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A Little Loud and a Little Alone: A Phenomenology of Leadership Identity Construction among Women in Higher Education Technology

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A LITTLE LOUD AND A LITTLE ALONE: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AMONG WOMEN IN HIGHER

EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY

by

Amy Barry

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University of Nebraska, 2024

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This qualitative study is an exploration of how women in higher education information technology (IT) positions navigate constructing their leadership identities. This includes the messy, personal, internal identity work that occurs prior to claiming their leadership identities on the public stage, followed by an examination of what the experience of attempting to claim and negotiate a leadership identity is like in the social context of their organizations. This educational and sociological study employs an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach with a series of three interviews per participant that allowed the researcher to deeply explore the personal identity experiences of participants. Findings reveal that women in IT experience challenges that can hinder their ability to successfully claim and establish a leadership identity. Women in IT and IT organizations will benefit from the knowledge generated in this study.

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It is literally impossible to be a woman. You are so beautiful, and so smart, and it kills me that you don't think you're good enough. Like, we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we're always doing it wrong. You have to be thin, but not too thin. And you can never say you want to be thin. You have to say you want to be healthy, but also you have to be thin. You have to have money, but you can't ask for money because that's crass. You have to be a boss, but you can't be mean. You have to lead, but you can't squash other people's ideas. You're supposed to love being a mother, but don't talk about your kids all the damn time. You have to be a career woman but also always be looking out for other people. You have to answer for men's bad behavior, which is insane, but if you point that out, you're accused of complaining. You're supposed to stay pretty for men, but not so pretty that you tempt them too much or that you threaten other women because you're supposed to be a part of the sisterhood. But always stand out and always be grateful. But never forget that the system is rigged. So find a way to acknowledge that but also always be grateful. You have to never get old, never be rude, never show off, never be selfish, never fall down, never fail, never show fear, never get out of line. It's too hard! It's too contradictory and nobody gives you a medal or says thank you! And it turns out in fact that not only are you doing everything wrong, but also everything is your fault. I'm just so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into knots so that people will like us. And if all of that is also true for a doll just representing women, then I don't even know.

—Gloria, *Barbie*, 2023

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Problem

In American colleges and universities, women hold a majority status compared to their male peers. According to the American Association of University Women (2022), there is prevalence of women in higher education in staff roles. There are also record numbers of women students in colleges and universities, with the number of women students reaching nearly 60% in the 2020-2021 academic year across the United States (Carrasco, 2021). Despite holding a majority status, the women on United States campuses do not have proportional representation when it comes to technology leadership on their campuses. This is problematic due to the ubiquitous nature of technology (Clark, 2012) and the broad-reaching implications that technology has on our day to day lives.

Both the National Center for Women & Information Technology (2022) and Ashcraft et al. (2016) reported that approximately only a quarter of information technology (IT) professionals are women. The proportions of women in IT do not improve for women in technology leadership positions, either. According to data from 2018, only 23% of Chief Information Officers are women (Galanek et al., 2019). Similarly, data from NCWIT (2022) revealed that in 2020 a mere 13% of U.S. Chief Technology Officer (CTO) positions were held by women (para. 1). What is preventing more women from advancing into IT leadership positions?

This qualitative study affirmed the concept of leadership identity construction as presented by DeRue and Ashford (2010) and explored how women in higher education information technology experience the construction of their own leadership identities. Since identity construction is a social process that is co-constructed and negotiated (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), I posit that gender bias plays a role in women's experiences with this process. This phenomenological study aimed to explore and describe the identity work that these women experience as they construct their identities and how they experience the social aspects of identity construction. In this way, this study is both educational and sociological in nature.

Context for the Study

The following sections detail the theoretical framework and key terminology for this study. Together, this information will provide helpful context through which the main components of this study can be understood.

Theoretical Framework

This research is undergirded by the theory of leadership identity as a social construction (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), which posits that an individual must first internalize a leader identity and then proceed to express that new identity as a claim to others. For that claim to become social reality, other individuals must relationally recognize it. If there is social agreement that the claim to leadership should be granted, that individual will then receive collective endorsement for their leadership identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). This research is also undergirded by the concept of identity work (Snow & Anderson, 1987), which is the self-building that people must undergo

prior to internalizing newfound identities. Since the traits that are commonly associated with leadership in American society often clash with the traits that are expected from female gender roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Phelan, 2008), I embarked on this research with the perspective that women may experience unique challenges as they attempt to claim and gain acceptance for their desired leadership identities.

Key Terminology

Women

For the purposes of this study, I define a woman as any adult person who identifies as a woman. I acknowledge that gender is a spectrum and that there are men, women, and non-binary persons who do not necessarily identify as men or women. I acknowledge that and choose to focus this study on the experiences of people who identify as women.

Microaggressions

The term microaggressions is used multiple times in this study's findings. Sue et al. (2007) stated that microaggressions are the everyday subtle (and not so subtle) derogations that serve to exclude and negate people who are in marginalized identities.

Higher Education Information Technology

In this study, I am exploring the leadership identity construction process in the context of higher education information technology organizations. Higher education IT organizations differ from other IT organizations by having a unique focus on serving faculty, students, and business processes at educational institutions. John (2015) defined higher education IT as "a combination of the processes and tools involved in addressing

the educational needs and problems by using computers and other related electronic

resources and technologies" (p. 233). With the focus on those educational needs and the

fact that IT organizations differ from institution to institution in terms of organizational

makeup, there are many variances in the key services and focuses that these organizations

provide. The priorities of a higher education IT organization depends on the needs of

their educational institution.

     IT also includes a wide-ranging and ever-changing assortment of technologies. To

this end, Dewett and Jones (2001) stated,

> Information technologies encompass a broad array of communication media and
> devices which link information systems and people including voice mail, e-mail,
> voice conferencing, video conferencing, the internet, groupware and corporate
> intranets, car phones, fax machines, personal digital assistants, and so on. (p. 314)

Though this article was written over 20 years ago, not much has changed besides the

specific technologies themselves - IT organizations still encompass and serve a broad

array of technological needs. Today, common departments that an IT organization might

include are client services (such as customer-facing technology support like a help desk),

phone services and telecommunications, academic technologies (if the IT organization is

in an educational institution), infrastructure and networking (including physical data port,

router, and cabling work), information security (including identity and access

management and security threat response), data analytics, and systems teams. Due to the

evolving nature of technology, IT organizations are complex, ever-changing, and

dynamic.

Statement of the Problem

For women in higher education, information technology is a male-dominated field. The few women that are in this field face biased processes and persistent masculine norms, stereotypes, lack of perceived support, narrowed pathways, isolation, and tokenization (Clark, 2013; Drury, 2010). It is important that the experiences of women in their gender-biased, male-dominant organizations are researched and elevated, so that we have a better understanding of these experiences and can endeavor to make change. This study seeks to make sense of why women in technology leadership (and aspiring leadership) positions take on a leader identity in such a challenging, isolating, barrier-ridden field and what the experience of expressing that identity is like in the context of gender biased organizations. Not only have there been calls for additional qualitative studies about women in information technology and leadership identity construction (Clark, 2012; DeRue & Ashford, 2010), but the primary problem that this study seeks to address is the lack of understanding around leadership identity processes for women in higher education information technology, a phenomenon that has been unexplored up until this time.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study is to explore the experiences of women in higher education information technology with leadership identity construction. An outcome of this study will be an essence statement that will describe the identity work and identity construction process that women in higher

education IT experience. Findings will be clustered in the style of thematic analysis to illustrate the participants' lived experiences with leadership identity construction.

Research Questions

The following central research question central will guide this qualitative study:

RQ: How do women in technology experience leadership identity construction in higher education information technology organizations?

The following subquestions will undergird this research:

SRQ1: What is the process of internalizing leadership identities like for women in higher education information technology organizations? What is the identity work that goes into that internalization like?

SRQ2: What is it like for women in higher education information technology to claim a leadership identity in their workplace social settings? How does gender-bias play a role?

Methodology

In this dissertation, I employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to study the experiences of women with leadership identity construction in higher education information technology settings. IPA is a suitable choice for studies in which nuance, sensitivity, and close attention to the particular is needed (Smith et al., 2009). A phenomenological approach allowed me to uplift the voices of my participants and construct meaning through their lived experience, eventually producing an essence statement of common meaning for the leadership identity construction process of these women (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Smith et al., 2009). A deep investment with one's

participants is necessary in IPA (Smith et al., 2009), and in the spirit of this I completed a series of three (Seidman, 2013) semi-structured interviews with each participant to establish rapport and gain an intimate understanding of their identity work processes, internalization of leadership identity, and experiences with claiming or expressing those identities in their IT organizations.

Importance of the Study

Contributions to the Literature

This study contributed to the literature that studies experiences of women in higher education information technology. As of 2024, there were only a handful of studies that examine the experiences of these women. Most of the literature is about women in information technology and not about the specific context of women in higher education information technology. For that matter, the little literature that does exist mostly focuses on the experiences of top leaders in higher education information technology who are women. This study seeks to examine the experiences of women at all levels of the organizational hierarchy, as long as they are aspiring leaders. This study will also contribute to the leadership identity construction literature, an area in which there have been calls for more qualitative work (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

Personal Understanding

As a woman in higher education information technology, I witness the male-dominated nature of my field every day. In Zoom meetings and office spaces, I am often the only woman in the room. I have struggled to advance myself as a leader in this male hegemony, and I am thrilled to have completed a study that has allowed me to learn more

about what leadership identity construction looks like for aspiring women leaders and to uplift the voices of women through qualitative research. This underscores a big piece of my positionality which I will elaborate on in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Professional Implications for Women in IT and IT Organizations

By examining the experiences of women in higher education information technology with leadership identity construction, this study provides a useful guide for aspiring women leaders in this field. Aspiring women leaders will gain insight into the common identity work that other women experience, what the process of identity internalization is like, and what happens when women try to claim a leadership identity in an information technology workplace. The findings of this study serve as a guide and reveal strategies that should make leadership identity construction more successful for women in social settings. This study acknowledges that sexism and anti-women bias are still very big factors for women in the workplace, and I have endeavored to provide strategies for women to work around those pervasive challenges.

This study also informs IT organizations and their administrators about the challenges which aspiring women leaders in their organizations face, informing them about how they can better support these women as they strive for leadership positions. In this way, this study provides IT organizations with new institutional pathways for support for their aspiring women leaders.

Researcher Bias

As a produced and constructed form of research where the researcher herself is the primary instrument (Creswell & Poth, 2024), qualitative research requires that the

researcher take on a reflective stance and acknowledge the bias that she is bringing into her study. As the researcher, I identify as an aspiring woman leader in higher education information technology, and I see this experience as a strength for this study that will allow me to reflect upon my data and uplift my participants' voices in a way that honors their realities. That is one of the reasons that I reject Moustakas' (1994) idea of epoche or bracketing out one's beliefs and experiences prior to conducting a phenomenological study. Smith et al.'s (2009) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis values the life experiences of the research and honors the researcher's ability to let those experiences shine through in the finished research product. While I believe that my background will be conducive to this study for those methodological reasons, I would like to acknowledge the following biases prior to this study:

- I am a woman in higher education information technology who works in a male-dominated department. In my immediate department at my institution as of 2023, there are 7 women out of 18 total full-time staff including myself. In my larger organization, there are far fewer women than this 38.9% number.

- I believe that gender bias and sexism are still prevalent in American society. I have experienced gender bias and sexism in my organization and believe that all women in the workplace have experienced some form of it.

- I am a woman who has strived to increase her leadership status in her organization, with mixed results. I believe that this is because of my gender.

- I have strong feelings that more women deserve to be in positions of leadership.

Summary

This qualitative phenomenological study seeks to explore and illustrate the experiences of women in higher education information technology organizations. As members of male-dominated organizations, these women face gender bias and sexism that seeps into their attempts to claim a leadership identity. This research study seeks to unveil and uplift their experiences, providing valuable contributions to women in IT, IT organizations, and the literature. In the following chapter, I will detail the literature and theoretical framework that will guide this study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

In the first part of this chapter, I will provide an overview of the literature that explores the experiences of women in information technology as well as the literature that examines the ways in which sexism and bias is manifested against women leaders. In the second part of this chapter, I will explore both components of the theoretical framework of this project - identity work and the social theory of leadership identity construction literature. Together, these four sections will provide the empirical and theoretical underpinnings of this dissertation.

Literature Review

The Status of Women in Information Technology

Multiple studies reveal that information technology is a male-dominated field. Both NCWIT (2022) and Ashcraft et al. (2016) provided data that shows that women hold only a quarter of computing occupations, and the numbers do not improve for women in technology leadership. According to data from 2018, only 23% of CIO [Chief Information Officer] positions are held by women (Galanek et al., 2019). Similarly, data from NCWIT (2022) revealed that in 2020 a mere 13% of U.S. Chief Technology Officer (CTO) positions were held by women. As gender marginalized members of the field, what are the experiences of these women? The following section will explore their experiences in the larger information technology context as well as the context of higher education information technology, specifically.

The Experiences of Women in Information Technology

The following section is a comprehensive overview of the most salient literature on the experiences of women in information technology. I searched the UNL Library EBSCO and Google Scholar Databases with the key terms "experiences of women" and "information technology." A variation of this search is that I performed it with and without adding on the key term "higher education" for both databases, since this literature review examines the experiences of women in IT in general and in higher education IT specifically. For this literature review, I chose to cite the most salient literature that has been most impactful to the field of study (e.g., having a high number of citations in other research or providing an original contribution to the topic area).

I have organized this first section by clustering the findings of the women in IT literature thematically. This literature is clustered into the following groups: challenges and barriers, career choice, career anchors and values, retention, gender stereotypes, women's experiences in information technology careers, mentoring and other support structures, gender imbalance and lack of female representation, career advancement for women in IT, the exclusivity of good old boys' clubs, and job embeddedness.

Challenges and Barriers. Several studies explored the challenges that are unique to women in information technology fields and attempted to provide an explanation for their underrepresentation. Trauth et al. (2009) examined organizational barriers to the retention of women in IT, providing opportunities for organizations to remediate their barriers through examples like increased workplace flexibility and mentoring. Rosenbloom et al. (2008) examined how personality might play a factor in women's

career choices. Their discussion examined that men and women value different aspects of work and have different preferences in what they want to do in their careers, terming this "occupational personality" (Rosenbloom et al., 2008, p. 553). However, I posit that this is deficit frame thinking since it puts the onus of the problem back by blaming women for lacking the right personality and not situating the issue in a larger systemic context. A report by the National Center for Women in Information Technology takes a different perspective for the cause of these challenges, using a sexism frame instead of a deficit frame (Ramsey & McCorduck, 2005). Ramsey and McCorduck (2005) stated that cultural stereotypes and a prevailing negative climate are the reasons for the challenges women experience in information technology positions.

Allen et. al (2006) used a conceptual framework to make sense of barriers that women in IT experience, including "work schedule flexibility, family responsibilities, work stress, job qualities, and lack of consistency in workplace policies" (p. 831). Armstrong et al. (2018) created a very similar list of barriers in their exploration of challenges that women in IT face, differentiating them into social factors and structural factors: social expectations, work-family conflict, occupational culture, lack of role models, lack of informal networks, and institutional structures. Hyrynsalmi (2019) revealed that women's perceptions of the field are peppered with low self-esteem and imposter syndrome, showing that women's own attitudes about working in the IT industry may be a potential barrier. Miles' (2009) dissertation is an exploration of challenges for women in IT, finding three key challenges: family, the influence of role models, and job satisfaction.

Career Choice. Calitz et al. (2020) evaluated the impact of culture on South African women's decisions to choose an IT career path. Their findings showed for women of some racial backgrounds, culture has no impact, and that for other women, culture has a positive impact - they found no negative impact from culture on women's decisions to enter the field (Calitz et al., 2020). Njoki et al. (2016) looked at IT career choice for undergraduate and graduate students, determining that the ostensibly narrow definition of IT (which is a fallacy) is a deterrent to more students being interested in this path. Pretorius and de Villiers (2009) found that some women do not choose the IT industry for their career paths because they perceive that it is a male-dominated field.

Career Anchors and Values. Quesenberry and Trauth (2008) explored women's career anchors (career anchors meaning the skills and aspirations that influence one's choice of career). They determine that gender is not a sole determination of women's career anchors, and that women choose career paths based on a variety of other constructs (Quesenberry & Trauth, 2008). Quesenberry and Trauth (2012) continued to explore women's career values in their study, exploring them in the context of organizational interventions that might shape those values. They suggest that this is key - shaping perceptions of the IT field through interventions before negative perceptions are developed.

Retention. Annabi and Lebovitz (2018) examined retention of women in IT and attempt to determine whether interventions that companies use to address women leaving the industry are sufficient. They determine that most interventions are not sufficient to retain women and propose a theoretical framework as an assessment tool for the efficacy

of IT workplace interventions that seek to retain women. Annabi and Tari (2018) also explored retention, specifically in the context of if women affinity groups (a common IT organization strategy designed to help women) are helpful enough to solve the retention issue of women in IT. They address several limitations of women affinity groups and determine that more theoretically grounded study is needed in this area to evaluate their effectiveness.

Gender Stereotypes. There are both positive and negative stereotypes which may respectively help and hinder women in IT. In their article, Adams and Weiss (2011) presented an argument that women have a stereotype that works in their favor when it comes to leadership paths in technology: the stereotype that women are better than men at communicating and working with people. Trauth et al. (2016) examined negative stereotypes as they pertain to how others perceive the knowledge and skills of women in IT. They find four primary findings, all of which demonstrate the pervasiveness of masculine gender stereotypes in IT. Most shockingly, Trauth et al. (2016) stated, "First, our analyses clearly show that masculine gender stereotypes exist with respect to the skills and knowledge that an IT professional should possess" (p. 20). Even though it is the 21st century, these stereotypes continue to exist and problematize the field for aspiring women.

Experiences of Women Leaders. Several dissertations explore women's experiences in information technology leadership. In Alford's (2011) dissertation, he used a phenomenological lens to explore the experiences of women leaders. Delmont (2016) also employed a phenomenological approach, and she examined experiences of

women as they transition into next levels of leadership. Johnson's (2013) dissertation is also a phenomenological study, and provided insight into the lived experiences of senior women in information security technology management. Johnston's (2012) dissertation also used phenomenology to capture the perceptions of women who were laid off from IT positions and to determine whether they were likely to stay in the field.

There are also a handful of studies about the experiences of women in IT that are not in the format of dissertation work. For example, Kenny and Donnelly (2020) explored the experiences of women as they navigate their careers in such a male-dominated field. Kenny and Donnelly (2020) stated,

> They [the findings] reveal how women use their agency to assert notions of femininity into technical careers, disentangle narratives around whether women have unique and different (but less technically focused) strengths in IT and interface with 'geek' and 'nerd' identities to achieve successful IT careers. (p. 326)

Pretorius and de Villers (2010) explored the experiences of South African women in IT fields, asking what attracts or causes these women to avoid the industry. They found that while women are attracted to the tough challenges of the field and have passions for IT, many women often avoid the industry due to its male-dominated nature and the narrow definition of "hard tech" (Njoki et al., 2016; Pretorius & de Villers, 2010). Finally, McKinney et al. (2008) examined the differences in work experiences for men and women in IT. They suggest that women may be underrepresented in the field because they have fewer positive experiences than their male peers (McKinney et al., 2008).

Mentoring and Other Support Structures. Draus et al. (2014) asked whether formal mentoring, a commonly used support structure, is as helpful for women in IT as it

is believed to be. Interestingly, their study finds no clear relationship between mentoring and career success for women in IT. There are split opinions about the importance of mentoring relationships to women in IT. For example, in Reid's (2007) dissertation, she highlighted mentor-mentee relationships as one of the most helpful support structures for women's advancement in IT. Trauth's (2017) article looked at more ways to be socially inclusive of women in information technology organizations, including an array of environmental factors and individual factors.

Gender Imbalance and Lack of Female Representation. Gorbacheva et al. (2019) painted a picture of the gender imbalance in IT and investigate the lack of impact that widely used interventions are having on this phenomenon. Mennega and de Villiers (2021) tried to determine how gender imbalance studies have progressed over the past 25 years through a literature review. They determine that gender and IT research has progressed from gender atheoretical to essentialism to social construction to intersectionality (Mennega & de Villiers, 2021). Karanja and Zaveri (2012) explored the representation of women in IT management positions. Like other authors (Galanek et al., 2019; NCWIT, 2022), Karanja and Zaveri's (2012) analysis determined that it is indeed rare for women to become IT leaders in United States IT organizations.

Karanja et al. (2015) also explored the underrepresentation of women in IT, determining that women are underrepresented in both academic IT/computing fields and in the top IT leadership positions. They posited that these things are connected and create a vicious cycle of underrepresentation. Finally, Ridley and Young (2012) examined three theories - essentialist theory, social construction theory, and individual differences theory

of gender - to determine which theory might best explain the lack of female representation in IT. Based on an assessment of news articles, they determine that essentialist theory is the most dominant society theory to explain this phenomenon (Ridley & Young, 2012). Trauth et al. (2012), on the other hand, explored the underrepresentation of women in IT through the lens of intersectionality. To do this, they examine African American male and female perceptions about gender norms in the context of IT work, and they determine that race does influence gender stereotypes about the field (Trauth et al., 2012).

Career Advancement for Women in IT. Cordova-Wentling and Thomas (2005), Wentling and Thomas (2007), and Brown (2020) all looked at the intersection of women's career advancement in information technology. Cordova-Wentling and Thomas's (2005) work provided a discussion of barriers and opportunities for aspiring women leaders. They noted that there are personal and professional factors impacting the advancement of women in IT fields, and that organizations should learn more about these factors to get more talented women in senior roles (Cordova-Wentling & Thomas, 2005). Similarly, Wentling and Thomas (2007) looked at barriers and assets to women's career advancement in IT through a qualitative lens. The stories from their participants gave an emotional edge to the ups and downs that these women have faced. Finally, Brown's (2020) dissertation about retaining women in information technology determined that pay and lack of advancement opportunities must be addressed to retain more women in the field, further showing the importance of studying the process of career advancement in this field.

The Exclusivity of Good Old Boys' Clubs. An article by Wentling and Thomas (2009) found that a primary challenge is "The male-dominated good old boy culture aspect of their workplace culture and environment made it difficult for them to feel accepted" (p. 36). Morgan et al. (2004) also examined these good old boys' club cultures, finding that women interact with these networks in different ways and adapt to the circumstances whether they are included in these cultures or not. Beyond exclusion in one's current workplace, Wentling and Thomas (2009) also explored how good old boys' clubs can impact one's future career development opportunities. Wentling and Thomas (2009) suggested that "gender differences embedded in the IT workplace culture negatively affect the career development of women" (p. 37).

Job Embeddedness. Ryan and Harden (2014) explored the significant differences between men and women in the context of job embeddedness in information technology work, examining the concept of perceived organizational fit in information technology between women and men. Major et al. (2013) took a different path, exploring predictors of job embeddedness for men and women in information technology. They find that "there may be important gender differences in the relative importance of predictors of occupational commitment" (p. 312). Positive predictors that are correlated with job embeddedness for women in information technology include having growth opportunities, job security, and a flexible work-family culture (Major et al., 2013). It follows that the opposites of these things – lack of growth, lack of security, and lack of flexibility – are correlated with women wanting to leave their current positions in search of something better suited to their needs.

Women in Higher Education Information Technology

Though there is some literature that focuses on information technology in higher education (Goldstein, 2008; Katz et al., 2004; Latimer, 1999; Penrod et al., 1990; Woodsworth, 1987), there is very little literature that explicitly addresses the experiences of women in higher education information technology settings. To demonstrate how narrow the literature is in this field, the UNL Library EBSCO Database search that I performed returned 633 results with the combination of key terms "experiences of women" and "information technology." Once I added in the key terms "higher education," the number of results plummeted to 17. The literature that does exist in this field primarily focuses on the experiences and challenges of women in higher education IT settings. For example, Cezar (2002), Drury (2008, 2010, 2011), Clark (2012, 2013), Othman (2016), and Rogers (2015) all addressed the experiences and challenges of women in higher education information technology in their research.

Clark (2012) began by arguing for more women in information technology leadership, stating that considering the broad ranging power and pervasiveness that technology has in American society, it is important that people making decisions must reflect the diversity of the populations they serve. Clark (2013) also conducted a mixed methods study of women executives' experiences with senior role attainment in higher education information technology organizations for her dissertation. Her findings unveiled biased processes, persistent masculine norms, and a masculine discourse that informs the organizational culture of higher education IT organizations (Clark, 2013).

Similarly, Drury's (2010) article (which is informed by her 2008 dissertation work) presented barriers that are experienced by female higher education Chief Information Officers (CIOs), including stereotypes, lack of perceived support, narrowed pathways, isolationism, and tokenism. Drury (2011) explored the experiences of three women CIOs in higher education information technology. Writing about the more significant findings of the work, Drury (2011) noted:

> The more significant experiences were related to being a female in a male-dominated environment, the lack of acceptance of female "outsiders" into the higher education IT environment as integration attempts occurred, male domination of technical positions creating greater occupational jurisdiction, and the lack of gender-friendly cultures in higher education IT leading to the perpetuation of genderedness. (p. 105)

In this way, Clark (2013) and Drury's (2011) barriers are overlapping, and they located women in information technology in an isolated existence in which masculine norms maintain power. Othman's (2016) narrative inquiry took a slightly different approach by locating the challenges and victories in the experiences of women chief information officers. By not reducing women CIO's experiences to the negative, she takes a humanistic perspective of their lived experiences.

Similarly, Cezar's (2002) study explored the experiences and uplift voices of women in information technology. Cezar's work differs from Drury's (2008, 2010, 2011) and Clark's (2012, 2013) by locating participants at all levels of the organizational hierarchy instead of only focusing on women in leadership roles. By providing insight into the experiences of women at all points of the organizational hierarchy, Cezar's work is a good representative of the average woman in IT's experience. It is important to note that Cezar's (2002) work was an examination of the experiences of women at Canadian

University, which means that similar work that explores the experiences of women at differing levels of the organizational hierarchy has not yet been completed for women in higher education information technology in the United States.

Finally, Rogers' (2015) piece was not an empirical study, but rather a literature review that shows the overlap of topics of women in leadership, women in technology, and women in higher education. Rogers was interested in the intersection of those three and shows that very little work has been done in that space. Overall, the little work that exists for the women in higher education information technology population is mostly centered around experiences and barriers. Considering the diversity of topics in the larger women in information technology literature, this shows a wealth of research topics simply waiting to be tapped into.

Manifestations of Sexism Against Women Leaders

To further enlighten the experiences of women in information technology, it is important to bring in a discussion of the research that explores the prejudice, sexism, and disadvantage that women face daily due to their gender status in organizations. The following section of this literature review will unpack what this sexism looks like in practice and explore the common concepts in the literature, including agentic and communal traits, descriptive and prescriptive norms, and the problematic concept of the double bind.

Agentic and Communal Traits

The first key concept to unpack is the gender-based discrepancy between agentic and communal traits. According to the literature, society ascribes communal qualities

primarily to women and agentic qualities primarily to men (Eagly & Karau, 2002;

Heilman, 2001; Heilman et al., 2004; Ridgeway, 2001; Rudman & Phelan, 2008;

Rudman et al., 2012). The term communal is used to "describe primarily a concern with

the welfare of other people—for example, affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic,

interpersonally sensitive, nurturant, and gentle" (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 574). In

contract, an agentic person would be described as having "an assertive, controlling, and

confident tendency—for example, aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful,

independent, self-sufficient, self-confident, and prone to act as a leader" (Eagly & Karau,

2002, p. 574). The concept that these traits are respectively tied to the sexes is rooted in

Bakan's (1966) social role theory, a theory which was furthered by Eagly (1987).

Since these agentic and communal traits are tied to social roles, this means that

they also contain gendered expectations about male and female leadership. To this end,

Eagly and Karau (2002) stated,

> Because women who are effective leaders tend to violate standards for their
> gender when they manifest male-stereotypical, agentic attributes and fail to
> manifest female- stereotypical, communal attributes, they may be unfavorably
> evaluated for their gender role violation, at least by those who endorse traditional
> gender roles. (p. 575)

In other words, women are expected to display communal traits and they are punished

when they don't. Describing what this punishment can look like in organizational

settings, Brescoll (2011), Rudman and Phelan (2008), Rudman et al. (2012), and Vial

et al. (2016) all explored the concept of backlash effects for women leaders.

In a 2011 article, Brescoll wrote about gender in politics and organizations and

illustrated that both low and high-power women show concerns that they will experience

backlash from being highly voluble. Women likely show concerns about expressing this trait because it is typically considered an agentic quality in American society. Rudman and Phelan (2008) also wrote about backlash effects, looking at the areas in which women can receive a backlash: disconfirming gender stereotypes, hiring, salary negotiations, promotion, leadership evaluations and on the job. They also describe backlash effects as a heteronormative gender preserving strategy, which serves to keep "atypical men and women out of the spotlight" (Rudman & Phelan, 2008, p. 73). This oppression strategy for atypical gender behaviors preserves the existing culture and is likely why change for women flows at a slow trickle in American organizations.

Rudman et al. (2012) described backlash as preservation of heteronormativity as a defense of the gender hierarchy and way to maintain male power. To this end, they wrote, "Consistent with this view, epithets for powerful women often cast them as destroyers of male virility (e.g., "ball-breaker" and "castrating bitch")" (Rudman et al., 2012, p. 167). This casting "perpetuates inequality by reserving power and its privileges for men" (Rudman et al., 2012, p. 177). In other words, if women stay to their communal traits and do not infringe on male power, they will be able to maintain their status quo, but claiming agentic traits and threatening the gender hierarchy is forbidden in a male dominant society and will receive the appropriate response to keep them in check. Finally, Vial et al. (2016) looked at backlash as a result of low legitimacy perceptions of subordinates that are cast on women leaders due to their gender. Women are less accepted as leaders than their male peers, and Vial et al. (2016) showed that subordinates may be less likely to follow a woman leader as compared to a male. They also pointed out that women

receive increased negative feedback compared to men and are less likely to receive the

same jobs (Vial et al., 2016). Their low-status condition only appears to be ameliorated

when they support the gender hierarchy: "But if female leaders endorse the same

conservative beliefs and uphold the status quo, then they are less likely to be seen as a

threat, and therefore more likely to elicit status and legitimize their power," wrote Vial et

al. (2016, p. 410). With all these examples, it rung true when Heilman et al. (2004) wrote

that "Thus, the self-assertive and tough, achievement-oriented, agentic behaviors for

which men are so positively valued are typically prohibited for women" (p. 416). If these

prohibited values are enacted, punishment is a near certain outcome.

      Connection to the Feminist Communitarian Model. To conclude the discussion

of agentic and communal traits, I would like to situate these traits within the larger

framework of Denzin's (1997) feminist communitarian model. Christians (2011)

underscored how this model placed inherent value on communal traits, stating,

> From the perspective of a feminist communitarian ethics, interpretive discourse is
> authentically sufficient when it fulfills three conditions: represents multiple
> voices, enhances moral discernment, and promotes social transformation. (p. 71)

This is reminiscent of the work of Adams and Weiss (2011), which stated that women

have an advantage in the workplace due to their communal leadership styles. The

difference with Denzin's (1997) work is that it argued that communal traits are more than

relational and are deeply rooted in the social fabric of identity and power hierarchies. The

power of this model shines through in Neuman's (2011) discussion. Neuman (2011)

stated that the feminist communitarian model of research ethics is an alternative to

research ethics that are steeped in the positivist tradition and portrayed this model as

aligned with participatory action research. Since the communitarian ethos can provide a powerful template for transformative change in research, I would like to expand on Denzin's (1997) model by arguing that communal traits can also hold a transformative power for women leaders as change agents.

Descriptive and Prescriptive Norms

Closely linked with the concept of agentic and communal traits is the concept of descriptive and prescriptive norms for men and women. These norms are rooted in societal norms, and, referencing the work of Burgess and Borgida (1999), Eagly (1987), and Terborg (1977), Heilman (2001) described the difference between descriptive and perspective norms.

> Not only are gender stereotypes descriptive, they also are prescriptive. That is, they denote not only differences in how women and men actually are, but also norms about behaviors that are suitable for each—about how women and men should be. (p. 659)

While descriptive norms describe what women and men are like (according to society), the prescriptive norms are prescribing who men and women should be for society. Rather than referring to them as norms, Okimoto and Brescoll (2010) and Rudman and Phelan (2008) referred to descriptive and prescriptive norms as descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes to make the point that these norms are rooted in social stereotypes.

We also see how these overlap with agentic and communal trait expectations in organizations. Rudman and Phelan (2008) wrote,

> Indeed, prescriptive and descriptive stereotypes tend to overlap, with the communal qualities viewed as typical of women seen as ideal for women (but proscribed for men) and the agentic qualities viewed as typical of men seen as ideal for men (but proscribed for women). (p. 63)

If women (or men) would demonstrate gender proscribed behaviors in organizational settings, it is likely that they would experience the backlash effects described in the above section. This is because descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes align with the traits that men and women are permitted to utilize in their leadership styles, from a social perspective. That being the case, the research also shows that women leaders are held to different standards than men with the norms and traits that they are required to display. In their 2002 study of college students, Prentice and Carranza showed that "masculine qualities are the norm on most campuses" (p. 279). They write that "What was desirable for a male undergraduate overlapped so extensively with what was desirable for a person at Princeton that there was little evidence of any gender-specific imperatives for men" (Prentice & Carranza, 2002, p. 278). In this way, men, unlike women, don't seem to face the burden of change to fit in with their organizations.

Double Bind

This combination of agentic and communal traits as gender based and descriptive and perspective stereotypes creates a challenging combination of circumstances for women in the workplace. Several authors (Carli, 1999; Rudman & Phelan, 2008; Rudman et al., 2012) have described this difficult state of existence as a double bind. To expand on this concept, Rudman and Phelan's (2008) provided this excellent definition of the double bind, "In other words, ambitious women may have to choose between being liked but not respected (by displaying communal qualities) or being respected but not liked (by displaying agentic qualities), a dilemma not faced by men" (p. 65). In other words, since agentic traits that are commonly associated with leaders are not commonly associated

with prescriptive stereotypes of how women should behave in society, women are put into a double bind. In the lens of this bind, women leaders can either satisfy the perspective requirements of gender stereotypes by not displaying agentic traits, therefore harming their careers, or be overly agentic, which would clash against expected gender stereotypes and harm their careers. Rudman and Phelan (2008) put this a different way, and framed it in the context of displaying gender stereotypes instead of enacting agentic traits, "The picture that emerges depicts a catch-22 for women, such that they may be damned if they disconfirm feminine stereotypes and damned if they do not" (p. 62). What is a woman to do?

This is where the concept of backlash comes back into the foreground, because women who are aspiring to leadership positions in organizations who disconfirm gender stereotypes are doing so at great personal risk, including prejudice and hiring discrimination (Rudman et al., 2012). Masculine discourses are also greatly valued in the academy (Acker, 2012), which goes back to the double bind. For example, women may be expected to enact gender stereotypes while still operating within the confines of normative maleness - an impossible task. There is also the issue that women are not perceived to be as competent as men in performing male gender-typed work, according to Heilman and Okimoto (2007). Heilman and Okimoto (2007) found that when women in male-dominated careers present evidence of their communality to their workplaces, it can help ameliorate negative reactions to them as leaders - but this is no reprieve for them. To this point, they write, "Doing what men do, as well as they do it, does not seem to be enough; women must additionally be able to manage the delicate balance of being both

competent and communal" (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007, p. 92). Striving to appear communal as well as competent adds in yet another complication for women who are in search of social acceptance.

Empirical Evidence of Prejudice Against Women

Studies about prejudice against women in the workforce go back well into the 20th century, and one of the seminal works in this area was Schein's 1973 study titled "The relationship between sex role stereotypes and requisite management characteristics." In this article, Schein (1973) sampled over 300 managers and found that "The results confirm the hypothesis that successful middle managers are perceived to possess those characteristics, attitudes and temperaments more commonly ascribed to men in general than to women in general" (p. 99). Sadly, 50 years later, not much has changed - since American society ascribes agentic traits to necessary leadership traits (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which are inherently male (Rudman & Phelan, 2008), Schein's (1973) results still put women at a deficit compared to their male colleagues.

Prentice and Carranza's 2002 study described these gender prescriptions in terms of social desirability, and they look at trait desirability for women and men among women and men Princeton University undergraduate students. Discouragingly, their study finds that "Nonetheless, the results indicate that people believe women and men to differ in most of the ways they are supposed to differ" (Prentice & Carranza, 2002, p. 275). Their results show the existence of gender-prescriptions and gendered beliefs that affect women more than men. In summary, Prentice and Carranza (2002) stated:

> Women in masculine roles, like our Princeton female undergraduates, are not just held to higher (irrelevant) standards of feminine niceness than are their male

counterparts; they are also not held to equally high (relevant) standards of agency and achievement. If they show high levels of intelligence, competence, rationality, and ambition, that is good—these qualities are certainly desirable for Princeton women. But if they do not, that is not so bad—not as bad as if Princeton men failed to demonstrate high levels of these qualities. (p. 280)

As one can see from this discussion, the overlapping theme is that women experience harsher punishment for not following gender norms than men in the workplace.

Women are aware of this punishment too, and it seems that conforming to the gender hierarchy to avoid retribution is a common strategy - and one that several authors seemingly try to point out to women. A 1995 article by Copeland et al. warned its female readers to avoid dominant leadership styles, since dominant female speakers receive more negative reactions than dominant male speakers (p. 64). Similarly, Rudman's (1998) piece described self-promotion as a risk factor for women, another piece by a woman author that takes the tone of advice for the workplace. Carli's (1999) piece took a similar tone in the context of interpersonal power, suggesting that women avoid using coercive and reward power in their work due to potential backlash effects.

Finally, Ridgeway (2001) studied gender in the context of status that it affords. Citing the work of Fiske (1998), she described the automatic mental sex-categorizing that people mentally perform when considering those who they relate to. She wrote, "People automatically and almost instantly sex-categorize any concrete other to whom they must relate. Sex categorization, in turn, automatically activates gender stereotypes, including gender status beliefs, and primes them to affect judgments (see Fiske, 1998)" (Ridgeway, 2001, p. 643). These judgements in turn determine peoples' status in group settings, and the backlash that low-status individuals might receive for acting outside of their

prescribed norms. It is all these constraining expectations, reactions, stereotypes, and norms that, in Ridgeway's (2001) view, combine to form the glass ceiling, a term coined by Marilyn Loden in 1978 (BBC News, 2017) that is still relevant today.

Theoretical Framework

Leadership Identity as a Social Construction

The idea of leadership identity as a social construction is rooted in the work of DeRue and Ashford (2010). Their theory frames leadership as a socially negotiated and co-constructed process and posits that leadership identities are co-constructed because followers need to 'grant' the 'claims' to a leader identity that aspiring leaders make to turn them into social reality (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). This concept of leadership identity as a social identity is a theoretical linchpin of this dissertation. To further elaborate on DeRue and Ashford (2010)'s perspective, they stated that it takes three things for a leader identity to be enacted: first, an individual must first internalize that leader identity, next, others who they interact with must provide recognition towards their leader identity, and finally, there is a sense of collective endorsement for that person's leader identity to be accepted as social reality. In this way, leader identities shift amongst the sands of the social landscape, and followers play an equally important role in the making of leaders by validating their proffered leader identities. Thus, leadership identity construction does not happen in isolation or only within oneself; it occurs within the social ecosystem of one's organization in an iterative and reciprocal manner (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

DeRue and Ashford (2010) also described a claiming and granting process in their model (which occurs during the relational recognition and collective endorsement phases). The person who desires the leader identity must claim their leader identity to others in their workspace, either verbally or nonverbally, by actions like making verbal claims, sitting at the head of a table, or dressing like the most high-status individual in a department (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). But the process doesn't end there – to determine what happens next, those around this person must respond to this person's claims by either granting or not granting the leader identity through validation or lack thereof. It is only after several claims have been granted that the collective endorsement phase can occur, and one's organization sees their leader identity as valid. It is important to note that DeRue and Ashford's (2010) work is rooted in the sociological traditions established by Berger and Luckmann's (1966) seminal text, "The Social Construction of Reality." This foundational work introduced the theory that social realities are collectively constructed, laying the groundwork for both DeRue and Ashford's (2010) theories and the ontological perspective known as constructivism.

In addition to DeRue and Ashford (2010), several other studies have explored the concept of social construction of leadership. Similarly, Day and Harrison (2007) pointed out that leadership develops on multiple levels and that leadership development programs should emphasize building individual, relational, and collective-level identities for aspiring leaders. Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012) also viewed leadership with a relational lens, suggesting that leadership is a "a phenomenon generated in the interactions among people acting in context" (p. 1043). According to these researchers, leadership is not a

state of being or something that occurs in isolation - it is the outcome of relational

interactions. This is a deeply sense-making process, and DeRue (2011) wrote:

> In contrast [to social exchange theory], the present theory adopts a social
> constructivist perspective, where individuals' identities as leaders and followers
> and the pattern of leading–following relationships emerge based on how people
> make sense of and place meaning on their interactions with others. (p. 143)

In this way, leadership as a social construction is ever evolving and emerging. It is also

dependent on how those in organizations make sense of the aspiring leaders around them.

Individual Internalization of Identity

The first step of DeRue and Ashford's (2010) process is individual internalization

of leader identity, which is the moment when one first considers oneself as a leader and

internalizes that as a desired identity. In DeRue et al. (2009), the authors discussed the

way by which this internalization occurs. Key to this concept is the fact that, though

identity internalization may begin within the self, "The internalization of leader as a

personal identity is not simply an intrapersonal, cognitive act but also a social process of

mutual claiming and granting through word and deed that gets enacted over time"

(DeRue et al., 2009, p. 6). In this way, there are two parts to individual internalization -

considering yourself a leader, and then negotiating yourself as one on the social stage.

This touches the concept of identity work (Snow & Anderson, 1987), which will be

explored in greater detail in the following section of this literature review.

In addition to there being desired identities or selves, there are also unwanted

identities or selves that must be negotiated as aspiring leaders strive toward a leader

identity. Petriglieri and Stein (2012) explored how leaders deal with unwanted aspects of

their identities during the identity internalization stage. Petriglieri and Stein (2012) stated:

> A corollary of this argument is that, the more visible and demanding the leadership role, the more pressure there will be from the self, followers, and the public for the person holding the role to embody views of what the leader should be like in representing the group or organization. (p. 1220)

Essentially this means that if internalized identities are validated and co-constructed by others in social settings, pressures about what a leader should look like and how they should behave become more intense, which may affect a person's other non-leader identities and the ways in which they are expressed to others. Ibarra et al. (2010) raised similar concerns and pointed out the potential grief of identity loss that may result when a person feels that they cannot socially express all of who they are.

The Importance of Followership

Since leadership identities are socially constructed by those that validate the leader identities, the followers who are validating the leaders play an extremely important role. Meindl (1995) had some of the first work in this area that showed another important role that followers play: constructing the romantic image of leadership that makes it so socially desirable and important (which is a necessity for effective leadership). In this way, "The romance of leadership notion embraces the phenomenological significance of leadership to people's organizational experiences" (Meindl, 1995, p. 330). It's about the ways in which followers construct mental images and representations of leaders, playing into Meindl's point about phenomenological significance to their organizational experiences.

In embracing the significance of leadership (Meindl, 1995) and granting a leader identity to someone who has made a claim (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), collective endorsement occurs for an aspiring leader. Humphreys et al. (2015) painted a qualitative

portrait of what collective endorsement of a leader looked like for James Meredith, a famous civil rights activist. In speaking about collective endorsement as the final eventuality of the leadership identity construction process, they refer to leadership as an outcome. Humphreys et al. (2015) stated that, "in the social domain, leadership can be viewed as the outcome of mutual influence between leaders and followers" (p. 1391). While a leader's identity is the input or starting point, leadership itself is the outcome in Humphreys et. al's (2015) perspective.

Oc and Bashshur (2013) expanded on Meindl's (1995) work, casting leadership outcomes (such as wins and losses) as the perceptions of followers. They also described another important power of followers: the ability to provide social information to leaders (Oc & Bashshur, 2013). Finally, two pieces by Uhl-Bien provided another layer of insight into the criticality of followers to leader dynamics in organizations. In a perspective that harkens back to DeRue and Ashford's (2010) model of leadership identity construction, Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) took a follower-centric stance by stating "followers are "constructors" of leaders and leadership" (p. 83). They also made clear that to follow is a verb, not a noun - it is a set of behaviors and deferment of leadership to others in a particular context. There are rarely followers who exclusively follow and leaders who exclusively lead.

Lastly, Uhl-Bien (2006) took a relational stance in which she views leadership as a social reality, and one in which there are no hierarchical managers and subordinates - there are simply participants. Since not all managers are leaders and not all leaders are managers, she is taking any verbiage about management out of the leadership equation

and focusing on leaders, regardless of where they are in the organizational hierarchy.

DeRue (2011) also agreed with this stance, unequivocally stating that "leadership, even

within hierarchically structured groups, is not synonymous with hierarchy, supervision or

formal authority" (p. 128). In DeRue's (2011) perspective, the social process is the source

of leadership, not the person and any traits or roles they might have.

Implicit Bias and Barriers to Identity Construction

In the original DeRue and Ashford (2010) article that is at the heart of this section

of my literature review, the authors discussed how critical implicit theories of leadership

are to leadership identity construction. Implicit theories of leadership are our assumptions

of what leaders look like, or as DeRue and Ashford (2010) put it, "That is, when an

individual looks like, seems like, and acts like a leader (follower), people are more likely

to grant that person a leader (follower) identity" (p. 637). One can easily see how one's

unconscious and conscious biases would come into play here and affect how one might

be able to picture a low-status person (such as a woman) as a leader. Unless one has done

a lot of identity and privilege work of their own and has learned to acknowledge and be

aware of their own biases, they are most likely going to see people who look like

themselves as the right fit for positions they would find desirable.

Two studies have looked at the topic of leadership identity construction in the

context of gender bias. Ely et al. (2011) discussed that not only is the relational

recognition of others to construct one's leadership identity difficult for women, but so is

the identity work needed to get to the first phase of identity internalization (DeRue &

Ashford, 2010). Per the first critique, they wrote, "The social interactions in which people

claim and grant leader identities do not occur ex nihilo but are shaped by culturally available ideologies about what it means to be a leader" (Ely et al., 2011, p. 8). They also described the array of challenges that aspiring women leaders face on the outset of beginning any leader identity work, including: few role models for women, gendered career paths, women's lack of access to networks and sponsors, women leader's heightened visibility, and gender-blind leadership development training programs (Ely et al., 2011). Ely et al. (2011) described these barriers as second-generation forms of gender bias.

Hogue and Lord (2007) also wrote about implicit theory as a problematic factor in gender bias in leadership. They described implicit theory as the "mental stores of knowledge" (Hogue & Lord, 2007, p. 376) that guide our responses. This makes gender biases extremely difficult to quash in organizations, because they come from pluralistic, entrenched dimensions of our own experiences. To this end, Hogue and Lord (2007) stated "Leadership perceptions can reflect constraints from multiple levels such as an individual's own expectations, her or his personal history, the history of his or her work group, and the history of the parent organization" (p. 378). These layers, which are all imbued with social expectations and stereotypes from the society in which we live, are the facets that complicate leadership for those who do not identify with a normative gender. Lord and Hall (2005) noted similar concerns about gender biases affecting leadership development. Lord and Hall (2005) wrote, "We speculate that women may find it more difficult to develop self-views as leaders despite equivalent performance to men, because their leadership attempts may be less accepted (e.g., Hogue & Lord, 2004;

Ridgeway, 2003)" (p. 596). In their perspective, gender may affect how likely it is that leadership identity claims will be accepted by others, and may also affect the self-view of leadership that is necessary to the initial individual internalization phase. These may be complicating factors that can help provide an explanation for the lower number of women leaders compared to men.

Identity Work as a Process of Intrapersonal Negotiation

DeRue and Ashford (2010) demonstrated that before claiming an identity status in a public setting, an aspiring leader must first internalize their newly desired identity as an individual. To get to that point of accepting and internalizing an identity, an individual must undergo messy, difficult, and sometimes painful identity work (Snow & Anderson, 1987). This identity work occurs in tandem with exploring the dynamics of one's organizational identity (who one is in the context of one's organization). This identity work must also serve to reconcile and acknowledge one's salient personal identities (such as gender or race) in the context of professional identity.

Identity Work and the Self

Though identity work is a term coined by Snow and Anderson (1987), the concept of identity has been written about by scholars for ages. Perhaps one of the first modern scholars to explore the concept of identity in relation to the self is Goffman (1959), in his seminal text "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life." Goffman (1959) used a clever theatrical analogy for the way that the self is perceived, describing the performances that we give to others as the front stage and what happens out of view of our audience as backstage. In Goffman's (1959) view, he described the importance of authenticity to our

act, since our audience attempts to clue in on any of our behaviors that might make us appear fraudulent in our claims. Thus, he brings in the concept of impression management; how we as performers must manage the impressions that we are giving off to our audience (Goffman, 1959).

However, impression management is only one part of identity work - the social side of negotiating what we want about ourselves to be seen by others. The arguably more difficult part of identity work is the intrapersonal work that we must wrestle with as individuals. Snow and Anderson (1987) described identity work as follows:

> We conceptualize identity construction and assertion as variants of the generic process we call identity work, by which we refer to the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept. (p. 1348)

In my view, identity work can be described as a continual process of metamorphosis; making sense of who we are becoming so that we have the language to communicate that out to others. Finally, Snow and Anderson (1987) also made the important point that identity needs are just as critical to human existence as physiological needs, a perspective that contradicts Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (p. 1365).

Similarly, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) also supported Snow and Anderson's (1987) position of the criticality of identity needs. Their research examined the human desire to construct a positive identity, even for those who engage in occupations that are considered "dirty work" by social standards (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). To this end, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) argued, "Research on identity indicates that individuals need a relatively secure and stable sense of self-definition- of who they are within a given situation to function effectively" (p. 417). In this way, they show that humans need a

stable and positive view of themselves to function in society, a concept that echoes Snow

and Anderson's (1987) perspective.

One of the ways in which people create self-views that are socially accepted is

through the art of the story. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) presented the concept of

identity as narrative, and in their view, this is how people story and re-story their life

from a repertoire that is authentic, credible, and socially acceptable. For example,

different stories from different eras of our lives might be told in different eras when they

are more relevant or desired. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) wrote:

> Just as people construct work identities by telling their story they also reinvent
> themselves by telling new stories about what is happening to them, reinterpreting
> past events in the light of these new understandings, and weaving past and present
> into a coherent repertoire that allows them to communicate their identity and
> negotiate it with others. (p. 150)

This ever-changing repertoire of stories is one way in which our intrapersonal identity

work becomes socially visible to others - it is an expression of who we believe we are at

any given point in time.

Identity Work in the Context of Organizations

In their study of medical students' sense of identity, Pratt et al. (2006) discussed

some ways in which identity work happens, including trying on identities and doing

identities. They show a process that takes time and nurturing, and that must start with the

creation of a need for identity construction in the mind of the person, gives them the tools

and resources for that construction to happen, and ends with validation of the newly

constructed identity (Pratt et al., 2006). Looking at how temporary employees in

organizations construct their identities, Bartel and Dutton (2001) also explored identity

work in organizational settings. Like Goffman (1959), Bartel and Dutton (2001) pointed out the performativity of being in an organization. They also provide some examples of how employees might claim (perform) an identity - declaring, questioning, and equipping. Bartel and Dutton's (2001) examples of these acts included making a verbal assertion toward an identity (declaring), being an inquirer of the right knowledge (questioning) and using material and symbolic resources to claim one's identity status (equipping).

Finally, Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) provided one more example of identity work in organizations, using the case of business schools. They introduced the concept of the identity workspace, which they define as a holding environment or safe place in which identity work can occur (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) wrote,

> This work, which is both intrapsychic and social nature (Kreiner et al., 2006), involves individuals crafting, protecting, and modifying their views themselves, as well as gaining social validation for those views. Being successful in these endeavors sustains one's sense of personal agency, continuity, coherence, and self-esteem. (p. 45)

Like other researchers, they illustrated the criticality of identity work to one's sense of consistent and positive self and demonstrate the messy and challenging nature of the work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Snow & Anderson, 1987).

The Meaning of Identity for Women in Higher Education

Several authors have studied identity work in the context of gender. Morley (2013) provided a fascinating narrative about her experiences in academia and what it currently means to be a woman leader in higher education. Morley (2013) presented

leadership in higher education as problematic due to its male origins, stating, "Furthermore, leadership is socially articulated and constituted by a social and policy world that many women do not choose or control" (p. 118). In Morley's (2013) view, leadership often means needing to fit oneself into an identity cage that is not of one's own choosing. In her piece about African American women in higher education, Howard-Vital (1989) posed similar concerns. She noted that African American women in the academy are silenced, and contributions ignored by white male colleagues and suggests that this is a compounding factor in the lack of African-American women in higher education leadership (Howard-Vital, 1989).

Nearly 30 years later, Zhao and Jones (2017) noted similar concerns for women at Chinese higher education institutions. Similarly to Morley's (2013) comments about the male academy, Zhao and Jones (2017) referred to the work of Eagly and Karau (2002) in writing, "Even in contexts such as education where women often outnumber men, prototypes of leaders are predominantly male and so are the scripts that set the norms of associated attributes and characteristics for leaders" (p. 2). For example, in education, where there might be more women teachers than men teachers, the male leadership is so baked into historic examples of what leadership looks like that that norm is the standard. These male ideologies have a damaging outcome, and Zhao and Jones (2017) argued, "These [male] processes can make it difficult for women to claim legitimacy in leadership roles. Women internalize negativity, discrimination, exclusion and othering as feelings of fraudulence" (p. 10). In this way, Chinese women are forced to downplay

their leader identities because they do not mesh with their gender identities through a process of negative internalization.

Kreiner et al. (2006) examined how people reconcile multiple identities that might not necessarily play together in an optimal way. Though their article isn't explicitly about gender, the concept of reconciling multiple identities clearly applies to women who might have wife or mother roles that are at odds with their professional identities. For example, in writing about priests and the demanding nature of that work, Kreiner et al. (2006) stated:

> We explore (1) the intense identity demands placed on priests by their occupation and pertinent stakeholders, (2) the identity tensions associated with these demands, and (3) the identity work priests engage in to maintain a state of optimal balance between social and personal identities. (p. 1031)

In their findings, they explored different strategies that priests use to differentiate or integrate their personal and professional identities. This is consistent with Snow and Anderson's (1987) finding that people who are homeless may either try to distance themselves or become more unified with the homeless identity; the differentiating or integrating occurs depending on what results in a more positive outcome for sense of self. In this way, it appears that identity work is based on what makes us feel good (what creates a positive sense of self) and then that identity is validated by others after it is verbalized and storied (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

Summary

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the literature that explores leadership identity as a social construction, identity work as a process of intrapersonal negotiation, described the ways in which sexism is enacted against women leaders, and

reported on the status of women in the information technology professions. When it comes to the ways that women enact their leadership identities, these processes are complex, and there are two primary compounding factors. The first is the internalized sexism that may negatively affect women's abilities to negotiate their identity work to view themselves as leaders. The second compounding factor is the socially enacted prejudice that women experience as they attempt to make their identity claims (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), a form of subversive bias that may sabotage their attempts to be socially seen as leaders. The effects of this negative bias may be even more severe in the field of information technology since it is male-dominated. The question remains: how do women in higher education information technology internalize, construct, and negotiate leadership identities, despite the prejudice and bias inherent in their male-dominated organizations?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This dissertation employs a qualitative, phenomenological approach with a feminist and constructivist epistemology. I used the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology to explore the lived experiences of my participants with their own leadership identity construction experiences. I used criterion sampling to select women participants who meet the qualifications for participation in this project. My primary data source consists of a series of semi-structured interviews with women who work in higher education information technology organizations.

Restatement of Research Problem

Information technology is a male-dominated field for women in higher education. The few women that are in this field face biased processes and persistent masculine norms, stereotypes, lack of perceived support, narrowed pathways, isolation, and tokenization (Clark, 2013; Drury, 2010). This study seeks to make sense of why women in technology leadership (and aspiring leadership) positions take on a leader identity in such a challenging, isolating, barrier-ridden field. This study also seeks to explore what the experience of expressing that identity is like in the context of male-dominated organizations.

Restatement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to describe the experiences of women in higher education information technology with leadership identity construction,

including the intrapersonal identity work stage and the interpersonal stage of claiming and expressing that identity socially.

Research Questions

The following central research question central will guide this qualitative study:

RQ: How do women in technology experience leadership identity construction in higher education information technology organizations?

The following subquestions will undergird this research:

SRQ1: What is the process of internalizing leadership identities like for women in higher education information technology organizations? What is the identity work that goes into that internalization like?

SRQ2: What is it like for women in higher education information technology to claim a leadership identity in their workplace social settings? How does gender bias play a role?

Project Design

This project is a qualitative phenomenology study couched in a feminist constructivist epistemology that endeavored to understand and describe the experiences of women in higher education information technology with leadership identity construction. The next sections will describe my own ontological and epistemological beliefs that I bring to this project as the researcher, as well as my rationale for choosing a qualitative and phenomenological methodology for this study. Specifically, this study employed the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Ontology and Epistemology

Before I discuss the rationale for my qualitative approach for study, I will begin with a brief description of the ontological perspectives that shape my worldview of reality as a researcher. I identify as a constructivist, and as a constructivist my goal is to understand the world through interpreting the constructions of meaning that others create (Creswell & Poth, 2024). I believe that everyone has a different reality based on their experiences and perceptions of the world, and I choose to honor the individual values and experiences that shape these multiple realities. Though this study is a phenomenology and not a grounded theory, Charmaz's (2014) ontological perspective that the meanings and views we generate are constructions of our realities resonates with me deeply as a researcher. Since my study seeks to understand how women make sense of their own work worlds and leader identities, it follows that it is deeply rooted in the constructivist tradition.

In addition to being rooted in constructivism, my study is also rooted in feminism - specifically, feminist standpoint epistemology. Feminist standpoint epistemology is rooted in Marxism and suggests that women are aware of their oppressed state and have a unique clarity due to their experiences being oppressed by the patriarchy. Millen (1997) wrote, "It is a response to the patriarchal statement that feminine or female experience is an invalid basis for knowledge, by positing that it is in fact a *more* valid basis for knowledge because it gives access to a wider conception of truth via the insight into the oppressor" (p. 9). Therefore, the goal with research that aligns itself with a feminist standpoint epistemology is to allow its reader to see the world from a woman's

perspective, rejecting the notion that women's experiential knowledge is invalid. To this end, Maynard (1994) stated, "Feminism must begin with experience, it has been argued, since it is only from such a vantage point that it is possible to see the extent to which women's worlds are organized in ways which differ from those of men" (p. 14). Therefore, by exploring the experiences of women and showcasing women's vantage points, feminist research can unveil how women's experiences differ from the hegemonic male experience, revealing inequities and opportunities for change.

Therefore, I identify the epistemological underpinnings of this study as feminist *and* constructivist. This is important to note since feminism and constructivism are typically viewed in competing epistemological categories; the critical and interpretive paradigms, respectively (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Neuman, 2011). Despite their paradigmatic differences, I believe feminism and constructivism can not only fit together under the IPA methodology but can be greater than the sum of their parts when used in epistemological tandem. For example, Allen (2011) successfully employed a feminist constructivist viewpoint in her empowering grounded theory of violence against women. She compared objective views of reality to hegemonic male views of reality, suggesting that feminist constructivist research must value the personal, subjective, and the experience that have traditionally been ignored and unvalued by the male discourse (Allen, 2011). In this way, focusing on uplifting women's lived experiences combines feminism and constructivism into what the best of both perspectives can offer. I believe that my methodological selection of qualitative Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

as discussed below fit well with these epistemological perspectives and allowed their strengths to shine through in the finished manuscript.

Qualitative Rationale

This project was an excellent fit for qualitative research for several reasons. First, there is a noted paucity of qualitative research that describes the experiences of women in higher education information technology (Clark, 2012). Second, DeRue and Ashford (2010) made a call for qualitative research studies to explore how the construction of leadership identities works in different organizational settings so that a greater understanding can be gained. Finally, the in-depth nature of qualitative research also made it an excellent choice for this project. My goal was to describe the experiences of these women with their identity construction, which aligns with the power of what qualitative research can do. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) wrote, "qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 15). In this way, a qualitative study allowed me to focus on the experiences, views, and perspectives of my participants, and this let me construct a richer description of the phenomenon in the process. Thus, qualitative research was methodologically congruent with the feminist constructivist epistemology of this project.

Phenomenology Rationale

I selected a phenomenological approach since a goal of this study was to describe and interpret the stories of its participants and describe the common meaning of the phenomenon at hand (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Though there are several sub-approaches

to phenomenology, with the most popular arguably being transcendental phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Moustakas, 1994), this dissertation employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009), commonly referred to as IPA. IPA pulls its philosophical origins from three areas: from phenomenology as a philosophical concept, from hermeneutics as a process of near-religious textual interpretation, and from idiography as a commitment to the particular (Smith et al., 2009). These three ideological tenets create an approach that is suited for studying one's experience with the world, the part and the whole, and the particular. These three systems intersect and create the larger structure of IPA: an approach that focuses on the phenomenological and personal lived experience, the hermeneutic value of considering the part and the whole at the same time, and the idiographic commitment to detailing each case before moving to the next.

It follows that IPA, an approach that values lived experience, the personal and the particular, and the whole, has been successfully applied in areas of study such as health and illness, sexuality, psychological distress, and life transitions and identity (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Therefore, since this dissertation examined identity in the leadership context, my topic was a good fit for the method. In this way, the feminist, constructivist, and phenomenological perspectives of this dissertation work together congruently. By valuing the multiple and subjective realities of my participants (constructivism), having an underlying desire to describe their unique vantage points as women (feminist standpoint epistemology), and combining that with the power of studying their lived experience (phenomenology), I was able to honor my participants when interpreting their experiences.

Bracketing and Bridling

Since this study does not employ Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenology approach, it does not employ Moustakas's concept of bracketing. Bracketing (or epoche) is a bias reduction strategy for transcendental phenomenology that implores researchers to acknowledge their biases and personal experiences prior to engaging in the research process and to leave them out of the study as much as humanly possible (Moustakas, 1994). Though I understand how this practice may be helpful for some phenomenological research that is primarily descriptive in nature, I believe that our views and experiences create our realities and are not something we can easily leave behind, and that our views and experiences can also provide a helpful touchpoint of understanding for our research. Similarly, Smith et at. (2009) stated that one of IPA's strengths is in valuing the life experiences of the researcher by honoring the researcher's ability to let those experiences shine through in the finished research product. Ergo, instead of bracketing I took a reflexive stance throughout this project by employing a concept called bridling (Dahlberg, 2006). Bridling is an application of reflexivity *as a process.* It is intended to enhance one's level of openness in a project through ongoing understanding and personal reflexive practices with the data. Stutey et al. (2020) wrote, "Bridling is an innovative reflective practice where the researcher intentionally reflects on preconceived ideas of the phenomenon being studied" (p. 144). By reflecting on my preconceived ideas in the context of the data I collect and analysis, I was able to create an even stronger phenomenological study that incorporates the strengths of my personal knowledge and understanding of this phenomenon.

Research Setting and Context

At the time of data collection, all my participants were employees of colleges and universities at American higher education institutions who worked in information technology. In order to cast a wide net for participant recruitment, I advertised this study in several different ways: by presenting it at a monthly meeting of the Educause Women in IT Community Group and requesting participants; by emailing out to the Educause Women in IT Community Group list, the Educause Young Professionals Community Group email list, and the Diversity in IT Community Group email list; and by emailing out to Big Ten Academic Alliance Learning Technology Leaders subgroup. Educause is a national higher education information technology non-profit organization that provides opportunities for technology peers in that space to collaborate on their mission of advancing IT. They have several community groups for special interests, and their Women in IT group is one with 1600 members, a social media presence, and monthly meetings. The Big Ten Academic Alliance is an academic consortium of universities in the Big Ten Conference. The Big Ten Academic Alliance has subgroups in different staff areas, such as HR and IT.

Ethical Considerations

Strong ethics in qualitative research are extremely important (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and they must be weaved into the very foundations of a research project's methodology. It is not sufficient to tack on ethical considerations at the end of a study as an afterthought and consider that enough. I committed to a high ethical standard through my positioning and reflexivity (personal transparency), and my ethical

considerations are also evident in my robust validation strategies and considerate protection for the identities of my participants. Through my diligent application of ethics in this study, as evidenced in the below section, my hope is that I have crafted a study that espouses an "ethic of care" (Matteson & Lincoln, 2009). As applied to research, this concept is essentially the due diligence in care that we, as researchers, should provide to our participants by way of protection and concern for their well-being as individuals who have agreed to take part in my study.

Institutional Review Board

I submitted the original IRB research proposal (IRB project ID 22432) for this project to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board (IRB) on November 4th, 2022, with Dr. Grady listed as the secondary investigator. I received approval for this project on November 16th, 2022 from Becky Freeman with IRB number 20221122432EX. The project has been classified as exempt and my certification of exemption is valid until November 16th, 2027. I have attached a copy of my IRB approval letter in Appendix B of this dissertation. Within my application packet, a recruitment presentation explaining my project and asking for participants, an informed consent form (Appendix C), and interview protocol (Appendix A) were also all approved by institution's institutional review board for my study.

After I proposed this dissertation topic to my doctoral supervisory committee, I received feedback to make several small adjustments to my research design on March 3, 2023. After receiving that feedback, I made those corresponding changes to my IRB

project by submitting a change request form on March 20, 2023. Specifically, in this change request I added and changed the following items:

- That participants would be compensated $25 from personal funds.

- I shortened the interview protocol.

- I changed the participant inclusion criteria to reflect that I am seeking women who have been in IT for at least 10 years.

- I changed the participant inclusion criteria to reflect that my intention is to interview women who reflect the current racial makeup of the field IT.

- I added that I will also recruit participants from the BTAA (Big Ten Academic Alliance) IT subgroups and will send out recruitment emails in addition to my recruitment presentation.

I received approval for these changes from the IRB office on March 28, 2023 and have included a copy of the "Project Approved" communication that I received in Appendix B.

I submitted my final change request to the IRB office for this project on May 5, 2023. This final change request officially changed the secondary investigator of this project to Dr. Xia from Dr. Grady after her retirement and Dr. Xia's elevation to a co-chair of my dissertation committee. At this time, Dr. Wesley become my other dissertation committee co-chair, but she was not listed as an investigator on my IRB project. In this change request, I also requested approval to use VidGrid (a UNL managed and secured video platform) to generate professional transcriptions for my collected data. I received approval for these changes from the IRB office on May 11, 2023 and have included a copy of the "Project Approved" communication that I received in Appendix B.

Researcher Positioning

My interest in studying the experiences of women in higher education information technology stems from my own experiences as a woman in higher education information technology. As noted in the researcher bias section in Chapter 1, I currently work in a male-dominated IT organization and have personal experience with gender bias and seeing a paucity of women in IT leadership roles. I have worked at the same R1 research institution since 2008, when I started as a student worker. Since that time, I have climbed the organization hierarchy in several different departments, progressing my organizational status to coordinator, manager, and to my current role (as of writing this dissertation) as assistant director. I have a strong desire to increase my own professional title and status, a trait which does not fit my ascribed gender role as a woman-identifying person (Ridgeway, 2001). Does the fact that this trait doesn't fit with my gender role explain my difficulty in progressing along my own leadership path?

My experiences with gender bias and my inward interest in my leadership journey are the two areas that prompted my interest in this topic. In seeking a research topic for my dissertation, I read vast amounts of literature, and reading DeRue and Ashford (2010) was the salient reading that sparked the idea that I could study leadership identity construction in the context of women technology professionals in higher education. The leadership identity construction literature resonated with me because I immediately saw the application to women's experiences with claiming leadership identities and how others might respond to those claims in the context of gender bias in male-dominated organizations.

Procedures

The following sections will detail the data collection and analysis procedures of this dissertation, including the scope of participants, sample selection, interview conditions, use of pseudonyms, plan for data analysis, and strategies for trustworthiness and validation.

Sample Selection

I used homogenous criterion sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2024) to recruit participants who met the parameters of my study's participant requirements and therefore were likely to have similar, homogenous experiences. Participant homogeneity is an important facet of phenomenology studies so that a pattern of convergence can be identified (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). To select my participants from those who responded to my invitation to participate, I chose consecutive sampling (Sharma, 2014). This strategy allowed me to select the first six participants who contacted me back who met the participation requirements for this study. Consecutive sampling is a type of sampling where the researcher selects all participants who meet the inclusion criteria in consecutive order of when they expressed interest in the study and is particularly useful for small populations (Sharma, 2014). One strength of this sampling strategy is that it does not view participants as commodities to be sorted through and analyzed for value. Rather, it sees all potential participants as having inherent value and respects each participant's desire to be included. I believe this philosophy of respect toward participants is at the heart of good qualitative research.

Participant Recruitment

I began my participant recruitment by presenting this project to a monthly meeting of the Educause Women in IT Community Group and requesting participants on 4/24/23. That same day, I emailed out to the Educause Women in IT Community Group email list, the Educause Young Professionals Community Group email list, the Diversity in IT Community Group email list, and the Big Ten Academic Alliance Learning Technology Leaders subgroup email list with a call for participants. I received an overwhelming and supportive response, with a total of 72 women emailing me back and offering to participate.

Intersectionality

One of the goals of my sample was to have it align with the current racial makeup of women in IT. A key reason that I had for this goal was that I did not want this study to only be reflective of the experiences of white voices since women in IT are a much more diverse group than that. Ashcraft et al. (2016) provided data that reveal that in 2015, 64% of women in IT identified as white, 20% of women in IT identified as Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI), 12% of women in IT identified as Black/African American, and 4% of women in IT identified as Latinx/Hispanic. Unfortunately, at the time of writing this dissertation there was not more recent data to show the racial makeup (something which also illustrates the little research that is done in this area).

To specifically reach women of color, one of the places that I advertised this study was the Educause Diversity in IT Community Group, a community group with many members from diverse racial backgrounds. After doing this, I employed maximum

variation sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in an attempt to align the participants of my study with the current racial makeup of women in IT. My participants included women of a diverse set of backgrounds: 3 White American women, 1 Russian Jewish woman, 1 Middle East and North Africa woman, and 1 African American woman (n=6). Smith et al. (2009) recommended that the IPA researcher should select a relatively small sample group of 3-6 participants due to the in-depth interviews and time-consuming analysis required by the method, which is the reason why I selected six participants for this study. In my findings and discussion, I was cautious of generalizing the experiences of my participants of color to all women in IT who come from marginalized racial backgrounds. Generalizing is a common pitfall in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis studies (Smith & Nizza, 2022) and I am committed to looking at each woman's experience in her own context (the idiographic commitment).

Scope of Eligible Participants

The scope of eligible participants for this study included full-time and part-time employees at public or private American higher education institutions who identify as women. Eligible participants must have worked in an information technology organization, should have at least 10 years of experience working in the information technology field, and been at or above the age of consent at the time of study participation. Participants were able to review this list of eligibility requirements and self-select as being qualified to participate in this study. Upon the first interview of each participant, I filled out a brief demographic information chart that allowed to verify that each participant met the qualifications for this study.

Informed Consent

After I selected my participants, I emailed them with an informed consent form (Appendix C). This document further explained my study and asked that each participant sign to express their consent to participate. Participants digitally signed this document and emailed it back to me. I received all signed informed consent forms by the end of April 2023. At that time, I reached out to all participants to schedule their first interviews. It is important to note that my advisor changed from Dr. Grady to Drs. Xia and Wesley after my participants had signed their informed consent forms. Therefore, it was necessary for me to update my informed consent form accordingly to represent the change of advisership. After making this change, I received approval for the new form through the IRB office. I sent the updated version of the form to all participants and received signed consent forms back from my participants in June 2023.

Benefits to Participants

As a small token of my gratitude for completing three 1-hour long interviews with me, I sent each participant a $25 e-gift card of their choosing (e.g., Amazon, Starbucks, etc.). However, I think that the real benefit to participation was one's experiences as a woman in IT analyzed and interpreted through the lens of the IPA methodology. This was an excellent opportunity for participants to increase their self-understanding (both through the introspective interview questions and the finished product) for those who aspired to gain more understanding about their experiences with their growth and identity. I made a point of this benefit in my recruitment materials. Another benefit for participants is knowing that their contributions may eventually lead to improved

conditions for women in higher education information technology organizations. One

participant replied to me via email and said, "Your work will help all of us whether

directly in IT or connected with this varied field" (Grace).

Interview Conditions

Since Educause and Big Ten Academic Alliance members are located throughout

the U.S., I utilized remote semi-structured interview protocols for this project. I held my

interviews via Zoom and recorded each Zoom meeting, which saved a .mp4 video

recording file to my computer. The interviews with my six participants ranged in length

from 30 to 89 minutes. The average interview length was 58 minutes. I titled each video

recording file with the participant's pseudonym for their protection. After each file was

saved to my University-secured laptop, I uploaded each file to VidGrid (a UNL video

content management platform) to have it professionally transcribed. This professional

service allowed me to download a text file with transcriptions of each interview, which I

used for data analysis. For participant protection, I destroyed my video recording files

after the interviews were transcribed.

According to Smith et al. (2009), an IPA researcher should ask interview protocol

questions about "people's understandings, experiences, and sense-making activities"

(p. 47). From asking about their identity work to their identity internalization to their

presentation and claiming of their leadership identity at work, my interviews focused on

my participants' understanding and sense-making of their identity and the way that it is

perceived. To build deeper rapport and create conditions in which I will be able to gain a

more intimate understanding of their identity processes (Seidman, 2013), I had a series of

three interviews with each participant. Seidman (2013) recommended that the first interview cover a condensed and focused life history of the participant, as pertains to the topic. Seidman (2013) recommended in the second interview the participant covers every detail of the experience at hand. Finally, in interview three, the participant is given the opportunity to reflect on the greater meaning of their experience (Seidman, 2013).

Applying this three-step interview process to my own study, I planned the following topics for each interview:

- Interview 1: The aim was getting to know the participant, their work history, and the general story of how their identity has changed.

- Interview 2: The aim was asking each participant to recount their experiences of identity work, internalizing that budding identity, and what it was like to put that identity out there in a social context.

- Interview 3: The aim was to provide a reflection opportunity for each participant to explore their overall experience of leadership identity construction and what that has been like for them in the context of their gender and their IT workspace.

With its in-depth nature and complete focus on the importance of the lived experience of each participant, Seidman (2013) described this as a phenomenological style of interviewing (p. 16). This made the three-interview approach methodologically congruent with the IPA method of this dissertation as well as the feminist and constructivist underpinnings of this project.

Some IPA studies make use of longitudinal interviews that occur over time as new experiences occur (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Since I am exploring participant experiences that have already occurred vertically throughout their career development, I would like to launch the idea that this study is a *latitudinal design*. I am not exploring new concepts in longitudinal real time, but rather I am traveling up and down into my participants' pasts to explore the phenomena at hand, through multiple interviews that explore their lives.

Use of Pseudonyms

I made clear to my participants that neither their real names nor any other identifying data will be used over the course of this study. Protecting participants is one of the most important researcher responsibilities and something that I take very seriously. I gave all participants the opportunity to select their own pseudonym as it will appear in this study and five out of six participants selected their own pseudonym. The idea to allow participants to self-select their pseudonyms was inspired by an article by Allen and Wiles (2016). I made a note of each participant's preferred pseudonym on the interview protocol note sheet that I have for them, and after all interviews were complete, I created a document in my University-secured OneDrive account that linked participant names to participant pseudonyms. This document was destroyed upon completion of this project.

Data Analysis

One of the IPA methodology's hallmarks is its commitment to idiography, which is the commitment to going through cases one by one. Therefore, I followed Smith et al.'s (2009) recommended data analysis steps case by case (e.g., data analysis was fully

completed for one interview before moving to the next). Smith et al.'s (2009) and Smith and Nizza's (2022) data analysis steps for IPA are as follows:

1. Read and re-read a transcript.

2. Perform initial noting to make codes and memos about things that first appear (can include descriptive notes, linguistic notes, and conceptual notes). These are described as exploratory notes.

3. Look at the whole and the part of each transcript and your initial notes to develop experiential statements.

4. Search for connections across those experiential statements.

5. Cluster the experiential statements into a table of personal experiential themes (PETs) for the case. Usually, each case will have 3-5 PETs. Each of those PETs will contain all experiential statements that were clustered into it, typically 3-5 as well.

6. Move to the next case and repeat steps 1 through 5 (meanwhile, bracket ideas from prior cases so that they don't influence data analysis).

7. Look for cross-cutting patterns across cases (including themes that converge and diverge).

8. Create a new table of group experiential themes (GETs) that represents these patterns.

I performed data analysis with a combination of Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel. I made Smith and Nizza (2022)'s recommended exploratory notes in Microsoft Word as comments, directly on the file of each transcript. In completing this task, I read through a

total of 262 pages of interview transcripts and made 3056 exploratory notes. When I

finished making exploratory notes for a transcript, I would move all comments over into

a Microsoft Excel document. Then, I summarized these initial notes into larger

experiential statements (Smith & Nizza, 2022) by collapsing each section of my

transcript into its most important takeaway. I have provided an example of the way that I

used Excel for this data analysis step in Appendix D.

Across all my cases, I reduced my exploratory notes into a total of 902

experiential statements. Then, I clustered these experiential statements into related

themes, which allowed me to develop the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) for each

interview. I did this individually for each interview and clustered my experiential

statements into a total of 94 PETs. When I was done creating each PET, I was able to

begin clustering these themes to unveil the Group Experiential Themes (GETs) of my

interviews. Smith and Nizza (2022) wrote that these GETs should entail a "commitment

to convergence and divergence," (p. 56), implying that participant views and experiences

may vary but they are all connected around the same key themes. I created a total of five

GETs that encompassed the experience of my participants and that I refer to as "Themes"

throughout the remainder of this study. These themes form the core of my findings

(Chapter 4) and phenomenological essence statement (in Chapter 5).

Data Confidentiality

Over the course of this study, records and data collected were stored on secure

UNL servers such as the UNL instance of Microsoft Word, Excel, OneDrive, and

VidGrid. Specifically, these stored items were kept in my University-secured, two-factor

authentication protected OneDrive account at https://uofnebraska-

my.sharepoint.com/personal/amybarry_nebraska_edu/. I kept a document in this account

that will contain a link between participants' names and pseudonyms, which was

destroyed upon this project's completion. The supporting data for this dissertation has

been registered in the UNL Data Repository with the following DOI:

10.32873/unl.dr/20231116 (accessible via URL:

https://doi.org/10.32873/unl.dr.20231116). All de-identified data, research records, and

other project data will be retained on secured UNL servers in my University-secured

OneDrive account for three years beyond the closure of the study. At that time, remaining

de-identified data, research records, and other project data will be deleted.

Methods for Earning Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is earned through methodological rigor and commitment, and this

study will employ several strategies to earn that trustworthiness. As referenced in Smith

et al. (2009), Yardley has four criteria for a valid IPA study: sensitivity to context,

commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. I aim to

satisfy these criteria through four strategies for validation: verisimilitude, using member

checks, incorporating a focus on reflexivity, and rich, thick descriptions (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016). Following Creswell and Miller's (2000) suggestion that researchers use

several validation strategies, I believe that my study is sufficiently rigorous to be

considered a good qualitative study. After all, Creswell and Poth (2024) suggested that a

researcher should employ at least two validation strategies, and I more than met that

expectation with the strategies used in this study. In the following sections, I will detail how I approached each one.

Verisimilitude

Verisimilitude is achieved when a researcher provides their reader with a sense of being there (Creswell & Poth, 2024). To me, this means imbuing your reader with feeling what it would be like to be in each participants' shoes. I will need to craft a cohesive narrative of each participant's experience to accomplish this, so that the reader can follow the story and understand how the participant would have felt and what they would have thought at different points in their leadership journey. It is important to note that per the embodied nature of phenomenology, it is never fully possible for a reader to *fully* understand the experience of a participant. As Smith et al. (2009) wrote in reference to the ideas of Merleau-Ponty, "We can never share entirely the other's experience, because their experience belongs to their own embodied position in the world" (p. 19). What this means is that the experiences of my participants are fully their own embodied experiences, and for that reason another person outside of that experience can never have complete understanding. Ergo, the goal of verisimilitude is to get their reader as close to that point of embodied understanding as possible even if the reader has never directly experienced the phenomenon at hand.

Member Checks

Member checking is a process where the researcher puts a nearly finished copy of their research manuscript in front of their participants and gives them a chance to provide feedback prior to the finalization of the manuscript (Creswell & Poth, 2024). In their text

about naturalistic inquiry, Lincoln and Guba (1985) summed up the process and importance of member checks, writing, "The member check, whereby data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stakeholding groups from whom the data were originally collected, is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). In this way, providing my participants with the opportunity to examine my manuscript through the lens of what needs to be edited to better represent their views is one of the best ways that I can establish trustworthiness in this study. I emailed the relevant sections of this manuscript to my participants on November 6th, 2023, and received all feedback from participants by December 1st, 2023. Reaching out to my participants for the member check process allowed me to re-establish rapport, find and remove several pieces of potentially identifying data, and ensure that my findings aligned with my participants' experiences.

Reflexivity

As sole author, another strategy I employed throughout is clarifying my own bias through a focus on reflexivity (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Not only is that reflexivity a good strategy for trustworthiness, but it is also methodologically congruent with Smith et al.'s (2009) IPA and the concept of bridling, an iterative process of reflexivity throughout data analysis. The reflexivity in this project will not be limited to a one paragraph section describing my positionality; it will be ongoing, ever-present, and weaved into the very soul of the final product.

Rich, Thick Description

Finally, my writing will use a "rich, thick description" (Creswell & Poth, 2024, p. 263) that will allow my reader to follow the reasoning of my study by following each detail. Similarly, I will also incorporate an in-depth usage of the literature to connect my findings back to what is already known about the phenomenon. I want my literature review to have an iterative, connected feel and for the literature to be woven throughout my study to enhance its scholarly authority. This was done with great skill in Dahlvig and Longman's (2014) piece about women's leadership development in Christian higher education, and that is the specific example I have in mind as I discuss how a good literature review (and general literature incorporation) can enhance a study. I also think that by using a rich, thick description I will enhance the verisimilitude of this study. After all, one cannot feel a sense of being there without a seeing an in-depth picture of the phenomenon at hand.

Research Timeline

I submitted this project to the Institutional Review Board on November 4, 2022 and received my Approval Letter (included as Appendix B) on November 16, 2022. I received approval from my dissertation committee to proceed with work on this dissertation on March 3, 2023. Following my dissertation proposal, I received approval from the IRB office for the changes to my research design on March 28, 2023. I submitted additional changes to the IRB office for my research design in May and received approval on May 11, 2023. I began recruiting participants in April 2023, began interviewing participants on May 4, 2023, and finished interviewing all participants on

June 19, 2023. Data analysis occurred from June 20, 2023 through July 22, 2023. I finished writing up my first draft of Chapter 4 on September 12, 2023 and finished writing up my first draft of Chapter 5 on October 17, 2023. I sent a copy of my manuscript to my participants on November 6th, 2023 for member checks and received all feedback from participants by December 1st, 2023. I continued to make edits on this manuscript through the remainder of 2023.

Summary

A feminist, constructivist epistemology in conjunction with a phenomenological methodology allowed me to learn more about the experiences of my participants with their own personal lived experiences with leadership identity construction in higher education information technology workspaces. The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis sub-approach of phenomenology gave me the creative freedom and space to interpret the experiences of my participants through the lens of my own reflexivity. This method also ensured that I focus on the whole and the part of each woman's story, finally letting me search for the cross-cutting themes that emerged from my interpretations. Multiple semi-structured interviews with a homogenous group of women served as the data source for this project. I placed an emphasis on trustworthiness and goodness in the very methodology of this project to ensure that it is doing right by my participants as human beings.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to describe the experiences of women in higher education information technology with leadership identity construction, including the identity work and social identity expression stages. The findings in this section emerged after I completed analysis guided by the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology, as demonstrated by Smith et al. (2009) and Smith and Nizza (2022). This chapter will open by providing a demographic and contextual overview of the study's six participants. This important opening section will serve to honor the lived experiences of the participants while also providing the reader with a frame of reference for understanding their experiences before proceeding into the findings. After providing that context, I will explore the five group experiential themes (GETs) that emerged through my data analysis and interpretation. At the end of each theme, I will provide an analysis to contextualize my participants' experiences and derive the meaning as it appeared through my hermeneutic lens (Smith et al., 2009).

The Participants

As Smith and Nizza (2022) put it, "The aim of IPA studies is to illuminate individual lived experience" (p. 14). Therefore, as the purpose of the study itself, the participants in an IPA are mission critical. There would be no study without a desire to understand their experiences and having participants who are willing to speak about their personal lives with such honesty. Before embarking on our discussion of themes, this

section will attempt to set the stage by describing who the participants of this study are, both as IT professionals and people.

Table 1 contains demographic details for each participant. Please note that some demographic names (like exact IT organization name) have been altered to help protect participant privacy. Also, all participants reported coming from 4-year non-profit institutions, so though that demographic question was asked, it was not included in Table 1 since the responses were the same for all participants.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics (N=6)

Pseudonym	Public or Private Institution	Research or Teaching Institution	IT Unit in Organization	Years in IT	Race / Ethnicity	Country of Origin
Reba	Public	Teaching	Acad Tech + IT Business Services	24	White	America
Kaya	Private	Research	Service Management	28	White	Australia
Tina	Private	Teaching	Client Services	25	Middle East and North Africa (MENA)	Palestine
Nicole	Public	Research	Distributed IT	20	Black	America
Tiffany	Public	Research	Enterprise Solutions	27	White	America
Grace	Public	Research	Instructional Design	16	Russian Jewish	Russia

Table 1 shows some important participant demographics, including institutional data, IT organization data, and racial/ethnic data. It is important to note that three of my six participants immigrated to the United States, a life event that came up in their interviews and had substantial impact on their experiences.

Participant #1 – Reba

Reba is a white American woman who works at a public higher education institution as a director. Her institution is classified as teaching, and she works in the academic technologies and IT business services areas. She has been in IT for 24 years. A hallmark of Reba's personal identity is that she is a strong, independent woman who has been through a lot and chose to keep going. She is a single mother, member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and has a master's degree. Reba is a divorcée and, above all, a survivor.

Participant #2 – Kaya

Kaya is a white woman whose family immigrated to America from Australia. She works at a private higher education institution as a director in IT service management. Her institution is classified as research, and she has been in IT for 28 years. Kaya has many identities: she is a mother, divorcée, wife, MBA graduate, partial business owner, and dog mom.

Participant #3 – Tina

Tina is a Middle East and North Africa (MENA) woman whose family immigrated to America from Palestine. She works at a private higher education institution as a director. Her institution is classified as teaching, and she works in the

client services department of her organization. She has been in IT for 25 years. Tina has many personal identities, including being a Muslim woman, Palestinian, a mom, an American, a sister, a daughter, and an EdD graduate. She also sees herself as a leader, problem solver, and co-worker. An identity that brings a lot of joy to her life is that she is a Disney adult. She is also looking forward to becoming a grandmother in the fall of 2023.

Participant #4 – Nicole

Nicole is an African American woman who works at a public higher education institution as a director. Her institution is classified as research, and she works in distributed IT. She has been in IT for 20 years. Nicole identifies as Black and is a mother, martial artist, and part-time teacher. She identifies as a higher education employee (describing the field as near and dear to her heart), IT leader, volunteer, PhD graduate, and leadership trainer.

Participant #5 – Tiffany

Tiffany is a white American woman who works at a public higher education institution as a manager. Her institution is classified as research, and she works in the enterprise solutions unit. She has been in IT for 27 years and has many unique identities. Tiffany is a mom, dog mom, a self-described "helper of people", bachelor's degree graduate, video gamer, introvert, and artist. Tiffany loves dressing up and really likes swords.

Participant #6 – Grace

Grace is a Russian Jewish woman whose family immigrated to America from Russia. She works with nurses as an instructional and technology consultant in her organization. Her school is classified as a public research institution. She has been in IT for 16 years. Grace is Russian-Jewish by ethnicity, and she came to the U.S. as a refugee in her late teens from the USSR a couple of years before it disintegrated. She is an American citizen, has two master's degrees, writes articles for a non-profit higher education IT organization, volunteers for several open education organizations, has a collection of colorful scarves, loves all things related to zoos and zoo animals, and likes British comedy shows. She's an advocate, a daughter, a partner, and a lifelong learner.

Themes

I identified five themes that encompassed the experience of my participants after a thorough and time-intensive data analysis process. I began by reading and re-reading my transcripts (Smith et al., 2009) and made 3056 initial exploratory notes. I was able to reduce these notes into a total of 902 experiential statements. I clustered these experiential statements into a total of 94 Personal Experiential Themes (PETs). It is important to note that due to the idiographic commitment of IPA (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022), I completed all analysis in a case-by-case manner (e.g., going through the whole process of making notes, statements, and PETs for one case before moving on to the next). Finally, I clustered these themes into similar categories and developed the five overarching Group Experiential Themes (GETs) that will be detailed in the section below. The five GETs that emerged from my analysis are as follows:

1. Navigating Bias and Challenges

2. Growing and Building Resilience

3. Cultivating Meaningful and Nurturing Connections

4. Self-Building and Developing Authenticity

5. Solidifying Leadership Perspectives and Practices

In the next part of this chapter, I provide a detailed description for each theme, as well as relevant contextual evidence in the form of quotes from interviews. As Holliday (2007) wrote, this thematic approach is at the heart of good qualitative research. Holliday (2007) stated, "Taking a purely thematic approach, in which all the data is taken holistically and rearranged under themes which emerge as running through its totality, is the classic way to maintain these principles" (p. 94). By following this approach and providing evidence for each theme that has emerged, I will show how each participant's experience converges and diverges (Smith & Nizza, 2022) with the theme at hand, illustrating and feeling each of its unique bumps and indentations.

Navigating Bias and Challenges

Theme One, *Navigating Bias and Challenges*, emerged from the experiences of all participants and reveals the challenging, rocky, and sometimes cruel world that women in higher education IT must navigate. From experiencing workplace disrespect to being non-willing participants in bias-laden gender dynamics to experiencing social challenges that lead to self-doubt, bias and challenges can manifest in many forms for women in IT organizations.

Experiencing Disrespect in the Workplace

One of the core experiences that comes along with navigating bias and challenges is experiencing disrespect in the workplace. In this first example, Nicole recalled a time that she was singled out and disrespected for using a laptop in a meeting. She also described how she stood up for herself in this difficult situation.

> And so we're doing this meeting and stuff, and so then he asked the question and I go, oh, let me look that up. I look it up on my laptop, I respond. And after the meeting he was like, oh, you know, it'd be best if you were not like on your laptop looking stuff up while we're doing the meeting, however everyone at the meeting was on their laptop doing this, and so I said, I understand, however, I understand that that could be considered rude if I was the only one on my laptop. However, the norm of the room was, everyone else was on their laptop. So is that a new rule that we're going to implement? Because if so, I would like you to share that with everyone at the meeting, versus me here personally, unless you've already had this conversation with other people. (Nicole, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

Nicole also provided an example of another time that her identity was treated disrespectfully. When she was at the front of a classroom and preparing to teach a class, a student said, "when is the teacher gonna get here?" (Nicole, Interview 2, May 31, 2023). In this example, the student did not see Nicole as an authority figure due to her external, physical identities. In this situation, Nicole responded to the student by describing her expertise – essentially "proving" herself to the student by describing the ways in which she was qualified to be the teacher. Kaya also talked about feeling the need to "prove" herself. In Interview 3, Kaya said that as she has gotten older, she has overcome some of her need to be ready to prove herself constant in the workplace (Kaya, Interview 3, June 19, 2023). She suggested that this may be due to having more positive and supporting women in leadership in her current institution. In Interview 3, Grace suggested that trying

to prove yourself is connected to burnout (June 20, 2023). She described the state of

constantly trying to prove yourself as simply not sustainable (Grace, Interview 3, June 20,

2023), which aligns with the experiences of the other participants of this study. She also

mentioned that this state of constantly trying to prove yourself is connected to feelings of

imposter syndrome.

Another surprising source of bias comes from Tina's relationship with her CIO.

Unfortunately, Tina has had a difficult relationship with her institution's CIO, and she

believes the tension is so obvious that others have noticed. Tina reflected on this strained

relationship and wonders which of her identities may have led to her boss feeling this

way about her. "Because I'm female and middle Eastern, I'm Muslim?" Tina wonders

(Interview 3, June 6, 2023). Luckily, their relationship is not as strained as it used to be.

Tina says that the CIO experienced a change of heart during the COVID-19 pandemic

and became more supportive during that time. Tina sees the fact that she "stuck it out" as

a sign of her toughness and tenacity, especially since she was able to get through a

situation like her boss being her main barrier (Interview 3, June 6, 2023). Tina wears this

as a badge of honor.

Tiffany discussed what it was like to experience a hostile climate in a higher

education organization. Prior to her current institution, not only did her male colleagues

yell at her for when she would attempt to lead in male spaces, but she would also cry at

work due to her maltreatment. She also had a bad boss in this toxic climate, who gave her

bad feedback out of the blue. She reflected on one such incident in particular:

> My manager didn't have any contact with me for two years until one day he
> brought me into his office and said, "I'm very disappointed with your work," and

my response was, "You've never had a meeting with me ever in all the time that I've worked here. So you're only meeting with me saying that you're disappointed, but no, like, proof, nobody, you know, he just heard that, I have no idea, he had no actual identification for backing up that claim. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

This was the point at which Tiffany knew that she had to leave her former institution. She partially chalks up this hostile climate to living in a state with a male-dominated religious culture. She noticed the permeance of a good old boys' club structure that reinforced the toxic patriarchy (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023). Tiffany was certain that she would have left the field of IT had she not changed jobs and found her current institution. Kaya had a very similar experience working in a male-dominated organization with a toxic climate. She stated that there were many microaggressions and that this made her feel "less than" as a person (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023).

Microaggressions and Racially Coded Bias. As a Russian immigrant, Grace was very frustrated when she had a colleague and at least one of her former bosses suggest that her Russian accent was a barrier to her career progression.

I had people say to me, "Well, they don't understand you because of your accent. One boss was blunt (or insolent enough), to say that anything I say washes over the group." So first of all, my first question is, "Would you say this to somebody of a different race or ethnicity? Would you say it to them? No. So what makes you think you can say it to me?" And frankly I feel I should have told them that. (Grace, Interview 1, May 5, 2023)

Grace was hurt by this disrespectful response to her accent, and in Interview 2 she expressed more frustrations around the fact that nothing has seemed to change outsider perceptions that others have about her (May 30, 2023). These experiences have taught her to no longer put up with discrimination when she experiences it (Grace, Interview 2, May

30, 2023). She used very strong language to illustrate that she will respond forcefully the

next time that this happens.

> The only reason I don't really care right now is if anybody so much as even tried
> it, and I did say to my team, I'm gonna make full force. I will not put up with this
> anymore. Not from anybody. (Grace, Interview 2, May 30, 2023)

For example, in Interview 2, Grace recalled a time when someone singled her out based

on her ethnicity, without even hearing her speak.

> I remember many, many years ago, my God, I must have been in the country for
> what, 10 years maybe even less. It's funny but not funny. I was walking to a
> computer lab to work on my paper and to print it out. I wasn't speaking, wasn't
> saying anything. Probably watching out for potholes as I walked. I was walking
> alone and was dressed in very American clothing. Jeans, sweatshirt—the like.
> And I was just walking, walking to the computer lab. Purposely walking because I
> needed to get my paper done right? And so a passerby said to me, "Hey, are you
> Russian?" I remember looking at them, like, my jaw dropped. I wasn't even
> talking, how do you know? "You walk like a Russian." How does a Russian
> walk? (Grace, Interview 2, May 30, 2023)

Grace believes that these microaggressions had improved during the remote work period

of COVID-19, when in person encounters were more limited. Even though Grace has felt

a great deal of anger and hurt over this discrimination, she still believes that breaking

down biases and stereotypes is possible.

Male Bias Against Emotions. Nicole was criticized by her first supervisor about

being too emotional at work, something that she noticed was not brought up to anyone

else on the team besides herself. She reflected on what he told her, paraphrasing what her

manager at the time told her, "It was like, oh Nicole, I need you to be more professional

on your meetings" (Nicole, Interview 3, June 13, 2023). The fact that she was singled out

and that he didn't give others similar feedback was what made her think that this was

gender-related negative feedback. Kaya has also noticed bias and stereotypes around

emotions in the workplace. She stated that stereotypes dictate that emotion shouldn't be brought into the workplace but feels that this is antiquated advice. "It's what you do with them, right? So if you harness the emotion, and direct it towards doing something better, more creative, more collaborative, like, that's not bad, right?" (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023). In this way, Kaya rebels against the patriarchal bias against emotion by using it to her advantage. She sees emotion as a potentially positive strength, just waiting to be drawn out and leveraged into its maximum potential.

Tiffany also noticed challenges with her emotions in the workplace. First, she has had to begin regulating her emotions as a strategy to succeed as a leader. She has recognized over the years that people who are emotional are hard to want to talk to. Therefore, since Tiffany attempted to be an approachable leader, she has decided that emotional regulation is a necessary strategy (Interview 2, June 1, 2023). She also says that she gets annoyed with her emotional qualities, stating, "A lot of the qualities that are considered female, like being overly emotional and that, I actually get kind of annoyed with, like I need to separate the emotion out of this" (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023). When it comes to gendered expectations of female behavior, Tina adopted a strategy to clamp down emotions and not let them command her behavior. She stated, "and if your emotions are on a high alert or what have you, then just clamp them down. And sometimes it's hard to control that" (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023). In this way, shutting down her emotions gives Tina an added sense of control.

Feelings of Powerlessness. There was one incident when Reba felt disrespected in a meeting that made her feel powerless.

> In a meeting, six men, my VP, three Deans, a lead in another department, and me. We're sitting in the room, I set up the meeting, I did all of the agenda items, I did all of the work. John led the meeting, he's my boss. And yet they ignored me, in fact, John went around the room and said, "Here's everyone, oh yeah, and Reba." So number one, he discounted my value in the meeting. Number two, I was basically, I felt like he was making me a scribe in the meeting. He used me like a secretary. When I basically told him at the end after the meeting, I said, I really feel like you did me a disservice in that meeting because you did not adequately represent me, that I had a place at that table. I set up the meeting. It was my call. They all looked to you, you all talked around me, and none of you addressed me. And it made me feel very uncomfortable. Now I have a relationship with my boss that I can tell him those things, but I don't know if I could have done that with just anybody. And that's a perfect example of how I feel like women are devalued at our university. (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

After being ignored and feeling uncomfortable in this situation, at least Reba was able to approach her supervisor after the meeting and provide feedback. However, the lingering challenge for Reba was that she was not able to resolve her feelings with the other VPs in the meeting room since she did not have a strong enough relationship with them to provide them with feedback.

In another situation, Reba felt like she was unable to act on her intuition that she noticed sexist traits in a man who was applying for a job at her institution.

> And in the interview, like a public presentation, they spoke to only the men in the room. I asked the question, they didn't look at me, they didn't address me, they spoke to the men in the room. And yet at the end I still offered that person the job because he was the number one candidate. And fortunately, he didn't accept it because I knew it would be really rough. So, I do think sometimes you have an instinct for how people are gonna perceive you. You share it, you voice it, but you do what is best for your university or for your department or whatever you're doing. (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

Yet again, she felt powerless - she felt that she needed to focus on doing what would be best for her institution, even if that meant ignoring her intuition.

Stigmas and Feeling Invalid. There have been times in her life when Reba has

witnessed teachers using moralistic allegories in their classes that made her life choices

seem socially unaccepted.

> In my degree, when I was getting my bachelor's degree, I would sit in these
> classes and I'd have a professor say, "If you're a professional, you've never filed
> for bankruptcy. If you're a professional, you've never had a problem." I'm sorry,
> I would sit in those rooms and say, well, I can't speak up and tell them, I can't
> make myself so vulnerable to tell them I've filed for bankruptcy, I went through a
> divorce, I've had $5 to live on, right? I've done the Top Ramen peanut butter
> thing, right? But whatever it is that students do, I had five kids and not enough
> money to live on. And I've been in that vulnerable state before where I was
> beholden to other people for my survival, but yet I still push through. (Reba,
> Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

When people insult the things that she has had to go through or portray them as "less

than," they disregard Reba's lived experiences. This is something that she has had to

work on, to be able to get to a point of feeling comfortable with putting her hardships out

there in front of others (Reba, Interview 2, May 31, 2023). Now, she sees it as a type of

wisdom to be able to share the hardship that she has gone through at the right time if

someone else is able to learn or take value from her experience. Reba has even had the

opportunity to share her story by speaking about her life experiences at a scholarship

ceremony. She has given the speech several times, and she has learned how to speak

about her life in a way that gives values to others (Reba, Interview 2, May 31, 2023).

In addition to experiencing stigmas that come from identity groups, people can

also experience stigmas directed at their personal attributes. For example, Tiffany shared

an incident where a faculty member refused to accept her technical support solely based

on her name. This anecdote illustrates the broad, systemic challenges that women in IT

roles can experience.

So you gotta remember Brad is now off the team and I am the manager. My secretary in information services contacts me and she says, I just got a call from a faculty member, a male faculty member that said, I'm having a problem with PeopleSoft and I need help. And she said, great, that is Tiffany on our team that can help you with that. I can transfer you to her. And his response is, "No one named Tiffany can ever help me with it, with IT." So she's like, "Well, she's the only one on the team that can help you with this. I don't know how to help you." And he's like, "Just get me somebody else, anybody else." So without even talking to me, he had already made that assumption that anybody named Tiffany couldn't help him. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

Tiffany was shocked by how the faculty member's assumptions about her name made him react in the way that he did. In Interview 1, she also reflected on the prevalence of assumptions, wondering how many people make assumptions and how many people don't reach out at all if they have perceptions of bias from seeing someone's name alone.

Gender Dynamics

Another common thread among the participants' discussion of bias and challenges were gender dynamics. Participants spoke about both their personal experiences with gender dynamics in their organizations and the gender dynamics that they see play out with those around them in their organizations. This section will be split into those two categories of experiences.

Personal Experiences with Gender Dynamics. Nicole explored why the people in her organization expect her to play into gender stereotypes and don't see that there are other options. For example, she questioned why she is expected to make gifts for employees when it would also be an option to send them gift cards or purchase gifts at the store (Nicole, Interview 2, May 31, 2023). Nicole also noticed that gender stereotypes are thrust upon her outside of the workplace, particularly on a board of trustees that she sits on. She postulated that, due to her gender, the other members of her committee

expect her to "take notes, and bring snacks, and do all these things" (Nicole, Interview 2, May 31, 2023). Kaya has had a similar experience with gendered assumptions in meeting rooms, and one of her counterstrategies is not volunteering to take notes (Interview 2, May 18, 2023).

Nicole felt that she must perform better than a man to get the same benefits, because she has had a situation happen where what a man was receiving was not automatically offered to her.

> Now I knew what he was making in terms of his pay, which was significantly more than my pay. And so when I did get the job offer, they said, hey, I'm so happy that you're gonna be here. Here's the pay. And I was like, that's great. Because it was still more than I was making, but it was not what he was making. And we had the same level of experience. We've been in the institution the same way. But I knew what he was making so I was like, nope, I want this. And they were like, oh, well, and they gave me what I wanted, but when they first said here's the, it's better than what I was making, they were like, here's the offer. And I was like, no, I'm gonna need $15K more. And they were like, oh, okay. Only because I was like, how are you going to offer me this position doing the exact same job this person did? We had the exact same experience, but you offered me $15K less than what he was making? (Interview 3, June 13, 2023)

She also thought that this was frustrating because HR made no effort to give her a matching salary offering from the beginning of the interaction. If she had not known his salary going into the conversation and did not think to bargain for a higher salary, it is very likely she would have been stuck with the initially offered salary. This entire situation left her feeling frustrated and disgusted with the patriarchal power dynamic of her organization (Nicole, Interview 3, June 13, 2023). Like Nicole, Tiffany also believes that she must perform better than a man to get the same benefits. This is a personal belief, and she has a desire to set her bar higher to make sure that she will do better (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023). Kaya, on the other hand, believes that things have changed for

the better in this area. She suggested that women used to have to do better compared to their male peers, and that nowadays women can just be equal to men and still succeed (Kaya, Interview 3, June 19, 2023).

Reba has noticed that men respond with a surprising amount of fragility when women are picked instead of them for opportunities like managerial roles.

> And the men had a harder time with it. The men when they were deselected, felt like they were demoted even though they weren't doing their job as a manager, they felt isolated and frustrated that a woman dared take them out of their manager role, which was an interesting concept. (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

Kaya proceeded to discuss other areas in which she has seen examples of male fragility. Similarly, she noticed that when women are in non-traditional positions of power, like being the breadwinners for their families, it can be threatening to the men who have traditionally held these roles (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023). She believes that these traditional beliefs are due to deep-seated generational values that are being uprooted in current waves of sweeping societal change. For example, when Kaya witnessed a woman or person of color get celebrated or promoted in the workplace, she noticed the white male response as "don't I matter too?" (Interview 2, May 18, 2023) instead of being happy for that person. She thinks that this privileged attitude of feeling like they deserve everything is at the core of toxic male fragility.

Kaya stated that there have been times in the past when she has received negative feedback on evaluations for what she describes as the assertive versus aggressive perception. She is a self-described Type A personality and assertive with what she wants, and that led to her supervisor giving her negative feedback for being overly aggressive.

> And I think it is the assertive versus aggressive perception, right, that I'm a little bit too much, like, right there, calling people out on thing, where I think some of the comments that I've had over the years, and who did them and the way it was phrased was, like, if a man had done this, you would not have put this in the performance review. (Kaya, Interview 3, June 19, 2023)

Kaya reflected on this and stated that she hasn't received this type of gender biased feedback in at least the last seven years. She suggested that this may be because she has more female leadership in current role than she did in the past. Similarly, Grace received negative feedback from peers due to her ambitious behavior. She has had peers question why she presents all the time, and this feedback made her feel that she was in an unsupportive environment (Grace, Interview 3, June 20, 2023).

Perceptions of Gender Dynamics. Several of the participants noticed differences in their male and female leadership that create a differential experience for them in their organizations. To begin, Reba has noticed that men see getting personal as a boundary that they don't want to cross. "It's interesting, my boss is a male and he's a VP and he always says, I can't talk, I can't get personal with people. I don't ask when their birthday is" (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023). On the other hand, Reba saw personal touches as acts of caring. She finds it important to "see" people's identities and let people know that they are "seen." It's important to note that Reba does not think that all male leaders are non-caring. During Interview 1, she reminisced about a supportive male mentor who advocated for strong women. This mentor gave her opportunities but showed his respect by leaving it up to her if she would take those opportunities or not. He "had her back" regardless of her decision (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023). Tiffany has noticed similar

qualities in her male leadership. She reflects on the differences between her current male

CIO and her past female CIOs.

> And he doesn't, he's not quite as open as the other two women were. You know, they were very much in the office talking to people as much as they could. Whereas he, I feel like I haven't heard from him in a little while and that might be on me. So, but I feel like they're just simply not quite as open. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

In this way, Tiffany described male leaders as quiet and insular and female leaders as

more relational with their staff. Tiffany also connects this viewpoint with her current

reporting line in her organization. She stated that her current boss isn't as supportive or

helpful when it comes to making time for her and helping her grow her career (Tiffany,

Interview 1, May 15, 2023). In Interview 3, Tiffany elaborated more on the differences

between male and women leaders. She summarized the differences by suggesting that

male leaders are more business oriented and that women leaders are more about the

relationship (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023). She describes this as a difference of

motivation, suggesting that men are agenda driven and women are relationship driven.

Reba believes that men are often overconfident in their behaviors and that women

don't give themselves enough credit. She reflected on this and suggested that women

often define themselves by their limits:

> All women, all people kind of can be hardest on themselves, but I think women especially are defined by their limits. You know, we see a job description that says you have to have these 10 things and we say, I don't have all 10 things so I'm not gonna apply. And a man may see 10 things to say, I have five of those and I can learn those other five and they'll apply. They think a little bit differently than we do. We're really, I think, as I said, we're the hardest on ourselves and we don't give ourselves enough credit for what we could do. (Reba, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

Tiffany has noticed a gender hierarchy in her organization and has realized that it is easier to put herself out there as a leader when more women leaders surround her. She reflected:

> It was less scary when there were a lot more women leaders that said exactly what needed to be said. It becomes a little bit scarier now that we have a few more male leaders in the organization because it feels a little bit like their voice sometimes outranks yours, and that becomes a little bit . . . I mean, that's gonna be true in any hierarchy, whether they're female or male, but I may second-guess whether I want to say something versus someone I feel like a little bit more is on my side than not. (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023)

Tiffany partially felt this way because she fears that men might misinterpret her ideas, while women are more likely to try to make the effort to understand the perspective that she's coming from (Interview 3, June 8, 2023). For this reason, Tiffany has noticed that she needs to be strategic with her comments when she needs to communicate in a male-led meeting. For example, she states, "Whereas now, meetings, I feel like very much I have to be on the agenda and make sure that it's something that I'm supposed to be saying" (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023). In this way, she feels a stronger need to censor herself in male-led scenarios.

Social Challenges

For the participants of this study, social challenges often entail trying to fit in with one's organization, navigating assumptions and social gender dynamics, working through social scenarios of feeling like an outsider, and challenges involving one's personal appearance. In Interview 1, Reba described how it can be challenging to be listened to as a woman leader in social settings with an all-male audience (May 16, 2023). As she reflected on the challenging nature of being in this situation, she says, "And to be able to

be a woman who's a leader and trying to lead out in those things, it can be a hard sell"

(Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023). It does not help that she has noticed that male leaders

seem to prioritize "checking things off the list" instead of building relationships and

valuing each person as a whole being, something that she describes as more feminine.

> I act more emotionally, meaning I care about people, I have compassion, I feel like I do that personal touch more. And the others are all about, I check off all the boxes. I got this project done, I got this task done. So male leaders are driven to check things off the box and finish a project. Not that women can't do that, but women want to make sure people are part of a team and care about others. And that we work together as a team. It's just a different perspective, I think. And so that's kind of what I see is people tend to say, well if I want a project done, I'm gonna assign it to a man. But if you assign it to a woman, not only do you get the person who finished the project, you get the team who finished the project. (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

She even had a colleague come to her who felt this same way. The colleague told Reba

that she felt devalued in the workplace because her male boss was more interested in

checking things off his to do list than valuing what she could contribute as a person. That

made her feel disengaged and unmotivated, and her experience resonated with Reba's

perspective (Interview 1, May 16, 2023).

To fit in with her organization on a social level, Tina has intentionally had to cut

down on her swearing (Interview 1, May 16, 2023). She talks about how she aspired to

have no filter, implying that that aligns with her authentic self. But in a professional

setting, she felt the need to adapt her real self to what is professionally acceptable:

> You know, I aspire to be my mother, who's 72 this year, and she gives no filters, no shits, nothing. And I'm like, that's where I wanna be in my life when I get there. But when you're in a professional setting, it's a little bit more challenging to do that. (Tina, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

Though she feels the need to make these occasional adaptations, Tina did not feel that she

had to change as a person for her job. Tina says, "I don't feel like I've changed as a

person. Like I'm still me" (Interview 1, May 16, 2023).

Tiffany found it frustrating that her leadership doesn't ask who wants

opportunities that are available. She reflected on one situation when she wasn't selected

for a leadership training:

> So I found out that this leadership thing was coming up, and I said, "Hey, I wanna
> be part of it." I let everybody know I wanted to be part of it, from like the CIO, to
> co-CIO, to my manager, to directors. And in the end they chose not to have me
> included. It was very frustrating that I had done so much work to be part of
> something for them to say, "No, we're only gonna give it to people that are
> actively managing or supervisors." Which really sucked because then I found out
> that at least seven of the supervisors that were made to go didn't actually end up
> going. They didn't even want to go. And I'm like, "Here I am wanting this
> training, but you didn't ask who wanted it, you just chose, you know, if you're a
> supervisor then you're gonna go." It was very disappointing. (Tiffany,
> Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

This experience has influenced her own leadership style, and she stated that she tries to

make sure that values peoples' interest and intentions when it comes to the opportunities

that are available.

Feeling Like an Outsider. Grace also talked about being frustrated with her

limited knowledge, and how it would have been more helpful for her to know about

things rather than learning them the hard way.

> So first of all, I didn't even know that there was a program to reimburse for
> tuition, okay? By the time I found out I only had a course left. Second, course, I
> don't even remember. But second, I just went through a lot of challenges as a
> learner, you know? There was a lot of bias, not from everybody, but I dealt with a
> lot of bias and prejudice, and that would be putting it mildly. I also had no idea
> how to handle something like that. Some of these things, I also realized later just
> what it was, 'cause it was really hurtful and it was making things even harder.
> (Grace, Interview 1, May 5, 2023)

In another part of Interview 1, Grace talked more about this topic. She said that she believes that people accidentally disadvantage themselves by not having insider knowledge, and has several regrets related to that. For example, she used lots of personal vacation time to work on presentations and articles for her higher education organizations - something that she didn't realize is commonly done on work time by other higher education staff members. She had a similar situation with not knowing how to handle a salary negotiation when she felt that she was given a lowball offer. Sadly, she did not attempt to negotiate for a higher salary due to her lack of insider knowledge. In Interview 3, Grace reflected on her cultural background and stated that it took her many years for her to realize there were perceptions of her culture as a group, yet another thing that would have been helpful for her to fully understand earlier on (June 20, 2023). So, in these ways, not knowing the ropes and unwritten rules can be a personal disadvantage.

Grace has experienced several other social challenges in her organization. First is the social context of her organization, where there are clear lines drawn between the high status (nurses/educators) and low status individuals (IT support staff). She has noticed that even if you move into a new and higher status role, some people in your organization will continue to perceive you as support staff - and never see you as someone who can mentor or lead.

> And so as I was trying to construct my personality on that professionally, it was difficult because well, let's say you transition to a different role and somebody comes to and says, "Can you order coffee?" And you can say, "Well, let me introduce you to Kate or Adam, and they have taken on this role." Well, I couldn't do that in our group. (Grace, Interview 1, May 5, 2023)

This anecdote shows that Grace was in a position where she had to continue performing menial tasks even when she was elevated into a new position. She described these tasks as "admin work" and said that she continues to get more of this work assigned to her even though this is not a part of her job description (Grace, Interview 1, May 5, 2023). Grace reflected on how her low status gets continually reinforced by leadership:

> She sends out a message, "Thank you to all our support staff," and then we have another person and she's very condescending, "Your efforts are appreciated." And so when I know that I cannot really take on a leadership role because only nurses can do that, I just, I think today I got yet another reminder that I will never be anything other than support staff in this group, at least. (Grace, Interview 1, May 5, 2023)

Overall, these affirmations of disrespect and inferiority have been harmful to Grace's experience at her institution. Grace has recognized and accepted this negative culture and navigates this by emphasizing co-leadership positions in ongoing projects, acknowledging cultural dynamics, and learning to have lower expectations of her organization.

Personal Appearance. Reflecting on gendered expectations around clothes and makeup, Tina revealed that she doesn't dress up or wear makeup in her daily life (Interview 3, June 6, 2023). Reba also stated that she doesn't like to dress up or wear makeup because she does not want her appearance to reflect poorly on who she is (Interview 3, June 6, 2023). Similarly, Kaya stated that she doesn't want her body to be noticed for the wrong reasons. She felt that dressing too revealingly would cross a boundary line into the personal that she wouldn't want to be crossed at work (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023). Overall, Kaya summed up her beliefs with these thoughts,

> But you wanna come across as professional, and somebody who gives a visible representation of being trustworthy, you've got it under control, put your faith in me that I can handle it. So, I just try to dress in that fashion. (Kaya, Interview 3, June 19, 2023)

Grace noted that appearance-based assumptions play a huge role, and often lead to organizations granting or denying trust to an aspiring leader (Interview 3, June 20, 2023).

As a Black woman, Nicole has experienced hair-related bias. She likes different hairstyles and colors but feels the need to manage when she can wear these styles.

> I'll sometimes have box braids, or dreads, or different hair colors, and I change my hair fairly frequently. Sometimes if I know certain events are coming up, I will plan accordingly of how I'm going to change. I'm like, you know, today's not the day to get honey brown braids to have for the next two months, because I'm gonna be presenting at this event. And not that it's, but it used to be a conception that it was not considered professional to have certain types of hairstyles. (Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

In Interview 3, Nicole indicated that she has gotten past worrying about what's appropriate as she has matured in her career (June 13, 2023). Nicole reflected on how this has lessened as a worry for her.

> I used to think about it, but not anymore. Like that used to be very early on, I was like, oh my God, can I get my hair braided and still go to work? Yes, of course I can. But I'll always go, oh, should I get color? Should I not get color? Like, ooh, if it's too much color, like will that be, like I can't go platinum blonde, they'll be like, what's going on? So I used to think about those a lot. (Interview 3, June 13, 2023).

Another hair bias experience for Nicole has been when people touch her hair without permission. Nicole described how that makes her feel.

> And since I have been working in the profession for however, 20 plus years, there have been multiple occasions where people, without me asking, just come in and touch my hair. Oh my gosh. And I'm like, I've never felt the need to go touch somebody else's hair, whether it be curly or a different texture. I don't go, you know what I need to do, put my hands on your head without asking. And it makes

me feel less than, and like a doll, and that has happened on, I wanna say more than five times. (Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

This frequent situation has taught Nicole how to "swerve" to avoid being harmed. She describes swerving as a protection strategy where she interrupts the behavior immediately by telling the person that she does not consent. She reflected on this, "And I was like, I'm not your toy, like what is happening? And so I definitely know how to swerve and say, oh, what's going on here? Oh, you know, stop. I don't want you to touch my hair" (Nicole, Interview 2, May 31, 2023).

One outlier, Tiffany, indicated that personal appearance can be an opportunity to connect with others in the workplace if one is conscientious about one's decisions. When Tiffany began discussing this topic, she reflected on a time when she had a manager whose look would dramatically change from day to day and how that was unsettling for her. After having that experience, she knew that she didn't want her appearance to be unsettling to others, and now she makes sure to dress with intentionality for herself and others. For example, she stated that she will wear certain things if they make her feel good about herself.

> I wear eyeliner almost every single day even if I don't wear a base. I do wear jewelry. I feel like it makes you look more put-together, and I want to look like someone that knows what they're talking about. So, I mean, I wore specifically these earrings and this white, little tank top shirt that's all kind of glittery and a little flower necklace specifically for this meeting because I wanna remember what it feels like when I feel like I am being a good leader and I'm on top of things. Whereas if when I'm in a T-shirt and my hair's in a ponytail, I don't feel quite that I am ready to do things. It's kind of something I discussed earlier. When I am more nervous, I wear more makeup because it's like war paint. If you feel like you know what you're talking about, eventually you do know what you're talking about, right? So, yeah, makeup I'm there. The outfits and clothing, I very rarely wear T-shirts. I'm usually in full dress. I like wearing dresses. (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023)

In this way, Tiffany demonstrated how wearing certain things can make her feel good about herself when she's at work. In addition to dressing for herself, she also dresses for others:

> And I'm usually taking their lead of, "Well, let's see, how does it make me feel when I see them? What do I want to take from that?" So I make a cognizant decision on what it is I want people to feel about me that day. If I'm having all one-on-ones that day, and they're with my employees, and they're my employees that I need to feel more informal with, then I might wear one of my T-shirts, one of my rock band T-shirts, or Wicked, or something because that will make them feel a little bit more familiar. Or if they come online and they have their camera off, I leave my camera off, too, 'cause I'm like, "You know what? That's fine. I understand you're having a stressful day and don't really wanna be seen. I respect that and we'll just do this over voice." And I respect that idea. So I try to mirror that with my employees, but with anything else. (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023)

In this way, Tiffany viewed matching and mirroring employees as a sign of respect. She espoused a desire to meet employees where they are at and consider the way that her appearance will make them feel. In this way, she is considering the entire employee experience of how people interact with her, starting from their initial reactions to her appearance. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that she cut and dyed her hair to fit more of a "normal" look before getting into leadership herself. She stated, "I did cut off all my hair and change it all to normal color before I attempted to get the supervisor to move me up the ladder at all" (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023). By going with a "normal" look, she was assured that her appearance would not be a social hindrance by making others feel uncomfortable.

Strategies that Help Overcome Bias and Challenges

All the participants brought up things that have been helpful to preventing bias and counterstrategies that help them disrupt bias as it happens. To begin, one thing that Nicole thought that helped with bias and assumptions is her title.

> If I'm interacting with someone as a new person for the first time, they usually will see my title first before, even though they know that I'm coming to this meeting so they'll see my title, and my avatar shows I'm a Black woman. But because of the title that now proceeds, they're like, oh, I'm assuming she knows what she's doing because she is the director, versus, oh, who's this person? (Interview 3, June 13, 2023)

In this way, she viewed her title as giving her extra clout in her organization, something that helps tamper down assumptions and bias.

Tina believes that part of navigating bias is supporting women in male dominated fields, something that will help them navigate the bias they face (Interview 3, June 6, 2023). She sees it as a loss of talent when women leave the field, and that this could have been a preventative loss with more support.

Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication Strategies. When Nicole is communicating with men, she stated that she makes sure to get eye contact back as a non-verbal sign that they are acknowledging and following what she is saying before continuing (Interview 3, June 13, 2023). Tina used a combination of verbal and non-verbal strategies. When men "mansplain" or disrespect her, she will rely on verbal strategies to make her discontent known:

> Mansplaining or they are trying to get ahead of you or something, and sense that, and I'll say . . . and I will oralize and say, "You need to take a step back, that was inappropriate." And I will say that not only to my team members, but I will say that to others. Or like if you have ideas and then a male iterates it and they're like, "Oh, what a great idea?" I'm like, "I thought of that first, you're welcome." Not

because I want the accolades, but because you don't get to decide who's more valuable. (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

In this way, Tina said that she will directly, verbally, and immediately shut down misogynistic behavior. Tiffany has noticed several things when it comes to the intersection of communication and the gender dynamic in her organization. First, she has noticed that men are more likely to talk over people than women. Like Nicole, Tiffany stated that she used eye contact to regain control of meeting rooms when men are disrespecting her (Interview 3, June 8, 2023). She will also use a one hand in the air gesture, which she describes as somewhere in between aggressive and defensive. Like Tina, Tiffany also used verbal interruptions for men who don't respond with her more subtle non-verbal gestures (Interview 3, June 8, 2023). She describes men who don't respond to cues as being afflicted with "main character syndrome" (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023).

Tina described using nonverbal communication strategies to signal when she has something important to say.

> if I'm getting ready to say something, I kind of sit up in my seat, kinda sit a little higher, fix the shirt a little bit, and I'm not sitting at the back of the seat, I'm sitting forward, and that kind of means that I'm ready to fight it. And so that's another gesture. (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

In addition to making herself big prior to making a point, she has also gestured discontent to her team with silence.

> And so when, and I hear this from my team, and they'll say it, they're like, if... And again, the gesture is not a gesture, it's the silence. So if I'm silent at them, then that's kind of a flag or a red flag that they either went beyond the boundaries or they broke a rule or something. (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

In this way, letting the silence sit and not filling it with words sends a strong message to

her team about the way that she feels. Tiffany has similar non-verbal strategies that she

claimed to use if she felt that people don't respond to her. First, like Tina, she stated that

she got even more direct and forward leaning if people do not respond to her. Like Tina,

she also used the strategy to make herself big to project authority. She has also brought

people back to her with eye contact and hand gestures:

> I'll get some hand gestures involved a little bit. But I'll be honest, when I
> remember things like that happening, I'll usually, like, I'll gesture with one hand,
> but the other one I kind of keep next to me. Just, it's right in between that
> aggressive and defensive, right? (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023)

In this way, this strategy is a powerful trifecta of attention-getting, defensive, and

confident, all at the same time. Finally, Kaya also uses nonverbal gestures and

expressions in her meeting interactions.

> I think I pay attention to what my facial expression is, right, in terms of am I, is
> my face looking like I wanna hear more, or disapproving of, say, you know,
> whatever outbursts there are. I do know that I'll do the, settle, you know, like, I
> think we need to settle down. I think things are getting too, a little too heightened
> right now. I think we need to just cool things off, maybe take a break, pick this up
> later. So, I'll do things like, you know, this sounds like a really, you know, this
> sounds like a much more in-depth topic than we have time to talk about today.
> Let's schedule some time later, whoever's applicable to finish going through that.
> Or let's, you know, I try not to use the let's take this offline, but it's essentially
> that kind of stuff. But I would say I just watch my body language in that I'm
> paying attention, but I may not be liking what I'm hearing. (Kaya, Interview 3,
> June 19, 2023)

In this way, she is very intentional with her reactions and uses her hands and facial

expressions as tools to signal her opinions to others. Kaya has also learned to react if

something escalates in a meeting, and to put a stop to it then and there (Interview 3,

June 19, 2023). When leaders don't react, it sends a message to others on the team that can be damaging and start to create the fissures of an unsupportive environment.

Reframing. One of Nicole's formative experiences with dealing with bias took place when she was an undergraduate in her institution's engineering program. Reflecting on this time, Nicole explained the microaggressions that she faced and how they led to questioning herself.

> I walked into a large classroom and there was always a laundry list of questions like, are you in the right room? Are you supposed to be here? There's lots of group work in terms of our programming. And people would go, oh, I don't wanna be in her group, or I would hear all of these things. And sometimes I'd even hear things like, oh I never got to date a Black chick before. I hope she's in my group. Like all of those misconceptions and just microaggressions. And so I started to question myself early on like, oh, am I in the right room? Am I supposed to be here? (Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

Instead of changing herself in response, Nicole made the decision that she wouldn't allow herself to be changed by other people. In that moment, she committed to believing in herself and embracing self-love. Similarly, in an early career phase, Nicole shedded some people-pleasing behavior by re-affirming her belief that if people question her, it's their problem. As she reflected on this, she said, "And so even though some people might say, oh Nicole, you're too loud. And I was like, but am I? You know what I mean? If I'm not yelling, maybe I'm not too loud, maybe you're just hearing my voice" (Nicole, Interview 2, May 31, 2023). Similarly, Tina viewed it as the other person's loss when she is not valued as a person.

> And you kinda asked a question about how do you behave depending, and so she wasn't getting, I don't wanna say my authentic self, but she just got just the minimum, you weren't gonna get everything. And not because I'm like the best person in the world, but all of me as a package is a wonderful thing, and so when you don't get to have it, it's your loss not mine. (Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

In this way, Tina, like Nicole, has framed the people who don't value her as having a deficit, not her. This framing is a form of self-love that allows her to feel more resilient and like she can effortlessly move past situations when "the full her" isn't valued.

Reba's experiences have made her realize she can't change who she is, which has resulted in a perspective shift, "It's more of how they made me feel because of who I am and things I can't change that forced me to own who I am and say I can't win everybody over (Reba, Interview 2, May 31, 2023). This perspective shift has brought Reba to a point of being able to own and accept herself for who she is and what she has experienced. For example, Reba has noticed stigmas in higher education that have made her question the value of her own experiences, revealing a hostile and classist climate. Reba stated:

> I do think that there's a stigma in higher education that if you don't have a PhD, you're not worthy. If you have a master's degree, okay, you're almost worthy. You mean you've shown it. If you don't have a degree at all and you just have the experience of hard knock life, that also is not valid. (Reba, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

When Reba feels these attitudes, she does not allow others to put a deficit perspective on her, just like Nicole and Tina. Even if she feels that others see her as invalid due to stigmas, she sees her progress in life as positive and valid. She refused to see through the lens of those who perceive her negatively.

To counter some of the discrimination and bias that she has faced in her organization, Grace has actively tried to work on not using language that may imply self-doubt. Another strategy that has helped in growing Grace's confidence has been her choice to not "hide behind dragons." In the following anecdote, she explained:

> Why do I have to hide my face behind dragons? You know, I used to have all this dragon clip art, so I put that on my LinkedIn. That was actually, the dragon was cute. I am not sure such a smart idea to put that into LinkedIn, though. My friend told me, "You know what, this is it, get rid of the dragon. You nuts?" "Put your face on there." "I kind of hate cameras." "Yeah, I know. Put your face on there." So it's just, I think actually because I started finally accepting things, it's also given me the tools not to put up with any BS, whether it's me or somebody else. You don't like my face? Whatever. (Grace, Interview 1, May 5, 2023)

Therefore, by having the courage to have a picture of herself as her profile picture instead of the image of a dragon, Grace has started a brave process of self-acceptance.

Leaning into Strengths. Kaya believes that it does not make women "less" than men to have different characteristics than them. In fact, she suggested leaning into those characteristics and indicates that not leaning into those strengths sooner only hampered her own career progress.

> And I remember saying like, stop apologizing or feeling apologetic for being a woman, as if it's less. We as women have very, we have different characteristics, different strengths that we can bring to the table, just by the gender that we offer, right? In terms of the caring and the nurturing. Like, lean, do that. Do that more, because that's what you need as a leader. And, I think I embraced that personal side of it, the mom, the wife, the nurturing kind of stuff, later in my career, once I realized I was hampering myself by not giving it credence. (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023)

She brought up this idea of female strengths in another part of Interview 2, suggesting that what have typically been considered female strengths are becoming more mainstream and necessary for good leadership. Due to this change in leadership norms, Kaya thinks it's finally becoming okay for women to just be who they are (Interview 2, May 18, 2023).

The Importance of Allies. There have been several occasions when an ally at work made Reba feel good about herself. At a time when she was questioning herself,

Reba's ally would say things like "You're the right person for that job" (Reba, Interview 2, May 31, 2023). These compliments would boost her confidence, even though she felt like she didn't fit the mold of a typical IT employee. Similarly, Tiffany also had a male ally who noticed her and began supporting her. He noticed her after she stood out by being the only female to learn a new computing system, and this ally suggested that Tiffany apply for a position on his team. Tiffany got the job, and this position became an important steppingstone in her career path (Interview 1, May 15, 2023).

Grace had a validating moment when a mentor helped her realize something about leadership. She helped Grace realize that sometimes, you might not feel like a leader if you aren't supported by your department. In the mentor's perspective, even though Grace was not a leader according to her department's social hierarchy, she *was* a leader since she exhibited the traits of a leader (Interview 3, June 20, 2023). In this way, Grace's ally helped her dismantle the false leader vs. follower dichotomy that had been forced upon her by her department's strict social hierarchy.

Pushback as Fuel. Tiffany received pushback from several people when she announced that she wanted to become a leader. Both her husband and her manager were not supportive of this decision, and those reactions added even more fuel to her desire.

> I wanted to be part of something bigger that made a bigger impact on things. So that feedback kind of pushed me a little bit harder. It gave me a pause for a minute going, "Is this really what I want?" But then it really just pushed me more to go, "No, if this is something you want, then this is what you need to do," you know? (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

In this way, the negative feedback that she received acted as a strengthening agent that

made her fight for what she wanted even harder.

Tiffany has also had other experiences with her supervisors resisting her wishes to

get into leadership. Speaking about a former supervisor specifically, she stated:

> In addition, when I told her I wanted to get into management, she fought me on it
> as well, going, you don't wanna be a manager. You know, getting into
> management instead of IT is difficult. It is not rewarding. You know, you don't
> get your hands on anything anymore, and you have to trust the people around you.
> And that's a difficult space to be in. So I definitely, I mean, I had to really want it
> 'cause I had to push her for it, you know? And to, you know, to go out and start
> communicating with all of the leads, this is what I want. You know, I had to start
> telling everyone around me, this is what I want. You know, I couldn't rely on
> someone to speak on my behalf. I learned that the hard way after two years of
> thinking people knew that. And then finally talking to someone and them going,
> "I didn't know that's what you wanted." So thinking somebody else was gonna
> speak for me. So I had to learn to speak for myself and speak loudly about it to
> anyone that would hear. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

In this way, this pushback also fueled her desires to become a leader. It also taught her

that leaders need to be loud and clear about their intentions to anyone who will listen.

Later on in Interview 1, she summed this up, "So yeah, definitely a support group is

important if you can get it. But if you can't get it, you have to be loud and you have to

know exactly what you want and how to get it" (Tiffany, May 15, 2023). In this way,

Tiffany suggested that aspiring leaders who don't feel supported need to compensate for

that lack of support by being extra vocal, determined, and invested in their own career

advancement.

The Intersection of Home Life and Work Life Challenges

Several participants had experiences with home life and work life challenges

intersecting that affected their personal sense of identity. First, Tiffany explained several

challenges that are related to how she achieves a state of harmony between her personal life and work. Overall, she saw the concept of work-life balance as a false dichotomy. "Yeah, everybody says "work-life balance," like you're supposed to do 50% of this and 50% of this, but that's not what it is. It's having the flexibility to take care of what you absolutely need to, you know?" (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023). Tiffany also felt that another challenge that is a trickle-down effect of universities not adequately investing in backup staff. She believes that this creates a phenomenon where staff feel like they can't be gone to do what's important (like take care of family, being out sick, or taking vacations), because of the pressure of not having backup staff to adequately cover your work when you are gone (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023). She believes that this is creating a challenging mental health effect where staff feel that constant pressure and no support from their institutions.

Early in her career when Reba was experiencing financial and family challenges, her goal was to support her family on her own without state assistance. She described it as a huge personal win when she no longer needed to be supported by the government and could pay for everything on her own (Reba, Interview 2, May 31, 2023). Reba is very much defined by her survivorship and the fact that she overcame such arduous circumstances. She stated proudly, "I refuse to give up. Like suicide was not an option for me. Survival was the only option" (Reba, Interview 2, May 31, 2023). This is a woman who dealt with hard things and didn't give up on herself.

Identity Separation. During a particularly challenging period of her life when she was with her ex-husband, Kaya felt the need to separate her identities out of self-preservation.

> He was threatened by my success. And he was threatened by my drive and desire to continue elevating myself and growing. And the more success I had at work, the more he resented it, and it actually kind of came to a head, and we are no longer together, and I have continued to grow, and so what would happen, is, I ended up having like, two personalities. I'd have, like, work Kaya and home Kaya. And work Kaya, I was more me. I was more open, more collaborative, more assertive, much more willing to, like make the decision, and like, let's go with it, we can do this, we can pull this together and use my, I have a decent ability to put myself in other person's shoes, and to understand where they're coming from, and to really use that a lot. And at home I was, what do you wanna do? What do you wanna do? Right? I was less bright, I was less, I was less everything. And you know, it wasn't a good situation, and now that's over, and I'm in a much better place. Now work Kaya is just Kaya. (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023)

In this way, this identity separation was a strategy that she had to employ to be herself. And since that was not possible at home, it came out in the workplace. Since her work identity became her dominant identity after she separated from her ex-husband, the "work Kaya" identity was the idea she felt was authentic and chose for herself (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023). She proceeded to describe how she saw work as an escape:

> Work was an escape, and I could throw myself into it, and distract myself from the drama at home, until I had to go home. And it allowed, you know, I was able to like, you know, really get into it, and give myself that mental load relief, because I didn't have that going on at home. And I think women who go through, you know, the traumas like that, that you listed as well, work can be an escape, and, if you allow yourself to escape, right, so that's the thing. (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023)

In this way, she used work as a distraction and an escape during a traumatic experience. She has also grown to see this period of her life as something that has contributed to her growth as a person, even though it was difficult.

> I do believe everything that you go through, good and bad, obviously forges who you are. Like, while I would not, in any stretch of my imagination wanna relive going through pre divorce, post-divorce, I'm better for what I went through, and who I am now because of it. (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023)

In this way, she framed even one of her most painful experiences as a source of growth.

Analysis of Theme One

The bias and challenges that come along with being a woman who is aspiring to leadership in a male-dominated organization is represented in Theme One, *Navigating Bias and Challenges*. Sometimes, the bias that they experienced was related to their status as women, other times, related to their minority status in male-dominated organizations, and other times still related to the fact that they are women seeking leadership (traditionally considered a male pursuit in the American patriarchy). Not knowing the intention or reason for the bias they face also makes it challenging to know which of these binds that bias was directed at. For example, when Nicole was singled out in a meeting for using her laptop, even though she was taking notes, did that incident happen due to her woman status, minority status in her organization, status as a woman seeking leadership, or something else entirely? When Tiffany experienced times of being attacked by male colleagues and given negative feedback by a male supervisor for no reason, why was she being maltreated?

Regardless of the intentions of those who antagonize them, the challenges that they create result in a difficult experience that makes it hard for these women to survive, let alone thrive, in the workplace. Sometimes, bias and challenges can present itself in seemingly arbitrary ways, like when a male faculty member refused to get the technical support that he needed from Tiffany due to her feminine-coded name. Disrespect like this

comes in many forms, and several participants, including Kaya, Nicole, and Grace, spoke of feeling the need to be ready to prove themselves in the workplace as a counter to their hostile environments. In this way, proving oneself acted as a defense mechanism for these women. Other strategies, like using verbal and non-verbal communication to signal leadership in meetings, mental reframing to choose self-acceptance over the judgment of others, and leaning into female strengths were also common strategies used by the participants of this study to navigate bias and challenges.

Some of these women also experienced discrimination that was at their intersection of their race and gender identities. Grace spoke of times where she was discriminated against due to her accent, ethnicity, and immigrant status. Similarly, Nicole also provided a story about being accused of being in the wrong rooms due to her visible identity as a Black woman. Tina spoke of needing to guard her religious beliefs as a Muslim in a post-9/11 world. The participants also discussed the problematic gender dynamics that they personally experienced and witnessed around in the workplace. Nicole expressed frustrations with being offered $15k less for a job position compared to the male colleague who had the position before her. For these women, personal experiences with gender dynamics also included times when they received poor ratings on performance evaluations and gender-based feedback. They also commented on the gender dynamics with others they noticed in the workplace, like noticing male fragility when women receive promotions instead of men. Participants like Reba and Tiffany also noticed stark differences in the leadership styles of their men and women CIOs. While the men seemed more closed off and impersonal, the women seemed more relational and

willing to show care for their employees. The participants of this study indicated a strong preference for the latter relational leadership style.

Growing and Building Resilience

Theme Two, *Growing and Building Resilience*, emerged from the experiences of all participants. This theme includes a wide variety of experiences, good and bad, that went into the participants' growth as leaders, as well as specific experiences that occurred in their lives that built their resilience. From personal adversity to professional challenges to strategies for growth, this theme will explore the many things that contributed to the participants' growth as leaders.

Personal Adversity, Professional Success

Most participants felt that personal adversity events were connected to their professional growth and success. To begin, Kaya experienced a period of adversity as she got into her IT career. She experienced a toxic situation with her ex-husband, an identity that she prefers to not share with others. Kaya stated, "Right, so it's not like I actively hid it, but I also didn't actively advertise it kind of thing" (Interview 1, May 4, 2023). During the personal rough patch of this divorce, Kaya said that she felt that she had lowered performance at work - but others around her didn't see that. She reflected on how her divorce era affected her:

> And even though all the negativity and everything from the divorce and all of that was going on, I gained a ton of confidence in who I was as a person because I was in charge of what happened in my house, and my kids in my house, and their schooling, and really setting that proper example. I didn't have to worry about, you know, trying to make their dad look good at the same, you know, like I could just do me, and my kid says I became happier, they could talk to me more. I think that lives improved, and my confidence definitely, because I came through it at

> the other end. I was much stronger and had more belief in myself. (Kaya, Interview 1, May 4, 2023)

So, though this was a challenging time, it was also freeing in by contributing to her personal growth. Similarly, Reba also started to believe in herself during the era of her divorce. In the following passage, Reba described how the bad times in our lives can lead us to good places.

> Had the divorce and all the messiness of my life not happened, I may not have come back to school. I think I'm way farther ahead than I ever would've been or that I ever saw for myself due to my circumstances. (Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

Similarly, Reba also connected how going through the negative periods in one's life and coming out the other end can lead to leadership strength.

> And I tell my daughters, we're strong women because we have to be and because we choose to be because we're survivors. So I think that strength can lead to great leadership strength as well. (Reba, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

As Kaya and Reba's experiences demonstrate, the personal adversity that women experience can contribute to their success in leadership.

IT as an Investment. To begin, Reba made the intentional choice to get into the IT field at a time when she was dealing with personal adversity. One of the key negatives in her life at the start of this period of adversity was her ex-husband, who damaged her sense of confidence by belittling her. Despite his emotional attacks, she described getting into the IT field at that time as a leap of faith:

> That was my first position here as an hourly technical support person. And I can't even remember the exact title. It might have been IT technician. And I worked in the college for about nine months doing that at $10 an hour. No benefits. I had five children. I was on welfare. It was a really hard time for me. I wasn't divorced yet, but there was a lot going on in my personal life that really made that jump to that position, leap of faith. I knew that that was the field that I wanted to go into,

and so I knew it was the right move to make when I did it. I just also knew it was gonna be really tough. (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

So even though her first job in the field was very low paying, Reba was hopeful that a career in IT would pay off for her future. She referred to this story of survival multiple times during Interview 1 as a formative part of how she built personal resilience and how she has grown into a strong woman leader (Reba, May 16, 2023). Reba described herself as a survivor and a fighter, describing her personal willpower and her own sense of empowerment as the keys to her survival. She was also inspired by the strong women in her family, specifically her grandmother and mother, who were both divorced at an early age but were able to successfully raise their children.

And so when I think you're faced with reality, you realize all these women in your past have been able to do that, you too can do this. And it's partially about survival, but it's about proving to yourself that you can do hard things. (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

Part of Reba's resilient approach to life also came from a desire to prove wrong the people who made assumptions about her. She found it validating to succeed and prove others wrong by being a successful person. Similarly, Tina also got into the field of IT when she was going through a stressful period of her life - she was pregnant, in school, and working. Just like Reba, Tina saw this career change as an investment.

So, did the math, and it really wasn't better, like the money-wise, wasn't about the money, but, and then I wouldn't have my summers off because this was a staff position at an institution. But we felt the investment, the change in career, would make a big difference in the sense of growing my professional portfolio. And so we did that. (Tina, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

Since she is still in the field today and has been able to move into a leadership position, it is safe to say that the investment has paid off for Tina's career.

Insights from Professional Experience

Next, most participants discussed insights, experiences, and lessons from their

time in the workplace that have contributed to their growth as a leader and have helped to

build their resilience. Tina discussed her stance on growth and identity change over time:

> I think identity shifts as we shift, and it changes as we change. You're not the
> same person you were when you were 20. You're not the same person you were
> when you were 30, and if you are, then there's something amiss, right? And so I
> look at my past, and I look at myself in the past, and I've definitely seen a lot of
> growth, a lot of just confidence that I didn't have when I was younger, and
> sometimes we think about that too, and I think about that, like, "How did I get
> here?" Like, "How did I make it here?" (Tina, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

In this way, she sees that peoples' identities change as they grow, just like a constantly

evolving IT organization.

One area of growth that was important to Nicole's development was shedding

being a people pleaser. She mentioned that she had some people-pleaser qualities early on

in her career, and she needed to overcome that to be able to grow and get to the next level

of her career (Nicole, Interview 2, May 31, 2023). Similarly, Kaya also did not

experience a radical need to change her identities when she got into her career. "I was

proud of all of those identities and I thought they each strengthened me in certain ways.

So I just, you know, wanted to lean into that more" (Kaya, Interview 1, May 4, 2023). So,

instead of shedding any identities, Kaya leaned into her strengths (pieces of identity) as

she progressed in her career.

Echoing Nicole's comments on adapting her communication style to different

audiences, Tina discussed framing things to people in ways that make sense to them:

> But then later a situation happened where she kind of did something that was, I
> felt like inappropriate, and so I learned that she wouldn't understand that what she

did was inappropriate unless I brought it in the same way that she did. So I called her and I said, "Oh, you hurt my feelings," like in that way, because that's kind of how she understands good and bad things. If it hurts your feelings, then it's a bad thing, but it was really more along the lines of my feelings weren't really hurt. I mean, I didn't, I wasn't lying, but at the same time, it was like that's how she would understand that that action she took was not appropriate, and so you learn over time to read your people and to be able to respond to them in the way that they understand how it works for them. (Tina, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

By using this method, Tina has learned to give feedback in ways that matter to people and will continue to stick with them.

Over the past few years, more and more stories of the experiences of women IT with gendered situations in the workplace have resonated with Kaya. She reflected on one time when she counseled another woman who felt like a second-class citizen due to her gender:

So one of the things I counseled a woman a couple years ago about is this perception that we as women almost have to overcome being women or apologize for it kind of thing, that blows my mind that we even feel that we have to apologize for, you know, of being a representative of half the population on the earth, like really? Like men and women each have, and every gender, every bucket has unique characteristics, that if you hone them can make you awesome at whatever you wanna do, right? Like there's the traditional stereotypes that women are more about the relationships. Well, like relationships are the keys to the kingdom. You can't get anywhere or do anything if you can't have good relationships. So why would I not want to capitalize on all the things that make women awesome, right? (Kaya, Interview 1, May 4, 2023)

By seeing women's strengths as things that can be capitalized on and made powerful, Kaya displayed resourcefulness against the patriarchal gender politics that are designed to confine her.

Another strategy that Nicole has incorporated as she has grown as a leader has been using a combination of modeling behaviors and leading people:

I think modeling the behavior that you want reflected is a great way. With my peers, I do a lot of leadership coaching. And so when I'm doing that, especially at the peer setting, it's really kind of asking reflective questions, making sure that when I'm asking questions it's not because I want people to go, oh, Nicole, you know so much. But sometimes when someone's asking something I go, oh, can you tell me a little bit more about X? Versus explaining, oh, don't you mean da-da-da-da-da? And so letting them actually come to the realization themselves and coaching them through it while they're at a meeting, because I know that there are other people in the room that may not have gotten all of the information they need from what they're sharing. So instead of me finishing their sentence or adding more information, I go, can you tell me a little bit more about like, give maybe a hint of what I would like them to share. Maybe like lead them certain ways. (Nicole, Interview 3, June 13, 2023)

This strategy is evocative of good coaching, where she plays the part of a supportive leader in interactions with her peers.

Perspectives on People. Reba described her perspective on mentors, which could be described as a cyclical perspective on relationships. She described how you learn what you need from one person and then continue down your path to the next:

And I think when you find people like that who give you kind of advice that you can say, you know, you make it your own, you take it, what they offer you and say, "I see good qualities in you. I think you could stretch over here. I think you could give this," and then they leave and you gotta find someone else who's kind of that next person to help you along your path. (Reba, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

This passage is evocative of Reba's adaptability and pragmatism. She saw that other people play an important role in her life but doesn't think those relationships need to be permanent.

As Kaya has grown as a leader, she has realized that the most important thing to focus on is her people and not necessarily the day-to-day work. "So yeah, it would be really paying attention to the people that I lead and not necessarily worrying about the things that we're doing" (Kaya, Interview 1, May 4, 2023). This relational perspective -

having an established, trusting relationship with someone - is what allows Kaya to ask the big, hard questions when they come up. This well-liked relational approach may be one of the reasons why she received a positive reception when she arrived in her current role. Kaya said, "I think, so my current role, I was brought in as, oh, finally you're here. Like this was the role I should have been in for years." (Interview 1, May 4, 2023). Kaya had been in her organization prior to being promoted into her current director position, so she also described herself as a known entity - others knew what they were going to get with her and wanted her in that role (Interview 1, May 4, 2023).

  Communicating the Negatives, Accepting the Struggle. A big part of Nicole's career growth has been learning how to communicate the negatives. She reflected:

> So you know, there's instances of, when you do a lot of help desk work, or when you do a lot of endpoint management, that you'll always kind of get that, oh my goodness, I deleted the dean's files, what do I do? How do I make that work? And so I've definitely had some of those stories on the ready. It's like, oh, what happens? Or how do you tell that most important person no, and defend it. So those are, they lean towards my personality more so because of how the situation resolved itself. So like people go, oh of course you can tell people no. And I was like, yeah, but when you're telling the super important person no, how do you do that in a manner that you don't feel like they're going to bite your head off or chew your head off and stuff? (Nicole, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

Due to these types of difficult conversations and situations, Nicole reflected later in Interview 2 and suggested that learning to accept that struggling is key.

> I had to be okay with the struggle. Sometimes you have to, it's like that tiny seed, you have to sometimes be dropped in the dirt and be covered with like all of that, and then hit the sunlight and come out. (Nicole, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

She also affirmed that it is never too late to grow, change, and learn, and that leaders should be doing these things constantly. Similarly, Tiffany reflected on how she has learned to communicate and express the negatives with others.

So since then I've kind of learned and tried to make sure that I develop, you know, the ability to talk to people about my frustrations, about my weaknesses, about any, you know, my vulnerabilities, to make sure that people know that I'm not even trying to be perfect. I'm trying to come across as competent, yes. (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

By learning how to express the negatives, Tiffany can come across as a real person who does not only have unrealistic positive experiences in her career. This creates a healthier image of who she is to others.

Resilient Relationships. Tina has grown to gain a nuanced perspective of how decisions work with her staff members.

But not only that, as a leader, I have to make difficult decisions that not everybody's gonna be fully supportive or fully involved in, but they need to be, you know, like you have to give your reasoning or rationale. I don't just make arbitrary decisions. We usually do a lot of collaboration, a lot of discussion. We go back and forth. You know, like this is where I built a system with my team where the door is open. They can, you know, they can disagree with me and the world doesn't end. (Tina, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

While she does value collaboration and cooperation in decision making, she also understands that at the end of the day a leader must be able to own their decisions and move forward regardless of if they have everyone on board. In this way, she has built resilience to not have complete social support and has the strength to move on and make progress with her decisions. This assertive personality trait has created complex relationships with her team members.

I'm a very, what's the word? Like affectionate leader, you know, I'm very compassionate in the way I work, you know, understanding you have to be. But in it, there's also those pieces of like, okay, I'm not gonna let you also, I'm not gonna doormat for you either. (Tina, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

This way of seeing relationships with complexity and nuance is a huge asset. For example, while Tina is relational and affectionate with her team, she is also able to stand

up for what she believes in. Kaya reflected on having a similar style with her team. In Interview 2, she described the power of being caring while also staying aware.

> So once I started to bring the mom characteristics into my job, and I feel like it really amped my game up, because I was clearly caring about the individuals, and I was looking out for them as people, and not just them in the role that they were playing in either projects, or under me. And that has really resonated with my team. I've gotten excellent feedback about doing that. They know that I have their back. They know that I'm gonna call them on, you know, if they're trying to get away with stuff, and, but I can also see the big picture of what we're trying to do, and help steer them in that direction. (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023)

In this way, being able to leverage her caring and nurturing mother identity in the workplace is something that has worked well for her – and her team.

Like Tina and Kaya, Tiffany has come to realize that strong relationships are able to withstand the times that she needs to push back.

> And I feel like the people I have to talk to, they know me personally, I know I'm not gonna break that relationship just because I'm mad at them about something or they're mad at me about something. We can still be annoyed with each other and then go hang out, you know, have a drink or go golfing or something. (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

In Tiffany's perspective, this is one of the many advantages of having a personal relationship with your colleagues. A personal relationship creates a bond that can withstand trying environmental contexts, which is better for everyone involved.

Flexible Leadership

Most participants' responses centered around how learning to be flexible and adaptable as a leader has been beneficial to their career growth. To begin, Nicole discussed how she has learned to be able to take a backseat as a leader. In this way, she doesn't see leadership as an all or nothing state of being. She used a dramaturgical

metaphor to show how a leader can move to the center stage, the side stage, or the

backstage depending on the situation.

> But it's not a term that I use, primarily because if you've ever thought about leaders are always on stage, the MOR[1]-ism, there's always parts of your personality that are there that you need to sometimes have shine and be center stage, and there's some that you need to kind of be on the wings of the stage or kind of take a backseat depending on your situation. And so sometimes I let other parts of my personality shine in terms of, I bring out some of those strengths that I need for various situations. (Nicole, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

This flexible perspective shows that Nicole feels that she can still contribute as a leader in

situations, even if she is not on center stage. Similarly, she will adjust her communication

style and tailor it to the audience that she is working with.

> So being able to figure out when I'm talking to faculty or people that have more of a research interest, how do I craft it and how do I share what I need? What's my ask? Why do they wanna know about this? All these things I need to know how to communicate, and so being able to learn how to communicate was less about, how do I present myself, and presentation and facilitation skills, but more about learning how to actively listen and learn about the individuals that I needed to present to. (Nicole, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

She brought up this topic again in Interview 3. She stated that the way that leaders tell

their story and speak to peoples' whys is very important (Nicole, June 13, 2023). In

Interview 2, she described how she finds places of convergence with others to build

connection, something that lets her understand the perspective that someone is coming

from and then be flexible with her communication approach from that level of

understanding. Nicole has also learned to be flexible with the presentation of her own

identity:

> So it's not that I change anything, I just kind of share what needs to be shared. Sometimes I use it to make more connections at work because that's how you find

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[1] This refers to the MOR Associates Leadership Development program. https://morassociates.com/

>commonalities amongst people. So I guess sometimes I use that to help me connect with various individuals. (Nicole, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

It is important to note that while Nicole can change across social contexts, she described herself as an authentic person with no identity separation. She will not let her identities be threatened by those around her, and so while she might spotlight a part of who she is in a certain situation, it does not mean that she is changing for others or diminishing anything about herself. Overall, Nicole is a very adaptable person who can be flexible across an array of contexts - leadership, communication, and personality.

Grace is still trying to navigate the cognitive dissonance of a flexible leadership mentality in her current position. In Interview 1, Grace saw the need to think like a leader even though she is not yet in a leadership position and discussed how that is difficult to conceptualize.

>The hardest thing is to think as someone you want to become and not as someone you are, if that makes sense at all. So you have to think beyond who you are now. And that honestly, I think that's the most difficult part. I mean to me, how can you say you are somebody else when you are not somebody else? (Grace, Interview 1, May 5, 2023)

In this way, Grace is beginning to move past seeing leadership in black and white terms and more so as a spectrum of actions. Later in Interview 1, she also discussed how as a leader, one often must be a leader and follower at the same time. In this way, Grace is acknowledging that leadership and followership is not an either/or dichotomy (Grace, Interview 1, May 5, 2023). Tina also stated that there are times when you're leading and times when you're following, evoking Grace's belief of leadership as a spectrum.

>I mean, leadership is, is being able to pivot, right? And there are times when you're leading the group, you're leading the pack, and then there are other times

when you have to follow, and that happens a lot. (Tina, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

The operative word here is pivot, which visualizes leadership as a flowing dance of adapting and moving from one end of the leadership spectrum to the other as necessary.

Flexible and Contextual Boundaries. Boundaries are another area that Kaya has grown in as she has established them between her work and personal lives. Kaya has created boundaries with her family and even rules for handling emergency situations:

> So, if I'm at work and I get a call from a family member, if I'm in a meeting or something like that, I'm not gonna answer it on the first call. So if it's an emergency, they call back immediately. Like I set the boundaries where, 'cause I'm in a lot of meetings, right? That I may, if I can't answer, and it's an emergency, immediately call back, and then I'll know it's an emergency and I can step out. But I don't just step out for every single time it's called, because sometimes it's, you know, my daughter, where's my sock, right? Like, no. Kind of stuff. But then, we'll use texts sometimes as well. And the same thing with my parents, as well. Like everybody sort of like knows the emergency rules. So I had to have that, that sort of boundary. (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023)

She went on to say that that separation is harder to accomplish when she is working from home. Kaya knows that this is a work in progress for everyone, so she tries to model boundaries to her staff to show them healthy expectations in the workplace.

> And then I also, in my email signature block, I did put a thing that, you know, like, if I'm sending you this after hours on the weekends, I do not expect a reply. Because I'm trying to show healthy boundaries for staff. Because sometimes in the middle, you know, like, I'll get an idea, or, you know, I'm checking my email, or I'm thinking about it, kind of stuff, and I want the flexibility to like, write the thing down, or send the quick email. But I don't necessarily wanna presume that that style is what works for other people, too. (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023)

In this way, Kaya maintains her own style by being able to respond to things during off work times but reinforces that this is not an expectation that she has with her own staff.

Similarly, Tiffany also tries to model and normalize things if she thinks that they will benefit her team.

> And I have told my team, I do suffer from depression and I suffer from migraines. So that if I'm out, or something like that, or if they are feeling depressed and they need a mental health day, then they can feel like they can take it, you know? (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

By revealing parts of her personal self to benefit others who may be going through the same thing, Tiffany showed that she looks out for the human needs of her staff.

Nicole described her personal boundaries with an analogy. In the following passage, she reflected on juggling the balls of life and how there are certain things that are too precious to be juggled.

> Well I usually say yep, but wherever my priorities are, like when I'm juggling, my family or things that are close to me, my health, those are in crystal balls. So when I'm juggling I can't let that crystal ball drop, because those are the priorities. And once it's cracked, it's kind of done for. However, if there's like a work task or something else, those aren't in crystal balls, so if they kind of drop, I can pick 'em back up, I can delegate, I can do other things. But if I am careless with the things that I hold really close and dear to me, then once you have that crack in that crystal ball, it doesn't kind of work. And so I kind of remember that and stay grounded by using like, oh, you know, family, whatever those priorities are that you have, how do you keep those close to you, even when you're going through multiple different tasks, because it's really hard to mend those afterwards. (Nicole, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

This analogy reveals the sanctity of certain things in her life and shows the ways in which she has grown to see those things as precious and not worth damaging.

Tina is an outlier when it comes to her perspective on boundaries. When it comes to people who are not a part of her immediate family or friend group coming into her home, she has a clear separation. She provided an anecdote about a recent time when she invited people from work into her home to celebrate a religious occasion:

> So anyway, we're on one committee, and this person says, "How do I get invited to somebody's house for Iftar?" Which is the breaking of the fast. And I like her, and I said, "I'll invite you over." And I had never done that before to give you the story of that. And I had been here for that for 18 years, and my home life is different than my work life. (Tina, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

For Tina, it was a big deal to invite people into her home since this was not something that she had done before. She described a sacred separation with her physical home, and goes on to describe this feeling in the context of other personal things that come up at work:

> I may or may not go to the house opening or whatever they call it. I will do the funerals, I've gone to funerals, I've gone to wakes, but there's like this just separation. My personal home life is different than here. Although I'm the same person, it's just like there's. . . . My kids went here, people know them, so they know us in that way. But my house is sacred, my home is sacred, and it needs to be separated from my work. (Tina, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

Inviting others into her home was anxiety provoking due to Tina's boundaries. Despite the anxiety, Tina stated that she had a great time with the dinner and said she would even consider doing it again as long as she wouldn't feel that it would turn her home into an open door (Tina, Interview 2, June 1, 2023). By making this statement, Tina demonstrated that she wants to keep her boundaries with her home within her control.

Gaining Grit Through Challenges

Most of the participants described challenging situations in the workplace and in other contexts that have allowed them to build grit and resilience that has benefited them professionally. To begin, Grace has had to create her own growth experiences to make up for not feeling supported by her organization. She does this by volunteering for professional development opportunities in other organizations. She reflected in Interview

1 on her experiences with these opportunities after realizing that staff growth is not the

mission of her department:

> Now, I'm not somebody who gives up easily. so I filled it up with free work. So
> we have an enriching scholarship at our university. Right now, it's two days and
> it's virtual. Back then, first of all, they didn't even allow me to do it. Second,
> someone who saw me present, and I will never forget that, he and his colleague,
> both of them said, "We'll sponsor you," because nobody was willing to sponsor
> me either. So I started doing teaching and technology presentations. (Grace,
> Interview 1, May 5, 2023)

This clever and constructive coping mechanism has allowed Grace to continue to grow

and develop in a hostile environment. Another growth strategy that Grace has found at

her institution is simply listening in - in other words, absorbing as much information from

others as possible by hearing, reading, and following others.

One thing that Grace has learned in her journey is the importance of firmly

breaking ties with old roles, if possible. In Interview 1, she reflected on how if you don't

break ties with former roles, you will still be seen as who you previously were.

> If you are a leader, you have to get out of that role of being a charge nurse, for
> example. Okay, because if you don't, then they will think that you're a charge
> nurse on steroids, not a leader, nurse leader. And so that's also something that
> gave me pause, well, how do you do it? How do you get out of that mode? For
> one thing, you have to be given a chance and then you have to be given support
> because if you don't have the support, you're gonna flunk it. (Grace, Interview 1,
> May 5, 2023)

Grace stated that this is one of the many obstacles that she has encountered in her

journey. She described often feels stuck in her mold and typecast, reduced to the role

(and former roles) that she has been in.

Tiffany had a former supervisor who micromanaged her, and this negative

experience was one of her reasons for not wanting to adopt that style with her own

employees. Instead, she wanted to adopt a style of open communication where there is an open sharing of feedback.

> So at this next quarterly review, I'm gonna be asking all of my team to provide me feedback. Say, "Look, I've only been a manager now for a year," or a supervisor for a year, the leadership I'd been doing for years before that, but, "I've now been your supervisor for a year. What feedback do you have for me? What is working well, what is not working well? (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

In this way, witnessing a managerial style that she did not think was effective has allowed Tiffany to avoid that style in her own practices.

Beyond Imposter Syndrome. In addition to "owning it" when responding to bias, Nicole has also used several other strategies to display her own confidence in her career. First, she used a strategy of being ready to provide smart answers and prove herself. Now that she has built trust and created established relationships in her institution, she doesn't feel as much of a need to prove herself as she used to. This connects to another strategy that she used to elevate her status among other IT professionals: "talking the IT talk."

> I don't know as much about security or privacy or some of these technical fields. And so I wanted to attain more of that language so that I could talk in those spaces. And so it wasn't really identity per se, it was just that I didn't wanna be pigeonholed in IT as customer service or something else because I've done system administration and other things. And so this is more of a technical skill that I wanted to kind of add to that part of my identity. So I was like, oh, I need to know what the language is in terms of server virtualization and all these other things so that I could speak that way. So it wasn't because I thought people would respect me if I didn't otherwise. But even within IT, there are different realms. They're like, oh, you're ed tech, so you don't know anything about this or you're this. (Nicole, Interview 1, May 9, 2023)

In this way, Nicole would "talk the IT talk" to avoid being labeled as insufficiently knowledgeable.

Kaya has grown out of the need to prove herself as she has progressed in her

career, something that she has chalked up to the learning emphasis of higher education.

> I would say, I definitely had that, that like, this need to prove that I actually knew what I was talking about, that I did actually know how to do my job, sort of stuff, was a little bit into that. I had that before I came to the university, I think the higher ed, or least this higher ed environment, helps you get out of that sooner, because it's all about, you know, learning, right? Like it's the essence of what we do, kind of stuff. And a part of learning is, you don't already know it. And so like, that's okay in the norm. I think it's a more normalized way of thinking about stuff being in higher ed, than say, in the commercial and industry side of things. And it's a lot more cutthroat, if you make a mistake, and stuff like that, where it's a little bit more forgiving on the higher ed, to learn from the mistakes. And so, it's okay to acknowledge that you don't know everything, and that you can learn from others, type of stuff. (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023)

In this way, since learning is the modus operandi of higher education, it makes sense that

a learning/growth mindset works well for higher education employees.

One thing that Kaya struggled with when she was growing as a leader and

building personal resilience was imposter syndrome.

> But I also had a big period of time where I was suffering from imposter syndrome. So I was really trying to prove I knew what I was doing, like learn as much as I could and do it. (Kaya, Interview 1, May 4, 2023)

What really helped Kaya overcome her feelings of imposter syndrome were some big

wins in her career:

> So I would say like a leader of people became an identity that I morphed into, and I think it was because I'd finally gotten over my imposter syndrome, and I'd won a presidential award for a big project that I achieved, and I finally proved to myself, I'm like, I am good at this. And I felt good, I'm like, I could say that I am really good at this and I can help others also be good at this kind of stuff, and I had really good feedback and such. (Kaya, Interview 1, May 4, 2023)

After this experience allowed her to grow, she reflected further and stated that the next

phase is to help teach others how to grow, too. She stated the following after reflecting on

giving custom coaching and development to an employee of hers:

> So, and watching him light up, and get confident, and his performance, and the quality of what he brought to the table improved, dramatically kind of stuff. And that experience seeing him, and observing him, and being able to find things that he could work on that it would tap into his curiosity and his growth like that, that time period was where I'm like, I wanna manage people, I want to see other people grow. That's what my focus is, I want to enable other people to grow. I'm at the top of my game and that's great, I want to do what I can to help other people get to the top of their game and stuff. (Kaya, Interview 1, May 4, 2023)

In this way, Kaya perceived the next step after personal growth as coaching others into

growing.

Outsider Syndrome. Nicole has had experiences with being accused of being in

the wrong rooms when she was younger:

> So when I was in undergraduate I did, one of my degrees was in engineering. And so a lot of times I would go into classrooms and there wouldn't be anybody that looked like me in the classroom. And sometimes I would, there would be a laundry list of questions that people would ask, whether it be from other students, like are you in the right room? Sometimes that'd also be from the instructor. They're like, oh, are you in the right space? And I was like, yes, I'm here for, you know, computer science, whatever. (Nicole, Interview 1, May 9, 2023)

She also experienced microaggressions in these spaces, which led to a period of self-

questioning.

> When we got around to group work, there was a lot of self-selecting. So I would hear rumblings, oh I hope she's not in my group. Oh, I don't wanna be partnered with her. I also would hear things like, oh I always wanted to date a Black chick. Like all of these kinds of misconceptions and I don't even need to say microaggressions cause some of 'em were very macro in terms of what was happening. But I would hear all those, and I started to kind of doubt myself. I'm like, oh, am I in the right space? Should I be here? (Nicole, Interview 1, May 9, 2023)

When figuring out how to handle these feelings of self-questioning, Nicole rejected the feelings of being an outsider that others cast upon her and decided to choose self-love and acceptance instead. She still occasionally receives bias and discrimination when she is in spaces and others do not perceive her as a leader due to her age, race, and gender. When this happens, Nicole owns her response and informs people with confidence that yes, she is in the right space. Reba has also experienced feeling like an outsider in her IT department.

> So many of them knew me on campus. I think at first it was really hard when I was in my other position where I worked away from IT, Central IT, and I would have to kind of like beg to get the rights to do stuff. It's like oh you're not part of us, you can't be privy to the password, you can't do these things. And I'm like, but you expect me to do this in my college the way you do it, but you don't allow me to do it. (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

For Reba, these experiences created a personal desire to be inclusive in own leadership style. Reba remembered how bad this exclusionary treatment felt, and when she moved into her director role she began intentionally including people so that they wouldn't have to feel excluded like she did.

Experiences that Facilitate Growth

Finally, most participants reflected on experiences that they thought were directly responsible for growth and advancement in their careers. These experiences show where there is transformative potential for organizations to leverage as they consider ways to nurture and grow their women who aspire to be IT leaders.

Trying on Leadership Traits. To begin, Tina described the power of getting hands on experience and being able to "try on traits" in her growth journey.

> You know, education is helpful, but until you are hands on experiencing it, you know, getting all those degrees was great, but until you're in it and immersed in it, it's a different type of experience, and you change your decision-making based on that. I learned what I don't want to be and that has helped me go to where I want to be. (Tina, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

In this way, Tina described the mentoring relationships that she has had as an opportunity for observation and emulation of the traits in others that she likes. She could "try on traits" that she thought fit with who she is, and remarked on how it was inspirational to see the possibilities of others' journeys into leadership positions.

It was also beneficial for Tina's career growth when she was able to see and understand the IT career pathways early in her career.

> I did wanna be a lawyer, but that was just kind of like, hmm, maybe in passing, but as I got into the IT field and started to see and be exposed to different levels of roles in the IT world, I think I started to change kind of my focus and shift my attention to certain career paths and certain careers, and so I know that I want to be, a Director of IT, then I need to supervise people. (Tina, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

In this way, seeing these paths allowed her to apply their own possibilities to her life. Similarly, a major inspiration for Kaya's leadership identity was observing a leader in her professional life and seeing that as a template for what leadership could be:

> She was amazing. I mean, she was one of those leaders that you would walk through a wall for, and that's what I wanted to be. I wanted to garner as much respect, and faith, and trust in, and have people in me where I could lead them wherever because they trusted I'm gonna lead them in the right direction and they were gonna do awesome things and they were gonna be able to actually accomplish and do exciting, fun, challenging things that they wanted to do as well. (Kaya, Interview 1, May 4, 2023)

In this way, this template of good leadership gave Kaya inspiration for her own leadership identity. In Interview 2, Kaya also described how helpful it has been to cherry pick, mimic, and model traits that she likes in other leaders in her own identity.

> It's like, I like this trait, and this person, and this trait, and this person, like explore, right? Like don't feel like you've gotta, if you're gonna have a mentor, or get a coach or something like that, it's like all or nothing kind of stuff. It can just be pick and choose what actually resonates with you that we're together, it's gonna be a good thing. And I think that's something that I've tried to do, and I try to encourage others, like, you don't have to take it all, you can just pick the things that work, and you connect with, but then look elsewhere as well. (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023)

In another part of Interview 2, she went into further detail about how she applied traits from the leaders in her life:

> I think it was, for me, keeping in the forefront the leaders I had worked under, what worked for me, and what didn't work for me, and mimic the things that resonated, and make sure you don't do the things that didn't resonate. (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023)

In this way, she has been able to try on traits from others and keep the ones that resonate with her authentic self.

One of Tiffany's strategies has been getting her name out there and getting involved as she embarked on her journey into her institution's leadership. In Interview 2, she stated, "I did anything I could to kind of get my name out there as someone that could be a leader" (Tiffany, June 1, 2023). Later in the interview, she highlighted that this has been a lengthy process that has included years of intentional trust-building work:

> I think I'm lucky that I am at the same place, that I didn't job hop to another university. I know the people here and I trust them. And it has taken years for me to trust them and to gain their trust as someone that, you know, can be relied upon. (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

In this way, finding ways to grow her social capital was critical to Tiffany's career advancement.

One thing that Tina has begun to realize over the course of her career in IT is that it is important to cater to the leadership style of one's superiors. In Interview 2, she spoke about the reality of power dynamics and how a willingness to pivot is necessary.

> And so I feel like, and that was where we had a philosophical disconnect and like, she's my boss, so I needed to really pivot to her style until we found our way to be more authentic with each other, if that makes sense. (Tina, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

In this way, it's not about sacrificing authenticity - it's about letting the budding relationship take the forefront instead of oneself. After all, Tina indicated a belief that sometimes leaders must make sacrifices to move up - and this "identity shifting" is just another one of those potential sacrifices.

Another thing that has been helpful to Tina's growth in her career has been her committee work.

> Here they pigeonhole everyone, you're all stuck in your roles until you aren't. And so this is where I think the committee work kinda takes you out of your position and gives you more access to other parts of the university, and so it has nothing to do with male, female here, the worst thing I can hear from someone is they say, "That's not my job," no, no, whatever, everything is everybody's job to make sure we all have a positive experience here. (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

Later in Interview 3, Tina described a particularly rewarding experience that she had as the co-chair of a search committee. This opportunity has paved the way for so much more for her and is an experience she expressed profound gratitude for.

Being Seen by Mentors. Nicole described an informal mentoring relationship with a professor that was an impactful experience for her.

> I will say one of the first ones [mentors] that I can recall is one of my graduate, when I was in graduate school, one of the professors, they came and they were talking about, you know, how they overcame everything, and they reached out

and they said, you know, I definitely have individual office hours, people can go to them, but I also, you know, take people out to lunch and do these things, so we can have more informal conversations. And so it was kind of this barrier of, I've never really had, I had teachers be very approachable, but not to the point of like, hey, a very friendly atmosphere, but in a respectful type way. And so it was like, no, you can ask me anything. (Nicole, Interview 1, May 9, 2023)

In this way, having an ally in the institution that she felt was truly looking out for her best interest was transformative to her idea of what a relationship could be. Reba has also had strong mentors, and she described how it has been powerful to have others see her value.

And so I really feel like those people who saw value in what I could offer and knew they had something they could offer me to get me where I needed to be, that's how. . . . Whatever they recognized in me, I don't know specifically, but I felt like their faith in me made me wanna work harder and challenged me to do more. (Reba, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

She continued to describe one of her mentors in the following passage:

The dean of the college at the time definitely believed in helping single women, strong women, women who maybe have had it tough in other ways. And he really tried to kinda buoy me along and give me opportunities, you know, so I could make a proposal. I could come one day and say, I have this really great proposal. And as long as I had written it well, he almost funded every single proposal I gave him. He's like, you know what? That's a great idea. I'm gonna fund that. He nominated me for awards. He gave me other opportunities to serve on some committees. I even chaired the five-year MBA gala because he believed in me. And although other people didn't believe I could do it, he did all the way till the end of the gala. And so I really felt like he was a great supporter. (Reba, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

This mentor also continued to support Reba even after he was no longer her supervisor. He told her boss that Reba should lead a project, and the project was given to her (Interview 3, June 6, 2023). In this way, a mentor's support doesn't have to end when the formal supervisor-direct report relationship ends - it can turn into a supportive friendship that transcends direct reporting lines. Tiffany also described having impactful mentoring relationships. She described one mentor who helped pave paths for her:

> So my earliest supporters were, well, James, back at the University, who kind of would take the steps to acknowledge me and state that, "You are good at this and you are in an underrepresented group. Make sure that you try for these things and you try to. . . . Wave the flags of, 'Hey, this is coming, and I see this is gonna be a need.' You should look at this. This is a good path for you." And so he'd kind of just kind of pave the road or make a little path for me to look at, whether I went down that path or not. (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023)

Another key mentor in her life trusted her and made her feel safe to fail:

> And then Betty was my next supporter, where she. . . . She was very difficult because she supported me in my technology leadership field, saying, "Okay, I believe in you. I know you can do this, go ahead." And then she would trust me to go run with it, and I made sure that I had constant feedback so that if I stumbled, I'd let her know. So there was a lot of give and take with that relationship. (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023)

What both mentors had in common is that they saw something in Tiffany that she never saw in herself. She reflected on her experiences with James as her mentor in particular:

> He saw something in me I definitely never saw in myself, so he was definitely my biggest supporter and definitely the biggest guide. So yeah, he kind of saw me in that I had potential beyond just being a secretary, which is what I was at before he kind of said, "Hey, this is a great field, you should go into it." (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023)

In this way, this ability to build esteem within her for what she could be capable of was hugely impactful in her career progression. Similarly, a mentor was also a big influence for Tina. She reflected:

> And he was like, "You know, let's talk about that." And then we had a really good conversation and sat down and went through the pros and the cons, and at the time it wouldn't have been the best choice. And so I kind of like appreciated him for that. But like that was someone I would go to for advice and I'd say, "Hey Sean, I'm thinking about X, Y, and Z. I just got an offer, what do you think?" And he was like someone that I could definitely like talk to, but he was like faculty, so it wasn't on the IT side. (Tina, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

In this way, this mentor's biggest influence was teaching Tina to think analytically.

Despite Grace's challenges with relationships, she has had the opportunity to learn from mentors and to find the places where she thrives. She reflected on a time when a CIO from another university offered mentorship and support to Grace when she was feeling overwhelmed. She felt that these meetings were helpful and built her confidence:

> So regardless of how all these things come out, it's helpful to have these meetings just to kind of bounce ideas off. It's helpful to push yourself to even ask the assistant for scheduling that time for a meeting. (Grace, Interview 3, June 20, 2023)

She has also taken value from being able to be a mentor. She stated, "But to me it meant that I can be good as a mentor, I can be a good mentor. And again, not perfect, but really good people can learn from me" (Grace, Interview 3, June 20, 2023). In this way, Grace feels that she thrives when others can learn from her.

Receiving Feedback. Feedback is another thing that helped Kaya grow in her career, especially as it pertained to applying to higher up roles. Kaya reflected on this:

> And then the ones that I didn't get, I was able to talk to the hiring manager, and get some good meaningful feedback. Either I gotta shore up this area, or like, this person just happened to have this breadth of stuff that, you know, I don't have, because I would need to be 10 years older, kind of thing. So I do feel like there was good feedback on, kind of why, what I need to do to kind of be an even better candidate in the future, sort of thing. But there was always a lot of positive reinforcement of the teams I was coming from, the teams that I was joining, the senior directors in play, related to that. (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023)

So, the combination of positive reinforcement from peers and superiors along with the feedback from hiring managers were helpful to Kaya's leadership development.

Nicole also experienced an impactful moment when she received positive feedback from a dean.

> And I remember her mentioning something, I did a report or I had to give like, a two minute update of something. And she took me aside after the meeting. She

said, Nicole, you have a good way of communicating and telling your story and making people listen to you and like, break it down to the various different audience levels. (Nicole, Interview 3, June 13, 2023)

This feedback helped her realize that she was on the right track with her communication style, and that she shouldn't shy away from speaking up since it was effective. For women like Kaya and Nicole, positive feedback was a game changer.

Promotions and Other Affirmations. Tina has received promotions over the course of her IT career, and she described those moments as validating. She stated, "And then getting into this role, or becoming an assistant director, director, it really solidified and kind of the movement, the momentum towards that leadership style, just reinforcement" (Tina, Interview 1, May 16, 2023). Another moment when she felt valued and given a chance to grow in her career was when there was a push from the presidential leadership at her institution. Tina stated:

And then really we had a change of leadership that gave us more, like a presidential change, that wanted more from us with regard to our personality, our identity, or I felt like. And so that kind of changed things for me too, where I felt like I could. In my role as staff council president, we talk about shared governance, being able to speak up and things like that. The faculty side didn't like it a lot, but where we were like, "Oh, we're finally getting heard." And so that piece changed a lot for me in that way. (Tina, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

This shows just how impactful it can be for staff to receive affirmations from leadership.

It was also a big growth opportunity for Nicole when she was offered an interim position prior to her current role.

I mean probably because it was the director role, I think I did an interim for two or three months before I interviewed for this job. And that was very helpful because it was a test, not just for me. I was like, oh, is this gonna be a good fit? And it was interim like, only a few hours out of the week. So it was like, oh, help out, go to some meetings, make some decisions. (Nicole, Interview 3, June 13, 2023)

In this way, having a trial period allowed Nicole and her organization to test out her new leadership role. Similarly, the biggest opportunity that has contributed to Tiffany's growth has been being given a formal leadership role in her organization (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023).

Analysis of Theme Two

In Theme Two, *Growing and Building Resilience*, the participants of this study discussed the importance of growth. At the core of this theme is the concept that these women have grown by turning their own personal challenges into opportunities. For example, Kaya and Reba both discussed how personal life events that were marked by adversity may have been connected to their professional success as leaders in their organizations. They described challenging periods that they think made them stronger, like divorces and low-income periods when they were struggling for survival. In this way, they felt that the hard times made them harder, stronger, and more prepared for the challenges of being in leadership.

It's important to note that this growth and resilience building did not solely happen for the participants of this study through personal development. Professional development was also a large part of this theme, and all participants discussed the insights they have gleaned from professional experience, how they have learned to be flexible and gain grit, and the experiences that have been the most facilitative of growth. For example, Nicole discussed how it was helpful for her to learn to accept the struggle of continual growth and challenges in her organization, showing that she understands that struggles are part of the journey and can hold valuable life lessons.

Participants also described learning that a flexible perspective on leadership, where they can be the leader or be the follower in different contexts has been important to their growth. Similarly, they described learning to be flexible with how they share themselves to others, such as using different levels of disclosure with different people. Both things show an ability to pivot or be adaptable in different contexts, and this mutable mindset was crucial for all participants. Kaya, Tina, Tiffany, and Nicole also all discussed their perspectives on boundaries. Some had more flexible styles than others, but at the core was a thread of learning what to be protective of in one's life. Nicole used an analogy about juggling crystal balls in her reply, stating that she has learned which of the balls that she is juggling are crystal and are simply too precious to juggle and risk breaking.

In their development journeys, participants also reflected on shifting away from a "prove it" mindset and towards a learning mindset. In realizing that a learning mindset is an option, participants like Kaya described how this new perspective is in many ways more in line with the spirit of higher education since it is learning-focused. It is also a less self-critical perspective that allows these women the grace and space to be open to new experiences without the pressure of having all the answers or getting everything right. Finally, trying on traits and being affirmed and validated were also huge for the participants' journeys. Kaya and Tina discussed looking at the leaders they respect around them and observing the traits and techniques they admire, and then attempting to incorporate those techniques into their own approach to see if they work for them. As all this growth begins to take shape into something that is more tangible, participants like

Kaya, Tina, and Nicole discussed how receiving positive feedback and being validated

(in formal ways like promotions or informal ways like praise) was affirming to let them

know that they were on the right track.

Cultivating Meaningful and Nurturing Connections

Like the previous themes, Theme Three, *Cultivating Meaningful and Nurturing*

Connections, emerged from the experiences of all participants. This theme explores how

the study's participants have worked to cultivate meaningful relationships with others in

the workplace. The following sections will describe the ways in which the participants

have built authentic connections, how they have navigated challenges with relationships,

and the strategies they use to combat these issues.

Building Authentic Connections

Most participants described how important it is to them to have a relational

leadership style that is focused on building authentic connections with others in the

workplace. To start, Reba described how the power of vulnerability is critical to

relationship building.

> Not oversharing but saying enough to be vulnerable. And I think when you show
> some vulnerability, it could bite you in the butt at some point. But at the most part
> what it does is opens up the ability to have a conversation where you can
> communicate, either you like expectations or not. (Reba, Interview 2, May 31,
> 2023)

This concept parallels her belief about leaving doors open in conversations, both literally

(with her centrally located and accessible office location) and figuratively.

> So timing is important, but I do think by asking or at least responding to say, "I
> can't think of anything right now, but if I think of something, I will get back to
> you on that." That response again opens that door for you're willing to ask and
> I'm willing to give you an answer. (Reba, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

In this way, Reba's semantic style evoked an open conversation that has the possibilities to continue in the future. Reba has also become a trusted leader by giving her staff the space to try things on their own - she does not micromanage. Reba reflected:

> I also allow my employees to do the operational work, so I'm not trying to do their job for them, which I think is important. You give them a project to do and it's theirs to finish or not finish, and you kinda work through those processes, but you hope that you have the same faith in them as your boss has in you to get that work done. (Reba, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

By giving her employees the freedom to do their job, she shows them goodwill and trust - two things that bolster her relationships.

Tina espoused the belief that progress is only possible if we all go together, showing that she places a value on connecting with and leading her whole team. She stated, "And I say this, "If we're not going in the same direction, we're not gonna get where we need to get to"" (Tina, Interview 1, May 16, 2023). This comment demonstrated the high value that she places on relationships and people feeling connected on her team. In Tina's mind, being on the same page with other people is necessary for progress. In other words, every single person matters when it comes to the group achieving their goals.

Tiffany explained that she likes that she can make peoples' lives easier by being in leadership.

> So I think that's really where it started, is that in order to make life easier for me, and make life easier for everyone else, I need to start putting processes in place. And in order to put processes into place, you had to listen to people and you had to make them listen to you. So that's really that next leap where I realized I needed them to listen to me to make everyone's life easier is probably where the leadership part came in. I started working on that and realizing that I got a lot of

> joy out of making life easier for other people. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

In this way, she was drawn to leadership out of a desire to have the power to improve things for others. When Tiffany first realized how crucial relationships were, she tried to become as visible as possible and create as many new relationships as she could.

> Anything I could do to kind of get my name recognized and so that I could get the experience working with people and creating relationships, both inside and outside of my department. And any sort of leadership experience I could get, even in small situations, I would just jump at the chance to do it. (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023)

Tiffany doesn't see this as something that gets any easier. Due to the shifting social landscape, leadership and its required relationships are something that are a constant work in progress.

Opportunities to Connect with Leaders. Nicole immediately felt a warm connection with other senior women leaders when she started in her most recent role.

> But I loved it because all the department heads were women in applied health sciences. The Dean is a woman, and when I first got here she was like, is it okay if I give you a hug? And she was like, oh. And I was like, yes, of course. And so it was one of those like, it was very welcoming. (Nicole, Interview 1, May 9, 2023)

From this response, she felt excitement from others that she was chosen for the role. Nicole described others as seeing her as a breath of fresh air (Interview 1, May 9, 2023).

One formative experience that Tiffany had with building relationships in her organization was being able to sit on her IT department's Operations Team.

> Being on the operations team back when I was a new DBA was probably one of the most formative things 'cause I got to sit in with all of the other people that were leads from their position. So they weren't management, they were leading from where they were. And being part of that team and talking to people, even if it's an argument, you know, if it's a debate of why are you doing this and this and this, and there was one person I did not see eye to eye with. And having that,

having to work through that and figure out what they wanted out of it and what I got out of it. And just having those experiences of meeting with other people that are leading where they were and other people that had leadership aspirations, you know, what were they learning about, that was definitely formative. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

This experience was helpful because it allowed Tiffany the opportunity to build relationships with other future leaders, learn about the social landscape of the department, and get a sense for where she fit in socially.

Modeling Good Behaviors and Fostering Openness. One strategy that Nicole recalled using when interacting with others is modeling good listening. By doing this, Nicole modeled appropriate behavior that she expects from others:

Modeling good listening and how to do that appropriately for everyone. So I talk a lot, but I try my darndest when I am in meetings to not cut people off, because I want to make sure that they're doing the same thing when I'm speaking. And so I know how to take nice pauses and wait for other people to share if I've been oversharing. So I know how to take a step back. But at the same time, I don't want people to feel like they can just talk over other individuals. And so modeling not talking over individuals is something that I also do to kind of show my leadership styles when I'm with my peers. (Nicole, Interview 3, June 13, 2023)

Similarly when working with others, Kaya stated that she tries to verbalize her behavior so that she models it to others. "I mean, I was before, but like, I try to verbalize the thing I was just doing so that other people hear the words so that they hopefully will start thinking about doing it" (Kaya, Interview 3, June 19, 2023). By verbalizing her behavior, she hopes that what she is doing will influence others and that her actions will help serve as a guide.

Kaya stated that in terms of people, leadership is about pulling out the awesomeness and brilliance in your people and applying it toward the greater good.

So I'll flat-out say, like, I do not know this subject matter as much, as well as you do. Like, I really need your expertise here. Right? So I wanna pivot so that we're not adversarial, we're working on the same thing together, by acknowledging the awesomeness that they're bringing to the table. It's just pulling that, pulling that out. And so facilitating and getting to that is, like, embrace what you don't know, right? Be vulnerable for the fact that you are not the expert in the room, because like, that's gonna be well received. (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023)

So, by being vulnerable and transparent with the fact that she doesn't know everything, Kaya creates a trusting and safe environment for employees to voice their ideas. Later in the interview, she spoke about the importance of this again, "Like, actually bringing, harnessing, and releasing all the brain power in the room, and that it can actually result in good things, I think, helped" (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023). In this way, Kaya shows that she values everyone on their team by being open and willing to benefit from their creative perspectives.

Reba has made intentional choices that have helped to foster a relational and open style. The first of these strategies is an inclusive weekly meeting of her creation:

When I first started in this role, I set up a weekly meeting called On the Same Page meeting. There was a lack of communication in IT, and from IT to the campus. And I said, if we are all on the same page every week, if we spend 30 minutes just talking about what are our most pressing issues and what are we trying to do, then we all are on the same understanding. (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

By getting everyone on the same page, she is ensuring that everyone feels included and that all brainpower is focused on the big issues. The second strategy is that Reba made herself visible, available, and accessible to her team by picking a central office location.

The other thing I did is I selected my office in the middle of the hallway. There was an office at the end of the hallway where the manager had been. And I told the VP, the CIO at the time, I wanna choose this office. And he's like, okay. And everyone in the hall was like, you can't do that. And I'm like, it's already done.

But to me it was about being centrally located so I could hear what's going on. (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

Later in Interview 1, Reba described the open communication made possible by these strategies as key to her success in her new role (May 16, 2023).

Valuing the Whole Person. A hallmark of Reba, Kaya, and Tina's leadership styles is that they are all humanistic leaders who value the whole person in their employees. In Interview 1, Reba discussed how some leaders (especially male) tend to focus on the boxes that people can check off for them in projects, and how those leaders seem to put more value on that than the people themselves. Reba discussed how her approach with employees is so much more than that:

> I check off that I'm holding meetings, but I have a more personal conversation with each employee, whether it's a man or a woman. You know, how are you doing? What is it I can help you do? How are you interacting with your male and female reports and how can I help build your leadership skills to better meet their needs? I think of more of the well-rounded part of that employee and I'm trying to help them, versus just checking off the box, did you finish the project? Did you come to work on time? You know, did you do the personnel reviews for your staff? You know, it's more than just checking off the boxes 'cause I well-roundedly want to know that they're succeeding in developing themselves, meeting their responsibilities and still loving what they do. I want 'em to be happy in their jobs, right? (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

In this way, Reba described herself as an emotional leader with a caring approach. She summed up her style by saying, "I act more emotionally, meaning I care about people, I have compassion, I feel like I do that personal touch more" (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023). This leadership style likely comes from Reba's strong belief that being emotional is part of being a person, and she showed a desire to respect that human element of her staff. In Interview 2, she described this as a desire to see the whole picture of her staff members' lives so that she can understand their circumstances and where they are coming

from (Reba, May 31, 2023). Kaya discussed the same phenomenon, stating that you can't draw the best out of your employees if you don't know the whole person.

> And if you, only as a manager, focus on the one professional side, you miss this whole other side of who they are, the things that are personally motivating them, or stressing them out. Like you're not very effective in being able to draw the best out of them. (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023)

Though she is applying this whole person concept to her employees in this passage, she also connected the power of the whole person to her own experiences.

> I was under the impression that I needed to keep a clear separation between who I was as an individual, a human, female, mom, wife. Like, that needed to be separate, and I needed to be a professional, and just a professional identity at work. And I don't know if that's a generational thing, 'cause like my parents are of the tail end of the traditionalists, the silent generation. And so, that was just kind of what was drilled into me, type of stuff. What I have learned, though, in my experience with the latter years of running projects and then my current team, is that, I am limiting myself if I don't embrace those other roles, and who I am. (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023)

In this way, she has realized that it is better for her and for her team to be able to be wholly who they are, and to not have to hide or separate personal identities in the workplace. Finally, she discussed how being herself allows her to harness all her power:

> I think if you ever watched "Mad Men," I mean, like, there's some elements of that, that emotion shouldn't be a part of it. It's like, but if you don't, you can harness, no things are bad. It's what you do with them, right? So if you harness the emotion, and direct it towards doing something better, more creative, more collaborative, like, that's not bad, right? If you just get angry for angry's sake, that's not good. But that's not a male, like, that's just an emotion, kind of stuff. And I think it's acknowledging the power that the softer side has on being more effective in the workforce. (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023)

By accepting her female strengths, Kaya is harnessing her whole self for her success.

Finally, Tina always discussed how she makes sure to keep a humanistic perspective in the back of her mind when interacting with others.

> But it's just, it's also about the human piece and the human factor. And COVID really did a number. People are very fragile, the mental state of many. And so that's always something on the back of my mind for others, and kind of making sure that we're fair, equitable. (Tina, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

She knows that people are delicate and important and thinks that this is one of the reasons why others respect her as a leader.

Giving to Others. Tina understands the importance of adjusting her leadership style for her staff to give them the best growth opportunities. First, she finds herself code switching from leader to follower as a staff development strategy. She described her attitudes around this and how this shifting allows others to shine and take the center stage:

> And so good leaders have to know when to transition from one role to the other. And they don't even think about it in that way. It's just, you just, now you're, you know, somebody else is ahead of you, or knows this more than you, you need to, you know, you need to pivot, you need to transition and let them take center. (Tina, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

In addition to this leader-follower switching, Tina will also change her leadership style to what works best for the people that she is leading.

> And leading people is you kind of, you know, switching up your practices to kind of meet their need, their well, how they need to be managed, you change the way you behave and how you, yeah, communicate based on their style and what works best for them, versus where I'm having my people now change to match my style. (Tina, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

By adapting to others and not forcing them to adapt for her, she is putting her people first and giving them the best chance to succeed. This connects back with Tina's general service mindset, when she stated, "I'm here to serve you, you know, even as a leader. That's part of that servant leadership piece that I like" (Interview 1, May 16, 2023).

Just like Tina, Reba is also very much focused on what she can give to others in what she does. For example, when giving a speech about the hardships she has experienced for a scholarship program it started out as a relief for her - but it turned into something where she hoped she was giving value to others.

> But I think the more you tell it, you leave out the parts that are heart achy enough that you can't get through them and you focus on the parts that are going to be telling that story, but then give value to the person. It's more about the person you're giving your story to than it is to get it off of your chest, in the end, looking back, the reflective part is, yes, it was a relief to tell that story again, I hope I helped that person I was talking to. (Reba, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

In this way, Reba tried to make her stories relevant for her audience, showing that her focus is on them and not herself. Similarly, she also described reading people and adjusting based on their reactions while talking with them. She does this so that people are comfortable while interacting with her; being inclusive with others while interacting is one of Reba's primary concerns. For example, she described a recent conversation that she had with a colleague in a group setting when the colleague brought up something related to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

> So for instance, in the training I was doing today, someone, or before the class, there were three or four of us sitting in the room and she asked me, "So did you get a new bishop?" I mean, people who aren't LDS don't understand what's a bishop, how is that different, right? And so we were talking, but I noticed it made other people uncomfortable. (Reba, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

The fact that this made others uncomfortable made Reba uncomfortable; she always prefers that conversation topics remain inclusive in the workplace.

Navigating Challenges and Strategies

All participants reported challenges in connecting with others and several offered strategies for managing these challenges. To begin, Tiffany talked about some of her

challenges in creating relationships with others. First, she talked about the challenges that

people with a long institutional history have as seeing her as a leader.

> Most of the people that report to me definitely see me as a leader. Some of them
> that have been here for 20 years, that have been my peer for 15 years, that is hard.
> That is hard to say. I mean, it kind of helped because even though I'd been
> working with them for 15 years and some of them might've been really good
> friends, there were already times where I said, "Look, no, we have to do it this
> way. This is why we have to do it this way." And every once in a while, I'd get a
> little bit of pushback, but for the most part, they'd be like, "Okay. I can see your
> point of view. Here's my point of view. Do we still wanna go that direction?
> Okay, well, then let's go." (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023)

She also reflected that sometimes others are just going to be against you in the workplace.

Tiffany suggested that the people who are most likely going to be against you are actively

trying to make their own identities and find their place in the larger organization.

> Anyone that I had that I had trouble with were usually people that were trying to
> make their identity at the same time, and we just kind of mashed against each
> other instead of really. . . . Whereas if we would've come to the point of, "Okay,
> look, we have the same goal. Let's listen, let's figure it out, and let's move
> forward." I think we both would've been better off. (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8,
> 2023)

She implied that as she continues to work with more mature leaders who have established

leadership identities, this pushback and challenge has become less of an issue.

Early on in her career, Nicole felt the need to initiate a courageous conversation

with her direct supervisor about a difficult subject. That conversation transformed their

relationship:

> And I remember having a frank conversation with him when I was about six
> months, and I said, I can't be, I can't be led like this. Like I can't, you have to
> trust that I know what I'm doing. And he said, but this is, you know, this is what I
> have to do. I have to, I was like, do you want my job? Because you hired me to do
> my job, and you're gonna do your job, so you have to trust, like let me know if
> I'm not doing something right. Of course, and when he said that, he said, his face
> like dropped. He was like, how dare you talk to me? But he didn't say that. He

just went, I'm gonna trust that you know what you need to do. (Nicole, Interview 1, May 9, 2023)

After having this uncomfortable conversation despite the power dynamic, this relationship with her supervisor went from negative to a true give and take mentoring relationship.

Reba has had a couple of challenging moments with members of her staff. There were two occasions where employees waited until they gave their notice to provide negative feedback.

And when they were working for me, I mean like we would have really detailed good conversations and when they would leave, and both times, women, they would come to me and say, you know, "You really weren't a great supervisor, you know." And then they would kind of unleash. It's like, I'm leaving so I can tell you what I think about you. (Reba, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

In at least one of these situations, the employee felt like Reba had done her a disservice by helping offload her responsibilities, even though this is something the employee originally indicated that they wanted.

When she started in a new position, Nicole learned that how you are introduced by leadership can make or break the relationships that you need to build in your work.

There were some individuals that the deans shared what my role was going to be doing and kind of was like, oh, she's here to see if you still have a job. And I was like, oh, why would you say that? Like, that's crazy. So it was not received well because they were pretty much like, yeah, I'm working and this is what I do. And like, so anytime I came it was like, why are you here? You're here to evaluate me. And so it was not received well, the authority, it was harder to win people over because of the way it was introduced. (Nicole, Interview 3, June 13, 2023)

Unfortunately, after this happened, Nicole needed to do damage control and re-earn peoples' trust to be able to do her work.

Grace has experienced several tensions with the relationships in her organization,

and these are primarily due to lack of support from her institution's leadership. For

example, Grace feels that she doesn't even have the cultural capital to ask to get into

leadership.

> And then I also thought, you know, I, just basically observing things around me and I thought, "You know, maybe I could do this." And I even sometimes I thought about it years ago but I thought, "You know, it's just, there's no way. And how do I get started? Who do I talk to?" (Grace, Interview 1, May 5, 2023)

Later in the interview, she reinforced similar concerns. "However, as far as the

organizations is concerned, I think in order for them even to be supportive I have to

articulate it. I've never articulated, because frankly I had no idea how to do it" (Grace,

Interview 1, May 5, 2023). Grace felt that she can't even articulate how to ask for the

support of her leadership in her career growth, leaving her in a stuck place with her

career. She even proceeded to describe that she felt that she can't even ask her direct

supervisor for help in this area:

> However, again, no matter what I do, they really, I don't know honestly what I'm going to put into my goals affiliation this year because, well, what do I say to my boss? That I wanna progress into a leadership role? (Grace, Interview 1, May 5, 2023)

The fact that Grace feels that she can't voice what she needs and wants has made her feel

alone in her struggle. There have also been a couple of occasions where Grace has been

hurt by the way that people in leadership have reacted to her. Once, she was deeply hurt

when a senior leader questioned her presence in a leadership training session.

> You know what was the first question out of one of the leader's mouths? "What are you doing here?" I'm never gonna forget that. Amy, I had things said to me that were way beyond microaggressions, which are bad in themselves. But I'm, this is one of those things I'm not gonna forget. She really, she literally looked at

me and said, "What are you doing here? Why are you here?" So I was at a loss for words and then she filled it in for me very kindly. She said, "Oh, you must be observing." (Grace, Interview 1, May 5, 2023)

This incident made her feel unwanted and like others did not perceive that she belonged in leadership spaces. Reflecting on this anecdote, Grace wondered if the leader realized the true impact of her words. Another time, there was a departmental leader who made a discriminatory comment to Grace about her accent. In this situation, her bottled up emotions from experiencing discrimination due to her ethnicity in the past all came out at once, and Grace blew up at the person:

So I didn't, I, you know, at the end when I had a person, you know, leadership in my department, not my current leadership, but leadership in my department say, "You know what? Whatever you say to them washes over them because of your accent." That was 2018 or 2019. It was before the pandemic. So I don't know what came over me, the only thing I wish I had done was open, left the door open. I closed the door and I gave her some education. And actually, then I sort of had to smooth things over although really I didn't have to, now that I think about it. I didn't have to smooth at all. (Grace, Interview 1, May 5, 2023)

The other tensions with relationships that Grace has experienced have to do with the way that she thinks that they perceive her as a leader. First, she indicated that some of her colleagues seem annoyed with her when she shares her frequent accomplishments: "But I also noticed that when I do share my accomplishments in the department, some people congratulate me all the time and they speak so supportively - that means a lot. But others are like, 'Her again?'" (Grace, Interview 1, May 5, 2023). She has also felt that it is hard to lead a project. Since she is perceived as a support staff person in her organization, she felt that she will not be listened to by lead nurses and that any project she leads would not be successful.

I try to step into a leadership role on the project and basically, "Well no, this person wants to take over and teach it all." Okay. And also, you question yourself and you think you want a paycheck, right? You don't want to lose good relationships and trust either - or be seen as aggressive and ambitious. So you know, at some point you gotta just like let it go, 'cause that's the way it will always be. What I've done, is talked at length and reinforced as much as needed that we're co-pilots on a project. Some will still either view me as support staff or not mention my name in connection with a project. I don't care. My boss actually acknowledged both of us. So that's a plus. It's always a tough work in progress. (Grace, Interview 1, May 5, 2023)

In Interview 3, she discussed how it is very important for her to read the social context to determine if she is perceived as a leader in a particular group that she is in (Grace, June 20, 2023). In this way, reading the room allowed her to tailor her behavior before she is potentially shut down by others. This gives her back some power.

Tiffany explored the communication strategies she uses with superiors and peers in Interview 3. In the following passage, she reflected on the communication approach she will take with leaders who she doesn't feel she has enough time with:

Yeah, and funny enough, now that I think of it, I definitely take more of a speaking approach than a listening approach with a leadership position. I have found repeatedly that if it is someone that is in a higher structure than I am, it is sometimes hard to get them to listen to you. So I have felt like if I am taking their time to have this kind of conversation, if I only have a very limited amount of time, I feel like I need to shake them. I'm like, "Look, these are the issues that you are not seeing from this level. I need to make sure you understand where we really are and what you are not seeing because I am a couple layers underneath you and you don't see that these issues are going to come up, and they're going to come up soon. I feel like I am the one, I'm the smoke that is letting you know that there is a fire down here that you're not seeing." So it doesn't. . . . I probably need to work on how to do that better, but if I have a limited amount of time, that's what I find that I'm doing and what I feel like I have to do. (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023)

In this way, Tiffany tried to ensure that her superiors are aware of what's going on at her level, making up for the lack of face time with added intensity. She stated later in

Interview 3 that she is less pushy as she has more time with people (Tiffany, June 8,

2023).

       Embracing the Spotlight. Next, Tina described how she must force herself into

the spotlight - but how she enjoys it once she gets there. She also described understanding

the importance of meeting new people, and saw the value of bringing people closer to

create the opportunity to have real conversations:

> So I push myself beyond my boundaries because I think it's important to get out
> there and people know you, understand kind of your value system, what's
> important for you and that kind of brings people who are like-minded into your
> circle, and people who are, then you have conversations and you're able to like
> have discussions if they're open to it of course. (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

So, despite it being difficult for her to push herself into the spotlight, she expressed that it

is worth it when she can create these new connections with open-minded people. Kaya

had a similar experience with feeling the need to push herself into the spotlight. Between

not liking public speaking and feeling imposter syndrome, she felt that she had to push

her way through into being vocal and visible in her organization (Kaya, Interview 3, June

19, 2023). Tiffany also felt similarly, describing that she realized the necessity of being

an extrovert so that she could create informal relationships.

> You have to create those informal relationships. You have to be an extrovert, you
> have to listen to people, you have to be ready to talk to people about things like
> that and make them feel heard formally and informally. (Tiffany, Interview 1,
> May 15, 2023)

So, Tiffany perceived informal groups as an opportunity to let others begin to trust you so

that deeper connections can be forged. She reflected on these relationship opportunities:

> I'm like, do you like to golf? On the flip side, do you like to walk and drink on
> occasion? You know, then come golfing with us, you know? Or do you, you
> know, what are you into? How can I get you involved in this chat? You know, I

put together this coffee chat where people can just talk informally about things that are going on, whether it's personal or at the university. And they can have that informal, you know, complaining time about the president doing whatever. You know? I create those so that people have an opportunity to talk. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

For Tiffany, combining these informal relationships with a formalized cheering process has worked well in building her relationships.

I believe in cheering people on. I believe in giving accolades where I can and congratulating them when I can. And so I've kind of adjusted from just kind of cheering from people in person to trying to remember to actually write it down, you know, saying, "Hey, good job on this," or "You did a great job at this email," or "This was really good." So I do it a little bit more formally instead of just, "Hey, way to kick ass," you know. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

Being a relational leader isn't difficult for Tiffany since she described having the ability to separate her friendship with an employee from their work when addressing a problem.

I mean, I made a lot of friends that I am now a manager over, so I had to be able to let someone know when I was talking to them informally and when there was a problem and why it was a problem, and when it was serious and that I had to use, you know, kinda like when you use your mom voice, right? It's not your mom voice, it's definitely a manager voice, but you have to be able to separate your friendship from the work getting done. But it also means that when you are talking to someone, it is you and them versus the problem. So if I have an employee that is consistently late for work, it is me and them versus being late for work. So we are going to work on this together, we are going to figure it out. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

For Tiffany, framing problems as her and the employee vs. the problem is an effective strategy because that does not cause any harm to the relationship.

Analysis of Theme Three

Theme Three evoked the importance of building relationships and working to maintain them with others so that they are meaningful personally and professionally. For these participants, at the heart of cultivating these connections was fostering an open

environment and an approachable style so that others feel comfortable initiating and building rapport. Participants like Reba and Kaya described how vulnerability can be used to help with this; by being vulnerable, each participant modeled to her team that it is safe to communicate honestly. Tiffany made similar comments about the importance of vulnerability, stating that she modeled vulnerability to her team when she was experiencing a recent period of grief by being open with what she was going through.

Several of the participants also illustrated the ways in which they "value the whole person" when they work with their employees. Reba described how she doesn't want to just check off the boxes of other peoples' accomplishments as a leader. Rather, she thinks it is important to get to know your employees, be empathetic with what's going on in their lives, and show an interest in who they are to build a richer relationship. Kaya described a similar approach, stating that you can't draw the best out of your employees if you don't know the whole person. It is important to note that valuing the whole person is an ongoing endeavor. Asking a personal question once isn't sufficient; leaders need to make continual efforts to get to know their employees to reinforce that they care about and value them. One way that Tiffany has invested in relationships with others in her organization is organizing and attending informal social events that are inclusive and open to all staff members in her department. She described these opportunities as very important to relationship building and being able to connect with people in a different way.

Participants also talked about the challenges that they encounter with relationships in their workplaces, including things like difficult conversations, lack of support, and lack

of face time with leaders. Nicole reflected on a time when finding the courage to have a difficult conversation with her supervisor transformed their relationship. Grace reported not feeling supported by her leadership, and described how that has made her feel like an outsider in her organization. Tiffany discussed how it is difficult when you don't get much face time with leadership in your organization and revealed that her counterstrategy is adding more intensity to her interactions with people at those higher levels. Overall, the experiences from the participants of this study show that building relationships is like building muscle. Unless re-investing in relationships happens habitually, consistently, and intentionally, relationships (like muscles) will atrophy.

Self-Building and Developing Authenticity

Theme Four, *Self-Building and Developing Authenticity*, emerged from the collective experiences of all participants. This theme includes the many things that went into the participants' constructions of self through identity work, allowing them to uncover and refine their genuine selves. This section will include subsections that cover the various facets of this process, including participant self-discovery and identity exploration, identity building, personal values and leadership traits, confidence building strategies, how they cope with challenges, and support systems.

Self-Discovery and Identity Exploration

Most participants discussed the importance of uncovering a core, authentic identity. Participants accomplished that by blurring the lines between their personal and professional identities, leaning into life experience, and embracing womanhood - overall, accepting and embracing who they are. To begin, Reba described how important

authenticity is to gaining confidence at work. First, she illustrated how she tries on the characteristics of leaders she admires through a system of trial and error:

> Well, I think number one, we learn how to lead by how we follow others, right? Who are those people that we aspire to be like? What are the characteristics they have that make you gravitate towards wanting to learn from them? And then also, I think it takes time and wisdom. You learn through trial and error over years what works and what doesn't work for you. And that eventually someone is going to want to learn something from you. (Reba, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

Reba alluded to the fact that we can only keep the characteristics that work for us - they must be authentic and fit with our leadership style. Grace has adopted a similar strategy by thinking about things that she likes about other leaders and trying to model those characteristics.

> Give yourself the grace to learn. It's not gonna be perfect, perfect is staying in the good. But also think about what you don't like in a leader and what you do like. I mean there are things that I'm learning from my boss also that I would myself use, okay, this is what I would do, but this is what I would do, okay? (Grace, Interview 2, May 30, 2023)

In this way, Grace described learning from others and applying their traits as a way to grow confidence as one is becoming a leader.

Tina stated that feedback doesn't change the core of who she is as a person, a concept that connects back with Reba's view that we must be our authentic selves.

> But I'm confident enough in what I do and how long I've been here and familiar with the technology, with my own, I guess, smarts, my own capabilities that I can always be better. I always look for good feedback, but it doesn't mean that changes me as a person. (Tina, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

In this way, Tina's beliefs align with Reba's - that good feedback or making small changes do not change your core person.

Personal and Professional Blurred Lines. For Tiffany, part of becoming an authentic leader at work was merging her personal identity with her work identity. She reflected, "A lot of my personal life, I definitely do merge in. I feel like it lets people know where I am" (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023). One of the downsides of this merging is that Tiffany discussed that it has become difficult to keep her emotions out of the workplace:

> If I come in and I'm in a bad mood one day, people think that I'm just in a bad mood. But if I come in and I'm in a bad mood and I say, "Oh, I can't believe I spilled mud on myself," then they know why you're in a bad mood. But if you don't follow up with that, then I feel like I have to justify my mood changes. And I have a hard time always separating my mood from my professional life. Sometimes you can put it down. And if it is something serious that I can put down, I won't bring it up at work. To be completely honest, if it's something that I feel like is not gonna affect my emotions, then I don't bring it up, you know? (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

Part of being authentic for Tiffany has been learning when to share and not to share when she is experiencing something upsetting. Tiffany has learned that it is often better for her to share what's going on if she knows that it's going to affect her emotions at work. Recently, she felt the need to share with her team after a beloved pet passed away:

> So my dog, for instance, my dog died a number of months ago, and I really didn't mention that I had lost my dog. I mean, I knew he was gonna be put down and I took an afternoon off and I just said I was gonna be out sick. But it affected me more than I thought it would. And I found myself a little bit quick in some of my replies because I was so distracted. And during one meeting I just kind of started tearing up and I needed to go off the camera, you know? So then I let the entire team know, "Hey, just to let you know, I did have to put down my dog this weekend and it's affecting me more than I thought. So please be a little bit patient with me." And then I'll let them know. (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

So, in this example, Tiffany shared this information with her team so that they would be able to make sense of her behavior at work. Tiffany believes that another perk of being personal and showing that she is human at work is that it can make the tough times easier.

> So informally, you know, being a little eclectic, a little bit, you know, vulnerable, and just kind of human to make sure that, you know, that then if we get into meetings that are a little bit more stressful, they know that if I have a strong language, it's because of my frustration, not about them. So something that is something that I have to deal with and not a personal attack. (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

In this way, Tiffany put a lot of intentional effort into building her personal self-image in the social context of her organization. For example, earlier in the interview, she reflected on sharing personal anecdotes to make others feel comfortable.

> And during these meetings I try to make sure that I share things with myself so that other people feel comfortable sharing with themselves. So my mom has this best friend, her name is Suzie May. She would tell people everything about her life, you know, whether it was embarrassing or anything at all. And she was always smiling and she was always laughing when she did it, you know, and the fact that she could make herself vulnerable and open, I found that that made me feel more comfortable and able to be vulnerable, you know? So I've always wanted to kind of do that for the people that I work with, to make them feel like they could talk to me if they wanted to. . . . (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

However, this personal approach doesn't mean that Tiffany reveals overly personal information at inappropriate times.

> If it's a more formal meeting but we're talking, you know, before a meeting or something like that about what's going on, then I usually, the stories I tell about my life are usually about my gardening or my chickens or, you know, or other work that's going on. (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

In this way, she adapts and portrays different parts of her identity in different work contexts. The stories she reveals are all still authentic but are curated to a different

audience. Overall, Tiffany stated that she has been happier since she began choosing to

embrace these blurred lines between the personal and professional in her life.

> And so I would say for the first couple of years of my professional life, I kept it very separate, and I kind of just wasn't happy doing that. So now they blur a lot and I'm a lot happier with that. And I feel like the people I have to talk to, they know me personally, I know I'm not gonna break that relationship just because I'm mad at them about something or they're mad at me about something. We can still be annoyed with each other and then go hang out, you know, have a drink or go golfing or something. So, no, I blend them quite a bit and I'm a lot happier doing that than when I used to keep it all separate. (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

Overall, for Tiffany, blurring and blending her identities has been a successful strategy

toward becoming more authentic and confident in her role, but it's important to note that

not all participants felt this way. For example, Grace discussed how separating her

personal and professional identities was her strategy of choice:

> So certain parts of my identities, I simply have to keep out of work. I don't feel comfortable sharing them. I mean, the university supports LGBT and all that—but the thing is, I worked with some of these humans for a long time. And this has been a shock to me a few years ago, when I put myself off autopilot, always working, studying, volunteering, trying to survive in the office, just everything. Then hard stop. I realized what was going on. Thank God I wasn't in the office in person —it was very very rough. I couldn't talk to anyone. Imagine saying something to them. No way. It took me so many years even to even accept myself, who I'm, where I'm from, bad experiences, good stuff I learned from - I had and all that, well, you've seen my profile so at least some of what I've been able to share. It took me years to do even that much - and learn that I don't and shouldn't have to listen to any of what I put up with for years. I experienced a lot of prejudice and antisemitism and so did my parents - even more obviously. I was so naïve; I really thought the U.S. is different in that respect. That's why my parents wanted to leave USSR so much, and the beautiful city where we lived - to escape all that because I also knew in Russia what it was like to be the other. So, thing is, we haven't escaped any of it. None. And, you know, for several years, I realized that I can truly function if I think "zoo." I mean, since the zoo helps me cope, I just tell 'em, okay, Grace, zoo handler. It really helps me. It also made me sensitive to different cultural nuances and always try to be civil. (Grace, Interview 2, May 30, 2023)

In this way, Grace attributed her experiences of cultural discrimination and her personal interests that she perceives as different than her colleagues as the main reasons that meaningful connections with her colleagues are not possible.

> Everything else, I just have different interests. That's really the only part and then with one of my colleagues she's into British comedy, sort of like I am. So that we discuss. But mostly other than the zoo, which is big, Other than that I try to not discuss too much because everybody's interests differ. So I don't, for example, discuss all the books that I read or anything like that. Because it sort of came up in a conversation a few weeks ago and I finally said, look, most people I'm sure don't read what I read or watch what I watch and that's okay. (Grace, Interview 2, May 30, 2023)

So, rather than blurring the lines of the personal and professional like Tiffany, Grace felt that it was safer and therefore more logical choice to keep her personal life to herself.

Life Experience and Personal Identities. One part of Tina's identity that has had a big effect on her sense of self and perceptions is being a mom. She stated:

> And then I got my kids, and they're fun, once you're a mom, it changes like your. . . . I don't wanna say personality, but it changes your perceptions and what was important before is not really that important anymore, so we started giving importance to other things, my career was really like important to me, I would give up all kinds of hours to work late and do whatever, and then the kids come along and we have soccer and we have hockey, and we have whatever it is that they decided, Taekwondo, whatever it is that we decided we were gonna do, and we, my husband and I would take turns, balance it, whatever, but there were some things that were non-negotiable, family vacations and things like that. (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

She continued on to say that since identities are constantly moving and shifting, she will likely have another identity perception shift when she becomes a first-time grandmother later on in 2023.

For Reba, part of building herself up as a leader has included finding her

confidence, focusing on being the best that she can be, and experiencing a decrease in

anxiety as she has gotten older.

> You can't be more than you can be. And yet our children want and deserve more than we maybe can give them. And so the life lesson is you just be the best you can. You calm down as you get older, you know, with age comes experience, with experience comes a calmness. I have less anxiety about those things, and I feel like it, that maturity level helps me to better influence decisions that I make and influence the decisions of others. (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

Later in Interview 1, she reflected more on the advantageous perspective of beginning her

IT career a little later in life:

> So I think the most interesting thing for me is because I'm older, came back to school in my 30s and 40s and didn't start this position until I was in my 40s, I just have a different perspective on life. And I think part of that is you get that wisdom over time of saying, you know, I know how to be a parent, I know how to guide my own children, I know how to guide workers. And I felt like I brought that to my job, the ability to sit back and listen. (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

In this way, Reba felt that being older and bringing those life experiences to the table has

been helpful in her career. Grace echoed these thoughts, stating that she has gotten more

comfortable with being herself as she has gotten older (Interview 2, May 30, 2023).

Embracing Womanhood. Another lesson that Tiffany has learned as she has

journeyed towards authenticity and finding self-confidence is to embrace being a woman.

> You have to be okay being the person out and then speaking up and knowing that you have worth in there and that has to come from inside because nobody's gonna give that to you. And then embrace you're female. The presentation I gave when I was a DBA is how RAC, which is this database application, how RAC made me the DBA goddess I am today. I mean, I embraced it. I have no problem with it, with being female and being out there. You kind of have to, you know, be ready to be loud, I guess, and alone a little. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

In this way, Tiffany described being a woman in IT as a journey of acceptance and embracing oneself. Her final words about being ready to be loud and alone are highly evocative of the ongoing challenges and isolation faced by women in the field.

The Experience of Identity Building

Most participants discussed their experiences with identity work, and how it was helpful for them to use a variety of strategies that made them feel more like their true selves.

Dressing as Representation of Self. Nicole indicated that she is drawn to bold and bright colors when it comes to her professional wardrobe.

> I'm not afraid of bold colors. I think it actually helps me stand out, even though people are like, you don't need to stand out, you can just blend in. And I was like, why blend in when I can stand out? So I go for bright colors, not to throw the color palette off of the meeting, but I'm like, if you're gonna look at me and I want you to look at me, I'm gonna go ahead and do that. So I do find professional wonderful dresses that are in neon colors, not neon but gold or other things that I can do. So I intentionally make those choices and I don't shy away from them. It's been a long time since I went, oh, I probably shouldn't wear this. I just go, oh, no, I definitely should wear this. (Nicole, Interview 3, June 13, 2023)

Even though Nicole and Reba have different styles, Reba also found it important to dress in clothes that represent who she is.

> So I think professionally I try to, I usually come a little more dressed up, but some days I have my casual days, like I'm in jeans today, but a nice outfit, right? So on camera I look fine, in person I did that training. I have tennis shoes on and jeans with appliques on 'em. But to me it's like, that is who I am as a person. (Reba, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

In this way, like Nicole, Reba is happy if what she wears to work makes her feel like she is representing her authentic self. Tina also had similar things to say as Reba insofar as the self-presentation styles that make her feel more authentic.

> So I take a simplistic approach to my, I guess, outer shell, and I have two hairstyles, this one with a little band or the comb and then the pullback with gel so it doesn't go everywhere, and that's because I have not so much now, but I've had like curly hair and it does a thing, right? I wear the polos, the pants, again, it goes back to from years past and not being a dress wearer, that I don't feel like super comfortable in a dress. (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

Similarly, Grace found it important to be authentic and true to herself in how she dresses. In Interview 3, she stated, "So I usually like wearing colorful scarves, everything else kind of muted. But I do have colorful scarfs that I wear" (Grace, June 20, 2023). She talked more about her scarves later in the interview, stating that she has special scarves for special occasions:

> But obviously if I were to meet with a senior leader, I have a set of scarfs that I have saved just for those kind of things. If I'm doing presentations, for example, doesn't matter forget senior leaders, right? If I'm doing a conference presentation, so I would always wear a scarf and some kind of a muted shirt, but I have my scarf on - and, sometimes, a very small zoo themed necklace. (Grace, Interview 3, June 20, 2023)

In this way, adding in a colorful scarf makes her feel special and powerful before a big meeting or presentation. This ties back to the concept of performativity and how dressing up can make someone feel special. For example, Tiffany described how she enjoyed dressing "glittery" and "not male" for an important conference presentation:

> And I don't know why it was important for me to wear it, but it was billowy and purple and glittery, and I mean, oh, I should send you, I should show you this picture of it. Like if I can find it while we're chatting, then I should send it. But it was a lot, okay? I mean, it was not just a suit. I did not go male. (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

Being performative is not mutually exclusive from being authentic. For example, an "outrageous" (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023) sense of fashion is authentic for

Tiffany - again, it's about finding comfort in what is authentic in terms of her own style.

Reflecting on her style at work, Tiffany stated:

> I'm a little bit more outrageous than I think normal people should be. I know it doesn't look it, but I dress up all the time. I just like to dress up. That's what I like to do. I mean, today I'm wearing a lovely little summer dress, and I have so many summer dresses. Just a year and a half ago, I think I already told you, I had purple hair and bright fire engine red hair. I try to get a little bit more outrageous sometimes on my earrings and my necklace. Not today, but some days. You know, I've got sword earrings actually, that I have, they're very large. (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

Tiffany also noted that she puts on additional makeup to cope with nerves and anxiety, again showing that this is a confidence building strategy for her.

> I didn't, I mean, I still had long blonde hair, full makeup, because when I'm nervous I put on more makeup. That is the other thing that I have found that I do. If I'm in a situation that I have never been before, or I don't know how I should react or dress, I get fancy, I go full makeup. Like the first time I ever went to Dungeons and Dragons, literally it was just this little tiny four man group. I was 30 years old, they were all 30s. I went full makeup and a dress, because the fancier I felt, the better I felt about myself, and just, that's what I do. I guess that's kind of like war paint, everybody says. (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

In this way, makeup is a confidence building strategy for Tiffany while also making her feel authentic.

Reforming Professional Identity. One thing that Reba has had to do in her career is build back her confidence in the face of a landscape of shifting identities.

> I mean, I'll tell you, when I first separated from my husband, I found that I talked a lot about my marriage and I realized that's not a work trait, right? I mean it was really, I was trying to figure out who I was gonna be as a leader and a person in IT without that part of the aspect of my job life. So I needed to make sure and keep that out of it. But I did also find that as you shed one part of your identity, you're picking up something else. So you're growing it in other ways. (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

In this way, Reba had to re-discover how to talk about her professional identity when her ex-husband was no longer a part of that identity. In a later part of Interview 1, Reba came back to this idea of shedding identities, speaking specifically about how this seems to be a frequent expectation of women, "So we shed some of those ideas and we grasp onto others, and individually I think women do that better. But not all women. I'm sure there's women out there that don't, that's just not me" (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023). In other words, Reba explained that women are asked to shed, gain, and change identities and are asked to do that more frequently than men in our patriarchal society.

Independence and Personal Values. Seeing her institution become more conservative has led Tina to wrestle with whether her institution is the right place for her in the context of her own value system. In Interview 2, she stated, "So this was kind of an epiphany moment, like, "Is this the place for me?" And I'm still assessing that" (Tina, June 1, 2023). This example came out of a time when her institution attempted to roll back birth control and other gender-related health care for staff and faculty. As a U.S. Citizen and immigrant, Tina described placing a high value on the rights that she is afforded in the U.S. and that she believes that U.S. citizens are lucky to have. This point of experience makes seeing rights get stripped away very difficult for her. Later in the interview, she reflected on the differences between freedoms in Palestine and the U.S.:

> And I come from Palestine, and I don't know if you know where Palestine is, but Palestine has direct conflict with Israel, and then Palestine is Israeli occupied. And so you don't have your own freedoms. We don't have the same ability to walk down the street like we do here in the US. It's occupied, and the people of Palestine are oppressed. So when we immigrated to the United States, I was young, but I was there long enough to see a lot and to hurt a lot by what I saw. (Tina, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

Thus, these experiences plus her mother's high values of independence and freedom encouraged Tina to always advocate and fight for what's right. These values of independence trickle into all areas of her life and are an important aspect of Tina's authenticity.

   Finding Personal Leadership Traits. For Grace, it has helped her find her own sense of authenticity by discovering her personal leadership values. In Interview 1, she talked extensively about how she values civility, respect, and egalitarianism in her interactions with others.

> So I would also try to empower every person in the department to grow. And one thing I would definitely not do, and this is something I learned from a nursing mentor, that you don't divide people into support staff or nursing staff or nurse educators or whatever. You say to everyone that we have different professional, educational and personal experiences. We are one group, so we celebrate one group. (Grace, Interview 1, May 5, 2023)

Grace believes that not having a system of ins and outs cultivates the best workplace culture. This belief also aligns with her value of wanting to advocate for others who might be in a lower status position:

> So it's just, I think actually because I started finally accepting things, it's also given me the tools not to put up with any BS, whether it's me or somebody else. So I consider myself an advocate. I also learned that if you don't stand up and advocate for yourself, no one else will either. (Grace, Interview 1, May 5, 2023)

In this way, Grace has found the confidence to advocate for what she sees as right, allowing herself to be authentic to her true values at the same time. As Grace has begun to grow as a leader, she has mentally conceptualized a category of ideal leadership traits. She strongly believes that being a leader isn't a matter of ego. "Because being a leader is not an ego trip. I mean, you, we know there are leaders who do have a major ego trip. But

if you are like that, then you're not a good leader" (Grace, Interview 3, June 20, 2023).

Instead, she believes that being a leader is a matter of seeing other people as human

beings, respecting them, and maintaining a respectful work environment.

> If you see people as human beings, if you respect them, if you try to do the best that you can, if you own up your mistakes and not just dump them on everybody else, if you try to grow people, and also this is something I said to someone, I appreciate you trying to help me. That's why I also feel it's on me to try to help you to help me if it makes sense. To me that's huge. So that's not all of it, but that's partly how I define myself as a leader. And value everybody. Be respectful to everybody. Don't allow any kind of ageism or any kind of BS going on. It doesn't matter who it's coming from. The only way you can have a good group is if any kind of nonsense that comes up. It doesn't matter from whom frankly, it really doesn't. It needs to be stopped. (Grace, Interview 3, June 20, 2023)

In this way, Grace's strong beliefs have informed her sense of what good leadership

should look like.

Confidence Building Strategies

Half of the study participants spoke of strategies that have been effective at

building their confidence during this part of their identity construction journey. Being

bold, jumping in feet first, and fake it until you make it are the strategies that will be

discussed in this section.

Being Bold. Nicole has built herself up as a leader by being bold, noticeable, and

novel in her decisions. In Interview 3, she discussed how she can get away with flying in

the face of tradition due to the ever-changing nature of IT:

> I will say following norms has not been something that I always have subscribed to or done. Sometimes I fly in the face of tradition and that has worked best for my unit or organization. Not all the time because there are times that, higher ed, we move a bit slower. But in IT sometimes you gotta move fast and you have to take on those challenges. And so I feel that, I'm not saying that Nicole always rocks the boat, but if they need people to kind of volunteer to go first for a transition or we're gonna switch over from Skype to Teams or something like

that, I have volunteered our units to do some of those things. Because I knew we could, but also because I wanted to be bold and be, not a forefront, but be kind of a leader in terms of how things were perceived. (Nicole, Interview 3, June 13, 2023)

Nicole also mentioned that an added benefit of this style is being able to "take the punches early" (Interview 3, June 13, 2023). What she means by this is that by trying a new thing and figuring out the failure points early, you place yourself ahead of the curve by giving extra time to figure out any necessary solutions. This methodology also aligns with Nicole's personal desire to be bold. She reflected on the advice that she would give her younger self and stated, "I think something that would be helpful for her to know, I would say young self, continue to be bold and believe in yourself" (Nicole, Interview 3, June 13, 2023). In this way, Nicole perceived being that being bold is an asset towards one's career. She also described using bold strategies in her communication style that make her stand out in interactions with peers when she is trying to assert her dominance.

> When I'm interacting with men primarily, a lot in IT that happens, when I wanna assert my dominance, I usually will make sure that my voice is heard. I'm not a soft speaker in terms of tone, but I will elevate my voice, not necessarily to, cause I have a low register, but I might make it higher pitched, not like super high, but a little higher pitched and louder to make sure that they know that I'm talking right now, how's everybody doing, are we great? And so like I may come up at a higher pitch level when I am wanting to make sure that they're understanding that I mean what I'm saying, so. (Nicole, Interview 3, June 13, 2023)

So, rather than shying away or turning inward, Nicole described getting louder and higher pitched as a strategy to secure attention.

Jumping in Feet First. One thing that has been helpful to Tiffany's confidence and self-building has been getting past the feeling that she's not ready for a new and scary opportunity.

> There were a couple of opportunities that there were available maybe five or six years ago, and I didn't talk to the right people at the time. I thought that my boss was just speaking for me. I didn't do the training that I needed, I didn't go out and try harder to do it because I thought for sure that the position that was available, those people would just eat me alive. Or I would fail miserably and I just couldn't handle that. It was, at the time, like, "No, I'm just not ready yet. I'm not ready yet, I'm not ready yet. I don't already have that experience." But the thing is, you can't get that experience without trying and going to do it. (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023)

In addition to being willing to jump in feet first, Tiffany also emphasized the importance of continuing to grow. She described the ease of stopping growing as a trap that we can't fall into, and that we need to continue to grow as leaders. Tiffany ended Interview 3 by suggesting that the fear of changing and growing is what keeps people down:

> We shouldn't be so afraid to move, and change, and grow. And I know that's very difficult, but that's the only other advice that I have heard from people that I was shocked when I heard it, and now I understand. (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023)

Even though change and growth and movement can be scary, in Tiffany's perspective, they are necessary to feel fully alive and actualized in who you are.

Similarly, for Grace, she has had to learn to stop questioning herself and to simply move forward into unknown opportunities. Her partner has been helping her with this:

> So, 'cause I can be honest with her, you know? I can, "Hey, like should I even do this?" I mean, you know, every time I do it, I think, "Should I even do this?" She's like, "Stop that," you know? She's very direct. (Grace, Interview 1, May 5, 2023)

In this way, gaining confidence has also included a journey toward self-acceptance for Grace.

Fake It Until You Make It. One area in which Tiffany but has had to use a "fake it until you make it" approach has been acting like an extrovert.

> I hundred percent am an introvert at heart. And for many years I completely embraced introvert. You know, there were days where I sat in my office for eight hours, didn't talk to a single person. Sat in my office, did my work, got up, left. I didn't talk to people for a while. And then one day I decided I wanted to be in management and that a manager can't act like that. They have to create relationships. They have to care about people, which the introvert in me just wholly rolls her eyes at that whole thing, you know, caring about people and listening to people. And it was just, that's not me. That wasn't me for years and years. But once I realized who I wanted to be and the position I wanted to be in, I knew what I had to do. So that's what I started doing. (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

Therefore, Tiffany decided that it was in the best interests of her career to "fake it" by acting like an extrovert. What she did not expect was that faking it would turn into the real thing:

> I started faking the whole caring about people thing. Until eventually I did, you know? Now I do actually care about listening to people and their story and making sure that they're taking care of themselves, and taking the time to talk to people instead of just being annoyed that they were bothering me. (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

In this way, incorporating extroverted behaviors into her leadership style created an identity shift within Tiffany that allowed her to find her passion for working with people.

Coping with Challenges

Most participants discussed difficulties and challenges that they experienced with constructing their leadership identities. In this section, I will explore how these women faced the challenges of a chilly climate, the ambiguity of identity work, and what happened when being authentic created tensions.

The Challenges of a Chilly Climate. Grace reflected on how imposter syndrome has been a hurdle for her in her journey to gaining confidence and finding authenticity.

She spoke about how challenging imposter syndrome is, and how it's important to realize

that you cannot be perfect:

> I mean it's difficult. It's especially difficult if you are battling that [imposter] syndrome, you cannot show yourself. But I'm learning not to do it anymore. Not to stick your finger into every hole, honestly. So that was really good feedback from someone I didn't know. Just reading that article and that really jumped out for me. You are professional, you're knowledgeable, you're not gonna know everything, you shouldn't worry about proving yourself every minute. (Grace, Interview 2, May 30, 2023)

These feelings of imposter syndrome are certainly not helped by the unsupportive

environment of her department.

> On a local level, I don't feel quite supported just because of this false support staff versus leader dynamic. So there, I can tell you for sure. Frankly it's not a question I would raise with my boss just because I don't feel comfortable doing it. That I want to transition into a leadership role. (Grace, Interview 2, May 30, 2023)

Unfortunately, this chilly climate is coupled with disrespect and condescension from

peers and leaders alike, making it very difficult for Grace to feel like she has any real

opportunity to grow.

> Okay, so my boss sends out a message, well thank you to our support staff, blah blah blah. So then a few people say thank you, one person very condescendingly, "Your efforts are appreciated." I'm reading this like, really? We're not your support staff. Even though my boss as well but really we are not. We're all supporting , right? Okay. So then one person emails me back and we work well together. She's a responsive team lead and all that. She says, I know your title is not quite administrative and I appreciate all these things that you do, but to me you're still an administrator and thank you for answering those check support emails. So what are you gonna do with something like this? You're gonna throw up a fuss? You need to stay civil, respectful, and accept the thanks. (Grace, Interview 2, May 30, 2023)

In these ways, Grace has felt that her institution is a difficult and unsupportive

environment where she is not able to grow as a leader. This realization has made her find

other ways to grow on her own without her department, such as taking online courses.

One thing that was damaging to some of Tiffany's early attempts at self-building as a leader was a toxic climate at her former institute. Her attempts to suggest change were poorly received, and her suggestions would either be skipped over or met with abuse:

> And the team that I was on were all men. I was in my early 20s and they were all over age 45. They had been working together for a very long time. And when I said that something needed to be done, they just kinda looked at me like I was speaking another language. It was so weird. It was so weird. And then they'd just kind of skip over it like I hadn't said anything. And then if I kept pushing it, one of them would come in the office and actually yell at me. It was so odd. (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023)

She felt very stifled in this climate since she knew what kind of response she would receive if she attempted to lead in any small way. Now in her current institution, where the climate is much more welcoming and inclusive, she has had the opportunity to try more strategies as a leader.

The Ambiguity of Identity Work. Reba has done a lot of identity work in considering her social persona and status in the larger context of her organization. Reba remarked that she is often unsure of which persona to put on during personal conversations at work:

> For the most part, I wanna feel like I'm approachable and they can come and talk to me about things without it being about my personal life, right? I want it to be about them. And so sometimes that's kind of a boundary where I don't know which persona to put on, and mother is an easy one, coworker, peer, supervisor, or as some of my employees may call me boss lady, you know what I mean, we can cut up and joke about it. (Reba, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

She also commented that a mother role perspective often creeps into her persona at work since she has kids, possibly because that is a dominant identity in her life. Talking more

about these different personas or selves, Reba reflected on how it made her feel like she

had to be a different persona when she transitioned into her most recent role:

> In this role, I didn't feel like I was faking it, but I felt like I was being a different persona because my other job was I was managing people's computers, I was managing their expectations, but I wasn't managing people. And when I came to this director role, all of a sudden I was like, I have to command a room and I can do that 'cause I like to talk and I like to be upfront, but I'm doing it now in such a way that I represent a group, not just myself. It's not just my own views. And so at that point I was like, I don't wanna be fake up here. I want to be real and how do I present myself? (Reba, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

In this way, Reba felt like she had to be slightly performative to be the person who she

wanted to be in her work role. On a similar note, she mentioned that it was extremely

important for her to try to fit in for the first 6-8 months of her current position.

> Or how do I make someone feel more engaged or whatever it was that maybe I learned from that first six to eight months of trying to make sure that I actually felt like I fit in? So maybe a more of a fit in than a fake it. I wanted to make sure that I was bringing the right skills and that I fit into what they needed from me. Not that I was trying to be someone that I wasn't. (Reba, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

So, Reba experienced a brief period where she struggled to bring her authentic self into

alignment with the expectations that others had for her in her role, which lasted until she

was able to fully negotiate those two things.

Tensions Created by Authenticity. At times, Tina has felt tensions at work by

being her authentic self. She reflects on her propensity for profanity:

> I have a potty mouth, so that's something I struggle with a little bit, but not really because I don't care. I've reached a point where I'm beyond the filtered age, if that makes sense. So yeah, I don't think there's a difference. It's me, this is what you get. Like there's no. . . . Truth is coming out. (Tina, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

Even though this is a line that she rides, she stated that she is often comfortable in just not

having a filter due to her comfort in her role and stubbornness. However, she is not

stubbornly authentic in all areas of her personality. In one example, Tina felt the need to

hide her authentic self from her boss due to a differing leadership style.

> But I wasn't my authentic self because I felt like she didn't appreciate that, if that makes sense. We're different personalities and the way I did things was completely different than the way she did things. And she just didn't understand my capacity or my mental reasoning or whatever for things. And so that was a struggle for her because she was coming at it from a different perspective. (Tina, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

So, she didn't want to put herself out there because she didn't want to go unappreciated.

Tina will also tamper down parts of her identity, like her culture/religious beliefs. Tina

stated:

> So being Arab, because Arab, Middle Eastern, that was, again, 9/11 was very, very, very detrimental and very harmful to us as a group, as a society, but are there times where I feel like I have to tamper some of my identities, like it really depends. (Tina, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

In this way, these challenges can make her feel like she must be different than her true

self for the sake of societal acceptance.

Support Systems

Finally, most participants discussed the various support systems that have helped

to make them feel validated during their leadership identity construction journeys. This

validation can come from different social structures, from the leadership in one's own

organization to peers and colleagues to one's own family.

Top-Down Validation and Acceptance. Kaya spoke about several leaderlike

traits that the leaders around her noticed when she was early on in her career:

And then another thing that has stood up, and it's just the nature is when you're into big discussions, somebody needs to summarize what was said or what the next things are. And I just tended to always just do that. So, I was, you know, I tried to make sure that I incorporated what all the different people said, so that everybody felt like they were acknowledged and they were heard. And I think that was recognized by the leaders, because I was, I had got a reputation of being really good at facilitating conversations and making sure that the salient points weren't lost. (Kaya, Interview 3, June 19, 2023)

In this way, Kaya's confidence and sense of self as a leader was able to grow when she was noticed, validated, and recognized by leadership. This was the first sign where Kaya began to realize that she was being accepted, but Kaya knew that she was truly accepted as a leader by others in her department on a different occasion. When others began coming to her with questions, she felt like she was truly part of the group:

And I think because I asked questions, and I was interested in how people were feeling about a thing, and I was good at putting myself in their shoes, and I just operated that way. And so, then I would start having people come to me and ask me questions, and, you know, okay, "What did you hear in that meeting? Because I don't think I heard it correctly," kind of thing. (Kaya, Interview 3, June 19, 2023)

In this way, Kaya experienced top-down self-building in her role. Once leadership accepted her, she was able to get a larger role, and then others were able to start accepting her in that role after she modeled open and empathetic leadership behaviors.

For Tiffany, many elements have gone into growing and creating her own personal leadership identity. She reflected on her original opportunity to get into IT, which came from being the only female on her team who wanted to learn a new computing system:

So, we were moving over to an all-new computing system. So I, for the budget office, being the technical person in the budget office, went over to learn it and I was the only female in any of the classes that was doing it there. So the manager that was putting it on, his name was Rick. He identified me and he's like, "Wow,

that's really cool that this girl is doing it." Also, it probably didn't help that I had bright red hair. I had been dyeing my hair fairly regularly. So then when he had a position come up that was client support, he literally reached out to me. It's not something I would've done probably, even though I was wanting to get into technical support. But he reached out to me and said, "Please apply for my job." So I did and got it. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

Like it was for Kaya, this top-down validation was also a helpful boost to Tiffany's confidence at an early stage of her career. It has also been confidence boosting for Tiffany when her bosses have given her the space and trust to lead.

So Cindy, my boss, she believed in my ability to get things done. I think without that, I don't think I would've made it. So it started with her saying, "You know what, you've got this, you can figure it out." And then giving me the leeway to do that, which was very difficult for her because she was definitely a micromanager. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

Finally, Tiffany reflected on the impact of strong female leaders on her leadership identity. She stated, "I think a lot of my leadership identity is because I had strong females leading me" (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023). In this way, these strong female leaders paved the way by giving Tiffany a template for what good female leadership could look like.

Family as a Support System. Tina reflected on the importance of her family's support and involvement in her life.

And so going real quickly, going back to answering that question, support system at home was pivotal in my leadership growth, and like I said, nickname is the general here and there, even this morning we're planning, my nephews getting married and I got a call like about bouquets and I was like, "Just buy the bouquets, I mean, what's so hard about bouquets?" And they're like, "We need you; we need you to lead us in like this cause. (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

In this way, Tina is perceived as a leader among her own family, and their support and perception of her as a leader was key to her leadership development. She is clearly very

grateful and loving to her family, and reflected again on their special relationship later in the interview, "I think I'm spoiled because . . . and I say this, I wish for every person to get like someone like my spouse and my children who support my ridiculousness the way I deserve to be supported" (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023). In this way, she described feeling blessed to have had a supportive family who helped her along the way as she gained her confidence and built up her leader identity at work.

Being Seen by Others. Another key to Reba's identity confidence is allowing others to see where she is coming from:

> And I think that's where my personal and my work life cross is because I'm vulnerable in a lot of ways like that. And I want them to know, "Hey, I'm a single mom. Hey, I have all these other identities that come to the table when I'm having a conversation with you. I'm not cold, I'm not heartless. Yes, we have deliverables, and all these things are important, but I want you to know that I am really listening to who you are and how can I help you? (Reba, Interview 2, May 31, 2023)

In this way, she believes that others benefit when there is a mutual sharing of who we are on a personal level in the workplace.

Analysis of Theme Four

Underscoring Theme Four, *Self-Building and Developing Authenticity*, is the messy, gray-area process of becoming that we must all experience as we matriculate in life. At the core of this theme is a thread of self-learning: learning who we are and how to be. The participants of this study reveal that this is partially a process of uncovering an innate core identity and partially finding traits that mesh so well with that authentic identity that we incorporate them into ourselves. For example, Reba and Grace discussed trying on traits after noticing leadership traits in a person they admire. They like the

process of being able to try these out and keep what works for them. However, there is also a core self that must be embraced. Tiffany discussed how embracing her core self and her own womanhood were necessary in her journey of self-acceptance.

Participants also discussed identity separation and how they felt about blurred lines or lines of separation between the personal and professional. Kaya and Tiffany felt that they were happier and became more successful in their careers once they started blurring the lines between the personal and the professional. Both of those participants indicated that they kept the personal and professional separate when they were earlier on in their career, and that they began to play with blurring their lines as they gained more confidence and became confident leaders in their organizations. Perhaps because she is still early career along the leadership track, Grace described a preference for keeping her personal and work identities separate. More research would need to be done to determine if there is a correlation between identity separation and leadership.

Identity building also includes the ways that we want ourselves to be seen by others. Participants spoke of dressing (clothes and makeup) as a representation of self, which connects with the larger concept of image management. They also discussed how they had to reform the identity that they show to others after times of personal upheaval. For example, Kaya reflected on how she needed to alter the stories that she told about herself after she separated from her ex-husband. The participants also described the way that they coped with identity building challenges, which were often things outside of their control. For example, external factors like a chilly organizational climate were discussed,

as well more internal factors like the feelings of ambiguity caused by identity work and the tensions that it creates when we begin to feel when we are our authentic selves.

Considering these challenges, participants discussed confidence building strategies that emboldened them to continue making progress in their journeys. Things like being bold, jumping in feet first, and "fake it until you make it" were applied differently by each participant. They found that during this process that support systems were important, whether they were their leadership, family, or peers at work. And it makes sense that that support would be needed, since this journey of self-discovery and vulnerability can even make the most resilient people feel exposed and defenseless. However, as we learn to embrace our true selves, we discover the true strength of our full potential, bolstering our confidence and adding the final brushstrokes to the beautiful portrait of our authentic selves.

Solidifying Leadership Perspectives and Practices

Finally, Theme Five, *Solidifying Leadership Perspectives and Practices*, emerged from the experiences of all participants. This theme encapsulates all the ways in which the participants pull their constructed leadership identities together into a cohesive whole, including the various practices and perspectives that solidified because of their growth as leaders. This section includes a discussion of how these women solidify their leadership identities, their perspectives on survival in the workplace and resilience, and how they enact leadership in practice.

Solidifying Leadership Identities

All participants discussed experiences of solidifying their leadership identities in the context of who they are in their organization. This section includes a discussion of how participants experienced living with chosen/given and visible/invisible identities, seeing balance as unrealistic, feeling like more than a monolith, having a relational approach to leadership, and being intentional and having integrity.

Chosen/Given and Visible/Invisible Identities. Nicole described her chosen field and how that has impacted the social construction of her leadership identity. She begins by describing that higher education as her chosen field:

> So I always definitely identify as higher ed, I put it in there because even though I have had jobs outside of higher ed, that's the field that I've chosen to stick with. And so this education field is something that is near and dear to me. And so I also keep higher education as one of the areas and arenas that I stick with. (Nicole, Interview 1, May 9, 2023)

In this way, since higher education is near and dear to Nicole, she has incorporated it into her own sense of identity. This is meaningful because Nicole also talked about visible/invisible identities and discussed how some visible identities can't be taken away. As part of our known identity, what we choose and what others see are important because they put what is important to us on public display.

> And I definitely understand that a leader is always on stage and there are parts of your characteristic that you can always display. But I tell people it's like acting. There's some things, you're never gonna be able to change your identity, but sometimes I will leverage other parts of my identity in certain situations. (Nicole, Interview 1, May 9, 2023)

In this way, Nicole espoused that our known identities are intentional choices, and described that she will take the extra additional step of leaning into certain ones when it is

advantageous to that situation. She articulated that that is not about changing who she is,

but it's more like adapting or adjusting based on one's audience:

> However, if I'm in different arenas I can adjust to how that needs to be perceived so that I am more accommodating or more approachable. I can definitely do that in both ways, whether it be talking more with more urban speak versus like more professional speak, but I don't say that I'm changing my identity. I am trying to adapt to that environment. There are times cause I can't say, oh, let me make myself more, less female or less gender. I mean I am what I am, but yes, I have had to make certain adjustments of, hmm, I wanna listen more and talk less in this situation so I can understand what the environment is before kind of raising and sharing my opinion. (Nicole, Interview 1, May 9, 2023)

So, adjusting one's identity in certain social situations could be likened to changing the

volume on a radio station, or even changing channels.

Balance as Unrealistic. Tina discussed how she has struggled to achieve balance

between her personal and professional lives as she has constructed her leadership

identity.

> So being American, going back to that identity, and I know we circle, but being American, being Palestinian, being Arab, being Muslim, being a female, being a mom, being a wife, a sister, friend, whatever, that all comes together, and they don't always align, and they always don't... There's not always harmony. And so how do you find the balance? And if anyone says there's a balance, they're lying, they're lying their asses off. There's no balance. There's no balance between work life and home life. There's no balance being a woman leader. You have to make sacrifices and gotta figure out what those sacrifices are that you're willing to make, right? (Tina, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

In this way, Tina believes that balance is not always possible.

More than a Monolith. Another big piece of Nicole's leadership identity is

wanting to be seen by others as an individual and not have assumptions made about her.

In talking about how she doesn't want to play into stereotypes that anyone might have

about her, Nicole stated:

> Because stereotypes aren't bad, it's just that sometimes they're incomplete. And so I really wanna make sure that it's okay because some people are gonna have things that they're like, oh, she's gonna probably say this because of X. And I'm like, hmm, perhaps, however, it's not the total story until you hear directly from me. So I don't want people to think like, oh, she's a woman. Here's the monolith story that all women are gonna share because that's not the case. However, yeah, it may be the majority of women may say something like me, but I am not just women. So here's what I said. (Nicole, Interview 1, May 9, 2023)

In this way, Nicole illustrated that she wants to be perceived as an equal and an individual. It makes her want to disengage when others make assumptions about her before she speaks since she places such a high value on her own individuality.

Relational Approach to Leadership. Supporting others (both employees and customers) is a huge part of Reba's leadership identity. First, she described supporting employees, and specifically how she supports them by taking the role of follower to give them the chance to grow.

> I think you have to allow other people the chance to lead. And so I think it's perfectly acceptable to be a leader and be a follower. I like to be the fly on the wall in some of the meetings. So I have really good employees who invite me to their meetings just so I can be a part of it. They're usually gracious and say, "Reba, do you have anything to add?" But it's their meeting, they're commanding the meeting. Sometimes they'll pull me aside and say after, hey, do you have any hints or suggestions? They'll send me emails, say, hey, can you read through this before I send it off? And I think that goes to their character and mine that we can work together, and that I just wanna be supportive of their needs. I'm not trying to micromanage them, I just wanna be able to help and listen. And I think that makes you better teammates and better team members when you do that. You need to be a follower sometimes. (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

Much like how she is valuing employee needs with this adaptable leadership-followership dynamic, she also described how one of her focuses in her role is valuing customer needs:

> And that [what her institution was lacking] was focus towards the customer, and that our faculty as our customer, and our staff as our customer, as well as the

students in the classroom, they're paying to come and learn, but we need to make sure the technology is working for those who are teaching the courses or those who are supporting students to get their grades in and get the classes that they need. And that was my role to try and help them. So moving to Central IT, I felt like I could do that on more of a university level to help all the colleges, and I could help to set precedents and priority in a way that said, we care about when you call in and have problems or incidents or issues. (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

In this way, Reba applied an ethic of care to her customer service approach, creating positive relationships and goodwill in the process. Kaya's leadership identity also includes a similar relational perspective of leadership. She discussed how it is key to enable your team, peers, and even your leadership to make the right choices.

I would say one of the things that I have found in terms of like in a hierarchy, so as a leader, right, you want to enable your team and you believe and you have trust in them, but you also wanna do whatever you can to enable your boss and their leadership to realize the things that they want to do as well, right? So showing support for, and that means not only like, yes, we can do this, but it's also like, have we thought about this other perspective, right? Making sure that they're making the most informed decisions, because one, you're gonna be impacted anyway, but then their success is also my success, and all the way down and all the way up kind of thing. So I would say it's not just about your team, it's also about your leaders themselves, and across too, the other leaders in the organization. Because if everybody's leading well, then like everybody's doing well. So I'd say you have a responsibility to kind of distribute it wherever you can to help your colleagues and your boss to realize the things that they want to do as well. (Kaya, Interview 1, May 4, 2023)

In this way, she described leadership as an artful combination of managing up, sideways, and down. When working with people in these different roles, Kaya has found that being human and using humor have been authentic traits for her leadership identity.

I mean, I have that curiosity about patients and stuff, so I do pick up things, so I can actually somewhat pick up their language, and I make fun of myself too. It's like, well, you know, like, all right, explain it to me like the noob I am, what does this mean kind of thing. And I think humor's a big part of being a leader too, the work that we do can be a slog sometimes, and you don't have fun, it's just going to drag you down. I mean, we're working with these people every day, 8 to 10

hours a day, if you don't have some fun, and enjoyment, and connection while doing it, you're not gonna wanna do it for very long. (Kaya, Interview 1, May 4, 2023)

Grace's relational approach to leadership is centered around treating others with respect and wanting to collaborate with them. In describing her collaborative identity, she stated, "And so I do say to people, a part of my identity is trying to be as collaborative as possible and work with others. We're all in it together" (Grace, Interview 2, May 30, 2023). This desire to treat others with respect likely comes out of Grace's experiences being disrespected, and later in Interview 2 she described how she has learned not to make assumptions about people because of the assumptions have been made about her.

So I said, so what I learned from that is this, don't question why people are there. If they're there, they're there for a reason. Your job as in a class is to help them get what they can get out of this class. So that's part of my identity, being respectful. Not assuming that somebody should or should not be somewhere. You never know, you should not assume. But it's part of my personal identity. (Grace, Interview 2, May 30, 2023)

In Interview 3, Grace reaffirmed that not making assumptions about others is a part of who she is. She stated, "But that really is the thing that will get you further I think, if you don't make assumptions about people because those can be pernicious and they can be very dangerous" (Grace, Interview 3, June 20, 2023). In addition to respect and collaboration, a final core leadership value that Grace has integrated into her leadership identity is empathy. Reflecting on the importance of this treat, she stated, "And do care about others. Nobody's asking you to go to parties with them or anything like that, but try to be a human being. It's also part of it. I mean, try to see where they're coming from" (Grace, Interview 2, May 30, 2023). In this way, Grace revealed that she has a leadership identity that is centered around being humanistic and egalitarian. Similarly, Kaya

observed that a leader's job is enabling, trusting, and believing in people. She said, "I would like to say that my role as a leader, I truly believe our job is to enable those that we're leading to do the best job they can do" (Kaya, Interview 1, May 4, 2023). Kaya proceeded to describe how the next step to enabling people to succeed is by capitalizing on their strengths and clearing roadblocks.

> Like I'm not a big fan of that [making people improve on their weaknesses], I'm way much into the StrengthsFinders to capitalize on strengths, 'cause no one can do it all anyway. And just like get the stuff out of the way so that they can actually accomplish what they were aiming to accomplish, and make sure that they know I have their back. (Kaya, Interview 1, May 4, 2023)

So, she empowers her people by leveraging what they are already good at and making them feel valued through those strengths. Kaya has also leveraged her own strengths to grow in her career. An example of one personal strength she has leveraged is curiosity:

> And I just had a natural curiosity to figure out how stuff worked on applications, and so that enabled me to help others figure out what was going on and stuff like that. And so I used that as I got into consulting and that I had a curiosity about the different applications that we were using and we were rolling out for customers and such like that. So I was able to capitalize upon that interest and curiosity, along with I just know how to organize stuff. (Kaya, Interview 1, May 4, 2023)

In this way, Kaya had personal experience with capitalizing on her own strengths before she began applying this approach as a leader.

Being Intentional, Having Integrity. A key part of Tiffany's leadership identity is integrity, and she explained that it is important for her team to know that she is a leader with integrity. Reflecting on what she has needed to succeed as a woman leader in IT, she offered the following reflection:

> I have no problem with it, with being female and being out there. You kind of have to, you know, be ready to be loud, I guess, and alone a little. And yeah, I do agree with having to have, have a team that believes in you, that knows that you

> can get things done. If you're gonna be, if you have to be loud in order to do it, have a team that knows that even though you're loud, you'll back it up and you'll be the person that goes to bat for them and they will for you. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

She has also learned that being intentional with communication is critical to being a good leader. Reflecting on something she learned in an Educause IT Managers training, she stated:

> They taught me so much about, you know, making sure that, you know, make sure you have intention when you are leading people, don't just do it just because that's, you know, somebody gets a response and you expect to respond. No, you have to think about what you're saying, what it could mean, how somebody could take it and then think about it, you know, think if that's what you're going for, you know. So it takes a lot more time to communicate with people during difficult situations. You know, make sure you know what your goal is and make sure the communication that you're going to send is going to accomplish that goal. So that is a lot more work and it takes me a lot more time to respond to people because of that. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

In this way, Tiffany felt that communication is more challenging now than before she was a manager.

Forming Perspectives on Survival and Resilience

Most participants discussed their perspectives on navigating survival and enacting resilient leadership in their roles. This section includes a discussion of the combat analogies for the workplace, how they manage discontent, a "just keep swimming" analogy, how they stay aware of pitfalls, how negative experiences influence their leadership, and strategies for growth in adverse conditions.

Combat Analogies in the Workplace. In this first section, I will describe how participants used battleground and hunting analogies to convey their experiences in the workplace.

The Workplace as a Battleground. When reflecting on times when she hasn't

been treated with respect in the workplace, Tina used a battle analogy to describe that

experience.

> You're fighting this battle. Your heart is in the right place, your direction is going
> in the right place, but then the barrier is someone who is not seeing your capacity
> and your capability because they've pigeonholed you or whatever their perception
> is. (Tina, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

In this way, the very act of constructing a leadership identity can feel like a battle when

one is negotiating in a challenging social context. In Interview 3, she reflected more on

what navigating this battle is like when your boss is your barrier.

> And so how then do you navigate that when your boss is your barrier to growth or
> development? And it's just you do it smart and you find ways to really, what is
> important for them, make sure you fulfill that and give that to them and what
> makes them feel ratified or whatever, and then you do what you need to do. (Tina,
> June 6, 2023)

In this way, Tina has grown as a leader by learning how to overcome the limitations of

her own leadership. She has learned that you need to fulfill your obligations with a

difficult leader and then put the rest of your energy into making sure you are fulfilling

your own growth needs. Similarly to Tina, Tiffany also described the workplace as a

battleground by using a war paint analogy to describe the makeup she wears to work.

When she is wearing makeup that increases her sense of personal confidence, Tiffany

stated that it makes her feel as if she's wearing war paint (Interview 2, June 1, 2023). The

fact that she used this analogy implies that the workplace can feel like a battleground.

Becoming a Huntress. In the context of her gender, Tina has also realized the

necessity of strategizing for what she wants in her career.

Right now, yeah, I kinda think about it and I'm like, where am I gonna go next? And then who's gonna be the competition and what do I have to do to be like, my mother says, number one? What is it that will take? And looking at the prep work and the brand of me, what is my branding, what is my sale, and so making sure that's solid before taking the next step. And it's a behavior we as females do versus the males, like at one point it's a risk that you take and I have to like, am I ready for that risk? (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

Tina stated that this forethought and strategizing is more necessary for women than men due to the gender factor. She likened career advancement to becoming a lioness:

Yeah, and then the next, I think having to get out of that comfort zone to really start that hunt, and it's the best way I can describe it, it's like you're on a hunt and being that female lioness where you're bringing home bread and bringing home the little zebra or whatever, but it's just, am I ready for that? And I don't, and that's part of it. (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

This huntress analogy shows the way that Tina has realized that she must act to get what she wants in her career.

Managing Discontent. Tina has learned to manage her discontent with her university's choices.

And I know I can go in and say my truth and it may not agree with what's happening, and especially like I mentioned it way earlier in one of my meeting, my discussions with you, it's like this push and move towards like a more conservative Catholicism, is really not something that I'm enjoying, but it doesn't mean that I can't oralize my discontent, but it has to be done in a way where it's not harmful or hurtful and minding my words, but still being truthful. And so really making sure that, thinking before you're speaking, but you get what you see. (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

In this way, Tina learned that she can speak her truth, but that she must do so in a smart, strategic way that is considerate of her career. Similarly, Tina also reflected on having the wisdom to decide if something is a hill that's worth dying on:

Like I'm one of those people that you're just gonna get whatever and I really, really mean it and I always say, I have no regrets, I said what I said and I'm gonna move forward and challenging some of the norms here and other places, I think

it's one of the things, the strategies that I deliberately choose them, but I have to choose my fights, like is this the hill I wanna die on? And it's usually when we're working on something with faculty or administration and it's like, is this something that is worth? Like how valuable is this time? And meaning me, like my team, my life, my world, and it's not just, I don't mean it me personally, but the whole shebang or how is this gonna be better for this institution, versus what it looks like now. (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

In these moments, Tina is deciding if something is a hill worth dying on not only for her, but for the institution as a whole through the lens of her value system.

Just Keep Swimming. For Nicole, growing as a professional and constructing her leadership identity has included learning how to reframe the negative. Nicole explained how she coped during a rough period in her undergraduate life when she had to have a lung removed and dealt with her grandma dying in the same semester.

And this is, you know, I'm 18 and young. And so at this point I'm just like, what's gonna happen to my scholarships? I worry about all these things, and I just had to keep swimming. And so this was this idea of, I came back to school the next semester. My scholarships were still in place. I was able to graduate on time, you know, do all these things. Physically I was like how am I gonna survive with one lung? I teach Taekwondo. I run often. I still stay very physically active. These are things where I was like, I'm not gonna let this one thing stop me. I'm just gonna just keep swimming, just keep swimming. (Nicole, Interview 1, May 9, 2023)

By using the "just keep swimming" mantra during these traumatic experiences, Nicole taught herself that she won't let things stop her and she will always have the power to keep going. Nicole suggested that this attitude has permeated her mindset at work and has allowed her to become more resilient and tough.

Staying Aware of Pitfalls. Another important aspect of Tiffany's leadership identity has been making the intentional decision to not remain blissfully unaware of potential pitfalls and problems that may be on the horizon. Tiffany describing wanting to

know about challenges as soon as possible so that she can address those problems head

on:

> So I would say you do have to have experience to be a leader. You know, you
> have to know what pitfalls there are coming up or that you've seen in the past so
> that you know how to dodge them in the future. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15,
> 2023)

She also described this as a perk of leading and making sure that everyone on your team

is going in the same direction. In describing where her desire to lead comes from, Tiffany

stated:

> Just really from understanding that if we're not all going in the same direction,
> things are gonna fall down and we're gonna forget things and we're gonna miss
> things. And I just wanna help make sure that we don't forget anything, that we
> avoid any problems before they come up. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

In this way, Tiffany illustrated that a leader's insight can be used as a preventative against

potential problems.

The Influence of Negative Experiences. In Interview 3, Grace again discussed

how some of her negative experiences have shaped her leadership identity. First, she

discussed how important it is to give credit where credit is due and to not shift the blame

onto others:

> Give other people, especially if, you know, I've been in many situations where
> credit wasn't given to me, so I resolve that. I don't act this way. You
> acknowledge, you always acknowledge, and you thank your peers and your
> teammates and if you make a mistake, do the best that you can to fix it. Don't,
> you know, don't blame it on somebody else. (Grace, Interview 3, June 20, 2023)

Grace also discussed how her experience with receiving bias from others has made her an

inclusive leader.

> So everybody has different experiences. So I will not speak to anybody else's, but
> I will speak to mine, and I will tell you that there are lots of perceived biases, you

> know, that were aggressive, they're this and they're that. That's garbage. It's not ok for Russian/Soviet Jews to be ambitious, to want to learn, to want to do better? I had a family member who overheard someone say, "you're all like that." Yeah. Whatever. Unless you're willing to generalize like this about every group, drop the subject. But I honestly don't care at this point, because I also know that I would do my best to treat others with respect. (Grace, Interview 3, June 20, 2023)

In other words, Grace's goal as a leader is to be as respectful and civil with others as possible, even though she has experienced many biases herself. She wants those in her orbit to have a better experience than the one that she had.

Strategies for Growth in Adverse Conditions. Participants discussed their strategies for growth in challenging circumstances, including learning to speak up, incorporating a strengths mindset, leaving the comfort zone, and not taking things personally.

Learning to Speak Up. For Kaya, part of her leadership identity is speaking up when she believes in something, even if there are potentially negative consequences. In this example, she described a time when she told someone that their project plan was not a good idea and received negative feedback for that:

> And I escalated it. I'm like, "This is not a good idea. This is not what the institution needs," kind of stuff. And it continued in that fashion. And then part of my feedback was that I didn't know how to take no as an answer. So, and I, to this day, stand by that decision. They've done, you know, several subsequent projects for, like, to try and get visibility into those stakeholders. It's like, yeah. And now, we're replacing that core system, because it doesn't offer visibility into, for other stakeholders. (Kaya, Interview 3, June 19, 2023)

Even though this feedback was damaging to her, Kaya said that she would not have chosen to handle this situation any differently. This shows that for Kaya, integrity and speaking up are a big part of who she is as a leader.

A Strengths Mindset. One of Kaya's core leadership identity beliefs is that there is power in the strengths of who we are:

> I would say just in general, don't apologize for who you are, right? You should never apologize for being a different ethnicity or being a different gender or whatever non-gender you are. Like, there's strength and power in whoever you are, however you are, and figure out what those strengths are and bring it. (Kaya, Interview 3, June 19, 2023)

In this way, Kaya believes that we must lean into our strengths to be successful. In fact, she explained that she wished she had learned this strengths-based approach earlier in her career. Near the end of Interview 3, Kaya reflected on what advice she might have given to her younger self, and she stated, "I would say focus on strengths. I learned that later in life, and I wish I had learned that earlier, focus on strengths and how to elevate others, right?" (Kaya, Interview 3, June 19, 2023).

Leaving the Comfort Zone. Tina also described the importance of coming out of her comfort zone to constructing her leadership identity.

> And that's what these projects, you put yourself out there and everything you do is some type of project, mini or large, and so again, it's coming out of that comfort zone and making sure you're up front and center. And that's kind of my business, that's my job 'cause we're the front line and so we won't do well if we're in the back room, we have... and sometimes it's uncomfortable and you just have to get over that uncomfort. (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

So, with both her job and her identity as a leader at work, she has had to come out of her shell and make the intentional choice to put herself out there.

Not Taking Things Personally. When reflecting on what happens when Tina has to assert herself as a leader, she stated the following:

> Sure, I mean, you get challenged, and have I been told, "Stay in your lane?" Sure, and my response is, "Are you on this bus or are you getting in the way of this bus?" And so are we on the same pathway, are we going in the same direction?

And so yeah, you hear it, and I don't take it personal, it's not, I have to make decisions that I have to make. (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

So, Tina has learned to not take peoples' responses to her decisions personally because she believes in her own good intentions as a leader.

Leadership in Practice

Most participants discussed the ways in which they enact leadership in practice. This section includes a discussion of the ways in which these participants see themselves as storytellers and communicators, the differences between leaders and managers, how they build trust and create influence, how they see gaps and take on leadership, the parallels between teaching and training and leadership, finding a common language, and realizing the power of "I don't know."

Being a Storyteller and Communicator. For Nicole, a large part of her leadership identity is coming across as a storyteller, communicator, and influencer. In Interview 1, she described how one of her hallmarks is being able to successfully communicate and share the story of IT:

> They needed someone that could talk about security and privacy and technical things, but they just needed a communicator. They were like, can you please go talk to the President and tell him why it's so important? Like share the story of IT. (Nicole, Interview 1, May 9, 2023)

This is clearly very important to Nicole, as she speculated that the foundation of leadership is good communication. When asked about the way that she defines good leadership, she again emphasized the communication piece, "But it's really a function of knowing yourself and being very self-aware but also having a vision and being able to communicate that vision very effectively" (Nicole, Interview 1, May 9, 2023). Nicole

sees being able to communicate effectively as one of the main functions of a leader.

Seeing communication as a key part of her leadership identity has also affected how

Nicole sees her role in IT.

> I do that role currently, but in the IT realm, and sometimes you put the IT hat on, but when I go talk to other department heads, they keep thinking of me as the solution IT person. And when I come in, I'm really just a partner. And even though technology may be the tool, I'm looking to just partner and give solutions at that higher level without having just the caveat of what's our tech solution. And so cause sometimes I'm not offering a tech solution. Maybe it's a business solution, maybe it's a, you know, it can be anything. Maybe technology is related, but yeah, so. (Nicole, Interview 1, May 9, 2023)

In this way, she visualized her role as more of a problem solver than just IT, relying on

her communication and strategic thinking skills. Another part of Nicole's leadership

identity is giving back by sharing her story. Referring to the service mindset that was

imparted on her by her service fraternity, Nicole stated:

> And that always came with giving back. And so being able to give back to students, whether it be time management or how can you, you know, do all these things encouraging, I was always able to say, sure, I'll fly out to Texas and talk to them about diversity, equity and inclusion. Or oh I can go to Zoom Rutgers right now and talk to them about that. And so that was part of when I was going to school that I thought, yep, that's just what you do. You also give back when you can. (Nicole, Interview 1, May 9, 2023)

In this way, Nicole has framed the things that she can share with others as a gift.

Differences Between Leaders and Managers. A belief in the difference between

leadership and management underscores Tiffany's leadership identity.

> Okay, so leadership style versus management style. So leadership. Hmm. I very much feel like the people that I lead are smarter than me. So, but that they may not have as much scope as I have. So usually when I try to lead people, I talk to a lot of people, I get a lot of input, I get a lot of finding out what their priorities are and why it's going in a specific direction so that I can make sure that I communicate with everyone else that is doing this. And then we all go together. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

Unlike this differentiation between leadership and management, Tiffany perceived that

leadership and followership are not different entities. To her, they seem to be on the same

spectrum and roles that she can switch between with ease. Describing this phenomenon,

she talked about how she will switch between states of leadership and followership even

during the same project:

> And it's been three weeks and finally I come in, I'm like, "Okay, that was your chance. I'm sorry but I have a deadline on this. This is what I've gathered all your information, this is what we're going to do." They're like, "Okay, that's fine. Manager's made the choice." You have to switch into leadership. And then I take a step back again and like, "Okay, what do you guys think of this? Is this a good choice? Now weigh the pros and cons. Now that I've said this, how does that sound? Okay, now you guys are done. Okay, now I'm going to take what you built and I'm going to give it to everyone else and I'm going to tell everyone else how we're going to use it and I'm gonna make everyone use the things that you guys put together. So then I have to lead again, ensuring all of my team is on the same page, moving in the right direction, making sure that we are all using this same template or this same, you know, and they're setting the priority. This is important because the board of trustees is going to need it next month. I need you to prioritize this over this project, but not this project. You know, so it just transitions into what the team needs at the moment, you know? (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

In this way, being able to seamlessly adapt into a leader or follow depending on the

context is an integral component of Tiffany's leadership identity. Using one more

example to describe how quickly and contextually these roles can shift, Tiffany stated:

> Everything you're doing is always, even when you're a leader, you're still part follower. And even when you're following, you're part leading. You're kind of both all the time. And it can shift, I mean, in the middle of a sentence. And I think that's the way it should be. (Tiffany, Interview 1, May 15, 2023)

So, being a leader or follower is a constantly shifting spectrum that is in greyscale and

not black and white. For Kaya on the other hand, she felt that she shifts into a follower

role when she feels she isn't being valued.

> When I am no longer listened to as a leader and my opinions and my perspectives aren't valued or considered, I have no choice but to move into follower mode, because me just continuing on isn't gonna do anything other than continue to frustrate me. (Kaya, Interview 1, May 4, 2023)

Rather than seeing leadership as a spectrum of peer collaboration like Tiffany, Kaya saw leadership as her default setting and something that she is only forced to switch off in frustrating situations.

Building Trust, Creating Influence. Nicole remarked that one of her strategies as a leader is to build enough trust to influence others in the right direction. She reflected:

> But the other part is being able to communicate that vision. And that's something I think in my leadership role I can do well. So the ability to story tell, to get people to understand what the value add that technology has or what information technology is something that I excel at and I continue to do because technology and IT, it costs money, but people are always willing to invest that money or do other things. They're like, oh, they hear $2 million, and they go, nope. I'm gonna just say no. And I'm like, actually here's why you need to say yes. And let me explain that. So I think in terms of my leadership style, it's really been being very self-aware, being able to communicate, building the trust amongst my colleagues. (Nicole, Interview 1, May 9, 2023)

In this way, she can communicate the reasons for saying yes to stakeholders and influence them in directions that she sees as strategically advantageous. This relationship trust is not a one-way street. Nicole also remarked that she has reciprocal relationships with colleagues who will reach out to her for help and tap her when needed. So, by empowering her colleagues and stakeholders with knowledge, Nicole trusts them to make the right decision. In turn, these people trust Nicole to help and provide knowledge when needed.

Seeing Gaps and Taking on Leadership. Part of Reba's early leadership identity construction involved trying to lead and taking on increased responsibilities before she

was even in a formal leadership role. In Interview 1, she reflected on taking on work that

she saw wasn't being done:

> So I started tracking all inventory for the LMS, just on a spreadsheet. And so for me it was like, I was kind of upset that it wasn't happening the way I thought, because I guess I assumed that in that role, that was her responsibility, and I knew it was mine. In this building that I'm in, it's called the Smith Building, this open floor plan. There was no building manager and I immediately stepped up and said, I'm gonna take that role. And everyone's like, why? And I'm like, 'cause no one's doing it. And look at all these decisions that need to be made that nobody's made. Who buys the copy paper? Who makes sure the kitchen is stocked? Who makes sure that we have the right contracts in the building? You know, all these things. We have to have an emergency plan, all these things. And I just told everyone, I didn't ask, I just told everyone, just send them to me, I will do it. (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

This aligns with a personality trait of Reba's to lead whenever possible, even without

being in a formal role. She reflected more on this perspective of hers:

> In higher education and here at the university, although I wasn't, you know, a manager at first, when I worked in the School of Business, I would lead out on projects, right? I would try to find something that I could help lead. (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

By espousing this leadership trait, Reba shows a bias for action.

Teaching and Training as Leadership. Another aspect of Reba's leadership

identity is that she has the heart of a teacher. She described teaching as a parallel to

leadership:

> I did teach here at the university for 18 years. I taught as an adjunct faculty member teaching people how to set up computers, how to, you know, build and set up imaging computers, do it on a network, which was fairly new back then, right? How do you do it on a network, versus just putting a CD in your computer and setting it up? So I think that training aspect for me helped me to wanna say, when you're training people, you're in front, you're leading them down a path of sharing your knowledge. And again, as an older adult, I felt like I had those values and those capabilities to teach. So it seemed kind of natural to me. (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023)

So, she equated teaching and training others to leading them to knowledge, and this framing has continued for her perspective of leadership in her current role. In describing teaching employees how to lead and succeed in their roles, she stated, "And I do think that, you know, the better you are at talking to people, teaching them about things, the more you tend to lead out" (Reba, Interview 1, May 16, 2023). To Reba, teaching and leading are one in the same.

Finding a Common Language. Since leadership identity construction is a social phenomenon, Tina has learned to share things in languages that others can understand.

> And so that's kind of like almost a force when I need to put myself out there, so that I can be heard and overcoming that fear so that it's still like that almost coming outta my own shell kinda deal, and people won't, and I do have this philosophy, people are not gonna know what you're thinking if you don't tell them, and so you need to share parts of you and so that they can understand your stances, your values, and that's part of also the IT world where we become these translators between the technical and the non-technical and so you have to be able to explain it in terms that people who don't live that technical life can understand it and how it relates to them, and so you often hear me say, I'll give actual almost human behaviors towards technology or that computer's misbehaving and it's like just it's a failing computer, some hardware or the server is in a bad place today. I mean, it's just, people don't understand when you say it's just the hard drive failed, that means nothing to them unless you go into say, "You know what, it's just, it's not in a good place today, these are the things that we need to do to fix it," and they're very like the definition, or "We're gonna go through this new project of multifactor authentication, what does that mean to you?" They don't know what multifactor means; we just have to explain it more along the lines in layman's terms. (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

By using human terms for computer issues, she illustrated that she is able to make them more understandable to the average person. This accessible approach keeps barriers from technical terms at bay.

The Power of I Don't Know. One epiphany that Tina has had in constructing her leadership identity was realizing that she doesn't know all the answers and using that as a strength.

> But I've come to, at one point in time, an epiphany in my life where it's okay to say, "I'm not sure, I don't know, and I'm going to figure that out and get back to you," or "I'm gonna help you find the person that's gonna give you the best answer." And so I found that to be more authentic and to be better received than making up something or faking that I'm all-knowing. (Tina, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

Prior to this realization, Tina felt that not knowing things was connected to her sense of imposter syndrome. She reflected on this and said that she often felt the need to "fake things," and offered this reflection on needing support:

> There's an Arabi saying, 'cause I'm originally from the Middle East. You don't know that. You haven't heard that yet. We say, which means you carry a crutch, you crutch until you are steady, or you use a walker until you are steady. Best way I can describe it then. It doesn't translate. We know what it means, but it doesn't translate exactly into English. So you need to hold onto things until you can become steady and walk on your own. And so do you fake it till you make it? I think when I first started, I mean, not necessarily here, when I first started in computing, I didn't know what I was doing, right? And you go through these phases of, and I don't know a lot about it, I researched it a little bit, but imposter syndrome almost. Should I even be here? Who am I? (Tina, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

So, prior to accepting that she didn't know things, Tina used a combination of faking things and getting support from others to bolster her image in her organization. In Interview 3, Tina described how not knowing all the answers can be a trust building strategy:

> Again it's that preparedness, it's that having the correct answer, I have and I'm okay with saying, you know what, I'm not sure about this, but I'm gonna look into it and get back to you, I don't wanna give you the wrong response. And really building that trust that way, you don't wanna use that all the time because then you look like an idiot, but it's just enough to say, "I don't have all the answers,"

it's just, "How can I find a way to get them to you? (Tina, Interview 3, June 6, 2023)

On a similar note, Kaya discussed the power of being honest and not pretending to know everything in Interview 1.

> But by that point I had proven to myself as well as to others that I don't try to presume to know all the things, I just find the people who do and get them to work on it, and just make sure are they working in the right direction, primarily by listening to what they have to say and trusting their opinion, and helping to get them to collaborate with their peers and such like that. (Kaya, Interview 1, May 4, 2023)

This is just another example of the ways in which Kaya strives to appear human in her leadership identity: she would rather be honest with her knowledge than create a perfect yet false picture. She returned to this concept of embracing what you don't know and being vulnerable with not knowing things in Interview 2.

> So I'll flat-out say, like, I do not know this subject matter as much, as well as you do. Like, I really need your expertise here. Right? So I wanna pivot so that we're not adversarial, we're working on the same thing together, by acknowledging the awesomeness that they're bringing to the table. It's just pulling that, pulling that out. And so facilitating and getting to that is, like, embrace what you don't know, right? Be vulnerable for the fact that you are not the expert in the room, because like, that's gonna be well received. (Kaya, Interview 2, May 18, 2023)

In this way, Kaya leads with "I don't know" by using that phrase to do two things. First, it allows her to model that vulnerability is okay, and second, she uses it to show that she believes it is a good thing to want to learn where you have gaps. It is no surprise that Kaya has leaned so hard into these honest and open leadership traits. She described further in Interview 2 that being honest and open "created a slingshot effect" (Kaya, May 18, 2023) in her career trajectory. Finally, Tiffany has also been able to adopt a strategy to lead with "I don't know."

> Whereas I start the conversation with, "I don't know what I'm talking about, but here's what I've learned. Tell me if I'm wrong." I find it is more important to get things right than for me to be right, you know? I'm okay being wrong. (Tiffany, Interview 2, June 1, 2023)

Not only does this strategy affect openness, but it also builds trust by showing colleagues that she doesn't think she knows everything. She reflected more on the power of "I don't know" in Interview 3, and how it has been a powerful counter to imposter syndrome:

> I haven't had it [imposter syndrome] quite so much since I switched to this new position. Mostly because I welcomely tell everyone, "I don't know what I'm talking about. I'm going to listen to you." I am just doubling down on, "I'm not an impostor 'cause I'm letting everyone know I don't know what I'm doing until I figure out what I'm doing." And then I'm hoping that will give that impostor syndrome no room to move if I'm like, "Okay, here's what I know," and then I start with that, like, "Here's the things I know. Let's move from there." And I take the time to. . . . Yeah, I don't know everything and that's okay, and here we go. (Tiffany, Interview 3, June 8, 2023)

In this way, Tiffany has allowed the transparency of the limitations of her knowledge to take center stage instead of the fears that she has about not knowing everything. In other words, she has chosen openness over fear. In this way, "I don't know" can be a powerful phrase that allows leaders to build trust, become more effective in their roles, and advance their own careers in the process.

Analysis of Theme Five

Theme Five, *Solidifying Leadership Perspectives and Practices*, is highlighted by experiences of forming, coming to be, and embodying leadership. Participants discussed solidifying their identities, forming their perspectives on what it means to survive as women in male-dominated fields, and managing the delicate balance of practicing leadership. Note that I use the word "solidifying" to describe this phenomenon. This word signifies a process of becoming more certain and firmer in our beliefs and behaviors

since our perspectives remain liquid and mutable until they are solidified by the social validation of people in our sphere.

A central component of solidifying leadership identities is coming to consciousness with who we are. In this theme, Nicole provided deep insight into the difference between chosen and given identities and visible and invisible identities. For example, she ascribed meaning to the fact that she considers higher education as her chosen field. Due to this value, she has incorporated that chosen identity into her own sense of identity. This is different from given identities that are just inherently part of us from the beginning - like in Nicole's case, being a Black woman. Though some of these given identities are visible, meaning that others are automatically aware of them when they see us (whether we are ready for them to be seen or not), some given identities are invisible (like some religious identities). Some of our chosen identities might also be invisible, like where we went to school or our personal interests. Navigating how and when to bring out these identities in social contexts with others and how to portray our individuality is critical to solidifying who we are in the workplace.

Many participants discussed their perspectives on survivorship in the workplace. Tina and Tiffany used battleground and hunting analogies to describe their experience, revealing a possibly adversarial, conflicting, and competitive undercurrent in their organizations. Nicole described her resilient "just keep swimming" attitude that is marked by a personal need to persist, a philosophy that successfully illustrates her strength but could also be potentially mentally and emotionally exhausting. Several other participants, including Tiffany, Grace, Kaya, and Tina, also revealed similar attitudes, indicating a

desire to keep pushing despite external obstacles and, occasionally, despite internal desires. These participants are nothing short of resilient, if not indefatigable.

Finally, the participants discussed the ways in which they embodied leadership in practice. This included a discussion of their enacted perceptions of how leaders should behave, as participants took care to describe their traits that they most readily aligned with good leaders. Some of these included things like being good communicators, how a leader is different from a manager, how important it is to build trust, how leaders should take things on when needed, perspectives on teaching/training as leaders, and how leaders should find common languages. Perhaps the most ubiquitous and important experience of embodied leadership to this study's participants was the power of an "I don't know" mindset. Tina, Kaya, and Tiffany all espoused the belief that by being transparent with not knowing everything, they can accomplish several key things: appear more honest and trustworthy to others, take the pressure off themselves to be perfect and have all knowledge, and model to others that wanting to learn where you have gaps is a good thing. It is important to highlight that this "I don't know" philosophy is the antithesis of the "need to prove myself" philosophy that the participants described in Theme One. In this way, growing past the need to prove oneself and into the open "I don't know" mindset was one of the keys to the participants for unlocking their personal power and leveling up as leaders.

Summary

This chapter provided detailed summaries of the experiences of the six participants of this study to reveal their unique vantage points as women in higher

education IT organizations who have constructed (or are actively constructing) their leadership identities. These summaries were organized around the five themes that emerged from the experiences of the six participants, which were: navigating bias and challenges, growing and building resilience, cultivating meaningful and nurturing connections, self-building and developing authenticity, and solidifying leadership perspectives and practices. Each theme was supported by data that came from participants' responses in each of their three semi-structured interviews with the researcher and each theme concluded with an analysis that was derived through the researcher's interpretation. The thematic findings of this study will be discussed in Chapter 5 through the lens of this study's research questions and the existent literature. In Chapter 5, a phenomenological essence statement, implications for practice, and directions for future research will be discussed.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion of the findings of this research study that is grounded in the data. This chapter includes a discussion of this study's research questions, a discussion of how the findings fit into the existent literature, a phenomenological essence statement, implications for practice, strengths, limitations, and delimitations, and directions for future research. Within this chapter is an embedded hope that the experiences of this study's participants will affirm, inform, and improve leadership journeys for women in higher education IT settings.

Discussion of Research Questions

The findings provided in Chapter 4 revealed the many ways in which this study's participants navigate and experience leadership identity construction. This section provides an overview of the research questions and their relationships to the findings of the study. Based on those findings, this section will attempt to provide answers for each research question that is grounded in the semi-structured interview data of this study and traverses the educational and sociological landscapes. Prior to embarking on this discussion, I will present a table of themes with representative quotes. This table is meant to serve as a bridge prior to the discussion to follow, and a guide to the heart of this study's data that is clear and concise. I hope that this table will serve as a helpful guide to readers to allow them to traverse my analysis through the participants' own words.

Table 2

Themes and Representative Quotes

Themes	Representative Quotes
Navigating Bias and Challenges	"So without even talking to me, he had already made that assumption that anybody named Tiffany couldn't help him."
	"When is the teacher gonna get here?"
Growing and Building Resilience	"Had the divorce and all the messiness of my life not happened, I may not have come back to school. I think I'm way farther ahead than I ever would've been or that I ever saw for myself due to my circumstances."
	"I think identity shifts as we shift, and it changes as we change. You're not the same person you were when you were 20."
Cultivating Meaningful and Nurturing Connections	"I check off that I'm holding meetings, but I have a more personal conversation with each employee, whether it's a man or a woman. You know, how are you doing?"
	"I was under the impression that I needed to keep a clear separation between who I was as an individual, a human, female, mom, wife. Like, that needed to be separate, and I needed to be a professional, and just a professional identity at work."
Self-Building and Developing Authenticity	"But also think about what you don't like in a leader and what you do like. I mean there are things that I'm learning from my boss also that I would myself use, okay, this is what I would do, but this is what I would do, okay?"
	"A lot of my personal life, I definitely do merge in. I feel like it lets people know where I am"
Solidifying Leadership Perspectives and Practices	"But I tell people it's like acting. There's some things, you're never gonna be able to change your identity, but sometimes I will leverage other parts of my identity in certain situations."
	"I have no problem with it, with being female and being out there. You kind of have to, you know, be ready to be loud, I guess, and alone a little."

Research Question 1: How do women in technology experience leadership identity construction in higher education information technology organizations?

The women in IT who participated in this study had experiences with leadership identity construction that emerged into five themes: *Navigating Bias and Challenges;*

Growing and Building Resilience; Cultivating Meaningful and Nurturing Connections; Self-Building and Developing Authenticity; and *Solidifying Leadership Perspectives and Practices.* Underscoring these themes are experiences of surviving challenges, empowerment, inclusivity, authenticity, and balancing perspectives with adaptability.

Faced with the difficult double bind of being a woman and aspiring to the traditionally male-coded role of leadership, the participants of this study discussed the bias and challenges they needed to navigate as they sought to advance their careers. These women reported experiencing feelings of being disrespected in the workplace, which often included experiences of microaggressions and racially coded bias, noticing male bias against emotions, having feelings of powerlessness, and feeling invalid due to social stigmas. In addition to experiencing disrespect, the participants noticed experiences with and perceptions of problematic gender dynamics. They also discussed social challenges in the workplace, including feeling like an outsider and the many challenges related to personal appearance as a woman. Participants also discussed strategies that helped them overcome the bias and challenges they experienced, including verbal and non-verbal communication strategies, reframing, leaning into strengths, discovering the importance of allies, and using pushback from others as fuel. Finally, they discussed the challenges at the intersection of home life and work life.

The motif of empowerment underscores the experiences of this study's participants in the next theme, as they began to explore how the concepts of growing and building resilience were critical to their leadership identity construction. The participants discussed how they often felt that personal adversity events often preceded their

professional success, and how many of them originally viewed getting into the field of IT as an investment in their careers. Participants also discussed their insights from professional experience related to their personal growth, including perspectives on people, learning to accept the struggle, and the value of resilient relationships. They also discussed becoming flexible leaders with changing and contextual boundaries and what it is like to gain grit through challenges like proving oneself, imposter syndrome, and feeling like an outsider. Finally, they discussed experiences that were valuable to facilitating their growth and validating their leadership style, such as being able to try on leadership traits and mimic them, being seen by mentors, receiving feedback, and getting promotions.

During the leadership identity construction journey of facing the challenges of the double bind and finding ways to grow and build resilience through a sense of personal empowerment, the participants also found it critical to forge meaningful and nurturing connections with others in the workplace through an inclusive, relational style. They describe building authentic connections as a relational two-way street, where they sought to cultivate connections with others and foster a sense of openness in their relationship style so that others would feel comfortable building relationships with them. To build these authentic connections, the participants used strategies like modeling good behaviors, growing an open and inclusive work environment where colleagues feel comfortable being themselves, valuing the whole person in workplace relationships, using adaptive leadership as a staff development strategy, and finding ways to give to others as part of an inclusive mindset. It is important to note that these efforts to build

relationships were not without some difficulties and challenges, and the participants discussed the ways that they navigated those challenges as well.

In addition to being inclusive with others, participants found it critical to go through a process of self-discovery and self-building to develop a personal sense of authenticity. Participants discussed self-discovery and identity exploration in the context of their personal and professional lives, explored the impact of their life experience on their sense of identity, and discussed the importance of embracing womanhood. They discussed what it meant to build their identities, which included outer appearance as a representation of self, how they formed and reformed their professional identities, where independence and personal values come into play, and how they found their personal leadership traits. Participants also discussed confidence building strategies like being bold, jumping in feet first, and fake it until you make it, which were all necessary to build the confidence needed to cope with challenges such as working in a chilly climate, the ambiguity and uncertainty of identity work, and the tensions that are created by becoming a more authentic person. Finally, participants discussed their support systems during this time, including top-down validation from their leadership, framing their family as a support system, and how critical it is to be seen by others.

As these women began to find their own sense of authenticity, they found ways to solidify their newfound beliefs and incorporate them into the realities of their lives as women in IT by becoming adaptive and agile leaders in practice. These women discussed solidifying their leadership identities by giving thought to their chosen/given and visible/invisible identities and forming perspectives on their sense of balance, who they

are in their organizations, finding a relationship approach, and intentionality and integrity. Even though the participants have solidified leadership perspectives, they also discussed the importance of staying adaptive to be resilient and survive in an imperfect world. Many participants used combat analogies to describe their experiences in the workplace, spoke of the strategies they used to manage their discontent, used analogies like needing to "just keep swimming" and stay aware of pitfalls, discussed the influence of negative experiences in their professional lives, and spoke of their strategies for growth in adverse conditions.

Finally, these women explored what leadership in practice meant to them, including being a storyteller and communicator, realizing the differences between leaders and managers, building trust and creating influence, seeing gaps and taking on leadership, framing teaching and training as leadership, finding a common language, and realizing the power of an "I don't know" mindset. With the constraining, competing, and overlapping demands of surviving challenges, finding ways to be empowered, creating inclusive spaces, becoming authentic, and forming perspectives yet staying adaptive, it is no wonder that there are so few women in the field of higher education IT leadership.

Subquestion 1: What is the process of internalizing leadership identities like for women in higher education information technology organizations? What is the identity work that goes into that internalization like?

For the participants of this study, the process of internalizing a leadership identity was evident in the two emergent themes of *Growing and Building Resilience and Self-Building and Developing Authenticity.* This messy, difficult, and deeply personal journey

is a process of self-building, self-discovery, and developing a sense of authentic self-expression, and coming to this point is what allows these women to internalize and actualize their aspired leadership identity. One of the reasons why this journey is so personal and difficult is because growth was often spurred by both the good and bad experiences in participants' lives. Growth also came from personal and professional experiences. For example, participants Kaya and Reba implied that they wouldn't necessarily want to relive the negative personal experiences they went through, but that they were grateful for coming out the other side stronger because those experiences prepared them for leadership roles.

Several participants described an important part of internalizing being a leader as learning about the negatives - this included learning to accept their struggle and learning how to communicate the negatives in appropriate ways. Another important part of the process for the participants was learning to be a flexible leader who can change across social contexts and set contextual boundaries that may vary from situation to situation. For example, Nicole used the analogy of juggling crystal balls, stating that there are some things that are too near and dear to her to juggle and risk dropping (Interview 2, May 31, 2023).

Participants also discussed imposter syndrome and how they had to "get over" the need to constantly prove themselves in the workplace. Participants stated that having an inclusive and welcoming climate was helpful toward eliminating the feeling of needing to prove themselves, and that being open with their limitations through transparency (e.g., being honest with not knowing things) was also helpful. Participants also remarked on

how helpful it was to be able to try on the traits of other leaders they respected and use them in their own leadership trait repertoire during this identity internalizing period. They might not keep all these traits in their toolbox if they don't resonate authentically with their leadership style, but they described seeing those potential new traits and being able to test them out as extremely helpful. This shows the discovery and exploration spirit of this phase, and how it's all about finding out what is available and discovering things for oneself.

Blurred personal and professional lines were another important point as participants reflected on internalizing a leadership identity. Tiffany discussed how she is happier now in her career with having blurred personal and professional lines, rather than trying to keep work and her work self entirely separate all the time. Life experiences also have a huge impact on identity growth. Many participants discussed how their roles - like being a mom, wife, or even a gamer - will come out in the workplace and shape their interactions with others. They also discussed other elements of identity building, such as learning how to dress (including clothes and makeup) to represent themselves most accurately. Participants described this as a confidence building strategy.

Participants also discussed the difficulties and challenges in their leadership identity construction journeys. Chilly and outright hostile climates tended to make this development more difficult, as does the ambiguous nature of identity work. Reba remarked on being unsure about which role to put on at certain times, and Tina commented on how she felt more tension as she began to become a more authentic version of herself. Participants also illustrated the importance of support systems during

this construction process and reflected on needing validation and support from their leadership at work, from their families, and from peers around them.

Overall, the process of developing authenticity and identity building is like crafting a statue out of a marble block. Slowly, we must slowly and artistically chip away at our stone exteriors to reveal the beautiful and unique statue underneath. While authenticity can have natural origins, it must be developed, crafted, and polished for display in settings like workplaces to achieve its maximum potential.

Subquestion 2: What is it like for women in higher education information technology to claim a leadership identity in their workplace social settings? How does gender-bias play a role?

For the participants of this study, the process of claiming a leadership identity was evident in the three emergent themes of *Navigating Bias and Challenges, Cultivating Meaningful and Nurturing Connections,* and *Solidifying Leadership Perspectives and Practices*. These themes comprise the social elements of fighting social inequities that come in the form of bias, discrimination, and other challenges as well as building the social capital through relationships that it took for the participants of this study to lay claim to a leadership identity. For the participants of this study, navigating the bias and challenges as women in a male-dominated field was a treacherous process that took many forms. One of the most common ways that bias and challenges manifested for the participants was experiencing disrespect in the workplace. Disrespect also comes in many forms, including singling women out, making relationships feel intentionally strained, and providing negative, unwarranted feedback out of the blue. The participants also had

experiences with feeling powerless, like the time when Reba was not properly addressed by VPs in a meeting room.

Another core part of navigating bias and challenges is experiencing gender dynamics, whether that's in the form of having personal experiences with gender dynamics or seeing the effects of those dynamics play out. For example, Nicole discussed a time where she was offered less money for a position than a man was making previously in that role - she was only able to counter the offer because she knew the previous person in the role and the salary he was earning. Social challenges were also common for the participants of this study, and they often reported having to navigate tricky social situations by changing their own behavior. Participants felt like outsiders. Finally, participants reported strategies that helped them overcome the bias and challenges that they faced. Many participants spoke of using verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to combat disrespect or inattention, and many practiced reframing and leaning into their strengths.

As a social process, dealing with the negatives caused by their gender and other identities is just one part of the puzzle for women who are trying to claim a leader identity. Additionally, participants expressed the importance of fostering meaningful and nurturing connections with others in the workplace due to the social nature of leadership identity claiming (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Most participants discussed the importance of having a relational leadership style that allows them to build authentic connections with others. To participants like Reba and Tiffany, this includes sharing who you are with those you work with without oversharing. These participants described this as a delicate

combination that allows them to be vulnerable without being completely exposed. Tiffany also discussed how she tried to build as many relationships as possible to gain visibility at the start of her push into a leadership track, highlighting how important she felt that it was to have people in her corner.

It emerged from conversations with the participants that relationships are more than just the connections that we initiate with others. Rather, relationships are a two-way street, and fostering an open and inclusive environment is critical to allowing others to feel comfortable and want to build relationships with us, too. Kaya and Reba discussed how having everyone feel comfortable and valued is the best way to get all the brainpower out of your team. In the view of the participants, creating an environment in which your team members feel comfortable enough to be themselves is better for the employee, the relationship between that employee and their manager, and the organization. Participants reported trying to foster this type of environment by making efforts to value the whole person and showing a continual interest in who they are and their lives and interests. Kaya discussed this phenomenon and how managers can only draw out the best of their employees if they can understand them on a deeper level.

Finally, participants discussed perhaps the most challenging phase of the leadership identity construction process - how they have had to work to solidify their leadership perspectives while remaining adaptive and open to new challenges and new possibilities. For the participants, the work of solidifying leadership perspectives included pulling together their identities, practices, and styles into a cohesive whole. Participants discussed coming to consciousness with their chosen, given, visible, and invisible

identities and learning to see who they are and the realities of what that means in the workplace. They also discussed their perspectives on how to survive in the workplace, which included using combat analogies such as battleground and huntress, learning how to manage discontent and how they persevere despite adversity. Participants provided strategies for growth in adverse conditions, such as learning to speak up or leaving the comfort zone despite how difficult (and sometimes unproductive) some of those things might feel at the time. Finally, participants discussed how they view their leadership in practice, which included their perspectives and an overall sense that it is critical for them to stay adaptive and open to new challenges and new possibilities. In this way, these women remain agile and ready to tackle opposition or jump on new opportunities that could be advantageous.

Whether a woman in IT is navigating social challenges and inequities, building relationships, or solidifying their leadership perspectives while remaining agile huntresses, these experiences are all experienced in a social framework. This is due to the social nature of leadership identity construction (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Since leadership identity construction is a process of claims and grants that must be reciprocated to legitimatize a leader's desired status (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), successfully claiming a leadership status requires social successes (wins like gaining positive relationships) as well as overcoming any existing social bias and challenges (resolving negative interactions or perceived bias).

In this study, the participants faced a unique challenge due to their gender status as women who are aspiring to leadership positions in male-dominated fields. This puts

these women in IT at a distinct disadvantage. While women experience many challenges that they must negotiate on their path to leadership, individuals who are part of the normative culture and do not experience bias do not face such extreme conditions. For example, individuals who do not face bias may only need to focus on building positive relationships to be socially validated as leaders. This is also made more complicated for women in IT because the challenges that they face often occur simultaneously with other difficult experiences. It is also important to note that the findings presented in this study depict a non-linear, overlapping, and non-exclusive process. For example, women in IT may face some of the challenges depicted in Theme One while they are experiencing the messy and difficult self-building as depicted in Theme Four. Therefore, women in IT may experience their own unique and challenging combinations of scenarios that may hinder their ability to successfully claim and establish a leadership identity.

Discussion of Findings

The following section will situate each theme in the context of the study's literature and theoretical framework. By contextualizing my five themes within the larger academic discourse, I will set the stage for the remaining sections of this chapter and underscore the implications of this dissertation. Immediately after this discussion, a phenomenological essence statement will be provided that will summarize the experience of what it is like to be a woman in higher education IT who is constructing and claiming her status as a leader.

Challenges experienced by the women in this study align with barriers found by Clark (2013) and Drury (2011). Both authors situate women in higher education

information technology in an isolated existence where masculinity remains at the top of the hierarchy. In Interview 1, Tiffany stated, "You kind of have to, you know, be ready to be loud, I guess, and alone a little" (May 15, 2023) and this phrase is evocative of the experience for women in higher education IT. Clark (2013) revealed how these feelings of isolation came to be with her revelation of how women are still on the fringes as outsiders:

> Thus, the discourses embedded in higher education IT, where men have dominated in the profession and leadership roles since the very beginning, provide a distinctly masculine foundation for the profession's culture. In such a culture, women exist on the periphery of cultural creation – they are "outsiders." (Clark, 2013, p. 251)

The challenges and biases experienced by the women in this study were most like the experiences presented in Chapter 2's "The Experiences of Women in Information Technology" subsection titled "Challenges and Barriers." Specifically, the experiences in the findings of this study are similar in tone to those in the work of Trauth et al. (2009), Rosenbloom et al. (2008), Ramsey and McCorduck (2005), Allen et al. (2006), Hyrynsalmi (2019), and Miles (2009). One example of an anecdote from one of the participants in this study that is common in the literature is Nicole's story of being offered less for a position than her male colleague was previously making in that position. Salary is hugely important for the retention of women in IT (Trauth et al., 2009), not to mention the happiness of these women at work. Some of the other women in IT literature, such as the articles around career choice, career values, and job embeddedness, were not as relevant to the experiences that emerged from the women in this study.

There were several parallels between the experiences of this study's participants and this study's literature review section titled "Manifestations of Sexism Against Women Leaders." For example, I provide a discussion of Rudman et al.'s (2012) article that described backlash against women in male-dominated fields as a preservation of heteronormativity. This inequality preserving system was very evident in Kaya's story of receiving poor ratings on a performance evaluation because her assertiveness was interpreted as aggressiveness. The double bind (Carli, 1999; Rudman & Phelan, 2008; Rudman et al., 2012) was also a central component of the participants' experiences. For example, when Tiffany exhibited diffident behavior in her former institution, she would often receive the abuse of her male colleagues and was unable to increase her leadership status in her organization. Through the lens of the double bind concept, this is likely because Tiffany was not agentic enough to be perceived as a leader and others felt that they were in a position of authority over her. When she moved to her current organization and became too masculine in the eyes of others by obtaining a managerial role, she received the wrath of a faculty member who didn't want to work with someone named Tiffany. In the lens of the double bind, she was being too agentic by being in this role as a woman, and this was intolerable to the faculty member. Either way, whether she was too communal or too agentic, clearly she wasn't good enough in the eyes of the men around her. In this way, the double bind is an impossible tight rope that women are forced to walk throughout the different life stages of their careers.

Next, Chapter 2's theoretical framework sections of "Leadership Identity as a Social Construction" and "Identity Work as a Process of Intrapersonal Negotiation" also

had many connections to the "Navigating Bias and Challenges" theme. To begin, one of the core components of the theory of leadership identity as a social construction is the idea that it is a process of claims and grants (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). In this model, the aspiring leader puts out claims to leadership which must be granted by others to become social reality. The women in this study explored the concept of making claims to leadership in two disparate ways - being ready to prove themselves and finding and using verbal and non-verbal communication strategies. By being ready to prove themselves (like by being ready to "talk the IT talk" like Nicole or being prepared like Kaya), these women are attempting to make a claim at leadership through knowledge. By using verbal (e.g., being loud or using language as cues) or non-verbal (using gestures or silence) communication strategies, they claim a leadership status through behavior and presence.

Bartel and Dutton (2001) provided a framework for the ways in which employees might claim an identity in an organization and making a verbal assertion toward an identity (declaring) is one of the ways that a claim can happen. In this way, by using verbal and non-verbal communication strategies, the participants of this study were declaring or making a verbal assertion toward an identity without even necessarily being consciously aware of that. In these ways, these women are very constructively coping with the challenges and bias around them - by responding to challenges with attempts to claim a leadership identity, they are attempting to gain leadership status and negate the bias of others at the same time.

The experiences of these women were also evident in the "Individual Internalization of Identity" section of the theoretical framework. This is the first step of

DeRue and Ashford's (2010) process in which the individual first considers oneself as a leader and begin to internalize that as a desired identity. This concept of internalization was evident in the "Reframing" section of the first theme, when participants described times in their lives when they first challenged the deficit frame that had been cast upon them. By challenging this deficit thinking, they recast themselves as worthy of self-love and acceptance, worthy of taking up space, and worthy of having value as people in their organizations. Similarly, participants also described choosing to lean into their feminine strengths as a response to the challenges and bias in their organizations. This response is another example of participants beginning to internalize that they can lead by embracing their own unique qualities and seeing themselves in a leaderful light.

I was surprised to realize that the research that I examined in Chapter 2 of this study did not dive into the correlation between personal adversity and professional success. This was a deeply salient topic for several of the participants of this study, so I am surprised that past studies have not uncovered this and sought to contribute to the knowledge in this area. Rather, most of the women in IT literature is centered around the experiences of these women in the workplace. Some studies such as Miles' (2009) explored how challenges intersect with family life, bringing a small slice of the personal life of women in IT to the literature. However, no studies that I found as part of Chapter 2 captured the personal adversity to professional success pathway that was described by Reba and Kaya as part of Theme Two.

In the section of this theme that covered insight gained by professional experience, there were strong parallels to the findings of Kenny and Donnelly (2020).

This article explored how women navigate the gender structure of IT organizations, including normative pressures, preserving femininity, and perceptions of female strengths. At the core of Kenny and Donnelly's (2020) findings is the sense that growing as a woman in a male-dominated organization is tricky business, which is underscored by the gymnastics that the participants in my study revealed as necessary to growing in their roles. From learning to be okay with struggling to being able to pivot on a dime to adopting flexible perspectives on leadership, the participants in my study needed to develop their own experience-based toolkit that not only allowed them to survive but also thrive despite their marginalized status as women.

As the participants of this study reflected on growing and building their personal sense of resilience, they provided examples that showed that finding their boundaries was helpful. I visualize this as finding the shape of their identity. For example, if someone like Tina or Nicole began to realize that family was one of the most important things to them, they start to realize that they need to be protective with that aspect of themselves. After individuals make those realizations, they add these facets as fixed points along the periphery of their identity (their boundary). In this way, these boundaries demarcate clear limits between peoples' inner selves and the external world, acting as a protective buffer. From the findings, it is clear that every person's boundaries are different.

As they explored the concept of growth and building resilience, participants also engaged with the concept of "trying on the traits of other leaders they admired" without prompting from the researcher. Surprisingly, this common thread was not so common in the identity work literature. Pratt et al. (2006) was the only article that discussed the

specific phenomenon of trying on identities as part of the identity work process. Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) discussed identity workspaces and how it is helpful for people to be in organizations that allow them to test out new identities in group settings, and most participants in this study would be described as working in organizations that are flexible and supportive enough to meet the definition of workspace (perhaps except for Grace). In their article, Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) discussed that new inclusions or additions to our identity are more likely to be used again if they are socially validated by others. So, it follows that if the participants in this study are trying on new identities in an identity workspace (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010) and receive social validation (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) for applying a new identity, they are going to have more successful experiences with trying on new identities. In this way, social validation is key to everything in the journey that leads to leadership identity construction, in two key places. First, social validation is necessary for a new identity to become cemented into our repertoire. Second, social validation is necessary in the process of claims and grants (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) so that we can become validated as leaders by those around us.

Finally, shifting from a "prove it" mindset to a learning mindset was also key for the participants of this study. Bartel and Dutton (2001) wrote that being an inquirer of the right knowledge is one way in which people might claim an identity in organizations, and they referred to this concept as questioning. Consequently, by adopting a learning mindset, the participants of this study asserted their identities as inquisitive leaders committed to continuous growth. This shift removed these women from an all-knowing role, which is a mentally healthier and more realistic personal expectation. Finally, this

learning mindset is also beneficial for the participants of this study due to the nature of

the higher education field. By adopting a mindset that aligns with their own field,

participants positioned themselves as individuals suited to leadership roles within their

respective organizations.

Overall, the importance that the participants of this study placed on their own

growth and resilience building strategies were not surprising considering Snow and

Anderson's (1987) point that identity needs are just as important to humanity as

physiological needs like hunger, safety, and shelter. From trying on identities and finding

ones that suit us to developing a toolkit for survival to shifting perspectives to a learning

mindset, in this theme the women in this study show that our search and desire for growth

is deeply interwoven with the basic human need for a stable identity (Ashforth & Kreiner,

1999; Snow & Anderson, 1987). This essential aspect of the human condition

underscores the deep connection between our sense of self and our ability to grow, face

challenges, and persevere.

Adams and Weiss (2011) found that women leaders in technology may have a

slight advantage compared to their male peers by way of already performing Business

Expert and Change Agent related roles in addition to their Technologist roles. As it

follows, performing these roles in addition to the Technologist role can be an advantage

for them in terms of job opportunity. The Change Agent and Business Expert roles also

have a few common threads: the ability to work with people, build relationships, lead

times, and, in general, work with others through trusting relationships (Adams & Weiss,

2011). Ergo, Theme Three, *Cultivating Meaningful and Nurturing Connections,* is

associated with the growth of women in those Change Agent and Business Expert roles, something that may correlate with an increased chance of job opportunities.

The participants of this study grew their meaningful connections and relationships with several strategies. Fostering an open environment and being approachable were very common, as well as using vulnerability to model honesty and openness. The participants, especially Reba and Kaya, also discussed the importance of valuing the whole person they are interacting with. They did this through strategies such as showing a real interest to build a deep connection and making this a continual and habitual part of their relationship to ensure genuineness. Participants like Tiffany also discussed the power of informal and inclusive social events in their organization where all are welcome. These inclusive activities are the opposite of the good old boys' clubs that are described by Wentling and Thomas (2009) and Morgan et al. (2004). These exclusive cultures often require identity membership into gender or race-based categories, and inclusion often leads to professional success for members (Wentling & Thomas, 2009). The inclusive groups that Tiffany described reveal a new era of social group that celebrates diversity, equity, and an inclusive sense of belonging for all.

It is important to note that not all the participants of this study had positive experiences with creating relationships in their organizations. One outlier is Grace, who felt like an outsider due to the lack of support from the leadership in her organization. Bartel and Dutton (2001) spoke to this phenomenon in their article, stating that the greater the social ambiguity one perceives in an organization, the greater one will perceive oneself as an outsider. This aligns with Grace's ambiguous situation in her

organization and feelings of being an outsider. Other participants like Nicole and Tiffany also reported challenges with relationships, including negotiating difficult conversations despite a power dynamic and lack of face time with senior leaders. Challenges like these disrupt the nurturing that is needed to for identity construction to happen (Pratt et al., 2006), something that increases the bumpiness on the road to leadership.

In addition to relationships being helpful for one's career prospects, it also makes sense in the context of the theory of leadership identity as a social construction. In DeRue and Ashford (2010)'s perspective, the people that we interact with must recognize and then collectively endorse our leader identity for that to become an accepted social reality. That being the case, it is critical for the participants of this study to develop and nurture their relationships so that it is more likely that others will see them in the way that they want to be seen and validate them as leaders. After all, as DeRue and Ashford (2010) stated, this validation does not happen in a vacuum. It can only happen with other people in real settings. Overall, by building nurturing and meaningful relationships, the participants of this study accomplished two things: (a) they had their own growing identities nurtured and career prospects strengthened, and (b) they invested in relationships with the people who they would eventually need to socially validate them as leaders in their technology organizations.

Theme Four, Self-Building and Developing Authenticity, primarily tied into the literature by way of its connections to the theoretical framework of the study. In the Chapter 2 section titled "Identity Work as a Process of Intrapersonal Negotiation," I examine the identity work literature, exploring what identity work means for an

individual on a personal level. In this theme, participants focused on experiences that related to identity building, embracing themselves, blurred lines between the personal and professional, image management, and what it's like to reform a professional identity. Overall, the participants of this study described their identity work as identity building: learning who they are, building that person up, and adjusting for who they want to be. This makes identity work an iterative process, as we continually build our mythos and identity by tweaking and adding new pieces that fit with our self-concept as we receive social validation from others. This finding fits in with Snow and Anderson's (1987) view of identity work as a continual process. Describing identity work, they wrote:

> We conceptualize identity construction and assertion as variants of the generic process we call identity work, by which we refer to the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept. (Snow & Anderson, 1987, p. 1348)

In this way, we have a human need to ensure that our constructed or social identity fits in with our self-concept and that we see it in a positive light.

Participants of the study described this as typically starting with uncovering a core identity and embracing our rudimentary social identities, such as gender. For example, Tiffany described embracing womanhood as a key step along her identity journey. This is key because being a woman is often considered a negative in patriarchal American society. Several of the authors in the literature explore the phenomenon of what it is like for marginalized people to experience identity construction. Both Snow and Anderson (1987) and Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) described how individuals in marginalized societal roles navigate this, exploring the phenomenon in relation to homeless

populations and people working in professions stigmatized as 'dirty,' such as sanitation workers. Both authors determined that even people in these marginalized societal roles need a positive and stable self-concept and sense of identity to be functioning members of society (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Snow & Anderson, 1987). Therefore, it makes sense that the women in this study would also need to see themselves positively to function and develop professionally. As Cooley (1902) famously wrote, "I am not who you think I am; I am not who I think I am; I am who I think you think I am." This quote encapsulates just how contingent our perception of ourselves is upon the perceptions of others. External opinions shape our self-concept and in turn have a vast impact on our identities. This shows that the intricacies of identity work, and that it is not just internal – it is a negotiation with the outside world.

After participants in this study embraced their self-concept and saw themselves positively, they embarked on the messy, gray-area identity work as explored by Snow and Anderson (1987). For the participants of this study, this work often included noticing traits that they admired in other leaders and "trying them on" to see if they fit. This goes back to Kreiner et al.'s (2006) work about how individuals make efforts to craft, protect, and modify their views and behaviors and make those modifications through the lens of social validation. In this way, social validation is the cornerstone of identity work *and* leadership identity construction (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

In this theme, participants also talked about the importance of dressing in a way that is authentic to them in the workplace. This ties in with the concept of impression management and how we negotiate the way that we want ourselves to be seen by others.

Goffman (1959) discussed how people apply a certain level of performativity to the way that they present themselves to others. Through his dramaturgical perspective, there is a front stage on which others see us and a backstage on which others don't. The front stage is where we present a performative version of ourselves that aligns with our self-concept. For example, Nicole described herself as bright and vibrant, and her clothing choices (bright colors and dresses) reflect this self-concept that she then outwardly presents to the others around her. Tiffany saw herself as showy, fashionable, and outrageous, and her outfit choices correspond accordingly. The same can be said for each participant in this study - their attire and personal look choices were important to them since they manifested an outward representation of who they are to others. This emphasis on outward appearance also makes sense in consideration of the heightened visibility (Ely et al., 2011) that women leaders experience. Since they are more visible than their male colleagues, women leaders are hyper focused on what their outward appearance is saying about them.

The literature did not explore the phenomenon of what happens when people reconcile or merge multiple identities in a positive way. Kreiner et al. (2006) and Snow and Anderson (1987) found that people with identities that are at odds with each other might be more likely to differentiate or separate those identities as to prevent conflicts. Interestingly, in this study I noticed that the participants who blurred the lines of their professional and personal identities tended to have happier life circumstances (like Tiffany) and a correlation between people who employed more of an identity separation perspective with unhappier life circumstances (like Kaya when she was experiencing

adversity in her personal life or Grace's identity separation and dissatisfaction with her organization). So, in the context of this study, it was less about identities that are at odds being correlated with unhappiness or personal stress, as was described in Kreiner et al. (2006) and Snow & Anderson (1987). Rather, my findings show that the participants who successfully merge or integrate their multiple identities (especially personal and professional identities), tend to experience more happiness and personal satisfaction. What this suggests is that a sense of harmony among one's identities can contribute to one's emotional well-being, shedding new light on the relationship between identity management and personal happiness that is a departure from previous research findings in this field.

Next, participants discussed how they needed to reform their professional identities after times of personal upheaval, again revealing the emergent and iterative nature of identity work (Snow & Anderson, 1987). For example, Reba discussed how she had to change the way that she told her own story in the wake of her divorce from her ex-husband. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) described how this storying and restorying of personal narratives into a current, authentic, and accurate repertoire is very important to our self-concept because it makes our intrapersonal identity and experiences visible to others. In this way, this restorying and reforming of identities is a crucial part of the identity building process since parts of us are always constantly shifting.

Theme Five had several connections to the literature explored in this study. This study discusses the solidification of identity, which includes coming to consciousness with our social identities (tying back to Theme Four), recognizing our chosen/given and

visible/invisible identities, and learning how and when to bring these out in the social

context. These aspects of identity solidification can be difficult for women leaders

considering the implicit bias faced by women and people of other marginalized social

identities (Ely et al., 2011; Hogue & Lord, 2007; Lord & Hall, 2005). Since culturally

imbued implicit bias shapes the schemas of those who have the power to grant or deny

claims to leadership, this can make it extremely problematic for women to feel

sufficiently safe to bring out and be open with their identities. Furthermore, my findings

affirm the work of Lord and Hall (2005) by showing that women's self-view of their own

leadership ability may be diminished by misogynist cultural tropes.

With these challenges, it is no surprise that this theme included a large discussion

of exactly how the participants view their own survivorship at work and what it takes for

them to persevere. For example, Tina and Tiffany used battle and hunting analogies when

describing their experiences in the workplace, and Nicole, Tiffany, Grace, Kaya, and

Tina all discussed their experiences with continuing to exert the energy to push back

obstacles and "just keep swimming." These findings had parallels to Morley (2013) and

Howard-Vital's (1989) work that explored what the existence was like for women in

higher education. For example, Morley (2013) discussed that women are still

underrepresented in leadership positions at universities, showing that the women who do

make it into these positions are often rendered effete and forced to ascribe to masculine

identity patterns. Over twenty years prior, Howard-Vital (1989) examined the experience

for African American women in higher education specifically, stating that the

contributions of these women are often minimized and denied. Sadly, it seems that

conditions for women have not yet improved. The combination of denied contributions in a sea of obstacles continues to make existing a challenging proposition for a woman in higher education.

Finally, I wrapped up this theme with a discussion of enacting leadership in practice for the participants of this study. While things like good communication and the importance of building trust were discussed, perhaps the most salient topic that emerged from this theme was the way that participants shifted from a "prove it" to an "I don't know" mindset." The "prove it" mindset is discussed by participants in Theme One as they recalled experiences of navigating challenges and bias in their organization. In the context of this theme this idea emerges anew, as participants discussed embracing not knowing everything and learning to be okay with that. In the discussion for Theme One, I wrote that these women use a "prove it" strategy to be constantly prepared to make a claim to leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). However, the "I don't know" strategy makes an even stronger claim by illustrating an evolved approach. Leaders who utilize this approach showcase humility, the strength to accept uncertainty and ambiguity, a commitment to growth and learning, and a value on the knowledge of those around them. In this way, this profound evolution from a "prove it" to an "I don't know" mindset demonstrates a strong, human, and effective leadership approach that is grounded in personal authenticity. When followers see these leadership traits in practice that resonate with their humanity, they construct their leaders by granting the leader's claim to leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), socially endorsing that person and allowing their desired identity to become social reality.

Essence Statement

Now that I have situated the findings in the research questions and existent literature, I would like to provide an essence statement that summarizes and holistically portrays the experiences of the participants in this study. Creswell and Poth (2024) wrote that an essence statement is a common ending for phenomenology studies, and that researchers often use this descriptive statement to incorporate ""what" they [participants] have experienced and "how" they experienced it" (Creswell & Poth, 2024, p. 77). My hope is that I have honored my participants by crafting this study's essence statement in a way that represents the experiences of each participant without being reductive. This is the essence statement for this study:

> *To construct a leadership identity, women in higher education information technology organizations must embark on a journey of growth through self-building, self-discovery, and authentic self-expression that allows them to internalize their aspired leadership identity. To claim this leadership identity, they must navigate bias and challenges, foster meaningful and nurturing connections, and solidify leadership perspectives while remaining adaptive and open. By embracing their whole selves and finding continual strategies for survival in their male-dominated fields, these women emerge as inclusive, adaptable, and empowered leaders.*

In all, these women face a difficult challenge as they struggle to ascend in their organizations. This is because the fight to build personal identity and socially construct leadership identity is already not a linear process, and they are doing this work in the

context of the double bind that they experience as women (Carli, 1999; Rudman & Phelan, 2008; Rudman et al., 2012). Many of these things may be happening congruently, and to the participants of this study this could often make their experience feel overwhelming and exhausting. Even for leaders who have "made it" to positions that they consider leadership, the social complexities of existing and maintaining a leader identity in an organization is a continual process of awareness, reinvention, and adaptation to ever-changing circumstances.

Implications for Practice

In this section, I discuss implications for practice for information technology organizations, recommendations for women in higher education IT positions, and recommendations for how governing bodies might create interventions to ameliorate some of the problems that women in higher education IT face.

Recommendations for IT Organizations

Several participants brought up the realization that leaning into their gender-specific strengths empowered them to harness the power of their whole selves in their roles. In my experience as a woman in IT, I have not been exposed to professional development content that has specifically spoken to my gender or explored how I might lean into my strengths as a woman. I think that providing leadership training for women specifically to address this need would be incredibly powerful, and help women capture and understand their strengths earlier on in their careers. If an IT organization does not have the resources to provide a professional development program specifically for women, I think that recommending women-specific leadership books such as "Lean In:

Women, Work, and the Will to Lead" by Sheryl Sandberg may help expose these women

to the idea of seeing gender differences and learning to value how their strengths can be

honed to their advantage in the workplace. Organizations could support women's

endeavors to form informal book clubs where women read and discuss books like this.

The participants in the study who were from international backgrounds and/or

people of color reported another layer of discrimination on top of the double bind that

they experience as aspiring women leaders. I recommend that organizations provide

cultural communication training that helps train employees in the different ways in which

people from multicultural backgrounds interact and would prefer to be interacted with.

For example, Grace discussed experiencing racism related to the way that others

commented on her accent. Providing training that helps people realize that this behavior

is not okay and only serves to marginalize people would be helpful.

Next, it would be helpful for organizations to provide workshops and other

learning materials that help illustrate women's current challenges and experiences in their

organizations. A widespread cultural myth began to permeate in the 1990's that feminism

was no longer a social issue and that, therefore, society had reached a point of

postfeminism (Hall & Rodriguez, 2003). This postfeminism mindset still has a firm grasp

in America, and one example of the way that it manifests is the erroneous belief that

since women's equality struggles of the 20th century are over, feminism is no longer

necessary. As this study and many others reveal, that is not the case. There are persistent

challenges for women in American society. If women must learn to accept this struggle,

as Nicole discussed in this study, it is only fair that men must see their struggle, which

will help them accept that gender disparities exist. Organizations can help men come to consciousness by providing qualitative learning materials and workshops that help men understand women's experiences from their vantage point. By better understanding women's experiences, they can be better allies.

Finally, information technology organizations can support their women by offering informal social opportunities that are the antithesis of exclusive good old boys' clubs (Wentling & Thomas, 2009). By creating inclusive social opportunities that are broadly available to all, organizations can create an environment in which it is possible for women to build the relationships that they need to gain the needed social validation to construct their leadership identities. Tiffany mentioned how helpful these informal social groups and gatherings have been in her organization (Interview 1, May 15, 2023). In addition to building relationships and receiving support from these social opportunities, senior leaders in IT should also realize just how impactful their validation and support can be for the women in their organizations. By seeing traits that they can try on, women become exposed to new leadership approaches that can begin to incorporate into their repertoire. Senior leaders in IT should make efforts to be visible and accessible to their women leaders so that these learning and validating opportunities are possible. If their organization is a safe space that could be considered an identity workspace in which this self-building and experimentation can happen (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010), women (and others) in organizations will reap dividends by being able to experiment and find out who they are and who they want to be as leaders.

Recommendations for Women in Higher Ed IT

As demonstrated by several of the participants of this study (Tiffany, Kaya, Nicole, Reba), women in higher education IT settings may benefit and have an increased sense of well-being if they integrate their life identities. Not only does finding ways to bring forward aspects of one's personal life into the frontstage (Goffman, 1959) of the workplace create opportunities for connection with others, but it may also reduce one's stress by creating a more consistent sense of identity across different contexts. For example, by merging and blending in her personal life, Tiffany has discovered that she is freer to be her authentic self with those around her at work. Kaya discovered something similar, realizing that she could only unlock all her potential when she began bringing her whole self to the workplace. By sharing who they are outside of work and making the effort to be that consistent person across life contexts, the participants of this study seemed to experience greater levels of life satisfaction and professional success.

The next recommendation for women in IT is to "just keep swimming," as Nicole discussed. Unfortunately, it is a universal part of the experience for the workplace to feel like a struggle for women in IT - this means that if things feel like a struggle for a woman, she is likely having a normative experience. "Just keep swimming" and facing those challenges is the way that the participants of this study persisted and succeeded in their careers. In addition to needing to navigate bias and challenges externally, ambiguity during identity work is also a normal part of the process (this was especially evident in Reba and Grace's stories). If a woman in IT experiences these feelings of struggle or

ambiguity, I recommend that she relies on the social support of others to help process where she is at in her journey.

Next, women in IT should take on a strength's mindset. They need to find and embrace their unique strengths as women, which may come from unexpected sources. For example, Reba discussed how leaning into her mom strengths have helped her in her relationships at work. In this way, these strengths may come from one's personal or feminine side. They should be discovered and built up so that they can be leveraged in the workplace - again, this goes back to Kaya's perspective that the best of someone can only be accessed when the whole person is brought out and valued. I recommend finding professional development offerings that are specifically for women leaders or reading books that are related to developing women's strengths.

Women in IT should also realize that dressing in ways that are empowering to them is more than superficial. Rather, the way that we dress can be a powerful approach to building confidence. This could include hair, makeup, and/or clothes, but it is important to note that dressing in a way that felt authentic was key for every participant in this study. Every participant also discussed using verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to increase their power when meeting with people who showed them disrespect. Using commanding and attention-grabbing hand motions were common, as well as using verbal tactics like increasing one's volume, immediately addressing inappropriate behavior, and using silence in meaningful ways. The primary commonality between these strategies is finding something that works through communication, rather than just avoiding reacting to disrespect in social settings.

Finally, there are two more evidence-based recommendations from the findings of this study. The first is that women in IT should practice reframing so that they don't see themselves as a deficit. Tina, Nicole, and Reba all described experiences reframing and intentionally choosing to reject the idea that they are worth less than others due to their status as women in male-dominated organizations. Rather, they chose self-love and acceptance, making the intentional choice to see the people who don't value them as having the deficit. Finally, several participants of this study revealed that when they stopped trying to prove themselves in interactions at work and switched to embracing an "I don't know"/learning mindset, this was helpful to their success. Participants felt less pressure and that this shift was more in line with the expectations of the field of higher education, a win-win.

Recommendations for Governing Bodies

Finally, I turn my attention to governing bodies. By this, I mean the organizations like governments and non-profit groups that have broad-reaching impact and reach to make change on these issues. First, I would like to propose funding for new initiatives that seek to advance the status of women in IT. One of the ways that I envision funding helping with the advancement of women in IT is with the lack of research in the field. More funding could be allocated towards research that is dedicated to the advancement of women in IT to increase the knowledge and consciousness in this area. More funding could also be available for women to apply for to use for professional development opportunities such as conferences.

Next, there should be a governing body that serves as a professional association for women in the field and an advocacy group. For example, it could collect statistics on the current makeup of women in IT and other research, host annual conferences to advance knowledge, and also possibly hold a lobbying role with the government to improve conditions for women in IT. This body would be specific aimed at improving conditions for women in higher education IT, and it could even be affiliated with Educause or another national non-profit in some way. This organization could also take the lead on annually addressing the trending primary challenges that women in IT experience.

Higher education IT organizations in the United States are often not consistently structured due to the fact that they exist to serve the larger higher education institutions around them. This creates even more disparate experiences for women in higher education IT fields. One solution for this may be the creation of consistent policies that address gender bias and the promotion of women that all IT organizations in the United States could incorporate into their operating procedures. These standards could include recommended salary bands that are aimed at reducing pay inequity for women in IT, as well as standards that IT organizations should follow that support their female employees such as flexible work arrangements.

Finally, there could be some sort of public relations campaign that helps to raise awareness and champion the success stories of women in IT. This could help change the perception that IT is a male industry, and in the process more women might feel comfortable considering IT as a possibility for their career. This campaign could show

success stories of women in IT leadership who started in entry-level IT careers and

thrived, and could even culminate in yearly awards for these women to highlight their

contributions to the field. For this recommendation to be realized, multiple stakeholders

would need to collaborate, including the aforementioned governing body, other higher

education non-profit groups such as Educause, and educational institutions.

<div align="center">**Strengths, Limitations, and Delimitations**</div>

The following sections will describe the strengths, limitations, and delimitations

of this study.

Strengths

I believe that one of the biggest strengths of this dissertation is the robust way in

which I followed the IPA methodology's data analysis steps as outlined by Smith and

Nizza (2022). I followed their process to the letter and was very thorough in the way that

I developed my Exploratory Notes, Experiential Statements, Personal Experiential

Themes, and Group Experiential Themes. This lengthy process of making notes, reducing

them to statements, and reducing those to personal experiential themes was, frankly,

time-consuming and labor-intensive. Despite the immense amount of work involved, I

embodied the idiographic commitment of IPA (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022)

by working through each piece of data (each interview) before proceeding to the next. I

created documents with lists for the notes, statements, and themes that I created in my

University-secured OneDrive account, which allowed me to go back and track which

notes were connected to which statements and themes as I began to write about them in

the Findings section of this dissertation. Appendix D is just a small glimpse into the work

that went into this work and helps demonstrate the process through which I was able to write up my findings in Chapter 4. Since I had my experiential statements and exploratory notes in the same place, I was also able to backtrack and see which exploratory notes made up a statement which was clustered into a PET, allowing me to follow the original thought that underpinned each statement and refer to that as I wrote about it. In this way, the data analysis process and then the process of writing about that data in the findings chapter was like assembling a jigsaw puzzle only to disassemble it piece by piece. This methodology allowed me to see how each of the pieces fit together, allowing for a very informed and methodological final reassembly.

Another strength of this study is the robust research design, as well as the interconnection between that design and the theoretical framework and literature review. I went above and beyond most qualitative studies by doing three interviews with each participant to truly get to know their story, and I think this depth of knowledge and familiarity shines through in my Findings and Discussion chapters. I also like how my theoretical framework was not just an afterthought - it is truly baked into the soul of this study and comes through in every aspect, from the interview protocol to the findings and the discussion. Similarly, I liked how I set the stage for the feminist ethos of my project in the Literature Review by creating a clear picture of the state of gender disadvantage for women in America. I am also pleased that I connected the literature (both from the literature review and theoretical framework) back to my findings – the literature doesn't just remain in Chapter 2 and go unmentioned after that.

Overall, these things and many more make this dissertation a highly original and important contribution to the literature. By connecting topics like identity work and identity construction and gender and looking at those in the context of a specific population and then using the IPA methodology to get extremely close to the phenomenon, I think that this study is an example of the power of good qualitative research. One of the final things that I am proud of is the fact that I drew clear lines between my findings and the implications for practice. Not only are my recommendations for women and for IT organizations empirically based, but they are usable because they are written in a common language that any of the target audience could follow. Readers should note that I intentionally avoided using academic jargon in those sections; they were crafted for their audiences so that they are practical, usable, and accessible. My hope is that the Recommendations for Women in IT section in particularly is an accessible guide for women who feel stuck and isolated in male-dominated organizations. After this dissertation is published, my goal is to put my recommendations in front of IT organizations like Educause in hopes that they might gain a broader audience.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that although I had collected different institutional data points from participants (such as two-year vs. four-year institutions, non-profit vs. for-profit institutions, and research vs. teaching institutions), I did not explicitly explore how experiences differed between my participants in the lens of these data points. I probably did not explore this as much as I should because it turned out that all my participants were from 4-year non-profit institutions. While this was good in terms of my

methodology (since an IPA study should comprise a homogenous sample), it was also a limitation of the study because more knowledge could have been generated across experiences that did differ. For example, as illustrated in Table 1 of this study, my participants included a mix of public and private and teaching and research institution types that could have been further explored. Since no women were selected to participate who worked at 2-year institutions, that is also a limitation of this study.

Another limitation is that I did not account for participant heteronormativity in my demographic planning or interview protocol. I did not think to include demographic questions or interview protocol questions that considered gender diverse experiences, and for that reason my study skews towards the heteronormative experience by not exploring the experiences of my participants with their own salient gender and sexuality experiences in the workplace. Future research should explicitly explore the experiences of LGBTQIA+ women with their leadership identity construction experiences.

Delimitations

One specific delimitation that worked well in the context of this study was pairing the study's potential recruitment pool down to a smaller scope. After I submitted the initial proposal for this dissertation, Dr. Xia suggested that I narrow the study so that potential participants would need to have been in IT for at least 10 years to participate. With the overwhelming response that I received, I think that it was helpful that I narrowed the scope, and I think that it also resulted in a greater homogeneity of experiences for the participants in my study. Had I interviewed women who had been in IT for a year or two and then some who had been in IT for multiple decades, it would

have been much more challenging to draw commonalities among the way that they

constructed their leadership identities since participants would have been at different

stages of that process.

One area that I did not delimit in the participant requirements of this study was IT

organizational area or role level. For example, I did not delimit the study to women who

were CIOs or to women who worked in the Client Services area of their organizations. At

the outset of this study, I was concerned that not having a delimitation in place for this

might skew my study towards what experiences are like for women in one or two

subareas of IT and not necessarily represent all women in higher education IT settings.

To be able to tell if this would be an issue, I collected demographic information about

organizational unit and role level from each participant. At the end of the study, I found

that all my participants were from different areas of IT, showing that my study did not

skew towards a particular IT subarea. When it came to role type, I found that my sample

was mostly composed of women who were in a director role. So, while my results do not

skew toward organization subarea, they do skew towards the experiences of a director-

level woman in higher education IT and are not representative of the experiences of

women at all levels. In the future, delimiting the role type and/or organization subarea

might be helpful to further narrow the sample for any qualitative study done in this area.

Directions for Future Research

As one can see from the sheer length of the finished product of this dissertation,

there was a lot to unpack in this study's findings. Not only was this the case because I

had three interviews per participant, but also because I focused on two big concepts -

leadership construction and identity work. A qualitative study that is focused on just one of those specific aspects and streamlines the data collection method into one interview would be a good suggestion for future research. This would provide greater nuance and understanding to one of the aspects of this study while also allowing a different qualitative method (like narrative inquiry or grounded theory) to provide a different type of insight into this phenomenon. Another direction may be for me to select my most informative participant and write a follow up study to this one with a detailed narrative about their experiences. From a quantitative perspective, this study had such a small n that it may also be insightful to do a quantitative study with a larger data set. A priori codes based on the emergent codes developed in this study could be used, and having a larger n would help determine if the findings of this study are generalizable to a larger number of women in IT.

One of the very interesting things that came out of this study was the connection between adverse personal life situations (like divorce and traumatic relationships) and professional growth and success. For example, several of the participants of this study reflected on being in abusive relationships early on in their careers, and then discussed how they felt that growth from those negative circumstances may have been beneficial to their careers in the long run. I think that this connection is worthy of further qualitative study. Not only could it provide a wellspring of hope for early-career women who are experiencing life trauma/adversity, but this topic would help inform IT organizations how they could better support their women staff members who are actively experiencing trauma in their personal lives.

Next, I was fascinated by the relationship that emerged between identity separation and leadership in this study's findings. Several participants reported that blurred lines between their professional and personal spheres led to a greater sense of well-being. The flip side for this phenomenon was also true: one participant connected separating her identities earlier in her life with being extremely unhappy and not feeling free to be herself in all of life's contexts. I think that another IPA study would be well-suited for this topic to begin to understand what is happening here with the concept of identity integration and separation. Does blurring one's lines of identity happen at a linear point in time for all people in the workplace, regardless of adversity events? Is this phenomenon connected with psychological well-being and periods of adversity? More understanding is needed, which is why it would be well-suited for a qualitative study.

This study specifically examined the experiences of women who are actively in IT fields, but what about the experiences of women who leave IT? My study suggests that it is beneficial for women in IT to "just keep swimming" and stay the course, but is leaving IT a potentially healthier choice? While it is true that women can only ascend into IT leadership if they stay in the field, at what cost is that? To find this out, I am proposing two studies: one could look at the psychological impact of staying in the male-dominated IT field for women, by having a survey instrument given prior to beginning a career in IT and several months into the new position. Second, are women who leave IT for other fields happier compared to their peers who elect to stay? At the end of the day, it is all about well-being and choosing a career that is healthy and good for oneself, and these

studies could help generate new data that answers the question: What is truly best for the women in this field?

Finally, it would contribute to the literature for there to be a study that specifically addresses how people of color experience this phenomenon. Are there more or different challenges that they experience? Are there other ways in which they must construct their leadership identities or build up themselves prior to becoming leaders? After finding that out, it would be interesting to compare the experiences of women of color in IT to white women in IT to determine the specific ways in which those experiences differ. This information would provide another layer of nuance for women's leadership development programs and IT organizations, contributing information about the ways in which women of color who are aspiring toward IT leadership can be more adequately supported.

Summary

Women in higher education IT fields have an undeniably difficult experience as they struggle to advance their careers. As the participants of this study revealed, not only do women in higher education technology experience bias and challenges, but they must navigate those challenges in tandem with other types of personal growth that are necessary for leadership success. For example, all the while navigating the challenges that are brought on by the double bind, these women must continue to grow and increase their own resilience, actively build relationships and connections with others, find ways to develop their own personal authenticity, and solidify their growing leadership perspectives. These concurrent ways in which women must grow to succeed are

exhausting to say the least and this example highlights the remarkable determination and perseverance of these women.

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of women in higher education information technology with leadership identity construction. By closely examining and exploring the experiences of the six women who participated in this study, I have created a tapestry of lived experience that illustrates the challenges, strategies, and profound experiences as encountered by these women at the locus of their personal and social identity. Through this exploration, it is my belief that this study carves a significant niche within the body of literature dedicated to women in IT, leadership identity construction, and the broader domain of identity work by offering new and interdisciplinary insights. I am optimistic that this dissertation will serve as a catalyst for conversations within the higher education technology community, and my hope is that it will ignite discussions and embolden initiatives that create more support for the emerging women leaders of tomorrow.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

How Do Women in Technology Experience Leadership Identity Construction in Higher Education Organizations?

Participant Information:

Interviewee _____

Preferred pseudonym _____

Institution information (circle one): 2y or 4 y // public or private // non-profit or for-profit // research or teaching

IT organization (ex: client services, networking, or academic tech)
_____

Number of years in IT
_____

Race/ethnicity
_____

Email address _____

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. The purpose of this qualitative research study is to study the experiences of women in higher education information technology (IT) with leadership identity construction. In this study, I hope to learn about the identity work process that women in higher education IT go through, explore what causes these women to adopt and internalize a leadership identity, and examine the subsequent experience of what it is like for these women to express and attempt to gain acceptance for that newfound identity. During this interview, I will record and transcribe what we say today so that I accurately reflect your opinions and beliefs in my writing.

This project is fully dependent on your honest, personal opinions. For the sake of clarity,

please note that I may also ask you some additional questions that are not listed today.

Please also know that I will take every measure to safeguard your identity and protect

your privacy as a participant. We will have three, one-hour long interviews. In the first

interview, I will want to get to know you, your work history, and get a general

understanding of how your identity has changed over time. In the second interview, I will

ask you to recount their experiences of identity work and internalization and share what it was like to put that identity out there in a social context. In the third and final interview, I would like you to reflect on your overall experience of leadership identity construction and what that has been like for you in the context of your gender identity.

Date _____

Interview 1 – *Focus: Getting to know you and your work history. How have your identities changed over time?*

1. Tell me about your work history. What positions have you been in in your career and what do you do now?

2. Tell me about your leadership traits. Who are you as a leader?

3. Tell me about your other identities, beyond work. Which identities make up the complete you?

4. When did you first realize that you could be a leader in professional spaces? What led to that realization?

5. When you were first becoming a leader, did you perceive a sense of being endorsed by those around you in your organization as a leader? What was that like?

6. If you asked a person in your organization what a leader in your organization looks like and how they act, what would they say?

7. When you were first becoming a leader, did you feel the need to shed identities or traits that seemed "unleaderlike"? Please describe that experience.

8. On the flip side, did you feel the need to acquire new identities or traits that you thought would improve the way you were perceived? Please describe that experience.

9. How were you perceived by others when you first started in your most recent role? Has that changed?

10. What would you say have been the main obstacles or challenges for you in your leadership journey?

11. Do you feel like a leader sometimes and a follower at other times? What causes that shift?

12. What formative experiences have you had with leadership development in your organization or past organizations? How have those influenced you?

13. Have you had any particularly impactful mentors who have shaped your journey? Please describe them.

14. Where did your desire to lead come from?

15. What else would you like to say about who you are or your experiences with your leadership identity?

Date _____

Interview 2 – *Focus: Recounting experiences of internal identity work and identity internalization.*

1. Tell me about your professional identity. Who do you feel like you are in your job?

2. How do your personal and professional identities interact? For example, do you keep them separate, have you merged them, etc.?

3. When you were first becoming a leader, did you ever adopt any "fake it until you make it" strategies? Please explain.

4. Have any of your identities ever been threatened by your job? What did you do?

5. Tell me about a time that the opinion of others had an impact on your identity. For example, did any feedback cause you to make any changes to yourself?

6. When you were becoming a leader, were there times when your identity as a leader was not treated respectfully? How did that make you feel?

7. Would you say that you have boundaries between your professional and personal life? Please explain.

8. Are there any stories or narratives about yourself that you regularly use as a presentation of your identity? If you have one that stands out, can you tell me that story and shed some light on what you think it says about you?

9. Do you ever feel like you must perform certain gender stereotypes in the way that you work with others, like being caring, empathetic, or nurturing because it is feminine?

10. Have you ever had to regulate any aspects of your identity that you thought your organization might perceive as undesirable?

11. Prior to you becoming a leader in your organization, was there a time when you were not interested in becoming a leader? When did that shift for you and why?

12. In your own words, what does it mean to "become a leader"?

13. What was the experience of "becoming a leader" like for you? In which ways did you have to learn and develop to get to where you are now?

14. Has your organization supported your leadership development and growth? How so? Also, please explain if you have not felt supported in this way.

15. What else would you like to say about who you are or your experiences with your leadership identity?

Date _____

Interview 3 – *Reflect on your overall experience of leadership identity construction. What has that been like in the context of your gender.*

1. An important aspect of becoming a leader is putting yourself out there to your larger organization. What has that experience been like for you as a woman leader?

2. Tell me about some of your early supporters as you were beginning your leadership journey. How did they notice and support you?

3. What strategies do you use to maintain your leadership status in meetings or interactions with peers?

4. What strategies do you use to demonstrate that you are a capable leader when you are interacting with superiors?

5. Are there aspects of your physical appearance that you feel the need to manage so that they fit in with your desired leadership identity? Hair, clothes, body, makeup etc.? Please explain.

6. Are there any strategies (this could include verbal or non-verbal) that you use to gain more respect in interactions with men, specifically?

7. How does your race/ethnicity affect how others perceive you as a leader?

8. Do you believe you have to perform equally to a man or better than a man to get the same position or other benefits? Please explain.

9. Research shows that women receive increased negative feedback by subordinates. Have you ever experienced receiving increased negative feedback as an employee or supervisor due to your gender?

10. How long did it take you to gain acceptance as a leader in your current role?

11. Have there been any big moments in your career when you have been granted a leadership opportunity? This could include being given a big project, new role, or other opportunity because you were noticed. Why were you given this opportunity?

12. Has there ever been a time in the past when you tried to assert yourself as a leader and that was not reciprocated? What happened?

13. Since normativity and prototypical behavior is rewarded by followers/organizations, would you say that you have had to follow more norms (gender and otherwise) to rise in your organization? Please explain.

14. If you could go back in time and give your younger self some advice, what would be helpful for her to know about becoming a leader in IT?

15. What else would you like to say about who you are or your experiences with leadership identity construction?

Appendix B

Institutional Review Board Approval Letters

Original Approval Letter Received November 16, 2022

Nebraska
UNIVERSITY OF
Lincoln

Official Approval Letter for IRB project #22432 - New Project Form
November 16, 2022

Amy Barry
Department of Educational Administration
BL 305D UNL NE 685880110

Marilyn Grady
Department of Educational Administration
TEAC 128 UNL NE 685880360

IRB Number: 20221122432EX
Project ID: 22432
Project Title: How Do Women in Technology Experience Leadership Identity Construction in Higher Education Organizations?

Dear Amy:

This letter is to officially notify you of the certification of exemption of your project for the Protection of Human Subjects. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects at 45 CFR 46 2018 Requirements and has been classified as exempt. Exempt categories are listed within HRPP Policy #4.001: Exempt Research available at: https://research.unl.edu/researchcompliance/policies-procedures/.

o Date of Final Exemption: 11/16/2022
o Certification of Exemption Valid-Until: 11/16/2027
o Review conducted using exempt category 2(ii) at 45 CFR 46.104
o Funding (Grant congruency, OSP Project/Form ID and Funding Sponsor Award Number, if applicable): N/A

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Final Approval: 11/16/2022.

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:
* Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
* Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
* Any protocol violation or protocol deviation
* An incarceration of a research participant in a protocol that was not approved to include prisoners
* Any knowledge of adverse audits or enforcement actions required by Sponsors
* Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
* Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
* Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 402-472-6965.

Sincerely,

Becky R. Freeman, CIP
for the IRB

Full Accreditation

University of Nebraska-Lincoln Office of Research and Economic Development
nugrant.unl.edu

NUgrant

Approval Communication for Change Request Form Received March 28, 2023

Subject: NUgrant Message - IRB - Project Approved - Certification of Exemption - Change Request Form
Date: Tuesday, March 28, 2023 at 10:06:51 AM Central Daylight Time
From: Becky Freeman
To: Marilyn Grady, Amy Barry

NUgrant

RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION SYSTEM

IRB - Project Approved - Certification of Exemption - Change Request Form

Your project has been approved by the IRB.

Project Title: How Do Women in Technology Experience Leadership Identity Construction in Higher Education Organizations?

Approvers Comments:

Dear Amy Barry and Dr. Grady,

Project ID: 22432

Form ID: 60457

Review Type: Change Request Form Exempt Review

Title: How Do Women in Technology Experience Leadership Identity Construction in Higher Education Organizations

IRB Approval: 20221122432EX

The change request form has been approved to include the following changes and procedures as described in the form:

Approval Communication for Change Request Form Received May 11, 2023

Subject: NUgrant Message - IRB - Project Approved - Certification of Exemption - Change Request Form
Date: Thursday, May 11, 2023 at 11:20:13 AM Central Daylight Time
From: Becky Freeman
To: Jiangang Xia, Amy Barry

Header

RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION SYSTEM

IRB - Project Approved - Certification of Exemption - Change Request Form

Your project has been approved by the IRB.

Project Title: How Do Women in Technology Experience Leadership Identity Construction in Higher Education Organizations?

Approvers Comments:

Dear Amy Barry and Dr. Xia,

Project ID: 22432

Form ID: 60739

Review Type: Change Request Form Exempt Review

Title: How Do Women in Technology Experience Leadership Identity Construction in Higher Education Organizations?

IRB Approval: 20221122432EX

The change request form has been approved to include the following changes and procedures as described in the form:

1. It has been approved to use VidGrid transcription services. If interviews are not complete by

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF Nebraska Lincoln

IRB Project ID #: 22432

Participant Study Title: How Do Women in Technology Experience Leadership Identity Construction in Higher Education Organizations?

The purpose of this research is to study the experiences of women in higher education information technology (IT) with leadership identity construction. If you are a full or part time employee at an institution of higher education in the United States, if you are employed in the field of information technology, if you are at or over the age of consent, and if you identify as a woman, you may participate in this research.

Participation in this study will require approximately three hours, split into three one-hour long interviews. You will be asked to respond to interview questions that will be about your experiences with your professional and personal identities and your experiences seeking social acceptance for your leadership identity in the context of any gender bias you may have faced in your career. Participation will take place over Zoom.

You may benefit from participating in this research by learning more about yourself and your identities. Society may benefit from having a framework through which it can better support women in higher education information technology organizations.

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect the privacy and the confidentiality of your study data; however, in some circumstances we cannot guarantee absolute privacy and/or confidentiality. Research records will be stored electronically through University approved methods. Records will only be seen by the research team and/or those authorized to view, access, or use the records during and after the study is complete. After the study is complete, de-identified data will be stored in the UNL Data Repository. By de-identified, I mean that you will only be referred to as your pseudonym, with other identifying data such as employer, colleagues, and location redacted. If individual level data for this project is shared with journals as part of publication, it will only be shared as de-identified data.

This study will involve the collection of private information (name, dates, etc.). Your information could be used or distributed to another researcher for future research studies without an additional informed consent from you. Identifiers (name, dates, etc.) will be removed prior to being distributed.

If you have questions about this project, you may contact Amy Barry at (402)601-2267 or amybarry@nebraska.edu or Dr. Jiangang Xia at (402)413-1261 or jxia@unl.edu.

If you have questions about your rights or complaints about the research, contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (402)472-6965 or irb@unl.edu.

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can withdraw at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or your own institution. You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

By signing this form, you are providing your consent to participate. You will be given a copy of this document for your records.

Participant Name:

_____
  (Name of Participant: Please print)

Participant Signature:

_____

Signature of Research Participant Date

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln wants to know about your research experience. This 14 question, multiple-choice survey is anonymous. This survey should be completed after your participation in this research. Please complete this optional online survey at: http://bit.ly/UNLresearchfeedback.

Appendix D

Data Analysis Sample

	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
1	**Experiential Statements**	**Exploratory Notes**						
2	Easier to put herself out there when there are more women leaders	it was easier to put herself out there when there were more women leaders						
3		it's scarier to put herself out there with more males in the leadership roles bc "their voice o						
4		language: implying there is a gender hierarchy in her org						
5	Feeling that men might misinterpret her ideas	she thinks women leaders are more "on her side" and that's why she second guesses saying						
6		her former women CIOs would have all IS staff meetings						
7		they had a relational way of opening the meetings, but talking more casually/informally abo						
8	Agenda/business oriented w men, relational and informal w women leaders	it's more business oriented/driven now with male leaders						
9		with men, it's more of an agenda vs. a relationship						
10		language: dismisses her feelings her						
11		in the past, she felt more free to speak up and say she wanted to be a part of things						
12	Having to strategize her comments when she needs to step in a male meeting	now, she has to be on the agenda and make sure it's okay to say what she has to say						
13		female led meetings are conducive to chiming in						
14		men talk over you - she thinks it's personality driven						
15	Talking over people happens more frequently w men	more noticeable when a woman is trying to have a voice and a man talks over them						
16		she is also guilty of talking over people on occasion						
17		but, she tries hard not to. do the men?						
18		a lot of people were talking over each other on zoom						
19	She creates rules to keep everyone on a level playing field	she put in rules - you have to raise your hand to speak bc we're all talking over each other						
20		this also makes it so people have to have a better reason to say something						
21		stopping and thinking about what you're going to say is a good leadership skill						
22	Being more intentional with what you have to say is important	make sure what you have to say isn't coming out of a place of emotion, know what you're t						
23		someone at her previous institution was an early supporter						
24		he would acknowledge her and tell her to try for things and say she was good at things						
25	Impactful mentor would make recommendations and pave paths	he would recommend that she looked at things and said that "this is a good path for you" -						
26		he'd pave a path for her, it was her choice to take the path						
27		her next supporter						
28	Another mentor would trust her and make her feel safe to fail	she would believe in her and trust her to run with things						
29		she gave constant feedback, made Tiffany feel safe to share with her if she stumbled						
30		she was supportive up until Tiffany expressed an interest to be in leadership						
31		she didn't pave the path						
32		she went to her boss's boss and asked "how do I get to where you are someday?"						
33		after she kept bringing that up, the boss's boss scheduled regular meetings with her and sta						
34	Strategy to go to people 2 steps above her for advice	it's worked for her to go to people 2 steps above her						
35		current supervisor is too inundated with the day to day to support with the strategic planni						
36		no mentorship type support from current boss						
37		acknowledged her in private when she did well						
38		like coaching - I noticed you, good job, you should do this						
39		he recognized her by knowing where she should be and listening to her skills and strengths						
40	Mentor saw something in her she never saw in herself	he saw something in her she never saw in herself						
41		she thought she could only be a secretary before						
42		he recommended the IT field, stood behind her, and tried to push her into different things						
43		listening to understand pain points and determine where they might align						
44	Creates a relationship to help someone with their needs	if she can help someone else with their issues, it creates a relationship where they're tacklin						
45		accomplish something that is a mutual benefit and you are both going the same direction						
46		a listening approach vs. a speaking approach						
47	Does speaking with superiors, listening with peers	takes more of a speaking approach vs. a listening approach when demonstrating she's capa						
48		she feels like it's sometimes hard to get higher ups to listen to you						
49		so, if she's taking their time and they have limited time, she "has to shake them"						
50	Has to "shake" superiors and let them know what's going on at her level	you need to see the issues that i'm seeing a couple of org levels below you						
51		I'm the smoke letting you know there is a fire						

Nicole1 | Reba1 | Tina1 | Grace1 | Tiffany1 | Kaya1 | Nicole2 | Tina2 | Reba2 | Tiffany2 | Screenshot | Grace2 | Nicole3 | Tina3 | Reba

Ready   Accessibility: Good to go