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WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: A QUALITATIVE REVIEW OF CHALLENGES, EXPERIENCES, AND STRATEGIES IN ADDRESSING GENDER BIAS

BRYNN HARRIS, BA

APPROVED:

SUSAN TORTOLERO EMERY, PHD

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By
BRYNN HARRIS, BA, MPH
2019

DEDICATION

To the strong women who have bolstered, edified, and inspired me.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: A QUALITATIVE REVIEW OF CHALLENGES, EXPERIENCES, AND STRATEGIES IN ADDRESSING GENDER BIAS

By

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BACHELOR OF ARTS, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK, 2017

Presented to the Faculty of The University of Texas

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in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF PUBLIC HEALTH

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS
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PREFACE

I have been fortunate to be raised and surrounded by strong women throughout the entirety of my life. These women have overcome immeasurable adverse circumstances personally and professionally to flourish as leaders in in their communities. Having witnessed the additional challenges associated with being a female leader personally and vicariously, I endeavored to better understand what it really takes to become a successful female leader and how women can better prepare themselves to take on advanced professional roles. I aimed to increase the current body of research around leadership and the experiences of professional women in an effort to better educate and support both male and female leaders.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my mother, Anne Taylor, and sisters, Devon Harris Rothlisberger and Dr. Kyrsti Harris Christensen. They have been invaluable role models and sources of guidance both for this project and throughout my life. I would like to thank my brother, T.X, for pushing me to think both more critically and more empathetically. His pursuit to understand the experiences of others is a wonderful example to me. I would like to thank my father, Dr. Ed Harris, who has always been my biggest cheerleader; he is the embodiment of a strong man advocating for and encouraging strong women. I would like to thank Dr. Susan Tortolero Emery for encouraging me to take on this project and continuing to serve as a mentor. Her guidance has undoubtedly opened doors in my career that I did not imagine for myself. I would like to thank Dr. Melissa Peskin for serving as a valuable academic advisor and advisor of this project. Finally, I would like to acknowledge and share my gratitude for all of the women who agreed to open up about their professional and personal challenges for this project. These women were willing to be vulnerable about their frustrations, shortcoming, and successes. I cannot thank them enough for the ways in which they are supporting and building the next generations of strong women leaders.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: A QUALITATIVE REVIEW OF CHALLENGES, EXPERIENCES, AND STRATEGIES IN ADDRESSING GENDER BIAS

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Women are entering the workforce at an increasing rate, yet they are still drastically underrepresented in leadership positions. The primary research question addressed in this study was two-fold: what challenges have women faced in pursuit of leadership positions, and how have these women overcome these challenges to achieve success? While quantitative research has ventured into determining why there is still such a large gender gap in leadership positions, this study aimed to better understand the actual life experiences of successful female leaders. In this study, twenty-six women who hold – or recently held – significant leadership positions participated in qualitative interviews that ranged from thirty-five to two hours in length. Thematic Content Analysis of these interviews indicated that women still face a number of unique challenges, including an emphasized consideration of their appearance, especially with regard to their perceived age. Women reported feeling that their youthful appearance (even if they were not actually young), led to perceptions that they were not taken as seriously as their male colleagues. Due to these perceptions, they observed that they had to gain the respect that their male peers had already been given as they aged.

The interviews provided insights into how women can overcome the additional challenges they face as they pursue leadership positions. Strategies that the women recommended included learning how to advocate for oneself and connecting with mentors *and* sponsors. Finally, the women recognized that men must be actively involved in addressing gender bias if it is to be overcome. One method to improve their understanding of how gender bias impacts women is through personalization, which would help men better realize how they can support women in reaching their greatest potential. Women are still negatively affected by gender bias in the workforce, and successful female leaders have

overcome significant challenges in order to achieve their positions. Women should utilize strategies such as engaging with sponsors and advocating for themselves in order to minimize some of the barriers to career advancement. Furthermore, men need to feel personally invested in reducing the burden of gender bias on women.

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BACKGROUND

Literature Review

Women in the Current Workforce: Underrepresentation

Despite the rapidly increasing presence of women in the workforce, women still face unique challenges and disadvantages compared to their male counterparts. This is particularly evident in leadership. Women are now entering the workforce at a more accelerated rate than men; however, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions across nearly all industries (Tariq et al., 2017). While the 2010 national census found that 50.8% of the United States' population was female, only 3.0% of Chief Executive Officers of Fortune 500 companies in that same year were women (Howden et al., 2011; Suh, 2015). Even in 2017, the number of female CEOs of Fortune 500 companies was reported to be at an all-time high of only thirty-two total women (McGregor, 2017). At the same time, the growth of women participating in the workforce in the United States has reached 47%, and their presence in management and professional jobs is at 52% (Van Oosten et al., 2017). These numbers are particularly staggering considering that diversity trainings in the workforce were largely a response to sex discrimination (Kalev et al., 2016). However, even in the financial services, for which they were initially intended, representation of white women in managerial roles fell from 39% to 35% between 2003 and 2014 (Kalev et al., 2016).

This issue is particularly salient to the healthcare industry, because, though it is a female-dominant field – and is experiencing an influx of women –women are not proportionally represented in leadership roles (Bismark et al., 2015). For example, in the

United Kingdom, 44% of doctors are women, but only 23% of medical directors are women (Czabonowska et al., 2017).

Barriers to Leadership Roles

Women have a strong presence in the workforce, so the question remains: why are they not advancing into leadership roles? While overt bias is becoming less common, structural and implicit biases of co-workers, superiors, and company leaders may still negatively influence the opportunities and advancement of women (Carnes et al., 2015). Barriers to women's professional success can be categorized as interpersonal, internalized, and structural (Bismark et al., 2015). Women face a myriad of challenges socially, internally, and in their work environments. For instance, there are social challenges like potential exclusion when women are not included in certain social activities in or out of the office (Tariq et al., 2017). Women can also face obstacles due to stereotypes despite having all of the necessary skills and requirements for a role. These stereotypes can lead to stereotype threat, which becomes a self-reinforcing barrier: women are perceived (and often perceive themselves) as inherently less capable of taking on leadership roles, and, therefore, do not seek out those roles or do not succeed when they do take on a leadership position (Carnes et al., 2015).

The negative perceptions male coworkers have towards women can become a detriment to women's professional success. Desai et al. found that men who are married to women who do not work view the women they work with less favorably than men who are unmarried, married to a man, or married to a woman who does work (2014). In general, women are often perceived as less capable, of lower capacity, and less credible than their

male counterparts with similar credentials (Bismark et al., 2015). Women may also face the negative perceptions of their male coworkers due to their appearance, and women have reportedly needed to have an increased awareness of their appearance compared to their male coworkers (Howard, 2018). Bismark et al. also found that men felt that women are not in leadership roles simply because they do not pursue those positions or want to take on more professional responsibility (2015). This possibility deserves consideration, but, likely, is not the only factor. Research needs to be done to examine *why* women do not continue to seek leadership positions and what structural impediments might discourage them from pursuing the positions they actually want.

Women also have the greater burden of managing familial responsibilities along with their professional pursuits and obligations. In addition to the time and energy women invest in their families, women with families can be affected by the additional negative perceptions of men. Bismark et al. found that having a family is viewed as a detriment or distraction, and women would not be able to successfully balance a family with a career (2015). While taking care of a family can contribute to existing the barriers women face, it is important to note that women who do pursue careers along with raising a family can still believe that they have achieved an appropriate work-life balance. Hook et al. reported that women who balance professional obligations with raising children find satisfaction in both their professional and personal lives (Hook et al., 2018). Gender bias and a lack of understanding among male superiors about the additional barriers women face can lead to women having fewer opportunities or facing inflexibility while they are trying to start or raise a family (Johns et al., 2013).

In addition to the challenges posed by male coworkers, female coworkers are not always supportive of one another. Interestingly, in interviews with female healthcare managers, Czabanowksa et al. found that women responded that they would prefer working with men instead of women because men tend to be less emotional and act faster when making decisions (2017). This is a particularly interesting point to analyze in this study because not much research was found that addresses this finding or the potential negative impact that women have on each other's careers.

Added Value of Women in Leadership

There is significant research that recognizes the added value of women in leadership positions. Czabanowska et al. found that in healthcare leadership, women's strength and perseverance add just as much value as their more typically-cited female qualities, such as emotional intelligence, empathy, and intuition (2017). Research supports the notion that companies perform better when they include women in leadership positions, possibly because of skills such as empathy, emotional intelligence, intuition, perseverance, and ability to multi-task (Czabanowska et al., 2017). Yet, female representation in the highest corporate leadership positions in the United States is only 15.7% (Czabanowska et al., 2017).

Strategies for Women

In order for women to become successful leaders, specific skills and strategies need to be identified that will support their advancement. Both men and women interviewed by Bismark et al. noted that there is less representation of women in leadership, but that leadership roles went to the people with the strongest skills for the position (2015). Unfortunately, women may not have the opportunities, guidance, or support structures

necessary to develop these critical skills that would position them to take on and thrive in leadership roles.

Some key strategies have been suggested for women to overcome these negative, and often inaccurate, perceptions. These strategies include using adaptable approaches leadership, building informal networks necessary for advancement (e.g. mentors and sponsors), and increasing individual self-efficacy (Van Oosten et al., 2017). Van Oosten et al. suggested that innovative approaches to include women, especially in male-dominant fields, need to be utilized (2017). One approach that Van Oosten et al. found to be effective was partnering women with coaches and mentors who could provide specific career advice and help them learn and implement strategies to advance their careers (2017).

Responding to the Literature

This study responds to the current research by investigating the practical strategies women who hold leadership positions have utilized in order to advance to positions of leadership and maintain and flourish in those positions. The literature suggests skills and strategies for women to overcome gender bias and develop into successful leaders. But, the practical application of this advice may prove more challenging, or less effective, than it seems. Additionally, as aforementioned, research suggests women need informal networks, and this study considers the kinds of networks women have utilized, including how to develop relationships with mentors, build connections, and advocate for themselves (Van Oosten et al., 2017). This study addresses how the women have used the previously described strategies to overcome bias, and whether or not those strategies have been successful for them, or if they recommend using different approaches.

Public Health Significance

Gender bias in general, and especially in a professional setting, is detrimental to both men and women. While gender bias and workplace harassment may be less overt now, the micro-aggressions women can experience in the workplace due to their gender can negatively impact their self-esteem, their identities as women, and their overall mental wellbeing (Nadal, et al., 2012). Reports from all over the world describe how gender bias and discrimination at work can lead to increased stress, and experiencing gender bias is associated with an increased risk for poor health (Goradia, 2018; Perry, 2013). Stress can have a wide array of health implications, especially on women who are, in many cases, expected to also be responsible for the household tasks. Having the responsibilities of work and the home and family contribute to why women are reported to feel more stress and psychological distress at work than men (Harris et al., 2016).

In addition to the added stress and the negative impact gender bias can have on women's emotional and psychological wellbeing, gender bias can also impact a woman's financial status. Far fewer women hold leadership roles compared to men. Women are already often under-compensated compared to their male counterparts (Johns, 2013). Women then face fewer advancement opportunities and are financially affected as a result. This can lead to feeling increased stress as well as affecting the woman's ability to take care of her health and access health resources.

As aforementioned, the issue of gender bias and limited female professional advancement is of particular importance in the healthcare industry. In healthcare, the discrepancy between female presence in general and female representation in leadership is

particularly evident. Women are a majority of the workforce in the healthcare industry, yet only 4% of healthcare company CEOs are women despite the fact that 73% are managers (Chase, 2012). Healthcare is limited by the lack of female perspectives and experiences at the highest decision-making levels that could inform the direction and approach of healthcare. The healthcare industry aims at improving the health of the general population, which includes men and women as stakeholders and customers. Women need to be actively engaged as leaders within healthcare in order to best address the health needs of the population.

Research Question and Objectives

Rationale

This study addresses key elements from the literature and provides insights to better understand the experiences of female leaders. Interviews from a qualitative research study were analyzed in order to get specific information about challenges, shared experiences and observed instances of gender bias.

Additionally, this research is important because both women and men have reported that they either do not believe gender bias exists, or that, if it does, women are not actually negatively impacted by it (Bismark et al., 2015). Furthermore, bias is often not overt, so it may be harder to recognize and, therefore, to overcome. Statistics and quantitative data are already abundant to show the extent of the problem of gender bias. Qualitative studies can help better understand what the life experiences are and how those experiences can explain why more progress has not been achieved in both reducing gender bias and having representative numbers of women in professional leadership roles.

Research Question and Objectives

This study explored the intersection of gender bias and the ascension of women into leadership positions across industries through personal interviews. The research question at hand is about how successful women leaders advanced to and flourished in their leadership positions. The objectives are to determine the skills and strategies that have contributed to their success, how those skills were developed and could be developed in future leaders, what challenges they had to overcome (or, perhaps, were unable to overcome) during their career, and what should be done now to reduce the impact of gender bias on women's careers. A qualitative research study was appropriate to achieve these primary objectives, because the use of qualitative interviews of both men and women about gender bias for similar purposes have previously been performed (Bismark et al, 2015; Czabanowska et al., 2017). Qualitative research also provides rich, in-depth contextual data on individual experience, which could illuminate nuances about gender bias and experience in a way quantitative would not.

The objectives were achieved primarily through a set of direct, open-ended questions about these topics. The question set was written based on a review of the literature. Each interview was different, because follow-up questions were specifically tailored to better elucidate each woman's experience. In addition to sharing their own experiences, the women are asked to provide advice to women about gender bias and the process of developing leadership skills. Additionally, some of the objectives were addressed indirectly through the answers the women provided to other questions that illuminated the social, internal, or other challenges they have faced.

METHODS

Study Design and Setting

This study analyzes data collected through a series of qualitative interviews. This study takes an applied research approach by contributing to the current field of knowledge around women in leadership. It provides an improved understanding of the existing challenges for women and aims at beginning to identify areas for solutions to be developed. Thematic Content Analysis was used to analyze the interviews and elucidate common themes from the women's experiences.

This study, from its inception through analysis, took place between January 2018 and March 2019 in Houston, Texas, a large, metropolitan area. The interviews were conducted in various locations of the participants' choosing. Seven of the interviews were conducted via phone.

Participants and Recruitment Strategy

This study included 26 women between 35 – 70 years of age who hold, or recently held, advanced professional leadership positions of the manager level or higher. Women of various ages were chosen to investigate potential differences in their experiences due to their generation in the workplace. While the exact level of positions does not directly translate between certain industries (e.g. leadership structures and qualifications in research are different from those in financial services), all of the women had to be well-known and established as leaders within their field.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Caucasian	Asian-American	Indian	Black	Hispanic	Middle Eastern	Heterosexual	Married	Children
N=20	N=1	N=1	N=1	N=2	N=1	N=25	N=23	N=23

Table 2: Participant Industries

Financial Services	Law/ Legal Advising	Healthcare	Consulting	Oil & Gas	Academia/ Research	Real Estate	Accounting/ Audit	Publishing	Non-Profit
N=3	N=4	N=4	N=3	N=3	N=3	N=1	N=3	N=1	N=1

The inclusion criteria were that participants needed to identify as a woman and have leadership experience in their industry at a senior level. Women of any race, ethnicity, or other demographic background could be included. The exclusion criteria included not identifying as a woman and not having significant leadership experience in the workforce. Women who may have held leadership roles outside of the workforce only were not included.

The women were identified predominantly through convenience sampling or referrals from other participants. The study participants were recruited through other women in leadership roles or interpersonal connections through people who know the study participant and the researcher. The participants were then emailed a description of the project and asked for their participation.

Sample Size Calculation

The sample size for the qualitative interviews were based on standards for qualitative research as described by Patton and Marshall (2015, 1996). A small, purposeful sample of 26 participants were interviewed. Marshall determined that for qualitative research, a sample size of 24 or more participants was sufficient to achieve saturation (1996). All of the interviews conducted are included in the analysis provided in this study. This sample size is sufficient due to the in-depth nature of the interviews, which lasted from thirty-five minutes to two hours. Each interview provided useable data for analysis.

Data Collection

The data was collected through a one-point-in-time data collection method and used a group characteristics sampling strategy of a group with a depth of information and experience to determine both individual and shared experiences between the participants. Data was collected primarily through in-person interviews, which was the preferred collection method. Some data was collected remotely through phone interviews. Each woman was asked questions from a set of pre-written, research-based questions. The questions were written with the intent of allowing each participant the opportunity to elaborate on their own personal experiences. The trajectory of the interview and additional follow-up questions varied from participant to participant depending on her own experiences and insights. Women were allowed to interpret the questions and the context of the interview however they felt was most applicable to their experience.

Data Analysis

The interviews and interview notes were transcribed in Microsoft Word, and the interviews were coded by a single coder. All of the interviews provided usable data. The coding process consisted of identifying specific codes, or phrases to describe categories of data, that were then organized into broader families and themes. The codes were specifically assigned to quotes to categorize the data. The coding process was done using a word processor and Microsoft Excel, and the coding was performed continuously as each interview was transcribed. Thematic Content Analysis was performed to analyze the data by identifying common themes that emerged from the coding process. The most salient themes (<5) were selected for further discussion in this paper. The themes chosen for this paper had a substantial amount of data associated with the specific codes.

Human Subjects Safety Considerations

This research uses information, including identifiable information. Those interviews were de-identified to ensure that confidentiality of each participant is protected. Recordings of the interviews will be destroyed upon the completion of this study. Approval was required for the use of data derived from human participants. The Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects determined that this study qualified for exemption status according to 45 CFR 46.101(b); the approval number is HSC-SPH-18-1069 and the written confirmations of approval are included in Appendix A and Appendix B.

RESULTS

Theme 1: Social Challenges Due to Appearance and Perceptions of Age

The women interviewed for this study discussed a number of social challenges that they felt negatively affected their career. One of the predominant challenges was the judgments they felt their male colleagues made about their appearance. The women felt that they needed to be more intentional and considerate of their appearance than their male colleagues in order to be taken seriously. For example, one woman reported that once, when she was at a conference at a major hospital, she saw an event about dressing for success for women, "but you don't see that for men" (Senior Leader at a Health Sciences School and Prominent Researcher, 50-55). She noted that there are "so many events for women in leadership that aren't about skill but are about appearance" (Senior Leader at a Health Sciences School and Prominent Researcher, 50-55).

Some of the women described that it was particularly challenging when specific judgments about their appearance were targeted around their actual, or perceived, age. One woman described her experience as a young in-house attorney:

> "When I would come into the room to take a deposition as a 32-year-old young woman, I could tell they [the older, white millionaire plaintiffs] thought they could take advantage of me because I was younger and a woman and some of them would be probably more belligerent than they would have been to a male counterpart during depositions" (Manager of Litigation at an International Oil and Gas Company, 40-45).

The appearance of this woman as young led to a situation in which she felt her coworkers treated her with less respect than they would have if she were a male of the same age and experience level. Many of the women felt that judgments about their age from male

co-workers hindered their coworkers from taking them seriously, which is an experience they observed that their male counterparts did not face.

As a result of the perceived ageism, some women felt that they needed to prove themselves and their competence twice: once for being a woman and once for seeming too young. When asked about these social challenges, one woman explained that "there's still a, you know, the presumption is you've got to prove yourself to me, as opposed to with men sometimes it's 'I'll give you the benefit of the doubt until you screw up'" (Chair of a Litigation Practice at International Law Firm, 55-59).

Additionally, another woman described that she "worked doubly hard" to "prove herself" and her value to the company for which she worked (Executive Vice President and General Counsel for an Energy Company, 55-59). This came as a result of being the only woman executive on the team, which was a first for her company; she was also the youngest by a significant margin. She felt "a lot of skepticism about [her] experience and skills" (Executive Vice President and General Counsel for an Energy Company, 55-59).

The woman did acknowledge that the social challenges they faced improved as they aged. One participant described that she has "become good enough that now people assume [she's] right" and that "age makes a huge difference" in this assumption; she is now "older than most lawyers, which adds to a level of respect" (Member of Executive Committee at an International Law Firm, 60-65).

While women reported in general that their appearance contributed to social challenges in the workplace, these challenges were compounded when it was their perceived age that was judged. Being perceived as young led the women to feel that they were not

taken as seriously and needed to prove their competency in a way that their male counterparts did not. Perceived age negatively impacted them and contributed to a perception by their co-workers that they may be less qualified or less capable; the women did not feel that their male counterparts faced this same challenge.

Theme 2: Self-Advocacy

One strategy that the women discussed to address the myriad of social challenges they faced was through advocating for themselves. One participant explained that self-advocacy was vitally important for her professional career advancement. She articulated that:

> "Some women leaders think you should just work hard and prove yourself and then it will get rewarded. I disagree. Yes, of course, you have to work hard and prove yourself but you can't wait for someone to give you the next promotion or the next project that you need to build your resume. You have to speak up. Men ask for what they want – position, money, etc. We should do the same." (Senior Vice President for a Real Estate Operations, Risk Management, and Sustainability Firm, 50-55).

Without self-advocacy, this participant would likely not have had the same professional opportunities, and it is important for women to speak up about opportunities that they want, because, often, their male peers do not hesitate to do so.

The need to advocate for oneself was particularly apparent when the women were asked about compensation throughout their careers. One woman described a situation (when she worked in financial services early in her career) in which which her

> "year-end bonus, they gave to one of the other commercial lenders, and they said it was for, you know, incentive for the work ahead and not for the work that he had done, so half my bonus went to him because I was leaving" (Former Vice Dean, Director of Admissions for an Elite University, 40-45).

This woman was not satisfied with this re-distribution of her bonus, and she decided to address it with her superiors. She explained that she "fought hard for it, and I didn't get it

all back, but I did get back half of what I was owed" (Former Vice Dean, Director of Admissions for an Elite University, 40-45). While this woman was not awarded her entire bonus, she was better off after advocating for herself and trying to get back what she was owed than if she had decided not to advocate for herself.

Additionally, self-advocacy is an extremely valuable skill when negotiating a contract, even though it can prove particularly challenging or uncomfortable for women. One participant described:

> "I got advice from a male who's senior to me... who actually gave me very specific advice how to negotiate my first contract. You know, I never… it's very un-lady-like, right, to ask for more money, it's not Asian-like, and it's not lady-like, and it's very not me. It was extremely uncomfortable…and that was a really, uh, important development moment for me personally to ask for more money and sort of stand up for myself, and it actually worked" (Associate Professor of Gynecological Oncology, 40-45).

This participant addressed that self-advocacy, especially around compensation, can be an uncomfortable experience for women for a number of reasons. But, the women reported that is critical for women to be able to negotiate and advocate if they want equitable opportunities.

It was acknowledged that a critical element of advocating for oneself includes knowing how to do so appropriately. One woman stated that she became aware of a time in which her compensation was lower than her peers'. She "did talk to the superior about it" and "[knows she] got bigger increases along the way than [she] would've otherwise", but she also emphasized that "you have to pick your spots" (Former Market President and Senior Executive for an International Financial Services Firm, 60-65). She noted that

> "when giving someone feedback that they don't want to hear, you have to pick the right time and place, but be persistent; if it bothers you enough and they don't do something about it, then you have to consider choices about staying with that company" (Former Market President and Senior Executive for an International Financial Services Firm, 60-65).

Self-advocacy was reported to be an important skill that led to career advancement and improvement in compensation. Advocating for oneself did not guarantee that the women would accomplish exactly what they wanted, but it was still necessary to speak up for what they believe they deserved. Additionally, advocating for oneself should be done in an intentional and mindful way.

Theme 3: Sponsorship

All of the women were asked about their experiences with mentorship. In their responses, a number of women brought up that they had benefitted from sponsors, or people who provided opportunities for career advancement, in addition to mentors, people who provided guidance or advice. One woman explained that sponsorship is particularly important because sponsors "make sure you get the right experiences…to progress" and while "mentors sort of coach you", "sponsorship is what accelerates your career" (Principal at a Top Accounting Firm, 40-45).

One of the women discussed how necessary it is to have sponsors, because they are often the people in positions of power to advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves. She stated that she is "somebody who has experienced male, the male people, helping me", and that this help occurred when the men "actually became sponsors and demonstrated how I could help others" (Marketplace Strategist and Consultant and Founder of Own Consulting Company, 55-59). Sponsorship was critical to her because one of her

male sponsors "was in the room when I wasn't and he could advocate for me" and he "was really being my cheerleader when I wasn't there" (Marketplace Strategist and Consultant and Founder of Own Consulting Company, 55-59).

An additional advantage of having a sponsor is that they can help rectify situations in which women are negatively affected by bias. One woman explained that she became aware that she was not being compensated equally, and her "compensation was drastically changed when [her] male sponsor went up to bat for [her]", which resulted in a nearly 50 percent increase in her salary (Former Chief Strategy Officer and Managing Partner of a Major Consulting & Accounting Firm, 60-65).

Finally, while these women leaders acknowledged the value of sponsorship, utilizing professional networks and sponsors may not be as easy for women. One participant noted:

> "I think men are very good at sponsoring each other, and I think women are less good… I certainly see that a lot of the sponsorship activities, even within my department, even though men are the minority, like, they're doing it for each other much, much, much more than women are doing it for the other women… I really think there is gender bias" (Associate Professor of Gynecological Oncology, 40-45`).

This participant acknowledged that, even when men have a smaller presence within a department, they still utilize sponsors more than their female coworkers.

Sponsors have the ability to go beyond providing mentorship and guidance to actually providing advancement opportunities. The women described that their careers were significantly positively impacted by the presence of supportive sponsors and that sponsorship was particularly helpful in addressing situations of inequity.

Theme 4: Personalizing the Issues for Men

When asked how men could be better educated about gender inequities, nearly half of the women responded that the issues that face women need to become personal for men. Nearly half of the woman responded similarly to one who said that "the men I see who get it the most are men who have daughters" (Partner Principal at a Top Accounting Firm, 40-45). Another participant expanded on the idea of personalization by explaining that men should "have a woman close to them, who is probably younger, experience inequity and…see it firsthand" in order to be better educated about inequities that exist in the workplace (Member of Executive Committee at an International Law Firm, 60-65). This woman gave the example that she works with five associates who are pregnant and "four all work for and are adored by men. At one point, these men would've been those to say 'oh don't hire women, they'll go and get pregnant' but now these guys all want to create better benefits for these women" (Member of Executive Committee at an International Law Firm, 60-65).

The role of personalization was also reported to help women connect with the men that they work with. One woman explained that:

> "Most of the men I work with have wives who stay home. One of my male colleagues doesn't and he's probably the guy I would talk with the most with about some of the things I would otherwise speak with the other women about. But his wife is like us. His wife is a very strong, educated, she's a lawyer, and so he gets along with all of us because he understands what our life is like" (Manager of Litigation at an International Oil and Gas Company, 40-45).

Another woman discussed how personalization of gender inequities could help men better consider advancing the capable women that they work with. Her advice to men is to,

> "look at the room, you're 95% male, you might all have a daughter and you want her to have every opportunity that your male counterparts have and that will make a difference. Go back to high school, who was your valedictorian? Who was your

> salutatorian? Who were your class officers? In my experience, 75% of those were female. They have the skills, so give them an opportunity to use them" (President and CEO of an Energy Systems and Solutions Company, 60-65).

The role of personalization was evident when the women who had sons were asked about their families. One woman explained that the family "is where development of kind leaders begins" (Member of Executive Committee at an International Law Firm, 60-65). Her professional achievements have led to her sons being "feminists and very attuned to women and women's issues… because [she has] talked with them about [her] life and [her] experiences" (Member of Executive Committee at an International Law Firm, 60-65).

Many of the other women discussed how being an accomplished leader has positively impacted the views of their sons. One woman said that seeing her as strong and successful "has made [her son] better able to deal with female supervisors. He gets it. He is able to look at different decision-making styles" (Litigator named to *Best Lawyers in America*, 60-65). Another woman stated that her daughters and son "expect women to be strong and assertive… it would never occur to them that a woman couldn't do the same thing as a man" (Senior Vice President for a Real Estate Operations, Risk Management, and Sustainability Firm, 50-55).

Several of the women felt that the best way to educate men about gender bias and gender inequities is through personalization. The role of personalization was found to impact the views of several of the women's sons, who, because of the professional achievements of their mothers, were more aware of gender issues and expected women to be equally capable.

DISCUSSION

This study took a qualitative approach to understanding the experiences and challenges of women in leadership positions and how they overcame gender bias to succeed in their roles. This study aimed to better understand the skills that women who have become successful leaders have utilized and the strategies that have contributed to their success. This study also tried to address how gender bias could be rectified moving forward. After a review of the literature and an identification of areas for increased research, the most salient themes that emerged from the interviews in this study were analyzed. These themes included that age had as much of a perceived negative impact on these women as gender, that women's careers were positively influenced by self-advocacy, that these women were benefitted by sponsors in a different way than mentors, and that men can be educated about gender bias through personalization.

Social Challenges Due to Appearance and Perceptions of Age

The women explained that judgments from male coworkers about their appearance and, specifically, perceptions about the women's age, were particularly prevalent. The literature states that women are often viewed as less capable and competent by their male coworkers (Carnes et al., 2015). Women may then come to view themselves as less capable and be less inclined to pursue leadership positions (Carnes et al., 2015). Women may be perceived as less capable because of their physical appearance. Women can feel judgments about aspects of their appearance including weight, dress, and makeup (Howard, 2018). Women can also be judged on their hair color, which could indicate age. It is interesting that Howard notes that none of the 32 Fortune 500 female CEOs in 2018 had gray hair (2018).

While many women in the workforce make adjustments to appear younger, participants in this study reported that being perceived as too young was detrimental to their careers. The literature discussed perceptions of men towards their female coworkers but did not specifically mention the impact of perceptions that women were too young or younger than they actually were. The negative viewpoints that these women experienced due to perceptions of youth impacted how they felt in their roles as a result. Some of the women in this study reported that they did feel that men treated them with less respect or did not think they were as competent because of their appearance, including their perceived age.

Several of the women discussed that these judgments about their capabilities (or lack thereof) made them feel that they needed to prove themselves twice to overcome the criticisms about their gender compounded with their perceived age. Additionally, one woman addressed that she felt that she needed to prove herself to her male superiors while her male colleagues were given the benefit of the doubt and afforded an opportunity to fail. Women may feel that men are implicitly given respect from their superiors while women have to earn that same respect over time. The challenge of having to prove oneself creates additional barriers for women and can lead to internal feelings of incapability and lower self-efficacy. These feelings of being unqualified or undeserving may be a contributing reason that women do not actively seek leadership roles. Men, however, are not affected by this same kind of stereotype threat. The women in this study perceived that their male counterparts did not have to overcome obstacles imposed by their appeared age or gender. Additionally, men do not have to consider their general appearance to the extent that their female coworkers do with regards to dress and physical presentation beyond perceived age.

Of particular interest from these findings is unique intersection between age, appearance and gender. The combination of these factors creates an even greater challenge to women's career advancement than each does individually. An additional area of interest is that it was not necessarily the woman's actual age that they felt created barriers but how old their male coworkers perceived them to be. This is must be delicately balanced with not appearing to be too old, which is associated with its own set of challenges (Howard, 2018). The women indicated that the social challenges they faced, due to age or not, were alleviated as they got older. Of course, this could be due to a number of other causes, including their increased experience and confidence in themselves. It is possible that appearing older granted them increased respect from their male colleagues. Being perceived as older may be associated with increased competence or enough experience that makes them deserving of being taken seriously. Further research should be done on the impact of perceptions of age, especially how these perceptions may differ across male- and female-dominant industries. Additionally, the border between appearing too young and appearing too old could be a target for future study.

Self-Advocacy

The literature indicates that women speaking up for themselves confidently is a very useful skill for career advancement and opportunities (Van Oosten et al., 2017). Self-advocacy is largely about communication, which has been found to be a critical leadership skill (Tariq et al., 2017; Czabanowska et al., 2017). This study affirmed that self-advocacy can prove to be vital, especially with regards to negotiation and compensation. Wade noted that women have the potential to lose more than they gain when self-advocating (2001). In

this study, multiple participants reported that, in situations where they needed to advocate for their compensation, they were successful in receiving more than they initially did. They also stated that it was at least worth trying to self-advocate instead of accepting a situation in which they were treated unfairly.

This study also found that self-advocacy proved to be important beyond situations of salary negotiation. Self-advocacy is also critically important in taking advantage of career opportunities. One participant observed that men often ask for what they want, and women need to be better about that if they want the same kinds of advancement opportunities.

Self-advocacy can be challenging, uncomfortable, and a delicate process. In this study, the women addressed the challenges of self-advocacy, which are supported in the literature (Janoff-Bulman et al., 1996; Wade, 2001). Self-advocacy is often unintuitive and contrary to what women may consider to be polite or appropriate, when, in reality, it is necessary for advancement opportunities. These challenges include that, due to stereotypes, women have a heightened awareness of their communication and that self-advocacy can come at a professional risk for them that their male counterparts do not face, creating a "gendered difference" in advocacy outcomes (Wade, 2001).

Wade suggests that men may not be receptive to a woman advocating for herself because she fails to conform with ingrained stereotypes about how women should behave (2001). This study did not find that the women were negatively impacted by their attempts at self-advocating. The women certainly did not report that they were entirely successful every time they advocated for themselves, but they did not indicate that self-advocacy harmed their careers. This study took place nearly two decades after that of Wade. While gender bias is

still prevalent in the workforce, this elapsed time could account for a shift in certain workplace attitudes towards women and responses to deviating from expected female behavior. Additionally, this study only included women who became successful leaders; these women may have been better equipped to advocate for themselves, especially considering that they had other skills that aided them in advancing into leadership roles. They could have already refined their communication skills when they advocated and had an elevated level of awareness about when and how to advocate. Some of the women stated that they went into salary negotiations prepared with data about their performance, which likely attributed to their success in those conversations.

It is possible that at least some of the women in this study may have experienced some detrimental feedback when self-advocating. The women were not asked pointedly about negative experiences with self-advocacy, so they may have only chosen to share the positive ones, or felt that, even if they had experienced a negative reaction to self-advocacy, it is still a useful skill overall. One woman acknowledged that the process of self-advocacy is a nuanced one. She made a point of saying that women need to be mindful about how they approach situations in which they advocate for themselves. The participants encouraged women to consider the context and setting in which they discuss the issues they wish to address and to persist when advocating for something they really want. Additionally, one participant noted that certain situations may necessitate leaving the company if the issues being addressed are not resolved.

Future studies could try to evaluate the differences in approaches to self-advocacy between men and women. The participants in this study acknowledged that they find men to

be better at advocating for themselves than women are, but a further line of questioning could include if, when they do advocate for themselves, women use a different communication style than their male colleagues, and, if certain kinds of communication are more successful than others. Furthermore, a specific area for future study is that of negotiation, which is a critical skill. The women in this study reported that men are often better at negotiating, especially regarding compensation, so studies could address to what extent this is believed to be true in practice and how women can become better negotiators.

Sponsorship

While self-advocacy is a valuable skill, there are some instances in which women are not in a position to advocate for themselves; this is when sponsors are of vital importance. The literature suggests that having formal and informal professional networks is necessary for success (Van Oosten et al., 2017). While research suggests the positive influence of having a mentor, most of the women in this study reported having professional networks that were more extensive (Van Oosten et al., 2017, Czabanowska, 2017). These networks included other co-workers, leadership equivalents at other companies, and, most importantly, sponsors who sought to promote their careers.

Sponsors provide opportunities in a way mentors do not. Sponsors advance careers and provide unique opportunities. They are able to advocate on behalf of women. Multiple women gave examples of how their sponsors supported their careers when the women themselves were not able to be in the room. The women emphasized sponsorship to a surprising degree. They claimed it to be not merely important but absolutely vital in advancement and professional success. The participants who spoke about sponsorship

typically referred to supportive male sponsors with whom they formed connections, which is unsurprising considering that even in the current workforce the vast majority of leaders, and, therefore, the people in a position to sponsor others, are men. It is important for men to be aware that the women with whom they work will likely need male sponsors in addition to female ones, and they should actively sponsor their female coworker and support their career advancement.

Contrastingly, the women in this study addressed that it can be challenging to build supportive, professional networks with other *women*. An interesting and important nuance of sponsorship came from an observation from one participant who said that men are much better at sponsoring each other than women are. Nearly all of the women in this study specifically mentioned the important role of sponsorship. Yet, this participant has noticed that, even in her female-dominant department, men are better at sponsoring each other than the women are, and women do not take advantage of sponsorship opportunities as much as their male peers do. This possibly supports the findings by Czabanowska et al. that women prefer working with men over working with other women (2017).

Many of the women in this study noted that they try to actively support the careers of younger women, because they have experienced a lack of support from women with whom they have previously worked. This could be due to the fact that women are not as aware about the benefits of utilizing professional networks, and, therefore, do not know to sponsor each other, or there is a perceived competition between female coworkers that results in an active choice to not become sponsors. Regardless, women need to be more proactive in

advocating for themselves, finding sponsors to advocate on their behalf, and supporting the careers of their female coworkers.

Personalizing issues for men

It was particularly interesting that a majority of the women responded that men could be better educated about gender bias by having daughters. Some of these women elaborated on this point by adding that men could be educated by having wives, especially wives with careers. The women tended to believe that men need to have a personal connection to gender bias in order to best understand the influences it truly has. The women stated that, often, the men with whom they were best able to connect were those who had wives who also had careers, which gave them personal insights into the additional challenges women face and the ways in which gender bias can manifest. Many of the women who had sons discussed the positive viewpoints their sons have of women, especially women who want or have careers. These findings suggest that men can learn to both support women in the workforce and work more effectively with them. For example, one woman noted that her son is better able to communicate with and learn from female superiors because of what he has learned from his mother's professional experiences. These lessons have better prepared him to work with other women.

Desai et al. found that men who are married to women who do not work are more likely to disfavor women in the workforce or limit their female co-workers' advancement than all other men (2014). Men who do not have a personal connection to the impact of gender bias may be less likely to support the women with whom they work. Furthermore, Desai et al. reported that men who were single but then married women who did not work shifted into

having less positive views of their female coworkers (2014). This is particularly concerning and makes the need for personalization even more significant. Men need to be able to recognize gender bias and the ways in which their beliefs and behaviors may be limiting their female coworkers' advancement due to their own lack of understanding about gender inequities.

Lack of personalization could serve as a possible explanation for Desai et al.'s findings (2014). Men who are not exposed to the negative effects of gender bias and inequities in the workforce may not believe that those inequities exist. If they do not believe in the existence of gender bias but still have to attend trainings about bias or overhear complaints from their female coworkers, they may formulate negative perceptions or become resentful towards their female coworkers. An area for future research could be that of determining the veracity of the opposite of Desai et al.'s study by looking at men who shift from negative perceptions of their female coworkers to positive ones. It would be interesting to know if men who, initially, were married to women who did not work then later entered the workforce changed their views on their female coworkers.

The overall consensus from the participants of this study was that, in order to remedy the negative effects of gender bias, men need to be a part of the solution. Men need to be involved in confronting their own potential biases, which may include biases regarding appearance, allowing space for women to advocate for themselves, and then advocating for women when they are unable to advocate for themselves. They can do this by playing the role of sponsors. Men can move from mentoring women to sponsoring their careers and professional development. Some of the participants specifically noted the ways in which their

male superiors supported their careers and the positive effects this support had. The benefits ranged from developing skills to negotiate contracts to increasing salaries to be equitable to fighting for women to have the opportunities that they deserved. Men need to be aware that women face unique challenges. One woman brought up that she had not considered negotiating a higher salary, but her male superior was adamant that she do so. Men may not realize the preconceived norms they hold against women in the workforce and how women may have to overcome internal and external barriers in order to become successful. Personalization of gender inequities can help men reach a better understanding of how they can actively support the advancement of women.

This study suggests that personalization could be a potentially effective strategy for education about gender bias, which deserves consideration. One merely needs to look at the current number of women in leadership roles to know that the approaches to gender bias training (or bias training in general) have been, clearly, of limited success. Kalev et al. explain that diversity trainings increased in popularity as a response to sex discrimination lawsuits in financial services the 1990s, yet diversity representation at the managerial level has not improved much, if at all, since 2000 (2016). They suggest that questionnaires, negative rhetoric, and compulsory trainings often lead to even more negative attitudes (Kalev et al., 2016). While personalization could be a new approach, it is important to contemplate how to address personalization in a way that is appropriate and that will be well-received. Trainings may be more effective by including examples and descriptions of gender bias in a way that becomes personal to men, even men who may not have wives or other significant

women in their lives who have careers. Future research should include personalization as a novel tactic for aiding in a better understanding of gender bias.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study found similarities in experiences rom women in different industries and of various age groups. These women shared their experiences with gender bias and how they have been able to succeed in high-level leadership roles. While gender bias still creates barriers to success, women can succeed professionally in spite of it. The women described that they observed that they had to have a heightened awareness of how they appeared to their male coworkers, including that there were additional barriers when they were perceived to be young. This study found that there are numerous strategies women can utilize in order to confront gender bias, including self-advocacy and developing relationships with sponsors. Finally, men need to play an active role in addressing bias, and one of the best ways for them to educated is through personalization.

What stands out about the women who participated in this study is that they succeeded in spite of numerous internal and external obstacles. They provide hope to younger women that they can set high, yet attainable career goals. They gave recommendations for young women to learn and develop skills that will help them succeed before they enter the workforce. When it came to asking for advice and recommendations, the answers flowed.

The field of healthcare requires an increased presence of women in leadership in order to accurately represent the population of patients served. Women need to be included in deciding the future directions of the field in order to best address the specific challenges of female-patients, which often include increased stress, emotional distress, and experiences with harassment from their workplace environments. Additionally, women need to be aware of how to advocate for themselves in order to begin addressing the extensive gap in

compensation that women face compared with their male counterparts. Under-compensation can contribute to the financial stress and limit those women's ability to access health-promoting resources. Of particular importance is that even in female-dominant fields, such as healthcare, women may still not be advancing into leadership roles, be supported by their male colleagues, or actively utilizing strategies to succeed.

Strengths and Limitations

This study sought to understand the specific experiences of women in leadership positions. These experiences included how they observed or personally were affected by gender bias, social challenges they faced, and how they overcame barriers to career advancement in order to become successful leaders in their fields. The perspectives that were shared contribute to the growing body of research on gender bias and how to support women in leadership. While this study did include perspectives from women of various ages and industries, it is not without its own limitations. Participants for this study were largely recruited through convenience sampling. They were often referred to participate in the study through other female leaders. This group may not include the perspectives of all women in leadership roles. Additionally, this study aimed to include a diverse group of participants, but it only included one to four participants from any given industry. There may be nuances of experiences with gender bias that were lost due to the inclusion of so few participants from each professional sector. And, while there was some cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity of the participants, these intersecting identities could contribute to how women experience workplace bias and how they address it. These approaches to gender bias were out of the scope of this study. Additionally, only one coder was used to code all of the interviews. This

could limit the reliability of findings because, while the analysis was issue-specific, the study included twenty-six interviews (Weiss, 1994). A further limitation is that this single coder was not highly experienced. Thus, certain nuances of identifying or classifying themes may have been lost during the analysis process. Another limitation is that the interviews took on various forms. Not all of the interviews were able to be recorded or performed in person. In cases where the interviews were not recorded, detailed notes were taken throughout the interview and immediately following.

A new perspective could be investigating the views of men and their perceptions of gender equity in their organizations. Research has shown that more men believe there is gender equity in their organization than their female peers (86% compared to 69%) (Johns, 2018). Additional research could investigate the in-depth experiences of men who work with women in leadership. Additionally, while the diversity of women in leadership roles is currently limited, the intersection of different identities (racial, ethnic, etc.) with gender could be an area for future research.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services

MEMORANDUM

TO: Brynn Harris

FROM: Nesh Aqrawi
Assistant Director for Academic Affairs

RE: Thesis Proposal

DATE: December 20, 2018

TITLE: Women in Leadership: A Qualitative Review of Challenges, Experiences, and Strategies in Addressing Gender Bias

Your proposal has been reviewed and approved by The University of Texas School of Public Health
at Houston Office of Academic Affairs and Student Services. Your proposal was determined to be exempt by The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) Committee for the
Protection of Human Subjects as study # HSC-SPH-18-1069. You may proceed with your research.

Cc: Melissa Peskin, PhD
Susan Tortolero Emery, PhD

Appendix B: COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS

APPROVAL LETTER

Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects
6410 Fannin Street, Suite 1160
Houston, Texas 77030

Brynn Harris
School of Public Health

December 11, 2018

HSC-SPH-18-1069 - *Women in Leadership: A Qualitative Review of Challenges, Experiences, and Strategies in Addressing Gender Bias*

The above named project is determined to qualify for exempt status according to 45 CFR 46.101(b)

CATEGORY #4 *: Research, involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.*

CHANGES: Should you choose to make any changes to the protocol that would involve the inclusion of human subjects or identified data from humans, please submit the change via iRIS to the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects for review.

INFORMED CONSENT DETERMINATION:
Waiver of Consent Granted

HEALTH INSURANCE PORTABILITY and ACCOUNTABILITY ACT (HIPAA):
Exempt from HIPAA

STUDY CLOSURES: Upon completion of your project, submission of a study closure report is required. The study closure report should be submitted once all data has been collected and analyzed.

Should you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Support Committees at 713-500-7943.

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