Women in Leadership: A Proposal to Examine the Trends and Experiences of Senior Executive Level Women in the Workforce

Rhoda Overstreet-Wilson
rhoda.overstreetwilson@gmail.com

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Women in Leadership: A Proposal to Examine the Trends and Experiences of Senior Executive Level Women in the Workforce

Abstract
Although the presence of women in the workforce has increased and despite the advances women have made in the workplace, women still account for a small percentage of senior-level executive positions (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Federal regulations exist to eliminate workplace discrimination, but there remains scholarly evidence that discriminatory behavior has not declined but evolved into a much more ambiguous form of discrimination defined as gender microaggressions. Capodilupo et al. (2010) and Sue (2010) categorized gender microaggressions into three groups: (a) gender microassaults: identified blatant sexist slurs, or catcalling; (b) gender microinsults: subtle negative communication about women; and (c) gender microinvalidations: subtle communication that dismisses or devalue women's thoughts or feelings. This qualitative study utilized interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to make meaning of the lived experiences of the study participants. Data analysis resulted in nine themes congruent with Nadal's (2010) the taxonomy of gender microaggressions. Findings revealed that barriers such as gender discrimination, public shaming to discredit them, limits on opportunities to advance, verbal and physical aggression, submissive organizational cultures continue to plague women even in senior-level executive positions.

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Women in Leadership: A Proposal to Examine the Trends and Experiences of Senior Executive Level Women in the Workforce

By

Rhoda Overstreet-Wilson

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctorate of Executive Leadership in Education

Supervised by

C. Michael Robinson, Ed.D.

Committee Member

Ellen Wayne, Ed.D.

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher College

May 8, 2020
Dedication

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future,” Jeremiah 29:11

This dissertation is dedicated to my entire family to whom I am extremely appreciative for supporting me along this journey, your kind words and prayers will never be forgotten. My heartfelt thanks go to Dr. C. Michael Robinson and Dr. Ellen Wayne, my dissertation committee chairs for asking in-depth thought-provoking questions, pushing me to think critically, and showing patience when I needed it. I will remain thankful for the support you showed me! May God bless you both. To all the women who agreed to participate in my study and who shared their life experiences, I am humbled by your strength and courage. I am inspired to continue this leadership journey because of you.

To my husband, Roy, God blessed me with a good man. Thank you for always being gracious with your love, time, and tolerance. You have supported me through every endeavor and made me laugh when I wanted to cry. I am so blessed to be able to share my life with you! To my children Jahmere and Dejuan, you two are my most prized possessions and I pray that this accomplishment inspires you to dream big. You are not defined by other people’s definitions. To my siblings Michelle, Gary, Christopher, and Vann we have come a long way from Church Street, I am proud to be your big sister. I love and appreciate you all. Finally, to my mommy, Rita Macknail, none of this would be possible without you, I hope I made you proud.
Biographical Sketch

Rhoda Overstreet-Wilson is currently the Executive Director at Westminster Manor. Westminster Manor is a 32-bed Adult Care Facility. Ms. Overstreet-Wilson graduated from SUNY-Empire State College in 2004 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Community and Human Services. She graduated from Keuka College in 2007 with a Master of Science degree in Organizational Management. She came to St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2017 and began doctoral studies in the Education Doctorate in Executive Leadership in Education. Ms. Overstreet-Wilson pursued research, under the guidance of Dr. Michael Robinson, Ed. D. and Dr. Ellen Wayne. The research focused on gender microaggressions and the experiences of women in senior leadership positions. You can contact Rhoda Overstreet-Wilson at Rhoda.overstreetwilson@gmail.com.
Abstract

Although the presence of women in the workforce has increased and despite the advances women have made in the workplace, women still account for a small percentage of senior-level executive positions (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Federal regulations exist to eliminate workplace discrimination, but there remains scholarly evidence that discriminatory behavior has not declined but evolved into a much more ambiguous form of discrimination defined as gender microaggressions. Capodilupo et al. (2010) and Sue (2010) categorized gender microaggressions into three groups: (a) gender microassaults: identified blatant sexist slurs, or catcalling; (b) gender microinsults: subtle negative communication about women; and (c) gender microinvalidations: subtle communication that dismisses or devalue women’s thoughts or feelings. This qualitative study utilized interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to make meaning of the lived experiences of the study participants. Data analysis resulted in nine themes congruent with Nadal’s (2010) the taxonomy of gender microaggressions. Findings revealed that barriers such as gender discrimination, public shaming to discredit them, limits on opportunities to advance, verbal and physical aggression, submissive organizational cultures continue to plague women even in senior-level executive positions.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine in what ways and to what degree women in senior-level executive positions experience gender microaggressions, the sources and nature of gender microaggressions, and what strategies women in senior-level executive positions employ to dull the impact of gender microaggressions. This study explored traditional barriers, gender stereotypes, and career objectives. Over the past half century, women have gained greater representation in the labor force. Women currently comprise 50.8% of the U.S. population and comprise 47% of the U.S. labor force. Although the number of women in the workforce has increased, their slow advancement to senior managerial positions and their scarcity warrants continued study to determine what hinders their progress (Warner, Ellman, & Boesch, 2018).

The literature is rife with descriptions of challenges that women experience disadvantage them in the workplace compared to their male counterparts. Women contend with negative stereotypes, limited networking opportunities, lack of mentorship, and workplace gender discrimination (Basford, Offerman, & Brehan, 2014). Basford et al. (2014) define gender microaggressions as actions or behaviors that exclude, demean, or otherwise express hostility or indifference toward women, whether intentional or not. From overt attacks to more subtle forms of gender discrimination, such as being excluded from key conversations, these and other barriers continue to limit and erode access to the corporate world for women (Basford et al., 2014).
The 1964 Civil Rights Act states, “All persons shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, and accommodations of any place of public accommodation, as defined in this section, without discrimination or segregation on the ground of race, color, religion, or national origin” (p. 1). Provisions in the Act specifically deem employment discrimination as unlawful. The statute states, “It shall be an unlawful employment practice for an employer to fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual’s race, color, religion, sex, or national origin” (p. 13). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 also created a commission to be known as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The Commission is “empowered, as hereinafter provided, to prevent any person or entity from engaging in any unlawful employment practices” (p. 21). As determined by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, gender discrimination is a form of employment discrimination whereby employees are treated differently based on gender. Experiences of sexism and discrimination serve as barriers to promotion and are evidenced by a lack of opportunities for women for leadership development, mentoring, networking, and insider information (Basford et al., 2014).

There is an impressive amount of research that examines professional women and their experiences of career advancement barriers. Recent research highlights on microaggressions as a kind of stereotyping, and examining workplace discrimination through the lens of microaggressions fosters the opportunity to assess the subtle-to-overt range of these experiences (Basford et al., 2012). “Microaggressions” is a term first used
to describe interactions between White and Black people and were coined “racial microaggressions” by a psychiatrist and Harvard University professor (Pierce, 1970). According to Sue et al. (2007), racial microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271).

Microaggressions can be either intentional or unintentional, and come in three different forms. Sue et al. (2007) identified these three primary, recurring forms of racial microaggressions as microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. A microassault is defined as an “explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or non-verbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling” (p. 274). A microassault is a purposeful, discriminatory action. Microinsult is defined as “communications that convey rudeness, insensitivity, and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity” (p. 274). A microinsult represents a subtle snub and conveys a hidden insulting message to the recipient. Microinvalidation is “communication that excludes, negates, or nullifies the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person belonging to a particular group” (p. 274).

Individually, microaggressions may seem harmless or banal, hardly worth mentioning, but over time, cumulative experiences of microaggressions can lead to a diminished quality of life for the victims. Whether racialized aggression or microaggression, intentional or unintentional, the consequences of these experiences are deep, pervasive, and demand attention and remedy (Garcia & Johnston-Guerrero, 2015). A review of supporting literature suggests that members of minority groups who perceive
themselves as targets for discrimination also tend to exhibit poorer physical and mental health outcomes (Wong, Derthick, David, Shaw, & Okazaki, 2014). Members of marginalized groups tend to have higher rates of depression, anxiety, and physical health issues such as higher blood pressure, as well as decreased psychological well-being and lower self-regard (Wong et al., 2014).

The research on microaggressions has expanded in the last two decades. Contemporary researchers such as Sue et al. (2007), Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000), and Nadal (2010) can be credited with fostering interest and concern as well as contributing empirical evidence on the subject by examining ways in which covert forms of discrimination impact other marginalized populations, including women (Sue et al., 2007; Nadal, 2010). Research also indicates that gender microaggressions are often used to devalue the contributions of the targeted person or group. Miner-Rubino and Cortina (2004) examined how working in a climate of misogyny and examining experiences through gendered lens affected employees’ well-being, withdrawal, and general quality of life. The study found that observing or perceiving mistreatment of women in the workplace lessened psychological, physical, and occupational well-being for both men and women. More specifically, their findings showed that working in a climate of gender microaggression correlated with heightened anxiety and depression, which, in turn, are related to heightened job withdrawal, job burnout, and ultimately thoughts about leaving the organization. More gender-focused research will lead to awareness and understanding of how the effects of microaggressions on professional women are directly connected to higher rates of job withdrawal (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2004).
Problem Statement

Researchers have framed microaggressions as a phenomenon directly targeting minority groups. Although the notion of microaggressions is not new, a gap exists in the literature regarding senior-level executive women and their experiences with gender microaggressions, the sources and nature of microaggressions, and strategies used to alleviate the harmful impacts of these experiences. As such, this study intended to expand the body of knowledge on the topic of microaggression to include women in senior-level executive positions by conducting focused research on senior-level women executives’ professional lived experiences of gender microaggressions.

Theoretical Rationale

Pierce (1970) coined the term microaggressions as a way to label interactions between White and Black people. A resurgence of interest in the topic of microaggressions after Sue et al. (2007) refined the definition of microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal or behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights or insults that potentially have a harmful or unpleasant psychological impact on the target person or group” (p. 273). The definition was expanded to include gender, sexual orientation, and other marginalized identities (Sue & Capodilupo, 2008).

Much interest has been given to the expansion of our understanding of microaggressions, including a laser focus on gender microaggressions. In the last decade, research has focused on subtle expressions of sexism against women, including both conscious and unconscious messages directed toward women. Capodilupo et al. (2010) and colleagues categorized gender microaggressions into three categories: (a) gender
microassaults, (b) gender microinsults, and (c) gender microinvalidations. These researchers found that women experience a variety of gender microaggressions. The research identified six themes of gender microaggressions including (a) sexually objectifying women, (b) second-class citizen, (c) assumptions of inferiority, (d) denial of the reality of sexism, (e) assumptions of traditional gender roles, and (f) use of sexist language (Sue et al., 2008; Capodilupo et al., 2010). Capodilupo et al. (2010) found that women most frequently experience sexual objectification and assumptions of inferiority. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) define sexual objectification as women being treated as objects and valued only for her (sexual) use by others. Women who are continually objectified or marginalized often experience a feeling of inferiority (Capodilupo et al., 2010). According to Adler (1907), an inferiority complex is initiated when an individual experiences a situation where their abilities and/or attitudes are denigrated, rejected, or demeaned by others. Feelings of not measuring up, self-doubt, and insecurity triggered by personal experiences are often associated with the psychological obstacle (Jing, 2012).

Capodilupo et al. (2010) assert that gender microaggressions are often used to devalue the contributions of women and dismiss their accomplishments and relevance by undermining their effectiveness within the employment and professional contexts. It is important to draw a contrast between gender microaggressions and other forms of sexism that women experience. Sexism is expressed in many ways, including blatant, covert, and subtle sexism. Blatant sexism is intentional unfair treatment of women, while covert sexism is unfair treatment of women that may be obvious but carefully hidden from reproach. On the other hand, subtle sexism is also unequal and unfair treatment of women, but unlike covert sexism, it is not recognized as sexism, per se, because it is
established common behavior and attitudes and therefore seems normal and appropriate. (Swim, Mallett, & Stagnor, 2004).

Acts of sexism are the prejudices and discriminatory stereotypes that women experience on a regular basis and which affect women’s psychological well-being by decreasing their comfort and self-esteem and triggering feelings of anger and depression (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Women who are exposed, directly or indirectly, to regular sexual harassment in the workplace report lower job satisfaction, compromised physical health, depression, and anxiety (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2004).

This study used gender microaggressions as the theoretical framework to explore the lived experiences of women occupying senior-level executive positions. Exploring the experiences of gender microaggressions through the lens of the taxonomy allowed for the exploration of how gender microaggressions shape the professional experience of senior-level executive women.

**Statement of Purpose**

This qualitative study examined the lived experiences of senior-level executive women and in what ways and to what degree these women experience gendered microaggressions, the sources and nature of incurred experiences, the strategies used to mitigate the impact of these experiences, and what role mentorship played in career advancement. The intent of this qualitative research study is to gain a better understanding of gender microaggressions in the workplace by exploring attitudes, motivations, and perceptions of these senior-level executive women participants. Researchers conducting qualitative studies aim to collect thick, rich descriptions of experiences to capture the elements of the phenomenon being studied (Sandelowski,
To explore the lived experiences of senior-level executive women who have encountered gender microaggressions in the workplace, purposeful research questions were designed. Through an extensive review of the empirical literature, this study also explored the issues of the scarcity of women in executive-level positions, the nature of barriers senior-level executive women encounter, and strategies used to circumvent the effects of gender microaggressions.

**Research Questions**

Qualitative inquiries often seek to know the why and how of human interactions. The research questions for such inquiries need to articulate what the study seeks to understand the intentions and perspectives of participants. In qualitative studies, the methodology of questioning is central to understanding the unfolding lives and perspectives of others (Agee, 2009). Creswell (2007) noted that questions shift during the interview process to capture increasingly refined understandings of the problem at hand. This study’s research questions allowed for a richer understanding of the lived experiences of the participants and addressed the research problem:

1. To what degree and in what ways do women in senior-level executive positions experience gender microaggressions?
2. What are the sources of gender microaggressions for women in senior-level executive positions?
3. What strategies are identified by women in senior leadership positions to mitigate the impact of gender microaggressions?
Potential Significance of the Study

An in-depth qualitative research study can offer a tangible account of the unique experiences of women who occupy senior-level executive positions. The findings of the study will add to the literature on women’s leadership experiences. It will inform women how to mitigate the harmful experiences of gendered microaggressions and determine the importance of mentorship in career advancement. The results of this study will be used to make recommendations for future research, policy development, and best practice models. Additionally, the results of the study will increase the amount of empirical data on gender microaggressions, specifically how the trend of gender microaggression shapes the choices women make in senior-level executive positions.

Definitions of Terms

For this study, gender discrimination, microassault, microinsult, microinvalidation, senior women leaders, and c-suite defined as follows.

Gender Discrimination – is defined as occurring when personnel decisions are based on gender rather than on an individual’s qualifications or job performance.

Microassault – is defined as an explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or non-verbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling.

Microinsult – is defined as communications that convey rudeness, insensitivity, and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity.

Microinvalidation – is defined as communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person belonging to a particular group.

Senior Women Leaders – is defined as members in senior management positions.
C-Suite – is defined as the group of the most important managers in a company, for example, those whose titles begin with the letter C, for “chief”: CEOs and other C-suite executives.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 discusses the advancement of women in the U.S. workplace, yet women still account for a small percentage in senior-level executive leadership positions. Federal regulations are designed to address these disparities, yet they persist. Federal regulations are designed to address gender and minority disparities; nevertheless, the problem of underrepresentation of these groups in senior-level executive positions persist due, in part, to the phenomenon of gender microaggression. Whereas workplace discrimination is well studied, scholars have recently included gender microaggressions to the list of experiences that create workplace advancement barriers for women.

As such, Chapter 2 is comprised of a thorough review of the empirical literature on the topics of the scarcity of women in senior executive positions, the rate of attrition of women in senior executive positions, and gender microaggressions. This is followed by a discussion of the research design and methodology in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 describes findings of this study and Chapter 5 offers a discussion of these findings and their implications.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

This chapter reviews the empirical literature as it relates to the workplace experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions. Historical barriers and the growing focus on gender microaggressions were examined, with the focus on the specific barriers that prevent women from career advancement in male-dominated career paths. Eagly and Carli (2007) describe the barriers prior to the women’s rights movement as a “concrete wall.” These were often legislative barriers that prevented women from reaching equal ranks in employment. Recent research conducted on barriers to women’s success concluded with explanations for the lack of career advancement for women, including the “glass ceiling” (Cook & Glass, 2014; Hobbler, Lemmon, & Wayne, 2014).

Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986) coined the phrase glass ceiling in 1986 to describe significant barriers, such as salary discrepancies, male-oriented corporate cultures, work/life balance, and the lack of networking opportunities that corporate women faced in career advancement in the 1980s. They argued these barriers were subtler in nature than earlier experienced impediments such as sexual objectification and overt sexual harassment, but equally damaging.

Eagly and Carly (2007) assert that the metaphor of the glass ceiling is mostly inaccurate. These researchers argue that the metaphor suggests that women and men have equal access to entry and mid-level positions, but in fact, women do not. The researchers further argue that the notion of a single static obstacle—the glass ceiling—does not
address the depth, complexity, and varieties of challenges that women face in their leadership trajectories. The authors introduce the “labyrinth” as a more descriptive metaphor to describe women’s leadership paths. As a more relevant symbol, it conveys an idea of a complex journey that is not simple or direct and which requires persistence in striving for goals (Eagly & Carly, 2007).

Recent studies that examine the barriers to women’s success conclude that gender bias and stereotyping, wage gaps, forced resignations, lack of career development, and the “glass cliff” work in conjunction to stifle the career trajectory of women (Cook & Glass, 2014; Hobbler et al., 2014). According to Hamel (2009), when women experience subtle forms of discriminations that want to process and make meaning of it, then respond to the experience in one of four ways: (a) women will leave their positions quietly; (b) women will leave while voicing their objections to the discrimination; (c) women will remain at work and continue to be silent; and (d) women will remain at work and try to raise awareness of the problem. Unfortunately, 90% of women will leave their positions quietly without raising awareness.

Researcher and scholar Dr. Derald Wang Sue focused much of his research on barriers that exist for marginalized groups, expanding Pierce’s work, described above, on racial microaggressions. The term “racial microaggression” has been in circulation since the 1970s when Pierce (1970) first coined it to define unsettling interactions between White and Black people. He described these interactions as subtle, stunning, and often automatic. Sue et al. (2007) purport that greater awareness and understanding of how microaggressions operate, their many ways of manifesting and morphing in social
relations, their impact across the board, and what strategies are most effective in eliminating them.

**Women’s Representation**

The Center for American Progress (2018) report examined the reasons for the gap in women’s leadership. The report notes that women currently comprise 50.8% of the U.S. population. Women account for 47% of the U.S. labor force and 52.5% of the college-educated workforce. Women earn more than 57% of undergraduate degrees and 59% of all master’s degrees, 48.5% of all law degrees, and 47.5% of all medical degrees. Yet, 52% of all working women remain in mid-management/non-professional positions (Warner, Ellman, & Boesch, 2018). In the legal profession, women comprise 45% of associates, but only 22.7% of partners and 19% of equity partners. In medicine, women represent 40% of all physicians and surgeons, but only 16% of permanent medical school deans. In academia, women have earned the majority of doctorates in recent years, but are only 32% of full professors and only 30% of women are college presidents. In the American financial services industry, women comprise 61% of accountants and auditors, 53% of financial managers, and 37% of financial analysts. However, only 12.5% of chief financial officers in Fortune 500 companies are women (Warner et al., 2018).

In the late 20th century, women advanced rapidly in the private sector. The percentage of women advancing to management positions rose as the gender-wage gap narrowed and sex segregation in most professions declined (Warner et al., 2018). By 2001, 11% of corporate leaders were women. In 2009, women’s share of board seats in Standards & Poor’s (S&P) Composite 1500 Index increased 7.2 percentage points, or 94% from 1997 and the share of women CEOs increased six-fold (Warner et al., 2018).
In recent years, the percentage of women in top management positions or corporate boards has stalled (Warner et al., 2018). Women comprise only 5% of Fortune 500 CEO positions, which is slightly down from a record of 6% in 2017, and women represent only 7% of corporate top executive employees. Women occupy only 10% of top management positions in S&P 1500 companies and hold just 19% of their board seats. Women are only 6% of all venture capital board representatives and lead only 9% of venture capital deals. In 2014, women were just 20% of executives, senior officers, and management in U.S. high-tech industries and, in 2016, 43% of the 150 highest-earning public companies in Silicon Valley had no female executive officers (Warner et al., 2018).

**Scarcity of women in senior executive leadership.** Ample research has been conducted on why women have not reached equal representation in senior-level executive positions. An executive is defined as a member of top management in an organization (Powell, 2012). Chandler (2011) explores three primary areas of strength women bring to the exercise of leadership, which include women’s leadership emergence, how women lead, and the benefits of women’s leadership. The researcher asserts that although women’s presence in senior leadership positions has steadily increased, women have yet to experience equal emergence into executive leadership positions as do men, and when they do, they are compensated at an unequal rate as compared to their male counterparts. The benefits of female leadership have produced new approaches to leadership that include collaboration, coaching, and teamwork. Chandler (2011) argues that women bring diverse strengths, perspectives, and innovation to leadership positions. Women bring inclusivity to their leadership styles. Eagly and Carli (2003) note that women lead
in a more democratic and participative style. With women making substantive contributions as leaders, Chandler (2011) concludes with the rhetorical question, “Why not women?”

**Limited access to resources.** Women remain underrepresented at every level in corporate America, with women of color the most underrepresented group of all (Thomas et al., 2018). The number of women of color in executive leadership roles lags behind White men, men of color, and White women. As a whole, women are vastly outnumbered in senior leadership. Only about one in five C-suite leaders is a woman, and only one in 25 is a woman of color (Thomas et al., 2018). Thomas et al.’s (2018) study is the largest comprehensive study of the current status of women in corporate America. The study focused on evidence of an inadequate corporate pipeline and uneven playing field, as well as creating a road map to gender equality. This study used pipeline data supplied by 279 companies, employing more than 13 million people, including data from a completed survey of these represented companies’ human resources practices. Each company submitted data on their diversity programs, policies, and organizational demographics. Pipeline data included the current representation of men and women, number of hires, promotions, and employees who left the company by gender and, optionally, race/ethnicity (Thomas et al., 2018). The focus of this study was to give companies and employees the information needed to advance women and improve gender diversity within their organizations. The study surveyed more than 64,000 employees on workplace experiences. Thirty-seven women of different races, ethnicities, and those who identified as LGBTQ offered further insight through qualitative interviews. Thirteen companies made up the sample, which included a range of industries
including health-care systems and services, professional and information services, retail, tech, banking and consumer finance, and food and beverage distribution. Interviewees were selected from volunteers and represented a range of levels, functions, and demographic groups. The interviews focused on women’s workplace experiences to flesh out the quantitative data collected from the employee survey.

Quantitative metrics were used to calculate promotion, hiring, and attrition rates. All three scenarios were calculated separately by dividing the total number in each category by the number of total male/female in that specific category (Thomas et al., 2018). The report concluded with several findings including (a) women remain significantly underrepresented, particularly women of color, (b) companies need to change the way they hire and promote entry and manager-level employees to make real progress, (c) women receive less day-to-day support, (d) women have less access to senior leaders, (e) senior leaders create opportunities, and (f) senior leaders are often the organization’s mentors or sponsors. Good mentors open doors for their protégés, provide career advice, highlight subordinates’ work to superiors, and advocate on behalf of their charges for new opportunities (Thomas et al., 2018). Lack of access to senior leaders creates a barrier for women towards career advancement, which can be crippling. Without senior-level access, women are less likely than men to advance in position and pay and may not aspire to long-term employment (Thomas et al., 2018). Based on the findings, six actions were recommended that companies take to make progress on gender diversity: (a) develop goals and reporting accountability, (b) ensure that hiring and promotions are fair, (c) make seniors leaders champions of diversity, (d) foster an inclusive and respectful culture, (e) address the parity and “only” person of color issues
in senior positions, and (f) offer employees the flexibility to fit work into their lives (Thomas et al., 2018).

**Mentorship**

Mentor role theory was developed by Kram (1985) after conducting research on mentor relationships between junior and senior managers in a corporate setting. Mentoring is understood to be an interpersonal process in which a more experienced colleague provides professional guidance, instruction, and support to a less experienced individual (Kram, 1985). The role of a mentor is to serve as a sponsor and use his or her influence to assist with a less experienced person’s entry and advancement in the workplace.

Kram (1985) targets distinct sources for her research, conducting qualitative interviews with individuals at every career stage, including practicing managers and employees across all sectors, human resource specialists, and organizational researchers and psychologists. The purpose of the research was to evaluate the mentoring relationship in a realistic way to determine the potential benefits and limitations of mentorship as well as to explore the different relationships that develop in the workplace.

The research was conducted on 18 developmental relationships between senior and non-senior employees involved in a significant professional development relationship, in a large northeastern public utility company of 15,000 employees. Interviews focused on the subjective experiences of the nine pairs and were scheduled in two 2-hour sessions for both senior and non-senior participants. Interview data were analyzed using an inductive process in which hypotheses were developed and revised as the interviews were conducted (Kram, 1985).
Kram (1985) identified purposes for mentoring: career functions and psychosocial functions. Career functions are defined as the aspects of the mentoring relationship that enhance learning skills and increase career advancement opportunities. Career functions include sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments. The psychosocial functions are defined as the aspects of the mentoring relationship that enhance the mentee’s sense of competence, clarity of identity, and effectiveness in professional positions in an organization. Psychosocial functions include role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship.

Investigating the role of mentorship in assisting women in advancing in intercollegiate athletic administration, Hancock, Grappendorf, Wells, and Burton (2017) conducted a qualitative study to understand the role of mentoring as it pertains to career breakthroughs. The researchers conducted the study with 51 athletic administrators. Six focus groups were facilitated with two moderators. Interview data were member checked for accuracy and coded in two cycles. Data from focus groups were organized into four primary findings: (a) the importance in developing a mentoring relationship, (b) benefits of mentoring, (c) becoming a mentor, and (d) benefits of cross-gender mentoring (Hancock et al., 2017). Women in the study obtained meaningful mentoring relationships through informal networking or other relationship-building opportunities. These women looked to mentors for support, encouragement, insight into organizational politics, and decision-making practices. These women felt a duty to mentor protégés, reporting that gender often influenced how the mentorship developed. Mentors offer guidance and assistance as women seek to overcome the challenges and barriers to professional success, which may include gender stereotyping, discriminatory hiring practices, and
limited opportunities for skill development. Similarly, mentors may provide a pathway to job and career opportunities, which may yield career growth, advancement, and other positive outcomes (Hancock et al., 2017). Results indicate that mentorship is critical to these women’s professional development and career advancement.

Einarsdottir, Christiansen, and Kristjansdottir (2018) conducted a qualitative study of 11 women managers, seeking information on their employment experiences. The research aimed to understand the experiences of women in middle-manager positions and to investigate whether these women wished to achieve top management positions, what barriers might prevent advancement, and what these women managers needed to overcome to reach the top management positions. In-depth interviews were conducted with participants from companies that employed between 50 and 1,100 employees. The interviewees were selected by convenience sampling, using the researchers’ professional networks. The women were sent, via email, invitations to participate. The duration of the interviews was 55 to 100 minutes. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed into themes following a phenomenological methodology. Findings show that participants did have the desire to seek promotions, but saw little opportunity for career advancement, citing a lack of mentorship as one of the barriers (Einarsdottir et al., 2018).

Mentoring can facilitate socialization into the organization as well as provide career guidance and personal support (Eby & Lockwood, 2004). In a qualitative study to determine the effectiveness of formal mentoring programs, Eby and Lockwood (2004) recruited participants from two organizations with formal mentoring programs. Ragins and Cotton (1999) defined formal mentoring as developed with organizational assistance and informal mentoring as spontaneous and without organizational assistance. The study
participants were from telecommunications and a nationwide community-based health organization. In both organizations, the mentoring programs were corporatewide and targeted to high-potential employees. The objectives of the mentoring programs were to broaden selected employees’ opportunities and experience with other aspects of the organization and its senior leadership and to foster career development and leadership skills.

The organizations identified employees, via telephone, who participated in the formal mentoring programs. In total, 63 employees participated. Participants were provided with the interview protocol and participated in 30-minute interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and coded for thematic meaning. Transcribed copies were sent to the interviewees for a validity check. The study concluded with several findings related to career planning, coaching, and networking opportunities. Mentees valued learning, developing a personal relationship, personal gratification, and enhanced managerial skills as benefits of mentoring. Both groups identified a number of problems in the program design, including mentor–protégé’ mismatches, scheduling difficulties, and geographic distance (Eby & Lockwood, 2004).

Chao’s (2009) pilot case study reviewed a formal mentoring program to determine if early new psychologists will benefit from it. Established by Gerald P. Koocher, then serving as president-elect of the American Psychological Association (APA), a task force to examine formal and informal mentoring relationships. The review focuses on the matching process, training and program resources, and program administration. The mentees were recruited electronically via email from the Committee
for Early Career Psychologists. Mentors were recruited from a pool of psychologists attending the April 2006 consolidation meetings of APA committees.

The 1-year long pilot program was launched with 22 mentors and 29 mentees, with seven mentors working with two mentees. Mentees were accepted by their matched mentor and notified of their acceptance into the pilot program via email. The pairs were encouraged to establish goals and consult the accompanying Center for Mentoring website for support. Furthermore, the program administrator’s contact information was provided if they needed any help or if any problems arose.

At the end of the pilot, 24 evaluations were returned by 14 mentors and 10 mentees, representing 47% of the 51 participants. Participants rated their satisfaction with their mentoring partner. A key finding was that the matching process in a formal mentoring program is critical. If the partners do not feel a connection with their partner, the mentoring process is compromised. Successful matches are more likely to be perceived if both partners have a choice in the process. Data also revealed that both participants in a mentor/mentee pair must be committed to the relationship. The analysis of this study concluded that mentoring could offer formal career support, whereby a mentor offers the mentee work-related challenging assignments and guides the mentee in developing organizational relationships, and ultimately, may aid in career advancement (Chao, 2009).

Kay and Wallace (2009) conducted a longitudinal study with 468 mentored lawyers. The study focused on who received mentorship and how that mentorship experience shaped the mentees’ careers. The data from this study were derived from a longitudinal panel survey of lawyers from Ontario, Canada. The data were collected in
three “waves,” with one wave every 6 years over a 12-year period. The 6-year duration between waves of the survey was to capture life-course events, such as the timing of children, marriages, and divorces, while allowing a short enough interval between surveys to allow accurate recall of job changes and promotion dates. The first survey was administered in 1990, with a second wave in 1996, and a third wave in 2002.

They mailed the first survey in 1990 to a sample of Ontario lawyers drawn from the membership records of the Law Society of Upper Canada. The sample was stratified by gender to include equal numbers of men and women called to the Ontario Bar between 1975 and 1990. This timeframe represents a 15-year period in which the first significant number of women entered law practice. The survey received a 68% response rate. The second survey yielded a response rate of 70%, and the third, 73%. Participants were asked to rate the quality of their mentorship on a 5-point Likert-like scale. Mentoring functions measured in the study were career development, earnings, procedural fairness, value of work, and work satisfaction.

The study revealed men and women were able to secure multiple mentors and establish meaningful relationships. The study found that both genders benefited greatly from these relationships. However, when the mentoring relationship was examined discrepancies emerged. Specifically, male protégés benefited from access to senior status mentors regarding their social capital. This access increased the mentees’ earnings, work attitudes, and overall work satisfaction, whereas women benefited from having multiple mentors, close mentoring relationships, and psychosocial support (Kay & Wallace, 2009).
Organizational Culture and Barriers

Workplace paradigms channel organizational thinking in powerful ways and have a powerful influence on the organizational culture (Thomas & Ely, 1996). Organizational culture refers to a set of values, beliefs, and behavior patterns within an institution that subconsciously and silently drive choices and decisions within an organization, and ultimately, differentiates the organizations from others (Ortega-Parra & Sastre-Castillo, 2013; King, 2012). Business managers often use the terms organizational culture and corporate culture interchangeably because both terms refer to the same underlying phenomenon (Childress, 2013).

Wentling and Thomas (2009) interviewed 25 women in different information technology (IT) positions across the United States to examine the workplace culture that hinders leadership development for these women in the IT sector. The random sample was derived from different Fortune 500 companies’ participation. The major research method for this study was in-depth, semi-structured telephone interviews. The IT culture has been described as largely White, male-dominated, anti-social, individualistic, and competitive. The researchers posit that social factors, such as gender stereotypes, are key influencers affecting leadership development of women in the IT sector. These stereotypes can lower feelings of acceptance for women and hinder the chances for career advancement in the IT sector. Women in leadership positions in traditionally male-dominated jobs, especially when deemed competent and acknowledged for excellent performance, are not well liked when compared to men who hold and excel in the same positions (Wentling & Thomas, 2009).
Shakeshaft (1987) asserts that “the major barrier to women has been a culture characterized by male dominance because all of the specific barriers identified can be traced back to a society that supports and enforces a male-dominant system” (p. 79). In a systemic review by Hirayama and Fernando (2018) of 12 quantitative and qualitative studies to identify barriers to advancement for female surgeons, two themes emerged. Contributing to the lack of career progression for female surgeons is organizational culture and work-life balance. Seven of the 12 studies reviewed indicated that the organizational culture as one of the dominating barriers affecting the female surgeons' career trajectory, citing specifically career structure, male dominance, and unequal opportunities. The structure of long work hours presents unique challenges as the women surgeons ponder motherhood. The review also revealed that women surgeons reported a workplace culture that did not address the bullying behavior they were experiencing, and the lack of networking opportunities created career advancement opportunities as well. None of the 12 studies reported on the various forms of work-family conflict that create barriers career advancement for female surgeons include: (a) domestic duties, (b) career breaks, and (c) finding balance in career and family duties. (Hirayama & Fernando, 2018).

Understanding organizational and social barriers (e.g., work-family conflict) is crucial when analyzing the current state of women's career advancement within organizations. The benefits of women in the workplace are clear (Rapp & Yoon, 2016). Women can bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the workplace, prompting creativity, stability, and resilience within organizations (Rapp & Yoon, 2016). The executive summary identified three organizational barriers to women’s advancement: (a)
non-inclusive work environment and culture, (b) unequal development opportunities, and (c) heightened stress and pressure. The social barrier is that women are leaving their positions because of work-family conflicts. While most women may aspire to be promoted, only 40% of women aspire towards senior-level positions and only 32% believe they will achieve it.

**The glass ceiling.** The glass ceiling is a metaphor used to describe the career barriers women encounter, often referenced as the leading barrier. The term was originally used by journalists Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986) in a Wall Street Journal article to describe the invisible barriers women confront as they approached the top of the corporate hierarchy from which the authors received widespread criticism. The article suggested that women did not achieve executive-level positions because of family demands, lack of education, and lack of relevant job experience.

The U.S. Department of Labor commissioned a four-part investigation into the glass ceiling. The third component of the report was a case study that involved nine randomly picked Fortune 500 organizations. The investigation focused on: (a) identifying systemic barriers to the career advancement of minorities and women; (b) eliminate barriers through corrective and cooperative problem solving; and (c) further the departments’ and organizations’ understanding of how to eliminate discrimination and fight article barriers (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991, p. 3-4). The glass ceiling is a metaphor used to describe the career barriers women encounter, often considered the leading barrier (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). The report confirmed that there is, for all intents and purposes, a glass ceiling in that there are points at which women and minorities plateau in their careers: (a) minorities plateau at a lower level in the workforce
than women; (b) there is little monitoring of equal access and is mostly never considered a corporate responsibility; (c) appraisal and compensation systems are not monitored; (d) placement patterns are consistent with data; and (e) there is a general lack of adequate recordkeeping (p. 4-5). Additionally, there are three attitudinal and organization barriers identified in the case study: (a) recruitment for positions or promotions was by word or networking and thus, Equal Employment Opportunity (EEOC) requirements were not followed; (b) career development opportunities were not readily available to minorities or women; and (c) accountability to the EEOC requirements did not reach senior-level executive and corporate decision makers (U.S. Department of Labor 1991, p. 5).

Eliminating the glass ceiling requires organizations to communicate, implement, and follow through with a plan of diversity. The report recommends that all CEOs and boards of directors set companywide policies that “actively promote diversity programs and policies that remove artificial barriers at every level” (p. 19). Furthermore, the report directed the governmental sector to lead by example, strengthen enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, improve data collection, and increase disclosure of diversity data. Then lastly, it recommends that federal enforcement agencies increase their efforts to enforce existing anti-discrimination laws. These laws include the Equal Pay Act, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 11246 (which prohibits discrimination in hiring or employment opportunities on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, and national origin), the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, the Americans with Disabilities, Act and the Civil Rights Act of 1964.
Breaking the glass ceiling is complicated, requiring action in several directions. Comprehensive programs aimed toward breaking down structural, organizational, and cultural barriers are essential. Ragins et al. (2006) posited that in order to shatter the glass ceiling, understanding what barriers women face against advancement and the strategies successful women use to overcome those barriers is essential. Further, organizational leadership must also gain a thorough understanding of these barriers as well as the organizational cultures women face. The researcher also contends that the glass ceiling is an invisible barrier that appears to be pervasive in corporate America, asserting that the glass ceiling is based on organizational culture (p.28).

Ragins et al. (2006) theorize that to shatter the glass ceiling, organizational leaders need a clear understanding of career advancement barriers for women and an understanding of the strategies successful women use to overcome those barriers. Data from 1,251 senior women leaders, vice president or above, in Fortune 1000 companies, were sampled along with the CEOs of each of the companies. Surveys were returned by 461 women and 325 CEOs. Follow-up interviews were conducted as well. The study focused on women’s advancement from the perspective of women who have experienced career success by advancing to senior-level executive positions. The women executives were given 13 possible strategies which may support career advancement and were asked to rate these criteria as to perceived importance. Unitedly the women all assert that they often must prove their abilities and outwork their male counterparts to fend off any negative commentary. The study revealed nine strategies that emerged as important. However, four stood out as imperative: (a) consistently exceed performance expectations,
(b) develop a style that male managers are comfortable with, (c) seek out challenging assignments, and (d) have influential mentors (Ragins et al., 2006).

Both the CEOs and women executives were given a second survey along with follow-up interviews and asked to select the top three. Ragins et al. (2006) assert that the findings were startling. The CEOs’ top three barriers were: (a) lack of relevant experience, (b) women have not been in the pipeline long enough, and (c) stereotyping and preconceptions. The women executives listed their top three barriers as (a) male stereotyping and preconceptions, (b) exclusion from informal networks, and (c) inhospitable corporate culture. The researchers report that the stark differences in responses between CEO responses and that of women is based on the dual environments and experiences of both groups. CEOs in the study were predominantly White and male, making them the dominant demographic in the study. The researchers argue that the corporate environment designed for these CEOs’ success and these CEOs’ lack of awareness is a consequence of that systemic model. Bridging the gender gap depends on investment from those in charge. Recommendations from the study include: (a) written policies to address systemic change, (b) conduct gender diverse focus groups, (c) conduct diversity training, and (d) implement a cross-gendered mentoring program (Ragins et al., 2006).

**The glass cliff.** The literature also explores the theoretical perspective known as the glass cliff. The glass cliff effect refers to the situation when a poorly performing organization is more likely to have a woman appointed to a leadership position, while men are more likely to be appointed to stable leadership positions in successful organizations (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Judge (2003) theorized that companies
underperform when women are appointed to their boards. Ryan and Haslam’s (2005) study to examine the performances of the Financial Times Stock Exchange’ (FTSE) top 100 companies on the London Stock Exchange used the archival data produced by Judge (2003). The conclusion of the study was drawn from the comparison of 10 companies’ performance on the FTSE. Ryan and Haslam’s (2005) quantitative archival study was conducted to explore Judge’s (2003) conclusion and hypothesis that women are appointed to high-level positions when the company is experiencing poor performance. The websites of all the FTSE 100 companies were searched to identify what companies appointed a woman to their board of directors during 2003. Additionally, the researchers used data from Singh and Vinnicombe’s (2003) study on the 2002 FTSE Index and women directors. In total, 19 female board appointments were made in 2003. One company appointed two women (at different times) that year, while the rest appointed one woman.

Two measures of company performance were computed and analyzed. The first was a measure of annual company performance, each calculated as the percentage movement over the 12 months preceding December 2003. The second performance investigated fluctuations in company performance. The calculation on the average monthly share price was calculated for the 6 months before and after the appointment of a board member (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). The strength of the correlation between the percentage of women on the board of a company and its annual performance was calculated. Results show that the higher the percentage of women on a company’s board, the poorer the company’s performance. However, the researchers stress that the analysis does not find causation and does not account for the time of appointment or fluctuations.
in company performance over time (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Changes in average monthly share prices were calculated to investigate the performances of companies before and after the appointment of a woman to their boards of directors. Calculations were executed with a mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA) for 5 months prior to their appointment and 3 months after the appointment. The analysis revealed that people appointed in the first half of the year were generally associated with improved performance. Those companies that appointed a male board member showed a relatively stable performance over time in both in the first and second half of the year.

However, those companies that appointed a woman to their board experienced low share prices: 5 and 2 months prior to their appointment of a woman, these companies experienced very low share prices. After that, however, company performance increased significantly. Companies that appointed a woman to their board in the second half of the year experienced positive and stable performances. Importantly, this archival study helped to uncover an interesting phenomenon. That is, women are particularly likely to be placed in positions of leadership in circumstances of general financial downturn and downturn in company performance (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

The glass cliff metaphor represents the precarious, stressful leadership position in which the leader is asked to direct a declining or unstable organization. Ryan and Haslam (2005, 2007) noted that women who broke through the glass ceiling were more likely than men to find themselves in precarious or insecure leadership positions. Several factors may contribute to women being promoted under these circumstances. Organizations may assess that stereotypical female qualities are needed to “turn” things around during a crisis such as emotional sensitivity, morale building, strong interpersonal
skills, and collaborative leadership styles. Additionally, women may perceive that there is less competition from men for these positions. Further, women may be more amenable to accepting these positions out of fear that another opportunity may not present itself (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007).

Cook and Glass (2014) explored the glass cliff phenomenon in the United States. They focused on CEO transitions of Fortune 500 companies from 1996 to 2010. Their research sample included the appointment of 21 female CEOs, 40 racial minority CEOs, and 551 White, male CEOs. Firm performance was evaluated using both accounting-based measures return on assets (ROA) and return on equity (ROE) and market-based measures (share price returns). Their findings showed that, when organizational performance was poor, both gender and racial minorities were more likely than White males to be appointed to CEO positions. Glass cliff research suggests that women who are promoted during times of crisis will experience tremendous barriers that may limit their career trajectory.

**Gender stereotypes.** About two-thirds of Americans say it is easier for men than women to get top executive positions in business (Pew, 2015). Research conducted by Chandler (2011) submits that women bring diverse strengths, perspectives, and innovation to the exercise of leadership positions. Although women have emerged in leadership roles despite the glass ceiling and the glass cliff, disparities continue to persist due to traditional gender stereotypes, inadequate mentors, and workplace paradigms (Klenke, 1996; Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Research supports how implicit or systemic likely affects people’s real-world behavior toward female leaders, and thus, arguably, impacting women’s career advancement (Nam, 2015).
In an article written for the *Harvard Business Review*, Eagly and Carli (2007) explored the mental associations of leaders based on gender. They observe that gender prejudice correlates with social constructions of what is masculine and feminine based on cultural perceptions and influences. Women are often associated with nurturing communal qualities, such as compassion, affection, and gentleness, while men are associated with agentic qualities like assertiveness, self-confidence, and dominance. This dichotomy for women is often referred to as a “double bind,” meaning that if women are seen as communal, they may be disparaged for not being agentic enough. However, if these women are highly agentic, criticism, or worse, for lacking communal tendencies is likely (Eagly & Carly, 2007).

The potential for prejudice is inherent in the stereotypes held against these women in leadership roles. Prejudices may develop when there is an incongruity between stereotyped attributes of women come into conflict with the leadership roles and expectations these women fill (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Leadership positions in the business sector, political, and military have been predominantly held by males in the United States. Although women have gained increased access to supervisory and middle management positions, women remain quite rare as elite leaders and top executives. Eagly and Karau (2002) posit that this lack of women’s representation in senior leadership positions and stereotypes of what leadership “looks like” is associated with role congruity theory. Role congruity theory suggests that the misalignment is between inconsistencies in characteristics associated with the female gender stereotype and those associated with typical male leaders. Role congruity theory proposes that a member of a group will be positively evaluated when his/her characteristics are recognized as aligning
with that group's typical social roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Eagly and Karau (2002) introduced this theory to explain how gender roles represent consensual and injunctive beliefs about men and women. The study explored and measured the degree of congruity between female gender roles and leadership roles. The term “gender role” refers to the descriptive and injunctive expectations associated with women and men (Cialdini & Trost, 1998).

Eagly and Karau’s (2002) role congruity theory asserts that prejudice toward female leaders happens because there are inconsistencies between the characteristics associated with the stereotypical female and those associated with typical (male) leaders. They examined existing research to explore the consequences of prejudice that are predicated by role congruity theory, and gallop polls and research surveys were referenced as well. The paradigms were organized according to whether these standards investigated (a) attitudes toward women and men as leaders, (b) the access of men and women to leadership roles, or (c) the success of women and men in leadership roles. The study proposes that perceived incongruity between the female gender roles and leadership roles leads to two forms of prejudice derived from the descriptive and injunctive aspects of female gender roles. These injunctive aspects of female gender roles include the discernment that women are perceived less favorably than men as potential occupants of leadership roles and behaviors, associated with traditional leadership roles, are viewed less favorably when expressed by a woman (Eagly & Karau 2002).

A study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2015) explored public attitudes surrounding gender and leadership, with a focus on leadership in U.S. politics and business. The main survey included a sample of 1,835 adults and was comprised of 921
women and 914 men, 18 years of age or older. The survey was conducted by the GfK Group using Knowledge Panel, its nationally representative online research panel. A second survey included a sample of 1,004 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in the continental United States.

The Pew Research Center (2015) conducted the survey via the phone (landline and cellular phone). Key findings include that women are far more likely than men to experience gender discrimination. Sixty-five percent of women surveyed indicated that they face at least some discrimination in society today. Approximately 50% of the women participants cited a higher standard for women's performance and businesses' unwillingness to hire women for top executive positions as significant barriers to career advancement. Conversely, at least three in 10 women said that these factors did not hold women back. Twenty-six percent of women surveyed noted family responsibilities as a significant barrier for women hoping to reach the top levels of corporate leadership. The study concluded that a high percentage of women in the study believed their lack of advancement to top leadership roles is because women are held to a higher standard than men.

**Work-life balance.** Work-life balance is defined by Santhi and Sundar (2012) as the proper prioritizing between “work” (career and ambition) and “life” (pleasure, leisure, family and spiritual development). Job satisfaction is named as one of the most important factors that affect workplace behavior. There is growing evidence that current trends in employment conditions may be eroding the levels of job satisfaction (Santhi & Sundar, 2012).
A healthy work-life balance is of great significance for working adults as the family and workplace expectations pose several challenges for them. The dynamics of this balance wield enormous pressure for working women, as they often have two competing sets of priorities. Research indicates that women experience greater difficulty in balancing this dynamic than men. Women experience additional conflicts because job expectations spill over into home life, where women often experience greater responsibility for family dynamics and duties (Sundaresan, 2015).

Sundaresan’s (2015) mixed-method study was conducted to investigate the factors affecting work-life balance among working women and their consequences. Sundaresan (2015) administered a structured questionnaire to a sample of 125 adults, randomly selecting working women across organizations and institutions in Bangalore City. A total of 116 survey responses were collected from five self-employed women, 63 women employed in the private sector, 14 women employed in the public sector, 32 women employed in academic institutions, and two women employed in other organizations. To ensure homogeneity, the sample was limited to women who were employed in full-time paid positions outside of the home and possessed a graduate degree. Qualitative data were sourced from journals, relevant literature, through discussions, open-ended questions, and observations. Quantitative data were collected by administering a structured 5-point Likert scale to find the degree of agreement for each item on the questionnaire (Sundaresan, 2015).

Findings for the study were placed into two separate categories: factors affecting work-life balance and consequences of poor work-life balance. The study concluded that women remain primarily responsible for their families and their careers rarely given top
priority. This study has revealed the burden of women’s excessive work, not having time for themselves, and the added pressure of increased workloads are the prime factors affecting work/life balance for working women. Consequently, women suffer from job burnout, experience high levels of stress and anxiety, and are unable to realize their full potential in the marketplace (Sundaresan, 2015).

James (2010) conducted a qualitative study to examine the experiences of executive women and their choices in balancing work with marriage and children. Data were collected through interviews in each participant's office and lasted an average of 60 minutes. The researcher asked each female participant to explain her experiences in her career as connected with sacrifices regarding marriage, children, and family life. Interviews were recorded for transcription and a short demographic survey was administered prior to the interviews. The transcriptions were coded, and the data were analyzed using the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method developed by Moustakas (1994). The researcher applied NVivo 8 software to identify common words and themes and confirmed the data as relevant or irrelevant to this subgroup of executive women. Results showed women in this study reported women being conscious of making some sacrifices, some expressed feelings of guilt for failing to make time for themselves or for being absent from their children’s events, while other women expressed no regrets for their decisions (James, 2010).

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) examined the literature on the conflict between work and family roles, which showed that work-family conflict occurs in three main forms: time-based conflict, strain-based conflict, and behavioral-based conflict. Identifying any role characteristic that affects a person's time involvement, strain, or
behavior within a role can produce conflict between that role and that of another role. A main cause of work-family stress is not having enough time to dedicate to both domains.

**Attrition of Senior Female Leadership**

The United States exemplifies a thriving economy. The number of available jobs and the competition for workers are both sharply increasing. In the US in 2015, there were more job openings than workers to fill them (Sears, Nelms, & Mahan, 2017). In 2017, The Work Institute conducted a study to report on retention, both trends and reasons. The researchers interviewed 240,000 former employees since 2010 to capture and analyze the data and report on the real reasons U.S. employees leave their jobs. The report revealed that more workers are choosing to leave their jobs. Total separations have gone up 14% since 2010, largely driven by a 46% increase in voluntary quits (Sears et al., 2017).

Retention has become more challenging for a multitude of industries because competent employees frequently move from one job to another as they are being sought after by more than one organization at a time. Retention is defined as a voluntary and strategic action by an organization to create an environment, which rewards its employees for longevity (Chaminade, 2007). Walia and Daroch (2017) conducted a qualitative study to identify the various reasons employees decide to quit their jobs and what organizations can do to retain their talent pool to avoid talent deprivation. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 15 managers and 37 employees from eight hotels in Jalandhar City, Punjab. Audio recordings and notes were analyzed to find common themes. The study deduced that people leave when they are dissatisfied with their work environment and feel unappreciated; employees stay when policies and practices match.
Employers who create attractive retention practices will help the organization minimize the pace and impact of employee turnover (Walia & Daroch, 2017). Strategic retention of employees is critical to the long-term health and success of any organization and is the responsibility of the employer.

In late 2017, the Network of Executive Women (NEW) commissioned research to answer the question: “Where are all of the female leaders?” According to the report, senior executive women are heading for the exit door. If the status quo remains, women will comprise just 15% of executive ranks by 2027, compared to 35% today. Female first- and mid-level managers exit at nearly double the rate of men (24.4% vs. 13.3%). Women in senior-level executive positions, including the C-suite, leave their jobs nearly 4 times as often as men (26.9% vs. 7.3%) (NEW, 2017). Many issues contribute to women’s attrition. The research demonstrated chief among these issues is women, particularly those in upper management, experience the workplace differently from their male counterparts. Arguably, there is a notable difference between what women tend to value and what most contemporary corporate cultures offer. This disconnect is driving many competent and ambitious women to leave corporate America, to either find or create other organizations that better meet these women’s needs. Leadership at the C-suite level is in alignment to look like it did 50 years ago (NEW, 2017).

The study surveyed more than 3,600 NEW members and U.S. employees in the retail and consumer goods industry (2,531 women and 1,270 men). Eight retailers and consumer goods companies shared hiring, promotion, and turnover data representing more than 400,000 employees. Additionally, executives from 11 companies participated in interviews. The report found women’s turnover rates are far higher than those of their
male counterparts (31% vs. 24.1%), leading to a deficiency in female candidates for leadership roles. Women at all levels are leaving consumer goods and retail companies at higher rates than men, higher than other sectors (NEW, 2017). Nonetheless, the report did find that from entry-level through middle management, women are hired and promoted at equal rates with their male counterparts, and thus the representation of women in the lower half of the corporate hierarchy is equitable. However, at executive-level and C-suite positions, the candidate pool becomes more homogenous, namely White at 83% and male at 67% (NEW, 2017).

To better understand what hinders gender diversity in organizations, Mercer (2016) conducted a large-scale study with its global partners. The report covered 583 organizations in 42 countries, representing 3.2 million employees, including 1.3 million women. The research used robust analytics to examine what companies are doing to support female talent and diversity across its organizational policies and then correlated these practices with the current representation of women at the professional level through executive levels. The study went further to project future representation of women at the professional and executive levels over the next 10 years. The study used a regression-based approach to link survey responses to the specific outcomes described above.

Results revealed a significant gender gap in retention in the industry, particularly at the higher levels of management that adversely impact competitiveness. Key findings in the reports are:

1. Women make up only 20% of the average company’s workforce at the executive level.
2. Women comprise only 35% of the average company’s workforce at the professional level and above.

3. Female representation declines as career level rises. Globally, women make up 33% of managers, 26% of senior managers, and only 20% of executives.

4. There is an increased focus on hiring and promoting women into executive ranks, seemingly driven by regulation and heightened media attention.

5. Current female hiring, promotion, and retention are insufficient to create gender equality over the next decade.

6. Improvements in hiring at the highest levels of the organization are not extending to lower levels (Mercer, 2016, p. 17)

In short, the main conduit to change in representation at the C-suite level is a recognition and redressing of the inequalities inherent in the corporate upper echelon. Organizations need a clearly stated intentional plan to correct those inequalities, a change in corporate culture, and policies that address the systemic reason for imparity (Mercer, 2016).

The Kapor Center for Social Impact Report on why people voluntarily leave their tech jobs yielded four concrete takeaways (Scott, Klein, & Uririidiakoghene, 2017). These takeaways include unfairness that drives turnover, experience differs across groups, unfairness costs billions of dollars, and lastly, diversity and inclusion initiatives can improve culture and reduce turnover if these initiatives are done correctly. The research asserts that unfair treatment among workers is the single largest driver of turnover affecting all groups studied. Turnover in tech is a $16 billion a year problem.
A nationally representative sample of 2,006 U.S. adults who left a job in a technology-related industry or technology function within the last 3 years participated in this analysis (Scott et al., 2017). These researchers constructed a 15-30-minute online survey questionnaire with 40 quantitative and four qualitative/open-ended questions. To gather additional qualitative data, surveys were distributed to a second convenience sample of 254 respondents who were recruited from networks of similar and diverse community groups. These respondents received an incentive of a $15 Amazon.com gift card or a $15 donation to the charity of their choice for participation. Only weighted qualitative data were analyzed for this study. Descriptive analyses were conducted to examine frequencies and means of experiences across the sample and by subgroups. Subgroup analyses were conducted to examine experiences by gender, race/ethnicity, LGBTQ-identification, and industry type. Significance testing was used to determine whether group differences were statistically significant ($p<.05$). Several variables were combined into scales to examine cumulative experiences. Correlation and regression analyses were used to examine relationships between variables and determine the direction of relationships (Scott et al., 2017).

The tech industry, in the last 3 years, has focused on diversity in its employment practices after reporting minimal representation. Companies have spent hundreds of millions of dollars per year on efforts to enhance diversity (mostly focused on recruitment, hiring, and initiatives like “unconscious bias” training), without significantly changing the diversity of their workforce. The tech industry has a vast underrepresentation of women at just 15% and other minority employees, including Black, Latino, and Native American people, also minimally represented. Black and
Latino employees are represented at 3-5% among the top revenue-grossing technology companies such as Apple, Google, and Facebook. The debate persists whether the lack of diversity is due to a “pipeline problem” or a “tech culture problem.” Do these complex sets of biases and barriers in the workplace prevent the tech ecosystem from being more diverse, inclusive, and representative of the entire U.S. population (Scott et al., 2017)?

The study is an important step in understanding how turnover and workplace culture contribute to the lack of diversity seen in the tech industry (Scott et al., 2017). The findings revealed four takeaways: (a) unfairness in the workplace drives turnover, (b) experiences differ dramatically across groups of employees, (c) unfairness in tech costs billions each year, and (d) comprehensive diversity and inclusion initiatives can improve culture and reduce turnover. The study indicates the complexity of what drives turnover in the tech industry.

This study emphasizes the complexity of what drives turnover for different groups in the tech profession. Additionally, Scott et al.’s (2017) study succinctly addresses these challenges by the release of the several recommendations that advocate for the implementation of comprehensive diversity and inclusion strategies, creating inclusive cultures, and the development of fair management processes. Hom, Roberson, and Ellis (2008) contend that high attrition rates among these underrepresented groups create difficulty for organizations to establish and maintain diversity initiatives.

**Opting out.** In 2003, *New York Times* writer Belkin coined the phrase, “The Opt-Out Revolution” to describe the phenomena of women choosing to leave the workforce or alter their careers after having children. Belkin argued that it was not merely that the workplace failed women, but that women were rejecting the workplace. Instead, these
women were choosing different priorities. Stone (2007) argues that significant numbers of women with impressive training and credentials do interrupt their careers. What is not known are the true mitigating factors that account for these voluntary and costly workforce exits.

In a qualitative study to help define those factors, Stone (2007) conducted face-to-face interviews with 54 female high achievers, recruited mostly from alumnae of four selective colleges and universities. The study found that 90% quit their jobs not to care for their families but because of workplace problems, chiefly frustration and long hours. Participants were women in their 30s and 40s who had completed their education and established their careers before childbearing. A thematic analysis was used on the transcriptions to establish themes around their choices and decisions. However, critics of the “Opt-Out Revolution” argue that the scope of the study was too narrow, and this study only captured a select group of women who could afford to quit their jobs. The women who were considered part of the opt-out revolution were White, college-educated, and married mothers (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Stone, 2007).

A study from the Center for Work-Life Policy found that the long-term penalty for women taking a timeout from their careers has worsened since the recession in 2008. The study conducted in 2009, after the recession, surveyed 3,240 professional women found that time outs or “off-ramping” from a career for childcare or other reasons have found it to be increasingly unaffordable as their families depend on their income. Moreover, for women who do take a time out, reentering the workforce creates another obstacle for them. Results show that:
1. 73% of women trying to return to work after a voluntary timeout for childcare or other reasons had difficulty finding a job.

2. Women who did return lost 16% of their earning power.

3. Of those who did return, 25% reported a decrease in their managerial responsibilities and 22% had to accept a less than equivalent position.

Of the women who participated in this study who had taken a career timeout, 69% of these women said they would not have opted out of their careers if their companies offered flexible work options such as a reduced workday, shared responsibilities, and part-time career track. Fifty-eight percent of the women in the study had switched to part-time positions. Family “pull” factors remain the top reason for career downshifting. The percentage of women leaving for childcare issues increased from 45% in 2004 to 74% in 2009 (Work-Life Policy, 2009).

**Microaggressions**

Research on systemic overt sexism is well argued and defined. Over the past two decades, research has focused more on the subtle forms of discrimination and have identified them as microaggressions. Microaggressions were originally studied from the point of view of race and described as the chief vehicle for pro-racist behaviors (Pierce, 1970). Sue et al. (2007) created a taxonomy of racial microaggressions through a review of the social psychological literature based on several criteria. These criteria included aversive racism derived from the study of the manifestations and impacts of everyday racism, and from personal narratives of counselors (both White and those of color) on their racial/cultural awakening. This review reveals that microaggressions oppress marginalized groups and contribute to psychological stress and distress for these groups.
The cumulative nature and continuing day in and day out experience of racial microaggressions contribute to the following: hostile and invalidating educational and work climate, devaluing of social group identities, lower work productivity, and educational learning among people of color. The perpetuation of stereotypes increases physical and mental health concerns for members of marginalized communities (Sue, 2010b).

Sue et al. (2007) used Pierce’s (1970) framework to synthesize previous work on subtle discrimination, referring to microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (p. 273). This definition specified microaggressions as a phenomenon experienced by members of non-dominant groups. In addition to providing an operational definition, Sue et al. (2007) presented the first theoretical framework of microaggressions. This taxonomy included a delineation of three types of microaggressions: (a) microassaults, (b) microinsults, and (c) microinvalidations.

A microassault is defined as an explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or non-verbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling. A microassault is a purposeful, discriminatory action. Microinsult is defined as communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity, and demeans a person’s racial heritage or identity. A microinsult represents a subtle snub and conveys a hidden insulting message to the recipient. Microinvalidation is “communication that excludes, negates, or nullifies the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person belonging to a particular group” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274).
Examples include the use of derogatory epithets, demeaning jokes, and preferential treatment for members of dominant groups. Microassaults are perpetrated consciously and deliberately. Described as trickier to identify is the most common form of microaggression, the microinsult. Microinsults are subtle acts that convey contempt and disrespect for someone; they are spur-of-the-moment, backhanded comments. Nevertheless, microinsults communicate demeaning messages of inferiority and undesirability to the recipient. Microinsults can have the most impact on a person’s mental and physical health (Sue et al., 2007). Similarly defined, microinvalidations are unconscious messages that communicate invalidation, minimization, or nullification of the reality of an individual’s experiences. Ultimately, microinvalidations involve the denial of discrimination interpersonally as well as in society. These three types of microaggressions often occur during interpersonal interactions (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273-274).

Solórzano et al.’s (2000) study was conducted to examine how adult students experienced the racial climate in both the academic and social spaces of college environments. The qualitative study included 34 African American students (18 women and 16 men) who were selected from three elite, predominantly White universities. The students participated in 10 focus groups that were convened on the campuses of each university. The researchers used the taxonomy of microaggressions to analyze and categorize the participants’ responses. The study revealed that these experiences had a profound impact on the students’ academic performance, including how these students viewed safe spaces in and out of the classroom, as well as evoking feelings to “exit” their education. The study further demonstrated that even at the highest levels of
accomplishment, where educational conditions might on the surface appear to be equal, inequality and discrimination still exist, even if they are in more subtle and hidden forms.

Research indicates that racism quietly persists even if other forms of overt discrimination are not as prevalent as they were in the early 20th century. The literature confirms that microaggressions are actions directed at individuals from various underrepresented or marginalized groups based on race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or persons with disabilities (Sue et al., 2007).

Gender microaggressions. The research on microaggressions has been extended to examine gender-based biases called gender microaggressions, which are a form of sexism and sex-based discrimination (Nadal, 2010 & Capodilupo et al., 2010). Gender microaggression is a relatively new theory, but hardly a new behavioral occurrence. Gender-based microaggressions, like microaggressions, are nuanced and brief everyday exchanges that communicate sexist disparagements towards women. Gender-based microaggressions are conveyed verbally and/or nonverbally through facial expression, gazes, and other gestures. They are subtle and can cause psychological harm or discomfort. Gender microaggressions into three forms:

1. Gender microassaults: blatant sexist slur or catcalling.
2. Gender microinsults: subtle negative communication about women.
3. Gender microinvalidations: subtle communication that dismisses or devalues women’s thoughts or feelings (Sue, 2010a; Capodilupo et al., 2010).

This taxonomy is useful in formulating studies to explore the breadth of discrimination facing women in the workplace. Examining workplace gender discrimination through the lens of microaggressions creates an opportunity to assess the
broad range of sexist experiences. Manifestations of gender discrimination vary widely at work, from obvious attacks to more subtle forms, and establishing these criteria can help establish the criteria for nuance in evaluation.

Gender microaggressions targeted toward women occur with frequency and vary in severity and ambiguity. Conducting research to examine why women remain underrepresented in the workforce and academia in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), Yang and Carrol (2018) conducted a quantitative study using female faculty across STEM disciplines at a large Midwestern land-grant research university. STEM disciplines were studied because of the disproportionately higher representation of males in these areas. Data were collected using the Gendered Racial Microaggressions Scale (GRMS) (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Participants were asked to fill out the 25-item questionnaire and rank to what extent they agreed with each statement regarding gender-based microaggression events on a 7-point scale. Results indicated that many of the female faculty participants had experienced different types of gendered microaggressions. Additionally, the comparison among faculty of different rankings yielded non-statistically significant results, indicating that gendered microaggressions were experienced by the female faculty regardless of the stages of their faculty career (Yang & Carrol, 2018).

Basford et al.’s (2014) study to examine gender differences in third-party perceptions of microaggressions against women at work queried 150 undergraduate students. Participants included 70 (46.7%) women and 80 (53.3%) men. Using a within-subject design, participants were to read a set of scenarios depicting interactions between female employees and their male supervisors at a fictitious organization. Each participant
read a series of eight vignettes. Findings suggest that observers, regardless of gender, perceive greater microaggression against women as the explicitness of discrimination increases. However, women tend to detect greater discrimination than men, particularly when instances are subtle in nature.

The experiences of gendered microaggressions within women's careers and workplace settings may also play a role in preventing diverse representation in specific fields. Sexual objectification, assumptions of inferiority, and traditional role congruity have all been reported by women as barriers to career advancement. For example, women may be told that “they are too emotional,” implying that these women are less able or incompetent (Capodilupo et al., 2010; Nadal, 2010). The nature of gender microaggressions lends itself to the role congruity theory. The implications that women are too emotional or not suited for certain jobs may take the form of being assigned to take on housekeeping or domestic duties in the office. In contrast, male colleagues are not held to this expectation.

In a qualitative investigation, Barthelemy, McCormick, and Henderson (2016) explored gender microaggressions among 21 women graduate students in physics and astronomy at major research universities. The participants were predominantly White and came from well-educated families. In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted in which participants described experiences that were comparable to hostile sexism and microaggressions. To code these more descriptively, the authors utilized the Capodilupo et al. (2010) framework of gender microaggressions.

Most of the participants reported experiences of discrimination in varying degrees. The results were divided into three parts: (a) those that reported no experiences
with gender microaggressions; (b) those that experienced gender microaggressions; and (c) those that reported overt hostile sexism. The study revealed that the fields of physics and astronomy were unwelcoming to women and discouraged women’s participation. When reported, these experiences were dismissed or ignored by the administration and were unacknowledged by the perpetrators. The study did indicate “exit” behavior, not because of one single incident but rather an accumulation of disadvantages from many small incidents. Lewis, Cogburn, and Williams’s (2015) review documented that cumulative and persistent experiences of discrimination are associate with measures of depression, anxiety symptoms, and psychological distress as well as increased risk of defined psychiatric disorders. Becares and Zhang (2018) concur that repeated experiences of discrimination are correlated with an increased risk of mental health problems.

**Health implications.** The literature robustly documents that discrimination and racism contribute to poor health, both directly and indirectly. Sue et al. (2010) write that gender microaggressions have long term mental and physical health implications. Because of the nature of gender microaggressions ranging from subtle to overt and often being expressed unconsciously, continual exposure can cause psychological harm or discomfort towards women (Capodilupo et al., 2010). Nadal (2010) writes that the cumulative effects and exposure to gender microaggressions can lead to short term physical distress as well as an array of mental health issues.

Kessler, Mickelson, and Williams (1999) conducted a study to examine the association between perceived discrimination and mental health. Perceived discrimination was categorized as major and minor. Data from the MacArthur Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS) survey served as the preliminary information
for the study. Kessler et al. (1999) administered the study in two parts. Participants were recruited from a random-digit-dial sample frame of the coterminous United States. Eligibility was restricted to people in the age range 25 to 74, and only one respondent from a household could participate. A sample of 3,032 people was contacted and participated in the study. The first phase of the study was a telephone interview with a response rate of 70%, and the second phase of the study was a follow-up self-administered mail questionnaire with a response rate of 86.8%. The overall response rate for the study was 60.8%. The first part of the study yielded a response rate of 33.5% of participants perceiving a major discriminatory experience as listed on the MIDUS, such as being fired without cause. No major differences were reported by gender in these experiences; however, non-White Hispanics reported much lower occurrences. The second phase yielded a response rate of 60.9% of participants reporting experiencing minor, common forms of discrimination against traits such as being poor, Black, or a woman (Kessler et al., 1999).

Kessler et al. (1999) identified the two most common forms of perceived discrimination as race at 37.1% and gender with 32.9%. This study indicated there is an association between perceived discrimination and mental health problems. The researchers caution not to overinterpret the findings, as selective perception may play an important part in the reporting of stressful events as discriminatory experiences. The study further states that if the association between perceived discrimination and mental health found in the MIDUS are due to causal effects of discrimination, then discrimination is among the most important of all stressful experiences that have been implicated as a cause of mental health problems (Kessler et al., 1999). Furthermore, the
prevalence of major depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and distress in the MIDUS survey is significantly higher among women than men. Meyer (1995) argues that marginalized groups face disparate amounts of discrimination, consistent with “minority stress theory,” or the notion that members of stigmatized groups face additional, group-specific stressors in addition to their disproportionate exposure to general stressors, leading to larger health disparities (Meyer, 1995).

Chapter Summary

Review of the empirical literature in Chapter 2 focused on the topic of barriers impacting the representation of women in senior-level executive leadership positions. The literature is robust and spans several decades. Factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in senior-level leadership are gender stereotypes and microaggression, limited access to mentors, organizational and cultural barriers. Research verified that these and other issues, such as the glass ceiling and opting out, contribute to the attrition of women as senior-level leaders in the workforce. The literature, however, exposes a gap in understanding how gender microaggressions impact the leadership experiences of women in senior-level leadership positions. In order to study the impact of gender microaggression towards retaining senior-level women leaders, a qualitative study will occur. In order to answer the proposed research questions of this study, a detailed description of this qualitative research approach will be discussed in Chapter 3.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

Career women who achieve middle-management positions often find themselves stuck. Women consistently fail to receive the support needed to propel them into leadership positions. Women are 18% less likely to be promoted than their male peers (NEW, 2017). Were entry-level women promoted at the same rate as men at the same level, the number of women at executive levels would more than double. The disparity in promotions is owing to a lack of ambition. Indeed, women are as ambitious as men and ask for promotions at comparable rates as men (Thomas et al., 2017). Unfortunately, organizational and institutional barriers impede their acceleration.

Barriers to women’s advancement in the workplace are well researched and documented. In a recent study, Thomas et al. (2017) focused on gender-based discrimination, finding 64% of women report having been exposed to gender-based discrimination in the form of microaggressions. Defined in the report as “everyday sexism and racism,” microaggressions are more elusive than overt discrimination and these microaggressions often go unnoticed or reported. Repeated experiences of microaggressions can have a significant impact on women who experience these occurrences regularly in the organization. The Thomas et al. (2017) study indicated that those women are three times as likely to think about leaving their jobs periodically.
The previous chapter included a detailed examination of the literature to highlight what research has been conducted on the topic of female leadership and the impact of microaggressions. The literature exposed a gap in understanding how microaggressions impact the leadership development of women. This study sought to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of the participants to address the research questions:

1. In what ways do women in senior leadership positions experience gender microaggressions?
2. What are the sources of gender microaggressions for women in senior leadership positions?
3. What strategies are identified by women in senior leadership positions to mitigate the impact of gender microaggressions?

**Rationale for Study Methodology**

Based on these research questions, a qualitative methodology using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was conducted to explore the lived experiences of senior-level executive women. The qualitative research method of face-to-face semi-structured interviews was used to collect the data. Qualitative research aims to understand a phenomenon by exploring perceptions, attitudes, and motivations of certain defined groups or individuals (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Through the use of IPA, the researcher attempted to find the ways in which women in senior-level executive positions experience gender microaggressions, where and from whom they are experiencing them, and what are strategies they use to mitigate the impact.

**Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**
This study used IPA, a qualitative approach, to examine the trends and lived experiences of women in senior-level executive positions. The strength of an IPA methodology lies in the interpretive approach the researcher uses to construct meaning from social reality, and in the description of the lived experiences of the study participants. IPA lends itself to this qualitative study as the methodology requires the researcher to fully participate in the meaning-making process (Mavhandu-Mudzus, 2018). The goal of this dissertation study was to “give voice” to the study participants as “meaning” is made of their experiences (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). Making sense of participant experiences is achieved, in part, through the researcher’s interpretation of the lived experiences (Larkin et al., 2006) and through reciprocal exploration and collaboration between the participants and the interviewer into how a person makes sense of a given experience (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The researcher chose to use face-to-face interviews and open-ended questions because of the flexibility they afford the researcher and the participants to explore the lived experiences as they were shared. During the face-to-face interviews, the researcher was able to gauge how comfortable the participant was and adjust the tone of voice, use different verbiage, or change the direction of the interview to create an environment of safety. The researcher found face-to-face interviews to be effective in building rapport with the participants, allowing the interview process to feel natural and unforced.

Research Context

The research study was conducted in several small upstate New York communities. All interviews were conducted within a 50-mile radius of one another.
Interviews took place in the study participants’ homes, professional offices, and public restaurants.

**Research Participants**

The population that was the focus of this study was women in senior-level executive positions. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit research participants. This study used a purposive sample technique to select the participants in an unbiased manner. Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of individuals who are information-rich related to the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002).

Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. John Fisher College, recruitment began immediately. Recruitment efforts were conducted in two phases, both via email. The first email invite was sent to 12 senior-level executive women across the central part of New York State, inviting them to participate in this study. The first emails were sent by an executive director of a local non-profit to minimize bias. The researcher acknowledges the experience of discrimination, namely gender microaggressions, in the workplace. The goal of sending a blind invite was to ensure that those participants who responded were not coached to do so by the researcher. The second round of emails was sent to an undisclosed number of women who had graduated from the St. John Fisher Doctoral Program in Executive Leadership. The recruitment letter, which included qualifiers for participation in the study, was attached to the email (Appendix A). Women who were interested in participating were asked to respond directly to the researcher via email.
Selection of participants. A distinctive feature of IPA is its commitment to a detailed interpretative account, which can only really be done in micro-sampling, focusing on quality over quantity (Smith & Osborn, 2008). To accomplish this, the researcher used a sample size of five participants. The small sample size allowed the researcher to commit to knowing every detail of every experience fully. The study focused on recruiting women who were currently in senior-level executive positions, who had been in their positions longer than a year and had never been a CEO of an organization, as these were the criteria for qualification to participate. Three participants were selected from the first phase of recruitment, three were selected from the second round, and an additional participant was identified through snowballing and interviewed as well. Seven interviews were recorded; however, data from five interviews were coded and analyzed for this study. Two participants from the first phase of email invites were excluded from this study. The interviews proceeded just like the others; however, during the interview with one of the participants, she divulged that she was currently on suspension from her position. The other participant was not included due to a potential conflict of interest between the researcher and the participant’s interview data. The researcher consulted with the dissertation committee and the decision to not use the data was made based on the eligibility requirements and study credibility.

Participants’ rights. Participants who agreed to participate were emailed a participation letter (Appendix B) and a consent form explaining the purpose of the study (Appendix C), which included permission to audio-record the interviews for analysis. Upon receipt of the signed consent forms, the researcher phoned all participants to schedule interviews and discuss the consent form. An outline of the interview process
was discussed, as was the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity for identities and interview transcripts and recordings. Participants were identified in the study by number. The corresponding participant number was used to complete all interviews. If inadvertently, the participant was identified by name during the interview, the researcher reminded the participant that the name would be redacted during transcription to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

The study did not have the possibility of risk beyond what is experienced in everyday life. Granted, the study topic had the possibility of bringing up difficult and painful memories, causing emotional distress. However, the participants were aware of the topic of inquiry and were reassured that they could withdraw from the process at any point. Before the start of each interview, participants were reminded that the process was voluntary and that they may choose to withdraw consent at any time as well as not answer any uncomfortable questions.

**Instruments Used in Data Collection**

IPA design permitted participants to share their experiences from the perspective of their understanding. The building of rapport started during the initial phone calls to confirm participation in the study. The researcher briefly described the intention of the study, freely listened to all responses, and ending the phone call by thanking them for sharing and agreeing to participate. Semi-structured interview questions were used to extract the lived experiences. The researcher used two audio recording devices, a Samsung phone recorder and a Samsung tablet, to ensure that the interview was recorded in its entirety. Interviews were performed at a mutually agreed-upon space (e.g., participants’ homes, work offices, and restaurants). Field notes were taken with
permission from each participant to capture nonverbal ques and to write down follow-up questions while the participant was speaking. To best address the research questions posed in this study, the researcher used the IRB approved interview protocol (Appendix D).

**Face-to-face interviews.** At the start of each interview, the researcher confirmed the participant had signed the consent form, followed by another brief description of the study. Each woman was reminded that participation was voluntary, and they could end the interview or not answer questions that made them uncomfortable. When conducting the interview, the researcher gave time for each participant to answer without feeling pressure to answer quickly. The length of the face-to-face semi-structured interviews was scheduled for 60 minutes. The interviews lasted between 45-76 minutes.

The researcher started to gather the lived experiences by initially asking for demographic information. As the interview continued, the questions became more specific to reveal experiences in their professional lives. The researcher used the following approved interview questions as a guide to explore each participants’ lived experiences: (a) Please tell me a little about yourself, education, and background; (b) What is your current professional position; (c) Describe your career path; (d) Why were you interested in pursuing executive level status; (e) Were there hurdles you were not able to clear if so, describe the hurdles; (f) What barriers are you presently facing as a senior level executive; (g) What barriers are you currently facing in the position that of senior-level executive that women in positions of less status are facing; (h) What strengths do you have that helped you prevail; (i) Describe the strategies you utilized to overcome any and all barriers you experienced; (j) What aspects of your position do you
enjoy and why; (k) Describe your professional successes in your current position; and (l) What advice would you give to other women who are aspiring to senior level executive positions?

The interview questions were sequenced to build trust and rapport with the researcher as well as help the researcher build confidence as an interviewer. Each interview included questions that were both general and research specific, based on the funnelling technique where a generalized question is asked to gain the participant’s broad perspective, followed by a more research specific question. The researcher asked questions in this sequence to minimize the potential for researcher bias, as recommended by Smith & Osborn (2007). At the end of each interview, the researcher thanked the participants for their time and for agreeing to be a part of the study. The researcher confirmed with each participant whether she would be comfortable being contacted again if further questions developed.

**Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis**

By using IPA, the lived experiences of the participants were captured and empirically documented. The researcher engaged IPA’s methodological step-by-step approach to analyzing the data. The researcher read and reread the transcripts of each interview to become as familiar as possible with each participant's account. The notes that were taken during each interview were read and reread as well. The researcher noted exact phrases or words and categorized them into codes. The researcher created several lists of codes for each interview as new understandings in the interpretive process developed. The researcher then grouped the codes into themes by looking for commonalities. Themes emerged as clusters of codes were grouped and categorized
together. The researcher mostly coded by hand, using the computer software NVivo 11 only once during the initial reading. The researcher found the software to be cumbersome and therefore elected to code the interviews and develop the themes by hand. Categorizing the themes took place during the interpretive process. Some themes ended up clustering together, and some emerged as dominant (Smith & Osborn, 2007), thereby identifying the key and subthemes in each category.

**Transcription and reading of the data.** To ensure verbatim accounts of each interview a professional transcription service, REV.com was employed to transcribe the interviews. Once the interviews were transcribed and returned, the researcher sent each transcription to the corresponding participant to verify and remove all identifiable information. When the transcripts were approved by the participants, the audio recordings on both devices were deleted. Each study interview was identified by the number given to the corresponding interviewee. The analysis took place in stages with the researcher. First, the researcher read the transcriptions several times, developed codes from the participants’ actual words or phrases, grouped the codes based on commonalities, and categorized codes to develop themes. The beginning coding process was a mixture of a priori and initial coding. The researcher used in vivo coding when the participants’ own words were used to create codes from the data, following the methodological protocol recommended by Saldaña (2013) and Charmaz (2014). The themes were organized to explain the phenomenon.

**Developing emerging themes.** After each reading of the transcript, the researcher wrote notes in the margins. The researcher looked for commonalities, differences, and contradictions. The notes consisted of prominent descriptive words, descriptive phrases,
and the researcher’s initial interpretation of the data. The researcher summarized and paraphrased the participants’ responses and divided them into three units. Each unit corresponded to the research questions. The researcher cycled through the process of reading, note-taking, summarizing, paraphrasing, and comparing for similarities and differences until the list of codes was transformed into concise phrases that became themes.

**Connecting themes.** The last stage involved in theme development is connecting the emerging themes by similarities, differences, or contradictions. The researcher connected the themes using the three units as a guide to help cluster the phrases. During this phase, some themes were dropped as they did not correlate with the dominant structure of themes that had emerged. The final list of themes was then categorized into key themes or subthemes. Each key theme and subtheme will be explained in further detail in Chapter 4. The researcher addressed four main perspectives of trustworthiness in this study: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and thick, rich description.

**Credibility.** When conducting a qualitative inquiry, the data collected and conclusions inferred must convey credibility and trustworthiness. To establish credibility, the researcher used member checking. During member checking, each participant received a transcript of their interview to check for accuracy. If any data were inaccurate, it was corrected based on the respective participant’s feedback.

**Dependability.** Dependability is the capacity to show that a study can be replicated with a logical process (Creswell, 2007). To demonstrate the replicability of this study, the researcher consulted with a qualified qualitative researcher and engaged in peer debriefing. The qualified qualitative researcher completed her doctoral studies with a
qualitative study. Additionally, the researcher is a professor and has extensive experience as a qualitative researcher in her department. The researcher debriefed with two doctoral candidates who are currently completing their qualitative studies as well. Their input helped to better shape the themes and confirmed that the researcher was analyzing the data correctly.

**Confirmability.** The interpretation of the data should be grounded in the data rather than based on the researcher’s preferences (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Member checking, peer debriefing, and using a qualified qualitative researcher ensured that the findings were grounded in the data, not the preferences of the researcher. Member checking was conducted when the transcriptions were approved by each participant. The researcher engaged in peer debriefing by processing the codes and themes with three other cohort members. The researcher wanted to ensure the analysis and findings were consistent with the recorded data and not based on researcher bias. The researcher asked a graduate of the St. John Fisher Executive Leadership Doctoral Program to process and evaluate the findings to ensure the conclusions were data driven from the study.

**Rich, thick description.** Rich, thick descriptions help make the replication of a study more accurate. The researcher describes the participants, the settings, the experiences of each interviewee in detail, the data and analysis processes, and the categorizing of themes in this study to allow other researchers to determine to what extent this study’s results may be transferable to other research studies.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter describes the qualitative methodology employed to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of women who are in senior-level executive
positions. The research design, IPA methodology, data collection methods, and the corresponding qualitative data analysis method used in this study were all described in detail.

Chapter 4 will report the results of the data collection and include a detailed analysis of the data derived from the IPA research methodology and subsequent coding analysis of the face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Chapter 5 synthesizes the findings with previous research, discusses study limitations, and offers recommendations for future research.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This phenomenological, qualitative study examined gender microaggressions experienced by women who have ascended to senior-level executive positions within their organizations, the sources and nature of the experiences with gender microaggressions, and what strategies these participants employed to mitigate any lasting impact. This study used the gender microaggressions taxonomy proposed by Sue (2010) as the framework to categorize these lived experiences. Gender-based microaggressions are nuanced and brief everyday exchanges that communicate sexist disparagement towards women (Sue, 2010a). Gender-based microaggressions are conveyed verbally and/or nonverbally through facial expression, gazes, and other gestures. Gender microaggressions are subtle and can cause psychological harm or discomfort (Capodilupo et al., 2010).

Capodilupo et al. (2010) and Sue (2010a, 2010b) categorized gender microaggressions into three groups: (a) gender microassaults: identified blatant sexist slurs, or catcalling; (b) gender microinsults: subtle negative communication about women; and (c) gender microinvalidations: subtle communication that dismisses or devalue women’s thoughts or feelings. Nadal (2010) asserts that gender microaggressions are often used to devalue the contributions of women and dismiss their accomplishments and relevance through undermining their effectiveness within personal and professional contexts.
The taxonomy of gender microaggressions provided a framework to present the narratives from study participants who had ascended to senior-level executive positions. Once the experiences were categorized, the taxonomy facilitated the understanding of how participants perceived and processed the experiences of gender microaggressions and the development of insights into how the experiences aided or hindered the maintenance of their senior-level executive positions. Each participant had a minimum of one year in their current senior position. The ensuing interviews were coded and analyzed to understand the influence gender microaggressions had on their professional careers.

Given the specificity of the criterion to participate, purposeful homogeneous sampling and snowballing were used to identify women who occupied the positions within their respective organizations. Recruitment was initially done through email and then through recommendations made by the participants. Emails were sent by the executive director of a local non-profit who had professional affiliations throughout the state, as the researcher did not. Additionally, the researcher acknowledged experiencing gender microaggressions in the workplace as a senior-level executive and did not want to taint the sample pool by extending invites to familiar colleagues. The second round of emails searching for participants was sent by the faculty at St. John Fisher College.

Initial recruitment emails were sent to 12 senior-level executive women across central New York State as an invitation to participate in this study (Appendix B). Of the 12 invitees, seven senior-level executive women never responded to emails, four agreed to participate, and one indicated that they would review and consider. Of these five potential participants, four agreed. The second round of emails was sent to an undisclosed number of women who had graduated from the St. John Fisher Doctoral program in
Executive Leadership. Nine women responded, indicating interest in participating; however, of these nine, only three were completed from the St. John Fisher College candidate pool. In total, seven interviews were completed for this study. Two of the seven interviews were deemed ineligible for use, one because of a conflict of interest between the researcher and the participant’s professional experience and the other because information was revealed during the interview that rendered the participant ineligible to participate according to the eligibility requirements. Data from five interviews were coded and analyzed for this study. Validation of data was conducted by using member checking. According to Creswell (2013), member checking allows for research participants to corroborate the transcription of their interviews and clarify any inaccuracies. To ensure accuracy and authenticity, copies of their transcriptions were emailed to study participants to complete member checking. All participants responded with minimal to no changes. Each participant acknowledged that the transcripts accurately captured their responses. The researcher then read the transcripts line by line, looking for patterns and themes.

**Research Questions**

The findings of this study were presented by addressing the following research questions.

1. To what degree and in what ways do women in senior-level executive positions experience gender microaggressions?

2. What are the sources of gender microaggressions for women in senior-level executive positions?

3. What strategies are identified by women in senior leadership positions to mitigate the impact of gender microaggressions?
Quotes from the interviews were selected and used to represent the voices of the participants’ answers to the research questions and to provide evidence of the themes.

**Research Participants**

All participants were women, who ranged in age from their early 40s through their mid-60s. All were born and raised in New York State. All the participants are currently in senior-level executive positions. Some professional titles held by the participants might suggest these positions are lower-level positions, but all titles fit within their specific organization’s hierarchical structure as classified as senior-level roles. Of the five women who participated, four were in the not-for-profit sector and one was in the for-profit sector. Three of the five women were in the health care industry, one was in the finance industry, and one worked in city government. Two of the five participants held doctorate degrees, one held a master’s degree, one held a bachelor’s, and the last had a high school diploma. Four were married and one was divorced. Each participant followed a traditional pathway to reach their current level of executive position. Table 4.1 provides detailed demographics of each participant.

Table 4.1

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Business Sector</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Years in Senior Level Executive Position</th>
<th>Terminal Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>60-65</td>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant Profile

**Participant 1.** At the time of her interview, Participant 1 was a 42-year-old White woman who was married with two elementary-aged school children and held a bachelor’s degree. She began her career in city government, eventually working her way up to a senior-level executive position. Participant 1 worked in many different communities across upstate New York as she rose to her current position. Participant 1 has been in her current position for over 10 years.

**Participant 2.** At the time of her interview, Participant 2 was a 63-year-old White woman who has been married over 30 years with two adult children, held a doctoral degree, and worked in the healthcare industry as a dean of a prestigious learning institute. She rose to the position of dean by following what would be now considered a traditional pathway: nursing school, transferred from a registered nurse diploma program to an undergraduate program, completed a master’s degree at a local university, taught nursing, became the assistant dean, then dean of the school. Participant 2 accomplished all her milestones in her career and education while taking care of a family and working. Participant 2 has been in her position for over 30 years.

**Participant 3.** At the time of her interview, Participant 3 was a 63-year-old White woman who was married, who earned a few college credits for completing course work, and was the branch manager of a local bank. Participant 3 started her ninth year in her
current role. Participant 3 followed a traditional pathway to bank manager by first becoming a teller, customer services representative, assistant branch manager, then rose to the position of bank manager.

**Participant 4.** At the time of her interview, Participant 4 was a 53-year-old White woman, married with two adult children, a doctoral degree, and worked at a teaching hospital overseeing a large department that included clinical and support services. Participant 4 began her career in the healthcare field in medical assisting. Participant 4 had worked in an array of healthcare settings. Over the course of three decades, Participant 4 returned to school to advance her education for the sole purpose of advancing her career. Participant 4 indicated, “you have to have a certain amount of credentials to be able to advance, particularly if you’re not a frontline healthcare hands-on clinician.” Participant 4 had been in her position for 18 years, serving in senior management to senior-level executive positions.

**Participant 5.** At the time of her interview, Participant 5 was a 54-year-old Black woman who was divorced with three adult children and another in high school. She held a master’s degree and was currently enrolled in a doctoral program. Participant 5 had spent her entire professional career in the healthcare field, working from the beginning as a floor-level registered nurse. Over the course of her professional career, Participant 5 returned to school to complete two separate higher education degrees to secure career advancement opportunities. Participant 5 has been in her current senior-level executive position over a year.

During in-depth interviews, each woman shared her experiences of gender microaggressions, the source and nature of the experiences, and her strategies to mitigate
the harmful effect. The commonalities shared among the participants are that each one sits in a senior-level executive position, each desired to seek career advancement after experiencing gender microaggressions in the workplace and each displayed intentional resilience.

**Data Analysis and Findings**

This section of Chapter 4 highlights the themes and categories that emerged through analysis of the data, focusing on the gender microaggressions framed by the taxonomy proposed by Capodilupo et al. (2010) and Sue (2010). As stated above, Sue (2010), categorizes gender microaggressions into three groups: (a) gender microassaults: identified blatant sexist slur or catcalling: (b) gender microinsults: subtle negative communication about women: and (c) gender microinvalidations: subtle communication that dismisses or devalue women’s thoughts or feelings. The themes that emerged from this study represent the participants’ responses from individual interviews.

Three broad categories were created using the research questions and Capodilupo et al.’s (2010) and Sue’s (2010) taxonomy on gender microaggressions as a guide to accurately categorize the themes. The three categories were: (a) experiences of gender microaggressions, (b) sources of gender microaggressions, and (c) strategies used to mitigate the effects of gender microaggressions.

The categories are organized by key themes, and subthemes related to each research interview question and gender microaggression taxonomy. The aim was to capture the meanings of the participants’ authentic experiences and present them in a way that connections are clearly established. Table 4.2 outlines the emergent seven key themes and seven subthemes identified during the process. The key themes identified
were: (a) gender microassaults, (b) gender microinsults, (c) gender microinvalidations, (d) organizational culture, (e) positional power, (f) strong sense of self, and (g) mentorship. The subthemes identified were: (a) racial microaggressions, (b) aggression, (c) environmental microinequities (d) visible power, (e) alignment with opportunity providers, and (f) words of wisdom.

Table 4.2

**Key Themes and Subthemes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Key Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of Gender Microaggressions</td>
<td>Gender Microassaults</td>
<td>Racial Microaggressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender Microinsults</td>
<td>Aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender Microinvalidations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of Gender Microaggressions</td>
<td>Organizational Culture</td>
<td>Environmental Microinequities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positional Power</td>
<td>Visible Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies to Mitigate Gender</td>
<td>Strong Sense of Self</td>
<td>Ordered Pathway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microaggressions</td>
<td>Mentorship</td>
<td>Alignment with Opportunity Providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Words of Wisdom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Category 1: experiences of gender microaggressions.** The first category—experiences of gender microaggression—emerged as a broad category that was used to categorize keywords and phrases participants shared regarding their experiences with gender microaggressions during their interviews. Gender-based microaggressions, like microaggressions, are nuanced and brief everyday exchanges that communicate sexist disparagements towards women, such as sexist slurs or catcalling (Nadal, 2010). These
are conveyed verbally and/or nonverbally through facial expression, gazes, and other gestures and can be subtle and cause psychological harm or discomfort (Capodilupo et al., 2010). Gender-based microaggressions may not always be in the form of overt sexism, but their less obvious messages still serve to maintain gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles (Sue, 2010a). The three key themes that emerged from this category were: “gender microassaults,” “gender microinsults,” and “gender microinvalidations.” The two subthemes that emerged from the category were: “racial microaggressions” and “aggression.”

**Key theme 1: gender microassaults.** Gender microassaults are:

“intended to degrade, attack, and/or harm a person through overt discrimination and may include derogatory comments or descriptions about a person or the person’s group identification, ignoring or overlooking a person because of their apparent group affiliation, or humiliating or objectifying name-calling” (Sue, 2010a, p. 8).

The intent is to “threaten, intimidate, and make the individual or group feel unwanted, unsafe because they are inferior” (Sue, 2010a, p. 8). Gender microassaults are the most blatant form of gender microaggressions posed by the taxonomy. Gender microassaults are ones that most closely resemble sexual and historical descriptions of discrimination.

The subthemes of racial microaggressions and aggression emerged when half the participants detailed very specific examples of each. Racial microaggressions are defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273).
Participant 5 started her interview with a brief timeline of her ascension from entry-level to senior-level administrator:

My first position in management came when I was promoted to a newly created clinic. . . I received immediate push back . . . [from] all levels . . . No one looked like me . . . A subordinate physically got in my face and yelled because I was asking him to do his job. . . No one intervened. So, I dismissed him from the unit as disciplinary action, it was blatant. But that was not supported. My supervisors were saying, “Oh, it is not like that,” “It is alright.” “It was a man and it was violent… I know he would not have done that with anybody else and I do not know why he was so comfortable doing that to me . . . So that was one level, the doctors were another. No one would say anything directly to me, but I would hear from my supervisor, that [the doctors] were saying that they could not find me, or I did not answer my phone . . . All of these soft accusations and none of them were true. And none of them would address me to my face.

Participants 5’s first shared experience in the interview encompassed not only the key theme of gender microassault but racial microaggressions and aggression.

As a follow-up question, Participant 5 was asked, “Did you feel set up?”

Participant looked at the researcher and in a stern voice said:

It for sure was a setup. . . I did not fit the model or look they wanted in that role; it was a high-profile position. . . .We had good clinical outcomes, we were running efficiently, and we were profitable. I just do not think they liked the sight of me being their representative.
Like Participant 5, Participant 1 described her experience of a gender microassault and aggression by being put in harm’s way when she was a young staff working in city government:

There was this critical thing I forgot to mention, probably because I try to forget it. This woman I worked for had decided to run for her elected position again. She was going rogue by having an outsider run her campaign, not someone who was running the other ones in the county. . . Unfortunately, this man did not have the best track record with women, and she knew it. So, she, with eyes wide open, put me in that predator’s pathway, with no remorse. Thankfully, I had support from other people, but it should not have happened at all. She knew it [was wrong], she knew it, because someone said to her that I was uncomfortable… She said, “Wow, she can take care of herself. Nobody ever took care of me.”

Participant 1 was asked to describe if her experiences differed with the male lawmakers:

So, I will give you a personal example first, then an example from a female colleague. So, for myself, when I had the tattoo placed here and it goes up my arm. I had some very inappropriate comments made to me and people just touching it without my permission. . . It was a man; he literally came up to me and touched my tattoo and asked if it were real, oh my goodness, why would you do that? A female colleague of mine told me she had several inappropriate comments made to her about her dress attire. . . She also said she received a counseling memo placed into her file that stated [that] she was sending the wrong message, her shirts were too revealing and suggestive and this same person had something
very uncomfortable happen to her that she reported… She basically got off the elevator and a male lawmaker was standing there with his shirt unbuttoned, no t-shirt on, and his bare chest exposed. So, she walks into the appropriate office to report it. I said, so and so is out there, I do not know if you have noticed, but I can only imagine the conversation somebody would have with me if I came to work like that. . . The response back to her was, “Oh, you would get promoted.” The male attorney [said that].

Participant 1 referred to these experiences as “exhausting” and “time consuming,” sharing that “if you focus on those experiences, you would never be happy or get the job done.” Participant 1 also disclosed another example of a blatant gender microassault when she shared that the administrator of the organization walked into a school function and put his arm around the principal and asked if she was going to the evening recital. The principal responded with an “I am unsure,” and the administrator proceeded to say to her, “Maybe we’ll hook up and I will show you what a real man is.”

Participant 2 works in the healthcare field. In the interview, she was asked directly if she experienced any “incivilities?” In Webster’s Dictionary, the word is defined as the “lack of courtesy, rudeness of manner, impoliteness.” During the interview, the word “incivility” was used to prompt the participants to discuss such interactions without using the specific term “gender microaggressions.” The goal was not to influence their interview responses with exact “study” language but to guide them to make the connections themselves. Participant 2 answered with:

Well, incivility in nursing is prevalent in many organizations. Even here, you have faculty who cannot celebrate each other or are not as celebratory as they
should be. We had students putting bleach in each other’s shampoo bottles, just mean girls. You see, this is a very competitive program. That is not regular behavior, but it happens. . . I will give you another example: faculty. I do exit interviews with all seniors. We get good quantitative data. I ask them about the strengths, weaknesses, and what would they change. I will never forget this one interview, a single mom with two children, she was a sweetheart. She sat right here, and I sat right there, she said to me, “She broke my spirit.” “She broke my spirit,” then she starts to cry, then I start to cry. . . She then talked about how she almost left the program because of this faculty member.

Participant 2 explained that the “she” the student was referencing was a longtime educator at the organization. The shared experience of incivility was aggressive in nature. Each participant was able to make the connections between overt derogatory language and person to person interactions that conveyed the message of unsafe, intimidation, and inferiority.

Participant 4 shared a racial microaggression she observed aimed at the first and only African American person in a senior-level executive position at her healthcare facility colleague. After completing her education in social justice, she describes the behavior as intentional and harmful. When asked had she had ever witnessed a time when her colleagues’ authority was dismissed or challenged:

Yes, I did. I would say that the times I witnessed, when he was present, things were a little opaquer. I would say the times when he was not present, they were more overt. Which created and fed a culture that was not conducive for him to be effective.”
When asked if it were due to his skill set or competence, Participant 4 responded, “I would not say it was his skillset, he is an extremely bright physician… I would say it was more about the fact he was hired because of his race.” The researcher inquired whether Participant 4 believed her colleague was aware that his hiring was based on his race and Participant 4 replied:

If I had to really think about it and give it what my gut reaction would be, is yes… Because this man did not fall off the potato truck, he was very sharp and knowing what I know now, even if it is opaque, it is visible. It is visible and knowing the uphill battle he was facing, I could not imagine somebody as sharp as him not knowing what was going on. . . I cannot imagine that, although it hurts my heart to say it.

Each participant described her experiences with gender microassaults, racial microaggressions, and aggression connected to a supervisor, subordinates, peers, and as a behavior observed in the work environment. As participants shared their experiences and interpretations, it became clear that many had not thought about these interactions nor had they been processed sufficiently to fully reconcile the depth of harm caused. This next section will explore the researchers’ interpretation of gender microinsults from the participants' lived experiences.

**Key theme 2: gender microinsults.** This key theme was identified from the interview questions related to gender microaggressions. Gender microinsults are defined as subtle negative communication meant to demean and messages of inferiority and undesirability to women. Often routinely dismissed as socially accepted behavior, microinsults are often invisible or can be interpreted differently to both the target and
The subtlety of microinsults can have the most impact on a person’s mental and physical health. Leading researchers and taxonomy developers agree that the cumulative nature of these behaviors can manifest into mental and physical distress such as; (a) depression, (b) body image issue, (c) increased stress, (d) anxiety, and (e) lower self-esteem (Capodilupo et al., 2010; Nadal, 2010; Sue, 2010b). All five participants indicated in some way that they had experienced microinsults in the workplace. The specific term “microinsult” was not used but was interpreted by the researcher from participants’ detailed descriptions of everyday interactions between themselves, peers, and supervisors. This concept of interpreted “microinsults” seeped into work experiences in varying degrees and emerged from the participants’ massive experiences of negative remarks being made to feel inadequate and messages of inferiority. When Participant 1 was asked to elaborate on her relationship with the female boss she described as abusive, she stated:

Her conduct was everything you do not want to be true about women in leadership. She would leave her dirty tissues and plates and things around the office and expect that when she came back, it would have been cleaned up. She would routinely miss events and it would be taken out on the office staff. I would apologize but it was a difficult situation to be in, especially as a young staff member where this person was not personally accountable.

Participant 1 was asked as a follow-up question, “Were there other times you were made to feel less than a hired professional in that office?” Participant 1 shared:

Anytime that there is a social event or meeting, how many times have the women department heads of this organization asked, “Could you order the food?” Or “be
on the bake sale committee? “Where is this?” “Where is that?” “Get the luncheon together, sweetie, okay?” over and over. “Put your little touches on that, could you?”

Like Participant 1, Participant 4 shared that in order to be respected as a woman in her organization, she often felt it was required for her to be muted in high-level meetings due in part to the behavior of her male colleagues. Frequent comments and body language from her male peers showed how little they valued her intelligence. “That is one of the many reasons I was silent more than I should have been.”

Participant 5 was asked to describe her insulting experiences after she was recruited to the dialysis field of healthcare. Participant 5 stated, “Basically, I am like an assistant nurse manager and that was a culture shock, I do not think I was groomed enough for the other nurses and doctors and I experienced a lot of push back almost from day one.” Participant 5 was asked as a follow-up question, “Describe what you mean by you do not feel you were groomed enough.” Participant 5 shared, “I think back and like, I had long nails, like, decorum type things. I do not think the doctors could relate to me in a leadership capacity. No one looked like me.”

The participants were very reflective in their comments. Many shared that they had not intended to give so much detail in their responses, but the questions really made them process some of the experiences that had chosen to bury for the sake of not rocking the boat and to keep their jobs. In addition to microinsults, gender microinvalidations were commonplace.

**Key theme 3: gender microinvalidations.** Stemming from the interview protocol designed for this study, gender microinvalidations are defined as subtle communication
that dismisses or devalues women’s thoughts or feelings (Sue, 2010a). Microinvalidations are what Sue (2010) calls “the most insidious form of microaggression” (p. 10) and is the most subtle form of microaggression described. Microinvalidations occur when a person’s experiences of discrimination are dismissed or minimized. These forms of microaggressions are not merely covert but completely hidden. The distinction between gender microinsults and gender microinvalidations was often difficult to distinguish, but there were instances in which the participants used the word “invalidate” explicitly to describe their experiences. The participants’ experiences with invalidation mostly centered on when they sought acknowledgment for their contributions or were looked over for promotion as well as when their significant relationships were dismissed.

Additionally, participants reported being chastised despite operating within the parameters of their job description. One interesting dynamic that became evident was participants invalidating themselves by justifying the hurdles they themselves faced, or decisions made about their future in their own careers or positions. Participants shared the hurt from being dismissed and overlooked. Participant 3 was asked to describe her experiences as she moved from working in sales to now working in the finance industry.

Participant 3 indicated that she had only worked three jobs her entire adult life:

I graduated, went to college for one year, decided not to continue to pursue college and I entered the workforce. I worked at a department store, my store closed, and I went into finance. . . I worked my way up from teller to branch manager, 9 years now.

The phenomena of invalidating oneself became evident as an underlying tone when Participant 3 was asked to describe any hurdles that she had placed in front of her
as she moved from sales management to finance management. Participant 3 contemplated and then answered, “Yes, I have been denied leadership roles, but if I looked back on it now, I totally agree, “management was right.” When asked to further explain why management was right, the decision was validated with this explanation:

There is a branch manager and an assistant branch manager and what they tried to do in those days was not have two identical personalities. I could see and I remember the manager, who was the branch manager, we are both the same personality. We would have drove the staff nuts... So other than that, I had no hurdles.

The researcher shared that data written on the experiences of women in leadership would suggest that the participant’s personal experience of a clean ascension into her senior-level management position is quite rare. Participant 3 responded with an affirmative, “That is unfortunate.” Another participant shared that her barriers may have been self-imposed due to her own *imposter syndrome* and feelings of not deserving the career success she worked for. Although self-invalidating was not pervasive in this study, the researcher perceived that there were undertones of self-invalidation with some of the participants. However, this specific behavior was not to any of the participant’s detriment.

Participant 2 was asked about the hierarchy within her organization after she shared her insights on the gender dynamic in nursing, “Because it is predominantly a woman type occupation and profession, there are male students, certainly male leadership in the hierarchy.” When queried about gender hierarchy in the organization, she answered with an affirmative, “Yes, 97% of the faculty and student body is majority women, but in
the upper hierarchies of leadership, they are male.” As a follow-up question, she was asked why she thought that was. She stated:

Well, I mean, I think the research, it is proven that men and I see it in the conversations I have with them that they are not content in nursing roles, men want to be administration. Men want a higher level of responsibility. Why do I think? Well, it’s research proven, why it is. Men are typically chosen in those positions. As an example, we had probably 8 years ago, we had a male nurse with his MBA join. He was driven and inserted himself in many places. He did not have a nursing degree. He received his registered nurse’s licensure, but did not have an academic degree. [Typically, members of the executive team Minimally have a Master’s in nursing or are an MD.] It is interesting, he was promoted anyway. There were a lot of other people that probably could have served in that role that are female, that were not chosen or maybe noticed by others.

Participant 2 was asked to elaborate on what she remembered about this man getting that role on the executive team.

Some of my peers, of course, the water cooler talk: “What, how did that happen”? “He is not really qualified to be in that role.” “He was supported by the C-Suite,” which is mostly males. [Do you believe there is an affinity for male leadership? - R] Yes. I will give you another example of what happened. I was asked to be a part of a three-team interview with two of my peers to interview for the position of director. There were two candidates: one female and one male. The male candidate came from another system and he was in his role as unit manager for
about 2 years. The female candidate had been with the organization for several years; I think she was a manager as well. We interviewed them, and our task was to let our chief nurse officer (CNO), who is a woman, know our choice, which we did. Our choice was the female candidate, she was more qualified, a hard worker, and she had all the characteristics of a leader. With him, we really did not see much. He is from another institution, he has only been here for 2 years, and she chose him anyway, even though our recommendation was for the female candidate. I think it is because he is a male. . . It really made me sad. I think when I spoke to my two peers about it, we were all like, what happened? Why did we spend all that time interviewing, preparing ourselves, looking at their backgrounds, asking good questions, researching what to ask? We felt like our decision did not matter, the CNO would have picked him anyway… Yeah, it was a formality, it didn’t matter because the “she” did what “she” wanted to do in the end.

Participant 1 was asked if her self-described strong personality was a hindrance for her from the male perspective in her organization:

So, I find that my role in this organization has been to speak truth to those situations and call out the inappropriate behavior. . . There has been an open administrator position for months and quite a few people have asked why I have not applied. It is not that I believe I do not have the qualifications, but I think I would be undermined by the sitting lawmakers. I have the skillset, without question, but I do not believe I could do it here because there were three female departments who spoke up at a committee meeting, me included. We were asking
management about our raises and we were promised an update, we had not received an update, so we were asking. After the meeting, we were all pulled into a private office by one of the male lawmakers and admonished for speaking in a public meeting, for embarrassing him and the rest of management. We were accused of being hacks. He was very threatening because he was asked by the local newspaper for a comment. We all three remember that day and working here and feeling absolutely intimidated to speak out.

Participant 1 shared another example after reflecting on something she mentioned earlier in the interview:

You try to put those experiences aside because “they” are so pervasive and can affect how you get through every single day. I am able to recall this very specific example: I am the chair of a committee here and I think this is my second or third year. The former chair was a longtime farmer who decided to retire from the board, and we have a new [male] member to the board whose personality is challenging and difficult… He is very aggressive, very inappropriate with his tone and language and he has made everyone uncomfortable. I was walking by the room and he was already sitting in there, I forgot how the conversation started, but he said something like, “Well, I asked that girl down in planning to get me the meeting items.” I am very aware of tone, the way this individual said “girl” was intended to portray her as incompetent when actually it was his own [incompetence]. He was not able to open the attachments and it was his own inability to navigate technology that was the problem. It was not the “girl” down in planning that was the issue.
Each participant’s experiences with gender microinvalidation varied in the scope of intensity from being blatantly obvious to unintentional and harmful to experiences. Participants stated that these incidences were intentionally forgotten until this interview. Additionally, many of them had not thought about these experiences as gender microinvalidations. Each understood that their described experiences would, for all intents and purposes, be considered inappropriate and professionally unacceptable. For instance, Participant 3 shared that early on in her tenure as branch manager, there were two long-time male customers who were refusing to do finance business with her. Both would come in and ask to speak with the male assistant branch manager. When she was asked how it made her feel, she described the interaction as “ridiculous” and “they were just being old men.” When asked how it resolved itself, she said, “The assistant left, so they had to work with me.” Glimpses of self-invalidations became evident when participants dismissed the experienced career hurdles and placed the blame on perceived shortcomings of their own.

Category 2: sources and nature of gender microaggressions. The second category, sources and nature of experiences of gender microaggression, emerged as a broad category that was used to categorize keywords and phrases participants shared regarding their experiences. The two key themes that emerged from the category were: “organizational culture” and “positional power.” The two subthemes that emerged were: “environmental microinequities” and “visible power.”

Key theme 4: organizational culture. This key theme was identified from the interview questions related to the sources and nature of gender microaggressions. The sources of gender microaggression were classic perpetrators in the workplace. Each
participant shared in detail how their supervisor, peers, or subordinate displayed the egregious behavior and the organization’s leadership downplayed, dismissed, or completely ignored it. Deep analysis by the researcher exposed a failure to adequately address reports of mistreatment, enabling a culture of hostility toward women.

Organizational culture is a fundamental concept in business and management. Many studies suggest that the strength of the culture has a significant impact on both the individual and the organization (Rahmisyari, 2016). Organizational culture creates the morality of an institution not only by the manners and behaviors of every individual in the organization but also by the collective attitudes and behavior of the organization in general (Aksoy, Apak, Eren, & Korkmaz, 2014).

This study used the concept of organizational culture and framed it under the Sue’s (2010) definition of environmental microaggressions in the world of business: “In the world of business, the term ‘microinequities’ is used to describe the pattern of being overlooked, under-respected, and devalued because of one’s race or gender” (p. 25).

The subtheme of “environmental microinequities” developed from participants’ responses when asked to describe the hierarchal structure within each of their respective agencies. Participant 5 was asked about the hierarchal structure and to describe the culture in her organization:

My organization did have a first and only African American president at one time, she was very visible in the community and she was loved… That position is now filled with a man, which is representative of what it has always been.” So, the culture, long story short, I returned to a job I was really familiar with in a senior leadership position. Immediately, I was met with kinds of resistance, I
even had a lower-level staff accuse me of putting my hands on them and this was a person I directly supervised—bananas, you can’t make this up—my supervisor at the time was relatively inexperienced as was her boss and they both were like, “Just tell her you’re sorry and you won’t do it again.” I was like no, why would I apologize for something I did not do, I mean, that would end my career. I told them to tell her to make a formal complaint, put your money where your mouth is. They were mortified because they just wanted it to go away.

The culture gave permission for this. So, no complaint was made, naturally, and nothing was ever really done to that staff for lying, but now you can’t peel her off of me, she is loyal. . . Knowing what I know now, these are signs of the undertone of the culture, the unspoken standards. . . And I am aware that there are different expectations of me.

Participants 2 and 4 both shared the same sentiment. Both of their organizations’ senior leadership is male and White. Without equal representation of the opposite gender, the culture in each of their respective organizations supported microinequities.

Participant 4 revealed some insight into her organizations’ culture after sharing the experiences of the first and only African American appointed to run her organization. When asked if she thought this person’s appointment uplifted the culture or not, she replied:

I would say both, but the culture is segmented and fractured, not broken, but siloed. . . The culture also where you are and who you are with and not necessarily in a positive way. As leaders in the organization, we know that there is work to be done, we know we have to improve and yet we allowed
activities, conversations, and actions to occur that do not support what we know is the right thing to do. I would not say we encouraged it, but we are in an environment where we must constantly check ourselves and others.

Participant 3 shared that her organization regionally had more women in positions of leadership; however, senior leadership was all male. When asked if what the racial make-up was of the women leaders, Participants 3 expressed that it was diverse, and in fact, her regional leader was a Black woman.

The sources of the environmental microinequities were perpetrated by the organizational culture, supervisors, peers, and subordinates, without consequences that negatively impacted career success. The shared experiences of the study participants placed a spotlight on organizational culture and its inability to create and sustain a safe and equitable work environment. The consensus from the women is that the culture sustained and ignored behavior and attitudes that created a physically and mentally unsafe work environment. The culture was overwhelmingly responsible for the dysfunctional working environment of these women. The hierarchical structure in each organization was significantly more male and Whiter than not. The operational systems in place did not give protection, nor did it allow for diversity to flourish. The shared lived experiences exposed the failure of the organizations to adequately address reports of mistreatment, enabling a culture of hostility toward women.

**Key theme 5: positional power.** This key theme was identified from the interview questions related to the organizational leadership structure and follow-up questions on power and control. As the researcher’s analysis deepened, the theme of positional power emerged. The key themes were more encompassing of the experiences the participants
shared during the interviews with people who were in positions of power. Positional power is the legitimate authority a person wields by virtue of the position they occupy in an organization’s structure and hierarchy (Hardy & Clegg, 1996). The power embedded in formal organizational structures and processes is aimed toward domination, which confers management the ability to control others’ behavior and to change organizational structure and processes. This use of power is observable and direct (Hardy & Clegg, 1996). The key theme of positional power was more encompassing of the experiences the participants shared about people who were in positions of power within their organizations. The subthemes of visible power emerged as the sources of gender microaggressions were emboldened by the culture to inappropriately behave in the workplace. The perpetrates of gender microaggressions lacked remorse or the capability to take ownership of their behavior based on the data from the study. The “visible power” reinforced the environmental microinequities and gave the participants shared incidents that tested their resolve and grit.

Positional power is attached to leadership titles. Titles alone command respect, in cases where leadership is all male and White, many of the study participants described interactions where the “senior” person was putting them in their place, without consequence for their behavior. There also were occasions when men who were not in positions of power or authority engaged in behavior that would suggest that there was a belief that he had positional power over the participant and acted as such. Participant 5’s experiences of a subordinate in her charge treating her as if she reported to them appeared to be common behavior at many of the organizations she worked for. However, her employment at a downstate hospital was starkly different. The hierarchy was diverse and
she reported being respected in all her interactions regardless of the position she held.
Like Participant 5, Participant 4 divulged experiences where the person in charge treated
them unprofessionally. Participant 4 shared:

I was in a high-level meeting and I was being yelled at by a male doctor who
didn’t know what he was talking about. We were meeting to discuss response
times to phone calls on the different floors in the hospital, basically quality
assurance. This doctor was out of control, I think it was because he was trying to
shift the focus of the conversation, but it was not his role or his area of expertise.
His behavior did not end until my supervisor interjected. I remember being so
angry because this behavior went on for a while. I do not know if I was angrier at
myself for not sticking up for myself, my supervisor whom had to rescue me like
an “uncle” or the rest of the people at the table because they created this culture
and it was commonplace.

The subtheme of “visible power” was also inherent in the predominantly male and
White leadership structure within each organization. The power is implied through the
hierarchical structure of the organization. One does not need to guess who is in charge.
Participant 1 was asked if there were times that she observed powered being abused and
what if anything did she do, to which she replied:

Very interesting, I worked in the finance office of one of the big five school
districts. I called it the triumvirate of evil women that ran the finance office, three
abusive women in power. Yes, [they made up the leadership] and it was the exact
example of everything I never wanted to be as a woman in leadership and it was
glaringly obvious in this work environment. The things that were happening were
very upsetting to me, the empath in me would take those things on. I told my husband that I cannot work in the toxicity, I couldn’t reconcile it, I couldn’t shed it or release it. I had not learned how to do that yet. So, what would happen is these women would arbitrarily make up rules, like one day they decided that the office space was closed so no more just walking through and you can’t listen to music. . . I just saw these as opportunities to have power without substance. There was no reason for it, other than to let people know that I have power over you, and if I say this you must listen. This was not management, more like, I am going to wear you down so you will leave. I know I cannot fire you because of the civil service test. I was supportive to the people I was working with and I would be compassionate about the way they were being treated. . . So, I met with the CFO at one point and said I could not work in an environment like this. This is toxic at a level that is not sustainable for me professionally or personally… I gave my notice and she asked me to reconsider. . . I told her that I have seen too much to believe that there was going to be enough change for me to stay.

Each participant shared detailed experiences of interactions with supervisors, peers, and subordinates. Each incident described how positional power could easily be abused even when one is not aware of it. The cultures in the organizations were conducive to constructing operating systems that supported microinequities. The level of harm from those interactions ranged from dismissing the behavior or normalizing the behavior to full distrust of the culture and the inability of the organizations to recognize it and form a working strategic plan to address. The other similarity between participants
was the level of insight and understanding that these experiences were not fabricated but were happening.

**Category 3: strategies to mitigate the effects of gender microaggressions.** The third category, strategies to mitigate the effects of gender microaggressions, emerged as a broad category that was used to categorize keywords and phrases participants shared regarding their experiences. This category was identified from the interview questions related to strategies employed to decrease any harm incurred physiologically or physically and how they survived the interactions. The two key themes that emerged from the category were: “strong sense of self” and “mentorship.” The three subthemes that emerged were: “ordered pathway,” “alignment with opportunity providers,” and “words of wisdom.”

**Key theme 6: strong sense of self.** Having a strong sense of self was central for each participant. The experiences shared during the interviews displayed a willingness to conquer fears, step outside of comfort zones, and continue to work on their personal goals. The subtheme of “ordered pathway” emerged as Participants shared their beliefs that they were in a position or role designed for them. Responding to the interview questions that related to their personal strengths, moments of personal and professional clarity Participant 1 shared:

> Okay, you have to know yourself and walk in your truth. I have survived some things. . .My first husband was a staffer on a campaign. He and I both worked on and a few years later, he became chief of staff. A certain legislator who did not know our history made comments about how I got my job….He was having some issues with his own caucus, then the party unfunded his campaign. He thought I
could do something about it but that was not something I got in-between…. He took a pen to paper and went to the media and sent letters out to all of his organizations and named me personally and basically gave everybody my phone number and said, “Well, she is worthless. She only has a job because she happens to be sleeping with the boss.” So, funny story, I was hired first. Oh yeah. So just that kind of toxicity. Thankfully, others checked him on it, but it went out. [Was this about you or something partisan? -R] It was about me. [How did you overcome this? -R] By being who I am. I think it is one of those, the actions speak louder than words and having others around. First, I knew the story of my ascension and my character. Nothing speaks louder than watching. I did not have to protest loudly. I have always done my job well and not in any partisan way and professionally.

Participant 4 describes a transformational change within herself that took place because of personal and professional growth born out of her recent lived experiences:

I have had a huge shift in who I am and what my belief structure is as a result of what I went through with this group of people and my education. And what is happening for me is that I came out and I realize that I will never be that same person, I can never go back; I do not want to go back. And so, I have to model and lead in this new belief and understanding and awareness that I have.

Interestingly, I am going to give you more than I thought I was going to give you: At the end of last summer, I participated in a workshop with the leadership team. I learned that I am an introvert, but my team sees me as somebody else who is not an open book. But what I learned is that what I think I am is not what people see
me as being. And so, I must come out of that shell to be what I want their perceptions to be. And so, I have decided that you’re going to hear my voice now, I am not going to hold back. And that is where I am making myself push with this team the diversity, inclusion, and social justice aspects.

Like Participants 1 and 4, Participant 5 described being strong and staying steadfast when you are faced with the barrier of being the first and only person of color in an organizational environment:

I worked in an environment where it was okay to be physically and verbally violent towards black women. I received no peer, supervisor, or organizational support when I reported these incidents. I had to stand up for myself, which I did. So, I always deal with it, and that is fine, but in general, it is very annoying, it is 2020 out here. [Do you think you have courage? -R] Is that what you call it? I just want to live my best life. It makes no sense that I just went and put myself into debt, I was chilling and doing good. And that is what people around me do not understand, like, it is not going to get you a better job. I am like, I know. It is not about that. It is not about that. It is about a level of self-actualization to where you are developing your best self, so you can do your best work. It is just another level of investment, right?

Participants 1, 4, and 5 each faced career hurdles that could have sidelined their ambitions. Each shared the experiences of personal growth and gained insight as they became the leaders they are today. Each participant demonstrated a “strong sense of self” by making unpopular decisions and not allowing hurdles such as self-doubt to impact their drive. Participant 2 shares the story of a nursing student who described being
emotionally and mentally beat down by one particular nursing supervisor and the hard choices she had to make:

She almost left the program because of her, that was it for me. That was the defining moment for me where I knew I’d looked the other way too many times. I learned a lesson that I can’t do that. In the past 3 or 4 years, I have taken care of some people that didn’t belong here anymore. [Feel like you were making up for the past? - R] Yeah, I needed to do the right thing instead of ignoring it or saying, “Oh, but, oh, but....” I knew that was a mistake and I was not going to make those mistakes anymore, so just this last year, we removed two people from the organization.

Making the program change required Participant 3 to change the way she assessed success in her organization.

Participant 2 had to examine quality and equality from her role as dean. She made changes to a structure that was familiar and comfortable, demonstrating the courage needed as a leader. She stood strong in her convictions of equality and equity. The lived experiences display bravery and fortitude as each woman navigated their personal and professional risk to make changes.

When asked to describe any barriers or hurdles that could have drove self-doubt to win, Participant 3 shared that she could not think of any barriers or hurdles in her career but shared how she, with an early leadership style of micromanagement, may have been a barrier to her employees:

Totally yes! I know that my micromanaging was an annoyance to my staff. This was such a long time ago. I got into the weeds too much, I did not let people get
from A to B on their own. You know what I mean? I had to step back and realize what I was doing and that made for better relations on my part. I had to learn how to empower and delegate, which I did. I was the worst delegator in the world. Oh, my God. I would not give anybody anything to do.

Having completed a life-changing educational experience, Participant 4 can now see that her barriers and hurdles were self-imposed, and she is where she belongs:

It happened once or twice where I would push, work like a dog, make improvements and it would result in a promotion. I was never told, you should apply; I was appointed. I would be on the job and look around like, “How did I get here? I do not have the skill set!” The barriers and hurdles that I encountered were my own inadequacies and were self-imposed, but it propelled me back to college. My own imposter syndrome.

Participants 2, 3, and 4 shared their unique moments of clarity in their careers. The three were able to reflect on how each may have been barriers to others and how each has grown from that. Thus, demonstrating the strength to take responsibility and effect immediate change through their specific professional actions. Each participant drew insight from their lived experiences. The nature in which the failures were addressed serves as a model for women in leadership.

Each woman shared their experiences of dismissive language, public shame, aggression, intimidation, and growth were what they shared. Each woman’s lived experiences are a testament to her resolve even when faced with enormous hurdles and barriers as well as capturing the essence that their “steps” had been ordered and each was on a path designed specifically for them. The theme does not imply that the intensity of
the event or problem was not felt but instead highlights how the women found purpose and support to remain resolute in their desire for career success as a senior-level executive woman.

Responding to the follow-up interview question, “Looking back at your ascension, you were young, you were educated, you came in and you were recognized immediately for your talents, but then you have these stereotypical encounters that have followed you throughout as well. Would you do anything differently?” Participant 1 replied:

No, I think it is my job to be vocal. One of the greatest challenges of being in this position is that the women in this organization fully participate in the stereotypes, and I am not if that means my ascension ends here, so be it. I will continue to be who I am. . . I have an eight-year-old daughter. I want her to be around positive, strong role models.

Participant 3 was asked what she believed drove her ambition? In a calm voice, she replied:

It felt natural to me. I think because I am not afraid of challenges. I am not afraid to put myself out there. I love doing a good job for people. I am also one of those people who thrive on and love attention, good attention. Everyone likes being recognized. That is why I make sure I recognize my people because I love that. I thrive on that.

Participant 2 shared that it was her parents that really paved the path for her. They had a goal and the resources to see it to fruition:
My parents, who were not educated; they were very insistent that I go on from nursing school and get a bachelor’s degree. I think that they were very wise. Because then, it was not really anything that was attractive to those of us that graduated from diploma programs. You really didn't go back to school and get a bachelor's at that time. If you were not a generic graduate for your program, you were fine, you had the same credentials. I think they were just wise beyond their years, and especially because they were not college educated. I had just spent three years with only one summer off, I wanted to buy a car and work. I even applied late, I kicked and screamed, but it was a set up for my future.

Like Participant 2, Participant 5 shared that she has always felt someone else has been in control of her path, “Well, I have never been in control of my education or my career. So out of high school, I was recruited by Cornell, I lived in Virginia. I did well in SATs and Cornell recruited me to come there to study engineering.”

Participant 5 shared that she dropped out of Cornell to get married and wound up going to nursing school only because it was being paid for:

I tried really hard not to go into nursing school like my mother, but I knew I needed to get my life together. It obviously was meant, like destiny. Earlier in my career, my belief and a determination that there was a life out there that I wanted, and I could have, that's what drove my early years. Nowadays, my faith tells me that to whom much is given, much is required. So, a portion of me feels that if God opens a door, I should go through and I should serve in whatever way there is to serve. And I know He is a progressive God, so he is not going to leave,
and I just honestly want to get the most out of my life. I want to know at the end of my life, I could not have done another thing.

Responding to the follow-up question, “Do you believe what you experienced was preparation for what you meant to do?” she stated:

I do not know. I just know I like what I am doing now. I know that I can govern, I know I can manage, I know I can teach and develop leaders. I do not know, so I guess I am doing what I was meant too. This is 2020, so when will there be more women of color going into leadership in healthcare? We need to see “us” in those positions. If we never see anyone that looks like “us” in positions of leadership, then we won't know that we can do it. There are not many of us and it does not make any sense. I just honestly want to get the most out of my life. I want it to be lived my best life. There was no other degree she could have earned, she did well with her money, and she makes good human beings who are contributing to society. I want to touch the lives of as many people as I can, I want to set some things in order. You know what I mean, I can't help it. It is in me; it is who I am.

**Key theme 7: mentorship.** The key theme was identified from the interview questions related to self-care and the development of meaningful relationships. Each participant shared the lived experiences around mentorship and the results it had on their personal and professional growth as these relationships aligned with career opportunities. The two subthemes of “alignment with opportunity providers” and “words of wisdom” emerged as participants shared their pathway to success. Participant 1 stated:

I made a phone call to one of my early mentors from the legislator because the new county executive was failing, and I could see the writing on the wall. I go to
work for him at the county level but then the new town supervisor started to lose interest in doing his job. I make a call to another contact and he directs me to reach out to a professional contact of his in the county office building because his hear a deputy staffer was retiring. The professional contact is aware of my work in the legislature and because I prepared the town budget every year and the town budget was submitted to his office so that the county could levy the taxes on behalf of the town. He was a phenomenal mentor. He had survived the county executive fiasco himself. He said, “protect yourself,” “I want you to take as many classes as you can.” He said, “Take all the assessor and county director orientation classes, go through it, get certified.” He said, “Because you just never know what's going to happen, never could have predicted I would've gone through what I went through here.” So, he sent me to all these trainings. Because of that early advice, I met my current husband and it led me here.

Participant 3 was promoted to mid-management and worked for a male branch manager. She was asked to describe those early interactions:

It was fantastic. First, I will credit him with being my best mentor of my life hands down. Best mentor in the workplace hands down. He allowed me to make decisions. He allowed me to trip and fall. Now, not seriously, not where there's repercussions, but he allowed me and wanted me to learn more. He got me on my first board in the community because he knew the executive director. He knew that I wanted to grow and learn, and he allowed that. Now, sometimes we had to talk about what happened, or this scenario, or this happened, or this happened to help me understand from a management standpoint, maybe I should have treated
that situation differently. He really coached me and mentored me to become a better manager.

Responding to the inquiry, “How did you find your way into nursing when you were so opposed to it?” Participant 5 indicated:

I did not want to do it, but I had an opportunity and I signed up for a program where a hospital basically paid my tuition for me to work for them for X number of years. I went into it thinking how hard it could be, fluff some pillows, you give some Tylenol. This is where my mind was at that time. Turned out to be like a very difficult but very rewarding experience, nursing school. So, I took a job in the ICU, and it was a great experience, and I had a manager who took a liking to me, I guess she saw things. I remember I was young and dumb, so I would try to come to work late, I would try to come to work hungover because I am 20-something-years old out here, and she really groomed me in the profession. Like no, you come to work 15 minutes before because you must be ready when it is time for you to work. “You're a professional. This is how you talk to doctors; This is how you handle yourself,” and I was afraid of her. She assumed the role of mentor, guardian, and opportunity provider. She was not going to let me fail and I really owe quite a few of my professional skills and grooming to her. So, when the leadership opportunity came up in the unit, she really encouraged me to apply, but I did not. And so, one day she came just kind of cornered me and she was like, “Are you going to do it or not?” She said, “You have to get in there, you can't keep walking around the pool,” and so I did. I went through like, the interview process and got the job.
Each woman’s lived experiences demonstrate their deep connections to their early mentors, for them and their careers, these mentors turned into more than just that. The subtheme of “alignment with opportunity providers” was highlighted in each of their descriptions of their relationships and advancements. Participant 1’s mentor encouraged her to get certified to protect herself and set her up for the future. Participant 3 had a mentor who molded her and provided opportunities to become a community leader as well, and Participant 5’s mentor saw her potential and refused to let her fail. Additionally, her mentor sought out opportunities for her and saw that she applied for them. Participant 4 had solid mentors who guided her and provided promotion opportunities:

Where I got the support was that first CEO that promoted me, and he still supports me to this day. I am still in contact with him. He was a huge mentor to me. And the boss that I had, when I was promoted into that role, my boss at the time was the COO. He was a huge, huge advocate for me. Huge support to me. So, I really did have a couple of good strong mentors.

Participant 2 takes pride in knowing she is molding the next generation of nurses. With a firm voice, she shared:

This is something that I have been doing for about 20 years. It is the boards, and I prepare them for that. Of course, we all prepare them. But during the exit interview, I give them that final encouragement. I also believe that I am fulfilling that responsibility, my mentoring new faculty, and being present, and having meetings with them.

“Words of wisdom” emerged as a subtheme related to the interview question of giving advice to the next generation of women leaders.
Participant 3 was asked to describe what the key to her long successful was:

You’re making me think of things I hadn’t thought about. I like managing people, being in charge and I am not afraid of challenges. One thing is that I have always stood out amongst my peers. I have always excelled at getting the job done, achieving the numbers, getting awards, that type of stuff. I changed my mindset to “it is not me that needs to win, it is us,” the team and I am good at developing teams. The team needs to win. I pride myself on being on being top. I will work at it until I am the best, nothing stops me. I am driven and if I didn’t pursue this path, I would have drove everybody else crazy.

Participant 3 shares that young leaders need to be passionate and driven, enjoy what they are doing:

I love meeting new people, and developing relationships, and showing them that a banking relationship with me is rewarding and that I will take care of you. I will always take care of you as long as I am. That, to me, is what I love about my job.

Participant 2 shared why she thinks her career has been long and successful:

It did not happen right away. I am not afraid to professionally speak my mind, but I have learned, over the years, to take two deep breaths. Think about it, think about your response, which I have graciously shared with my children, who one is just like me and the other is like her dad. That was a lesson learned in this leadership path that I have had. I think I did not do that as great when I was a young leader. I was not as patient, maybe. I certainly was not as . . . I did not have the emotional intelligence I have now.
Each participant recounted their unique experiences as they pursued executive leadership positions. Participants shared many examples of facing adversity but having the resilience to withstand. Participants shared what motivated their ambition and from where they drew strength. The different experiences of feeling ordered or destined to be on a journey became evident as the participants reflected on their courage.

Each woman’s lived experiences are a testament to her staying the course the shared experiences capturing the essence of what it means to walk in and on purpose and on an ordered path designed specifically for them. The Participants found purpose and support to remain resolute in their desire for career success as a senior-level executive woman. As each reflected on the interview questions about pathways to leadership, what they love about leadership and what advice they would give to the next generation of women leaders? A linkage emerged during interviews between the woman’s path to leadership and the idea that they were destined to be in these roles.

**Summary of Results**

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to examine gender microaggressions experienced by women who have ascended to senior-level executive positions within their organization, the sources and nature of the experiences with gender microaggressions, and what strategies they employed to mitigate any lasting impact. It was important that the interviews helped each participant navigate and process how they endured in environments that were less than welcoming. This chapter presented the results and data analysis from the study participants and the gender microaggression taxonomy.
The results from the data analysis yielded four categories, nine key themes, and eight minor themes related to the interpretive nature of the study and the gender microaggression taxonomy. The categories were: (a) experiences of gender microaggressions, (b) sources and nature of gender microaggressions, and (c) strategies to mitigate the effect of gender microaggressions. The key themes identified were: (a) gender microassaults, (b) gender microinsults, (c) gender microinvalidations, (d) organizational culture, (e) positional power, (f) strong sense of self, and (g) mentorship. The subthemes identified were: (a) racial microaggressions, (b) aggression, (c) environmental microinequities, (d) visible power, (e) ordered pathway, (f) alignment with opportunity providers, and (h) words of wisdom.

The themes that emerged from the category of experiences of gender microaggressions were linked to the taxonomy of gender microaggressions. The taxonomy provides a construct for the experiences to be categorized based on their severity and perceived harm. The theme that emerged from the category of sources and nature of gender microaggressions were linked to the organizational culture and its role in creating an environment conducive to placing and sustaining barriers and hurdles to thwart the ambitions of female employees. Environmental microinequities were identified as system senior-level executives employ to keep women in their place. The theme that emerged from the category strategies used to mitigate the effects of gender microaggressions were linked to the ways in which women survived their experiences and the strategies used to realize their goals. Unwavering resolve and the mentorship were key tactics the participants leaned on. The theme of ordained leadership explored each participant's resilience to a journey they believed was destined for them.
Chapter 5 summarizes the study, reiterates its significance for presidents, chief operating officers, and heads of human resources departments, discusses limitations of the study, and provides recommendations for future research. Additionally, the final chapter offers implications of the findings and make recommendations that will protect and support women as they seek senior-level elective positions within organizations that have gender parity in those roles.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Over the past half-century, the presence of women has increased in the labor force. Women currently comprise 50.8% of the U.S. population and account for 47% of the U.S. labor force and 52.5% of the college-educated workforce. Women hold more than 57% of conferred undergraduate degrees and 59% of all master’s degrees, 48.5% of all law degrees, and 47.5% of all medical degrees. Yet, 52% of all working women remain in mid-management/non-professional positions (Warner et al., 2018).

Although the presence of women in the workforce has increased, women still account for a small percentage of senior-level executive positions in the legal, medical, academic, and financial services professions (Warner et al., 2018). While women’s presence in the workforce remains strong, their slow advancement to senior managerial positions and the few represented at that level currently warrants continued study to determine what hinders the progress (Warner et al., 2018).

The purpose of this IPA study was to further examine the degree to which women in senior executive leadership positions experience workplace gender microaggressions. More specifically, the study sought to understand the sources and nature of gender microaggressions and what strategies the women in senior leadership positions employed to mitigate the impact of gender microaggressions. The goal is to offer a contribution to the literature surrounding the experiences of women in senior executive leadership positions. There are very few studies that use an ethnically diverse participant pool to
assess experiences with discrimination. Specifically, research on gender microaggressions has typically been studied with participants from the same race or sexual orientation.

Semi-structured face-to-face interview questions addressed the guiding research questions:

1. To what degree and in what ways do women in senior-level executive positions experience gender microaggressions?
2. What are the sources and nature of gender microaggressions for women in senior-level executive positions?
3. What strategies are identified by women in senior-level executive positions used to mitigate the impact of gender microaggressions?

The first phase of the research process involved establishing the participation criteria for the study. These criteria ensured that those who volunteered had the employment opportunities to experience the gender microaggressions being studied. The second phase involved a series of face-to-face interviews with participants who met the participation criteria. A set of three open-ended questions was used to help establish rapport and ease between the researcher and the participant. The final phase involved an analysis of the data. Data were analyzed using a priori, initial, and in vivo coding. The coding results were used to create four categories, nine key themes, and eight subthemes. This chapter discusses the implications of the findings and provides recommendations.
Implications of Findings

This phenomenological qualitative study asked five women who are in senior-level executive positions to share their lived experiences pertaining to gender microaggressions in face-to-face interviews with the researcher.

Table 5.1 depicts the categories and association between research questions, gender microaggression taxonomy, and themes.

Table 5.1

*Research Questions, Categories, Key Themes, and Subthemes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Key Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To what degree and in what ways do women in senior-level executive positions experience gender microaggressions?</td>
<td>Experiences of Gender Microaggressions</td>
<td>Gender Microassaults</td>
<td>Racial Microaggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gender Microinsults</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gender Microinvalidations</td>
<td>Aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the sources of gender microaggressions for women in senior-level executive positions?</td>
<td>Sources of Gender Microaggressions</td>
<td>Organizational Culture</td>
<td>Environmental Microinequities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positional Power</td>
<td>Visible Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What strategies are identified by women in senior leadership positions to mitigate the impact of gender microaggressions?</td>
<td>Strategies to Mitigate the Effects of Gender Microaggressions</td>
<td>Strong Sense of Self Mentorship</td>
<td>Ordered Pathway</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Alignment with Opportunity Providers</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Words of Wisdom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The findings from the participants' experiences, beliefs, and attitudes aligned with Nadal’s (2010) taxonomy of gender microaggressions. Three categories emerged from the data analysis: experiences of gender microaggressions, sources of microaggressions, and strategies to mitigate the effects of microaggressions. This phenomenological study identified the categories during the interpretive process based on the lived experiences shared. The key themes that emerged were: (a) gender microassaults, (b) gender microinsults, (c) gender microinvalidation, (d) organizational culture, (e) positional power, (f) strong sense of self, and (g) mentorship. The subthemes that emerged were (a) racial microaggressions, (b) aggression, (c) environmental microinequities, (d) visible power, (e) ordered pathway, (f) alignment with opportunity providers, and (g) words of wisdom.

Studies have been conducted to identify and examine barriers women encounter while ascending to senior-level executive positions. Many recent studies have focused their research on gender microaggressions as a barrier for women, mostly among women of color. The theoretical use of the gender microaggressions taxonomy is relatively new. Since the introduction of the gender microaggression taxonomy to the literature, many studies have used the lens to categorize and synthesize their study participants’ experiences. However, few studies have examined gender microaggressions and their effects from the perspective of the actual experiences, sources and nature, and strategies implemented to mitigate the impact.

Nadal’s (2010) taxonomy allows the experiences to not only be categorized but gives a name and meaning to what the study participants experienced. Through the interview process, the participants were able to gain a better understanding of the
behaviors and attitudes they were experiencing in the workplace. Many had not heard of the term gender microaggression; however, when it was explained by the researcher, each identified having experienced these actions and attitudinal positions in their professional workspaces. The participants shared having experienced different gender microaggressions at different times from their supervisors and coworkers. Additionally, they gained personal insight into how they developed strategies to survive an organizational culture that demonstrated inequitable practices in order to persevere and achieve professional success.

The data from the interviews were analyzed during three rounds of coding, first a priori coding, then initial coding, and finally, in vivo coding. Three categories, seven key themes and seven subthemes emerged from the data. The analysis revealed that each participant had been the recipient of an onslaught of direct verbal, physical, and attitudinal gender microaggressions. Implications of these findings are significant in that they provide further evidence to support the existing literature on gender microaggressions and the impact they have on women who are in senior-level executive positions.

**Experiences of gender microaggressions.** Gender microaggressions are defined as brief everyday exchanges that communicate sexist disparagements towards women. These are conveyed verbally and/or nonverbally through facial expression, gazes, and other gestures. Additionally, these are subtle and can cause psychological harm or discomfort (Capodilupo et al., 2010; Nadal, 2010). Gender microaggressions are often used to devalue the contributions of women and dismiss their accomplishments and relevance by undermining their effectiveness within the employment and professional
contexts (Capodilupo et al., 2010). The taxonomy of gender microaggressions emerged as a holding tank to categorize and define the specific interactions each study participant experienced in the workplace. All participants experienced a broad range of inappropriate behavior from their supervisors, peers, and subordinates and which their organizations did little to address in either a broad or narrow visible response. The participants shared experiences were categorized as gender microassaults, gender microinvalidations, and gender microinsults. In addition, there were experiences of racial microaggression and verbal and physical aggression.

Only one of the participants experienced all three phenomena of gender microassaults, racial microaggressions, and aggression in her professional capacity. Her experiences were connected not only to her supervisor but to her subordinates and peers. Being the only participant of color, this participant was confident that any taxonomy she experienced was a compound of both race and gender, but with racial microaggressions more pervasive. No other group better understands the intersection of oppression between race, gender, and class than African American women (Collins, 2000). Crenshaw (1989) argues that women of color uniquely experience discrimination and other forms of oppression that are often not taken into consideration because the basis of civil rights and equality for women is predicated on the needs of White women. The discoveries in this study concur with the findings in the existing literature on instances and occurrences of gender and racial microaggressions women of color experience. Other shared experiences of racial microaggressions were related to senior executives publicly being fired, being challenged to prove competence, being worn down with the goal of forcing a “quit”
behavior, and the physical invasion of their personal space. The now documented incidences of the social injustices the women experienced will be added to the literature.

As the participants reflected on their interactions with supervisors and subordinates, many disclosed the social injustices of experiencing gender microassaults and aggressions throughout their entire professional careers. Participants described the aggressive behavior from their counterparts as customary and minimized by the organization’s leaders. Aggressive verbal threats and physically having a male supervisor, coworker, or insubordinate walk and jar forward towards them in a menacing posture were frequent happenings for some of the women. Whether the incident is racialized microaggression, or verbal or physical aggression, intentional or not, the consequences of such incidents are deep, long-lasting, and pervasive, and demand attention (Garcia & Johnston-Guerrero, 2015).

There were several shared experiences where participants did not personally experience the indiscretions but witnessed gender microassaults, and racial microaggressions their colleagues and subordinates experienced. There was a shared sentiment that gender microassaults and racial microaggressions damage people and the responsibility to expose and extinguish the social injustices first lies with organizational leaders. The cumulative effect of gender and racial microaggressions through the course of a lifetime can lead to an inferior quality of life by way of self-doubt and personal frustration (Sue et al., 2007; Sue, 2010a, 2010b). Although the experiences of gender microassaults, racial microaggressions, and aggression were prevalent, these social injustice experiences did not diminish any of the study participants’ desire to lead. In fact, these behaviors gave participants a reason to fight harder. These findings support the
existing literature discussed in Chapter 2, specifically Sue et al. (2007), Nadal (2010),
and Capodilupo et al. (2010) and their studies of gender microaggressions and the
implications for the intended victims.

All five participants indicated having experience gender microinsults in the
workplace. The experiences of microinsults trickled into their work environments in
varying degrees. Each participant shared how the negative remarks made each participant
feel inadequate and inferior. Several spoke about the negative verbal interactions with
male colleagues that made them second guess their professional abilities and shaped the
way in which each viewed themselves as a leader. Being that gender microinsults are
subtle and often explained as “common behavior,” then this requires the recipient to have
an understanding that gender microinsults are meant to harm and keep women in a
position of fear from advocating for respectful treatment. Indeed, women experiencing
aggressive behavior in the workplace is not a new phenomenon. The Civil Rights Act of
1964 was partially enacted to protect women from aggressive predatory behavior. Many
of the participants spoke about intense verbal aggression experienced in the workplace,
such as threats of retaliation. However, the only participant of color shared incidents of
physical threats that were ignored by witnesses and dealt with marginally by the
organization. These experiences did manifest in some participants as stress and anxiety,
further supporting the research conducted by leading scholars Sue (2010), Nadal (2010),
and Capodilupo et al. (2010).

The women in this study were all subjected to stereotypes that invalidated their
contributions to their respective professions. How women are invalidated in the
workplace has been extensively studied. Numerous studies indicate the role that
stereotypes play into women not receiving appropriate credit for their contributions. Wellington, Kropf, and Gerkovich’s (2003) study report that stereotypes about women’s abilities are indeed a barrier to women’s advancement to the highest levels. Many of the participants described such behaviors but had not associated them with a specific term other than a vague notion of discrimination. Categorizing and labeling the interactions with a specific name not only introduced new terminology but also validated each woman’s story. All had a deep understanding of what their professional experiences were but had not had the language or concepts to assign a specific name or meaning to it.

**Sources of gender microaggressions.** Organizational culture creates the morality of an institution not only by the manners and behaviors of every individual in the organization but also by the collective attitudes (Aksoy, Apak, Eren, & Korkmaz, 2014). Detailed accounts of egregious behavior being ignored were par for the course in workplace culture. Many studies suggest that the strength of the culture has a significant impact on both the individual and the organization (Rahmisyari, 2016). Every participant’s most senior-level executives were all male and mostly White, demonstrating the environmental inequities at each organization. One participant spoke of the times her organization hired diverse candidates to fill senior-executive positions and how their treatment was starkly different from the White males who previously occupied those positions. In the latest published list from The Fortune 500’s 2019 list of CEOs, only 33 positions, or 6.6%, were women. The study’s participants were collectively grounded in their belief that despite the experiences of gender microaggressions, each was going to continue to pursue career success through advancement. This qualitative research study
focused on senior-level executive women’s first-person accounts of gender microaggressions.

Participants were eager to address what they believed were the sources of gender microaggressions in each of their organizations. Organizational culture establishes the value of an institution by the collective attitudes and behavior of the organization combined with the manners and behaviors of every individual in the organization (Aksoy et al., 2014). Each participant shared that, at different times, their supervisors, peers, and subordinates perpetrated these behaviors, but what was most concerning was how the organization lacked in its response to acknowledge or correct these violations. Most of the women believed that their organization’s culture gave permission to a certain segment of its employees to behave egregiously and not be reprimanded. Additionally, their organizations did not have well communicated human resources practices that they trusted would protect them or give them assurance of employment security. This belief highlights an organizational failure to address with concrete consequences the social injustices experienced by these participants.

Environmental microinequities illustrate the professional divide between women and men with respect to the different organizations' hierarchical structures. Sue’s (2010) definition of environmental microinequities relating to the business sector captured the subtleties between organizational culture and environmental microinequities as these factors relate to this study. “In the world of business, the term ‘microinequities’ is used to describe the pattern of being overlooked, under-respected, and devalued because of one’s race or gender” (Sue, 2010b, p. 25). Such prevalence of microinequities was exhibited in each organization as evidence of a majority White-male structure. The prominent belief
was that it was an intentional practice by the organization, and the culture sustained it. Many of the participants shared that their organization had diversity plans but those had not produced social change. The plan to sincerely integrate leadership with more women or people of color had not come to fruition.

Positional power is connected to a title; it is neither good nor bad in and of itself. It is about how an organization’s leadership practices its authority. The attraction to positional power can be external or internal, creating a dangerous barrier against women seeking career advancement. The participants’ shared experiences wove a story of both. Power dynamics are a substantial hurdle with which women seeking advancement must contend. The majority of CEOs, COOs, and senior executives are White men. Intel released its 2019 study, revealing 41 of its 52 top executives making more than $208,000 a year were men and 37 were White (McGregor, 2019).

This study’s participants experienced their supervisors, peers, and subordinates engage in exercising professional power over them, from refusing to acknowledge their presence to contradicting them in formal meetings. Some women describe it as common behavior that has been rewarded, making that an external motivator. If bad behavior is celebrated with promotions, then the message sent is that women will not experience social justice at this organization. The unsettling part for the women was trying to decipher what the true motivation was when that behavior is enacted without.

Positional power did not emerge in the literature review. However, given the findings of this study, positional power should be researched for future studies. Sandberg (2013) describes how women unintentionally hold themselves back in leadership, advising women to “take a seat at the table and speak up,” to, in her words, “lean in” and
get women to understand their worth and walk in their purpose. The women in this study are “leaning in,” intentionally or unintentionally. The dynamic of internalizing or owning the experience of gender microaggressions is a subject matter that would require more research. This qualitative study found that the sources and nature of gender microaggressions corroborate the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The experiences of gender microaggressions have not derailed the ambitions of the study participants. These experiences have, however, taught lessons on how to navigate partisan work cultures and power dynamics initially meant to exclude them.

**Strategies to mitigate the effects of gender microaggressions.** The experiences shared by the participants in this study displayed a willingness to conquer their fears, step out of comfort zones, and speak truth to their experiences. There was a collective sense that it was time to tell their stories. Each women’s ability to navigate environments that were unwelcoming and non-committal to inclusivity demonstrated their grit and resilience. The benefits of women in the workplace have been documented (Rapp & Yoon, 2016). Women often bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the workplace, which may foster creativity, stability, and resilience within organizations. Rapp and Yoon’s (2016) executive summary identified organizational barriers to women’s advancement, with one being a non-inclusive work environment and culture, noting that only 40% of women aspire towards senior-level positions and only 32% believe they will achieve it. The study participants developed grit to move past obstacles to reach the career goals they set for themselves.

Stone (2017) indicated that 90% of women in her study quit their jobs, not to care for their families, but because of workplace problems. Having a strong sense of self is
what kept this study’s participants focused and driven. Ordered pathways were demonstrated by the participants as they assessed their environments to determine how to respond to the gender microaggressions they were experiencing. Mentorship became one of those grounding and professional altering relationships for each participant. Mentoring is understood to be an interpersonal process in which a more experienced colleague provides professional guidance, instruction, and support to a less experienced individual (Kram, 1985). The women shared how their mentors supported their and personal and professional development. Mentorship was critical to the study participants’ personal satisfaction, professional development, and career advancement, which supports the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Eby and Lockwood (2004) assert that mentors provide career guidance and personal support. It was clear that this study’s participants felt a sense of mental safety with their mentors. Each mentor provided a safe professional space where failure did not mean the end of a career, but an opportunity for leadership development. The women in the study did not indicate if any of them participated in a formal organizational mentorship program; rather, the mentor relationship developed more organically. Trust and respect were mutually established, allowing for the relationships to mature into genuine friendships.

Critical to becoming a leader in an organization is the social networking and advancement opportunities a respected organizational mentor can offer. This study’s participants’ mentors became opportunity providers. Mentors offer guidance and assistance as women seek to overcome the challenges and barriers to professional success, which may include gender stereotyping, discriminatory hiring practices, and limited opportunities for skill development (Hancock et al., 2017). One participant shared
that her supervisor “saw” something in her and directed her towards advancement opportunities even though she felt unqualified.

Each woman’s successes and failures are a lesson for other budding women leaders. Each lesson demonstrates the importance of self-respect, how to navigate organizational culture, and paying it forward. The belief that leadership was inherent for these women is evident in the motivating effect each has on their peers, the demonstrated ability to develop and lead teams, and a catalog of created and implemented operational systems within their organizations. None took sole credit for her success but gave recognition to the many people who invested time into developing and influencing them as leaders. Each had words of wisdom to share for the emerging women leader.

Understanding the lived experiences of senior-level executive women in the workforce is necessary for improving career advancement opportunities and leadership development for working women. The findings of this study revealed that barriers continue to plague women seeking career advancement even upon reaching the higher echelons in their organizations, due in part to barriers such as gender discrimination, public shaming to discredit them, limits on opportunities to advance, verbal and physical aggression, submissive organizational cultures, and lack of human resources policies to protect and ensure change. The women were not naive about such barriers existing, but what did seem to be the greatest disappointment was that the barriers did not diminish as their careers advanced. In fact, the instances became more overt, as if their promotions were not warranted and someone needed to prove it. The barrier that posed the greatest obstacle for the study participants was the organizational culture at their respective places of employment. The culture tacitly endorsed and, by extension, sustained, discriminatory
actions by its lack of accountability, diversity in senior roles, a defined and implemented plan for diversity, and human resources policies. Thomas et al. (2017) conclude that women, particularly women of color, remain significantly underrepresented. Companies need to change the way they hire and promote entry and manager-level employees to make real progress. Women still receive less day-to-day support and less access to senior leaders. Glass and Cook (2014) and Hobbler et al. (2014) conclude that gender bias and stereotyping, wage gaps, forced resignations, and lack of career development work together to stifle the career trajectory of women. The main strategy employed by the study participants was the development of mentor relationships. Collectively, the women felt that their mentors developed them as leaders, providing guidance through tough situations, and secured career advancement opportunities.

The study also reveals that for these women, the desire to lead was innate. The women in the study were driven. Failure was not an option. The researcher used words such as defiant resilience and ordered pathway to describe the courage each demonstrated as they navigated the experiences of a first and only, meaning the first woman to hold the position and the only woman in the room. This statement accurately captures the reality for the only African American participant, on the axis of intersectionality, as she not only was the first woman to hold her position, she was the first Black woman. Leadership for women is about leaning in, being counted, and being seen. Each lived experience was an opportunity for growth. Each participant demonstrated their desire to lead by professionally navigating all obstacles and remaining focused on their career goals.

Unexpected findings. There was, however, an unexpected outcome associated with this study as it related to the participants being invalidated by their male colleagues.
Participants 3 and 4 engaged in their own form of personal invalidation. Participant 4 spoke of feeling not worthy of her blessings or feeling as if she did not deserve her accomplishments. Participant 3 described classic gender microinvalidations, but stated she agreed with their assessment of her. Both women involuntarily invalidated themselves and the undeniable professional accomplishments each had achieved. The study participants were collectively grounded in their belief that despite the experiences of gender microaggressions, each remained steadfast in the trajectory their career was taking them. This qualitative research study focused on senior-level executive women’s first-person accounts of gender microaggressions. However, the shared experiences did not diminish any of the study participants’ desire to lead. In fact, it gave reason to fight harder and persevere.

**Unanticipated outcomes.** There were noteworthy outcomes from this study that were unanticipated. IPA methodology offered the researcher the opportunity to interpret the lived experiences of study participants, with the goal of making sense of the phenomenon being studied. This study aimed to understand the lived experiences of senior-level executives as they relate to gender microaggressions. Examining the lived experiences through the taxonomy of gender microaggression highlighted just how often women are subtly and overtly dismissed, challenged, or attacked in the workplace (Capodilupo et al., 2010; Sue 2010a, 2010b).

One important unanticipated outcome to highlight is the amount of aggression and physical and mental violence against women that took place in organizations. From being yelled at and belittled during high-level meetings to having a male subordinate employee lose emotional control and aggressively “walk up” and scream and point in the face of
women are behaviors that should not be tolerated; however, in each instance, any reprimand amounted to less than a slap on the hand. Organizational culture either supports or dismantles behavior that is counterproductive to its mission. The behaviors and aggressions experienced by the women demonstrate a disconnectedness organizational leaders and human resources departments have with their organization’s culture, further supporting an environment that is not conducive to equality for women, thus further supporting the literature review in Chapter 2.

Another major unanticipated outcome to highlight is the lack of any reference to the human resources department for safety or organizational policy and procedures that could effectively protect and rectify every incident discussed. The women were essentially left to figure out how to keep safe, whom to trust, and how to keep their jobs.

Lastly and probably the most significant unanticipated outcome from this study is the behavior of self-invalidation and self-inflicted barriers. The study participants were all accomplished women leaders, who have overcome tremendous obstacles to reach the career goals they set, but the imposter syndrome of not believing they deserved the success or the self-doubt about their competence was a surprise. Because this issue was beyond the scope of this study, the researcher did not probe in depth into the rationale behind these feelings or beliefs.

Limitations

The primary goal of this research was to generate a better understanding of the lived experiences of senior-level executive women as they relate to gender microaggressions in the workplace. The use of IPA research methodology for this study was central, allowing the researcher to explore, describe, interpret, and analyze to make
meaning of the participants’ shared experiences. The use of IPA granted the freedom to
dive deep and interpret the meaning (Smith & Osborn, 2008). However, the study did
have limitations.

Data were collected from seven senior-level executive women; findings from five
were analyzed and used in this study. This study used participants from different
organizations from both the for-profit and not-for-profit business sectors, which limited
the opportunity to focus on one organization and one industry. At present, all participants
were senior-level executive women in their organizations. The study design voided out
non-managerial and male perspectives. The researcher acknowledges that face-to-face
interviews can be awkward and scary. During the sharing of information, there seemed
to be a general sense of “those experiences were from before” as evidence that none of
the study participants shared any current examples of gender microaggressions. The study
questions may evoke long-buried sentiments that were easier to forget than to face. Or the
face-to-face interviews and study focus was intimidating and it was a self-protective
stance.

Because of the nature of the face to face interviews and questions, there was a risk
of researcher bias. Explicit bias refers to unconscious attitudes and beliefs about people,
groups, or social (Aberson & Haag, 2007). As the researcher is a senior-level executive
woman and a woman of color, researcher bias was a concern at the onset of this study.
The IPA research methodology proactively identified personal and professional biases.
As such, this research shared experiences of gender and racial microaggressions with her
dissertation committee. The researcher recruited study participants using a purposive
sampling methodology. Invitations to participate in the study were extended by an
executive director in the community, who did not qualify as a participant, rather than the researcher targeting potential participants. Additionally, the executive director belonged to several professional women’s associations and was able to utilize her extensive network to draw participants for the study.

**Recommendations**

From this study, the lived experiences of senior-level executive women are relevant to understanding how women navigate workplace discrimination. This information is valuable as the women’s movement has gained momentum and the timing and results of this study can add to the body of literature on gender microaggressions in the workplace and the impact on senior-level executive women. While considering the valuable information in this study, there are several opportunities for future research, policy development, and best practice models for organizational development.

**Recommendations for further research.** Future research is necessary to expand the understanding of gender-specific discrimination, how this phenomenon impacts the recipient, and how to mitigate the impact. Based on the findings, limitations, and the literature review, the researcher has identified six recommendations for future study. One is to conduct a comparison study between women in senior-level executive positions in the for-profit and not-for-profit business sector. Although this study used a mixed business-sector participant pool, it did not compare the lived experiences between the two. If all participants were recruited from the same organization or business sector, it would allow the researcher to analyze and interpret the commonalities and differences in their experiences. Another suggestion is to interview participants in non-management positions to identify career barriers. This would aid in understanding why women still
choose to seek senior-level executive positions even after they have encountered early career barriers. Another suggestion is to recruit all participants from the same identified race or ethnicity. Research on microaggressions has typically been conducted with marginalized groups of people, that is, people of color, of certain religions, and specific sexual identities. However, this study used a blended participant pool and the stark differences in discriminatory actions perpetrated were blatantly obvious. Another avenue for future research is to study the impact of gender microaggressions on male employees at a predominantly female-led organization. Having a male perspective on perceived and experienced barriers to career advancement would offer different insights. Future research should examine the impact of internalizing and “owning” incidents of discrimination as there appeared to be an undertone of rationalization with some of the participants. Some participants minimized or even suppressed their experiences. The future study could focus on what past experiences created the pathology to take ownership of harmful behavior done to you. This study moved the researcher away from the topic; however, there was enough evidence to warrant further research. Lastly, examine the behavior of self-invalidation. Future research could focus on belief systems of the study participants to identify the root causes of this behavior.

**Recommendations for policy development.** Based on the results of this study and the gender microaggression taxonomy of Sue et al. (2010) and Nadal & Capadilupo et al. (2010), one recommendation for future research is to focus on how policies and procedures designed to address the subtleties of gender microaggressions might impact an organization’s culture. This would require a shift in understanding the different iterations and effects of discrimination on mental and psychological health. The findings
of the study would be used to develop policies specific to self-care and mindfulness in the workplace. Understanding what supports discriminatory behavior and how it is addressed would be vital to creating a culture free of harmful behavior to women.

Organizations would benefit from having a policy-driven recruitment and retention plan that focuses on diversity, sustainability, and disparity in leadership positions. Organizations need a clearly stated intentional plan to correct inequalities, change corporate culture, and policies that address the systemic reason for imparity in hiring (Mercer, 2016). Such policies would determine how employees were selected and interviewed, onboarded, supported, and promoted. The initiative should be driven by the organization’s leadership or human resources department. Additionally, any policies addressing the disparities in hiring and position acquisition should become a part of the organization's strategic development plan. Walia and Daroach (2017) assert that strategic retention of employees is critical to the long-term health and success of any organization and is the responsibility of the employer (Walia & Daroach, 2017). These policies should drive how trainings are developed and yearly employee evaluations conducted. Training departments should not only focus on operations, but the organization’s culture. Training designed with a focus on diversity and equity sets the expectation for any new employee, and becomes a reminder as employees participate in annual compliance trainings. The specific development of policies committed to diversity would ensure that organizational practices and processes are followed.

Another recommendation is for organizations to develop and implement a program with a focus on emotional and mental safety. As the research in Chapter 2 indicates, women who are experiencing discrimination in the workplace remain quiet or
choose to leave the organization out of fear of retaliation (Rapp & Yoon, 2016). A program that was dedicated to a safe place for women to report grievances without the fear of losing their jobs allows for organizations to retain their talent and boost morale. Women bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the workplace, which can prompt creativity, stability, and resilience within organizations (Rapp & Yoon, 2016). The program should be independent and answer to the board of directors or may function as an employee ombudsman to determine if the grievance requires an investigation.

Opportunity to advance is not promised to every qualified employee, that is the nature of business. Not every organization has the capacity to promote all its qualified employees. However, available promotional opportunities should not impact how employees are treated. All organizations should make every effort to provide training opportunities, mentorship, and policies and procedures that will ensure advancement opportunities for women and other marginalized groups. Each organization referenced in this study did not have a formal mentorship program. Based on these findings, mentorship is a key catalyst for ensuring women's career advancement opportunities. This research concluded that women benefit personally and professionally from the mentorship experiences. Mentors open doors for their protégés, provide career advice, highlight subordinates’ work to superiors, and advocate on behalf of their charges for new opportunities (Thomas et al., 2018). Although each participant achieved career advancement opportunities, each paid an emotional and mental toll that could have been thwarted had the organizations had a formal mentorship program that focused on leadership development and retention. Formal mentorship programs not only benefit the mentee but the organization as well.
Recommendations for organizational social change. Organizations need a blueprint to embrace change effectively. Change does not happen overnight.

Organizational change requires “buy-in” at all levels, including the board of directors. When an organization has policies and procedures that address cultural attitudes and behaviors, best practice blueprints are needed. Kouzes and Posner’s (2012) book *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations*, is a tried and trusted blueprint to effect organizational change. The authors lay out how change happens and how to sustain it in a five-practice framework: (a) model the way, (b) inspire a shared vision, (c) challenge the process, (d) enable others to act, and (e) encourage the heart. A recommendation based on the results of this study would be to develop cheerleaders of diversity training programs for the organization's leaders and use Kouzes and Posner’s sixth edition (2012) book as the blueprint. The outcome of the training then becomes the best practice model for the organization.

Addressing the culture is key to organizational change. Ideally, culture should be created at the top of the organization. Attitudes, assumptions, and behaviors should mimic the desired outcome of the organization’s board and senior-level executive leaders. If senior leadership fails to create and sustain the culture, employees will. An employee-led culture leaves the organization vulnerable and exposed. Attention to creating organizational cheerleaders at all levels creates the opportunity for change as employee investment will increase. Based on the findings of this study, the creation of training that develops departmental cheerleaders to support cultural change is another added step in the blueprint. This training would focus on communication, trust, and respect. Ultimately impacting social change for the organization from the top down.
Conclusion

There are numerous barriers to career advancement opportunities for women, and only a few have been discussed in this research study. The purpose of this study was to examine in what ways and to what degree women in senior-level leadership positions experience gender microaggressions. This study explored traditional barriers, gender stereotypes, and career objectives. The results of this qualitative study, involving six senior-level executive women, provides further understanding about gender microaggressions and the impact on women. This study adds to the body of knowledge as it relates to the taxonomy of gender microaggressions: (a) gender microassaults, (b) gender microinsults, and (c) gender microinvalidations (Capodilupo et al., 2010; Sue et al., 2010).

This qualitative study focused on women and the nature of their leadership experiences. Three research questions were used to explore the lived experiences of the study participants:

1. To what degree and in what ways do women in senior-level executive positions experience gender microaggressions?
2. What are the sources of gender microaggressions for women in senior-level executive positions?
3. What strategies are identified by women in senior leadership positions to mitigate the impact of gender microaggressions?

An IPA methodology was used to examine the lived experiences of the study participants. IPA lends itself to qualitative studies as the methodology requires the researcher to fully participate in the meaning-making process (Mavhandu-Mudzus,
The goal of this study was to “give voice” to the study participants as “meaning” is being made of their experiences (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). This study provided an outlet to explore these complex, ambiguous, and emotionally laden interchanges. Through exploration and collaboration between the participants and the researcher, an opportunity to make meaning was provided (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

Semi-structured, face-to-face, 60-minute interviews were scheduled and conducted at a mutually agreed upon location. Open-ended questions were posed to the participants to facilitate the sharing of their gender microaggression experiences. Interviews were recorded on two audio devices, a Samsung phone recorder and a Samsung tablet. Interviews were transcribed using the professional service, Rev.com.

The findings from this study are organized into four categories and nine key themes, and eight subthemes shared in Table 4.2. The categories identified were: (a) experiences of microaggressions, (b) sources of gender microaggressions, and (c) strategies to mitigate the impact of gender microaggressions. The key themes identified were: (a) gender microassaults, (b) gender microinsults, (c) gender microinvalidations, (d) organizational culture, (e) positional power, (f) strong sense of self, and (g) mentorship. The subthemes identified were: (a) racial microaggressions, (b) aggression, (c) environmental microinequities, (d) visible power, (e) ordered pathway, (f) alignment with opportunity providers, and (g) words of wisdom.

Recommendations from this study were broken down into three categories: recommendations for further research, recommendations for policy development, recommendations for organizational social change. A recommendation for further research is to recruit all participants from the same identified race or ethnicity. Research
on microaggressions has typically been conducted with marginalized groups of people, people of color, certain religions, and specific sexual identities. This study used a blended participant pool and the stark differences in discriminatory actions perpetrated were blatantly obvious in the case of the level of physical aggression expressed by the one participant of color. A recommendation for policy development would be for organizations to develop and implement a program with a focus on emotional and mental safety. A program that was dedicated to a safe place for women to report grievances without the fear of losing their jobs allows for organizations to retain their talent and boost morale. The program should be independent and answer to the board of directors or may function as an employee ombudsman to determine if the grievance requires an investigation. Lastly, a recommendation for organizational social change would be for organizations to develop a blueprint to embrace cultural change effectively. Organizational change requires “buy-in” at all levels, including the board of directors. Using Kouzes and Posner’s (2012) book *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations*, as the starting point to create a shared vision would give the change initiative credence.

The women in this study endured blatant discrimination, public humiliation, physical aggression, and received minimal support from their organization’s human resource policies, yet still have a passion for leadership and a drive to succeed. This speaks to the certainty these women have about their pathway. The women in this study are women of incredible strength and integrity. However, the most striking attribute of these women is their positive attitude. Each had reasons to be callous and cynical about their organizations; however, each shared how much they loved where they worked and
believed in the mission. Withstanding all challenges endured, the study participants did not allow any of it to affect their person or professional demeanor. Each not only survived these appalling gender microaggressions but learned to navigate these negative behaviors and thrive!
References


Appendix A

Invitation Letter

December 2019

Dear:

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study I am conducting as part of my doctoral degree in the Executive Leadership Program at St. John Fisher College under the supervision of Dr. Michael Robinson. I would like to provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement would entail if you decide to take part.

The topic of this study is to examine the lived experiences of women in senior level executive positions. The proposed study will focus on the scarcity of women in executive level positions, the rate of attrition, and the growing concern around women being targets of gender microaggressions. The results of the study will be used to inform the existing literature of the sources and nature of gender microaggressions and strategies to mitigate the harmful effects of gender microaggressions. I am interested in learning about what strategies you might have used to overcome professional hurdles during your career.

Participation in this study is voluntary. There is, however, inclusion and exclusion criteria that will guide the selection of potential participants. Participants must currently be in a senior-level executive position. The participants must have been in their current role for at least a year and have never been a chief executive officer. Additionally, participants must indicate that they have experienced or witnessed gendered microaggressions in the workplace. Women who meet this criterion will be included as they have the necessary experience to examine.

Exclusion from participating will be any women who does not meet the inclusion criteria, any women who does not consent to audio recording, and any women who is currently or in the past filed a discrimination claim with the Human Rights Commission (HRC), The New York State Labor Department, or the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Excluding women who are currently in a filing status, investigative status, or have filed in the past is to keep the personal risk at a minimum.

Participation in this study will involve sitting through an interview of approximately which is one hour in length and will place in a mutually agreed upon location. You may
decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences by advising the researcher. With your permission, the interview will be tape-recorded to facilitate collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis. Shortly after the interview has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points that you wish. All information you provide is considered completely confidential. Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study. Data collected during this study will be retained in a locked cabinet in my home office and destroyed no later than 2021.

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at, (315) 567-8195, or by e-mail at rjo08687@sjfc.edu. You can contact my supervisor, Dr. Michael Robinson at (315) 498-7237, or e-mail at crobinson@sjfc.edu.

I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Institutional Review Board at St. John Fisher College. However, the final decision about participant is yours. I hope that the results of my study will be used to add to the literature on women in senior level management positions and their experiences with microaggressions and the way in which they mitigated the effects. I will call you in one week to discuss your participation in this study and/or if you would like to discuss the details of this project. Please forward this invitation to other who might be interested.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Rhoda Overstreet-Wilson (rjo08687@sjfc.edu)
Ed.D. Doctoral Candidate, Department of Education, St. John Fisher College
Appendix B

Thank You Letter

January 2020

Dear: Ms.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Your professional position of senior level executive makes you an ideal candidate for this study. I have been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. John Fisher College, Rochester, NY, to conduct research for my dissertation in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. The study will focus on exploring the experiences of four to six senior level women leaders in a cross-sectional business sector. The study will add value to the literature on women in senior level management positions and their experiences with microaggressions and the way in which they mitigated the effects.

I would also like to schedule a face-to-face or phone interview with you, at your convenience over the next six-eight weeks. We can discuss a convenient, comfortable meeting location that meets your needs.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Rhoda Overstreet-Wilson, Doctoral Candidate St. John Fisher College, Ralph C. Wilson School of Education
Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership
3690 East Avenue
Rochester, New York 14618
Appendix C
St. John Fisher College
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Study: Women in Leadership: A Proposal to Examine the Trends and Experiences of Senior Executive Level Women in the Workforce

Name of Researcher: Rhoda Overstreet-Wilson (315-567-8195)

Faculty Supervisor: C. Michael Robinson, Ed.D. (585-738-3567)

Purpose of Study: Is to examine the lived experiences of women in senior level executive positions. The proposed study will focus on the scarcity of women in senior executive level positions, the rate of attrition, and the growing concern around women being targets of gender microaggressions. The results of the study will be used to inform the existing literature of the sources and nature of gender microaggressions and strategies to mitigate the harmful effects of gender microaggressions.

Place of study: Mutually agreed upon location.

Length of participation: One interview lasting no more than 60 minutes.

Method of data collection: All interviews will be audio recorded and some notes may be taken during the interview as a debrief for the researcher. The purpose for the note taking will be to capture any nonverbal or environmental data.

Risks and benefits: The expected risks and benefits of this study are explained below. Minimal risk exists, as the probability of and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during routine tests. However, the nature of this specific study could remind a participant of a painful past experience. In the event the interview triggers an emotional response the researcher will break from the interview and offer the participant a time-out from the interview. The researcher will also ask participants if they would like to reschedule or not participate at all. Participants may withdraw or decide not to be involved in the study without penalty. Additionally, the researcher will have crisis information available to the participants if they determine they need a professional counselor to speak with. There are no additional anticipated emotional or physical risks associated with participating in this study.
Benefits may include an opportunity to gain meaning, share their experiences in a safe environment, and learn of others who have had similar experiences. Additionally, participants will attain the understanding of how qualitative research studies are conducted.

**Method for protecting confidentiality/privacy:** All records (written, typed, and audio recordings) will be kept private and locked in a file cabinet in the researchers’ home for a period of five years after the successful defense of the dissertation. Only the researcher and professional transcriber will have access to the information. However, information may be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. John Fisher. Participants will be identified by numerical number and no other personal identifier. Participants names and any identifying information will not appear in transcript, analysis, or the final study. As a volunteer in the study, any participant can choose to answer any, all, or none of the interview questions and may withdraw consent at any time for any reason without penalty.

Your rights: As a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer any or all question without penalty.
4. Be informed of the results of the study.

I have read the above, received a copy of this form, and I agree to participate in the above-named study.

____________________________  ______________________
Print Name (Participant)      Signature Date

____________________________  ______________________
Name (Investigator)      Signature Date

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher above. If you experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, please contact your health care provider or local crisis provider.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study and/or if you experience any physical or emotional discomfort, you can contact Jill Rathbun by phone at 585-385-8012 or by email at irb@sjfc.edu
All digital audio recordings and transcriptions of interviews will be maintained using a private, locked, and password-protected file and password-protected computer stored securely in the private home of the principal researcher. Electronic files will include assigned numerical numbers; they will not include actual names or any information that could personally identify or connect participants to this study. Other materials, including notes or paper files related to data collection and analysis, will be stored securely in unmarked boxes, locked inside a cabinet in the private home of the principal researcher. Only the researcher will have access to electronic or paper records.

The digitally recorded audio data will be kept by this researcher for a period of five years following publication of the dissertation. Signed informed consent documents will be kept for five years after publication. All paper records will be cross-cut shredded and professionally delivered for incineration. Electronic records will be cleared, purged, and destroyed from the hard drive and all devices such that restoring data is not possible.

____________________________    ______________________
Print Name (Participant)    Signature Date

____________________________   ______________________
Name (Investigator)     Signature Date
Appendix D

Interview Protocol

**Study Title**: Women in Leadership: A proposal to examine the trends and experiences

Date of Interview: _________
Time of Interview: __________
Location of Interview: _______________________
Interviewee: _______________________________

**Review purpose of the study**: Is to examine the lived experiences of women in senior level executive positions. The proposed study will focus on the scarcity of women in executive level positions, the rate of attrition, and the growing concern around women being targets of gender microaggressions. The results of the study will be used to inform the existing literature of the sources and nature of gender microaggressions and strategies to mitigate the harmful effects of gender microaggressions.

**Review participant rights**: Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can withdraw your participation in the study at any point by simply informing me (the researcher) that you no longer want to participate. There will be no repercussions from withdrawing from the study.

**Interview Questions:**

1. Please tell me a little about yourself, Education? Background?
2. What is your current professional position?
3. Describe your career path.
4. Why were you interested in pursuing executive level status?
5. Were there hurdles you were not able to clear? If so, describe the hurdles?
6. What barriers are you presently facing as a senior level executive? What barriers are you currently facing in the position that of senior-level executive that women in positions of less status are facing?
7. What strengths do you have that helped you prevail?
8. Describe the strategies you utilized to overcome any and all barriers you experienced?
9. What aspects of your position do you enjoy? Why?
10. Describe your professional successes in your current position.
11. What advice would you give to other women who are aspiring to senior level executive positions?

Please be advised that during the course of the interview subsequent questions may be asked as a follow-up to an answer, to clarify, or to probe deeper. You do not have to answer any question you are opposed too.

**Close interview:** Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

**Follow-up call/email:** The recording of this interview will be professionally transcribed. Once the transcription is ready, I can share with you a copy and encourage you to review to ensure accuracy and intent. I encourage you to let me know if there are areas you’d like to clarify. We can do so over email or set up a call. If I do not hear from you, I will assume that you approve the transcript and your answers represent your intent.