down the societal barriers that prevent women from succeeding to the same degree as men:

There often times is a fair amount of competitiveness amongst women, and that is counterproductive. You need to identify women allies and to engage them in helping one another. There are networks of information, opportunities, insights that one can build with other women. And you could count on women more than you could count on men.
Susan stated that current social norms and structures work against women’s interests and that, although traditional gender roles are shifting, significant changes in the prevalent system must occur for women to finally realize equality. Susan shared that the current “support structures” are ineffective in advancing women’s causes and she stated that other countries, such as Israel, have social programs that do a much better job than the United States of helping women succeed. She stated that the problem of daycare is particularly detrimental to women’s success, leaving many to negotiate trade-offs between having a family and having a career.

Susan shared that she made choices during her career that pitted her professional aspirations against her personal desires. She described how she made sacrifices to accommodate a demanding career and how those choices “were very trying on a marriage.” It was clear that she had struggled during her career to nurture both her professional goals and maternal desires:

I had to compromise my personal life quite a bit. I had to initially hide that I was married in order to get the job. And when they found out they were shocked, because they thought that they were hiring a single woman. And then for the longest time they put off advancing me because they were concerned about me having children and just dropping out. And, so, I waited to have children. I waited to become pregnant with my first child until two years after I was made a principal. So, deliberately we made choices to kind of hide the other part of my life in order to advance in leadership.

If Susan could give her younger self advice, she would recommend seeking opportunities that were “more independent of male dominated and designed structures” and she would have invested in “entrepreneurial opportunities” or another career route that “would have been more supportive of women.”

During the mid-point of her career, Susan left her high-level position to start her own business. As an independent entrepreneur, she has been able to make decisions that
align better with her personal values and provide her opportunities to lead in a way that feels more authentic to her:

You don’t have anyone else’s guidelines to live up to but your own [when you work for yourself]. I think that I can be more truthful and transparent. And that is very critical. I can also be more collaborative and creative in terms of designing different partnerships and different working relationships than I could in a male dominated structure that tended to be more hierarchical and more prescribed.

Despite the adversity that Susan faced in developing her own career and balancing her personal and professional aspirations, she has maintained strong leadership values that give voice to others, recognize and invest in people, and advocate for individual empowerment. Susan shared that most of her work colleagues would describe her as “collaborative.” She described how she balances her formal authority with a genuine desire to give voice to others, and she stated that leaders “need to bring people with them” so that they can make informed decisions.

Susan also shared that it is important for leaders to recognize others and to take the time to express appreciation. In her role as board chairman for a nonprofit organization, Susan shared that she often gives “verbal support” for the CEO, fellow board members, and others in the organization. She calls out specific details of their work and praises their contributions because, as she stated, it is “very, very important” for leaders to express gratitude.

Susan stated that developing others is “the biggest task of leadership” and she shared that many leaders overlook this responsibility:

I think the male leaders of yesterday did not do that. And I think that’s why repeatedly people are brought in from the outside to take leadership roles over those longer tenured employees. I feel that for the health of any organization, and also as a basic responsibility, a leader owes their direct reports the opportunity to progress in their careers and take on more responsibility, and the only way you accomplish that is by developing them.
Susan used the analogy of leadership as being like an orchestra conductor to emphasize the importance of empowering people to exercise their strengths and abilities while also receiving guidance from leadership. She described these efforts as “bringing together all of these great authorities” so that objectives can be accomplished as a team.

Susan shared that many women have a natural tendency to act as caretakers, and she stated that this tendency lends itself to a positive leadership style. She shared that there is a perception that “women will be more collaborative” and “caring,” which described as positive traits in leaders. Susan stated that she sees herself as having a caring nature and that she believes that it, along with her sensitivity to others’ emotions, is a positive leadership trait. However, she shared that the situation factors into how much she demonstrates these traits:

I do have the caregiving tendency. And I do think that I do have the ability to perceive others’ emotions. I know that I do not enact these perceptions all the time. There’s a difference between having those characteristics and acting on those. And I think that sometimes I act in a caregiving way and with emotional intelligence and in other situations I don’t.

Susan’s IAT results suggested no automatic preference between male or female. She shared that having worked for both men and women leaders likely created in her a more neutral view of leadership, and that she did not believe gender should factor into leadership selection. However, she stated that there are still many women who “believe that men should be the leaders in society” and that it is “unfortunate” that they think this way. She attributed this bias to the “socializing” that women experience in environments where “men should be heads of household” and “women should be subordinate to men.”

Susan shared that women face gender stereotypes that men do not and that generational norms contribute to persistent gender inequities:
In every organization that I’ve been in there’s been very strong male egos that I’ve had to deal with, and in order to do that I have had to be self-effacing and modest in order to stroke that male ego. I keep hoping that things will change but we still have a lot of leaders who are from that generation when that was the norm. Leaders who are in their 50s and 60s and 70s who run our corporations and our government are still suppressing women, women’s rights and women’s equality. Until we get rid of those generations of leaders, things are not likely to change. It’s an unfortunate situation.

Tammy’s Story

Tammy is a mid-level leader in a manufacturing services firm with over ten years of leadership experience. She is married and has no children. I met Tammy more than fifteen years ago when we first became professional colleagues and our relationship developed into a warm friendship over the years. Tammy is a deeply self-aware and intuitive woman who displays a strong sense of empathy for others. She has a sharp sense of humor that endears her to others, and she balances this humor with a thoughtful and compassionate nature.

Tammy is the youngest of six children and has three brothers and two sisters. Tammy’s mother and father were together until her mother’s death when Tammy was a young adult, and she said that her mother had to be “self-sufficient” much of the time as her father spent a significant amount of time traveling for work. Her mother gave up her career aspirations when she had her first child and Tammy saw her mother as the “household facilitator.” Tammy credits her mother for being relatively independent despite some of the restrictions she faced, such as not having a driver’s license until she was thirty-five. However, she said that her mother was “stuck between a rock and a hard place” with raising six children and “not having the best of marriages.” Witnessing her mother’s situation motivated Tammy to “take care of herself” because she knew that “that wasn’t a life she wanted to have.”
Tammy’s siblings are all several years older than her with the next youngest, a brother, separated by five years. The sister closest to her in age is eleven years her senior and Tammy saw her as a key figure in her life. Tammy’s mother battled cancer throughout Tammy’s childhood and was often sick, so her sister would step in and play the role of “second mother” to her. Tammy described her sister as being “caring” and “very maternal,” and she viewed her sister and brother-in-law as “surrogate” parents. Tammy’s sister got married and had children at a young age and Tammy shared that her sister viewed motherhood as “her calling.”

Tammy’s oldest sister is sixteen years older than her and was an early model for independence. As a young girl, Tammy saw her as someone who led “this really cool life” by attending college and developing her own interests. Tammy described feeling inspired by her sister’s liberated lifestyle and it further fueled her own desire for independence.

Tammy also found inspiration in some of the television characters that were popular when she was a child. She viewed Mary Tyler Moore, particularly, as a significant influence on her quest for independence as well as her career aspirations:

I thought Mary Tyler Moore was so cool. I thought she was so pretty, she dressed really cute, and she had this awesome apartment in Minneapolis. She had this awesome job, and at one point I really thought I wanted to go into journalism, but then took a different route. It influenced me in high school because I then became managing editor of our high school newspaper and went to journalism camp one summer.

Tammy shared that she did not “give much thought” to gender when she was younger and had not “paid a whole lot of attention” to how her gender influenced her until she was approached for the current study. She shared that she “never had the
mindset that she could not do something because she was a female” and her gender was not a factor in how she viewed her ability to succeed.

Tammy went to college right after high school and described this period of her life as “fun” and a time of “exploration.” She described making new friends and exploring various opportunities to become involved in groups. She joined a sorority for “a hot tick,” but quickly decided that it was “too structured, too regimented.” She stated that the sorority “dictated” who she could have as friends, so she decided that it was not a good fit for her. She described her relationships with other college women in dichotomous terms:

As a woman, I did not want to be around women 24/7. Going back to a sorority experience—it’s a lot…A lot of personalities. A lot of strong female personalities. Women at that time—and maybe it has shaped me to a certain extent now reflecting upon it—but they can either be your biggest advocates or they can be your big, big nemesis, right? Or just people who can tear you down.

Tammy entered the workforce in the mid-1990’s and has spent her career in the manufacturing industry. She shared that the industry has changed significantly over the years but considered it “very male dominated” when she started her career twenty-five years ago. Reflecting her previous views, she shared that, even though she “just knew it was male dominated,” she did not think about her gender in relation to the industry and did not feel that she was disadvantaged because of it.

One of her first leaders was a male vice president who deeply influenced her commitment to developing strong relationships:

I had an awesome, awesome vice president that ran the company and I think was a huge influence in my life just in terms of how you treat people. He didn’t know a stranger, he knew something about everybody’s personal life that worked there, was able to communicate with them, and had conversations that made them feel like they were important to the company and that he cared about each and every person.
Tammy contrasted this to her experience with a woman manager during that same time:

It was old school. She ran it pretty old school. So, you got there at 8:00, if you got in at 8:01 you were late, and you got a talking to. It was very 8:00 to 5:00. You don’t come in late, you take an hour for lunch, you don’t get to take an extended lunch to get personal things done. It was very regimented. She was very regimented.

Tammy’s first formal leadership role was as a director for a small team of knowledge workers. She recalled an incident in which her boss overruled her on a hiring decision and left Tammy to manage someone who “had her own agenda” and “didn’t really seek any feedback” from her. This experience left Tammy feeling that she was not really a leader in that position. She eventually moved into a director role with another company where she was “empowered” to set strategy for her team and worked with senior leadership to drive business results. She shared that one of the biggest challenges she faced as a leader was “getting out of the weeds” and “relinquishing control of the tactical” needs of the business. She attributed this to her desire to maintain a “safety net” because being in a leadership position makes her feel “more exposed” to scrutiny versus being “somebody who’s doing the tactical day-to-day work.”

Tammy described her leadership style as that of a “coach.” She said that she considers herself “pretty democratic” and shared that it is important to “get everybody’s input” before making a decision that will impact her team. She shared that it is important to “listen to what’s important” to her team members and to collaborate with them on how to improve and grow. She shared that her team would describe her as “empathetic and fair” and “funny and helpful” but may also consider her “a bitch once in a while.” She shared that gender may factor into how her team members perceive her:
I think sometimes if someone is a sensitive individual on the team, they can take things out of context and maybe feel like I’m being a bitch, even though that’s not my intent. And it’s more so probably with females on the team versus males…I think it just comes with women being more emotional and taking things more to heart and not—and I feel that men sometimes, well often times, can just brush things off and not take things personally.

Tammy’s value of empathy showed up in a story she shared about having to address a problem with one of her direct reports earlier in her career. She said that she was “mortified” that she would have to confront him and that, as someone who “doesn’t like conflict,” she struggled with how best to approach the situation. Ultimately, she decided that she would try to put herself “in his shoes” and commit to helping him improve. This commitment to “humanizing” situations has guided Tammy’s leadership throughout her career.

Tammy stated that her gender may influence how she leads by making her “more empathetic” and being “in tune to feelings.” She also described having to “dial back” how she presents herself “because women in leadership sometimes get perceived as being bitchy and cold.” She shared that this perception has motivated her to “work a little harder on the softer skills to prevent that from happening.”

Echoing her earlier comment, Tammy shared that the industry has become more egalitarian regarding gender, though she shared that older generations may be “more judgmental” of women leaders. She stated that the diversity of generations in operation today lends to fewer “stereotypical expectations being placed on female leaders.” Yet, Tammy stated that she believes that women leaders face stereotypes that male leaders do not due to their gender:

If a man is a strong leader he’s a strong leader and he has a strong personality, but having a woman have those same qualifiers or same characteristics…you can be seen as being hardcore or bitchy.
As Tammy reflected on her success and the realization of her goals, she shared the role that her gender may—or may not—have played:

We’ve come full circle from when I was a kid and seeing what I wanted to be as a child—having that independence, having a career, being able to take care of myself, and those were things that I figured out at an early age, and here I am: an independent person who can take care of herself and has done so for many, many years now. And I don’t know if that has anything to do with me being a woman or not. I can’t say. I can’t say. Do I feel like I had to work harder for it? I don’t even know if I can say that. I feel like I’ve had some lucky breaks in my life…I don’t know.

Tammy’s IAT results suggested a slight association of female with supporter and male with leader. She was “not surprised” by her results and was “OK” about having a slight association of men with leaders because, as she stated, there is bound “to be a little bias” due to the “world [she] grew up in”:

I think it’s just what I’ve been exposed to, it’s what I know…coming up through the ranks. It’s always been a very—again, this industry in general has changed but it’s still very male dominated. It’s what I know. So right or wrong, it’s going to influence the results, I think.

Laura’s Story

Laura is a mid-level leader in a large financial services corporation where she manages a team of business analysts. She is married with no children. Laura and I met about six years ago and have developed a friendship that often entails stories and laughter over shared meals. She has a strong intellect, keen wit, and observational nature that give her unique—and often humorous—insights into human nature and its foibles. Laura has a friendly and open communication style that makes talking with her easy and enjoyable.

Laura grew up the oldest of two children and considers her childhood that of “a pretty standard Gen-Xer.” Her father worked as an electrical engineer and her mother left her career as a schoolteacher after Laura was born. Laura considered her early family life
as “kind of a standard, idyllic childhood.” Her mother was heavily involved in volunteer activities with her school and Laura reminisced on playing with her friends and “running around” in her “relatively rural, suburban exurb.”

Laura has one sibling, a brother, and did not consider her relationship with him to be particularly close growing up, attributing this to the four and a half years that separated them. They shared equally in household tasks, though Laura admitted that they “got off easy” because her mother’s perfectionist tendencies sometimes meant that they could get out of doing chores altogether. Laura reflected on one disparity that she saw between her and her brother as possibly being influenced by gender:

It is kind of funny, you know, when you talk about my youth and gender roles and stuff like that, they always encouraged my brother to go out and get a job. My brother had jobs—I had babysitting gigs where I earned spending money—but my brother mowed lawns for pay, my brother was a busboy at the local restaurant for pay. It was cool for my brother to do that and he was encouraged to do that in a way that I wasn’t. And some of it might be because I was the girl and he was the boy, some of it might be because I was the oldest kid and he was the baby and they just didn’t care at that point. I was a very gifted and talented AP student and so I think they wanted me to feel free to focus on my studies. Right? Maybe? Sometimes, upon reflection, I think there might have been a gendered component to that as well.

Laura described her parents’ roles in the house as reflecting traditional gender norms. Her mother “took care of the house” while her father managed yard work, home maintenance, and “did the money stuff.” Laura’s mother returned to the workforce when Laura and her brother were older, and this necessitated a shift in some of the responsibilities within her family, but her parents mostly maintained their roles until her mother’s death in 2008. It was during this time that the division of labor that existed between her parents was most apparent. Laura described returning home and spending
time with her father so that she could teach him how to perform basic household chores, such as laundry, which he “had never done…in his forty-odd years of marriage.”

Laura described her role models growing up as consisting of teachers and extended family members. She saw her grandparents as significant figures in her life, but being an academically gifted child, she found a lot of her inspiration in teachers. She described a female teacher in high school as “fantastic,” with a “no-nonsense” approach, a commitment to being “incredibly fair,” and having “very high standards” for her students. Laura was initially inspired to pursue a career in STEM, but then shifted to the liberal arts later in high school when she was nurtured and mentored by teachers who recognized her talent for language and literature.

Laura described her high school years as a time when, as she said, “I learned to play to my strengths effectively.” She shared that her goals were to “get out with the markers of future success” and “leave [her hometown] behind.” Laura described her high school self as “unhappy” and feeling that “high school sucked” because she struggled to break free from the social category in which she had been placed. She stated that academic achievement was her ticket out:

The bad thing was, once you were slotted into your particular lane, there was really no getting out of it. There was no crossing over…It was really safe. It was not objectively horrible, but again, you’re fifteen. It’s high school. And there is no…no boy soulmate lining up to knock down your door. And you’re lonely and you feel isolated. And I’m thinking, ‘I’m getting the hell out of dodge and the best way for me to do that is to excel at this.’

Laura considered herself an “anti-sexism” advocate in high school and it was there that she started to form some of her views about women in society. Her inclination toward literature and history helped bring clarity to her position. She shared examples from literature, including Zenobia, the ailing wife in Edith Wharton’s Ethan Frome, and
The Wife of Bath in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, which is a tale about women’s desires in a male-dominated world. Laura shared that these characters provided her with a historical context to “reckon with…from her current perspective,” but also stated that her views about women are “colored by her time period.”

Laura went on to college directly from high school. Despite her academic ability and desire to attend an Ivy League school, her family’s financial situation did not align with her ambitions, so she enrolled at a public university instead. She described herself as a “reluctant, cranky” freshman who had difficult fitting in with the other young women in her freshman dorm. She described this time as being “very lonely” because she lacked friends who shared her interests, and it was not until she joined a dorm for academically inclined students later in her sophomore year that she found “her people” and started to feel more accepted.

Laura described herself as being “very good at relationships of proximity” in which she enjoys friendships in the moment but is less inclined to maintain them over time and distance. She reflected on the female friends she had in college, and she shared deeper insights into the nature of her relationships with women generally:

I still don’t really have that [close female friendships] today. I have really good solid acquaintances. I see people who have capital ‘B’, capital ‘F’ best friends and I don’t actually have one of those. My closest thing to my best friend is actually my spouse. I have a network of close-ish friends. I have the women I work out with in the morning that I really like, I’ve got people that I…keep in touch with relatively frequently from former jobs, etcetera. But that really close, bosom friendship…I don’t even know that it’s in my nature. Sometimes I feel like a bit of a freak, but again, I’m really good at relationships of proximity. It’s cool. But, letting people in for that deep, really close friendship—I can do that for my spouse, but I don’t know who else I can do that for.

As with her high school teachers, Laura viewed her college professors as role models and mentors. One woman, who was her German professor, was an engaging
lecturer who inspired Laura to take an advanced language course and further develop her passion for medieval studies. Laura shared that her freshman comp professor was a woman who expanded her worldview by giving her a “first look at happy gay people.” While these women had a positive influence on Laura as a young college student, she did not seem particularly close to them. She shared that she had gotten to know her German professor “a little bit” and that she had stayed “sort of in semi-touch” with her comp professor, indicating that these relationships reflected Laura’s general tendency toward “relationships of proximity.”

Laura’s first career-related position was in an office setting where she moved from a temporary position into a permanent role. Her manager was a woman whom Laura described as the first boss she had who “actually cared about developing her.” She was a “very maternal leader” who challenged Laura to set goals for her personal and professional development and was invested in her success. Laura shared that her young age was a factor in the maternal nature of the relationship and described her boss’s management style as “pretty similar to her approach to parenting her grown kids.” She gave Laura opportunities to build her skillset and she nurtured her potential. Laura learned from her that leadership “is just applied common sense” in many cases and that “bosses aren’t inherently better” than others.

Laura’s next boss was a woman who Laura noted was closer in age to her and took a more “pragmatic” approach to their relationship. Laura described her as a “good formative leader” who helped her manage through “bullshit” to do the best job possible. She inspired Laura’s approach to problem-solving through “the Socratic method,” and Laura employs this method to encourage her team members to construct their own
solutions to business challenges. Laura stated that she appreciated her boss’s advice to “appropriately question the American culture of self-improvement”:

She said, “you’re fine the way you are. You got hired for who you are, not who you could potentially be. So make sure that as you move to change who you are and how you do what you do, that you’re doing it because it’s something that you genuinely want to do and that you genuinely feel will make your existence better—not because you need to change something to make yourself fit somebody else’s perception of what they think you should be.”

Laura had exposure to a senior-level woman leader whom she described as “effortlessly personable” and “extremely approachable.” She had a results-oriented focus that defined success as “progressing in terms of your problem set.” Her approach influenced Laura’s sensible, goal-driven leadership style.

In contrast, Laura then described a woman—a “skip-level” leader—as someone who displayed a leadership style that Laura knew she “didn’t want to emulate.” She described this leader as “a very big talker,” but someone who could not “translate” her strategic objectives into actionable goals.

Laura described her first management role in transactional terms. She was given supervisory responsibility for a temp worker who was “brought in to relieve short-term stress.” Laura shared that she did not seek out a leadership role for many years after that because she recognized that it would take a “certain amount of emotional energy” and she wanted to make sure that she was comfortable with who she was before she would take on “responsibility for the career of another person.” Laura said that she views herself as a leader who takes the role “very seriously” and attributes the development of her leadership ability to “self-reflection” and time spent in informal leadership positions where she developed “indirect influence and indirect power.”
When Laura moved from an individual contributor role into leadership, she learned that she was much more visible because “people do think of you as a leader and you need to learn to work that role.” She shared that leaders are sometimes “scrutinized” in ways that individual contributors are not, and this led her to change her behavior. She described having to “rein in” her expressiveness and to “comport herself as a leader.” Her description of sitting on a diversity panel at work provided insights into how she compartmentalizes facets of her personality:

I was on this ‘bringing your whole self to work’ panel. I was on a panel with a guy who was raised by Japanese parents, a guy of Hispanic origin, and me, a lady. I said, “yeah, I’m a white girl, but here’s the thing: I have an incredibly nerdy job with lots of dudes in it. I’m the girl at the sausage party fairly frequently. What you don’t know about me, what you don’t see, is that I have tons of extremely female coded hobbies. I knit, I crochet, I embroider. I quilt. But I don’t bring that to work because…” I thought, holy crap. I don’t go to the women’s sit and stitch over the lunch hour because if I were to do that, if I were to be seen sitting knitting a sock over lunch from noon to one people wouldn’t take me seriously! “We just saw her knitting a sock!” I’m thinking, ‘is this true? Is it fair?’ Probably not. But that’s the internal dialogue I had to have with myself in order to be taken seriously. I think we all round off edges of our personality to fit a more corporate mold.

She reiterated that she often excludes “female coded hobbies” in order to be viewed as credible, and she again hinted to the unfairness of these organizational norms:

I don’t know that that is something that I feel comfortable being in this professional environment given my role at the firm. It’s like, “no, no, Laura is a serious leader. The fact that she is knitting a gaily striped sock is not relevant to your understanding of her as a human.” Sometimes that’s kind of sad.

Laura shared that another woman leader in her organization communicated similar sentiments about making trade-offs between parts of her personality and the desire to be viewed as a credible leader. Laura indicated that these trade-offs are often necessary for those in leadership positions.
Laura stated that there is sometimes a “fundamental tension” between the needs of the business and her natural desire to develop deeper relationships with colleagues. She shared that, because of the demands of the job, she sometimes “forgets to treat her colleagues as human beings” and is forced to make tradeoffs between the work itself and personal connections with others, which she attributed to her need to “trim as much fat” as possible in order to meet demands.

Despite the situational pressures that sometimes prevent it, Laura described her leadership style as “collaborative.” She stated that she prefers to involve her team in decision making activities, but acknowledged that work demands, coupled with her “deep subject matter expertise,” make it difficult for her to be “a strategic leader and conductor.” Because her team has “so many plates that they’re spinning,” Laura does not always get to be the collaborative leader that she would like to be.

Laura also described herself as “direct and tactful,” but she shared that her gender influences the degree to which she communicates in a direct fashion:

Many of the female bosses that I’ve had will do that sort of guiding you to the solution on your own whereas male bosses will cut right to the chase. They’ll say, “this is just not quite right. I want this, that, and the other thing instead.” I think as women we’re conditioned not to be that direct. We’re conditioned to hint more at things and hope people get to it…and trying to split the right difference between “no, you’re wrong and I’m right and here’s the reason.” I’m figuring out how to be indirectly direct. I can see that guys get away with, “no, no, no, here’s the way it actually is” and I can do that sometimes, but sometimes I need to soften the approach so that people don’t think I’m just an absolute terrible person. Again, that conditioning to direct and bossy equals terrible person. I don’t think that’s actually true, but you carry it around with you anyway.

Laura’s values are reflected in her desire to treat others as she would like to be treated, while recognizing that people have varying levels of sensitivity and may not share her “high threshold for smart-assery.” She said that she values honesty and
transparency, and she shared that these values influence how she provides feedback to her team. She shared an experience in which she was “not allowed to be honest” due to a non-disclosure agreement and she found this conflict to be “excruciating.” This experience reinforced for Laura the high value she places on honesty.

Laura shared that she sometimes considers gender when she is managing through difficult situations. She stated that she thinks about how she communicates in terms of who she is talking to, including their gender, and she also considers how others see her. However, gender is just “one of the colors in that rainbow” of personal characteristics. She stated that gender sometimes “allows” women to be “a little bit warmer and more empathetic,” but Laura’s narrative took a highly nuanced view of gender and its significance to the larger context of the individual. She described gender as “performance” in that people “learn to perform the gender they’re assigned,” and Laura stated that she rejects certain gendered norms in favor of her own individual expression.

Laura described her gender and her “expressive” nature as “kind of unique” in her industry, and they have given her visibility in her organization as a speaker and representative of diversity. She described the environment in which she works as “tending to be guys without a lot of great social skills,” and she shared that she brings a valued perspective and way of presenting that is highly engaging. She shared that it took her some time to accept that she was being selected to participate on diversity panels not just because she was a woman who could “tell a good story,” but because she is an expert in her field with solid industry knowledge:

I’ve come to the point of owning that I know what I’m talking about, which was a very interesting shift in how I saw myself. I thought, ‘I’m just a contributor, I’m just a cog in the machine.’ Probably in the past two years I’ve had that realization of, ‘oh wait, no. I’m actually extraordinarily knowledgeable. I’m actually really
good at this. This isn’t just my imposter syndrome talking. It isn’t just that I’m the
girl that they’re gonna put on the panel. They wouldn’t ask you back if you didn’t
bring something.’

Laura expressed that her industry tends to be male dominated or “dude-y” as she
put it. However, she stated that leaders have tried to recognize exceptional women and
increase their visibility. Her own boss has supported her growth and encouraged her to
take on challenges—such as her participation on panels—so that she could develop “into
the role he knew she could play.” Laura was again careful to note that her gender is “a
bonus” when it comes to being selected for different opportunities and does not
overshadow her individual merit.

Laura described a double standard for men and women in relation to “emotional
eexpression” in the workplace, and she shared that she has felt misunderstood when
expressing herself:

I’ll have people say, “well, don’t get upset!” And I’ll say, “I’m not upset. I wasn’t
upset until you told me that. It’s not that I’m upset, it is that I am trying to convey
to you that this is inappropriate, or screwed up, or…why did you need me to tell
you this? We’ve been over this any number of times before.” And that sort of
figuring out a good way to express frustration without having it be a gendered
thing. It’s as if they’re saying, “oh, look at her, she’s high strung. She’s all
whipped up.” And I’m thinking, ‘but wait, I’m whipped up for a reason.’

This double standard motivates Laura to place constraints on her emotions that
she stated are not necessary to the same degree for her male counterparts. She shared that
she sometimes struggles to be “appropriately displeased” when managing through
conflict and stated that she must operate within a narrower band of natural expression in
most situations:

If we all run the gamut [of emotion] from zero to ten, appropriate for women is
somewhere between a five and a seven. Appropriate for dudes is between a four
and an eight. Natively, I run somewhere between a three and an eight. So, lopping
off those sides…I’ve got more to lop off.
Laura’s IAT results suggested a moderate association of female with supporter and male with leader. Laura described her results as “kind of enlightening,” but she was not “super surprised” given that she had been “conditioned to a certain set of responses.” She attributed her bias to the environment that she “was soaked in pretty much her entire young life and education.” She shared that she had received “a lot of indirect reinforcement” from the industry in which she works. She reflected on her feelings about a female executive-level leader in her organization who had been promoted in an area of the business that Laura considers a “harder discipline”:

Any time I do see a woman in a less traditionally female professional role I think, “Yes! Go get it!” Because there are still these roles where—and I’m disappointed in myself that I admit this—but there are still these roles where it’s ok to be a female executive and there are other ones where it’s a tougher road to hoe.

Laura also reflected on the compromises that she has made as a woman leader:

As I have gotten comfortable with leadership and the director position that I got promoted into about a year ago—I think about this stuff a lot. And what trade-offs am I making in this moment? Should I really be making all of those trade-offs? Or could I do things differently?...Am I worrying about the stuff that matters or am I worrying about the stuff that nobody but me is paying attention to? Could I free up some cycles by letting go of some of this stuff? When it comes to being the leader I want to, am I appropriately shaped for the leader that I want to be? Am I staying in alignment with that, regardless of whether it’s going to lead to any sort of short term or longer-term gains? If I trade off my integrity, what do I have left?

Kim’s Story

Kim is a consultant and coach for business leaders and previously spent over twenty years as a leader in the retail and manufacturing sectors. Kim is in her sixties, single, and has one child. I met Kim through an acquaintance who recommended her for the study. She has a relaxed and pleasant style that made her easy to talk with and a pleasure to interview. She has a sophisticated and nuanced view on many topics related to
gender and leadership, and she emanated a deep wisdom that is grounded in effortless self-confidence.

Kim is the oldest of two girls and was raised by hard-working parents who instilled in her the importance of education and personal values. Kim described her parents as “that first group of African Americans that knew education was the key.” Kim’s mother instilled in her the value of resilience, as was illustrated in a story about Kim’s childhood:

So, toddlers running around the house, they fall. Most toddlers, the first response—unless they’re really hurt—is to look up and see what the reaction is of the adults in the room. Right? My mother would say—and she knows the difference, she’s very intuitive—she’d get that look and say, “baby did you hurt the floor?” The kid would say, “what?” “Tell the floor you’re sorry.” What that really teaches you is, you’re going to have bumps, you’re going to fall. Unless there’s a critical, acute need, keep moving. Put one foot in front of the other and keep moving.

Kim’s mother was a schoolteacher who overcame an abusive home environment to complete a graduate degree and establish a successful career. Kim described her mother as someone who “never, ever stopped moving” and always challenged herself to be better. Kim saw her mother as a woman who overcame adversity and “defined success for herself”—a value that Kim holds dear.

Kim had other role models in her childhood who shaped how she viewed women and influenced her own identity. Her parents told her that “the most influential people in the building are the secretaries and janitors” and that she should always “get to know them.” Following that advice, when Kim was in elementary school, she forged a friendship with a woman who was the janitor at her school. While other children thought that the woman was “the meanest lady ever,” Kim found her to be a smart, financially savvy woman who valued hard work and “taking care of yourself.” Kim also described
other role models—women in her neighborhood—who demonstrated strength and tenacity in the face of struggle.

Kim shared that it is hard for her to separate gender and ethnicity because, as a child in the sixties, they were “intimately tied to her youth.” She described being surrounded by well-educated professional women who overcame barriers to success. These women inspired and motivated Kim’s ambition, but she also stated that social attitudes about gender and race created an environment where “there’s no such thing as good enough.”

Kim described her experience in junior high school as one that broke gender stereotypes and affirmed girls’ ability to lead:

It was really the girls that ran the school. We were in almost all the leadership roles—yes there was basketball, there were all the sports—but when it came to academics and student leadership, clubs and stuff, it was us.

She also recalled an experience with a teacher who, despite feeling “overwhelmed with being in a predominantly Black school,” encouraged Kim to stand up for what she believed. As an exercise in “inferred learning,” he asked students to stand while he made a statement about a topic that they had studied. If they doubted their stance on the topic, they were instructed to sit down. Kim was the last student standing and she credits this with her ability to “stand for what is right” even if you are “the only one standing for it.” Later in her life, Kim recognized this ability as an “inner trusting” guided by intuition, and it is an ability that she leveraged throughout her career.

Kim attended a co-ed Catholic school that nurtured her gift for music, and she described her friends as “a bunch of music geeks” who were “always both genders” and “were all equal.” She went on to attend a small religious university that was co-ed.
However, it had only started to welcome women ten years before Kim enrolled and it was there that she first started to experience gender bias. She described an unstated expectation that women attend certain “kinds of classes,” and she shared that this bias had consequences for her education:

I just said, “I’m really not good at math.” That was what it came down to. I also didn’t take a ton of advanced math. I didn’t take calculus, those kinds of things later in high school either. And it’s funny because, what did I do my entire career? Math. But there’s that bias, ‘well, this is really a guy’s program,’ right? Because it’s accounting. I thought, ‘alright, I’ll go hang out and take Latin with the seminarians instead.’

Kim is an accomplished musician and music has been a large part of her life since childhood. Yet, the only group that Kim could join in college was a sorority that consisted of women that she had little in common with, so she opted out. She shared that she may have enjoyed participating in the school’s music fraternity; however, that was never a consideration for her because “it was just that: a fraternity.”

Kim shared that one needs to be “extremely grounded as a human being” to see the unconscious biases that exist in society. She saw the gender inequities in her college as symptomatic of a traditionally male-only environment, and while Kim was not immune to the implications of these inequities, she combatted them by creating her own “equitable systems.”

Kim shared that she left college feeling “empowered” and “ready to take on the world.” However, she faced a difficult job market, as the United States at that time was in the middle of a deep recession. Kim started her career as an inventory control clerk in the fabric industry. Her first boss was a woman whom Kim described as “pretty cool peeps” with a “nurturing” leadership style. She taught Kim the importance of “removing obstacles” as a leader and ensuring that people have the “parameters of the job” to be
successful. She saw leadership ability in Kim early on and was saddened when Kim left the company to pursue new opportunities.

Kim then moved to a large city and took a role as the first female manager for a regional restaurant chain where she often managed a diverse group of employees spanning several generations. She recalled thinking about some of her team members as “family” and she expressed compassion for their unique circumstances:

We had kids that were in distress. We had one kid—he’d bring his own potato and fry it, and I thought, ‘that is the only thing this child is eating every day.’ You get in touch with what’s really going on out there in the world.

Through these experiences Kim learned to “meet people where they are” and to adjust her style in a way that “brings out the best” in people. She shared that she has refined this skill over time, but that her role as a restaurant manager was where that started to be “honed in.”

Kim later worked for a large retail chain and spent many years of her career in various roles there. She described one of her managers as a woman who was “really good at bringing out the best in people” and someone who was invested in her team’s success. She set clear strategies for the team, worked with them to define the tactics, and then empowered them to accomplish their goals. Kim saw this manager as influential in shaping her leadership style and she instilled in Kim the value of keeping people in “counsel” as a leader so that information can be shared and acted upon. Kim had many opportunities to develop and exercise her leadership skills during her tenure and she used her abilities as an influencer to move the business forward. She described a time when she challenged a “very senior” leader’s misguided focus on a relatively insignificant problem:
I pulled him aside and I said, “You know me, I’m not trying to speak out of school, but we’ve got twenty people in this room trying to figure it out. If we add up the salaries that we’re spending trying to figure this problem out…” He said, “you’re right. Never mind.”

Kim credits her intuition with helping her identify business issues and making sound decisions. She described how her colleagues learned to trust her intuition as well and would often turn to her for direction:

My inner guidance got to the point where I could look at a spreadsheet and say, “you know, something ain’t right here.” The math all looked right; the math was right. I’m like, “something’s not right here”… I did get teams to the point where…if I said it three times…I remember one of the team members said, “wait, time out guys. Kim has said this three times. There’s something wrong here. She’s actually spoken up and said it three times.”

Kim’s many years in “corporate jobs” provided opportunities to develop her career and establish solid leadership skills, but she stated that she had also “sold her soul, in a lot of ways, for the security and the perceived success.” Aligning with her sentiments about her own “inner guidance,” Kim stated that women have an innate intuition that is often overlooked in corporate environments because “we become very much in our heads.” Kim shared that she eventually had to get out of the corporate world because she was “no longer true to herself.” She described needing to balance the internal organizational “politics” with her personal authenticity as a leader:

Always know what the political environment you’re speaking into is, but don’t get mired in it, because then you’re playing the political game. You’re not being a leader and you’re not actually moving things forward.

Kim forged her own path in many ways, and her success was bred from a desire to lead and influence on her own terms. She described how, throughout her tenure in large organizations, she had forged informal relationships with senior leaders that enabled her to succeed by breaking through the traditionally hierarchical channels. This
nontraditional, entrepreneurial approach served her well as she moved into a late-career role as head of sales for a small services firm. She partnered with two other women in the company and collectively they more than doubled the business.

Kim’s sister, who is also a leadership consultant, told her that she “leads by not leading.” Kim went on to explain that she “believes in team” and “sharing as much information as she can” with people so that they can achieve on their own. She does not consider her style laissez-faire because she can be “very directive,” but she prefers to let people “prove to her that they aren’t capable” before intervening.

She recalled a time when, as a corporate director working for a grocery chain, she had to tell her staff that the company had been put up for sale. She described how she navigated the situation as a leader and the depth of relationships that had been built:

I had sixty-year-olds in my cube crying because they had never had to do a resume…Solid communication. I was there for them. That group of people would walk through a wall for me. So, there was dedication on both sides.

Kim described how she would empower her team to create team-building exercises and how she broke organizational norms by hosting a team party at her home. She met with her team each week to gauge how they were feeling and always asked “what did you do that you were most proud of this week?” Kim shared that, even though her and her team were enduring great stress and uncertainty due to the corporate sell-off, she was “actually happy” as a leader, owing to the strong team cohesiveness that she had built.

Kim shared that she has a tendency to “fall into a ‘mom’ role” because she is so “protective” of her team members. She acknowledged that she also “corrects”
unsatisfactory performance when needed. Kim sees her age and wisdom as a positive facet of her identity:

As I’ve gotten older, the crone comes in. And I love being able to call myself a crone. I’ve got sixty-two years of life here and I want to make sure that people who are half my age have some access to maybe seeing things in a different way. And so, more and more crone energy comes through as I’ve gotten more settled in my career.

Kim also sees gender from a balanced perspective and considers her “strong feminine presence” and female “energy” as a positive counterbalance to a male-dominated setting. Since she was a young girl, Kim has sought out people who share her various passions—be it “spiritual”, “musical”, or “business”—and she considers them her “tribes.”

Kim’s IAT results suggested no automatic preference between male and female. She expressed her “relief” that her implicit bias reflected her explicit values and she reiterated that her ethnic identity strongly influences her gender identity and associated attitudes. She also stated that her age lends to a more balanced view:

What comes to mind first is back to ethnicity. Women have always been leaders in the African American community. That’s the cultural bias there. And so, I think that’s part of it. I also think being older—that’s a test that would be interesting: as you age. Because age is the great equalizer, right? It is.

Heather’s Story

Heather is a manager in a large healthcare organization where she leads a team of technology workers. She is in her thirties, lives with her partner, and has no children. I met Heather through an acquaintance who recommended her for the current study based on her interest in women’s issues. Heather has a warm and open personality that made our conversation easy and enjoyable, despite not having met previously. She has a calm confidence that was consistent throughout our conversation. I found Heather to be a
particularly thoughtful and introspective person, as was evidenced in the care she took in answering questions throughout our interview.

Heather is the oldest of four children and the only girl. Her father worked as an attorney and her mother gave up a career in the sciences to become a senior sales director in a cosmetics company. Her mother’s career change afforded her the flexibility to work from home while raising four children. Heather described her parents’ roles in the family as “fairly traditional” in that her father, who worked long hours, took care of yard work and other home maintenance tasks on the weekends while her mother assumed responsibility for the day-to-day chores of cooking, cleaning, and caring for the children. Heather and her siblings had different tasks around the house, but Heather was responsible for cooking the evening meals when her mother was away for business. She was not sure if this responsibility was “indicative of that gender role,” but she shared that she considers the tasks that she and her brothers were assigned as children within the frame of her “feminist” identity and that she believes in “more equality than what she experienced growing up.”

Heather described her early family life as “active,” with all the children participating in sports, and she received positive messages from her parents about her ability to compete and succeed. She shared that her family life represented more stereotypically masculine qualities:

Some of the messages were ‘you can do whatever you want. Play sports and be competitive.’ I would say I grew up with more lessons of being one of the boys than one of the girls… I grew up as more of a tomboy. For example, emotions weren’t really discussed or things like that. It was much more like a ‘boy’ house growing up.
Heather attended an all-girls Catholic high school and it was there that she started to think about women’s issues. She described her teachers as “strong women” who challenged her to think about gender and to challenge the stereotypes that women often faced. She described one exercise in which one of her teachers wrote a sentence on the board that said, “woman without her man is nothing” and then asked the students to add punctuation. One option would indicate a woman’s subservience to a man: “woman, without her man, is nothing,” while another would place a woman in a superior position: “woman, without her, man is nothing.” Heather described experiences such as these as being highly formative of her views on women:

I remember that vividly because those types of experiences or conversations helped me think about the strength of women, and being an all-girls school, it was all about your intellect and your integrity and who you were as a person and not about what you looked like, because we all wore uniforms...One of the most shaping experiences of my life was to be four years in an all-girls school that cared about our brains, not about how we looked.

Heather also attributed her feminist views to her family life and the role that competitive sports played in shaping her beliefs about what she and other women could achieve. These experiences helped her see herself as a “really strong person who’s trying to change the perception of how other people see women.” Further supporting this claim, Heather was an academically inclined young woman who excelled in math and started attending high school math classes at her all-girls school when she was just thirteen. During this time, she was challenged to think about “how women are pressured to think, act, and say certain things” and was exposed to women leaders who demonstrated that “there was an alternative path.”

Heather described other women leaders who shaped her early perceptions of herself and inspired her to, as she said, “choose my own path in life.” One was a teacher...
who nurtured Heather’s leadership abilities by giving her responsibilities that helped develop her skills as a leader. She also had coaches—male and female—who were “really instrumental” in shaping how she sees herself and her abilities. She recognized the influence that these early mentors had on influencing her independent spirit and “illuminating” that she “didn’t have to get married and have kids to be considered a contributing member of society.”

Heather attended a small, private college right after high school and, in contrast to her experience at an all-girls high school, she described those four years in college as a time of “losing” herself. She described how many of her peers would keep to their small group of childhood friends and “not really branch out,” though she eventually found friendship with people who were in sports and also with those who were “transplants” like herself.

Heather described experiences during college that diminished how she saw herself as a young woman, contrasting with the messages of empowerment that she received in high school. One particularly poignant story involved a romantic relationship during college in which she described feeling pressured to have sex, despite the pain that it caused her. She told me that she felt “obligated” and she shared that for many women there is “this sense of ‘supposed to’” that creates conflict between a woman’s striving for individuality and the social expectations that may be placed on her. She described how these social expectations affected her sense of self:

I believe that impacted me in terms of…what is expected from a woman in terms of sexuality…This came before that, but growing up with a mom who was selling makeup starts to socialize a message of, “you need to have a little bit of something here to be presentable to the world.” So, it’s pretty rare for me to go to work without—I have on really light makeup today, and this is about what I would usually do to go out into the world—but there were a lot of messages
growing up about what is appropriate in terms of what I was wearing, in terms of makeup, etcetera... But going to the all-girls school I didn’t have to care about it, except for the weekends and dances. When I got to college, I noticed this very bizarre sense that people are much more well-dressed there than most college campuses, so I felt the pressure of dressing up and having makeup on to go to class that, in retrospect, I thought, “why am I doing this?”

Heather returned to college several years into her career to obtain her master’s degree. She attended an all-women’s college that affirmed her feminist values and provided a nurturing environment. She described the nuns at her college as “strong women” and “phenomenal” teachers. Contrasting the experiences of her undergraduate and graduate programs, she said that she wished she had attended the all-women’s college for both programs, as her undergraduate school was not “a good cultural fit” for who she has become. In a succinct description of the contrast between the two schools, she described the women’s college as a “warm hug” and the co-ed college as “more like a handshake.”

Heather identified as a feminist several times throughout our conversation and was quite thoughtful about what this term means to her, as well as how her environment shaped her feminist ideals:

Growing up and going to an all-girls school, feminism was taught and described as equality between the sexes. But what we also talked a lot about how a lot of times that word is meant to mean that women are man-haters and are trying to be above men. And there’s always been this conundrum of, “do I identify with supporting women’s rights as a feminist or is that word so polluted that I don’t want to be associated?” And I decided that in its purest form of what it is intended to be, that is what I am...I think a lot of the education I had in high school was more about equality and the opportunity to have an education environment where I wasn’t conscious of what I was wearing or nervous to raise my hand...I really do think those four years were more the crux of—really starting to think about that and internalizing “what does that [feminism] mean?”

Heather’s feminist values were further reflected in her views on herself and other women as leaders. Heather demonstrated leadership potential from an early age—leading
a high school retreat, sitting on student and teen council groups in her school and church—and she considers her ability to “be decisive and move things forward” as key to her success as a leader. One of her early work experiences gave her exposure to a female manager who displayed these qualities in a high-pressure restaurant setting, and it instilled in Heather the value of being “cool under pressure.” This same leader recognized Heather’s potential and was an advocate in encouraging her to pursue her goals.

Heather moved into the healthcare industry in 2011 and her first role was working as a liaison between a technology team and internal business partners. She described this role as more “consultative” between the two groups and she developed the skills to work cross-functionally in achieving organizational goals. Heather then moved into a formal leadership role where she led a team of developers. She described the transition into leadership as “challenging” because she had to change how she interacted with people who had been her peers, leaving her to navigate what could be “kind of a lonesome path.” However, she received coaching and mentoring from her manager, a woman whom Heather described as a “phenomenal leader,” and still considers her a mentor.

Heather’s leadership style reflects “clear” and “frequent” communication and she prides herself on her “strong follow-through.” She considers herself “cool under pressure” and she finds “erratic” leaders to be detrimental to a team’s success. She stated that it is important for teams to “know what to expect” in a leader, so consistency is critical. Heather also likes to bring an element of fun to the workplace, though she admits that she is “prone to the more serious side.”

Heather sees a clear distinction between managing and leading, with managing being more “tactical” and leading more “inspirational.” She shared a story in which she
had to address a team member’s attitude and performance and, illustrating her thoughtfulness and reflective approach, Heather first spent time contemplating the options available to her. Ultimately, she decided that she would approach the situation from a ‘helping’ standpoint as opposed to ‘reprimanding’, resulting in better performance from the team member and a stronger relationship between them.

Heather shared that she deeply values discipline and she stated that people should always work to their “capability.” She considers “integrity of speech” an important leadership skill and works to reflect that value in her own behavior. She also shared that “transparency” is key to developing trust with teams and that she is committed to bringing information forward that will help her team be more adaptable. Heather also described convergence between her personal and leadership values, particularly the value of “health and wellness,” which she stated enables her to “show up in a way that’s stronger” for her team.

Heather has been exposed to women leaders throughout her life—through her all-girls high school, her all-women’s college, and throughout her time in the workplace. She has had mostly female managers throughout her career and women have held top spots in her organization since she joined almost a decade ago. Just recently she was assigned a male leader and she expressed concern about what the shifting gender dynamic might mean for the company:

Well, I have a new leader, and this is the first male leader that I’ve had since 2005. So, this will be interesting. But my response…was inner frustration…So, I think it provoked irritation in me because I view this old boys’ club forming at [company]. They used to be completely female-powered. There was even an article written about the C-suite at [company] being all women. That’s changing now and I think that’s unfortunate…
Heather shared that women sometimes present themselves in ways that are detrimental to their success, such as adopting physical postures that “make them feel small,” so she is intentional about presenting herself in a way that appears “more stereotypically male.” She described how she will make herself appear larger or take a seat at the head of the table during meetings in order to “garner respect” and to “emphasize” her skill as a “confident communicator.” She also stated that speech inflections are important for communicating confidence and credibility as a woman leader. She described an interaction with a woman who pointed out that Heather tended to uptalk at the end of her sentences, making declarative statements sound more like questions. She became tuned into this tendency and has since worked to overcome it so that she is not viewed as “less confident as a female leader.” She stated that these intentional behaviors to present herself in a more confident manner are “informed” by her gender and are a way for her to “go over the top of gender stereotypes.”

Heather shared that she views gender roles—and gender itself—as undergoing a change that will continue to challenge long-held stereotypes. She said that gender is becoming “much more fluid” as transgender people increasingly defy cultural norms and expectations around gender. She also shared that she believes men’s and women’s roles in society are becoming more flexible as women increasingly take on leadership positions in organizations:

There’s some interesting gender roles I see flipping, and I have a number of female friends who are the top earner of their family and their spouse is in a lower paying role and their spouse is doing more of the childcare. So, I think gender roles are changing. I also see the number of women in undergraduate programs and graduate programs is far exceeding men, and I think that speaks to what’s happening in organizations where there are more women coming in—more women leaders—and I have had this underlying thought for a long time that a lot of times it’s the women who are really the backbones of these teams and carrying
the work forward and I only see that now starting to be a reality as more women are leaders…we still have a small number of women who are CEO’s, but I feel that that will be the last thing to change.

For young women coming into new leadership roles, Heather stated that it is important to have someone—male or female—to “bounce questions off of” and who can act, not just as a mentor, but as a wise “friend.” Heather herself has women whom she connects with regularly and act as mentors to her. She also shared that reflecting on one’s values and being committed to personal development is important for leadership success. She said that she engages in regular reflection practices that challenge her to think about “what she is aiming to be and what she is really being in her work life.”

Heather’s IAT results suggested a moderate association of male with supporter and female with leader. She shared three factors that she believes have influenced her implicit attitudes toward women leaders. First, she stated that she explicitly advocates for women, and this has made her a proponent for women in leadership:

I think my desire for women to be viewed as leaders is so strong, and I have a feeling that any time I could choose leader [in the IAT] and it was woman going into the same category, I was thinking, ‘yes! yes!’ So, there’s that—it’s conscious. It’s a conscious desire for more of that and more of the recognition for how powerful I think female leadership is.

Second, she described her early experiences in an all-girls high school as being highly formative, and she stated that the explicit messages she received there likely influenced her implicit beliefs:

I can’t emphasize enough how much female power was instilled into my brain, not in like a ‘rah rah’ sense, but understated in like, “we are powerful, we are educated, we are smart.”
Finally, Heather shared that her experiences with seeing women in leadership roles and being empowered by strong women has deeply influenced how she views women in society:

It’s that old cliché of “you have to see it to know it’s possible for you.” And wow have I seen it. I mean, [all-girls high school]; [all-women’s college]; [employer]. There’s one woman at [employer], our old CEO, [leader’s name], was one of the most charismatic, powerful female leaders, but done in a really—in a way where she was never trying to be the opposite gender. In the way that I describe that I do things to be more masculine in nature, she was always herself. And she was so charismatic. So, to see all of these women, I believe, does shape that. I think it’s important because if you don’t see it how do you believe it?

Melanie’s Story

Melanie is a small business owner and recognized leader in her community. Along with her partner, she manages the operation of two successful restaurants where she provides leadership to her staff and determines the strategic direction of the business. She is single, lives with her partner, and has a grown daughter. I met Melanie seven years ago and know her to be a passionate, caring businesswoman and leader who expects excellence both from herself and others. She has an infectious positive energy that consistently shows up in how she presents herself.

Melanie is the oldest of four children and the only girl. Her biological father left when she was five years old and she was raised by her stepfather, whom she has long considered her father. Melanie’s stated that her parents were hard workers. Her father worked in construction where he routinely put in long hours and her mother worked inside the home as a daycare provider. Later in Melanie’s childhood, her mother took a job outside the home in the banking industry. Melanie attributed her own strong work ethic to the example set by her parents, and this commitment to hard work and excellence is reflected throughout her story.
Melanie’s mother and grandmother served as role models to her from a young age. She described her mother as coming from a lineage of women whom she considers “strong stock” and “do-ers.” She also described her mother as a woman who displayed grace and femininity, qualities that Melanie considers valuable traits in women. However, she shared that her mother often sacrificed her own well-being for others. Melanie recognized at an early age that she wanted to find more balance between taking care of others and attending to her own needs:

My mom never took time for herself. I mean, she did things that made her happy, like did her nails and stuff like that, but she would give you her last dollar and then starve. And not say anything. That kind of life doesn’t make sense to me. My mom and I butted heads a lot because I felt that she should be…she was such a giver, but to the point where she would sacrifice herself. And I was over there feeling, ‘I think it’s great that you’re giving, but you don’t give everything.’

Melanie described her parents’ roles in the family as conforming to traditional gender norms. Her father performed outdoor chores and home maintenance while her mother assumed responsibility for most of the indoor chores, such as cleaning, cooking, and laundry. Her mother was also the primary caregiver for the children. Melanie and her three younger brothers had equal responsibility for chores around the house, though Melanie described herself as the director of her younger siblings. She said she did not feel that her gender played a role in her responsibilities within the family; however, she sometimes felt that her father “didn’t want her around” because she was the only girl. She saw her father as “very dominating” and the “disciplinarian” whereas her mother took a passive stance in the family. This behavior upset Melanie, as she felt that her mother should have demonstrated more assertiveness:

My mom’s lack of…strength…she was more the compassionate type, like, “don’t worry, I got ya,”—’rub-the-head’ kind of person. I needed her to stand up a little bit more. It made me angry for a lot of years, even after she died.
Melanie described her relationship with two female friends during childhood as one of geographic “proximity” in that she could ride her bike to their houses, but she felt like a “third wheel” and that she “never fit in.” She shared that she had few female friends and saw other girls as “prettier” and “more popular” than her, leading her to think of herself as more of a “guy’s girl.” She developed a distrust of and negativity toward women that would shape her attitude and behavior well into her adult years. She stated that there was a time when she would “do anything to sabotage” other women.

Melanie shared that these feelings of not belonging had her seeking intimacy in maladaptive ways so that she could experience a “filling of that love tank that she so desperately needed.” She became pregnant with her daughter at fifteen and, without support from the father, considered the options that were available to her, including abortion and adoption. She met a woman who mentored her through conversations with her parents about the pregnancy and helped her decide what to do with her baby. Ultimately, Melanie decided to keep her daughter and, as her family rallied around her, she became “as close to them as [she] had ever been.” However, she experienced discrimination from others in her community. With tears welling in her eyes, Melanie described the pain of being rejected by her church:

I remember going to church and I was supposed to get confirmed, and my priest asked my mom to not bring me for confirmation. That I would have a private confirmation… Because I was pregnant. Because I was pregnant. That basically, when I got pregnant, they wanted nothing to do with me in the church. And the church was really important to me at that time. I was ashamed every time I went to church, but my mom and dad would say, “stand up. We’re going.” And I would make sure that I was dressed appropriately, and they always just loved me during that time. But having the church—I shouldn’t say the church—having that one man tell me that I was unworthy of God’s sacrament, that I was unworthy…kind of just shaped [voice breaks and she exhales deeply] a lot…and I felt a lot of shame for being a single mom.
These experiences of discrimination influenced how Melanie saw herself, and she struggled for many years to recognize her individual strength and self-worth:

The stigma of being a single mom for—now the rest of my life—I would say from sixteen until probably I was…almost thirty…it felt like I was always struggling. Struggling with my identity, struggling with… how I fit in anywhere. I’ve always been loud, I’ve always been a force, I’ve always been a leader…like taking control kind of person. But I never had the skills or the tools to feel like it really mattered.

Melanie started working when she was just fourteen and, through her experiences in her home and in her early work environments, adopted an ethic of hard work and dedication to excellence. Her earliest work experience was in a fast-food restaurant, which taught her the importance of structure, responsibility, and accountability and she said that this experience significantly shaped her management style. Melanie went on to work for several companies before settling into her current role as a business owner, and her story illustrated both the perseverance and growth she experienced through the years as well as the ongoing struggle to claim her self-worth.

At one point in her career, Melanie worked as a salesperson in the auto industry and felt that, as a woman, she had to work harder to gain the respect of her colleagues and customers. She described how her gender impacted how others viewed her as a credible salesperson, in that customers—both men and woman—would often bypass her and “automatically gravitate” to a male colleague. However, she had a male leader who believed in her and modeled a style of leadership that she values and emulates today. She described him as a “big teddy bear” who could also be firm and serious, and he acted as both coach and friend.
As Melanie moved from individual contributor roles into leadership, she realized varying levels of success depending on the environment, the level of support she received from others, and the degree to which she could overcome her own “self-sabotaging” tendencies. She described the success she achieved as a salesperson in a cellular communications company as a highlight of her professional accomplishments, but when she stepped into a leadership role, she felt unsupported by her manager and incapable of doing the good work that so defined her work ethic. As a result, she believed that she was “not a very good leader” and fell into the familiar self-condemnation that troubled her so often through her life:

   I went back to thinking, ‘I’m not smart enough because I didn’t go to college. So, I don’t know how to do spreadsheets.’ So, I was a fatalist. ‘I’m never going to get this so why am I trying?’ Rather than learning, rather than digging in and figuring it out, I just went the other way.

Despite the challenges that Melanie faced in this early leadership role, she went on to become a successful leader for a manufacturing company where she led a team of merchandisers. This experience allowed Melanie to leverage her sales experience to influence others to “buy into whatever you’re [metaphorically] selling.” She learned how to recognize different styles so that she could adapt her leadership approach and be most effective in different situations.

When asked about her leadership style, Melanie first replied that her staff would describe her as “intimidating.” She shared that this perception comes from her high expectation of responsibility and accountability and, leading a mostly younger workforce, she felt that many of her employees have lacked that in their lives. She also shared that her extraverted nature and “loud voice” can be misconstrued as aggressive, when, in fact,
she simply feels very passionate about the business. She shared that she believes strongly in personal well-being and infuses this value into her leadership style:

I always come up with a word for the year of what to work on and, for [business], our word is ‘health’. But it’s not just physical health…It’s mental, it’s spiritual, and it’s physical. So, I’m all about: we have one opportunity to make this day the best day, and I just hold them accountable to that. I ask, “what are you guys doing? What did you do today? How are you showing up?” I get to use my leadership role as a motivation. “Let’s change the way that we show up. Let’s change the way that we’re viewing the circumstances that are going on right now.”

Melanie stated that her gender influences how she leads in that she has come to embrace her femininity as a positive leadership trait. To illustrate this point, she shared with me that one of her employees recently told her that she is “like a mom” to them. Melanie took this as “the highest compliment” her staff can give her because she believes that their mother is their “highest leader.” Melanie also empowers her young employees—most of which are women—to assert their right to be treated respectfully, and she teaches them how to “have a voice” as women. In turn, she said that her staff trust her deeply and look to her as a mentor in both personal and professional matters.

Earlier in her career Melanie focused on building credibility and overcoming the feelings of inadequacy that so often plagued her, but with the support of her partner and a network of women colleagues and mentors, she has transformed her perception of herself and has built strong bonds with important women in her life:

I think now that I live more in my feminine side, I like both sides of me. I feel…more complete. I also look at women a little bit differently. They’re not the enemy any longer…maybe that’s age, maybe it’s just because I’m older and I can’t be bothered with it. But I even see it in my young ladies that work for me. They’re mentors to me as well. I learn from them every single day and it’s really such a gift. I think that it’s a shame when women aren’t stepping into their power.
This shift has opened opportunities for relationships with women that may have been closed to her previously, and Melanie shared that her female mentors have been critical to her growth:

The women in my circle of influence are so amazing…My coach—she’s what I want to be when I grow up. She’s like a strong powerhouse, but she says, “I’ll love you while I do it. I’m going to love you, and I’m going to hold you, and I’m going to support you, but I’m not going to allow you to show up with anything but your best self.”

Melanie was adamant that young women aspiring to leadership need a coach. She shared that having someone who can “push” one to be one’s best is key to succeeding, and that having a strong network is critical for forming personal aspirations based on the examples set by others.

Melanie’s IAT results suggested a slight association of male with supporter and female with leader. She stated that she was “pleasantly surprised” by her score and that she had “had a shift” from a bias for men as leaders. She shared that her attitudes about women leaders, as well as herself as a leader, have been transformed by the support and empowerment that she has received from her partner and from influential women in her life. Operating within a “controlled environment” has allowed her to explore new ways of seeing herself. She has been able to realize her strengths in a “really safe space,” resulting in a positive narrative that affirms her ability to succeed and places women and men on equal footing. She also stated that if she had taken the IAT five years ago she would have seen an association of men with leadership. However, she shared that her commitment to personal development and exposure to female role models have transformed the way she feels about women leaders today:

I’m so excited about the women who are coming up and are talking about money. And they’re talking about money the way that men talk about money. They’re
saying, “we don’t have to be afraid to say, ‘I’m doing this because I want to make money. I’m showing up working my butt off every day because I want to fly in private planes the rest of my life.’” I love that! It’s like saying, “wait a minute, we can talk about that?” I want to talk about that. Or the women who are talking about shame and just getting super into it and saying, “hey you’re not the only one who has felt this.” And I’m thinking, ‘ooh, I need to hear more about that.’ Because that’s making an impact. And I think right now there’s this explosion of really powerful women who are in our communities, whether it’s on Facebook—and I think social media has a big impact on our minds—and to be able to feed my mind right now with all of that…I’m thinking, ‘you know what, I’ve felt that way for a long time, I just haven’t had a voice and you’re my voice. Thank you. That’s exactly what I was thinking. Thank you for saying that.’

Melanie shared that her journey from a young woman filled with self-doubt to a strong woman leader with an abundance of self-worth happened with the support of women along the way, including a peer group that has affirmed her value and helped her see the strength in her unique characteristics:

Those women—those fifteen women—changed me forever. For ever, ever, and ever. I came in that first meeting…intimidated, which means I’m in my masculine state, because you can’t hurt me there. I came in there…like a bull in a china store. I feel awkward, I don’t know what I’m doing, I’m afraid I’m going to knock something down…and we went around the room and I don’t even know what the conversation was, but my answer was, “I…am loud and intimidating.” And one of these girls looked at me—who doesn’t know me—and said, “no you’re not. No you’re not. That’s what somebody’s told you. You’re actually really beautiful and we’re happy you’re here. Your energy is on fire.”

Rebecca’s Story

Rebecca is the owner of a professional services firm and has held leadership roles in organizations for over twenty years. She is in her fifties, single, and has no children. I met Rebecca through her sister, Kim, who also participated in the study. In addition to her work as a leadership development consultant, Rebecca is a talented professional speaker whose communication style emanates passion and energy, and her commitment to her values showed up throughout our conversation.
Rebecca was raised in a traditional two-parent household and is the youngest of two girls. Her parents instilled in her the values of education and self-sufficiency, and her mother, whom Rebecca described as a feminist, demonstrated an ability to thrive in the face of adversity:

My mother taught me that because of her upbringing of being basically the poorest of the poor. Like, not having shoes poorest of the poor. That’s why she knew education was her key. And she always wanted to be a schoolteacher—from the time she was five. Therefore, she was very dominant in our family. Both of them were, but my mother was very dominant.

As an African American woman, Rebecca was exposed to strong Black female role models throughout her childhood. She described being surrounded by “amazing, powerful, professional Black women” who exposed her to Black history and culture, which subsequently influenced her identity and contributed to her positive self-esteem. She also saw the consequences of her role models’ actions—or their “output” as she put it—as a powerful influence on her:

Dr. Dorothy I. Height, who was the grandmother of the civil rights movement—I was only a few feet away from her—but I actually got to see how she moved people in her leadership without hardly saying a word. So, it was the output. I would say the value is the output. What people’s actions are and how they’re reflected. And the impact of those actions.

Rebecca’s faith is a significant component of her identity. She was “brought to the church” by Mary, the patroness of Christianity, and she views Mary as “the ultimate feminist” because she overcame adversity and demonstrated strong leadership. Rebecca joined the Catholic church at sixteen and contemplated becoming a nun but chose to “continue to be lay” and exercise the tenets of Catholicism through the way she lives.

Rebecca shared that her gender identity is very much intertwined with her racial identity, and she said that these closely associated identities have helped her feel
“comfortable in her skin.” Rebecca said that she sees people as their “authentic” selves, beyond their gender, lending to her progressive views of gender and sexuality. She said that racism and other discriminatory “isms” are “man-made” constructs that are fueled by fear. Rebecca was explicit about her values:

Who am I to judge? It’s not my conversation. I tie it with free will and really understanding the golden rule, and hence I’ve been shifting for about two years now toward the ‘platinum’ rule. The golden rule is ‘treat others as I want to be treated.’ It’s very ‘I’ based. Been around for thousands of years. The platinum rule was created by Dr. Tony Alessandra in 1997. He said, “it’s the platinum rule. Treat others as they want to be treated.”

Rebecca attended an all-girls high school where she was taught by “liberal and conservative nuns” who expected the girls to learn and demonstrate leadership ability, even if they did not always like the way it was enacted. Rebecca went on to attend a co-ed public college, but it did not embrace women’s empowerment the way her high school did. Rebecca described feeling “shell shocked” by the “male-dominated” nature of the environment and ultimately said, “oh hell no,” to it, even though she appreciated the rich Black history that the school offered. She then enrolled in a human resources program at a university closer to her family and completed her education there. Rebecca described her college advisor as being a “feminist” whom she has remained close to throughout her life.

Rebecca has mentored students at her alma mater for several years and, through that process, has confirmed and expanded her views on identity:

However the person self identifies is how I choose to respect that and identify them. And that has nothing to do, for me, with social mores; it’s who that person is based upon their free will. That’s how I see that.

Rebecca’s first leadership role was with a retail chain and she was able to interact with front-line employees in a way that reflected her upbringing and values:
She [mother] said, “the most powerful people in the building…are the janitor and secretary, because one opens the doors and one closes the doors.” And she said, “those are the people you align with. Don’t align with the leaders. You align with the most powerful people in the building, with integrity and authenticity.” That’s where I learned about respect in a very visceral way, of how the cashiers ran those stores. Because if it weren’t for the relationships that they physically built with their fellow neighbors and their community members, those doors would not work. Those doors wouldn’t work.

Rebecca was the first Black manager for the chain, and although she successfully leveraged her ability to develop relationships and establish trust with employees, she also experienced adversity due to the management style. She described feeling “used” by the managers who would take advantage of her ability to “clean up” the stores—literally and culturally—and then transfer her to a different store to start the process all over again. Rebecca’s physical health suffered as she “allowed for other people’s crap to get into her world.”

Rebecca then assumed a leadership role in a manufacturer’s services firm that she described as “pure hell.” She was often undermined by her direct reports and bullied by her manager whom Rebecca saw as a woman who had established her “queendom.” Rebecca left her role as a manager to take a position as an individual contributor in the firm, and she said she felt happier because she was able to tend to her own line of business and get out from under an abusive manager. Despite realizing significant success in her role, Rebecca also grappled with being a Black woman in a predominantly White culture:

I got pummeled from some of my accounts because I was out in [state], in the [city] area, so again, being a black woman—that popped in again. So, I really learned in the past fifteen years…the ins and outs of [state] culture. Thoroughly. In ways that probably a lot of people have not before.
Yet, Rebecca viewed this as an opportunity to broaden her skillset and develop situational awareness:

That’s ok, because now I know how to observe a room in a very unique way. I know how to talk to people regardless of what level they are in their life standing, regardless of status, regardless of who they are and how they contribute.

Rebecca’s situational agility served her again when she worked in sales for a large corporation. She described her leader as a man who “gave her a chance” to prove her ability and recognized her as someone who was “kind” and capable of performing. However, some of Rebecca’s colleagues “tried to push her in a corner” and were “upset and jealous” when she exceeded her performance objectives. Rebecca moved into a different role that served as a stepping stone to a more influential position and, in her naturally optimistic way, she described this experience as an opportunity “to understand how the business worked” and to learn “how to maneuver” in various environments.

Rebecca described her leadership style as “team-situational” throughout her career, but she said that she now sees herself as an “adaptive” leader. Rebecca’s deep insights on leadership styles come from her master’s education in leadership, which she has leveraged to establish her own consulting business. Rebecca shared that authenticity is one of her core values and it showed up repeatedly throughout her story. Rebecca said that she also considers herself an advocate for young Black women. She shared an encounter she had with a young Black girl at a corporate event, and the compassion that she felt for the girl’s situation resonated through her words:

We walked out and there was a little girl—African American, about twelve years old. She had her [company name] bag. I’ll never forget this…she was putting all her little fun things that she made in the bag, and I said, “so, what was your favorite part of your day?” She says, “[company name].” I said, “what was it?” And I was about four questions in—you know, like pulling teeth from a twelve-year-old, very hard to do—but then she said, “[company name] makes filters to
help clean the world.” I said, “that’s exactly what they do. Why is that so important to you?” She said, “because my cousin can’t breathe.”<whispers> “Got it.” I said, “would you like to meet someone who helps your cousin breathe?” She said, “yes.” It was an African American powerhouse and female engineer.

Rebecca stated that her gender influences her leadership style, but she also shared that her style transcends stereotypically feminine and masculine qualities. She views vulnerability as a critical leadership trait, something she saw in her father, and she incorporates this value into her leadership development work with men. Rebecca has experienced conflict between her gender and leader roles when people have characterized her as “the ‘angry black woman’” because she “would speak a truth they didn’t want to face.” She shared that she sometimes felt that people did not understand her because she “sees life so differently” and often had to “pull back” so that others could catch up with her thought processes.

Rebecca considers herself a keen observer of human nature and sees many women leaders adopting either a “queen bee” or “I’m one of the boys” leadership style. Being able to adopt an observational attitude has helped Rebecca develop a flexible and adaptable nature in these situations:

I’ve worked very hard to actively observe. What that looks like, actively reflect, and then react to it. Because the only thing I can control is my reaction, right? And go forward from there. Sometimes it’s a matter of me empowering those people; sometimes it’s a matter of me giving a bit more empathy, because I know what they really need as opposed to what they think they want. And sometimes it’s walking away, for my own self-preservation and emotional space.

Rebecca’s positive parental influence and her ability to overcome adversity have developed in her a strong sense of self-worth and empowerment. She rejects the ‘angry Black woman’ moniker and instead sees herself and others as “passionate” Black women.
She described this view as her “coming into her power, powerfully” and “empowering herself through her self-esteem”:

I used to say, “I stand up and stand in who I am.” Boom. As the laser, as the bolt going into the earth. That’s taken me a long time to get there, even though that’s where I began.

Rebecca’s IAT results suggested no automatic preference between male and female. She stated that she was “not surprised” by her score and she attributed a lack of bias to her ability and desire to “see people as people.” She shared that she works hard to resist and overcome assumptions, and she credits her parents with instilling in her the importance of seeing the value in individuals, regardless of their role in organizations or society. She reflected on how poignant that view had become during the Covid-19 pandemic:

It goes back to what my mom said, “the most important people aren’t the people with the title; it’s the people who are doing the work.” And I think that’s so quintessential to what’s happening now. I actually saw a quote on Instagram saying it’s really interesting that the most important people for our daily lives right now are drivers, grocery people…people on the front line. And it’s not the celebrities, the politicians per se, and the athletes. It’s not the richest people in the world; it’s actually the poorest. To me, this whole shift has been very parallel to my life. And I think that this [IAT test] shows that.

Rebecca went on to share that she had been born with a physical difference that required her to wear braces on her legs when she was a young child. She said that some people considered her “handicapped,” but she saw herself as merely “living life” and when she fell, she would simply “fall and get back up.” She shared that she was embraced by her school, her community, and her peers, and that helped shape the lens of empathy through which she sees people today. Rebecca stated that her work as a consultant and speaker have prepared her to embrace and lead others through transformational change:
All of that work is truly, I believe, in preparation for how we are moving to our next level of humanity, and this is the beginning. We won’t see it to the end in our lifetime. I understand that. However, we get to shape the new foundation. That’s what I believe is happening right now.

**Kelly’s Story**

Kelly is a senior-level leader in a manufacturing services firm where she leads a team of sales managers and sales support professionals. She is divorced and has grown children. Kelly and I worked together for over fifteen years and I have known her to be a well-respected leader in her organization and the larger business community. She is open and friendly with a deep underlying wisdom that comes through in how she views the world. Kelly has a calm yet confident style, undoubtedly built through her many experiences of stepping into new and challenging situations.

Kelly is the third oldest in a family of six children and is one of four girls. She grew up on a farm where her father was the “breadwinner” while her mother assumed a “very traditional role” as the family caretaker and did not work outside the home. Kelly’s mother instilled in her children the value of education from an early age, and there was an expectation that all of them would attend college. Subsequently, Kelly and all her sisters obtained graduate-level degrees.

Kelly and her siblings pitched in equally to help with the various tasks around the family farm. Kelly described learning to “use tools and drive a pick-up” as part of her contribution to the upkeep of the farm. However, her oldest sister had “traditional roles imposed upon her” as she assisted Kelly’s mother with many of the indoor chores. Kelly attributed this to her mother’s ongoing struggle with clinical depression and the need for someone to step in when she was incapacitated.
Kelly considered her grandmother, who was a nurse by profession, and her mother to be key role models and advocates throughout her childhood. She felt supported by them to “be anything she wanted to be.” Kelly described her grandmother as “very loving” and, because she was also the “primary wage earner,” she instilled in Kelly the belief that one can be “a good parent…and also have a balanced life.” Yet, Kelly felt that the encouragement she received from her grandmother and mother contrasted with the lifestyles that these women had assumed, providing her with a “mixed message” that said, “this is how I do it, but you don’t have to do it that way.”

Kelly’s father, whom she described as a “workaholic,” was “not very present” as she was growing up, so her mother assumed most of the parenting responsibilities. Her mother was a loving parent who “dedicated her entire life to her kids.” Kelly’s mother regretted not completing her own education, and this likely motivated her expectation that her children attend college. Kelly’s relationship with her mother was shadowed by mental illness and the resulting hardship it created came through several times in Kelly’s story. She described her mother as “scary” and “volatile” at times, and, despite being hospitalized twice, she struggled to overcome depression. Kelly described the adversity that her mother faced when trying to get help for her mental illness:

She had reached out to the family doctor—little small-town family doctor who took care of everybody—she had reached out to him saying she was feeling so deeply saddened. He blew her off. She reached out to the family minister. He blew her off. She sunk deeper and deeper and finally those two, plus my dad, they came to our house. They confronted her and basically man-handled her. I watched through a little crack in the door in an adjacent room, and they basically man-handled her and said, “we’re taking you to [psychiatric facility].” I think that had a big impact on me—that here are the three most impactful, powerful men in her life and they didn’t honor her, in my opinion. She needed help, no doubt. But the way in which they did it was…cruel.
Kelly’s conflicted relationship with her parents was clearly illustrated when she said, “I think you learn more from your parents what you don’t want to be as an adult than what you do want to be.” She also described her relationship with her oldest sister as “strained” at times. Kelly shared that, until she went off to college, her “world was family, church, and school,” and that “they were all small.”

Kelly was active in sports throughout her childhood but experienced inequality due to her gender. She graduated high school two years before Title IX was enacted, which required schools to provide equal opportunities for girls and boys. Kelly described her feelings about not being able to compete in sports as a young girl:

Even in junior high, the boys could go do sports and I couldn’t. That always bugged me. But that’s just the way it was. I didn’t go fight to have girls’ sports or anything like that, I was just disheartened. So, that was one thing that shaped me. I was puzzled by that, but I didn’t know what to do about it.

Kelly’s family moved to a neighboring town when she was a junior in high school, and she attended a larger school where she found herself in a “foreign group of kids.” Although the move was hard for Kelly, she resolved to “embrace” the experience by challenging herself academically and immersing herself in extracurricular activities. She recalled being supported by the school’s principal, whom she described as “a tough old broad” and a “good leader” who was “very compassionate with [Kelly’s] situation.”

Kelly’s principal challenged her to take on new opportunities, including a speech communication class, which then led her to participate in theater. Through these experiences Kelly developed leadership skills, such as “presence in front of a group” and “how to communicate” that have served her throughout her career.

Kelly went to a large public college during a time when the country was undergoing significant turbulence. She described the Vietnam War era as creating a “lot
of anger” within young people and opposition was particularly strong on college campuses. Kelly recalled being “intrigued” by people like Jane Fonda, who stood up against the war. Kelly described her as having “tremendous courage” and acting with “dignity and intellect.” She shared that she believes the “vehement” criticism that Jane Fonda received was compounded by the fact that “she was a woman and she wasn’t afraid.”

Kelly shared that she was influenced by the feminist movement as a teenager and young woman. She started to engage with feminist literature, such as The Feminine Mystique, when she was about sixteen, and she recalled feeling that it was “pretty revolutionary” and “much bolder” than what she had experienced regarding “the roles that women play in society.” Kelly viewed college as being particularly formative of her views on women, as it was a “huge time of questioning the traditional norms.” Kelly engaged further with the feminist literature, and she developed a strong commitment to equality spurred by her belief that people “have to fight the norms” that uphold gender and racial inequities. By the time Kelly left college, she had “really started to embrace the feminist movement.”

Kelly entered the workforce during an economic recession, which made it difficult for her to find a job. A family acquaintance was running for congress at the time and gave her a job as an assistant on his campaign team. He lost the endorsement but ran for another political office and subsequently asked Kelly to act as his campaign manager. She felt unqualified for the role, but in her characteristic ‘can-do’ style, she accepted the position and successfully managed the various elements of political campaigning. He ended up losing the election, but took a role in state government, which he then leveraged
to get Kelly an interview for a position with a large phone company. She was hired as a management trainee and would become one of the first female crew supervisors for the company.

Kelly embraced the new challenge and met the requirements for her new role by getting trained in skills such as pole-climbing, trenching, and operating a tractor-trailer. She recognized that being a female manager in a male-dominated industry presented opportunities for discrimination, but she was transparent with her team about her feelings and fears. “I asked that they give me a chance,” she said, and she shared that they, in turn, were “amazing.” She described her all-male team as being like a father and older brothers. Kelly faced challenges as she grew in her role, but she was successful “by all the metrics” and was “in the top ten percent” throughout her tenure. She went on to become an engineer and “designed the jobs” on which she had previously been a laborer. Again, she was one of the only women in that role.

Kelly spent many years of her career in “male-dominated” roles and many of her leaders were men. Although she learned that her success was largely dependent on her ability to listen to her team and then make decisions in a “clear” and “confident” manner, she also felt that she “was always having to prove” that she was capable of the role. Most of her colleagues “accepted [her] competence,” but there were others whose blatant sexism created a hostile work environment for her:

A pipefitter was in the studio area doing some pipefitting, and there were…probably fifty plus workers, different trades, working on construction. This one pipefitter is up high putting in a sprinkling system, and he sees me, and he yells, “hey you, ‘c-word’, why are you taking the job away from a man?” All these workers were around. It was probably one of the most uncomfortable situations I’ve ever been in professionally. I didn’t know what to do. I ignored him. And the whole place kind of stopped. Some guys kind of chuckled and others were startled, and I just kept going and didn’t respond.
Kelly shared that there were other incidents in which she had to “continually” prove herself “because she was a woman.” She eventually moved into a training role where she worked alongside an older woman who mentored her and supported Kelly’s leadership development. She gave Kelly a copy of the book, *The Managerial Woman*, which positively influenced her attitudes about gender and leadership.

Kelly went back to college to get her master’s degree while working for the phone company and was later offered a severance package, which allowed her to “technically retire” at a young age. She raised two small children while completing her master’s education and then joined her husband in running his commercial real estate business. During that time, she met her current boss, who is the owner of a manufacturing services firm. He suggested that Kelly’s experience with the phone company would lend well to a role that he had in his business. Despite having no experience in the industry, Kelly accepted a role with the firm as an independent contractor and went on to build a successful business.

Kelly described her leadership style as “collaborative, inclusive, and decisive.” She shared that “everybody’s ideas are worth hearing and including” and she stated that she seeks feedback from her team members when making decisions that impact them. To illustrate the value she places on collaboration, she shared the story of a client who had fired her team a couple of years earlier and then came back recently to re-establish the relationship. She shared that it was important to her to understand and honor her team’s feelings about the matter:

I went to them and said, “if feelings are too hard for you to really embrace this and do it with all your heart, then let’s not…” To me, that’s the only way to do it.
I was even willing to give up a decent income stream if these guys couldn’t get past some of the hard feelings that were left when we were dismissed.

Kelly described how the value of decisiveness showed up in that scenario as well, as she acted quickly to move forward with the relationship once her team approved. As with other times in her career, this situation demonstrated Kelly’s a commitment to both collaboration and firm decision-making.

Kelly stated that her gender influences how she leads, but “more at a subconscious level.” She said she works “effectively with men and women” and is grounded in her sense of self, as she demonstrated when saying, “I am of the belief system that I am who I am.” Kelly strives to be a good role model for women and is committed to equality:

We must have equal numbers of male and female CEOs and on boards, that’s very important to me. So, in any way that I can lead or be a role model, I think we will all be better. Our corporations, we as people will be better, when it is equal. And political leaders included.

In contemplating whether she had experienced conflict between her role as a woman and her role as a leader, Kelly shared what she described as a “#metoo moment.”

As a successful female supervisor at the phone company, she was asked by a male leader to participate in a committee that would train other female employees and help them grow in the company. Kelly was excited to be part of a group that was focused on developing women. However, the leader who had originally approached her made sexual advances toward her, putting her in threatening and uncomfortable situations. She described how powerless she felt:

At that time there was no support for reporting something like that. It’s the classic battered woman syndrome, right? Not that I was battered, but it was emotionally abusive for sure. He was on the fast track, highly regarded. I had been on the job two and a half years. No one would have ever believed me. I’m totally convinced
of that. I mean, men took care of men then. Look at Harvey Weinstein, how long he got away with it, right? They just wouldn’t believe…But that was really eye opening. I thought, ‘I was doing this! This was a great cause!’ And I thought, ‘wow, this was a leader who was going somewhere in the company, and he’s on the fast track, and he’s advocating for women!’ And then it turns into that. What hypocrisy.

If Kelly could give her younger self advice, she would tell herself to “believe from day one” that she is “strong” and “worthy” and that she is “not less than any male in her life.” She said that she developed this attitude by being “willing to take on a challenge.” Even though she had doubts, she accepted new opportunities and summoned her courage to step into roles that others thought she was “a little crazy to take on.” Kelly attributed her courage to take on non-traditional roles partially to her father, who always told her she was as capable as her brothers. However, she wishes she had had the confidence “to call people on their stuff” in a “caring and compassionate way.”

A lifetime of hard work, courage, and a willingness to accept unprecedented challenges has given Kelly a strong sense of commitment to both the needs of the business and to people. She shared that she sees her gender as conducive to “connecting with the skill of compassion and understanding,” and she described how she sees the value of each individual’s unique strengths:

First and foremost is to be genuine. As a woman. As a leader. And as a human being. In the beginning, we’re all human beings. I think to find that true self and to be that…use all your skills, all your gifts, and admit where you don’t have them. Call upon others to help, to learn from in areas where your skillsets aren’t as innate. But at the end, most importantly, we all win when we’re all working together and have equal say.

Kelly’s IAT results suggested a slight association of female with supporter and male with leader. Kelly shared that her results were likely influenced by her early upbringing and “being in traditionally male worlds most of [her] adult life and career.”
But she stated that her environment has also raised her awareness of “the importance and value of women being good leaders” and she described how she works to advocate for women in her roles as a leader and as a mother:

I hope it’s helped me be a role model, to both men and women, that women can be competent and capable and decisive and fair. And inclusive. So, I often say that God gave me two boys, and I can help make the world more equal faster if I educate my boys to be understanding and inclusive of women. I think there’s a lot of truth to that. It’s not just the women we have to educate, it’s our young boys and men.

At the end of the interview, Kelly shared a story about her master’s thesis, in which she researched compensation across different industries and discovered that the lowest paying professions tended to be “female dominated.” She reflected on her own experience and how she views the state of gender equality today:

I remember when I was talking to the high school counselor my junior year she said, “well, basically you can be a teacher or nurse or secretary.” I mean, that was her world. And I was thinking, ‘are you kidding lady?’ I didn’t go back to see her. But when I did the research for my master’s paper, those were the low-paying professions because they were the female-dominated professions. And it still exists! It’s gotten better, but we’ve still got a ways to go. So, we keep fighting the battle, right?

**Dawn’s Story**

Dawn is a senior-level leader in a building materials company. She is divorced and has grown children. I was introduced to Dawn through an acquaintance and met her for the first time during our interview. I found Dawn to be warm and kind, and she shared her story with both generosity and authenticity. She has a positive, light-hearted energy and sense of humor that made her a delight to interview.

Dawn grew up one of five children and is the second youngest of four girls and one boy. She described her family as “kind of unique” in that her mother worked as a nurse during a time when few mothers worked outside the home. Dawn shared that being
exposed to a working mother taught her that she did not have to be a homemaker and that she could aspire to have a career of her own. She described how her mother “made it look easy” to work and raise a family, although Dawn shared later in the interview her own challenges in balancing both.

Dawn spent most of her childhood playing sports and doing more “male-oriented things” with her male friends. As she reflected on this, she shared that she often gravitated to “male-dominated scenes” throughout her life and usually felt more comfortable around men. She stated that she considers herself a competitive person and would put herself up against any of her male counterparts:

From early on it was, “I don’t see any difference between you and me.” Other than maybe physical things that they could do that I obviously understand I can’t do. But anything intellectual or anything like that, oh yeah. I’ll meet you on the field.

Dawn attributes her empowered attitude to her mother, whom she viewed as strongly independent and self-sufficient. Dawn’s father was an alcoholic and she saw her parents’ marriage as “toxic,” requiring Dawn’s mother to take a larger role in the family. Dawn would go on to instill the value of independence into her own daughters and encourage them to “always have a plan B, because things can happen.”

Dawn attended a co-ed grade Catholic school as a young girl. She described some of the nuns at her school as “modeling academic excellence,” though she said she did not feel that any were “pivotal” as role models. Dawn later attended a co-ed Catholic high school, which had just integrated boys and girls when she started. Dawn stated that she believes segregating boys and girls to some extent can be good for development as there is less pressure to perform in front of the opposite sex. She described high school as
“tougher” on her from an academic standpoint and she alluded to a gender bias that may have been present:

I don’t know if there was almost a pre-defined expectation that says, “well, it’s ok if you don’t get an A in physics. These guys over here, they’ve got it.” I don’t know. I could be making all this up, but I do see a place for that [gender segregation] in education.

In reflecting on how she thought about women in society as a young woman, Dawn shared that her attitude has always been that women are just as capable of succeeding as men. She never liked the “women as victims” message that she felt many of the social reformers of her youth endorsed. Further, she stated that the idea that “women can have it all” is damaging to women’s well-being:

I was talking to a classmate of mine and we both said, “you know what? That god-dang Gloria Steinem lied to all of us.” You can have it all, but not all at the same time because we all about killed ourselves trying to do that. I hate Gloria—I guess her child was older and she was spouting about, “hey, get out there and grab the brass ring and do this.” Not when you were trying to combine a family. And that’s the one thing that dawned on me after I had my own family, was that was a very stilted argument...

Dawn attended a private women’s university for her undergraduate studies, which she embarked on right after high school. Dawn was the first in her family to attend college and she single-handedly navigated the financial vehicles available to her so that she could afford the cost of a private education. She described her younger self as a “rebel” who found the school’s curfew policy too restrictive, so she chose to commute versus living on campus. Dawn recalled thinking about her female college instructors as “excellent” and her classmates as “smart gals” whom she admired. She shared that having mostly women in her classes allowed her and her peers to learn and grown in a positive environment that did not “have the distraction of all the guys’ stuff”: 
I think at that age still, you are less likely to jump in and say, “hey, Sparky, I need the floor now.” To compete with that male voice in the classroom. So, in that regard, I would say even at [university], I liked the fact that it was just women, and we could show our strengths, our weaknesses.

Dawn stated that in order to be successful, women should “not come across as though everything offends them.” She described women as “tough” and not “delicate little creatures” that need to be coddled. She said that women would benefit by “engaging people where they are” and by having a flexible attitude that allows for various personalities.

Dawn shared that she “doesn’t really identify as a woman” and instead thinks about her identity in terms of her relationships with others, such as her children and colleagues. Dawn described herself as “gender agnostic,” and she stated that when it comes to leadership, she is most interested in individual ability.

Dawn described an experience early in her career where she was subjected to gender bias in the workplace, but saw it as a challenge and opportunity to prove herself:

There was a guy that was an intern at their lab, and they had this open position. They ended up hiring me. I have a feeling that they were trying to go after gender quotas. I was the second woman in these two buildings there. I remember overhearing [a colleague] say, “yeah, we had [intern] and look who we got?” And I thought, “well, well, well. Yep, look who you got.” And I didn’t feel bad… You know, you want to throw that football harder, that’s fine. I’ll take it. No problem.

Dawn’s first career related job was working for a large technology company. She had succeeded as a front-line worker and got promoted into a laboratory position, which then took her to a position as a systems engineer. She described the leadership there as not “real present” and, while she felt they were “good” managers, they were more hands-off in their approach. Therefore, Dawn became her “own leader” and engaged in “a lot of self-learning.”
She went on to describe her first female manager as “professional and pleasant,” but someone whom she did not really “connect” with because she and Dawn were in very different stages of their lives—Dawn being a young mother with two children and her manager being childless.

Dawn went on to work for a government agency in the travel sector. It was there that she said she was exposed to “what leadership is not.” She described the environment as “toxic” due to the leadership, and her leader—a woman whom she called “broadzilla”—was “unpredictable” and “volatile.” Dawn ended up leaving because she felt that the problems with her leader were insurmountable:

Some days you didn’t know if you were her sister, her employee, her girlfriend—all of her emotional life played out through her staff. And that was crazy-making...It would have been a safe place to stay from a pension and that perspective, but professionally it was either her or me, and I knew that she had a lot more authority, presence, whatever you want to call it. Well, they did end up terminating her a year later, which was very unusual for them.

Dawn shared that the experience helped her appreciate good leadership. She was inspired to continue her education so that she could further develop her own leadership ability. She started a master’s program in organizational leadership at her alma mater while working for the government agency. Her master’s program resonated with her commitment to be an “ethical, effective, and enduring” leader, and she was inspired by the instructors who were business leaders in the community. Her dedication to hard work and personal development motivated her to work full time and raise three children while attending graduate school.

While still in her master’s program, Dawn left the public sector to become a vice president in charge of information technology for a building equipment manufacturer. She described the load of navigating a new job while going to school and raising children
as something she needed like she “needed a hole in the head.” However, the opportunity to have her education paid for by her employer motivated her to complete the program. Dawn described her new job as one she “loved,” but the company’s decision to move their IT operations to another state presented her with a dilemma: she could move her family out of state, or she could take a new role, which would require significant worldwide travel. Dawn, who was then a divorced single mother to three children, decided that she could not accept either position, so she instead moved into her current role as director of IT for a building products company.

Dawn described her leadership style as one that “sets people at ease.” She said she likes to bring humor to the workplace and to create a friendly environment where people can “remain calm” and “just have a good day.” She said she works to earn the trust of those she leads by taking “heat” when needed and by allowing herself to be vulnerable. She emphasized the importance of not taking things too seriously, though she admitted that she will get on her “broomstick” occasionally with vendors. She used the metaphor of an apple tree to describe how she views leadership:

> Apples are nurturing, they feed you, they shade you, you can relax and sit under one and so forth…Let’s just keep this in the right perspective. That’s kind of my style.

Dawn shared that it is important to solicit feedback from those who would not otherwise have a “voice at the table.” She said she considers everyone “special” and that she believes that her role as a leader is to empower others to become part of the conversation. Dawn also shared that she had to learn how to overcome the fear of making a “wrong critical decision.” She stated that getting feedback from people is crucial for weighing the pros and cons of an important decision, and she said she finds that people
are more engaged when they feel that they have a stake in the decision-making process.

Dawn described herself as a “collaborative leader” who is committed to listening to her team members:

I get all the voices in the room. I do that a ton. I schedule meetings. If you saw my calendar, it’s meeting-mania some days, but it’s the right thing to do because you’ve got to have the voices in. When that happens, you get to a) the best answer faster and b) everybody’s feeling good about the answer.

Dawn shared her thoughts on whether she thinks her gender influences her leadership style:

I would say that I don’t look at myself in terms of gender and leadership ever. But, others might…I think I’ve been at [current employer] long enough that the guys let their hair down in steering committee meetings. They’re not going to offend me with their language, with an outburst. I’m not going to go crying in tears anywhere.

As one of the only women in a higher level of leadership in the organization, Dawn sees herself as a “tough cookie” who is perfectly comfortable in her role and views her male counterparts as “kind of like brothers.” She attributes her success to her individual ability and rejects any notion that gender should be viewed as a barrier:

I’m kind of that woman who says, “leave that ‘I am woman hear me roar’ crap at the door.” My success has been related to many men who have been fantastic in support of my career. So, I’ve not really looked anywhere in that direction. Even if I hear somebody say, “well, it’s because I’m a woman,” I’d say, “I don’t buy into that.”

Dawn reiterated throughout our conversation that her attitude toward men and women transcends gender, and her belief about a woman’s ability to succeed was a strong theme throughout our discussion. She herself endured a marriage—and subsequent divorce—that was shadowed by her husband’s drug and alcohol addiction, yet she overcame these “hard knocks,” made sacrifices when she felt it necessary, and was committed to her roles as a mother and as a leader.
Dawn’s IAT results suggested a slight association of female with supporter and male with leader. She shared that being exposed to “far more men in leadership” than women may have factored into her results. She stated that she did not like that the test forced her to associate a male or female name with leadership as she would be as likely to “put a woman’s name there as…a man.” She also shared that any bias she may have had for women in leadership was “cured” by having one of her “worst leadership experiences” with a woman leader.

Dawn shared that women need to be aware of how they present themselves in different situations and “engage people where they are.” She stated that women need to be “less afraid of the boys’ club” and recognize that men prefer to be “relaxed around women” and not have to “worry about something being misinterpreted.” She shared that it is important for women to be assertive, but to temper it with an effort to be “one of the gang”:

You don’t have to be a ball-breaker. And that’s the best way to turn off any male leadership, ok? Now, if you can kind of be one of the guys? Great. Because they’ll engage with you all day long.

Dawn shared that her hope for women in leadership is to avoid putting a gender “fence” around themselves because it is “non-existent.” She shared that women sometimes deny themselves the opportunity to succeed by “waiting for permission” to do the things they want. Her advice for women is to “just go do it,” as she herself did throughout her career. However, she also shared that there is a false narrative in our society that says that women “can have it all” and she contends that this may be a contributing factor to the low levels of women in top leadership roles:

If I take myself as an example, I made a decision about the kind of mom I was going to be. I had children. I made that decision. And I made a decision that the
kind of mom I was going to be was not one that had full-time nannies and...just not involved with my kid’s life. And here’s the reality: you cannot have it all at the same time. You can have it all, but you can’t have it all at the same time.
Chapter 5: Identified Themes and Connection to Theory

The current study sought to understand the ways that women leaders experience their gender and leader identities within the context of gender-leadership implicit bias. Utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis, four superordinate and twelve major themes were identified that related to how the participants experienced their gender and leader identities (see Table 2.) Following, each theme is discussed and connections to relevant theoretical perspectives on identity are presented.

Table 2

Superordinate and Major Themes

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Influence of Developmental Environment

The participants discussed their early home lives and how the dynamics of family, school, and interpersonal relationships influenced and informed their identities. They shared how they and other family members assumed roles within the family and how those roles were or were not perceived to be influenced by gender. The participants further shared how their experiences at school influenced how they saw themselves in relation to their gender, and how single-gender or mixed-gender academic environments
had shaped their views about women. The participants all described having female role models who influenced their identities. Some of these role models were women who achieved success and encouraged the women’s aspirations, while others represented adversity and oppression, motivating the women to strive for better lives. Five of the women described how social reformers acted as important role models who shaped their views on women and their roles in society.

**Gender Norms in Early Environment**

The participants in the current study came from varied family backgrounds. Eight of them grew up in urban or suburban environments and two of them grew up on farms. Nine of the participants grew up in two-parent homes where their fathers worked outside the home or managed the family farm. Eight of the participants had mothers who worked inside or outside the home for pay while raising children. Eight of the participants described how their mother’s responsibilities within the family mostly followed traditional gender norms in that they assumed much—if not all—of the responsibility for the home and children. Melanie, whose mother worked inside the home for pay, described the extent of her mother’s responsibilities:

> Her [mother’s] role was really—she was the nurturer. She made all the dinners. She did all the laundry. She did all the cleaning. She did all the raising of the kids.

For Amber and Kelly, who grew up on farms, their mothers had large families to care for and many responsibilities related to farming life. Both women described their parents as having what Amber described as “pretty set gender roles.” Kelly described how these roles were enacted by her parents:

> She dedicated her entire life to her kids and her family… it was clearly a role that she loved and embraced, although it was hard for her at times. My dad was not
very present from a parenting standpoint because he was always working. He was a workaholic. But she embraced the role of the loving, caring parent.

Three of the participants’ mothers sacrificed careers or educational aspirations to care for children while their fathers worked, illustrating the central role their mothers held as caregivers. Tammy, Laura, and Heather’s mothers gave up careers when their children were born and, while two of them returned to work, they did not return to their originally chosen professions. Heather described how her mother “made a really strong pivot” in her career so that she could “stay home more often” because her personal life was not conducive to a career that required her to “be gone all day.”

Common throughout the participants’ stories was a strong maternal presence, and their mothers played what Rebecca described as a “dominant” role in the family. For Susan, who grew up without a father, her mother played the role of sole breadwinner as well as caretaker and was a woman who could “stand alone on her own two feet.”

Nine of the participants grew up with siblings, and, for some, the roles that they played illustrated the gender norms that existed in their families. Five of the women grew up with older sisters, and three of them described how their sisters took on roles that reinforced gender norms. Tammy, who is the youngest of six, shared that her older sister cared for her when her mother was ill with cancer and acted as a “surrogate parent” for her. Similarly, Kelly described how her older sister acted as an “assistant mom” who had “traditional roles imposed upon her.” Amber described how her older sisters “still assumed more of a traditional place in the home” even after establishing successful careers.

Six of the participants described their own roles and responsibilities within the family in relation to gender norms. Two of the participants described having
responsibilities that followed gendered norms while four participants viewed their roles within the home as gender neutral. Further, participants roles varied depending on the nature of the home and the make-up of the family. Amber and Kelly, who grew up on farms, described having broader responsibilities than participants who did not, but they each had distinctly different experiences regarding their roles in the family. Amber, who is the second youngest of six, described her responsibilities on the farm as conforming to gender norms:

My job every night was to make sure I made our meal. It always was a meat, potatoes, bread on a plate, butter and a vegetable. And I was always the one that had the coffee going. So, my role was to clean the house and get the supper made… I would say that in terms of that [gender norms] it was pretty traditional…

In contrast, Kelly was challenged to take on a variety of duties, many of which transcended traditional gender roles:

It was mandatory that we all learned how to help on the farm. So, it didn’t matter if you were a girl or a boy, you had to learn to use tools and drive a pick-up and help repair a tractor and know the different tools...When we had to re-shingle buildings, everybody had to help. There weren’t the male-female roles when it came to helping out on the farm.

Heather was the oldest sibling and only girl in her family and she shared that her tasks included making dinner for her siblings when her mother was not home. She described her responsibilities as being “indicative of that gender role”:

I don’t know if it’s because I was the oldest or because I was the only girl, but I think even if I’d been the second in birth order, I probably would have still been tasked to do that because of that traditional sense of ‘you’re the one who’s supposed to be cooking.’

Melanie, who was also the oldest sibling and only girl, stated that she was often the director of her younger siblings, but that they were “all one” in their responsibility for domestic chores.
Tammy and Laura described their roles in the family as being gender neutral. Tammy, who was the youngest, stated that she had few domestic chores assigned to her and Laura shared that she and her younger brother assumed equal responsibility for household chores.

The environment in which one is raised has the earliest influence on one’s gender identity as gender norms are reinforced or challenged by the important people in one’s life. Parental behaviors and attitudes about gender strongly influence gender identity (Bussey, 2011; Witt, 1997). For young girls, their mothers provide models of behavior that influence their gender identity (Bussey, 2011). Participants in the current study confirmed that their mothers were important figures in their lives and each shared how their mothers influenced their views on gender.

Gender norms are often reinforced in the early home life through the tasks and responsibilities that children are given and can deliver powerful messages about the roles that women play in society. Expectations that girls care for children and the home may create normative beliefs that carry over into later life. In a study by Meeussen et al. (2016), young adults’ gender norms orientation was examined in relationship with their future aspirations. They found that young adults generally subscribed to traditional gender norms (i.e. women as caregivers) and that these norms “spilled over” (p. 2) into how they visualized their future selves. The authors discussed the implications of these norms on women’s personal and professional ambitions:

[The] findings suggest that young women, more than or even in contrast to young men, ‘want it all’ (cf. Hoffnung, 2004): they want to pursue high aspirations in the family as well as in the career domain. This corresponds to the societal trend that
while their participation in the labor market and ‘agentic’ type tasks has increased substantially, women continue to have the main responsibility for family and communal tasks. (Meeussen et al., 2016, p. 7)

This research partially agrees with the findings in the current study. Of the ten women interviewed, four chose not to have children. Of the six who have children, four described the challenges and sacrifices involved in balancing work and family. Dawn was emphatic in her statement that attempting to “have it all at the same time” created a significant burden that “about killed [her],” and Amber described being in a “vicious cycle for a long time” where her professional responsibilities infringed on her role as a mother.

**School Experiences**

All the participants described their school years—primarily high school and college—as having informed their gender identity to various degrees. Prominent in their stories was the impact that single-gender versus mixed-gender schooling had on their experiences. Four of the participants attended single-gender high schools, colleges, or both. They each described how their school experiences positively influenced their views on women and how they came to see themselves through the lens of gender. Dawn’s all-women’s university provided a supportive environment where women could openly “show their strengths and weaknesses” and learn how to assert themselves. Amber, who also attended an all-women’s university, shared that her experiences there helped her “see things differently” and she felt “liberated” from the conservative community in which she had been raised. Rebecca described her all-girls high school as a place where developing leadership skills was “an expectation, not a request.” Heather, who also attended an all-
girls high school shared that this experience significantly shaped her beliefs about women and her identity:

When I was in high school, I think that’s where I started to really think about women’s place in society because a lot of my teachers were such strong women and they helped me think about those types of things… I would say one of the most shaping experiences of my life was to be four years in an all-girls school that cared about our brains, not about how we looked.

Heather and Rebecca, who attended girls-only high schools, went on to attend co-ed universities for their undergraduate studies. For both women, the contrast between the two environments was stark. Rebecca described feeling “shell-shocked” when she started at her university and experienced “how dominant the men were” in comparison to her high school. Heather’s move from an all-girls high school to a co-ed private college challenged her deeply instilled feminist values and shook her identity:

When I got to college, I noticed this very bizarre sense that people were much more well-dressed there than most college campuses. So, I felt the pressure of dressing up and having makeup on to go to class that, in retrospect, I thought, ‘why am I doing this?’… College for me—those four years—were a time, I think, of losing myself. I think in high school I had a better lock on who I was and how I showed up and after college I also had a better lock. I think those four years were a period of confusion, like, ‘wait a second, who am I?’

Six of the participants attended mixed-gender schools only. Susan described her college years in a co-ed university as “extremely, extremely stimulating” and highly influential on how she saw herself as a young woman because they offered her “different slices of life” that helped her “figure out” what she “liked and didn’t like.” Kim described her co-ed middle school as a place where “the girls ran the school.” However, she also speculated on the way she was taught throughout her education and how gender may have influenced her learning experience:

As women, my impression is that we tend to make things that don’t go the way we want them about how we’re…us. How we’re damaged or flawed versus
maybe it was just taught in a way that didn’t work for your brain. It takes a while to get to that point where you realize, ‘oh, this isn’t the right way. I need to figure out a different way to do this.’

Tammy shared that school was largely inconsequential to her views on gender:

I’m not sure I gave much thought to it [gender]. I just thought I was a person, and to be quite frank, I don’t know that I’ve ever paid a whole lot of attention until this study came up and forced me to think about it… I don’t think I ever had the mindset that I couldn’t do something because I was a female.

Three of the participants described aspects of their school experiences in negative terms. Kelly described the loss she felt as a young female athlete growing up in an era that preceded Title IX and how she would have “given up her right arm to compete in interscholastic sports.” Melanie shared that when she was in high school, she “hung out with the wrong crowd” and often felt like a “third wheel” within her peer group. For Laura, high school was regarded as an opportunity to build her academic skillset so that she could move on from a place that she disliked:

At some point in my high school career I learned to play the long game. Which is, ‘ok, this kind of sucks, and it’s stupid, and I’m unhappy, and high school sucks.’ I have yet to meet a person who didn’t feel that way about high school… But I thought, ‘here’s the thing: if I do well enough at this game, if I get out of here with high marks and play the game by these rules and get out of here with the markers of future success, I can leave this place behind.’

The participants described high school and college as important times in their lives and they all shared that their experiences in the academic environment influenced their identity. This aligns with McAdams (2013) who described adolescence and young adulthood as particularly important times in the formation of one’s identity, as the developmental stages of early to mid-childhood begin to consolidate into an identity narrative:
The psychological self begins life as a social actor, construed in terms of performance traits and social roles. By the end of childhood, the self has become a motivated agent, too, as personal goals, motives, values, and envisioned projects for the future become central features of how the I conceives of the Me. A third layer of selfhood begins to form in the adolescent and emerging adulthood years, when the self as autobiographical author aims to construct a story of the Me, to provide adult life with broad purpose and a dynamic sense of temporal continuity. (p. 272)

As eight of the participants confirmed, the academic environment can play an influential role in the formation of one’s identity. Variables such as school size, organizational values and norms, and approaches to learning inform adolescent identity development (Eccles & Roeser, 2006). Four of the participants attended single-gender schools and described an academic environment that bolstered their views on women. Heather’s description of her single-gender high school as one that “cared about our brains, and not about how we looked” coincides with a study by Cribb and Haase (2015), which found that girls who attended single-gender schools experienced lower internalization of messages about appearance and better outcomes related to self-esteem compared to girls who attended mixed-gender schools. While the current study did not explore self-esteem directly, participants who attended single-gender schools shared that the positive messages regarding women that they received in the academic environment had positively influenced their self-concept.

Three of the participants described aspects of the academic environment in negative terms, and their stories illustrated a struggle between their personal identities
and the social environment. Laura, who was a gifted student, described high school as a place that “sucked” and that she “wanted to leave behind.” Her early high school goal of pursuing a career in STEM was “lost” after having a chemistry teacher whom she described as “terrible.” Laura’s story is concurrent with a study by Casad et al. (2018) that implicated “threatening academic environments” (p. 469)—those that create a perceived threat to one’s social identity and are viewed as having a negative climate—as a factor in academic disengagement amongst women pursuing STEM education.

**Influence of Female Role Models**

Female role models played a significant part in each of the participant’s identity development. Role models were often described as either inspirational, in that they displayed traits that the women admired and wanted to emulate, or as having suffered adversity that motivated the women to seek different paths in life.

Two of the women shared that their older sisters had inspired their aspirations to attend college or pursue certain careers. Tammy described seeing her oldest sister “going off to college” and living “this really cool life” and how that inspired her to pursue her academic goals. Amber described how her older sister influenced her desire to go into nursing:

> The sister that is closest to me in age spent a lot of time with me when I was young. I spent the summers with her—she’s about twelve years older than me—and I was with her while she was going to school and becoming a nurse. So, I dove into her nursing books and her anatomy books and I always thought, well, I want to be like her someday and I want to know about these body parts and functions, and I always wanted to emulate her. She was my role model.

Seven of the participants described female schoolteachers and administrators as positive role models who inspired them to pursue their goals. Kelly described a high school principal as a woman who had defied gender norms to become an administrator, a
role that Kelly described as existing in “a man’s world” at that time. While others “just saw the hard side of her,” Kelly recognized her as a woman who was both “strong” and “compassionate,” and Kelly admired her genuine and collaborative leadership style.

Heather shared how a female schoolteacher had influenced her to think about the roles of women:

I really remember one of my teachers, who I put in the ‘admire’ column. There was a sentence she wrote on the board once and it said, “woman without her man is nothing,” and she asked us to punctuate it. And you could punctuate it in a way that said, “woman, without her man, is nothing” or “woman, without her, man is nothing.” I remember that vividly because those types of experiences or conversations helped me think about the strength of women.

Many of the women described their mothers as role models who inspired them to believe in themselves and their abilities. Kim described her mother as a key figure in her life who influenced her identity. She saw her mother as a “scrapper” who had overcome significant adversity to gain an education and establish a successful career as a teacher:

She was one of those people who grew up in a little town…and was told, “all you’ll be able to do is clean somebody’s house,” which she started doing at the age of twelve. And there was the egg plant. Processing eggs. “That’s it, that’s your life.” And she thought, “nope. Not gonna happen.” So somewhere this little girl—who raised herself for all intents and purposes, because her mother passed away when she was only two—figured out that education was the key. She said, “I’ve got to get out of here.”

Susan described her mother and aunt as “very astute women” who took care of themselves, and her mother demonstrated a tenacity that Susan said she values deeply and models herself. Susan described the women in her household as having a “very influential” effect on her gender identity by demonstrating strength and autonomy:

My childhood was spent observing strong women role models who came from very little, without a lot of support from male figures—or involvement with any male figure—to basically become successful, independent women.
For five of the women, social reformers were important, positive role models who influenced how they saw themselves as young women and helped shape the views that they hold today. Women who grew up during the 1960’s/1970’s women’s movement shared how the social reformers of that era influenced their views on gender equality. Kelly and Susan “embraced” the women’s movement, as Kelly described it, and they considered themselves advocates of the messages that people like Gloria Steinem promoted. Kelly shared that key figures in the women’s movement had “a big impact” on her. Susan, who is a strong proponent of women’s rights, described with great passion how progressive women had influenced her gender identity:

My high school and my college years were very, very frothy years in the women’s movement. So, Gloria Steinem was always in the paper. She had founded Ms. magazine and she was a big role model. Betty Friedan was another big role model, just in terms of the writers and the intellects at the time. In music, Helen Reddy had a hit song: I am woman, hear me roar. You had Aretha Franklin singing r-e-s-p-e-c-t, respect. You had…Carly Simon, and Joni Mitchell, and all of these female artists coming out with these very strong messages about womanhood. On the tennis circuit you had Billie Jean King challenging Bobby Riggs to prove that women’s tennis could be just as competitive as men’s.

In contrast, however, Dawn, who also came of age during the women’s rights movement, shared a different perspective on the social reformers of her day and how their message impacted her:

I was talking to a classmate of mine and we both said, “you know what? That god-dang Gloria Steinem lied to all of us.” You can have it all, but not all at the same time because we all about killed ourselves trying to do that. I hate Gloria—I guess her child was older and she was spouting about, “hey, get out there and grab the brass ring and do this.” Not when you were trying to combine a family. And that’s the one thing that dawned on me after I had my own family, was that was a very stilted argument…

For three of the participants, women in literature and religion were important social reformers who provided models for gender equality. Laura talked about being
“very anti-sexism” as a high school and college student, and she often turned to female literary figures to inform her views on women. Rebecca and Amber described women in Christianity as progressive figures for their time—and social reformers in their own right—who influenced their gender identities. Amber was so inspired by her university’s patron saint and her story of martyrdom that she not only chose to attend the school, but later named her first-born daughter after her. Rebecca saw the Christian figure, Mary, as a progressive “path-goal” leader who was a “very loud” woman in the Catholic church and someone who represents a broad network of strong women leaders:

To me Mary is the ultimate feminist as far as what she represents. There were other women way before her, no doubt in my mind. From the dynasties—from the Egyptian dynasties, the Ethiopian dynasties—from all those amazing women who led us. So, for me, she represents all of them, from a spiritual perspective.

In contrast to themes where women role models provided inspiration, themes of conflict and adversity were common for some of the women. Three participants saw their mother’s dependence on others and lack of self-sufficiency as strong motivation for their own independence. Kelly shared that her mother sacrificed her education to raise her family and that she “regretted” not getting a college degree. This motivated Kelly to invest in her own education. Tammy saw her mother as being “stuck between a rock and a hard place” and described how witnessing her mother’s adversity “had a lot of influence” on how she saw herself and motivated her own desire for independence. Similarly, Amber described her mother as seeming “just always stuck” and she shared that her mother’s situation had a significant impact on her own “determination to get out of that place and explore the world.”

As all the participants confirmed, children develop ideas about their future selves by observing others and using that information to inform their identity (Hardy & Carlo,
Role models provide “scaffolding for moral identity formation by channeling or persuading them toward valuing certain values and goals” (Hardy & Carlo, 2011, p. 507), as was illustrated in many of the women’s stories about how female role models had influenced their values of education and self-sufficiency.

The participants in the current study confirmed that their mothers were key figures in their early lives, and they all described how their mothers influenced their views on gender, which is consistent with research on identity (Bussey, 2011; Witt, 1997). However, they differed in how they saw their mothers in relation to themselves. For some, their mothers were inspirational role models who, as Dawn shared, “was a woman who could support herself out there” and their mothers inspired their own self-efficacy beliefs. For others, their mothers represented adversity and oppression, and this motivated their desire to avoid a similar lifestyle.

For two of the participants, older sisters played a particularly important role in shaping identity. This is consistent with Mchale et al.’s (2001) study that found that older siblings’ gender role orientations—attitudes, personality, and leisure activities—predicted similar orientations in younger children even more so than parents. Amber and Tammy, who both saw their mothers as “stuck,” drew inspiration from their older sisters and followed in their footsteps by pursuing similar academic or professional goals.

In addition to close female role models, young women take cues from people in the larger social environment to inform their future selves. In a study by Lockwood (2016), young college women who were exposed to “outstanding women” (p. 40) saw themselves as successful, drew comparisons between themselves and role models, and envisioned a future where they might be like that role model. This coincides with five of
the women in the current study who described prominent and exceptional women in society, literature, and religion as having positively influenced their identities.

**Self in Relation to Gender**

Participants shared how they had grown to see themselves as women, how they felt about other women, and, for some of them, how their important identities intersect. They shared their thoughts on what it means to be part of the female ingroup and the importance they do—or do not—place on their relationship to this cohort. They discussed times that they had been confronted with gender stereotypes, how they reacted to them, and what this meant for their outcomes. Two of the women stated that their ethnic and gender identities are deeply intertwined.

**Ingroup Attitudes**

All the participants expressed positive attitudes about women as a class and the overarching sentiment was that women should not feel constrained by their gender. They all expressed beliefs that women should aspire to leadership roles. Amber and Susan shared similar sentiments regarding women’s ability to achieve—if they, as Susan put it, “set their minds to it.” Melanie expressed passionately her belief in women’s ability to lead and succeed and she shared how her views have evolved to embrace women’s empowerment:

> Women rule the world. I mean, we do. If you look at everything we do, the only thing holding us back on anything is…ourselves. It’s so funny because I never have felt more sure that women can do anything.

Dawn shared that she views women as being just as capable as men and rejects any notion that women should be treated different from men. She stated that women are “tough,” not “delicate little creatures” who need to be “coddled,” and she shared that
women do themselves a disservice by adopting attitudes that do not align with their inherent strength.

The participants had varying attitudes about what it means to them to be part of a female ingroup. Five of the participants stated that it was their responsibility as women leaders to advocate for other women and to nurture their growth and development. Heather described herself as a “feminist” whose “desire for women to be viewed as leaders” was “so strong.” Amber stated that it is important for her to ensure that women’s voices are heard:

As we are woman leaders and we are kind of blazing our own trail in a way, our job is to make sure that those we are leading are turning into leaders as well. So, we are not just creating followers, but also leaders. I am somebody who feels that women should have a voice and not only have a seat at the table, but a voice at the table that’s going to be able to influence and which will be heard.

Melanie shared that she teaches and empowers her young female employees to stand up for themselves and “have a voice,” and she described a deep sense of attachment to women in her peer group:

I did a [peer mentoring group], which was fifteen women in a group… and we went around the room and I said, “I am loud, intimidating”… And one of the women looked at me—who doesn’t know me—and said, “no you’re not. No, you’re not. That’s what somebody told you. You’re actually really beautiful and we’re happy you’re here. Your energy is on fire.”… And now she’s one of my dearest, dearest friends because she gave me the permission to no longer put that label on myself. It just changed everything.

Kelly stated that she feels a responsibility to model excellence in leadership for women and she shared that it is “very important” to her that “we have equal numbers of male and female CEO’s.” Susan described her belief that women “should help each other out” as one of her “core values” and she is an advocate for creating “support structures” for women.
For other women, being part of a gender ingroup was purported to be less important to them. Laura described her relationships with women in distant terms:

I have really good solid acquaintances…I have a network of close-ish friends…Sometimes I feel like a bit of a freak, but again, I’m really good at relationships of proximity.

Dawn rejected any notion that she should feel a sense of solidarity with other women simply because they share a gender. She described an experience when a female colleague attempted to form a common bond around their gender:

I never was a, “hey, we’re sisters,” you know, in this whole world. I was never like that, either. I think that in my current position there was an HR person who was female, and I think she kind of thought we should be agreeing on things because women should support women, and that’s not me. I support what I think is a great idea. I don’t care who it comes from. So, I kind of sensed that I wasn’t maybe being part of the sisterhood or something.

Social identity theory posits that ingroup identification is foundational to one’s social identity (Tajfel, 1982), and attitudes and behaviors that support the interests of one’s ingroup are, by definition, a function of ingroup favoritism (Liberman et al., 2017). This aligns with all the participants statements that women can achieve success and should not allow gender to hinder their career aspirations. However, participants differed in the degree to which they identified with their gender ingroup. Self-categorization theory contends that people define their ingroups based largely on the situation in which they reside, and the salience of certain traits (e.g. age, gender) influences how people define and relate to their ingroups (Bussey, 2011). For four of the participants in the current study, their gender defined an important ingroup for them and they expressed the value they placed on belonging to and advocating for this group, which aligns with theory on ingroup favoritism. But for others, their gender played a smaller role in their overall ingroup identification motives. Dawn, for example, shared that her roles in relation to
others (e.g. mother, leader) are more important to her identity, and she “doesn’t really focus on gender,” demonstrating that situation-based self-categorization played a larger role for her than gender ingroup membership.

**Gender Stereotypes**

A common theme across the women’s stories was how they had experienced gender stereotypes in various situations and how they had dealt with these stereotypes. Some of the women described scenarios where they stood up to gender stereotypes and discrimination by either confronting them head on or dismissing them as illegitimate. In other situations, women described how they endured gender stereotypes by adapting their behavior to accommodate gendered expectations.

Eight participants shared stories where they challenged discriminatory attitudes toward women and stood up to gender stereotypes. Kelly and Dawn discussed how they explicitly rejected any notions that their career aspirations should be constrained by their gender. Dawn shared that she was never “that stereotypical” woman who believed she had to “be a secretary for the rest of [her] life,” and Kelly described her incredulity when a high school guidance counselor suggested she pursue a gendered career path:

> I remember when I was talking to the high school counselor my junior year she said, “well, basically you can be a teacher or nurse or secretary.” I mean, that was her world. And I thought, ‘are you kidding lady?’ I didn’t go back to see her.

Heather shared that she behaves in ways that “go over the top of gender stereotypes” and affirm her ability. Kim shared that she “ignores” messages that say she “can’t do” certain things or “shouldn’t go” certain places because of her gender, and she “tends to just show up as [she] is.” Melanie described gender stereotypes as “limits” that
women place on themselves and she advocates for women stepping into their own unique talents.

Laura described how she works to identify gender bias in her own thinking by questioning assumptions that she makes about others:

If I find myself having an unexpected reaction or a baseline assumption… I think, ‘wait, no. Why do you think she’s the assistant?’ Or, ‘what are you really thinking about that particular role?’ It’s something that I do try to actively query if I’m finding myself in a… well-trodden mental path.

Susan described how gender stereotypes experienced early in her career influenced her leader identity:

In the presence of a very male-dominated environment, I have found that I’ve had to go the extra step of appearing tougher… And that’s in response sometimes to the expectation that I won’t be. So, I think, again, that there’s social stereotypes of women and I think that sometimes to be a leader you have to address those and overcome those.

Heather and Amber each told stories about the ways that they have modified their physical presence to convey confidence as women leaders and intentionally overcome gender stereotypes. Heather shared that “gender influences how [she] shows up” as a woman leader and she described how she may manipulate her physical presence in ways that are “more stereotypically male,” such as widening her stance or taking a seat at the head of a table. She said that presenting herself in this way can help her feel more “secure” and gives her the confidence to be “more emphatic with her points.”

Amber, who is of a taller stature, described how she leverages her height to command respect in what may be an otherwise uneven playing field:

I have found when I’ve been in meetings where you need to be on point and you need to show that you deserve respect and you know it’s going to be a tough meeting, I always wear my super high heels and suit with my long pants so that they can’t see the heels that much—to walk in and I’m the tall girl, I think that helps.
Five participants shared times when they endured gender stereotypes and either conformed to expectations from others or refrained from challenging gender stereotypes. Amber stated that, as a woman, she “probably doesn’t take as much credit” for her accomplishments because women are often expected to be “pretty humble.” Tammy shared that she believes women leaders can be viewed as “bitchy and cold,” so she works on “the softer skills” to prevent others from seeing her that way. Kim shared that stereotypes about women’s math abilities hindered her academic choices, despite her innate ability:

I didn’t take a ton of advanced math. I didn’t take calculus, those kinds of things later in high school either. And it’s funny because, what did I do my entire career? Math. But there’s that bias: ‘well, this is really a guy’s program,’ right?

Laura shared that women are often expected to adopt a less direct communication style in comparison with their male colleagues. She described how this expectation influences her approach and the consequences that she might face if she does not conform to those expectations:

We’re conditioned to hint more at things and hope people get to it and trying to split the right difference between ‘no, you’re wrong and I’m right and here’s the reason’ and…I’m figuring out how to be indirectly direct. I can see that guys get away with, ‘no, no, no, here’s the way it actually is’ and I can do that sometimes, but sometimes I need to soften the approach so that people don’t think I’m just an absolute terrible person.

Stereotype threat creates conditions by which an individual expects negative stereotypes about their ingroup to “adversely influence others’ judgments” of her or his performance (American Psychological Association, n.d.). For women leaders, “stereotype-based lack of fit” creates perceptions of inferiority and may perpetuate the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016, p. 387). Kim’s
statement that she avoided math courses because they were viewed as “guy’s” courses, agreed with this study. However, it did not discourage her from pursuing a career in which math aptitude was a central requirement.

Hoyt and Murphy (2016) further discussed the individual and social factors that influence how women might respond to stereotype threat. Women leaders who have “sufficient power and self-efficacy” are more likely to “disconfirm” gender stereotypes versus women who are lacking power and feel less confident in their ability (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016, p. 392). Further, women leaders who view leadership as a “cultivated” ability are better able to overcome threats to their identity than women who have a more “fixed mindset” (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016, p. 392). Female role models can help women leaders overcome stereotype threat by “demonstrate[ing] that success in the stereotyped domain is available.” It is unknown what individual factors may have influenced the ways that participants in the current study responded to stereotype threat; however, several of the women who described confronting stereotypes also described having important female mentors in the workplace. These role models may have helped them identify and overcome stereotype threat.

**Gender and Ethnic Identity**

Two of the women in the study—Kim and Rebecca—identified as African American women, and they each emphasized the intersection of their gender and racial identities. Kim, who grew up as a Black girl in the 1960’s, stated that her gender was “intimately tied” to her ethnicity, and her community bolstered her identity development:

I was surrounded by teachers with master’s degrees and PhD’s. Lawyers, doctors—all female. Principals of schools—all female. So, a lot of those barriers didn’t exist for me. And we were all driven by...you have to be twice as good as
anybody else in the room to be considered average. That’s a combination of both
gender and race. There’s no such thing as good enough.

Rebecca also emphasized how her gender and race were intricately tied as a child
and how the larger social environment positively influenced her identity:

I saw powerful women who were becoming celebrities and activists and models
because of Ebony and Essence, those black magazines. So, gender identity for me
was very much tied into being black. Those correlate very closely in ways that
people don’t even realize. What that did was that it helped me to be comfortable
in my skin.

Rebecca went on to explain how her parents exposed her to her family’s rich
ancestral history and how that helped her see people in terms of “how genuine they are or
not”:

For me it was about the authentic person, who happens to be in a female body
bag. So, I’m always looking for that. That’s how I’ve expanded it beyond the race
conversation.

Intersectionality is the “mutually constitutive relation among social identities” and
is associated to the “power relations embedded in social identities” (Shields, 2008, p.
301). For women leaders of color, gender and race interact in important ways that
comprise a “multidimensionality of identification” (Bussey, 2011, p. 606), as was
supported by both Kim and Rebecca, who stated that their gender and ethnic identities are
interwoven.

Since the 1990’s and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1991) introduction of
intersectionality as a component of critical race theory, research has increasingly focused
on the relationship between ethnic/racial and gender identities specifically, and the
multidimensionality of identities generally. Wilson and Leaper’s (2015) study proposed a
multidimensional model of ethnic/racial and gender identity founded on previous models
based in social identity and gender identity theories. In it, they identified five dimensions
of ethnicity/race and gender identity that provided predictive validity for self-esteem, an important outcome of positive social identities: the degree to which individuals view their ethnic/racial and gender identities as central to their self-concept (centrality); how positive or negative individuals feel about group membership (in-group affect); how attached individuals feel to their groups (in-group ties); the degree to which individuals feel that they share similar attributes with their groups (felt typicality); and the degree to which individuals felt pressured to conform to group norms (felt conformity pressure). Further, the authors found that certain dimensions were particularly important for self-esteem:

[O]ur finding that in-group affect and in-group ties predict higher self-esteem suggests that fostering feelings of belongingness is especially important for positive adjustment. Furthermore, our research highlights how strong identities in multiple domains, such as ethnicity-race and gender, may additively contribute to positive outcomes. (Wilson & Leaper, 2015, p. 1631)

The current study concurred with this research. The two participants who identified as women of color expressed that their gender and ethnic identities are positive and important facets of their self-concept, and they both indicated that being part of a well-regarded ingroup of Black female leaders had influenced their aspirations.

**Self in Relation to Leadership**

Participants shared the experiences that shaped their leader identities and how these identities manifested in their organizations. They discussed their leadership styles and values in both agentic and communal terms, and how these traits were perceived in relation to their gender. They shared dissenting views on the relevance of their gender to
their leader identities. Finally, they discussed the positive and negative feelings they had about leadership.

**Agentic and Communal Leadership Traits**

All ten participants described their leadership styles in terms related to both agentic and communal traits. They shared that leadership requires the ability to be both directive and supportive while holding themselves and others accountable for results. Kelly shared the sentiments of many when she described her leadership style as “being willing to be decisive, to make decisions, and stand by those decisions,” but also committing to “cooperate with people and make things happen as a group.” Similarly, Laura shared that leaders need to “state their expectations clearly” and “hold people accountable to the deliverables,” yet work with people to “figure out problems together.” She described her leadership style as “direct and collaborative.”

Amber described herself as a “bold leader with high empathy.” When faced with a crisis, Amber stated that finding the balance between decisiveness and teamwork helped her “equip” her team to “serve,” and ultimately extended the life of a young patient.

Dawn shared that her leadership style was influenced by the book *Followership* and that she seeks balance between leading and following in her role as a leader:

Leaders have to understand when they need to follow as well...you don’t need to be General Patton out there. Sometimes you need to step back and follow. I even will follow my staff and say, “I will follow whatever you agree to do.” Or, “I’ll support you on that.”

Kim described her leadership style as being like “a good mom” in that she provides both direction and support:

Because a good mom—there’s discipline involved as well. There’s correction, there’s discipline, there’s encouragement. It’s the ‘all of it.’
Stories around communality shared many common characteristics, such as giving people voice, empowering others, and displaying a ‘democratic’ approach. The focus for many of the participants was on relationships and how they could foster collaboration and trust as leaders. Like Kim, Melanie sees herself as having a “maternal” style and she emphasized the importance of building a culture of teamwork with her employees.

Amber shared that engaging with others to establish trust and credibility was “one of the very first things that shaped [her] as a leader.” Heather described how communality showed up in her leadership style when working through challenges with one of her team members. She stated that she chose to “help this person get to where they’re going” instead of “putting them on a performance plan and saying, ‘you’re in trouble. Do differently.’”

Susan stated that her leadership values include being “collaborative” and “letting other voices be heard.” She shared that being a competent leader is like being an “orchestra conductor,” which requires “bringing together all of these great authorities and working together on accomplishing the task.” Rebecca stated that “empathy” is one of her core leadership values.

Stories around agency shared a motivation to realize results but varied across participants in terms of how agency was enacted. Amber described the agentic aspects of her leadership style as “bold,” “courageous,” “goal-oriented,” and “driven.” Rebecca stated that her leadership style is “adaptive” and that she values “authenticity” and “honesty.” Tammy stated that she acts as a “coach” for her team of experienced knowledge workers, which requires less directing and more “facilitating.”
Heather described her leadership style as “disciplined,” having “strong follow-through,” being “consistent,” and acting “calm under pressure.” Susan described how her leadership style in a “very male dominated environment” required her to act “tougher” as a leader in comparison to the entrepreneurial role she now holds.

Two of the participants shared that displaying agentic characteristics could have negative consequences for how others saw them. Tammy shared that her employees saw her as a “bitch” at times and Melanie stated that the younger members of her staff may view her as “intimidating” when she communicates her expectations and holds them accountable.

Participants’ descriptions of agentic and communal traits being important to their leader identities aligns with McAdams et al.’s (1996) early research on identity and their assertion that agency and communion are dominant themes in one’s identity narrative:

Themes of agency and communion in autobiographical scenes…illuminate how the person today chooses to narrate the personal past. They provide a way of characterizing in motivational terms what kinds of scenes are selected for narration and how they are indeed narrated (p. 372).

Stories that demonstrate a motivation toward power reflect themes of “self-mastery, status and victory, achievement and responsibility, and empowerment” while those that demonstrate a motivation toward interpersonal intimacy reflect themes of “love and friendship, dialogue, caring for others, and belongingness” (McAdams et al., 1996, p. 433). Agentic and communal themes exist relatively independent of each other and individual stories typically reflect both. While research has shown similarities between men and women on power motivation, women score slightly—yet consistently—higher
on intimacy motivation (McAdams, 1993). In alignment with this research, all the participants stories reflected themes related to agency and communion. However, none described intimacy as more prevalent in their leadership style.

As previously discussed, one of the most prominent bodies of research related to gender and leadership is Eagly and Karau’s (2002) role congruity theory, which exposed the ‘double bind’ expectation that women leaders are expected to display agentic characteristics, which are congruent with leadership but not gender, and are simultaneously expected to conform to communal characteristics that are congruent with their gender, but not leadership. In contrast with this theory, all the participants in the current study described communal traits as being congruent with their leader identities and an important aspect of leadership.

**Gender Relevance to Leadership**

The participants described how their gender was relevant—or not—to their leader identity. Six of the participants stated that they viewed the female gender as favorable to leadership effectiveness. Three of the participants described the stereotype of women as ‘caregivers’ in positive terms and perceived this as a desirable leadership trait. Laura described how her gender can help in navigating difficult situations because women are “allowed to be a little warmer and more empathetic” and can facilitate “getting through [challenges] together.” Susan stated that women’s “natural caregiving inclinations” give them an “advantage” in leadership. Amber, who is a leader in nursing, shared that her gender influences her leadership style “quite a bit” because caregiving is so foundational to her work. However, she also recognizes the inherent risks in this style:
As a woman and just as a caregiver, that has shaped my leadership style quite a bit… but it’s also really helped me over the years understand how to establish boundaries so you’re not taking on too much and doing too much for folks.

Three of the women talked about gender and its compatibility with leadership in broader terms. Heather described women as “the backbone” of organizational teams and as the ones who are often “carrying the work forward.” Melanie said that her gender is “a help” in her role as a leader because she can “nurture, guide, redirect, and direct.” Kim described gender and age as important factors in her identity, and she sees her “crone energy” as a complement to her leadership style.

For three of the participants, gender was viewed as less relevant in how they saw themselves as leaders. While Tammy shared that women may be better at the “soft skills,” she reiterated that she had “never given a lot of thought” to her gender in relation to leadership. Kelly shared that while her gender likely influences how she leads, it does so at a “subconscious level” for her. Dawn was unequivocal in her views on gender and its influence on her role as a leader. She shared that displaying stereotypically female traits is less about gender and more about personal style:

I would say that I don’t look at myself in terms of gender and leadership ever… I’ve always said, “you get more bees with honey than you do vinegar.” But that is a style of interacting. That’s got nothing to do with gender.

Dawn went on to say that gender “makes no difference” to her in relation to leadership and she feels that it is more important to “just look at people as people.”

Multiple identities are part and parcel of living in a complex world and can positively impact well-being (Kyprianides et al., 2019). However, the importance that individuals place on an identity influences the degree to which conflict with another identity affects well-being. A study by Settles (2016) found that women scientists who
placed high identity centrality (importance) on their woman identity, but not their scientist identity, experienced higher levels of identity interference (conflict) and, subsequently, worse psychological outcomes related to self-esteem, depression, and life satisfaction. They further found that placing high importance on the scientist identity helped “buffer the relationships between woman centrality and identity interference” (p. 497), suggesting that valuing the ‘scientist’ identity more than the ‘woman’ identity helped women scientists better navigate a predominantly masculine culture. Of the participants who described working in “male-dominated” workplaces, three shared that their gender was not a conscious consideration in how they led, suggesting that their leader identities may take a more central role for them than gender within the context of leading.

**Affective Views of Leadership**

Leadership was viewed as a generally positive experience for all the participants. Dawn enthusiastically described her time as a leader for an equipment company as an experience that was “wonderful,” and she said that she “loved it.” When talking about her role as the first female supervisor in a strongly male dominated industry and workplace, Kelly stated that her all-male team was “just amazing” and she described with pride how she was “in the top ten percent throughout.” Melanie described how her attitude toward leadership has helped her cope during a time of significant adversity:

> The first couple of days of the pandemic going on I was in that fear mode, but then [I thought], ‘no wait, on the other side of this there is this beautiful, unexpected rainbow waiting. Something is over on the other side.’ So, I’m actually super excited.

Susan warmly described how her leadership role provides her the opportunity to recognize and develop others, which she values deeply:
In my position as a board chairman I am constantly giving verbal support for our CEO, giving verbal support for the people that work for our CEO, and others in the organization as well as for board members. We have board committee reports and I ask the committee chair to give a report and I always afterward say, “thank you. That was very insightful.” And I emphasize, “the finance committee has just worked x number of hours to go over these reports that they’re sharing with you today. Thank you for your work.”

Three of the participants described specific times when they realized a sense of deeper meaning from their leadership roles. Amber described how “proud” she was of her team’s actions through a crisis situation and how her commitment to “leading with relationship” positively influenced her experience as a leader. Melanie described how, as a leader, she nurtures a culture of care that encourages her employees to develop deeper relationships with each other, and she cultivates an environment where employees can demonstrate affection for each other:

There’s the love word spread everywhere in [business]. “I love you. Love you!” Watch as our staff leaves. They don’t just say, “see you.” They say, “love you, see you tomorrow.” There’s love, but in that there’s accountability. If you fall down, we fall down.

Kim shared how her dedication to her team motivated mutual feelings of trust and commitment during a time when an organizational sell-off was creating uncertainty for her and many of her team members:

I was there for them. That group of people would walk through a wall for me. So, there was dedication on both sides. And inclusive...And as crazy as that time was, I was actually happy.

Two of the participants described feeling vulnerable in their leadership roles and saw leadership as creating the potential for risk. Tammy described feeling “more exposed in a leadership position” and felt that retaining the duties of an individual contributor ensured more of a “safety net” against scrutiny from others. Laura similarly described
how, as a leader, she is subject to scrutiny from others, and she consequently modifies her behavior to “comport herself as a leader”:

As a leader, people do think of you as a leader and you need to learn to work that role. You are actually in certain circumstances...being scrutinized as a leader and a representative of your department in a way that you aren’t when you’re an individual contributor.

Self-efficacy plays an important part in forming one’s identity as individuals develop beliefs about what they may be capable of achieving. Bandura’s (1977) foundational work on self-efficacy identified four ways that self-efficacy is bolstered: by performing activities and experiencing accomplishments directly; by witnessing the success of others; by receiving verbal encouragement from others; and by experiencing emotions that facilitate and encourage performance beliefs. For aspiring women leaders, self-efficacy play an important role in career advancement (Isaac et al., 2012). This was confirmed by the women in the current study, as they each expressed self-efficacy in their motivation toward leadership, had achieved at least mid-level leadership positions, and were successful in their leadership roles.

Meister et al. (2017) argued that women leaders are often “subject[ed] to intense scrutiny” (p. 673) as leaders, particularly when working in male-dominated organizations. In the process of “negotiating, claiming and being granted leadership identities,” women must contend with the common reality that they are “often categorized as women first and leaders second” (Meister et al., 2017, p. 674). Two of the participants in the current study described how their leadership roles subjected them to a level of “scrutiny” that they did not experience as individual contributors. Both women work in what they described as “male-dominated” workplaces and, as posited by Meister (2017), gender may have factored into their experiences. However, it is important to
consider other organizational factors that might play an important part in whether one feels secure or not as a leader, such as organizational culture and economic variables.

**Influence of Industry and Workplace**

Participants worked across diverse industries and with varying gender dynamics. Three of them described currently working in industries and workplaces where women—including women leaders—were well represented, while six participants described currently or previously working in environments that were “male dominated” and women leaders were the minority. They had varying exposure to women leaders from an interpersonal standpoint, and the quality of these relationships was described in both positive and negative terms. Lastly, participants shared how norms that exist in their industries and workplaces influenced their experiences as women leaders.

**Workplace Demographics**

Participants shared contrasting experiences regarding gender representation in the workplace. Amber and Heather, both of whom work in healthcare, are part of an industry where women often make up the majority and are promoted at rates higher than nearly all other industries in the United States (Berlin et al., 2019). Amber described her organization as “woman-driven” and Heather described her chain of command as being comprised entirely of women. Melanie, who is a restaurant owner, stated that her front of house staff is “ninety-nine percent women."

Six of the participants described currently or previously working in organizations where women were underrepresented and held fewer leadership positions. Melanie previously worked in the automobile industry where she was the “only female” amongst her peers. Susan also described having worked in organizations that were “male-
dominated” before establishing her own business. Tammy shared that, while gender imbalances have started to shift, her industry tends to be “very male dominated.” Kelly described “being in traditionally male worlds” throughout most of her career, and she shared that her experiences in male-dominated workplaces have inspired a belief in “the importance and value of women being good leaders.” Similarly, Dawn shared that she had “been the only woman in a lot of scenarios” throughout her career. Laura, in her colorful way, described being a woman in a financial services firm:

I have an incredibly nerdy job with lots of dudes in it. I’m the girl at the sausage party fairly frequently.

Further, the presence or absence of women in top leadership positions reflected the overall gender representation trends within the women’s workplaces. Women who worked in environments where women were generally well represented also saw a prevalence of women in top leadership roles. Amber described her company’s executive team as being comprised primarily of women, including the CEO. Melanie, who is a top leader in her business, has an all-women team leading her restaurant locations. Heather described the degree to which women leaders are prevalent in her organization:

For… six years my direct leader was a woman, her direct leader was a woman, and her direct leader was a woman. And that’s the CEO. So, the whole chain from me up to the CEO, and our current CEO is a woman. That’s just a really different experience to have your entire chain of leadership upward be female.

In contrast, other participants described having mostly men in top leadership roles within their organizations. Laura described how women leaders in her organization tend to fill traditionally ‘female’ positions, such as HR, while the “hard sciences” roles are almost exclusively held by men. Dawn shared that she is the only woman at the steering
committee level within her organization and that throughout her career she had experienced “far more men in leadership positions than women.”

One’s profession informs aspects of one’s social identity, and both the industry and workplace provide contextual information for constructing a situated identity. In agreement with social identity theory, which posits that identity construction is a “relational and comparative” endeavor that “defines” individuals as “similar to or different from” others (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 16), gender demographics can affect how women perceive themselves within the context of their workplace. Six of the participants stated that they currently or previously worked in “male-dominated” organizations and they described themselves as being different from others in their workplaces. Melanie shared that she was the “only female” in her organizational peer group, and Dawn described how she was “the only woman in a lot of scenarios,” suggesting that gender comparisons factored into how they saw themselves in relation to their organizational ingroup.

**Relationships with Women Leaders**

Nine of the participants described interpersonal relationships with women leaders as influential in shaping their attitudes about leadership. Six of the women described having positive experiences with women leaders who acted as influential role models. For some, these role models significantly shaped the course of their careers by encouraging them to step beyond their comfort zones so that they could grow. Amber, who “didn’t expect” to become a leader, described how her mentors “saw leadership qualities” in her that she “didn’t necessarily see” and helped elevate her personal expectations and belief in her ability.
Heather described one of her early female managers as a “phenomenal” and “supportive” leader who coached her on how to handle different situations and to develop her own leadership style. Similarly, Kim described an early-career leader as a “very nurturing” woman who influenced her leader identity by “bringing out the best” in her. This leader coached Kim through mistakes and demonstrated a strong commitment to “following up on the work.”

Laura described an early-career manager as a woman who positively influenced her leader identity and instilled in her the importance of recognizing her innate ability:

She told me, “you’re fine the way you are. You got hired for who you are, not who you could potentially be. So make sure that as you move to change who you are and how you do what you do, that you’re doing it because it’s something that you genuinely want to do and that you genuinely feel will make your existence better. Not because you need to change something to make yourself fit somebody else’s perception of what they think you should be.”

While many of the women described having influential female mentors and role models in the workplace who positively impacted them as leaders, four of the women described having negative experiences with women leaders. Some of these experiences involved “bullying” and “abrasive” behaviors that created a hostile work environment and diminished the participant’s self-esteem. Some participants described experiences with female leaders whose leadership style was viewed as undesirable. Laura described a former leader as a woman who “talked a good game” and Tammy viewed one of her early-career leaders as “regimented.” Dawn and Rebecca shared that they each had experiences with women leaders that exemplified, as Dawn said, “what leadership is not.” Dawn also shared that through the course of her career, her “worst bosses or supervisors were women.” She described her experience with a woman leader whom she nicknamed “broadzilla”:
She was kind of volatile, unpredictable. Some days you didn’t know if you were her sister, her employee, her girlfriend—all of her emotional life played out through her staff. And that was crazy-making.

Just as early role models play an important part in shaping one’s gender identity, workplace mentors play an important part in shaping one’s leader identity. As discussed earlier, sensegiving grounds the individual in the organization’s values and expectations and helps them adopt the “prototypical” group norms that will enable them to “endure and thrive” (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016, pp. 118–119). Mentors are an important resource for organizational sensegiving, and as models of behavior, they provide important information that can be used to construct one’s leader identity (Gibson, 2003).

The literature on women’s leadership development often stresses the importance of mentorship for shaping and supporting women’s career ambitions (Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017; Ely et al., 2011; Moyer et al., 2018). In Glowacki-Dudka et al.’s (2016) exploratory study of six high achieving women, they found that mentors played a significant role in participants realizing their career aspirations, even in the face of self-doubt:

Many of the women did not see themselves as leaders. They became leaders slowly while developing interests and attending to the needs around them. Through mentorship and experience, they found leadership skills within themselves (p. 694).

This coincides with the views of six of the participants in the current study who described how female mentors had positively influenced their career aspirations and, as Amber shared, “saw leadership qualities” in them.
In contrast to mentors who can provide positive guidance for sensegiving and identity development within organizations, negative role models can provide information that informs who one does not want to be. As stated by Ashforth & Schinoff (2016), people “make sense of their identities not only via what they resonate with (attraction to a desired self ) but also as a reaction against what they find repugnant (avoidance of a feared self )” (p. 120). This research agrees with four of the participants who described experiences with female leaders in negative terms and shared that their own leadership styles had been influenced by, as Dawn stated, “what leadership is not.”

**Behavioral Norms in Workplace**

Three participants described how behavioral expectations in the workplace intersected with their personal identities, and they shared how these expectations influenced their self-presentation. For Melanie, her workplace provided a “safe space” where she could express herself freely. She shared how her partner and co-owner in her business helped her to overcome her “imposter syndrome” by encouraging her to believe that she is “smart enough” and “worthy” of her role. Being in a “controlled environment” where she could explore and assert her leadership style helped Melanie develop a positive leader identity that validates her ability and self-worth.

Two of the participants described experiencing workplace norms that were incongruent with their gender, which motivated them to adapt their behaviors to comply with organizational expectations. Laura shared that her naturally expressive personality must be “reined in” in a way that she described as different from her male colleagues:

If we all run the gamut from zero to ten, appropriate for women is somewhere between a five and a seven. Appropriate for dudes is between a four and an eight. Natively, I run somewhere between a three and an eight. So, lopping off those sides is…I’ve got more to lop off.
Further, she asserted that managing her personal identity to accommodate organizational norms is something that she is both conscious of and able to reconcile:

Is that [moderating her expressive nature] fair? Not necessarily. Is it a price I generally pay? Yes. I can saw off a few edges for an interesting job.

Susan shared that her experience of organizational norms in a “very male-dominated environment” created “biases against women” and she stated that there are “structural impediments” present in organizations that create an unfair burden for women. She described how, early in her career, her organization’s expectations conflicted with her personal desires:

I waited to become pregnant with my first child until two years after I was made a principal. So, deliberately we made choices to kind of hide the other part of my life in order to advance in leadership.

People are motivated to reconcile their need to be “distinctive and unique individuals” with their “desire for belongingness,” which often requires negotiation between their personal and social identities (Crocetti et al., 2013, p. 305). In some instances, individuals may realize “fusion” between these identities, in which one’s personal and social identities “combine synergistically to motivate pro-group behavior” (Swann et al., 2012, p. 441). For Melanie, this fusion allowed her to express herself authentically without fear of upsetting organizational norms. But for Laura, full expression of her personality would violate organizational norms.

Further, workplace demographics can influence organizational norms and how women perceive themselves in relation to their workplace. A study by Ely (1995) demonstrated that gender demographics in leadership influenced women’s perceptions of sex roles in organizations and their implications for success:
In firms in which few women were in positions of power, sex roles were more
stereotypical and more problematic. Women in these firms, when compared to
women in firms with higher proportions of senior women, characterized men as
more masculine and less feminine, evaluated feminine attributes and attributes
they associated with women less favorably in relation to their firm's requirements
for success, and had more difficulty enacting gender roles that were both
personally satisfying and consistent with their firms’ norms and expectations. (p. 625)

This research concurs with Laura and Susan’s descriptions of working in male-dominated
organizations whose norms were more congruent with male attributes.

**Implicit Bias Test Results**

Table 3 presents the results of the major themes sorted by the participants’ results
from the gender-leadership implicit association test. Pertinent information related to each
major theme was coded and explanatory notes are included. An entry in the participant
column indicates that participant gave evidence for or discussed that theme and its
pertinent information in their interview. Note that the participants are numbered and
sorted based on their implicit association test scores, which suggested an association of
male with supporter and female with leader \((n = 3)\); no automatic preference between
male and female \((n = 3)\); or an association of female with supporter and male with leader
\((n = 4)\). Since they were organized by their IAT results, the order of participants (i.e., 1-
10) is different from the order in which their interview data was presented in chapter four.

Several prominent patterns emerged when considering results across participants.
Most participants had mothers who worked outside the home for pay. However, two
Table 3

Major Themes and Implicit Gender Leader Bias

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Theme</th>
<th>Female Leader</th>
<th>No Preference</th>
<th>Male Leader</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>School experiences</td>
<td>S, M</td>
<td>S, M</td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Influence of female role models</td>
<td>I, A</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>I</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender stereotypes</td>
<td>D, E</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender and ethnic identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Agentic &amp; communal leadership traits</td>
<td>A, C</td>
<td>A, C</td>
<td>A, C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender relevance to leadership</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affective views of leadership</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace demographics</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W,M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationships with women leaders</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>P</td>
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<tr>
<td>Behavioral norms in the workplace</td>
<td>S</td>
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Note. W = mother worked for pay; D = mother did not work for pay; F = female family members assumed traditional gender roles; T = participant assumed traditional gender role; X = participant did not assume traditional gender role. S = participant attended single-gender high school or college; M = participant attended mixed-gender high school or college. I = female role models inspired career/academic goals; A = female role model’s adversity motivated independence. P = Positive views of women as a class; R = positive identification with ingroup; N = neutral identification with ingroup. D = confronted gender stereotypes; E = endured gender stereotypes. G = gender and ethnic identities intertwined. A = agentic leadership traits; C = communal leadership traits. F = gender favorable to leadership; N = gender not relevant/salient to leadership. P = positive views of leadership; R = leadership creates risk. W = women well represented in workplace; M = male dominated workplace P = positive experiences with women leaders; N = negative experiences with women leaders. S = workplace norms supportive of personal identity; I = workplace norms inhibitive of personal identity.
participants’ results suggested an association of male with leader, had mothers who did not work for pay. Eight participants described early environments where female family members (e.g. mothers, sisters) assumed traditional roles, but the participants own roles within the early environment differed. Two participants described their roles as following traditional gender norms and both of their IAT results suggested an association of women with leader, whereas three participants, whose IAT results suggested an association of men with leader, described their roles as not following traditional gender norms. All three participants whose IAT results suggested an association of female with leader and one participant from each of the other groups demonstrated strong ingroup attitudes (i.e. they described specific ways that they identified with and/or advocated for women). This contrasted with two participants who demonstrated neutral ingroup attitudes, both of whom had IAT results that suggested an association of male with leader.

All participants described leadership as requiring both agentic and communal traits. All participants whose IAT results suggested an association of female with leader or suggested no preference stated that their gender positively influenced their leader identity. One participant whose IAT results suggested an association of male with leader also stated that her gender positively influenced her leader identity. Three participants whose IAT results suggested an association of male with leader described their gender as not relevant or not salient in relation to their leader identity. Workplace demographics differed in that all three participants whose IAT results suggested an association of female with leader stated that women were well represented in their current or former workplaces. In contrast, one participant whose IAT results suggested no preference and all four participants whose IAT results suggested an association of male with leader
described current or former workplaces as male dominated. Finally, relationships with women leaders were described as positive for six participants across all three groups but were described as negative by three participants whose IAT results suggested an association of male with leader.
Chapter 6: Discussion

Summary

The purpose of the current study was to gain an understanding of how women leaders experience their gender and leader identities within the context of implicit bias. Existential-hermeneutic phenomenology informed the research methodology and allowed for a holistic approach that was grounded in the individual participants’ lifeworld, illuminated researcher reflexivity, and humanized the experience of participating in research on identity and implicit bias (Todres & Wheeler, 2001). Data was collected through one-on-one interviews that explored the thoughts, beliefs, and experiences that influenced participants’ gender and leader identities. Following the portion of the interviews that explored participants’ gender and leader identities, participants took the gender-leadership implicit association test and shared the thoughts and feelings they had regarding their score. Analysis was performed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, which resulted in four superordinate and twelve major themes related to participants’ gender and leader identities. This concluding chapter presents a summary of the superordinate and major themes that emerged from the current study followed by a discussion of the participants’ implicit bias attributions and a connection to relevant theory on implicit bias and system justification.

All the participants described growing up in homes where their mothers played a key role in the family and eight of the participants stated that their mothers assumed the primary role caring for children and the home. Mothers, sisters, and other important role models influenced how the participants viewed themselves in relation to their gender and these role models motivated them to pursue academic and career related goals. The
participants’ stories differed regarding how their school experiences and the academic environment influenced their identity development. Four participants attended single gender schools or universities and described these experiences as positively influencing their gender identity. Six participants attended co-ed high schools and/or colleges only and described their school experiences in positive, neutral, and negative terms relative to their gender identity.

All the participants stated that they felt positively toward women as a class, but they differed in how they related to their gender ingroup. Four of the participants described feeling solidarity with other women and stated that they felt a sense of responsibility to advocate for women. Two of the women described feeling low or no attachment to their gender ingroup. Eight of the participants described experiences where they had confronted gender stereotypes through their words or behaviors, and two participants described how they had endured gender stereotypes by adapting their speech or behavior to conform to them. Two of the participants shared that their gender and ethnic identities were deeply intertwined.

Participants had all attained at least mid-level leadership roles and they all have a clear sense of who they are as leaders. Themes of agency and communion were prominent in all their stories and they all shared that it is important for them to be both directive and supportive as leaders. Six of the participants viewed their gender as a strength in relation to leadership and three described traits such as being “caring” and “warm” as complementary to leadership. Three of the participants shared that their gender was either not salient or not relevant to their roles as leaders. All the participants described their roles as leaders in generally positive terms and shared that leadership had
enabled them to make a positive impact on others. Three of the participants shared specific experiences where their leadership positions had enabled them to realize a larger sense of meaning. Two of the participants described feeling that leadership created an element of risk that they did not encounter as individual contributors.

The participants work in diverse industries including healthcare, building products, manufacturing, food service, nonprofit, finance, and professional services. Three participants described working in organizations that had many women and women leaders and six described their current or previous workplaces as “male-dominated.” Nine of the participants shared that interpersonal relationships with women leaders had influenced their leader identity, but the quality of these relationships varied. Six participants described relationships with women leaders as having positively impacted their career ambitions, and they provided them with inspiring models of leadership that helped shape their leader identity. Four participants described interpersonal relationships with women leaders in negative terms and two stated that these relationships taught them “what leadership is not.” Three of the participants described how they experienced their personal identities in relation to organizational norms. One participant stated that her workplace bolstered her self-esteem and was congruent with her personal identity while two participants described how organizational norms were incongruent with their gender identity.

**Implicit Bias Reactions**

Upon conclusion of the portion of the interviews that explored participants’ gender and leader identities, participants took the gender-leadership implicit association test and then shared their thoughts and feelings on their score. Three participants’ scores
suggested an implicit association of male with supporter and female with leader; three participants’ scores suggested no automatic preference between male and female; and four participants’ scores suggested an implicit association of female with supporter and male with leader.

Participants’ initial reactions to their scores varied. One participant, Kim, indicated that she was “relieved” because “that’s how [she] likes to see [her]self.” and that she “was hoping it would come out that way.” Two participants shared that they were surprised by their scores. Amber, whose score suggested a slight association of male with supporter and female with leader, stated that she was somewhat surprised because she “thought it [association] would be a little stronger.” Melanie, whose score also suggested a slight association of male with supporter and female with leader, shared that she was “pleasantly surprised” and that she had had a “shift”:

I’m glad that I view women the way that I do. Not only is it verbal—I’m not just talking it. I’m feeling it.

Four participants stated that they were not surprised by their scores on the implicit association test. Susan, whose score suggested no automatic preference between male or female, shared that she was “not really” surprised by her score. Rebecca, whose score also suggested no automatic preference between male and female, stated that she was “not surprised” by her score. Tammy, whose score suggested a slight association of female with supporter and male with leader, stated that she was “not entirely surprised” by her score and she was glad that it was “slight.” Laura, whose score suggested a moderate association of female with supporter and male with leader, shared that she was “not particularly surprised” by her score.
In discussing their scores on the gender-leadership implicit association test, participants shared their thoughts on why they may have received the scores they did. Participants attributed their IAT results to five areas: the developmental environment, their explicit views on gender and leadership, their experiences in the workplace, their age, and the test itself. Following, these attributions are presented and relevant theory on implicit bias and system justification is discussed.

**Developmental Environment**

Five of the participants stated that they believed the early environments in which they were raised and the people who influenced them ultimately influenced their implicit attitudes. Kelly, whose IAT results suggested a slight association of female with supporter and male with leader, shared that her implicit attitudes were likely formed early:

> I think we’re deeply impacted early in our lives, at a young age. What do they say, seventy percent of our personality is formed by the age of five or something. So, I think we’re highly influenced by our upbringing.

Similarly, Laura, whose IAT results suggested a moderate association of female with supporter and male with leader, stated that she had been “conditioned to a certain set of responses” that she was “soaked in pretty much [her] entire young life and education.” She shared that she felt she was “right on the cusp of the slightly more equality-focused professional world.”

Rebecca, whose IAT results suggested no automatic preference between male and female, attributed her results in part to the family and community environment in which she was raised and the messages of equality that they espoused:

> It goes back to what my mom said, “the most important people aren’t the people with the title; it’s the people who are doing the work.”
Kim’s IAT results also suggested no automatic preference for male or female. She attributed a lack of bias for men in leadership to her ethnicity and a culture that recognizes Black women as leaders in their community:

What comes to mind first is back to ethnicity. Women have always been leaders in the African American community. That’s the cultural bias there.

Heather, whose IAT results suggested a moderate association of male with supporter and female with leader, stated that her schooling and the messages of female empowerment likely influenced her implicit attitudes about women:

Going to the all-girls school… I can’t emphasize enough how much female power was instilled into my brain, not in like a ‘rah rah’ sense, but understated in like, ‘we are powerful, we are educated, we are smart.’ … I think a lot of it has been shaped by that school experience.

Agreeing with the five participants who attributed their implicit attitudes to the developmental environment, research has found that implicit attitudes stem from the early environment more so than explicit attitudes, which are influenced by more recent experiences (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Rudman, 2004; Rudman et al., 2007). Further, Bian et al. (2017) argued that gender stereotypes are often learned in the early environment and that girls as young as six accept negative stereotypes about their gender ingroup’s intellectual ability. However, the academic environment can moderate attitudes about gender. A study by Dasgupta and Asgari (2004) examined women’s implicit gender attitudes over time when attending either co-ed or all female universities. They found that women who attended single-gender colleges and were frequently exposed to female faculty experienced “less gender stereotypes… at an automatic level” after one year on campus than women who attended mixed-gender colleges and were frequently exposed to male faculty. Concurring with this research, one participant, who was exposed
to single-gender schooling, attributed her implicit attitudes to a positive academic environment.

**Explicit Views on Gender and Leadership**

Three of the participants attributed their implicit gender-leadership bias on their explicit views regarding gender and leadership. Heather, whose IAT results suggested a moderate association of male with supporter and female with leader, stated that her “desire and recognition of more women in leadership roles” contributed to her implicit attitudes about women. Melanie, whose IAT results suggested a slight association of male with supporter and female with leader, attributed her results to a deep belief in her and other women’s abilities:

> I know that there’s greatness in me and the people that I surround myself with. I want to figure out how we can do that. Seriously, when I said earlier that women rule the world…we rule this world. We have all the control. We have all the power. We can do anything as a team of women.

Rebecca stated that her IAT score, which suggested no preference between male and female in leadership, was due to her ability to “see people as people” and an overt drive “not to have assumptions.”

As discussed by Hofmann et al. (2016) in a meta-analysis of the implicit association test and explicit self-report measures, the question of correlation between implicit and explicit attitudes has been “highly controversial” (p. 1369) in research circles, and has resulted in “large variations” in the answer (p. 1370). Nosek (2007) argued that the correlation between explicit and implicit attitudes may be moderated by various interpersonal and intrapersonal factors. First, self-presentation may motivate individuals to respond explicitly in ways that are personally or socially desirable but may not reflect their internal attitudes. Second, individuals may be motivated to differentiate
themselves from group norms, resulting in a stronger correlation between implicit and explicit attitudes. Third, stronger bipolarity in one’s views (e.g. pro-choice versus pro-life) typically results in a stronger positive correlation between implicit and explicit attitudes. Finally, implicit versus explicit attitudes may be moderated by the degree to which individuals have ‘practiced’ certain views:

Practicing a response leads to its automatization and increased accessibility.

Consistently, attitudes that are important or well elaborated tend to elicit stronger [implicit-explicit] correlations than ones that are unimportant or infrequently thought about. (Nosek, 2007, p. 67)

The participants in the current study who attributed their implicit attitudes to their explicit views on women leaders all stated that they have a strong motivation behind their attitudes. Heather and Melanie described feeling, as Heather stated, “so strong” about women leaders and their abilities. Rebecca described the effort she puts into her egalitarian views:

I see life as it is. I work hard not to have assumptions. Even with past experiences, I work hard not to have assumptions. And that’s hard. Having unconscious bias—it’s hard. However, I have consciously chosen to go down that different pathway.

As suggested by Nosek (2007), “practicing” this attitude may have contributed to its “automatization” (p. 67) for these participants.

**Experiences in the Workplace**

More than any other theme, the organizational environment was indicated as a primary factor in the women’s implicit attitudes. Eight of the participants described their workplace as having shaped their bias. Amber and Heather, whose IAT results suggested an association of male with supporter and female with leader, shared that the
organizational environment likely influenced their bias. Amber described herself as “someone who’s surrounded by women leaders” and felt that “the environment that [she] works in” shaped her implicit views. Similarly, Heather shared that her implicit attitudes have likely been shaped by her exposure to and experiences with women leaders:

It [employer] was such a female-led organization…I’ve had female leaders for the past…thirteen years. I think of my direct leader as a woman. I believe that’s because I’ve had so many female leaders for so many years… it’s that old cliché of ‘you have to see it to know it’s possible for you.’ And wow have I seen it… So, to see all of these women [in leadership roles]—I believe does shape that. I think it’s important because if you don’t see it, how do you believe it?

Melanie shared that her implicit association of female with leader and male with supporter was likely influenced by a workplace environment that “lifts [her] up” and a business partner who validates her worth as a leader.

Susan, whose IAT results suggested no preference between male and female, shared that her exposure to both male and female leaders likely influenced her implicit attitude:

I think it’s because I’ve had experiences with both women leaders and men leaders over time. I think that I don’t have exclusive gender associations with leadership.

Tammy, Laura, Kelly, and Dawn’s IAT results suggested an association of female with supporter and male with leader, and they all stated that their experiences in male-dominated industries and workplaces may have influenced their implicit views on women in leadership. Tammy, who described working in a “male-dominated” industry, stated that her experiences likely influenced her bias:

I think it’s just what I’ve been exposed to, it’s what I’ve known coming up through the ranks. It’s always been a very—again, this industry in general has changed, but it’s still very male dominated. It’s what I know. So, right or wrong, it’s going to influence the results.
Laura shared that the industry in which she works may have contributed to her implicit bias:

I think I get a lot of indirect reinforcement…We don’t generally have female executives in the ‘hard sciences,’ outside of the more traditionally female leadership areas…There are still these roles where it’s okay to be a female executive and there are other ones where it’s a tougher road to hoe.

Kelly and Dawn both described having been exposed to more men than women in leadership throughout their careers. Kelly described “being in traditionally male worlds” through most of her working life, but she shared that this had raised her awareness of “the importance and value of women being good leaders.” Dawn stated that her IAT score was likely influenced by her experiences with male leaders:

There’s no doubt there are far fewer women the higher you go. It’s not to say that women can’t get there. I figure if I can do this, anybody can do this. So yeah, I’d say my overall experience over the years has been far more men in leadership positions than women.

Jost (2002) argued that system justifying beliefs often operate at a non-conscious level of cognition because “people are so thoroughly socialized to rationalize inequality that system justifying ways of thinking are over-learned and unconscious” (p. 588). One way that this socialization can occur is through repeated exposure to a phenomenon. First introduced by Zajonc (1968), the ‘mere-exposure effect’ contends that “mere repeated exposure of the individual to a stimulus object enhances his attitude toward it” (p. 1). This research aligns with the participants’ statements that workplace demographics—how prevalent women were generally and in leadership roles specifically—influenced their implicit gender-leadership attitudes.
Age

One of the participants attributed her gender-leadership implicit association to her age. Kim, whose IAT results suggested no automatic preference between male and female, stated that “being older” was a contributing factor because “age is the great equalizer.” Research purports that implicit attitudes developed early in life carry forward well into adulthood (Gibson et al., 2017; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Rudman et al., 2007). It is unknown whether Kim’s implicit attitudes have changed over time, but research suggests that her egalitarian attitude has likely remained constant.

The Test Itself

Two of the participants shared that their IAT scores were influenced by the test itself. Kelly stated that she had made some “mistakes” during the test. Similarly, Dawn shared that she thought her results could have been caused by “keying errors” and if it had been structured differently, she would have “put all the names in the same bucket.” As previously discussed, the IAT’s validity and reliability have been topics of debate amongst researchers (Grumm & von Collani, 2007; Nadan & Stark, 2017). Some research has found the IAT’s test-retest reliability to be “adequate” (Ventis et al., 2010, p. 188), but Rezaei (2011) found that “familiarity with the [IAT] test did improve reliability” (Rezaei, 2011, p. 1940), suggesting that taking the test several times could deliver different scores.

Discussion of Implicit Bias Reactions

Social identity theory’s (Tajfel, 1978) concern for group membership and how that membership informs identity was well represented in the participants narratives. They all viewed themselves as belonging to the social group ‘women,’ and they all
expressed some attitude regarding the “value or emotional significance” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255) they felt toward that group, even though these attitudes differed across participants. Further, eight participants stated that their implicit biases were influenced by a comparison of their (female) ingroup to the (male) outgroup (i.e. workplace demographics, women’s representation in leadership) and represented the most prominent implicit bias attribution across participants. This provided additional support for social identity theory. Social comparison is one of the primary psychological processes related to social identity theory, as intergroup comparison provides the basis for intergroup evaluation and, ultimately, one’s social identity (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019).

Of particular interest in the current study were the thoughts, beliefs, and experiences of the four participants whose IAT scores suggested an association of female with supporter and male with leader. Arguments regarding the validity and reliability of the IAT notwithstanding, these results indicated that implicit outgroup favoritism was present. The most prominent theme for these participants was their membership in organizations that were described as “male dominated,” and their experiences and attitudes regarding their gender suggested how they may have managed their membership in an underrepresented ingroup. When one’s ingroup social standing is diminished, as was arguably the case for participants working in male dominated workplaces, the psychological motivation to realize a positive social identity should elicit responses that either work to improve the real or perceived relative status of the group or create distance between the individual and the stigmatized group (Ellemers & Barreto, 2008; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). Three of the participants described their gender as not relevant or not salient in relation to their roles as leaders. It is unknown whether they adopted a
(conscious or unconscious) strategy of creating distance between themselves and their gender ingroup to resolve an undesirable social standing (Ellemers & Barreto, 2008), but social identity theory suggests that it is possible:

[I]f members of low-status groups believe that group boundaries are permeable, then in order to deal with the negative identity that is associated with their group’s low status, they should tend to favour a strategy of individual mobility that leads them to act individually and seek out a new positive group identity. For example, if a woman finds that her gender identity is a bar to preferment and promotion in her place of work, she may seek to disavow this identity and act like ‘one of the boys’ in order to get ahead. (Haslam & Ellemers, 2011, p. 720)

Perhaps the larger question related to these four participants is whether their experiences and attitudes suggest a motivation to “defend and rationalize existing social, economic, and political arrangements...at the expense of individual and collective self-interest” (Jost, 2018, p. 263) or, as others have argued, their implicit attitudes are the result of social learning (Owumalam et al., 2019) and therefore social identity theory suffices to explain their implicit bias. They each shared positive sentiments about women leaders’ social mobility, indicating that social learning had supported—or at least not hampered—overt attitudes about women leaders, and that system justifying ideologies were not present at an explicit level of cognition. However, it has been posited that system justifying beliefs often operate implicitly (Axt et al., 2018; Dasgupta, 2004; Jost, 2018), motivating individuals to uphold socially inequitable systems that work against their personal interests.
The moderators of system justifying beliefs—threats to the system; perceived inescapability; feelings of dependence on the system; individual “motives to reduce uncertainty, threat, and social discord” (Jost, 2018, p. 278)—were suggested by some of the four participants. Laura’s “lopping off” of the extreme ends of her natural spectrum of expression could indicate that organizational sensegiving simply succeeded in “impos[ing] sanctioned identities on individuals” (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016, p. 119). But for a woman working in a male dominated organization for whom personal expression operates along gendered lines, it could alternatively suggest an acquiescence to a system in which she feels some level of dependence (Jost, 2018). Tammy’s desire to work on her “soft skills” so that she is not viewed as “bitchy and cold” indicates a similar double standard in which women and men are held to different expectations for personal expression. Again, by “softening” her approach she may be moderating her behavior to ensure her ongoing membership in a system to which she feels dependent. There is opportunity for future research to address these questions.

Limitations of the Current Study

The current study was limited by several factors. Participant demographics were a limitation in that all were from a geographically limited area (Midwest, United States), which subjected the study to certain cultural norms related to gender and leadership. Also, all the participants were over age thirty and most were over age forty. This created limitations in the ability to explore generational differences related to gender and leader identity. Further, all the participants identified as cisgender women. Future studies should include a more diverse participant group based on gender identity.
The current study was inherently limited by its methodology. Qualitative research does not purport to uncover broad “truths” about human experience, therefore information that results from analysis does not aim to generalize for a larger population. The information produced by the current study was grounded in the lifeworlds of ten women leaders and the unique ways that they experienced their gender and leader identities. Further, the participants’ experiences were explored using an interview approach that almost certainly excluded information that could have affected any facet of the study. The nature of self-reporting and semi-structured interviews means that important information may be left out when exploring a topic as complex as identity.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The current study presents several opportunities for future research. While the research on women and leadership is abundant (for a review, see Lyness & Grotto, 2018), there is a paucity of research on women leaders and implicit ingroup and outgroup favoritism. Yet, holding an implicit association that does or does not favor one’s ingroup can be consequential for one’s self-esteem (Godfrey et al., 2019; Iacoviello et al., 2017) and behavioral outcomes (Dasgupta, 2004). Therefore, future research can help identify the various individual and situational contexts in which intergroup favoritism in women leaders exists; further illuminate the implications for women leaders’ identities and personal and professional outcomes; and provide insights on the mechanisms that might help women leaders overcome system justifying attitudes.

Further, the limitations of the current study present further opportunities to explore and examine implicit intergroup favoritism and identity within a more diverse population. A broader representation of national, racial, organizational, and inter-
generational leaders would provide richer insights into the phenomena of intergroup bias and identity.

Future research could expand on questions raised regarding participants’ implicit bias in relation to social identity and system justification. The question of passive social learning versus a motivation to uphold an inequitable system is one that persists in the literature (Jost, 2018; Owuamalam et al., 2019) and was raised in the current study as well.

Finally, the method and methodology utilized in the current study presents opportunity for different approaches. Qualitative research does not intend to generalize; therefore, its application is inherently limited. Further research may expand upon the current study by using generalizable samples that allow for hypothesis testing and representation of larger populations.

**Recommendations for Organizations**

Results from the current study suggest several opportunities for organizations that concur with existing research. First, workplaces that are committed to the development and advancement of women leaders might consider implicit bias testing and training. Bierma (2016) recommended that organizations “build awareness of women leaders’ skills and the damaging impact of stereotyping and implicit bias” and to target implicit bias through training and performance management (p. 130). The AAUW, who developed the gender-leadership IAT in coordination with Project Implicit (n.d.), recommended bringing awareness to “hidden biases” that “cloud [one’s] judgement” so that individuals can confront associations that “make it more difficult to treat people fairly (Hill et al., 2016, p. 30).
Further, organizations can expose and challenge system justifying beliefs that uphold an inequitable status quo, particularly in workplaces and industries that are male dominated. As discussed by Eidelman and Crandall (2009), mere exposure to an existing state can create beliefs that the status quo is “how it ought to be” (p. 95), even among people for whom the status quo is disadvantageous. Therefore, bringing awareness to and challenging system justifying behaviors (e.g. hiring and promoting men exclusively into specific roles) can help organizations adopt more egalitarian and inclusive environments.

Finally, organizations that influence implicit attitudes early in women’s lives have an opportunity to instill in girls and young women positive beliefs about women in leadership. Female teachers and leaders can inspire girls to pursue careers where women are currently underrepresented, as they provide models that can inform their future selves and establish the “scaffolding” for the values and ideals that inform identity (Hardy & Carlo, 2011, p. 507). Also, parents’—and particularly fathers’—implicit attitudes can unwittingly influence girls’ attitudes and professional outcomes (Croft et al., 2014). Therefore, identifying and discussing implicit bias within the family domain can help girls develop healthy attitudes toward themselves and others within their ingroup.

**Conclusion**

The topics of identity and implicit bias are particularly relevant today as organizations continue to grapple with women’s underrepresentation in leadership and ongoing gender pay disparities (Becker, 2017; Brown, 2017; Graf et al., 2019; Leith, 2014), while at the same time women are increasingly standing up to systems that represent inequality and oppression via movements such as #metoo. Further, these topics hold important consequences for individuals and organizations. For women leaders,
having a positive gender identity has been linked to reduced gender-leader identity
conflict, reduced stress, increased life satisfaction, and increased motivation to lead by
enabling a “blending” of their gender and leader identities (Karelaia & Guillén, 2014, p.
214). For organizations, fusion between important identities can result in positive pro-
group attitudes and behaviors that benefit the collective, increase engagement, and reduce
turnover (Swann et al., 2009, 2012).

The ten women leaders who participated in the current study contributed
important insights into the study of women leaders’ gender and leader identities and
implicit bias. They were gracious and open in sharing their stories, and they bravely
navigated their own implicit biases, especially those participants whose biases conflicted
with their own explicit views and experiences as women leaders. Their unique stories
illustrated the dynamic nature of identity, the fluid interplay amongst self, other, and
environment, and how individuals experience the phenomenon of implicit bias.

Research on identity is inherently challenging, and the current study was no
exception. Interviews provide hints regarding the internal world of the individual, but,
like the proverbial river that cannot be stepped into twice, one’s identity is both constant
and changing. What is salient or relevant at one time or in one place may not be in
another. The strengths and weaknesses of the research methodology become illuminated
when grappling with such a complex topic. In addition, researching the deeply personal
topic of identity requires special consideration of the intimate nature of the construct. In
this case, the ‘existential’ aspect of existential hermeneutic phenomenology was critically
important through every phase of the research process. It is my sincere and humble desire
that I have honored each participant’s story through the words and analysis presented in
this study, and that I have advanced the understanding of how women leaders experience their gender and leader identities within the context of implicit bias.
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Appendix A: Invitation to Participate

Subject: Invitation to participate in research

Dear [Participant],

I am a doctoral candidate in the Opus College of Business at the University of St. Thomas and am conducting a research study exploring women leaders’ gender and leader identities and how these identities are impacted by cultural stereotypes. You have been identified as a woman leader here in the Twin Cities area and are invited to participate in the study. If you agree, you will be asked to take part in an interview and to take an online implicit association test, which measures unconscious associations between gender and leadership. The interview is anticipated to take approximately 1.5-2 hours and will be audio-recorded. The online test is anticipated to take no more than 15 minutes. Both the interview and test will be conducted during the same meeting.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your identity as a participant will remain confidential during and after the study. Confidential information will be stored in password-protected files located on a secure server hosted by the University of St. Thomas. Identifying information will be replaced with codes that are known only to me, the researcher.

If you would like to participate in this study, please respond back to this email at your earliest convenience and indicate in the spaces below three dates & times that would work for you. The time requirement is 2-2.5 hours. Also, please indicate if you have a preferred meeting location, such as your office or via video conference. Alternatively, I can set up time for us to meet on the University of St. Thomas campus in either St. Paul or downtown Minneapolis.

Date/Time Option 1:
Date/Time Option 2:
Date/Time Option 3:
Preferred Location:

If you have any questions, please contact me at mall3738@stthomas.edu or 612.644.0560.

Thank you,
Allison

Allison Malloy
Doctoral Candidate, Organization Development & Change
Opus College of Business
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Gender Identity

Central Question: What thoughts, beliefs, and experiences have influenced your identity as a woman?

Sub-questions:

- What were your parents like? Did they uphold traditional gender roles?
- Did you have siblings? If so, what did you learn from them about gender?
- How do you think these early family and educational experiences helped you form your identity as a woman?
- Who were some of your female role models? What values did they instill in you? How did they influence your gender identity?
- Do you have women mentors in your life now, or women that you are close to, that inspire or influence you?
- How do you recall seeing women portrayed in the media growing up (tv/news/movies)? How did that influence how you view your gender?
- How do you recall thinking about the role of women in our society?
- How did your school experiences and relationships with peers shape how you saw girls/young women in society?
- Can you describe an experience in late adolescence or early adulthood that shaped how you view your gender?
- How do you view gender roles today? Do you think men and women should play different roles in society?
- Is there anything else you would like to share regarding how you have come to see yourself as a woman?

Leader Identity

Central Question: How have work and leadership experiences formed how you see yourself as a leader?

Sub-questions:

- What was your first job? How did that experience start to shape your views on leadership?
- What was your first leadership role?
- What did your early leadership experiences teach you about how you had to change in order to be effective as a manager versus an individual contributor?
- What were some of the key milestones in your leadership journey?
- Can you describe the experience that shaped you most as a leader?
- Can you describe a “moment of truth” experience (i.e. a critical time when you had to make a decision) as a leader that shaped who you are as a leader today?
• How would you describe your leadership style?
• What 4-5 descriptions would your staff use to describe working for you?
• To what extent do you feel your career is your calling?
• Is there anything else you would like to share regarding how you have come to see yourself as a leader?

Gender-leader identity

Central Question: How do you think about your gender and leader identities in relation to each other?

Sub-questions:

• How do you think your gender influences how you think about yourself as a leader? How others think about you as a leader?
• How do you think being a woman influences your leadership style? Does your gender influence how you work with others (direct reports/peers/clients)?
• Have you experienced any conflicts between your role as a woman and your role as a leader?
• Have you had any experiences where being a woman has helped or hindered your leadership success?
• Is there anything you feel you have had to compromise or give up to be a successful leader?
• Has being a leader influenced how you see yourself as a woman?
• What advice would you give to a young woman aspiring to a leadership role?
• Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your gender or leader identities?

Reaction to the IAT

Central Question: Will you please describe your thoughts and feelings about the IAT and the score you received?

Sub-questions:

• Do you think your experiences have influenced your unconscious attitudes about women in leadership?
• Are you surprised by these results? Why or why not?
• Do you think women leaders face stereotypes about gender that male leaders do not?
• Are you surprised to learn that many women have unconscious biases that associate men with leadership and women with support roles?
• How do you feel about the test generally?
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Research Participation Key Information

Exploring gender-leader implicit bias in women leaders

What you will be asked to do:

We ask participants to participate in a one-on-one interview and to take an online implicit association test that measures associations between gender (male/female) and leadership role (leader/supporter). Following interviews, you will be asked to review your transcribed interview for accuracy.

The total time commitment is about 2-3 hours. The implicit association test will be taken online and interviews will take place at a location of the participant’s choice.

Participating in this study has risks:

• You may choose to provide me with sensitive information about your experience as a woman leader
• Depending upon your lived experiences, the interview may be emotionally distressing

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

You are invited to participate in a research study about how women leaders experience their gender and leader identities and how these identities are impacted by cultural stereotypes. The title of this study is ‘Exploring gender-leader implicit bias in women leaders’. You were selected as a possible participant and are eligible to participate in the study because you identify as a woman and have formal leadership responsibility. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision whether you would like to participate or not.

What will you be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

• Participate in a one-on-one interview, where we will explore the topics listed below. Interviews will take 1.5-2 hours and will be audio recorded. Interviews will take place at a location of your choosing.
  o Your experience of being a woman leader
  o Your reaction to your results of the implicit association test
• Take an online implicit association test, which measures associations between gender and leadership role. This instrument will be completed online during the interview and should take 10-15 minutes.

• Finally, at a date following the interview, I will ask you to review the transcription of your interview for accuracy and provide clarification if required. This should take approximately 15-30 minutes.

What are the risks of being in the study?
The study has risks:

• The interview will be recorded and transcribed into a digital file. The digital nature of the file presents risk of a breach, which could result in sensitive information being revealed. This risk is very low. All confidential data will be password protected and stored on a secure file server hosted by the University of St. Thomas. All identifying information will be removed from transcripts and replaced with numerical codes (for example, your name will be replaced with “Participant 001”).

• How women are perceived in leadership can be a sensitive topic. The implicit association test measures unstated or unconscious attitudes that may be different from your conscious attitudes or beliefs about women leaders. There is a possibility that, if you find the results to be surprising or unexpected, that this may cause you to feel some concern or distress. We will take time during the interview to fully discuss any concern or questions you have about your results from the implicit association test.

Here is more information about why we are doing this study:

This study is being conducted by Allison Malloy, the primary investigator, and Robert Barnett, PhD, research advisor, with the Opus College of Business at the University of St. Thomas. This study was reviewed for risks and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

The purpose of this study is to explore women leaders’ gender and leader identities and how these identities are impacted by cultural stereotypes.

There are no direct benefits for participating in this study. However, participants may gain some enhanced insight into how they think about women and leadership as a result of completing the implicit association test and participating in the interview.

We believe your privacy and confidentiality is important. Here is how we will protect your personal information:

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study. Interviews will be conducted in a private location of your choice and at a time that you prefer. All information shared during the interview will be confidential, personally identifying information will be coded in the final transcripts, and all materials (data files, notes) will be kept in a password-protected and secured location.

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any reports I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you. The types of records I will create include:
- **Audio recording of interviews.** Interviews will be recorded using an audio recording device. This device will be stored in a secured, locked bag during travel. Recordings will be downloaded into digital audio files immediately following interviews and permanently deleted from the recording device. Audio files will be stored as password protected digital files on a secured server until they are transcribed into text. Once they are transcribed, the digital recording file will be permanently deleted. Audio recordings and their associated files will be accessible only to me.

- **Interview transcriptions.** Transcribed interviews will be kept as password protected digital files and stored on a secured server. They will be coded to remove any identifying information. The files will be deleted in three years, in accordance with research procedures. The transcription files will be accessible only to me.

All signed consent forms will be kept for a minimum of three years once the study is completed. Institutional Review Board officials at the University of St. Thomas have the right to inspect all research records for researcher compliance purposes.

**This study is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the research with no penalties of any kind.**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether to participate or not will not affect your current or future relations with myself or the University of St. Thomas. There are no penalties or consequences if you choose not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will be destroyed unless it is already de-identified or published and I can no longer delete your data. You can withdraw by telling me at any point that you would like to withdraw from the study. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

**Who you should contact if you have a question:**

My name is Allison Malloy. You may ask any questions you have now and at any time during or after the research procedures. If you have questions before or after we meet, you may contact me at 612.644.0560 or mall3738@stthomas.edu or my research advisor, Robert Barnett at 612.269.1244 or barn7687@stthomas.edu. Information about study participant rights is available online at [https://www.stthomas.edu/irb/policiesandprocedures/forstudyparticipants/](https://www.stthomas.edu/irb/policiesandprocedures/forstudyparticipants/). You may also contact Sarah Muenster-Blakley with the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu with any questions or concerns (reference project number 1536927-1).

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT:**

I have had a conversation with the researcher about this study and have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I give permission to be audio recorded during this study.

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**
Appendix D: Interview Confirmation and Reflection Questions

Subject: Interview confirmation, consent, and reflection questions

Dear [Participant],

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my doctoral research on women leaders’ gender-leader identities and cultural stereotypes. I am confirming that we will meet on [date] from [time] at [location].

Attached is a copy of the informed consent form that is required to be signed by all participants in my research. You can review it before we meet, otherwise you will be given time to read it before the interview. I will have a copy available for you to sign when we meet, so you do not need to bring it with you.

We will have two hours to discuss your experience as a woman leader and how your identities as a woman and a leader may have been impacted by cultural stereotypes. These concepts can be fairly private, and I have found that people do not often discuss them with others. So, if some thought and reflection would help you discuss these topics with me, I invite you to reflect on the following questions:

- What thoughts, beliefs, and experiences have shaped your identity as a woman?
  - Who were your female role models and what values did they instill in you?
  - How did your school experiences and relationships with peers shape how you saw girls/young women in society?
  - How did the media (tv/movies/news) influence your perspective on women?
- How have work and leadership experiences formed how you see yourself as a leader?
  - What is your leadership style?
  - What did your early leadership experiences teach you about how you had to change to be effective as a manager versus individual contributor?
  - Can you describe a “moment of truth” experience (i.e. a critical time when you had to make a decision) as a leader that shaped who you are as a leader today?
- How do you think about your gender and leader identities in relation to each other?
  - How do you think your gender influences how you think about yourself as a leader? How others think about you as a leader?
  - Is there anything you feel you have had to compromise or give up in order to be successful?
  - Have you ever experienced conflict between your identity as a leader and your identity as a woman?
Again, thank you for agreeing to participate in my research and I look forward to meeting with you!

Kindest regards,

Allison
Appendix E: Introduction to Implicit Association Test

In a moment, you will take the American Association of University Women’s implicit association test on gender and leadership. The test will take about 10-15 minutes. The test is designed for you to dedicate a few minutes to understanding the directions, and then, once you begin the test, push yourself to go as fast as you can.

The test will ask you to sort words into expected categories as quickly as possible. Before you begin the task, you will see a list of the words organized by the expected category.

After completing the test, you will receive your result, a measure of the strength of your associations regarding women and leadership.

Your test data will be saved as anonymous data that may be used for AAUW research purposes, but will never identify you as the test taker.

When you have completed all seven rounds, you will reach a screen that says ‘Press space to continue to the next task’. Please stop there and let me know that you have finished.

Do you have any questions before you begin?
Appendix F: Amended Informed Consent Form

Research Participation Key Information

Exploring gender-leader implicit bias in women leaders

What you will be asked to do:

We ask participants to participate in a one-on-one interview and to take an online implicit association test that measures associations between gender (male/female) and leadership role (leader/supporter). Following interviews, you will be asked to review your transcribed interview for accuracy.

The total time commitment is about 2-3 hours. The implicit association test will be taken online and interviews will take place via videoconference.

Participating in this study has risks:

- You may choose to provide me with sensitive information about your experience as a woman leader
- Depending upon your lived experiences, the interview may be emotionally distressing

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

You are invited to participate in a research study about how women leaders experience their gender and leader identities and how these identities are impacted by cultural stereotypes. The title of this study is ‘Exploring gender-leader implicit bias in women leaders’. You were selected as a possible participant and are eligible to participate in the study because you identify as a woman and have formal leadership responsibility. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision whether you would like to participate or not.

What will you be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

- Participate in a one-on-one interview, where we will explore the topics listed below. Interviews will take 1.5-2 hours and will be audio recorded. Interviews will take place via videoconference.
  - Your experience of being a woman leader
  - Your reaction to your results of the implicit association test
- Take an online implicit association test, which measures associations between gender and leadership role. This instrument will be completed online during the interview and should take 10-15 minutes.
• Finally, at a date following the interview, I will ask you to review the transcription of your interview for accuracy and provide clarification if required. This should take approximately 15-30 minutes.

What are the risks of being in the study?
The study has risks:

• The interview will be recorded and transcribed into a digital file. The digital nature of the file presents risk of a breach, which could result in sensitive information being revealed. This risk is very low. All confidential data will be password protected and stored on a secure file server hosted by the University of St. Thomas. All identifying information will be removed from transcripts and replaced with numerical codes (for example, your name will be replaced with “Participant 001”).

• How women are perceived in leadership can be a sensitive topic. The implicit association test measures unstated or unconscious attitudes that may be different from your conscious attitudes or beliefs about women leaders. There is a possibility that, if you find the results to be surprising or unexpected, that this may cause you to feel some concern or distress. We will take time during the interview to fully discuss any concern or questions you have about your results from the implicit association test.

Here is more information about why we are doing this study:

This study is being conducted by Allison Malloy, the primary investigator, and Robert Barnett, PhD, research advisor, with the Opus College of Business at the University of St. Thomas. This study was reviewed for risks and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

The purpose of this study is to explore women leaders’ gender and leader identities and how these identities are impacted by cultural stereotypes.

There are no direct benefits for participating in this study. However, participants may gain some enhanced insight into how they think about women and leadership as a result of completing the implicit association test and participating in the interview.

We believe your privacy and confidentiality is important. Here is how we will protect your personal information:

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study. Interviews will be conducted via videoconference and at a time that you prefer. All information shared during the interview will be confidential, personally identifying information will be coded in the final transcripts, and all materials (data files, notes) will be kept in a password-protected and secured location.

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any reports I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you. The types of records I will create include:

• Audio recording of interviews. Interviews will be recorded using an audio recording device. This device will be stored in a secured, locked bag during travel. Recordings will be downloaded into digital audio files immediately following
interviews and permanently deleted from the recording device. Audio files will be stored as password protected digital files on a secured server until they are transcribed into text. Once they are transcribed, the digital recording file will be permanently deleted. Audio recordings and their associated files will be accessible only to me.

- **Interview transcriptions.** Transcribed interviews will be kept as password protected digital files and stored on a secured server. They will be coded to remove any identifying information. The files will be deleted in three years, in accordance with research procedures. The transcription files will be accessible only to me.

All signed consent forms will be kept for a minimum of three years once the study is completed. Institutional Review Board officials at the University of St. Thomas have the right to inspect all research records for researcher compliance purposes.

**This study is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the research with no penalties of any kind.**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether to participate or not will not affect your current or future relations with myself or the University of St. Thomas. There are no penalties or consequences if you choose not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will be destroyed unless it is already de-identified or published and I can no longer delete your data. You can withdraw by telling me at any point that you would like to withdraw from the study. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

**Who you should contact if you have a question:**

My name is Allison Malloy. You may ask any questions you have now and at any time during or after the research procedures. If you have questions before or after we meet, you may contact me at 612.644.0560 or mall3738@stthomas.edu or my research advisor, Robert Barnett at 612.269.1244 or barn7687@stthomas.edu. Information about study participant rights is available online at [https://www.stthomas.edu/irb/policiesandprocedures/forstudyparticipants/](https://www.stthomas.edu/irb/policiesandprocedures/forstudyparticipants/). You may also contact Sarah Muenster-Blakley with the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu with any questions or concerns (reference project number 1536927-1).

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT:**

I have had a conversation with the researcher about this study and have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I give permission to be audio recorded during this study.

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

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**Signature of Study Participant**          **Date**
Print Name of Study Participant

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Signature of Researcher       Date

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Appendix G: Interview Protocol Change Email

Subject: Interview change due to COVID-19

Dear [Participant],

In light of the current pandemic, the University of St. Thomas is recommending that students reconsider in-person meetings and move to a virtual format when possible. Given that, I would like to move our interview, currently scheduled for [date] at [location], to an online Zoom meeting, which I will set up. In order to use Zoom, you will need a computer with the Zoom application installed.

Alternatively, if you cannot or prefer not to use Zoom, I am happy to follow up with you at a later date to reschedule an in-person interview. Also, I know that these are unprecedented and trying times for many, so if you would like to postpone our interview for any reason, please know that I understand and will accommodate whatever you need at this time.

Please let me know if you would like to either keep the current interview date/time and move it to the online format or reschedule for a future date. If you would like to reschedule, I will follow up with you the week of April 5th and hopefully we can schedule a new meeting at that time.

Warmest regards,
Allison
Appendix H: AAUW Implicit Association Test Interpretation

Thank you for contributing to the AAUW's research on the topic of gender and leadership. Below is the interpretation of your AAUW Implicit Association Test (IAT) performance.

Your data suggest a slight association of Male with Supporter and Female with Leader.

Here is a little more information about how the AAUW IAT assesses your performance and why the associations measured by the IAT matter.

If you are quicker to associate Leader-related terms with Male names with than with Female names, the test will indicate that you have an implicit association (bias) of men with leaders. Likewise, if you are quicker to associate Supporter-related terms with Female names, the test will indicate an implicit association (bias) of women with supporters.

Social psychologists use the word “prejudiced” to describe people who report and approve their own negative attitudes toward groups of people who are different from themselves. Yet, “prejudiced” does not describe most people who show a stronger implicit association with traditional stereotypical gender roles (e.g., Male with Leader or Female with Supporter). What the IAT shows is that most people have implicit or unconscious biases that do not reflect and may even contradict what they consciously believe. So although we would not characterize such people as prejudiced, it is important to know that implicit biases can predict behavior. Thus, it is critical to be aware that when we relax our conscious efforts to be egalitarian, our implicit biases can lead to prejudiced and discriminatory behavior.

If you would like to know more about AAUW or Project Implicit, please see the links below.

Implicit Association Test Details * About Project Implicit * Implicit FAQs

For more information about the AAUW IAT, click here or see future AAUW publications on this topic at aauw.org. To get regular updates about how AAUW promotes the success of women and girls, follow us on Facebook or Twitter. You can support our work by joining AAUW as a member.

The study is now complete and you may close your browser at any time.