The Experience of Women Who Are One of a Few on a Top Management Team: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of Women at 10 Healthcare Firms

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Abstract

Turbulence in the healthcare industry has created new demands for innovation, especially from Top Management Teams (TMTs). These teams are charged with both setting strategic direction and the resolution of competing demands for the organization’s time, talent, and dollars. The composition of a TMT appears to mediate its success at balancing these conflicting demands, but we know little about the impact of gender diversity, particularly from the perspective of those few women on TMTs. This paper addresses that gap by exploring the experience of ten women who are one of a distinct minority on a U.S. healthcare TMT.

In addition to context as a potential mediator of women’s experience on TMTs, minority status may also influence women’s contributions to the extent that social categorization impairs their sense of identity. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) provided an effective lens for exploring both the momentous career experiences of serving on a TMT and the potential impact of minority status on personal and social identity.

An identity continuum emerged from the research that reflected confidence and empowerment from personal identity, and social identification with TMTs that were both inclusive and supportive. The results suggest that steps to create an inclusive TMT culture and to build the sense of empowerment women on the TMT have may mitigate the projected downsides of adding women to the TMT.

Keywords: gender diversity, healthcare, innovation, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), qualitative research, social categorization, social identity, TMTs.
Dedication

To the love of my life, Tim Gaetano, this journey would have been impossible without you. I only wish you had been here for its conclusion.

*To the moon and back.*
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Organizations are dying at a faster rate than ever before. Publicly traded companies now have a shorter life expectancy than the employees who work for them (Reeves, Levin, & Ueda, 2016)—and it’s not by choice. Most organizations espouse a commitment to surviving and thriving for the long-term (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Tsui, Egan, & O’Reilly, 1992). Unfortunately, too few successfully adapt to changes in the external environment (Breslin, 2015; Reeves, Levin, & Ueda, 2016). Foster and Kaplan (2001) suggested that too many organizations focus on tweaking their current operations rather than on innovation and the kind of continuous transformation needed to respond effectively to market forces.

While innovation may be necessary for long-term survival, it is not only riskier than incremental improvements, it must be funded by the profits from those improvements (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009). Organizations that excel at both are ambidextrous, a status that O’Reilly and Tushman (2013) assert is synonymous with survival. The promise that ambidexterity might provide a recipe for long-term survival has fueled a substantial body of literature that explores the structural and contextual mechanisms that might enable a simultaneous focus on maximizing current operations and investing in the future (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2013).

A particularly robust stream of research explores the role of top management teams (TMTs) in balancing competing demands (e.g., Li, 2013; Lubatkin, Simsek, Ling, & Veiga, 2006; Umans, 2013). Hambrick (1995) defined the TMT as a group of approximately nine, highly influential executives that are generally recognized explicitly by titles such as the Executive Committee. While middle and operating management play key roles (Floyd & Lane, 2000), TMTs have the primary role in setting strategic direction (Talke, Saloma, & Rost, 2010) and bear
the primary responsibility for balancing the need to invest in existing operations versus the need to focus on innovation (Li, 2013; Smith & Tushman, 2005).

The composition of a TMT appears to mediate its success at balancing these conflicting demands (Dezsö & Ross, 2012; Opstrup & Villadsen, 2015; Umans, 2013). Of particular relevance to this study is the evidence suggesting that heterogeneity may enhance a TMT’s ability to foster new idea generation or solve novel problems, but hinder its ability to implement those ideas (Alexiev, Jansen, Van den Bosch, & Volberda, 2010; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Ndofor, Simon, & He, 2015; Tsui, Egan, & O’Reilly, 1992). The mechanisms generating this disparate impact are not well understood, despite the volume of studies that have attempted to unpack the TMT heterogeneity dilemma.

One problem plaguing the research is that diversity is not defined consistently. TMT compositional mediators addressed in the literature range from demographic to functional to personal background (Alexiev et al., 2010). Each dimension of TMT diversity motivates different organizational responses and is therefore likely to impact team functionality differently (Nielsen, 2010). Nielsen (2010) suggested that, as the demographic diversity of TMTs is slowly but surely increasing, gender warranted further attention from researchers as a mediator of interest.

Conflicting results for the impact of TMT diversity may also reflect the impact of context as a mediator. Parola, Ellis, and Golden (2015) found, for example, that organizational experience with mergers and acquisitions impacted the likelihood that gender diversity enhanced the effectiveness of the TMT’s role in acquisitions. Similarly, several studies (Carpenter & Fredrickson, 2001; Naranjo-Gil, Hartmann, & Maas, 2008) found that TMT diversity, broadly defined, only yielded benefits when uncertainty was high.
Social categorization is another possible mediator. Desivilya and Palgi (2014) studied women on Israeli TMTs and found that while the paucity of women on TMTs reflects a structural problem, a bigger concern may well be that social categorization seems to impact the nature of women’s involvement on TMTs. These results echo research by Ellemers, Rink, Derk, and Ryan (2012), who found that women’s sense of identity and the perceived impact of social categorization may impact their leadership experience. Thus, women on TMTs seemed to face several struggles that could impact their contributions to the team.

The Problem of Practice

The inexorable increase in gender diversity at the top levels of management adds fuel to an already identified concern, namely the impact of TMT heterogeneity on innovation. If the addition of women to the leadership team is to have a positive organizational impact, as headlines keep promising organizations that it does (Dishman, 2015), then research suggests we need to understand the experiences of those few women who have overcome the hurdles to joining a TMT (Ellemers et al., 2012). Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand how some of the few women who serve on a TMT of a healthcare organization, an industry plagued by healthcare reform uncertainty, make sense of their experience.

Research Question

The overarching question driving the proposed interpretive phenomenological analysis is:

*How do women on the top management team of a healthcare organization make sense of their experience when they are one of only a few women on the TMT?*

Rationale and Significance

Despite evidence that heterogeneous TMTs teams may enhance innovation (e.g. Dezső & Ross, 2012; Ndofor et al., 2015), TMTs have been one of the last bastions for corporate diversity...
with 50% of almost 22,000 corporate boards in 91 countries having no women on the TMT and another quarter having only one or two women (Noland, Moran, & Kotschwar, 2016). Even among the largest firms, namely the Fortune 500, women represented only 14.6% of the TMT as of 2013 (Catalyst, 2013b). To quote Bob Dylan (1964), however, “the times, they are a-changin’.” For example, the highest leadership level of those same Fortune 500 firms, namely the corporate boards, had 16.9% women in 2013 (Catalyst, 2013a). Evidence shows that the gender balance of corporate boards is rising rapidly in multiple countries due, at least in part, to a deluge of external pressure from researchers, business and political leaders, and critics (Corporate Women Directors International, 2014; Zaichkowsky, 2014).

The gender balance activism spotlight has begun to broaden its beam from its focus on corporate boards to encompass the executive ranks of organizations (Terjesen, Sealy, & Singh, 2009). At Davos 2016, a handful of the most powerful global CEOs committed publicly to gender parity by 2021 (Zarya, 2016). At the same time, The World Economic Forum reported that women now represent 50% of both its under-30 and under-40 leadership groups, suggesting that a shift in the gender balance of future TMTs, globally, is well under way (Zarya, 2016).

The increasing gender balance of the leadership pipeline holds much promise from a social equity standpoint. Teams, organizations, and societies, however, are struggling to achieve environments that are viewed as inclusive by either those in the minority or the majority (Dover, Major, & Kaiser, 2016). Absent a better understanding of how the few women chosen to serve on a TMT perceive their experience, TMTs may struggle to benefit from the increased heterogeneity.

The concern may be most acute in those industries where innovation is critical (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2013). While much of the research on TMTs and innovations focuses on the
technology sector (e.g., O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013), the healthcare industry is under increasing pressure to innovate. As Bessant, Künne, and Möslein, 2013) put it, the healthcare sector may struggle to balance increasing demand against funding pressures “without radical innovation” (p. 5).

**Theoretical Framework**

Recent research suggests the paucity of women on TMTs may influence women’s sense of identity because of social categorization and, as a result, impact their contributions. (Desivilya & Palgi, 2014; Ellemers et al., 2012). Thus, social identity theory (SIT) and social categorization theory (SCT) are used to frame the study. While the focus is limited to women on the TMTs of healthcare organizations, the research on group heterogeneity and diversity provides the relevant theoretical insight.

**Individual processes and inter-group behavior.** Social identity theory (SIT) was developed to help fill the knowledge gap that arose after then-current intergroup theories failed to yield sufficient insight to explain the rise of the Nazi party and the Holocaust (Hornsey, 2008). While SIT and SCT originally emerged out of Tajfel’s efforts to analyze intergroup processes, its applications are now so widespread that it is often viewed as a metatheory (Sindic & Condor, 2014).

Central to SCT is the notion of a social identity and the assumption that the development of one’s sense of self or identity is a relational and context-specific concept (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Individuals have multi-faceted lives, however, and thus interact in many different contexts, often with many different people. To make sense of the potential overload of information, individuals implicitly categorize information, social and otherwise, as a way to
make sense of an increasingly complex world (Page, 2007a). From an identity theory standpoint, the relevant categories are identity groups.

SCT posits that: (1) individuals define themselves based on the groups they identify with and (2) group identification is likely to be context-specific (Hogg et al., 1995). Hogg et al. (1995) suggested that social identity is descriptive in that stereotypical behaviors are associated with each group identity, and prescriptive as those stereotyped behaviors tend to influence individual behavior. Social identity is also evaluative in that all categories are not viewed as equal. Instead, social cognition impacts the relative value assigned to each category.

**Self-categorization theory (SeCT) as an extension of SIT and SCT.** SeCT explores the categorization and evaluative processes in more detail and the resulting impact of these processes on group behavior (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Tsui et al. (1992) suggested that, “in order for individuals to know how they feel about others, they must first define themselves” (p. 551) by self-categorizing. The self-affiliated categories then come to define one’s social identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). While SIT tends to downplay the notion of personal identity as separate from social identity, SeCT provides a valuable framework that treats both personal identity and social identity as levels of self-categories on a continuum, with the emphasis of social identity on a shared sense of self that reflects identification with a group (Turner et al., 1994).

Social identity becomes more important relative to personal identity when it is easier to compare oneself to members of a group and establish a fit based on a high degree of similarity to others in the group (Turner et al., 1994). Dichotomous variables, such as gender, more readily enable group differentiation and thus facilitate an analysis of comparative fit (Randel, 2002; Turner et al., 1994). Conflict can also shift individuals along the personal versus social identity
continuum. Several studies have found, for example, that social identities gain importance during times of conflict (Randel, 2002; Turner et al., 1994).

As the sense of social identity strengthens, the group identity gains importance for the individual. A key outcome of this group identification process is the de-emphasis, or depersonalization, of individual characteristics in favor of identification with the group characteristics (Turner et al., 1994). This depersonalization, according to Turner et al. (1994), then becomes a basis for explaining “major group phenomena” (p. 455) such as stereotyping, group cohesiveness, and competition between groups.

Because individuals strive to maintain a positive self-identity, they will strive for membership in a group with positive associations (Tajfel, 1982). When the individual achieves such positive group identification, they are motivated to take steps to maintain a positive view of the group. This can be achieved through selective accentuation of some group characteristics, while reinforcing others, and by emphasizing the comparative differences with other groups (Hogg et al., 1995). The notion of a positive group identity is, therefore, relational, and must be determined in comparison to another group(s), which becomes an out-group, thus establishing the basis for a hierarchy of groups (Hornsey, 2008).

**In-group and out-group conceptualization.** The foundational intergroup issue addressed by SCT is the notion that interactions do not take place in a vacuum; instead, individuals are impacted by the social environment in a way that causes people to categorize others in the group based on an in-group and out-group hierarchy (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Rather than an absolute hierarchy, the ranking of these identity groups reflects social cues that may be context specific (Tajfel et al., 1971).
Allport (1979) asserts that "it is difficult to define an in-group precisely" (p. 31), though the use by a group of the word "we" provides a reasonably clear signal of an in-group. While individuals must earn the right to belong to some in-groups, a TMT for example, membership in other groups, such as gender, is conferred by birth (Allport, 1979). Allport claims that the need to belong to in-groups is crucial “to individual survival” (p. 46).

A germane concept for understanding SCT is a reference group, which Allport defines as an in-group that an individual finds highly appealing and wishes or aspires to associate with. In-groups and reference groups may overlap, particularly for those in the majority. Minorities, however, may aspire to membership in and/or the privileges of the majority referent group. Even if the minority individual does not aspire to join the majority group, Allport (1979) asserts that he or she may be forced to adopt the practices, customs, and values of the majority referent group. Whether impelled or compelled to adopt the latter, the person in the minority may be rebuffed for the efforts. Thus, inherent conflicts are likely to arise when there is lack of congruence between one's in-group and referent group (Allport, 1979).

Solutions to these conflicts are illusive, even though group membership and the categorization of a group as in or out can be fluid. Macro level issues can result in previously accepted groups attaining out-group status, as has happened with immigrant status in the U.S. (Allport, 1979). Desired groups status may also shift over time as a result of personal preferences and choices. Allport (1979) presciently categorized political parties as an example of the later.

The strength of the attitude toward an out-group may mediate the ability to impact it. The presence of a common enemy, for example, is likely to solidify loyalty to the in-group. People belong to multiple in-groups, however, and exhibit a range of attitudes toward the relevant out-group for each category, from reviled to liked. Efforts to re-order individual attitudes about in-
group and referent group status, such as through intercultural competence training, may be futile (Allport, 1979). An easier, and more effective, approach might be to focus on changing group attitudes—if the appropriate leadership is provided such that group norms change (Allport 1979).

Though the research consistently supports two findings, namely that the cognitive separation of individuals into in-groups and out-groups appears pervasive and each group tends to view itself more positively than other groups view it, the evaluative judgments accorded to out-groups seems to be context specific (Tajfel, 1982). Individuals, however, may use social comparisons to in or out-groups and, as a result, internalize a negative message. For members of an out-group, this could lead to self-hate or to efforts to maintain a positive image. The latter could create a source of tension if the positive image conflicts with societal or context-specific evaluations of the out-group (Tajfel, 1982).

**The influence of group membership and perceived threats.** Though group categorization may be context specific, societies contribute to the creation of persistent in-groups and out-groups that influence group dynamics. This social favoritism takes place, even in the absence of scarcity or other forms of competition that might be expected to encourage group hierarchies (Tajfel et al., 1971). Perceptions about groups seem, instead, to reflect societal assumptions about the attributes, preferences, and motivations of the different groups and these collective assumptions permeate and reinforce all levels of a society (Tajfel et al., 1971). Most relevant to this study is Tajfel et al.’s (1971) finding that the socialized, implicit hierarchy of groups drives individual actions, which then influence intergroup relations.

One way to characterize intergroup relations is to consider interpersonal behavior as anchoring one end of a continuum and intergroup behavior anchoring the other end. On the interpersonal end, each in-group member views each person in the out-group as completely
differentiated (i.e. as individuals); at the other end, all out-group members are viewed as undifferentiated or as a collective (Tajfel, 1982). Tajfel (1982) asserts that, when tensions rise, social stereotyping and discrimination may result because behavior tends to shift closer to the undifferentiated end of the spectrum (i.e. out-groups are viewed as a "they" who “always” do X). The sources of differentiation are identity categories, the salience of which are context specific. Thus, specific identities will matter more to some groups, in some contexts, than to others (Randel, 2002).

Risks to positive identity arise if the status of a category deemed important is threatened (Randel, 2002). A key component of SCT is the likelihood that threats to a group’s perceived position on the group hierarchy will cause the group to respond negatively to the source of that threat (Hormsey, 2008). Alternatively, some threats, such as significant social change, could trigger sufficient intra-individual upheaval as to generate a reconceptualization of one’s social identity (Amiot, De la Sablonniere, Terry, & Smith, 2007).

**Summary of Research Design**

A qualitative research design was deemed most appropriate for exploring individual sense-making, particularly those in a minority situation such as the women on a TMT (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggested that interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was particularly valuable for exploring momentous personal experiences, such as being one of the few women appointed to an organization’s TMT. In addition, a growing body of research exploring identity issues relies upon IPA designs. Thus, IPA was selected from among the family of qualitative designs for the proposed study.
Conclusion

TMTs are charged with the most senior level responsibility for strategic innovation and thus play a crucial role in organizational survival (Talke et al., 2010). TMT heterogeneity appears to be a double-edged sword with the potential to both enhance and hinder innovation (e.g., Ndofor et al., 2015). A particular concern is the evidence that men and women may perceive shifts in gender balance differently (Randel, 2002; Tsui et al., 1992). SCT provides a valuable theoretical framework for exploring the salience of gender to the few women to join a TMT. Both the salience of identity (Randel, 2002) and the innovation imperative (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2013) may be context-specific. Thus, the proposed study will focus on TMTs in a single industry context, namely healthcare.

To establish the rationale for this research focus, the next chapter will explore the relevant literature streams. First, the literature on the innovation imperative will be explicated. A discussion of the role of the TMT and mediators of its impact on innovation will follow. Finally, the relevant research on TMT gender diversity and social categorization will be discussed. Chapter three will then explicate the proposed research design and its rationale.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Four strands of literature provide context and lay a foundation for exploring the experience of the few women on a TMT. First, the literature on the role and responsibilities of the TMT will be discussed briefly to provide context. The second strand addresses mediators of TMT success and/or failure. The third strand explores the intersection of TMT faultlines, gender diversity, and social identity. The final strand provides support for the relevance of the healthcare industry as a context for exploring the problem of practice.

The Role and Responsibilities of the TMT

The upper echelon perspective, as originally framed by Hambrick and Mason (1984) succeeded in shifting the research dialog on organizational outcomes from a focus on either externalities or a reified view of the organization to one that included the unique impact top managers have on outcomes, defined by the authors as “strategic choices and performance levels” (p. 193).

The concept of strategic choice was defined broadly to incorporate complex, ambiguous decisions that necessitated interpretations and assumptions that would, ergo, rely upon the subjective cognitive frames and the values of the individual decision-makers (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). In other words, the complexity and ambiguity of strategic decisions requires executives and TMTs to make choices based on incomplete information. How those information gaps are filled in reflects both individual and collective thought processes. Viewed sequentially, executive’s perceptions are first framed by the relevant knowledge they have been able to acquire, which is delimited by the relative importance assigned to that knowledge, which is further limited by the interpretation of that information through each leader’s cognitive lens and
value system (Hambrick & Snow, 1977). Team decisions then reflect the collective heterogeneity or homogeneity of TMT members’ interpretations.

Two critical roles generally assigned to the TMT are strategic direction and the resolution of competing demands for the organization’s time, talent, and dollars through the allocation of resources, both of which directly influence innovation (Smith, 2014; Talke et al., 2010). In large, complex organizations that have embraced structural separation between those units focused on current business endeavors and those focused on new ideas, the TMT may be the only group in a position to integrate the disparate activities and demands of the business units (Smith & Tushman, 2005). Even with a contextual approach, which embraces the opportunity to reconcile competing demands within each organizational unit, there is often a heavy reliance upon behavioral and social strategies that are determined by the TMT or which require its intervention (Li, 2013).

Alexiev et al. (2010) found that the TMT’s influence on innovation “emerged as an important theme” (p. 1344) in the literature. A number of researchers (He & Wong, 2004; Smith, 2014; Talke et al., 2010), for example, have identified the TMT’s responsibility for resource allocation, whether across (structural) or within (contextual) business units, as a key way the TMT impacts innovation. Floyd and Lane (2000) also found that, while each level of management contributes to organizational innovation, only TMTs were in a position to evaluate new opportunities that arose across the organization and to then select those with the best competitive potential. Despite widespread acknowledgment of the potential impact of the TMT, the determinants of a TMT’s effectiveness still plagues researchers (Li, 2013). As a result, a significant body of literature has developed to explore TMT mediators.
TMT Mediators

Researchers have explored an array of mediators that influence TMT behaviors and performance, including: external issues such as the pace of technological change or globalization (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2008); organizational level characteristics such as firm size or prior performance (Smith, Smith, Olian, Sims, O’Bannon, & Scully, 1994); and unit level issues, such as the distribution of power (Finklestein, 1992), levels of team interdependence (Barrick, Bradley, Kristof-Brown, & Colbert, 2007), team processes for communication and tasks (Edmondson, Roberto, & Watkins, 2003), and team composition (Nielsen, 2010). The latter two research streams have been explored jointly in a number of studies, and both have also been linked to SCT, the theoretical framework for this author’s research. Thus, each of these two latter stream merits elucidation.

TMT composition as a mediator. The literature on TMT composition, which has intrigued researchers since Hambrick and Mason’s (1984) seminal work explicating the Upper Echelons Theory, now constitutes a significant body of work (Nielsen, 2010). Hambrick and Mason (1984) asserted that efforts to predict organizational outcomes improved with the executive team as the unit of analysis, rather than only the CEO, because of the additional insight gained from the study of the TMTs “dispersion characteristics, such as homogeneity and balance” (p. 197). A key focus of subsequent research has been the quest to identify those aspects of TMT heterogeneity that will improve performance, as well as those that might weaken it (van Knippenberg, Dawson, West, & Homan, 2011).

One school of thought takes the position that diversity is beneficial because varied perspectives enhance performance through the generation of new ideas (e.g., Page, 2007a; Van de Ven, 1986). Li (2013) suggested this might be the case because “diverse TMTs have access to
more information” (p. 877). Researchers representing the opposing school of thought argue that those varied perspectives are likely to increase conflict, and reduce trust and communication (Klenke, 2003; Parola et al., 2015; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999).

The conflicting impact of TMT heterogeneity has been affirmed over time in an array of empirical studies. Hambrick, Cho, and Chen’s (1996) evaluation of TMT heterogeneity in the airline industry found both positive and negative implications for competitive decision-making, though the positive results outweighed the negative ones. In another study, Alexiev et al. (2010) found that heterogeneous TMTs exhibited some advice-seeking behaviors that increased risky investments, but also exhibited other behaviors that hindered risk-taking. Similarly, Ndofor et al. (2015) found that heterogeneous TMTs outperformed with respect to generating novel ideas to combat competition, but they underperformed when it came to implementing novel ideas.

The research results are inconsistent, however. Umans (2013), for example, found that TMTs with higher levels of national diversity were less innovative, and that firm performance suffered as a result. Thus, the research on TMT compositional mediators warrants additional explication. First demographic differences, including gender, will be explored, followed by a discussion of process or behavioral mediators.

**TMT demography.** Demography has become a highly charged term that, nonetheless, is often user defined. The EEOC, for example, defines the following demographic variables: sex, ethnicity, race, and physical ability (EEOC, 2014). Hambrick and Mason (1984), on the other hand, defined demography broadly to include “observable managerial characteristics…such…[as] age, tenure in the organization, functional background, education, socioeconomic roots, and financial position” (p. 196). Subsequent research has attempted to parse out the impact of different sources of TMT demography.
One approach frequently adopted in the literature for evaluating the impact of
demography is to bifurcate the analysis based on characteristics that are either invisible and/or
job-related versus sources of difference that are not job-related and/or are visible, such as bio-
diversity. Specific TMT job-related mediators that have been explored include: job function and
expertise (Carpenter & Fredrickson, 2001), organizational tenure (Finklestein & Hambrick,
1990), and education (Carpenter & Fredrickson, 2001). The mediators on the flipside of this
category have been classified as surface-level, observable, or bio-diversity. It includes categories
such as age (Richard & Shelor, 2002; Wiersema & Bantal, 1992), gender (Li, 2014), race, and
nationality (Umans, 2013).

Naranjo-Gil et al. (2008) asserted that one reason for ambiguity in the TMT literature is
the failure, in many cases, to differentiate between job-related and non-job related mediators.
The authors found, for example, that job-related diversity positively impacted the TMT, but they
found no impact for mediators that were not job-related. The researchers further argued that the
literature, in the aggregate, provides more, and more consistently positive, support for the impact
of job-related TMT diversity.

The debate is not inconsequential and the authors of a number of recent meta-analyses
have attempted to reconcile the competing views regarding which, if any, type of team
One such analysis, albeit not one limited to TMTs, attempted to reconcile research results that
purportedly favored a positive impact from job-related diversity and a negative impact from non-
job related diversity (van Dijk et al., 2012). The authors, who found multiple studies supporting
the benefits of each type of diversity, asserted that rater bias might explain the negative-only
impact from some studies because the latter tended to over-rely upon subjective, bias-prone
surveys. That said, the authors found the strongest case for the innovation benefits (e.g. complex information processing) from job-related diversity (van Dijk et al., 2012).

Another meta-analysis that focused specifically on TMTs found no consistent impact on performance from any type of diversity (Homberg & Bui, 2013). Instead, Homberg and Bui (2013) argued that the published results reflected a publication bias, defined as a higher likelihood that certain articles would be published “due to an editor’s or referee’s preferences for a certain type of results” (p. 457), such as those showing a highly significant and positive diversity link. Homberg and Bui’s meta-analyses might be interpreted to affirm a concern Hambrick and Mason (1984) identified in their seminal work, namely that subsequent research might determine that “observable demographic factors do not provide a reliable portrayal of a person’s makeup” (p. 204). Decades later, however, with the hindsight of thousands of citations for the seminal article, Hambrick (2007) defended demography broadly for its value as a proxy for cognitive diversity.

A study by Naranjo-Gil et al. (2008) emphasized the importance of cognitive diversity. The researchers found that the impact of job-related, TMT diversity was more valuable when uncertainty, and the resulting pressure for strategic change, was high. They found no relationship for visible dimensions of diversity, specifically age and gender, which they attributed to the much broader scope of cognitive diversity captured by the job-related measures of difference. The relevance of turbulence and uncertainty echoes Carpenter and Fredrickson’s (2001) assertion that, at least for some moderators, the external environment moderates the impact of diversity. While Carpenter and Frederickson found a consistently positive impact from diverse educational backgrounds, functional and tenure diversity only mattered when uncertainty was high.
Recently, TMT researchers have argued for more sophisticated measures of TMT demography. Li (2013), for example, encouraged future researchers to explore more detailed sub-components of diversity. Similarly, Nielsen and Nielsen (2013) argued that the ambiguous results from TMT composition research could only be resolved by parsing out the impact of individual modifiers because “group processes and firm performance are not influenced in the same way by every aspect of diversity” (p. 373).

In a prior meta-analysis, Nielsen (2010) concluded that further unpacking of the individual measures of TMT heterogeneity was needed, particularly the under-researched measures of visible diversity. The author suggested that future research might yield different results when increasing numbers of women and racial minorities were added to TMTs, thus rendering visible diversity an easier construct to study. Given the relevance of TMT gender balance to this study, additional delineation of the gender research to-date is warranted.

**Gender diversity as a compositional moderator of increasing interest.** Krishnan and Park (2005) argued that gender is an important TMT mediator to explore because it is a more complex construct than the other variables that have dominated the literature, such as age, function, or tenure. Historically, it has been difficult to study TMT gender composition because these top leadership teams have remained stubbornly homogenous (Klenke, 2003), with women representing, on average, only 14% of TMT members in 91 countries and 15% in North America (Noland et al., 2016).

This paucity of women on TMTs may have contributed to the conflicting results Homberg and Bui (2013) identified in a meta-analysis of the TMT gender diversity research. The authors discounted the value of this literature stream because studies have variously found that gender can have a positive impact, a negative one, or a neutral impact. Subsequent studies have
similarly yielded ambiguity. Parola et al. (2015), for example, found that TMT gender diversity enhanced pre-merger performance but negatively impacted post-integration performance, an outcome that seems consistent with the position that diversity enhances idea generation but may hinder implementation (Klenke, 2003).

Parola et al. (2015), however, found that the impact of gender diversity was context-specific, rather than universal, as acquiring firms experienced in mergers and acquisitions were able to avoid the post-integration problems associated with gender diversity. Other researchers have similarly identified the relevance of organizational context as a lens that may help resolve the contradictory results for the impact of TMT gender diversity. For example, several studies that explored other dimensions of TMT composition found that diversity only mattered, or mattered most, when times were uncertain (Carpenter & Fredrickson, 2001; Naranjo-Gil et al., 2008).

In contrast, an earlier study by Krishnan and Part (2005) found a direct and positive impact from TMT gender diversity for firms in the Fortune 1000, regardless of the levels of environmental uncertainty. That said, the authors observed that the focus of their research encompassed the entire Fortune 1000; that breadth may have masked the impact of environmental turbulence. An industry-specific focus might, for example, have yielded a differential impact. As the number of women on TMTs increases, future explorations of TMT gender diversity on an industry-specific basis might yield valuable insight.

Another contextual moderator of gender diversity that has interested researchers since Kanter’s (1977) seminal work on gender balance is the number or proportion of women in a work group. Kanter found that when women represent a very small percentage of a work group, they were viewed as token representatives of their gender. This impacted how others in the group
viewed them, how they viewed themselves, and, as a result, negatively impacted group performance. Though Kanter called for future studies to operationalize the specific numbers or proportions that mattered, the author hypothesized that once the level of women was gender balanced, defined as between 40-60% of the group, the negative impact would disappear.

The gender balance construct has been difficult to operationalize at the executive leadership level due to the paucity of women (Ruiz-Jiménez, del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes, & Ruiz-Arroyo, 2014). One related and fruitful line of research is the investigation of gender balance on corporate boards, particularly in those countries where gender quotas have facilitated the research. Torchia, Calabrò, and Huse (2011), for instance, studied corporate boards in Norway because it was “one of the few countries in the world with a sufficient number of companies where gender diversity” (p. 300) exceeded the level of tokenism.

Though Kanter focused on proportions, Torchia et al. (2011) relied upon prior corporate board studies (e.g. Konrad, Kramer, & Erkut, 2008) that demonstrated the numerical relationship between numbers of board directors and Kanter’s proportions. In particular, given the average size of corporate boards of between ten and twelve members, Torchia et al. (2011) identified a level of three or more women as the critical mass needed to achieve gender balance. As none of the Norwegian firms had a majority of women, it was not necessary to operationalize the upper limits of gender balance. It should be noted that the number/proportion relationship would be even more similar to Kanter’s (1977) proportions for a TMT, based on Hambrick’s (1984) identification of nine members as the typical size of a TMT.

Torchia et al. (2011) tested the impact of differential levels of women directors on firm innovation. Consistent with Kanter’s (1977) hypothesis, the researchers found that adding one or two women directors had no impact on firm innovation. The researchers asserted that the absence
of an impact at low levels of gender diversity affirmed the negative “behavioral consequences” (p. 310) of token status. In contrast, firms with a critical mass of three or more women directors achieved significantly higher levels of innovation in the study. Torchia et al. (2011) identified improved “minority-majority interactions and processes” (p. 311) as the likely source for the improved performance.

In a study of women on corporate boards in Germany, a country with voluntary quotas, Joecks, Pull, and Vetter (2013) confirmed and extended Torchia et al.’s (2011) results. A notable difference is that Joecks et al. found that corporate performance actually deteriorated at token levels of gender diversity. These results, if generalizable, suggest that organizations may need to embrace process or behavioral strategies to counteract the impact of tokenism if a TMT has low levels of gender diversity.

In one of the few studies to explore the impact of critical mass on a TMT, Ruiz-Jiménez et al. (2014) found that high levels of gender diversity had a significantly positive, though indirect, impact on innovation at high-tech firms in Spain. In particular, Ruiz-Jiménez et al. (2014) found higher levels of gender diversity were associated with an enhanced ability of TMTs to develop innovation through a knowledge combination capability or “by making better use of the knowledge generated or acquired by the firm” (p. 9). Low levels of gender diversity, on the other hand, had virtually no impact on the knowledge combination capability.

Rather than isolate gender as a mediator, a number of researchers have identified the value of exploring multiple moderators. To illustrate, Klenke (2003) argued that, rather than serving as a direct modifier, gender indirectly influences TMT decision-making processes specifically, Klenke (2003) found that, while gender might appear to impact decision-making processes, it was more likely that gender directly influences four underlying processes and
behaviors that, in turn, influence decision-making. The four constructs, which Klenke (2003) used to frame a conceptual model, are: power, internal politics, conflict management, and trust (p. 1025). This approach is consistent with Alexiev et al.’s (2010) study, which concluded that it is not sufficient to study composition in isolation. The researchers found the most valuable insight came from exploring the intersection of TMT heterogeneity and behaviors.

While the evidence suggests that gender matters, Mensi-Klarbach (2014) urges researchers to avoid an “overly simplistic dualistic model” (p. 541) that reinforces stereotypes that, ultimately, further disenfranchise women. This is not to suggest that gender is irrelevant as research clearly supports the dominance of male-centric notions for determining appropriate organizational practices and norms (Billing, 2011; Murray & Syed, 2008). The value of studying TMT gender diversity, therefore, may come less from identifying supposed benefits of one gender over the other, and more from understanding the processes and behaviors that either hinder or enable maximal performance at the individual and group levels.

**TMT processes and behaviors as mediators.** Researchers have long acknowledged the need to look beyond TMT composition to explain the impact of the TMT. Knight, Pearce, Smith, Olian, Sims, Smith, and Flood (1999), for example, identified the need to look beyond TMT composition to group processes and behaviors because demography alone had failed to provide clarity regarding the mediators of TMT performance. In particular, the authors suggested that, because different experiences and different backgrounds likely contributed to different cognitive models, TMT diversity was likely to generate conflict.

**Behavioral integration.** Hambrick (1995) first identified the relevance of behavioral integration, defined as the degree of mutual collaboration and interaction on a TMT (Hambrick, 2007), in response to observations of leadership teams that behaved like anything but a team.
Hambrick (1995) then defined behaviorally integrated TMTs as ones that shared a rich volume of information quickly, collaborated with one another, and made joint decisions. The researcher asserted that management groups that failed to exhibit these behaviors did not qualify as a team (Hambrick, 1995).

Structure and processes may serve to inhibit team integration. Examples include: TMTs that only meet formally a few times a year; teams that are so spread out geographically that little informal communication takes place; and TMTs that have virtually no overlap in job functions or decision-making (Hambrick, 1995). Li (2014) for example, asserted that self-interest might further exacerbate conflict because each TMT member typically has different functional responsibilities. The extent to which responsibility for current operations and innovation are assigned to different members of the TMT could also exacerbate fragmentation (Jansen, Tempelaar, van den Bosch, & Volberda, 2009)

A number of researchers have demonstrated the benefits of behaviorally integrated TMTs (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2006; Li, 2014; Lubatkin et al., 2006; Opstrup, 2015). Carmeli and Schaubroeck (2006), for example, found that integrated TMTs were more likely to avoid organizational decline because they encouraged divergent opinions yet still achieved consensus decisions. Lubatkin et al. (2006) similarly found that behaviorally integrated TMTs were more adept at balancing competing demands. The issue of how diversity impacts behavioral integration will be explored next.

*The impact of diversity on behavioral integration.* One early exploration of the impact of diversity on behavioral integration by Knight et al. (1999) found no direct impact on strategic consensus from an array of diversity metrics (i.e. age, tenure, function, and education), but they found a significant, and primarily negative, indirect impact. In particular, in a study of 82 high
tech firms in Ireland, the researchers found that the levels of interpersonal conflict were positively correlated with the diversity measures, which in turn reduced the likelihood that a TMT used the agreement-seeking behaviors needed to achieve a strategic consensus.

The only visible dimension of TMT diversity explored in the Knight et al. (1999) study was age, a dimension that may well interact with job-related dimensions such as length of experience or tenure. The authors called for future TMT research to further unpack the dimensions of diversity that might interact with group processes and strategic decision-making. One such study of 196 firms in multiple industries in China explored the impact of TMT diversity on different types of intra-group conflict (Li, 2014).

Similar to Knight et al.’s results (1999), Li (2014) found that TMT heterogeneity was a source of increased intra-group conflict, and that conflict hampered key TMT functions such as environmental scanning and strategic planning. The authors further unpacked the nature of conflict and found that TMT diversity negatively impacted both task and process conflict, but not relationship conflict. The researchers hypothesized that long-term TMT relationships in their survey sample might have attenuated the impact of relationship conflict. Of note, Li (2014) also found that TMT behavioral integration strategies helped to reduce the “harmful effects of task and relationship conflict” (p. 317).

A recent study by Opstrup and Villadsen (2015) looked specifically at the intersection of TMT gender diversity and behavioral integration. Notably, the authors found that gender diversity improved organizational outcomes, but only for a behaviorally integrated TMT that “shares responsibility broadly” (p. 299). In contrast, the benefits of gender diversity disappeared when the TMTs were structured to emphasize individual tasks and capabilities (Opstrup & Villadsen, 2015). Though the study was limited to TMTs of public sector entities in Denmark,
the results point to the value of a similar exploration of the impact of behavioral integration on corporate TMTs as more women are added to the team.

In a review of the literature to-date exploring gender as a TMT compositional mediator, Mensi-Klarbach (2014) expressed a different behavioral concern, namely that research too often relied upon gender stereotypes that ascribed certain behaviors to men and different behaviors to women, rather than acknowledging the influence of gendered norms on an organization’s processes, values, and behaviors. Mensi-Klarbach (2014) asserted that, before an organization can benefit from gender diversity, “identity differences have to be exploited and valued” (p. 544).

Shore, Randel, Chung, Dean, Ehrhart, and Singh (2011) also identified the relevance of identity as a mediator of group effectiveness. The authors called for a research shift from the impact of diversity on outcomes to a focus of the impact of inclusion, defined as an environment in which an employee perceives they are valued because the human need to feel both unique and socially accepted as a group member are met. Prime and Salib (2014) tested the impact of inclusion, also defined as a combination of feeling unique yet still belonging, on self-reports of innovation in six different countries: Australia, China, Germany, India, Mexico, and the United States. The results of the practice-based research found that in five of the six countries, the combination of perceiving “they were both similar to and distinct from their coworkers” (p. 4) resulted in a sense of inclusion; in India, the two concepts seemed to be perceived as interchangeable.

Prime and Salib (2014) found that in all six countries, when employees felt included, they reported higher levels of behavior linked to both innovation and team productivity. Of note, the authors reported comparable definitions of inclusion, and impact on outcomes, for both men and women. The study did not isolate results for senior leaders from all other employees. This is
noteworthy as Shore et al. (2011) warned that inclusion might elude women who struggle to achieve membership in a top leadership group, which is typically a high status, predominantly male group, because their gender calls attention to their uniqueness.

**Caveat Emptor.** Barkema and Shvyrykov (2007), in a study of the impact of TMT heterogeneity, warned of the risk when new TMT members became socialized to the group. The authors suggest that, over time, the benefits of cognitive diversity may erode as group-think replaces diversity of thought, which “increases the likelihood that strategic action will be incremental and conventional instead of innovative” (p. 675).

**Social Integration.** Smith et al. (1994) extended earlier research by O'Reilly, Caldwell, and Barnett (1989) on social integration, or the extent to which an individual felt psychologically linked to a group, to TMTs. The researchers found that social integration and demography have an interactive effect, such that a cohesive TMT is less hampered by the demands of “group maintenance” (p. 432) and thus better positioned to positively impact growth and efficiency. The authors interpreted the results as evidence that social integration further explained variance in TMT performance that could not be explained by demography alone.

Rico, Molleman, Sánchez-Manzanares, and Van der Vegt (2007) subsequently characterized social integration as a context-specific factor that should be explored in conjunction with team demography, particularly to the extent that diversity within a specific team creates faultlines around which sub-groups formed. While faultlines hold a prominent place in the TMT literature (Minichilli, Corbetta, & MacMillan, 2010; Ndofor et al., 2015; van Knippenberg et al., 2011), van Knippenberg et al. (2011) suggested there was a gap that called for further research on the intersection between social categorization theory (SCT) and TMT
faultlines. As such, the existing literature that addresses the intersection of TMT gender diversity, social categorization and faultlines warrants discussion.

**TMTs and the Intersection of Faultlines, Social Categorization, and Gender Balance**

While research suggests that an increase in new and different ideas are a benefit of diversity, the vetting of those ideas among people who think differently can lead to increased conflict (Klenke, 2003; Naranjo-Gil et al., 2008; Page, 2007a). SCT posits that conflict will increase the salience of social identity and, as a result, the importance of group identity (Randel, 2002; Turner et al., 1994). The resulting social categorization may then intensify intragroup conflict that overwhelms the benefits of TMT heterogeneity (Li, 2014). Li (2014) suggested, for example, that anticipation of intragroup task, process, or relationship conflict among members of a TMT might negatively impact key TMT contributions such as “cognitive flexibility and creative thinking” (p. 305).

Rising tensions are likely to result from inter-group conflict, which can exacerbate stereotyping and discrimination, and increase the us-versus-them behavior that categorizes group members into in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel, 1982). A critical problem for TMT researchers is that the formation of sub-groups may strip the TMT of the behaviorally integrated qualities of a team that underlie group level analysis (Hambrick, 2007). When executive teams fail to exhibit team-like behaviors, Hambrick (2007) suggested that analysis should focus, instead, on the existence, composition, and interaction of sub-groups. Faultline analysis provides useful insight for assessing the strength of sub-groups.

**Faultlines.** While some researchers advocate for exploring TMT diversity by isolating demographic attributes (e.g., Nielsen & Nielsen, 2013) and others by clustering them (e.g., van Knippenberg et al., 2011), the faultline research offers illuminating insight on the latter,
particularly the potential impact of sub-groups forming based on multiple sources of difference among group members. Early research focused on faultlines as a source of disruption, but subsequent applications have shifted to a broader focus that treats faultlines as mediators of performance (van Knippenberg et al., 2011).

A seminal study by Lau and Murnighan (1998) explored faultlines, defined as dividing a group’s members into sub-groups “on the basis of one or more attributes” (p. 325). The authors found that faultlines were both stronger and more likely to impact group performance when sub-groups differed from one another on more than one, easily identified, attribute. For example, if a group of four consisted of two 20-something white women new to the firm and two 40-year old black men with five years of tenure, a strong faultline would likely result that sub-divided the group into two homogeneous subgroups based on age, race, gender, and tenure.

On the other hand, the researchers suggested the faultlines would be much weaker, and less predictable, when differences are not clearly aligned, thus enabling an array of potential subgroups (Lau and Murnighan, 1998). If the group of four, for example, included a 26-year old white woman new to the firm, a 26-year old black woman with five years at the firm, a 40-year old black man new to the firm, and a 40-year old white man with five years of tenure, it is difficult to predict what faultlines might arise (i.e. age, race, gender, or tenure), but they would tend to be weaker than in the prior situation as group members would share characteristics with members of the other sub-group.

Lau and Murnighan (1998) focused on demographic attributes because these differences are easily identified and difficult for group members to disassociate themselves from, but acknowledged that, over time, other sources of difference might become the source of faultlines in groups with stable membership. As a result of the potential for faultlines, Lau and Murnighan
(1998) asserted that researchers needed to explore multiple sources of difference, and the potential interplay of those differences, in order to analyze the modifiers of team performance.

Barkema and Shvyrykov (2007) applied Lau and Murnighan’s (1998) faultline construct to a measure of TMT strategic innovation, namely foreign expansion, and confirmed that strong faultlines were associated with lower rates of innovation. The researchers further hypothesized, but did not test, that social integration strategies for building trust and improving communications would be more difficult for diverse TMTs with strong faultlines. Reinforcing Barkema et al.’s (2007) results, Ndofor et al. (2015) found that heterogeneous TMTs were more effective at converting firm resources into successful performance—except when strong faultlines developed. When that happened, the downsides of diversity were more likely to outweigh the advantages (Ndofor et al., 2015).

While faultline research provides additional insight about the impact of TMT diversity, Van Knippenberg et al. (2011) asserted that the related literature finds demographic differences matter in some cases and not others because the construct only captures comparative fit, or the degree of difference within a group. Instead, the authors assert that it is also necessary to understand identity salience, or the extent to which those differences matter, as well as the factors that trigger category salience. To address this gap, van Knippenberg et al. (2011) developed the Categorization-Elaboration Model (CEM) to extend the TMT faultline analysis to incorporate the strength of identity salience. Given that social categorization theory (SCT) suggests that faultlines are more likely to develop around identity attributes deemed particularly salient by group members (Tajfel, 1982; Turner et al., 1994), the CEM reflects both faultline theory, through comparative fit, and SCT, through normative fit.
Based on an empirical analysis of the TMTs of 42 manufacturers in the UK, Van Knippenberg et al. (2011) concluded that diversity by itself had no measurable impact; it was the salience of social categorization that yielded meaningful insight about the impact of TMT diversity on performance. Further, the presence of shared objectives served to ameliorate the negative impact on performance when strong faultlines developed. This conclusion seems consistent with the results of Opstrup and Villadsen (2015), namely that shared responsibilities ameliorated the negative implications associated with TMT gender diversity.

Of particular relevance to this study, Van Knippenberg et al. (2011) found that the strongest faultlines developed when gender was one of the faultline dimensions, with gender and function forming the strongest faultline of all. The literature on the intersection of SCT and gender, particularly the combination of faultlines around gender and function, are discussed next.

**Gender.** Gender is generally viewed in the literature as a dichotomous variable (i.e. male or female) that enables easy identification of comparative fit (Randel, 2002; Turner et al., 1994). It is also a highly visible characteristic, which enables easy classification (Umans, 2013). Van Knippenberg et al. (2011) further argued that gender has significant normative connotations because of strong stereotypes.

Ellemers et al. (2012) theorized that addressing the structural hurdles to TMT gender diversity (e.g. by appointing more women to the team) would not be sufficient because the impact of stereotypes and social categorization on expectations would impact women’s contributions. The researchers relied upon the empirical and theoretical analyses of others to develop a model (see Figure 1) of their hypotheses. Assuming that stereotypes are inevitable, the researchers posited that women could either embrace gender salience or reject it. If they embraced a gender-based identity that reflected stereotypes, they would be at risk of the glass
cliff effect, which could impair the prospects of individual women who might reject stereotypical identification. If TMT women reject the notion that gender, and female stereotypes, matter, they are much more likely to resist the notion that they are like other women and assert that their behavior is uniquely defined. This queen bee effect, the researchers theorized, was likely to hamper women’s career progress in the aggregate (i.e. having women on the TMT would not aid the progress of women generically).

**Figure 1. Glass Cliff effects and Queen Bees: Impact of Gender Bias and Self-views**

![Diagram showing the interplay between biased treatments of women in organizations and gendered self-views.]

Figure 1. Schematic representation of how glass cliff effects and queen bee effects emerge due to the interplay between biased treatments of women in organizations and gendered self-views.


Desivilya Syn and Palgi (2014), though they did not test Ellemers et al.’s (2012) model explicitly, did find support for the impact of gender stereotypes on the behavior of TMT members. In a study of Israeli firms, Desivilya Syn and Palgi (2014) found the TMTs were characterized, in the aggregate, by stereotypically male attributes. Women’s voices on the TMT
were silenced perhaps, the researchers suggested, because of out-group status. In addition, women on the TMTs tended to embrace stereotypically feminine, communal behaviors in order to exert influence. This would suggest that TMT women in Israel seemed to suffer from Desivilya Syn and Palgi’s (2014) glass cliff effect. The authors hypothesized that the emphasis on stereotypes might be less pronounced in more communal cultures.

Thus, it would seem, stereotypes have the potential to change the way people behave. Page (2007b) used mathematical proofs to support the benefits of cognitive diversity for improving innovation, but a key assumption underlying those proofs is that individuals bring their unique identity to the table, rather than conform to the identity stereotype associated with the demographic categories they represent. To the extent stereotypes caused individuals to subdue their identity, the diversity benefits might disappear.

**Gender proportions.** Kanter (1977) also found that stereotypes could reduce the likelihood that group members allow their unique identity to surface. The researcher found that women in a token status of less than 2 or 20% (which is the norm on a TMT), struggle to escape the behavioral confines of stereotypes. Those stereotypes impacted the behavior of token women in a group and the reactions of men to those women, until the group reached gender balance (i.e. 40-60% of each gender). In other words, women in a token status on a TMT are more likely to behave in a manner consistent with stereotypes which, according to Page (2007b), would negate the benefits of cognitive diversity. Thus, gender proportions would appear to be another possible mediator of the impact of TMT diversity on innovation. Woolley, Chabris, Pentland, Hashimi, and Malone (2010), for example found that the collective intelligence of a group increased as the proportion of women on a team increased, largely because of the impact on group processes. More recently, Ostrup and Villadsen (2015) recommended that increases in gender balance
should be accompanied by behavioral integration strategies. In addition to proportions, van Knippenberg et al.’s (2011) research emphasizes the importance of considering the impact of gender on faultlines.

**Gender Faultlines.** Van Knippenberg et al. (2011) found that faultlines were stronger when gender was a differentiating attribute, and strongest of all for faultlines that formed around both gender and function. By way of example, the authors concluded that, when adding a woman to a TMT, performance would be higher if the woman had a similar functional background to other TMT members. Though the researchers rejected a recommendation that women should be selected based on functional homogeneity as it would only increase barriers for women, the example raises a concern about the functional profile of women most likely to qualify for a TMT.

Statistical evidence, in fact, paints a bi-furcated functional profile of men and women who rise to the top echelons of management, with men more likely to have had line roles with profit-and-loss responsibility and women more likely to have risen through staff positions such as legal, finance, of human resources (Dezső, Ross, & Uribe, 2016). In a recent study of S&P 1500 firms, Dezső et al. (2016) found that not only were women on TMTs significantly underrepresented among those with line roles, but the proportion had actually dropped from 6.5% in 2009 to 6.1% in 2011. Wittenberg-cox (2014) suggested that the over-representation of women with staff backgrounds may reflect intentional efforts to improve TMT gender diversity given that the talent pool of women right below the TMT is heavily skewed toward staff roles. A recent study found, for example, that while most women had line roles early in their career, by the time they reach the VP level, they were 21% less likely than men to be in a line role (Waller & Lublin, 2015).
The statistical profile of TMTs paints a picture of very few women, as even the 20 largest companies in the most developed countries only average 15% women, who primarily (i.e. over 93%) have a staff background (Dezső et al., 2016). Given this profile, the potential for the development of strong TMT faultlines around gender and function may warrant consideration.

The paucity of women on TMTs has hindered each stream of literature addressed in this review. The same is true for faultline research, as evidenced by van Knippenberg et al.’s (2011) call for future researchers to address several specific questions as the number of women on TMTs increases. In particular, does gender identity become more threatening, thus generating stronger faultlines, when the number of women exceeds token status (van Knippenberg et al., 2004)? Or, van Knippenberg et al. (2011) asked, is the relationship curvilinear, as Kanter (1977) suggested, with performance improving once gender balance is achieved because “gender diversity becomes more the norm” (p. 329)?

In addition to exploring gender faultlines and the implications of social identity, context may moderate the impact of TMT gender diversity (Parola et al., 2015). In particular, Krishnan and Park (2005) identified the need for future research on an industry-specific basis.

Why Healthcare.

High performing organizations may find it harder to invest in innovation because they have the most to lose from taking risks (Van de Ven, 1986). The long-standing stability and high performance of the healthcare industry (Van Doorn, 2015) might, therefore, make it more risk averse. Changing global demographics and shrinking budgets, however, have generated an innovation imperative in the healthcare industry (Bessant et al., 2013). The impact of healthcare reform on historic healthcare business models is a prime example of the pressures facing the industry in the U.S. According to Rivlin (2015) at The Brookings Institution, the healthcare
reform act launched a period of “disruptive innovation” (para. 1) that will generate winners and losers for years to come.

Given the rocky future that lies ahead, innovation should be top of mind for healthcare organizations. Though Noland et al. (2016) identified the healthcare industry, with women representing 17% of executives, as above the overall average of 14%, the healthcare industry workforce is predominantly female. In the U.S., for example, only 47% of the total workforce is female compared to more than 75% of the healthcare industry workforce (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Thus, despite the industry imperative for innovation, women are underrepresented on the TMTs of healthcare organizations, relative to the overall workforce. An exploration of the experiences of those few women on a healthcare TMT might yield valuable insight for future, industry-specific research.

Summary and Conclusion

To survive and thrive in an increasingly volatile global economy, organizations must be able to change and innovate on an ongoing basis. An effective top management team (TMT) plays a crucial role in enabling the requisite strategic renewal. Composition is one mediator of TMT effectiveness. While non-visible measures of diversity, such as tenure and function, have dominated the TMT literature (Nielsen, 2010), studies focusing on visible dimensions of diversity are increasing (e.g., Desivilya Syn & Palgi, 2014; Li, 2013; Parola et al., 2015).

Gender is a mediator of particular interest, both because of the widespread attention it is receiving in the trade press as a potential driver of profits (Dishman, 2015), and because those pressures are likely to result in changes in TMT gender balance (Zarya, 2016). While the research on TMT composition yields significant ambiguity, there does seem to be an increasing volume of support for the premise that the impact of TMT gender diversity on self-image, and
the salience of gender to others, may result in negative behaviors (Desivilya Syn & Palgi, 2014; Ellemers et al., 2012), such as an increase in conflict (Li, 2014) or reduced opportunities for other women (Ellemers et al., 2012). TMTs that engage in behavioral and/or social integration strategies may be able to minimize the downsides associated with increasing levels of gender diversity on the TMT (Opstrup & Villadsen, 2015).

Parola et al. (2015) found that the impact of gender diverse TMTs was context specific. While several studies have isolated the impact of gender diverse corporate boards in the healthcare industry (Schnake, Williams, & Fredenberger, 2006; Thiruvadi, 2008; Zaichkowski, 2014), none were identified that addressed gender diverse TMTs in healthcare. Given that the healthcare industry represents 18% of the GDP in the U.S. (Rivlin, 2015), further exploration is warranted.

Given the paucity of women on TMTs, the limited research on TMT gender diversity has raised more questions than answers. It is equally clear from the literature that gender cannot be evaluated in a vacuum. In particular, social identity and integrating mechanisms appear to interact with gender. Thus, organizations would benefit from understanding how those few women on the TMTs of healthcare organizations make sense of their experience.

The next chapter outlines the methodology and proposed research design for exploring the problem of practice. First, the rational for choosing interpretive phenomenological analysis will be discussed. Then, the specifics of the research tradition, method, and design will be explicated, including: participant selection, positionality, data collection and handling processes, protection of participants, and trustworthiness of the process and analysis.
Chapter Three: Research Design

One conclusion is clear from a review of the literature: we do not know enough about the experience of individuals on TMTs, particularly those who represent a distinct minority on the TMT. The purpose of this study is to gain insight about the experiences of TMT women, a minority of all TMT members, in a specific context. Thus, the proposed study addresses the following research question: “How do women on the top management team of a healthcare organization make sense of their experience when they are one of only a few women on the TMT?”

Efforts to analyze perceptions call for recognition that meaning is relative and constructed at the individual level (Ponterotto, 2005). From an ontological perspective, truth may well be in the eyes of each TMT and each member of a TMT. From an epistemological standpoint, each TMT member would then be an expert (Hesse-Biber, 2010), and how each one makes sense of increasing gender heterogeneity would provide useful insight. In order to analyze that socially constructed, often hidden, meaning, the researcher must use a hermeneutic approach to coax the perceptions from the individual through a reflective process, and then interpret the individual level meaning (Ponterotto, 2005). Qualitative research designs are most suitable for such a constructivist-intepretivist paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005).

The dominant approach used to represent the management literature generally (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015), and the TMT diversity literature specifically, emphasizes a positive methodology that seeks to quantify “what is happening”. In contrast, this study seeks to understand “how” members of a TMT make sense of team diversity. Doz (2011) suggested that qualitative research designs were “uniquely suited to ‘opening the black box’ of organizational processes [to understand] the ‘how’, ‘who’, and ‘why’ of individual” (p. 583) responses and, as a
result, pick up where positivism leaves unanswered questions. Qualitative designs are viewed as particularly valuable for shedding light on individual sense-making in a way that does not privilege the perspective of those in power (Hesse-Biber, 2010) or, in this instance, those higher up on the hierarchy of social categories. Given the goal of this study, namely to provide insight by interpreting the salience of gender on a TMT to those in the gender minority, a qualitative research design was chosen.

**Research Tradition.**

Qualitative methodology is a broad field that encompasses grounded theory, ethnography, narrative research, case study, and phenomenology (Creswell, 2012). The latter is itself multi-faceted and ranges from Husserl's positivist approach to perspectives labeled post-positivist, interpretive, and constructivist (Dowling, 2007). The selection of a specific approach may reflect a researcher’s discipline, such as many anthropologists’ preference for anthropology (Creswell, 2012), but it should reflect both the research paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005) and the research question (Creswell, 2012; Smith et al., 2009).

Given the emphasis of this study on making sense of the lived experiences of individual TMT members and the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions that truth is defined by each TMT member, thus rendering each executive an expert, phenomenology was identified as the most appropriate method. Within that family of approaches, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was deemed the most valuable for exploring the link between identity and the sense TMT members make of team gender diversity. The broader phenomenology philosophy and specific IPA design will be discussed in more detail before segueing to the specific research method decisions.
Phenomenology. Phenomenology traces its roots to eighteenth century philosophical efforts to grapple with the meaning of truth (Dowling, 2007). It evolved from a philosophy to a research tradition, most notably captured by Husserl’s emphasis on intentionality, or the notion that an object has meaning because someone perceives—or consciously thinks about—it and all thinking has an object of attention; thus all perceptions have meaning (Dowling, 2007).

Individual perceptions are experiences that, from an epistemological standpoint, serve as the source of knowledge, thus rendering those perceptions worthy of study (Dowling, 2007).

Husserl argued that the true essence of a phenomenon would transcend the specific circumstances surrounding it if its essence could be identified (Smith et al., 2009). To do this, the experiences of individuals who have a phenomenon in common must be analyzed in such a way that allows the “universal essence” (Creswell, 2012, p. 76) of that shared experience to emerge. Despite, or perhaps because of the potential subjectivity associated with perceptions, Husserl embraced an approach to phenomenology that was more descriptive (van Manen, 2014) and positivist (Creswell, 2012), and less interpretive, or hermeneutic, than other branches of phenomenology. Husserl developed a number of specific tools, such as reduction and bracketing, to enable researchers to explore perceptions without tainting them with researcher bias.

Identifying the essence of perceptions is difficult because we take familiar objects for granted (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl proscribed bracketing, or the explicit identification and setting aside of assumptions about the object, as the solution for overcoming the curse of familiarity (Dowling, 2007). To achieve this, the researcher must apply an iterative series of reductions to continuously frame and reframe the insights, each time getting closer to an unencumbered perspective of the phenomena’s essence (Smith et al., 2009). This eidetic
reduction then serves as a method to make the invisible visible and observable (Smith et al., 2009). Though identifying the essence of an experience provides significant value, the focus of this study’s research question is more suited to what Smith et al. (2009) referred to as IPA’s “more modest ambition of attempting to capture particular experiences as experienced for particular people” (p. 16).

**Interpretive phenomenological analysis.** In addition to Husserl’s vision of phenomenology, Smith et al. (2009) identified the following theoretical contributions to IPA: philosophical enhancements from Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre; hermeneutics as its interpretive foundation; and idiography for its emphasis on the particular. Each of these streams are discussed below.

**Phenomenology.** Epistemology differentiates the streams of phenomenology. In contrast to Husserl’s focus on knowledge creation from capturing the essence of a phenomenon, IPA treats knowledge as resulting from interpretations of individual perceptions of a phenomenon. Heidegger shifted phenomenology from Husserl’s descriptive and bracket worldview to an interpretivist, or hermeneutic, one that emphasized intersubjectivity, or the notion of the shared, relational, and context-based, nature of knowledge (Smith et al., 2009).

Another fundamental contribution to IPA came from Merleau-Ponty’s identification of the significance of embodiment, or the physical world, as a central component of knowledge creation (Smith et al., 2009). In particular, how we think about what we see, touch, hear, and feel is a function of our sense of self and the relationship between that self and ‘other’, whether those perceptions are logical or not. This notion is not only key to IPA in general, it is key to the value of IPA as the methodology for this study’s exploration of how TMT members make sense of the gender of team members.
Sartre’s focus on the relational and social impact on perceptions further informed the development of IPA. In particular, Sartre emphasized the impact of context on perceptions, with context inclusive of both the individual’s history and background, as well as the social environment surrounding the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). This relational component combines with Merleau-Ponty’s world of objects and Heidegger’s emphasis on intersubjectivity to inform the IPA philosophy.

**Hermeneutics.** In addition to its philosophic sodality with Heidegger’s version of phenomenology, Smith et al. (2009) separately identifies hermeneutics as a differentiated theoretical component of the IPA methodology focused on the methods and objectives of interpretation. Schleiermacher contributed an emphasis on a holistic interpretation that incorporated both the value of analyzing the individual’s perceptions as well as situating that analysis within a broader context by comparing it to the perceptions of others in the relevant data set (Smith et al., 2009).

A far-reaching addition to IPA is Heidegger’s accentuation on both the visible and hidden meaning of a phenomenon. In other words, perceptions of a phenomenon are valuable but insufficient and must be accompanied by logos, or a robust analysis of deeper, often hidden, layers of meaning (Smith et al., 2009). Unlike Husserl, who believed the researcher could suspend their biases and preconceptions through bracketing, Heidegger viewed complete impartiality as impossible. Instead, Heidegger suggested that understanding is enhanced by focusing, first, on the new object of analysis, and then explicitly factoring in preconceptions. By forestalling the latter or the fore-structure, the researcher introduces objectivity or a modicum of bracketing to the analysis (Smith et al., 2009).
Gadamer emphasized personal involvement as a key to achieving understanding and suggested a reciprocal approach that encouraged the researcher to seek feedback from the research participant as part of the analysis (Dowling, 2007). Thus, Gadamer, as cited in Smith et al. (2009), extended Heidegger’s work by identifying the circular nature of the analysis in that the phenomenon “influences the interpretation which in turn can influence the fore-structure, which can then itself influence the interpretation” (p. 26). The resulting hermeneutic circle underscores the essential part-whole-part-whole, iterative approach to IPA analysis that stands in contrast to the more linear approach of other methods (Smith et al., 2009).

**Idiography.** The concept of idiography, a central component of IPA, emphasizes the need to study the particular, or individual level of analysis, in detail and in context (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, IPA studies rely upon small samples of purposefully selected individuals who have each experienced the phenomenon in question (Smith et al., 2009). To ensure relevance, Smith and Osborn (2008) assert that, rather than just sharing an experience, the researcher should identify a group for whom the “research question will be significant” (p.56). Idiography thus informed the participant selection process, described below.

**The value of IPA for this study.** Smith et al. (2009) suggested that IPA is particularly valuable for exploring momentous occasions when something important happens such that “the flow of lived experience takes on a particular significance” (p. 1). Participating on a TMT would be a significant accomplishment and a career high point for most executives given that, by definition, it sits at the top of organizational hierarchies. In addition, Smith et al. (2009) identified a growing body of IPA studies focused on identity issues. Given the focus of this research on the perceptions of individuals regarding a significant role in their career, as viewed
through the theoretical lens of social identity, IPA was deemed the most appropriate research methodology.

Research Method

A key characteristic of IPA is the emphasis on double hermeneutics in that the researcher not only explores how participants make sense of their experience (hermeneutics), but the researcher also attempts to make sense of those reflective insights (Pringle et al., 2011). The perspective, or positionality, of the researcher therefore has a critical impact on the ultimate insights gained from the analysis.

Positionality. The path to the problem of practice that defines this study was circuitous. As a former token (Kanter, 1977) female member of an executive team, I became concerned, on the organization’s behalf, by the paucity of women moving up the pipeline behind me. A desire to impact the heterogeneity of the pipeline fueled early research, which ultimately led to my appointment as the first global chief diversity officer at my former employer. That experience opened my eyes to the hurdles women faced, and to the resulting need for organizations to institutionalize processes that would improve inclusivity and diversity of the pipeline.

An acolyte of the practice-based research advocating a focus on board gender diversity as a path to firm diversity, I first focused my research on gender diversity of corporate boards. A funny thing happened along the way to writing this thesis, however. Several firms that I consult with on diversity and inclusion (D&I) asked for help exploring the paucity of women moving into executive roles at their firms. The results of a qualitative interview process of men and women at one of those firms opened my eyes to the importance of addressing heterogeneity of leaders inside the organization. Almost simultaneously, I read an article (Landel, 2015) about a global firm that favorably compared the effectiveness, on multiple dimensions, of its
management teams that were gender balanced (Kanter, 1977). This solidified my then nascent interest in researching the impact of increasing heterogeneity on TMTs.

Prior to the executive team experience where I was the only woman member out of a group of 12, I was on a subsidiary executive team that was gender balanced. Both teams reported to the same executive, yet my experience on each was dramatically different, as was the level of behavioral integration on each. Thus, I have first-hand experience with issues directly related to the research questions. The process of writing the literature review for this study provoked a personal reflective process that enabled me to re-characterize, positively and negatively, those experiences. Both my original perceptions and the post-reflection perceptions are bound to influence my interpretation of the planned interviews.

It is also worth mentioning that reflection has not been my strong suit. During my corporate career, I was so busy raising two young daughters and wracking up five million (yes, five million) frequent flyer miles that I fell asleep the minute I stopped “doing.” Thus, reflection rarely happened naturally or made it onto my to-do list. Even when I moved into the role of global chief diversity officer for my former employer, I focused on structural solutions to “fix” the diversity problem, rather than efforts to understand how people experienced difference. Had I understood the value of the latter, I might have shifted my focus years ago to meaningful efforts to address inclusion. My earlier educational degrees in economics, math, and business also contributed to a self-constructed cage that de-emphasized the development of interpretive and/or critical approaches.

It is only during the last few years that I have come to question what I know or think I know, as well as how I know it. I now realize the truth of Maher and Tetreault’s (2001) assertion that socially significant demographic characteristics, such as gender or race, influence the way
knowledge is constructed. Failure to address underlying, often implicit, assumptions about race or gender is likely to doom organizational diversity initiatives.

My avocation, now, is to help other executives question what they think they know and how they know it. I believe that such reflective knowledge, particularly at the leadership level, is critical if organizations are to become more inclusive, and not merely more diverse. I do not, however, have the answers. I hope the interviews that frame this study will help me make more sense of how other women perceive their TMT experience. Ultimately, I hope that insight will be a stepping-stone toward helping TMTs, and the organizations they lead, become more diverse and more inclusive.

Participants. The sample size should be small enough to enable both the collection of rich data and deep analysis of that data (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) state that published IPA studies typically have 6-8 participants, though samples as small as one case or as large as 15 are not uncommon. The target sample for this study is 8 women, though the researcher plans to include 10 women in case participants drop out due to scheduling conflicts. This size is viewed as large enough to yield the desired insight on the phenomenon, but small enough to ensure each participant shares a comparable TMT gender diversity phenomenon. The following criteria will be used to select participants:

- Each would currently sit on the TMT of a healthcare organization (exceptions might be made for women who have just left a TMT)
- Each would have at least 6 months tenure to ensure that they have attended a few TMT meetings.
- Each TMT would have a minority of women members, defined as no more than 2 or no more than 30%, whichever is smaller. This ensures the women on the TMT
represent the type of distinct minority that Kanter (1977) defined as token status, as gender is more likely to be salient.

The pool of women who share these characteristics will be relatively finite, and the results will not be generalizable. However, the resulting insights may well pave the way for future research on this phenomenon, which could lead to meaningful generalizations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

**Recruitment and access.** Given the very specific criteria for the purposeful sample, the few number of women likely to meet the criteria, and the extremely busy schedule executives at the target level have, personal relationships will be needed to recruit candidates. As a former woman executive in the healthcare industry who is also a member of Women Business Leaders (WBL), an organization for executive women in healthcare, this author has direct and indirect access to the pool of women likely to meet the criteria. A multi-step, sequential process has been identified to recruit candidates. The researcher will stop when at least ten participants have been identified. The steps that will be taken, in order and as needed to recruit a sufficient participant pool, are:

1. Reach out to personal contacts on TMTs or corporate boards in healthcare and request introductions to qualified candidates.

2. Solicit participants through WBL’s CEO and its newsletter

3. Solicit participants through professional contacts who are closely tied to CEOs and TMTs in healthcare (e.g. an executive recruiter in the healthcare industry and the head of a healthcare industry association, the board of which consists of CEOs).
4. Identify candidates who have recently been promoted to a healthcare TMT through announcements in *Modern Healthcare* magazine. Then use LinkedIn to identify connections to those women who might be willing to facilitate an introduction.

No compensation will be offered for participation in the study.

*Ethics.* TMTs have access to information before it becomes public. Used inappropriately, information gleaned from executives has the potential to sway stock prices and the fortunes, financial and non-financial, of the firms or individuals involved. Thus, TMT meetings are highly confidential and take place behind closed doors. The need for confidentiality will both limit access to information and necessitate appropriate procedures to ensure anonymity of all data and analysis. Because of the paucity of women who meet the criteria, steps will be taken to ensure that, not only are names anonymous, but that company descriptions are also anonymous. Any corporate identifiers (size, location, industry sub-segment) referenced in interviews will be masked in the study to ensure that readers cannot identify employers or participants. In addition, this author will ensure that the participants come from multiple geographies and not only from Nashville, the author’s home and the acknowledged center of for-profit healthcare corporations.

Beyond the protection of the data, participants deserve assurances of the steps that will be taken to accurately transcribe and interpret their comments. Each participant will be given a copy of their transcript and asked for feedback on any errors or miscommunications, or to identify sensitive comments that need to be deleted. The steps taken to assure trustworthiness of the analysis are outlined below.

*IRB.* The institutional review board (IRB) of a university provides an added, and formal, layer of protection to research participants. Once this researcher’s advisers have approved the
proposal, it will be formally submitted to Northeastern University’s (NEU) IRB for approval to recruit participants and conduct the research. In addition, because the researcher is on the faculty at Vanderbilt University, Vanderbilt’s IRB was consulted to determine the need to obtain its approval. Confirmation has been obtained, in writing, that no such approval is needed and that NEU’s IRB governs and controls the process. Permission for unsigned consent forms from the participants will be requested from the IRB in order to protect participant anonymity, a requisite for their participation given the confidential nature of their job duties. It will be made clear to participants, orally and in writing, that they have the right and opportunity to withdraw from the research at any time. This consent form is included as Appendix B.

**Protection of research participants.** Members of a TMT have access to highly confidential, privileged information. They not only deserve to have their comments treated with utmost confidence, agreement to participate and candor will likely be directly related to their confidence of confidentiality and anonymity. While this protection is promised as part of the recruitment and IRB approval process, it will be accomplished through the procedures employed for data collection, storage, and analysis, as well as the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness of the evaluative process. Each step is described below.

**Data Collection.** IPA relies heavily upon individual description of how a participant feels about the phenomenon, so interviews offer a rich milieu for collecting those thoughts and stories (Smith et al., 2009). The data will be collected through a series of one-on-one interviews with each participant. The researcher will request permission to tape all interviews to enable observational note taking, including notes on body language, as a supplement to the transcripts. As Deetz (1982) pointed out, the goal is to interpret what the participant says, not simply reproduce it. For that reason, a researcher’s notes can be invaluable for identifying deeper
significance that is not discernable from a verbatim transcript (Deetz, 1982). Attention to body language will also give the research an opportunity to modify the interview schedule based on the participant’s comfort level, or lack there-of (Smith et al., 2009).

Multiple methods will be used when feasible. Phone calls will be recorded using FreeConferenceCalling.com for enhanced clarity, with iPhone recordings as a back up. In person interviews will be recorded using the iPhone. Given the workload these senior executives are faced with, every effort will be made to keep the interviews to a maximum of two: a 15-minute intake phone call and one detailed, 60 to 90-minute interview. Participants will be asked to consider a brief, third interview, but only if the data analysis phase requires additional clarification. A third party, professional transcription service will be used to generate the transcripts. The researcher will compare each one to the original audio recording. Each participant will then be asked to verify the accuracy of the transcript and, if relevant, to identify any passages they want deleted.

The first interview will consist of a phone call that will both provide and collect background information. Specifically, the purpose is to: explain the study; request formal consent to participate and for the interviews to be taped; ask the participant to select a pseudonym, which the researcher will begin to use immediately; collect biographical data; determine date and location of primary interview; and afford the participant an opportunity to ask any questions about the study, including confidentiality and protection protocols. This interview should take approximately 15-minutes.

The second interview, approximately 60-minutes in length, will provide the primary source of data for the analysis. The interview will consist of a series of semi-structured interview questions designed to prompt the participants to share their thoughts and stories and to encourage
the kind of dialogue that allows the researcher to pursue interesting comments further (Smith et al., 2009). When possible, this second interview will take place in-person to increase the likelihood that the interviewee will relax enough to speak freely and thoughtfully, thus ensuring what Smith et al. (2009) referred to as the type of “rich” (p. 56) data required for IPA. At the conclusion of this interview, the request for a brief, follow-up interview if absolutely necessary, will be re-iterated. It should be noted that, while the researcher is willing to travel to destinations convenient for the participants, many healthcare organizations are clustered in a small number of cities, particularly Nashville where the researcher resides. Thus, it may be possible to conduct multiple interviews on a single trip.

An interview schedule has been prepared and is attached in Appendix A. It outlines the topics the researcher would like to address in an order designed to encourage the participant to relax and open up before more sensitive, and potentially threatening, questions are asked. Smith et al. (2009) suggest that the first few questions should be icebreakers, such as asking the interviewee to describe their current responsibilities. The first interview will be used to establish a basic rapport with the participant. The second interview will then launch with a descriptive, but open-ended, question designed to encourage the participant to open up and talk freely, namely: *Describe your experience on the TMT.* Subsequent questions will probe deeper to understand how the interviewee feels about topics such as their contributions to the team and identity issues. The goal, however, is to let each participant tell their stories and this will be made clear to them. The researcher will be sensitive to the participant’s lead as they are the expert (Smith et al., 2009); the interview schedule will be used only as a guide and for prompts when the conversation lags.
**Data Storage.** First, to protect confidentiality, only one document will be created that links the actual identity of the participants to the pseudonyms used in the study. That document, and all audio recordings that might be traceable based on voice recognition, will be stored on the researchers home computer and back-up hard drive in compressed files for enhanced security.

All audio recordings will be numbered and labeled using the pseudonyms. None of these data sources will be stored in the cloud, and no one else has access to this computer or to the backup hard drive. All other documents and transcripts of the audio recordings will be compressed for security, labeled using pseudonyms, and stored on both the researchers computer and on a secure cloud server until the dissertation has been completed. No one else has access to the passwords for the cloud computing account.

All audio recordings, and the pseudonym key, will be destroyed as soon as the dissertation has been completed. The unidentifiable transcripts will be maintained for seven years, post dissertation, and then destroyed.

**Data Analysis.** Interpretation and inductive analysis lie at the heart of IPA analysis, with depth of analysis, as opposed to description, differentiating an effective study from an ineffectual one (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). Unpacking the deeper insight behind the words of a participant, however, is difficult (Deetz, 1982). The transcription, by itself, will not yield the desired insight. Instead, the researcher needs to attempt to contextualize the comments, an effort that is enhanced by multiple readings of the entire interview (Deetz, 1982, 9. 136). Thus, reading the transcript should be viewed as an active, rather than a passive process. Smith et al. (2009) suggests that researchers document impressions while reading each transcript through the first time, and make notes and annotations during subsequent readings of it.
Typical of qualitative research generally, IPA data collection and analysis occur concurrently (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In particular, data analysis is an iterative process, with the researcher continually moving from the particular claims of a participant to its meaning, and back to the particular (Smith et al., 2009). In the early reviews, the transcripts are simply coded as data; it is in subsequent reviews that the researcher attempts to perceive the participant’s meaning (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Assuming the participants’ schedule allows, this researcher intends to transcribe each interview as soon as it has been completed and before the next participant interview. This approach not only provides an opportunity to identify streams worthy of additions or modifications to the interview schedule (Smith et al., 2009), it also provides an opportunity to begin the analysis while the interview is fresh in the researcher’s mind. Thus, in addition to note taking about impressions, word choices, contradictions, etc. while reviewing transcripts, this researcher will create a spreadsheet of themes that emerge, starting with the first case (Smith & Osborn, 2008). While Smith et al. (2009) caution about the use of spreadsheets, they are the bread and butter of this author’s work style, and thus more likely to enrich than detract from the analysis. The participant, the relevant line of the transcript where the theme emerged, and key words from the transcript, will be identified on the spreadsheet.

IPA analysis is not only iterative, it is recursive in that a researcher’s analysis is continually revisited, even at the individual level (Smith, 2011). First, the themes for an individual case will be reviewed to identify themes that are similar and merely worded differently, as well as potential superordinate clusters of themes (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Each will be checked against the transcript to ensure consistency with the participant’s comments. This researcher will include relevant passages, particularly for superordinate themes, on the spreadsheet. After each case analysis, the list of themes will be reevaluated to find both
similarities and new issues that might emerge from subsequent cases (Smith, 2011). In order to enhance the contextualization of the comments, the worksheet for this step in the process will identify the question that triggered the emergent theme for each participant, as well as the theme’s function, or whether it had a negative or positive connotation (Smith et al., 2009). This second-level analysis helps identify convergence and divergence among the cases (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011).

IPA involves a double hermeneutic process. Thus, the researcher does not merely identify all themes that arise in the transcripts. Instead, as Smith and Osborn (2008) suggest, the analysis will include a search for patterns that are replicated, as well as new insights that emerge across the cases. This requires the researcher to engage with the data to determine which themes are most important and which can be combined based on relative meaning in the passages rather than on simple signals like frequency (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The researcher will use a series of worksheets, as suggested by Smith et al. (2009) to identify recurrent themes, emergent themes, convergences and divergences, context, specific supporting passages and superordinate themes. Once the consolidated superordinate theme list has been created, the researcher will revisit each transcript to determine whether a specific case converges with or diverges from the theme. The researcher will be alert to the potential that a divergence actually represents “higher level convergences” (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 75). As a final step, the researcher will perform the higher order synthesis required to move the analysis to a more meaningful, perhaps theoretical, level.

Given the interpretive nature of IPA, the written analysis is a critical component of the data analysis as the reader is completely reliant upon the researcher’s ability to communicate both the data and her interpretation of the data (Smith et al., 2009). Much like the data analysis,
the whole-part-whole approach recommended by Smith et al. (2009) will be used to enhance the accessibility of the analysis for the reader. First, the writer will provide a simplified overview of the findings. Then, the researcher will walk the reader through each superordinate theme. This step calls for tracts of transcripts to support interpretations, thus allowing the reader to participate in the interpretive process. Tables will be used as appropriate to support the analysis.

During the writing, the researcher will be cognizant of the potential for this step in the analysis to alter the perceived importance of different themes and to require either further data analysis or shifts in the interpretation. Finally, the writer will pull the analysis together by summarizing the key insights gleaned from the analysis.

**Trustworthiness.** The value of research lies in the eyes of the readers and the extent to which they give credence to a written study. The onus is on the researcher, then, to ensure the quality of the analysis and to then communicate the steps taken to the reader. Creswell (2012), however, urges qualitative researchers not to attempt to introduce faux validity by resorting to quantitative terminology. In contrast to positivist methods, IPA acknowledges the temporal nature of truth derived from human experience because that truth relies upon interpretations that are subject to continuous renegotiation and thus fluid (Smith et al., 2009). Validity, in the sense of impartiality and adherence to methodologically specified criteria, becomes irrelevant. Instead, the burden in IPA shifts to ensuring and communicating the trustworthiness and reliability of the approach taken. Angen (2000) describes the approach as an ongoing focus on validation that requires an emphasis on morality and a conscious reflection of broad principles at each step of a study, beginning with the questions asked and method selected.

Ethical validation requires a research question worthy of study and, ideally for IPA, structured to inform practice (Smith et al., 2009). Insight from this study’s question into the
experiences of women in a distinct minority on a TMT will, it is hoped, inform efforts to integrate gender diverse TMTs.

Substantive validation requires acknowledgement of the researcher’s positionality, contextual sensitivity, and documentation of the procedures used throughout the study (Smith et al., 2009). While this author’s positionality has been explicated, substantive validation in IPA calls for the specific inclusion of personal bias (Smith et al., 2009), rather than for setting it aside. This researcher, therefore, acknowledges that her understanding of participant perceptions will be informed by her senior leadership team experiences. As Angen (2000) pointed out, however, rather than distort the results, this self-reflection will contribute “significantly to the substantive validation of the work as the necessary precondition of all further understanding” (p. 390).

The participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis procedures are key to both contextual sensitivity and reliability of the procedures. Trustworthiness, however, is very much in the eyes of the reader. The onus is on this researcher to provide a cogent, and well documented, description of the steps taken and procedures employed so that the reader perceives the research as reliable and that, as Angen (2000) phrased it, “the work is a worthwhile interpretation” (p. 391). This author will focus on providing a substantive written trail to allow the reader to follow the choices made in the study design, and to support each step in the data analysis by grounding interpretations with specific examples and rich, thick descriptions (Smith et al., 2009).

Conclusion

The impetus for this study was the paucity of women currently on TMTs and the increasing chorus calling for organizations to “fix” the problem. While an array of practice-based
literature claims to prove the business case for more women on the TMT, a robust body of evidence-based research suggests gender diversity on the TMT generates problems as well as advantages. TMTs play a critical role in an organization’s success, however. Thus, understanding how women experience being in a minority on a TMT may lay the foundation for future research on effective integration of new women members on a TMT.
Chapter Four: Research Findings

This study explored the experience of women who are one of the few women on the TMT of a healthcare organization. The purpose was to identify insight that might, ultimately, enhance the effectiveness of adding women to TMTs that have little, if any, gender diversity. Ten executive women were identified through a purposeful sampling procedure and agreed to participate in the study. Each participant was interviewed in person and nine also participated in a preliminary phone interview, for a total of nineteen interviews. Social identity and social categorization theory provided the theoretical framework for the study, but the open-ended questions allowed each executive to explore the TMT experiences that resonated with her. A discussion of the participant profiles will be followed by an analysis of the data.

Participant Profiles

While the profiles of the participants overlap on some dimensions, their path to the TMT varied significantly. Only Lisa, Julia, and Celia, for example, intentionally chose the healthcare industry, and only Lisa and Celia have a clinical background. The other participants all have educational qualifications that could have led to any industry. Julia, Fiona, Katrina, Tina, and Marina, for example, all have business-related backgrounds, while Sissy, Roslyn, and Danielle have IT or engineering skills. Except for Lisa and Celia, these varied backgrounds led to early career experiences in other industries. Their path to healthcare arose from serendipity or a prior relationship in one of those other industries. Due to the paucity of women on the TMT of healthcare organizations, anonymity required summarization of the other participant profile characteristics, particularly those that are organization-specific (see Table 1), rather than individual identification.
The participants have extensive experience as a member of a TMT. All have been on their TMT for at least a year, and all but four have tenure of three years or longer. Only one participant was promoted to the TMT from within; the others joined the firm as a member of the TMT. Seven have experience with different TMT compositions, either because they served on the TMT of other organizations or because they survived significant shifts in the composition of the TMT they currently serve on. Thus, most of the participants were able to compare or contrast their current TMT experience. The employer organizations are almost evenly split between direct providers of healthcare and healthcare technology firms. Four of the firms are publicly traded, one is a not-for-profit, and the others are privately held, for-profit firms. The next section begins the exploration of the superordinate and subordinate themes.

Table 1

Summary Profile of Participants

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<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>10 participants; 19 interviews in total</th>
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<td>Type of healthcare firm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Services Provider</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public, Private of Not-for-Profit (NFP)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Private</td>
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<td>NFP</td>
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<td>Staff, line, or hybrid role</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
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<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Path to TMT</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part of founding TMT</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hired</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promoted</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of women on TMT</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time on this TMT</td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt; 3 years</td>
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Analysis of the Data

An analysis of the data resulted in the identification of five superordinate themes that encompassed a range of experiences along the SCT spectrum, from those tied to personal identity to those linked to social identity. Nine subordinate themes, detailed in Table 2, emerged from comments made by at least eight participants; two reflect comments made by at least six women.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate themes</th>
<th>Subordinate Themes</th>
<th>Sissy</th>
<th>Katrina</th>
<th>Fiona</th>
<th>Lisa</th>
<th>Tina</th>
<th>Roslyn</th>
<th>Celia</th>
<th>Danielle</th>
<th>Marina</th>
<th>Julia</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Pride in unique ID</td>
<td>1.1 Self-worth enhanced by differentiated competencies</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☒</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1.2 Pride from contributions</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Empowered to uncover self-identity</td>
<td>2.1 Liberation due to personal enablers</td>
<td>☒</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2.2 Confidence from trust at highest level</td>
<td>☒</td>
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<td>2.3 Confidence threatened by self-doubts</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Passion for the work</td>
<td>3.1 Passion fueled by meaningful work</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.2 Sense of joy from work</td>
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<td>4. Felt included on TMT</td>
<td>4.1 Affirmation when valued by the TMT</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4.2 Respect for and from TMT peers</td>
<td>☒</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Supported by social identification</td>
<td>5.1 Competence-driven social identification</td>
<td>☒</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5.2 Encouraged by gender identification</td>
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A brief discussion of the participant profiles follows this introduction. The remainder of this chapter explores each superordinate and subordinate theme individually through the words of the participants.

**Superordinate theme 1: pride in unique identity.** The first superordinate theme that emerged was an across the board sense of pride from meaningful and differentiated competencies that formed an integral part of each participant’s perception of their unique self-identity. This first superordinate theme, *pride in unique identity* was reinforced by comments made throughout both the first and second interview. All of the participants made comments that resonated with the first sub-theme, *self-worth enhanced by differentiated competencies*. They also uniformly expressed a *sense of pride from personal contributions*, the second sub-theme, that they were able to make because of those competencies. These two subordinate themes are each discussed in detail using the participant’s words.

**Self-worth enhanced by differentiated competencies.** The participants identified a range of competencies that they felt differentiated them in a positive way from their peers on the TMT. Most identified their perspectives, or cognitive skills, as a key source of differentiation, while many also identified behaviors as a source of differentiation.

**Behaviors as a source of differentiation.** Fully half of the participants discussed behaviors that made them feel unique. These included a focus on facts, a willingness to speak directly, and the positive relationships they are able to establish with others. In particular, several participants identified honesty, even when direct speaking was difficult, as a way they felt unique. Sissy, for example felt like the “business parent in the room” who brought the voice of reason to the TMT:

I'm kind of the voice of reason, I'm the business parent in the room on the business side.

They're like hanging out with the guys from the Big Bang Theory. I'm the business person
in the room, just trying to make sure that they all stay within the ground rules and the financial ground rules and walls and doing things appropriately.

Danielle felt different from other members of the team because she is upfront and honest, even when the news is difficult to hear. "That is one of the biggest differences I think. To me, I'd rather be upfront and honest with you about where we are.” And she encourages her employees to embrace the same behaviors:

I've always told my team, "Don't hide the problem. Tell me about the problem. I'd rather know about the problem and let's put a game plan and fix it than to be blind sighted about something you didn't tell me because you didn't feel comfortable about telling me about a problem. I want to know if there is a problem. I'm okay with the truth. I'm not okay with a lie."

Similarly, Roslyn and Marina felt unique because of their willingness to say what they think. Roslyn pointed out how unusual she thinks that is: "Yeah, I feel very comfortable speaking my mind, and I think that's actually unusual." Marina perceived her need to be brutally honest as differentiating her from her peers. "I'm brutally honest to a fault. I cannot tell a lie; I just can't do it. There are a lot of people in my role who can be-what's the word? Obfuscate?"

She felt this level of honesty enhanced her internal and external credibility: "I think it's also the reason why people trust me, because they know they're going to get the straight story."

*Perspective as a source of differentiation.* Almost all felt that a differentiated perspective enabled them to contribute uniquely. Several identified a broader perspective as a key source of the contributions they felt they were able to make. Julia and Fiona both thought their role in the organization gave them unique insight into all of the firm’s operations. Julia said, "I think I have the most, besides the CEO, the most comprehensive view of all the stakeholders”, and Fiona
emphasized the hand she has had in almost all of the firm’s operations. Katrina also felt that her broad perspective on the entire firm’s operations differentiated her contributions. In particular, she thinks her focus on thinking through all the stages of an initiative upfront is both unique and important:

I get to hear everything everyone's working on, but I do think I think about things from a more task to completion perspective…that's just how my mind works. I know theirs all works, they're solving a puzzle too, but they're not thinking about the same things generally that I'm thinking about. Having that input into the thought process I think is important.

Roslyn felt that, though she didn’t bring a specific expertise in one area to the table, she did bring a broad perspective of the firm to the TMT that enables her to “connect the dots” in a way that is appreciated:

It makes me better at driving strategic things or driving operational things, because I can put all the pieces together. I don't look at things in a vacuum. I think that's appreciated, but at the same time, you're not an expert at one thing. I think as a senior person, being an expert at something isn't necessarily advantageous, because then you're just an expert at one thing, when you really need to be able to operate at a level where you can really connect the dots.

Lisa and Celia, on the other hand, felt unique because of those expert or technical skills. Even though they work for healthcare organizations, they were the only ones who bought the clinical perspective to the table. Celia, for example, felt that her clinical expertise has been critical to the TMT’s ability to implement its business plan. “What they didn't have was the expertise to implement the model. I had that.” Similarly, Lisa described her early career
experience as a bedside nurse as enabling her to understand “operations, and throughput of patients, and team environments and needs:

Just understanding the operations and the process and the management of the workflows, being able to articulate that, and bring that forward, was what was very helpful for me to be able to help others understand where the needs were.

While few of the participants have female counterparts on the TMT, only Marina and Danielle identified diverse perspective based on their gender as a unique source of differentiation. Danielle marveled that not only is she unusual as a female with a “a seat at the table”, as in the executive table, but that “even in technical discussions, I am unusually the only female.” Marina expressed concerns about the potential impact that all-male perspectives can have. She suggested that her male peers too often failed to consider the human side of the seemingly rational decisions they made. She believes she is able to impact that perspective by broadening the scope of questions the TMT considers:

I'm a data based person, I am very much a data based person, but I think I'd wrap that up with the empathetic. Recognizing the decisions and how the decisions will affect the people that you work with. Sometimes ... Men just sometimes just miss it. They make a decision and I go, “Do you realize what that's going to do? Do you realize how it's going to make this group of people respond to that, or even people outside the company?”

She also feels that she is, and has to be, more direct, because her voice is different from the “group voice”:

I think I started just talking about the difference now that it's all male. It's just a different dynamic. I feel like I have to have a stronger voice, because ... and I have to be more
direct and more ... because I think I'm the only voice in the room, sometimes, that's different from a group voice, if that makes sense.

Tina succinctly linked all three competencies, namely her ability to voice difficult topics, build relationships, and address the big picture, as part of what makes her feel unique:

I'd like to think I bring - and this is where I get personal feedback- that I work at a high level... people trust me. When you have that trust built in, that gives you a greater ability to influence and persuade, and challenge each other in a very non-threatening way, which I think could be very important. I can see the big picture and on down the road. I'm not tunnel vision. I bring up broader perspective of how things work and what ripple effects could look like and so forth. I'm able to interact with a lot of a different people in there and their style, and so bringing that trust to the table.

Tina’s comments suggest that she feels her ability to build positive relationships enables her to build trust. That trust, in turn, allows her to speak directly and challenge others in a non-confrontational way. This, she feels, enables her to voice concerns she may have that are related to the big picture.

*Sense of pride from personal contributions.* The participants didn’t merely feel different from their peers, across the board, they expressed pride in the contributions they were able to make because of those differences. In conjunction with the prior sub-theme, this suggests the participants feel pride in their unique identity. In most cases, participants self-identified their source of pride, but Sissy and Julia used positive comments made by others as evidence of their contributions. Sissy, for example, cited an oft-quoted comment about her effectiveness:

They were like, “Well, Sissy basically runs the place.” I don't. I make sure everybody's talking. I hear things in the hallway, and [I think], “Oh shit, that's not getting escalated.
I've got to make sure someone knows.” I'm like an old-fashioned telephone operator. It's plugging. I sit here all day connecting people and plugging holes.

Likewise, Julia’s pride in her “very straightforward but kind” approach came through when she quoted the comment made by a colleague that she “could beat you to death with a feather.”

More frequently, the participants spoke directly about the pride they felt in their contributions. Katrina, for example, feels she is “really good at organization, operations, making sure that we're executing as planned, making sure that we know the plan, have a plan.” Roselyn echoed Katrina’s sense of pride in her execution skills, saying that “they tend to give me things that are really complex in nature, to build a plan and execute against it, and get a team to rally around it. That’s what I do really well.”

A few identified the ability to get things done in the face of significant obstacles as a significant source of pride. Fiona, for example, identified “doing something they tell you can’t be done” as her “greatest feeling of achievement.” Tina pointed to her effectiveness, even when she didn’t have the level of CEO commitment that might be deemed a prerequisite by others:

I'm able to get things done, I think very effectively. I've always been able to find a way to get things done even if I don't specifically have top level support, but even if it's not a priority for the CEO, for example. If it's really important and critical for the organization. I still can get it done, because I'm able to persuade and influence and work through other people very well and still get the same results.

Several of the participants took pride in their ability to help the group achieve consensus or to feel more inclusive. Danielle took pride in her “ability to lead by example” as a way to influence others to set aside narrow self-interest and focus, instead, on decisions that benefit the team. Marina, similarly, took pride in her ability to achieve consensus:
I think I have an ability that seems to come naturally to me, to look at problems and issues, and we were going through a lot of problems, and guide to good decisions. That seems to be - I think why I have been as successful as I am is that I can get in a room with 10 people, we've got a bad problem, and listen to everybody's view and distill it all down to a couple of choices and then try to get everybody's buy in as to what the solution is. I think that's what I do all day long now, that's all I do all day long.

While Lisa emphasized pride in her individual contributions, she felt her contributions enhanced the inclusivity of the team:

I think that I'm very blessed with the ability to be visionary and so I just think that's one of my traits. I think that's very intimidating to some people. I look at that as very inclusive and I feel very strongly that people should work as a team and you contribute what you have and you help other people out and you don't worry about the rest of that stuff because you just don't.

While gender did not, for the most part, factor into comments that reflected pride in contributions, Sissy took pride in her ability, on her current TMT, to behave like “the guys”, rather than in a stereotypically female way:

I think now, when we're having discussions, not only am I physically part of the group, but I'm also presenting my ideas or my comments in a way that the guys around the table would. Instead of presenting my part of the conversation or my contribution in what would be a typically female way, I'm presenting it just like the guys are presenting their information.
In contrast, Cissy seemed to feel the weight of her role as the sole female executive, but prided herself on being “invited because I provide value”, not because someone felt obligate to include her:

I've always thought I want, no matter what the meeting is behind the door, I want to be invited because I provide value. If I don't provide value, then, there's no reason for me to be in there

Occasionally, self-deprecation was a source of pride, as suggested by Roslyn’s comment that, “I don’t have a big ego. I don’t feel like I’m the only one who knows how to do something.” This positive sense of self-identity feeds into the second superordinate theme, namely empowerment to uncover self-identity.

**Superordinate theme 2: empowered to uncover self-identity.** Not only did the participants uniformly express pride in their unique self-identity, they all described a sense of empowerment to bring that unique self to their workplace, defined her as “uncovering” (Dejordy, 2008). Though not a research question, this sense of empowerment emerged from responses in both the first and second interviews. It is captured by the second superordinate theme, *empowered to uncover self-identity*. Eight of the participants made comments that resonate with the first sub-theme, *liberation due to personal enablers*, and all pointed to the *confidence they felt from trust at very high organizational levels*. The third sub-theme, *confidence threatened by self-doubts*, captures comments made about the lack of confidence that still plagues seven of the participants, despite their impressive accomplishments and the level of trust they have established. These three sub-themes are discussed below using the words of the participants.

**Liberation due to personal enablers.** A dominant sub-theme echoed by most of the participants was the sense of liberation or freedom they felt as a result of personal circumstances
such as age, financial freedom, or a supportive spouse. Four of the women specifically identified supportive spouses as key personal enablers. Katrina, for example, pointed to her stay-at-home husband as a major source of flexibility for her in her career and her personal life. From the beginning, she said, they focused on ensuring neither one would feel trapped in a job. She discussed the freedom she felt as a result because “I don't have to have the job I have. I would rather have a happy work-life balance, which maybe that's part of the reason why it's easier to be successful too, because I don't have that pressure.”

Marina found the sounding board and safe space she needed, but didn’t always have on her TMT, by talking to her husband. She described talking to him as “a big coping strategy” because he understood the issues she was dealing with and could offer helpful suggestions. Celia and Danielle also used their spouses as sounding boards, particularly when they debated taking major career risks. In Danielle’s case, her husband pushed her to think through the risks, without being negative, by asking her tough questions, such as “Why do you want to do that?” and pointing out the risks associated with her decision, such as the “great career growth” and “all kind of opportunities” she would be giving up at her current employer. In the end, however, he supported her choice to take a big risk.

Some of the participants linked these enablers to their age or stage in life. Lisa, for example, spoke positively about the ability to be herself at her current firm, in contrast to other places she had worked. She also made it clear, however, that she would no longer have it any other way:

I have not had a sense of anyone, and I'm just going to use this term, patting someone on the head like, "Oh, that's a nice idea. Sit in the corner." I haven't come across that. I think that, I guess just personally where I'm at in my career, I wouldn't tolerate that anyway.
In conjunction with a discussion of her positive feelings for the firm, Sissy discussed her sense of liberation. In particular, she feels the combination of age and financial freedom have boosted her confidence and fearlessness such that she is more confident to take career risks:

Suddenly, I’ve got better motivated and happier employees because I used my feistiness to get what we needed. So what I told you earlier about my personality-- I'm not afraid, I guess that's the joy of being 50 something is that there's no fear. I feel like I can take anything on and that's part of going back. I feel confident of being at the table, I feel like I can take anything on and I can do this.

She followed up this comment with more detail, as part of the same uninterrupted response:

So there's a lot of factors. There's hitting my stride from an age perspective. There is no fear. I think part of that is that you can't scare me. I’ve raised two teenage boys, you can't scare me. I'm sure that's the same for teenage girls x10, but part of it may be I'm financially secure and I don't need the job. That's not true for other people but that does offer uh - I can take it or leave it.

Similarly, Danielle pointed to a higher level of comfort with mistakes now that she is older and more experienced. "As we get older, we just expect that if I make a mistake, I make a mistake. We all screw up. Let's just move on.” She also discussed how she wished she had known at an earlier age what she knows now, and hopes to find ways to impart that wisdom to the next generation of women:

As I've gotten older, don't know at what point life gave me this insight I got myself, but I know a lot more now what I need and what I want in a job than I did before. If I could coach somebody on trying to figure that out much earlier on, I'd love to do that. If I could figure it out where it happened, and why it happened - because I think that's really key.
That's some of the stuff that I want to talk about at WiTT if I do the panel is, there's only certain things you can control and you need to realize what you are in control and what you are not in control of. It's not about staying in the bad situation. Situations in your life may keep you from moving on, but at least, put a plan and some goals in place to where you've got a plan to take it to the next step that's going to make your life full. That took me years to figure out, to be honest with you.

In two cases, the personal enablers impacted their careers at an early age. Julia, for example, told the story of how she found her way to health care because she raised her hand to volunteer for an assignment when no one else would. Her attitude, at the time, was, “I cannot sit here waiting for my career to begin.” Celia also pointed to a willingness, early on, to raise her hand when volunteers were solicited for a business startup. Though she credited luck for being in the right place at the right time, she also felt empowered to take the risk because she had no dependents and knew she had skills she could fall back on:

There were a lot of people in that room that couldn't take that kind of a risk, right? If you look at it from my perspective, I'm a nurse, right? I have a nursing degree. At the end of the day, I was single so I wasn't married, I had no children and it's just me so at the end of the day if it didn't work out I just come back and I get a nursing job and I make a good living.

Celia reiterated similar sentiments when she quoted a discussion she had with her spouse about taking the career risk that resulted in her current TMT role. Though she again pointed to luck, she also felt empowered by the financial support from her husband and her own technical skills:

I said to my husband - I remember having the conversation. “Look, what's the worst-case scenario? You have a great job. I have a nursing degree. I'm going to be fine. I can always
make a living. This might fail. We might not get funding. We may be right here.” When we got funding, again, it was the conversation of, “This might fail but what's the worst-case scenario?” Then, you just go to work to make sure it doesn't. Some of it's luck. I think. I think it is.

Though Celia feels more comfortable taking personal risks now, she expressed concerns about taking risks that impact the organization because she feels her decisions impact others, and potentially impact the way others view her.

It's taken me a long time. I'm more comfortable doing that now then I was at the beginning. I was probably willing to take more risks. I'm a little less willing now. Risks from a deal perspective only because ... I don't know, it's interesting. You get older and you get ... I feel privileged that they care. That they believe me. I've spent a lot of time getting them to believe me. Not so much with Karl but these teams, when you sit on them they have to ... You have to be right.

Celia’s concerns, and similar fears expressed by others, are discussed in more detail as part of the third sub-theme on self-doubts.

**Confidence from trust at highest level.** Though the participants are all members of their firm’s top management team, each one talked about the positive impact that trust from the highest level of management had on them. This sub-theme is captured as *experienced growth in confidence from trust at highest level.* In most cases, the focus was on trust from the CEO, the Board, or a co-founder of the firm.

Tina holds a staff role that is not always fully appreciated by CEOs. Her experience is different at this firm and she gave credit to the CEO. "I would say my experience on this team has been very good. Our CEO values me personally, but he also values the function I lead."
While Tina feels that unique relationship skills enable her to work effectively with almost anyone, she also emphasized that she thinks a high level of CEO support is critical:

So, whether [the function] is deemed as important as some of the other areas, as long as you can still make sure that your leader has confidence in you, and respects you, and feels like you're adding value to the organization, then you can always make things work and find ways to be successful.

Similarly, Sissy discussed the differential impact on her confidence in this role, versus other teams she has been on, because of the high level of trust the CEO has in her. She credits that trust for empowering her to “venture out” and take risks:

One of the reasons it's different is that I have a very strong relationship with the CEO. There are years of trust that I can rely upon and that also I have provided him with a series of situations where I have analyzed the situation, come up with a response, and then, in the end, what my assessment and my recommendation was found to be the right path to go. I've got this relationship, plus I've got this confidence and a track record with him, so I feel more empowered to venture out with those. I also feel like in that particular group, I have the most history with the company. They may have more years of history in the industry or with other companies, but now I've kind of been there really some of the longest … I'm trying to think of other reasons, I guess the other reason is that not only do I have a proven track record with my boss, but the line staff know that I've got that proven track record, and I know that if I'm questioned, I can go back to that proven track record.

Katrina feels that her fearlessness enables her to speak up and ask the hard questions at TMT meetings. Speaking up, in turn, seems to have earned the CEO’s confidence in her:
He [CEO] said, 'Oh no, please never apologize for asking questions, never apologize for giving your input. You were the only one who was talking, I don't want you to tell me that you think I'm right all the time. I want to talk through it and I want to be able to answer your questions so that I can make sure that I validate what I'm thinking.

Roslyn similarly believes her ability to achieve results that others can’t has earned her a high level of support from the CEO and, as a result, the opportunity to pick and choose some of her responsibilities in the company. “That's why he [CEO] wants me to do what I'm doing, because he doesn't believe that there's been anybody in the company that's been able to actually do that. He's put a lot of confidence in me to be able to drive these major initiatives for the company.”

Celia described the positive impact that trust from both a co-founder and the CEO have had on her. She frequently finds herself in key meetings with the co-founder and outsiders. She believes she has almost instant credibility with those outsiders because the co-founder extends his personal credibility to her with statements like, “That's why I wanted to do this. The only other reason I did it is because she wanted to do it with me and she can execute it.” Celia also feels empowered by the CEO who includes “pulls me in on everything, just to bounce it off me.” As a result, she finds her contributions have “been easier here” because of the people.

Two of the participants credited support from the board for their sense of empowerment. Fiona believes she can accomplish anything she needs to in her current role because “the board has always listened to me.” While Marina believes that she has the support of her CEO who “considers me his right-hand person”, she also described the sense of security that came from the board’s confidence in her, especially when a new CEO was hired:

Now I'll say this, and this has been an important part of my success, is the board of directors of this company has always been supportive of me. And when they hired the
CEO, they told him “We want [Marina] here.” They didn't say, you can't ever do anything about it, but I had protection. I had a bit of protection.

For three of the participants, the source of enhanced confidence was slightly different. For Lisa, it was the CEO of her prior employer, who had always been supportive of her and whose recommendation to her current CEO, she subsequently learned, was a reason she was offered her TMT position. In Danielle’s case, if came from another member of the TMT, the CFO, who she credited with the firm’s decision to recruit her to the TMT. She referred to him as “one of my biggest cheerleaders here - and probably one of my biggest cheerleaders behind the door before I started.” She believes his knowledge of her from a prior experience working together led him to recommend her and stand up for her, telling his peers on the TMT:

“She can get this done. I know what you're saying but she can get this done.” As a female in this world - in IT - I mean it takes a lot for most men in Nashville. Most CEOs are males. Males gravitate towards male CIOs. I think it's just something that happens.

Julia also credited a TMT member for a high level of trust that boosted her confidence. In particular, she felt that the prior CFO's confidence in her enabled her to overcome the gender barriers she experienced once earlier in her tenure at the company. “That was a one-time thing and it never happened again. From that point on, I was at the table. It wasn't just that easy, but our CFO at the time, he, our CFO was very supportive of me and my career, and he fostered a lot of that.”

**Confidence threatened by self-doubts.** Across the board, the interviews with the participants painted profiles of very successful, very confident women. Despite their success and the sense of empowerment each one described, the majority expressed lingering self-doubts. The words that crept into these comments, repeatedly, were the lack of confidence, insecurity, fear,
and failure—even though no questions specifically probed confidence or lack thereof. The self-doubts emerged largely in response to interviewer efforts to probe a cursory comment. Of particular interest, many of the originating comments sounded positive in nature. Sissy and Celia, for example, were both explaining why they felt more comfortable contributing in their current roles in contrast to prior teams they had been on.

Sissy, Fiona, and Katrina pointed to the impact of a perceived skillset deficit on their confidence. Katrina turned down an earlier career opportunity because she didn’t, and perhaps still doesn’t, have the confidence in herself that others did about her ability to do the job. "I didn't think I had the strategic vision for it or even the skillset for it. I didn't have any confidence in myself. I mean, I still barely do, but more so now than then."

Fiona feared “looking like a complete idiot to your counterparts” because she lacked critical technical knowledge that was important to the business. To compensate for the deficit, she “started reading everything she could find on it” and worked with an expert in the field who didn’t work at her company. She “would spend Saturday mornings with him, asking questions, and he would go through and explain things to me and help me see it.”

Sissy, similarly, described all of the reasons that, “on paper I’m absolutely not qualified.” She described an array of technical skills, degrees, and experiences that peers in similar roles might have that she does not have. The concern she expressed was that, “if anybody from the outside came in and looked at this, I am the person that is least qualified to be at the table.” She hopes that her track record with the CEO and TMT have given her “a really good safety net underneath me so that if I do make a mistake, maybe that’s a one off.” Her coping mechanism is to revert to her unique competencies of working hard and focusing on objective data:
Well, obviously, I have lacked confidence, which is why I keep trying to go and constantly prove myself. That's why I kind of do everything based on facts because I know I am a little bit out of my … What do you call that, out of my … [comfort zone].

Though a skill deficit isn’t an issue for Julia, when pushed for details about situations in which she has felt uncomfortable bringing her unique contributions to the table, she described the need she sometimes feels to remind herself that she is the expert:

Sometimes just remembering, just confidence, that I am the expert in this. Nobody is going to know this topic matter as well as I do. Why am I nervous about presenting it? I have this wonderful gift of - just, my chest breaks out. I probably broke out right now just talking about myself.

Julia mentioned that she is often, or usually, the only woman in the room and she wondered if men would suffer from the same self-confidence hurdle if they found themselves in a similar position:

Yeah, there are times when that just ... It's just a confidence thing. If I had to characterize, I would say, either men are more confident in those roles, or they just are not in a situation where they're, not singled out, but they're not usually ... I'd like to see those confident men be equally as confident in a room full of high powered women, I guess. See if they would be as equally as confident I guess, I don't know… Anyway, there are definitely times when I'm not comfortable. I just have to put it out of my mind. Every time I'm in a board room, there's very few females in the room.

Roslyn and Celia both talked about the risks they feel they are taking and the associated fears if those risks don’t work out well. Roslyn pondered out lout about the downside of making
a mistake. "What happens if I mess up, right? You feel like it's hard to take risk, because wow, you could end up in a bad situation, and you don't want to do that."

Celia talked in detail about how she puts “more time and effort into” some projects because “here's this sense of this fear of failure that exists. It's in me. I, kind of, assume it's in a lot of people. I don't know that that's true or not.” Her fear of failing others seems to be a key driver in terms of both her self-doubts and her efforts to minimize the likelihood of failing:

I have worked hard. I have worked long hours. I have put a lot of mental stress in to making sure that I don't want to fail. I don't want to fail for them. I don't want to fail for me. I don't want to fail for the team and the people sitting in this office who count on us. Despite her fears, Celia believes she exudes confidence and that others would be surprised to learn that she still suffers from a fear of failing:

It's so funny because if anybody asks me if I was insecure, if anybody asks, the people that know me, if she's insecure, they'd say, "Oh heavens no, she's not." It's funny because it's that fear of failure thing again. If somebody says you're super talented, I always think to myself, "I need to make sure I am super talented. I need to make sure I know those subjects."

While Marina did not mention directly mention lack of confidence or insecurity, she seems to feel less confident that she can be herself with some of her current peers because there are ‘some egos in this room that, if you challenge them in a confrontational fashion, it goes south really fast.” As a result, she has had to adapt her natural, direct-speaking manner to a non-confrontational approach that allowed her to “still have my voice heard, and I think I’ve done it.”

**Superordinate theme 3: passion for the work.** Across the board, the participants seemed excited about the organization, its mission, the employees, and/or their work. Captured
as passion for the work, this third superordinate theme evolved from two different types of experiences that came up repeatedly in the interviews. The first sub-theme, passion fueled by meaningful work, captures the excitement and dedication evoked by the participants’ descriptions of the important work the firm is doing, the patients being served, or the employees serving those patients. The majority of interviewees were not only inspired by the work of others, they also conveyed exuberance for the work they are doing. This second sub-theme is characterized as sense of joy from the work.

Passion fueled by meaningful work. All of the participants expressed strong feelings for the firm’s mission and/or its employees. These comments were scattered throughout both interviews, sometimes cropping up multiple times in completely different parts of the interview or in both interviews. In some cases, the comments were uniquely linked to the firm’s healthcare focus. In other cases, the participants expressed unusually strong emotional ties to the company and employees. In both cases, the strength of the emotions expressed led to the sub-theme identification of passion fueled by meaningful work.

Unique to healthcare. Several of the participant’s feel their firm’s mission gives them a unique opportunity to impact the lives of others. Sissy captured this feeling eloquently:

I think in this case, the most important thing is that we, I and my contribution to what we're doing, is I will be able to impact patients. This is like being able to go out and become a missionary in Africa bring them water or teaching an illiterate person how to read, the ability to do something that has meaningful difference in the world. I will never be President. I will never have a statue. I will never have a building with my name on it, not that I care, but there's nothing when I leave this earth other than the fact that I've produced two great sons who maybe they'll do something. This is an opportunity to have
a meaningful impact on the world. I would do it for no money. You do not have to pay me for this job because if I can change the outcome for one patient - that's all. It's a life well lived if I've done it.

Sissy then differentiated the impact she can have at this firm compared to prior roles she has had, some of which were also in healthcare:

I see the direct impact of what I'm doing not only on the company, but on our customer, which is the patient...I can see it. In all those other jobs I had, I was so far removed from the customer and none of them frankly probably care two wits about the product that I was ending delivering.

Roslyn feels impassioned by the work her company is doing. “I think our mission is awesome. I think what we’re doing as a company is great”, and she wants “to be part of that.” Lisa, while she understands the good the industry can accomplish, is also concerned about the harm the industry can do. She feels a responsibility and opportunity to help patients by improving the quality of care:

It is very well known, published, and documented that we are killing people in healthcare and the tools that we have are not preventing them from being harmed. And so, it is my job to represent and to support the transformation of care by using technology instead of harming patients.

The firm’s mission clearly matters to Julia, as well:

I can bring that focus to the table as well, because as a mom, and a wife and all those roles, and you just think about where I've been the caregiver for people who have had surgery, because that's what we do, or I've had surgery myself. We have to remember as a corporation that we have to connect ourselves to the end point of what we do, and that's
impacting a person's life. I don't know if everybody brings that same mindset, but that's always important for me, to make sure people understand at whatever opportunity I can. Clearly, she feels a responsibility to ensure that employees understand the impact they have on the lives of their patients.

*Emotional ties to the company and/or employees.* Several of the participants feel bonds that are familial in strength. Fiona, for example, views the employees as a family:

Well, it has evolved over the years. Early on it was a very young team, and it has certainly matured, but it's been more like a family in some ways, because we have people who have been there for fifteen years, ten years, one guy's been there twenty-five years. You develop relationships with people and you see their families grow up.

Later, when asked about her greatest contribution, one of the first things Katrina discussed was her devotion to the employees and the company, saying that the employees “know how much they mean to me, and how much the company means to me.” Similarly, Katrina talked about the pains she and her colleagues on the TMT take to ensure they never have to let an employee go because they consider employees like family members:

One of our guiding principles is sustainable growth. We're never going to hire up for a project and then let all those people go. We see the team as our family and want them to be successful and stay here. We don't want to just keep cutting off pieces of the family.

Marina’s comments expressed an even stronger level of passion. She feels so protective about the company that she compares it to the protectiveness a mother would feel for her child:

When I talk about the company, I consider it my baby. This is my child, I raised it. Don't anybody get in my space about that. Don't anybody try to take my baby down, you know?
I think everybody in the group understands that and recognizes and has a respect for that, that there's ... I've got a lot of history here, and it's important to me, I own it.

Several other participants did not describe family-like bonds, yet still seemed to feel a strong commitment to the employees. Celia talked about how the commitment she feels to make the organization successful because “you employ all these people. Now, I feel like you, sort of, are carrying some of that on your back when you made the commitment.” She later reiterated that commitment and the pressure she feels to make sure the firm succeeds. "I don't want to fail for the team and the people sitting in this office who count on us. "

While Danielle and Tina did not express a comparable depth of emotion as some of the other participants, both clearly described the importance of serving others in the firm. Danielle, for example, feels passionate about the need to focus on the business and the internal customers her group serves, and she believes it is her responsibility to evangelize her staff to develop a similar passion. "We are here to serve the business. You do not tell the business. No, you serve the business.” Tina, on the other hand, feels the work she does meet employees’ needs are very important to the firm’s mission:

Our operation depends on ... We are a service industry. We don't make anything so the employees are very important. Engaging the workforce is very important.

**Sense of joy from the work.** In addition to the strength of the commitment participants felt for the mission and/or people, seven of the participants talked about how happy their work makes them feel. In some cases, this was linked to the passion they described for the mission or people, but in other cases the source of joy seemed more multi-dimensional. For Lisa, her work has been a lifelong passion. She "always kind of knew what I wanted to do. I was very fortunate to be able to serve and take care of people."
Three of the participants talked outright about how much they “love” what they are doing. Danielle, in describing her path to her current position, said, “I’m loving what I’m doing here”, and then reiterated it a moment later. “I love doing this stuff!” Sissy expressed a similar sentiment when she, too, described the path to her job in the first interview, saying it was “not typical and not planned, and it’s the best job I’ve ever had.” In a follow-up question to this comment during the second interview, Sissy reiterated how much she loves this job. “But I would do it if I wasn't paid, not because I have the money, but I love it that much. I've loved it this much since the day I started."

Katrina’s sense of joy is circular. She loves the company, the work she does, and her fellow employees. “I'm so fortunate. I have a fantastic job for a company that I love with people that I truly enjoy working with. I don't think everyone can say that." The flexibility the company grants her gives her a sense of life balance, which in turn seems to increase her joy from work:

I love that balance I have, which is one of the reasons I love this job because I'm afforded that opportunity to have great balance and be the things that I want to be to my family and be able to give myself to my job.

Celia, Roslyn and Tina all seem to find fulfillment from their work. Celia talked about how important it is for her to enjoy work because it consumes so much of her life:

I've enjoyed this. I will tell you that we spend so much time at work, right, that if I didn't, I wouldn't be here. Absolutely, for sure, would not have not done this. I've always said I've done, so far, knock on wood, nothing for money in my professional career.

Roslyn, though less ebullient, finds that joy from her work compensates for other things happening at work that she somewhat unhappy about. “At the same time, you know, in the end, I look at it and say, ‘As long as I like what I'm doing and I'm enjoying the work, then it's okay for
now.’ I'm in this place where it's okay.” In contrast, Tina’s sense of work-related joy comes from feeling as though she is “contributing in a meaningful way”:

It makes me feel like I can contribute. You want to get something out of the job that you're doing, so you want to feel like you can add value and contribute in meaningful way to an organization. Yes, everybody gets paid for what they do, but you're still spending a lot of time doing work in the office, or at home, in your own personal hours, so you want to be getting something from it. My personal perspective is that, I feel like I can add value and contribute, and in turn, people feel like I can do that as well, then it's a great working role for me.

Superordinate theme 4: felt included on the TMT. Notably absent from the interviews was the sense of exclusion characteristic of teams that are divided into in-groups and out-groups. Instead, without exception, each of the participants described TMT environments in which they felt included as a member of the TMT. This fourth superordinate theme reflects two underlying sub-themes: the participants’ sense of affirmation when valued by the TMT and, with one exception, the high level of respect both for and from their TMT peers. For a few, this sense of inclusion was in sharp contrast to prior group experiences.

Affirmation when valued by the TMT. The participants were generous with comments that affirmed how valued, respected, and/or needed they felt by their peers on the TMT. Katrina and Celia, for example, both talked about how much easier it is to contribute on a TMT like the one they currently sit on where they feel appreciated. In discussing her TMT contributions, Katrina said of her peers:
They tell me they appreciate me. I feel very much like I have a great fit here with the people I work with. I know that people don't have that, so I'm extremely fortunate, even when I have a bad day.

Celia, who made a very similar comment, emphasized her belief that the TMT makes it easier to be a valued contributor: "I feel like to contribute here has been- although, I'd like to think I've contributed everywhere, but clearly this has been an easier place to contribute. Again, not because of the position but because of the team."

Tina and Julia both described the ways in which their peers on the TMT make them feel valued by going out of their way to solicit their ideas and input. Julia thinks her ability to help others find solutions is one of the reasons her input is respected:

They'll come to me, we'll bounce things off of each other, and find a solution is usually what I'm here for. To help work through issues as they arise, and what we can do. Just setting the parameters, because I know what we can do from a lot of the governing factors.

Tina not only feels that her input is desired, she feels she is treated as an equal. In particular, she doesn't feel that either her function or her gender put her in out-group status:

I'm very involved. They seek me out for my input, my opinion, I give feedback, they accept it. I would say that I'm treated on par, I don't feel slighted for my role. I don't feel slighted for my gender. I feel very valued and respected by my team.

Sissy and Roslyn described a sense that their peers rely upon them because of their proven track record within the firm. Roslyn specifically feels valued for her ability to get things done in a relatively young organization:
…[I’ve] been driving a significant amount of growth and change and building for the organization. In fact, the CEO recognizes that, and even our Chief Medical Officer does in terms of, "You are the only one that can take something and actually drive it through, get things really done." They tend to give me things that are really complex in nature, to build a plan and execute against it and get a team to rally around it. That's what I do really well.

Sissy, one of the longer tenured members of her TMT, talked about her experience on the TMT in terms of specific steps she has taken to ensure each new TMT member has what they need to be successful:

With the current ones, it's really an excellent relationship and I've spent a lot of time getting to know them. The minute they joined the company, I called them. I reached out, asked them to spend time [with me] and talk to them about themselves and their career and tried to engage with them...No matter what they needed at any time, I was the one with the answers. I became their go-to.

This has paid off, in her mind, because it has allowed her to prove she can be relied upon and trusted. “They then, now, have a track record with me that I deliver and that I do what I say I'm going to do, and I do it when I say I'm going to do it, and I should be trusted." The benefit of this approach became very clear later in the interview when Sissy discussed her contributions to the TMT and the extent to which she now feels needed. “Everything I did, I was starting things from scratch. They needed everything. I felt needed. I feel needed. How about that? Oh my God, they need me.”
Danielle reiterated the value of a building-blocks approach to establishing personal value with the other members of the TMT. In her case, however, a crisis early in her tenure speeded up that process:

I think building that trust takes time but then also if you go through a crisis, it quickly matures that respect very fast. We went through a little bit of crisis here [last year] … And we were down off and on for two weeks. It was just a total disaster. I mean I don't know, there was hardly any sleep for me and Bob during those two weeks but we got through it. They saw - and I think that was the first time - certainly seeing me underneath the very stressful position, I'd been with the company less than six months. How I handled it, how I communicated it, how I handled my staff in front of others, my decision-making ability, and the stress. I mean there's a lot of things that you discover when somebody gets under stress. To me, you don't know anyone until you see them under stress. It could be your best friend and until you see them under stress, you really don't know the inside of that person. Right? I think going through that situation, I gained a lot of respect pretty quick because we made it through it and I thought we handled ourselves very professionally. They also saw although that I didn't walk away from it, I was in the middle of it - very, very deep - trying to get us out of it, and I think that helped.

Marina also pointed to her track record with others. They “know that they’re going to be listened to”, as long as they come armed with information and don’t “just go from their gut”. As a result, she said, “I think I get the respect from both my peers and those that work underneath me.”
Celia and Lisa both cited their technical expertise as the reason they feel valued. Lisa, one of the newest TMT members among the participants, feels respected for helping her relatively young organization build an effective strategy:

I also think we're in such a building of a strategy right now that I'm just making sure that we're not building waste into a solution. That's my footprint and how it truly translates to the care team and to the patient who is core of anything. If we're going to eliminate this waste and these non-value add solutions, that's where I speak up.

Celia not only cited the value her peers place on her technical expertise, she talked about how that makes her experience on the TMT feel “better and easier” than prior experiences:

The fact that I have clinical background. The nice thing is that these gentlemen value that. I think that hasn't always been the case in companies but it certainly is here. They get it. That knowledge base is important. That credibility with the physician. I think that's important, right? They think it's important. That makes it even better and easier. So it's been good.

Fiona was one of several participants who are both members of the TMT and have a seat on the corporate board. Her situation is relatively unique in terms of the influence she has at the board level, and this impacts her relationship with the other members of the TMT. At times, she finds she has to tread carefully between her two roles, which can sometimes conflict. Nonetheless, she feels her fellow TMT members are “very respectful” of her, as she is of them. Each of the TMT members has very different sources of technical expertise, but she feels that they each value the expertise of the other. She discussed the integration of each of their sources of expertise on the technology decisions that are so critical to her firm. Fiona feels they rely upon
her financial expertise for those decisions, and she relies upon their expertise. By way of example, she discussed how they handled a recent, significant, IT decision:

To do that, I had to have knowledge of it. What was great, was the CIO was very supportive and would sit down and talk to me as well, and help me understand. With [each] of the guys, there were no dumb questions.

**Respect for and from TMT peers.** The mutual respect the participants described for one another came up early in most of the interviews when they were asked to describe their experience on the TMT. The participants talked specifically about respect, collaboration, and cohesion. The sub-theme of *mutual respect* emerged directly in Celia’s opening comments about her TMT experience:

It's a team that's been together a long time. We get along well. There's a lot of mutual respect there. We've spent time building our relationships. I think, we value each other’s opinions. It's been a good experience.

Danielle’s opening description of her experience on the TMT reinforced the sense of inclusion and the corresponding absence of any out-group faultlines:

We are a very collaborative leadership team. We make decisions as a team. Very open door policy here. We talk about problems; we also openly work together on how to make - fix those problems. It's not cliquey around here at all.

Tina also mentioned the strong, mutual relationships among the TMT. "My experience on this team is great. I have good working relationships with my coworkers in the C suite and I have good relationship with our CEO as well."
Open debate was mentioned by multiple participants as a sign of the mutual respect they have for one another. Tina, for example, linked open debates to the trust they have for one another on the TMT:

I'd say I have good working relationships with all of them. I don't have personal conflict with them. Of course, we do have healthy debates and discussions, but we have very good working trusting relationships with my colleagues.

Roslyn pointed to the ease with which the members of her TMT are able to debate openly without fear of negative repercussions. “We have a very open dialog, so everybody just says what they have to say. People don't hold back. We have good discussions. If we don't agree, we talk through them.” A few moments later, in response to a probe about her comfort level “speaking my mind”, she added:

I just get the sense, and part of it's just my own prior experiences, that we have a very open management team and really honest communications and debate, and I'm not sure that's always that way in other [companies].

Celia emphasized the ability of her TMT to respective cognitive diversity among the team members by encouraging differences of opinion and open debate as a team, and by not complaining about one another behind closed doors:

You're going to disagree, especially, development and operations. You've got a sales guy and the people that have to implement what he sells. We may disagree about those things, as I mentioned, but, we're going to sit down and talk about it. We're not going to carry that around to other people in the company. I'm not going to walk into the CEOs office and say, ‘Boy, Karl's really, you know. This is what's going on.’ Because the rule we've made is, ‘Listen, if we're going to say it to each other ... you have to be able to say it to
each other if you're going to say it to the rest of the team. Let's have these conversations. Let's be mature about it. Let's know we might end up on opposite ends of the fence.” In past experiences, that hasn't always been the case. I think that becomes an undermining element in success, to me.

Like Celia and Roslyn, Lisa emphasized the culture of open debate encouraged on her current TMT and contrasted that to other organizations. She feels that the collaborative culture results, at least in part, from a shared sense of mission. “Well, I think they're [the TMT] very collaborative and they're mission-driven, right?” When then prompted to compare her current experience to prior ones, Lisa reiterated the sense of open debate on her current TMT:

It’s not to say that people here - I think the executive team, people feel very open to disagree and to counter, but it's not done in a behind the scenes kind of way that has been my experience with more corporate.

While Julia did not reference prior experiences, she, too, described a very cohesive team with minimal conflict:

Most of them I've known for years, so we've figured out ways to ... We've worked together for so long that I understand where they're coming from, so there's not a lot of conflict, which is good, it's very good. There's one or two that I'm like, it's just frustrating because I know them so well. I know how they are and there's things, but there's generally not a lot of conflict, which is good at this point.

The value of a shared history was echoed in Katrina’s comment about her long-term experience with members of the TMT:

We've always done great projects together, even when we didn't have the company, it was working for an employer executing outstanding projects that help change people's lives
and save the company tons of money, so you have that proven history of great project implementation. We like working together. It's a company's no different than a project...

Fiona’s discussion of mutual respect emerged through a dialogue that first explored her sense of frustration when she struggles to get her points across to other members of the TMT. “It can be frustrating because part of the challenge, then is, I'm not communicating well enough.” She reflected, in response to interviewer prompts, on other possible sources of the differences of opinion, including her lack of experience with the topic or the potential that they may “just have a different perspective.” When that happens, she tries to take a step back, “look at it from their perspective, and then trying to look and see, ‘What am I missing?’”

The sense of mutual respect emerged when, in response to the interviewer asking if she felt her peers tried to do the same thing for her when differences of opinion arose. She responded by saying: “I think they probably do. They're very respectful, and I have to say, in my entire career, I have never dealt with anyone who I felt was not respectful or didn't take me seriously.”

In contrast to the positive experience on their current TMT, several participants described less than respectful or inclusive experiences with leadership teams at other organizations. Roslyn, for example, referenced the positive experience on her current TMT versus “her own prior experiences.” Sissy also contrasted the inclusive nature of her current experience to prior experiences and her resulting comfort with contributing as one of “the guys” would:

In the past.... I always deferred to other people. I deferred to other people's opinion. I posed issues as questions...I think now when we're having discussions, not only am I physically part of the group, but I'm also presenting my ideas or my comments in a way that the guys around the table would.
These perceptions were captured most strikingly by Lisa, who once worked with executives who poisoned the team environment with self-promoting, dishonest behavior:

Then you get into these executive roles where you think you're advocating for these people and what you find is there are some very dishonest people within these C suites who are really, truly self-promoting, self-advocating and that just ... Personally I feel like I'm hemorrhaging this stuff to you but I feel like that is not appropriate. I think I don't conduct myself that way. I think it's very unethical and I think it's very dishonest when people have hidden agendas and I personally don't like it.

Only one participant expressed concerns about the level of shared candor on her current TMT. Marina felt that shifts in the composition of the TMT have hampered the level of openness and trust once shared mutually among the TMT:

Confrontation does not work here. It used to work, it used to. Where you would say, "I can't believe we're doing this. We need to really think about it." They’d go, "Oh okay, let's think about it." Now it's like, "What are you talking about?" It was just a total shutdown if there was a confrontation. I had to change my whole persona in dealing with confrontational issues without being confrontational. Being firm and data driven and less emotional and less hyper about that. I don't think I was particularly that before.

In other words, Marina remains comfortable being honest and direct, despite the behavioral modifications she feels compelled to make to avoid coming across as confrontational.

**Superordinate theme 5: supported by social identification.** A potential sense of loneliness at the top emerged from the interviews, particularly because of the need to preserve confidentiality. At least three of the participants, for example, talked specifically about the need
to be circumspect when confiding in anyone not on the TMT because of the confidential nature of much of the information accessible to the TMT.

Despite the requisite confidentiality, participants frequently described a need for advice, a sounding board, or just a sympathetic ear. In some cases, participants described a need to seek out peer advice prior to a TMT meeting or after one that might have been more contentious than usual. The final superordinate theme, supported by social identification, captures the sense of reinforcement participants found from other executives. All but two participants singled out one or more TMT peers who they turned to because of shared competencies. This sub-theme has been characterized as competence-driven social identification. While only three participants have another woman on their TMT, over half the participants talked about the reassurance or confidence they have experienced from confiding in another woman. This sense of encouragement from gender solidarity is the final sub-theme that will be explored.

**Competence-driven social identification.** The focus on shared competencies as the source of identification was striking, as was the sense of affirmation some participants found from competency alignment. By way of example, Katrina shared a story early in the interview of what happened when the current CEO joined the firm. As part of his on-boarding process, he reviewed all of the processes and procedures she had established in her realm of responsibility. She “got validity” from his shared perspective on how the work should be done:

> All three of us report to the CEO. When he came onboard it was really, for me, a pivotal moment in my career, because things that I thought that we were doing right, because it felt right and we were having success with it, was, I guess, I got validity from that... Getting validity, like as he asked for information and as we could provide that just without running ... for me, made me feel better about the job I was doing.
In terms of who she most identified with, however, Katrina identified one of the founding TMT members as the person she goes to “if I have something I need to talk about.” She feels that he “and I think so much alike, which is probably why we work on projects together.” That said, she then questioned whether always thinking alike on shared work initiatives was necessarily positive: “it's probably not the best. I mean being on the same page all the time is not great.”

No one else voiced concerns about excessive peer identification. To the contrary, the participants expressed the affirmation they felt from those they most identified with. Though Tina feels as though she has positive relationships with all of her colleagues, she felt the strongest alignment with the CFO, who she felt shared her data-driven approach:

I think the chief financial officer and I certainly have similar perspectives when it comes to financials and numbers, and especially since I’m so data driven, and because he naturally is as well. But what we don't always agree on everything. Like I said, it's hard for me not to like somebody.

Despite the high level of trust and history Sissy has with her boss, the CEO, she is more likely to turn to Matthew, a TMT peer, for solidarity:

I'm actually the opposite of my boss, but Matthew and I are very direct. We're very driven. We both work very hard. We hold people accountable to achieve and to deliver. We follow through. I think he's kind of a male version of me. He can call a spade a spade and then go have a beer with you. We can disagree on something and be best colleagues the next day. I most identify with him ...I admire his background and experience, his intelligence. I admire his participation and how he brings ideas to the table, but most of all I admire the fact that he's somebody that gets the job done.
Celia also felt the strongest alignment with the senior team member (the CEO) who, like her, tempers a focus on the data with "gut instinct":

You know that's interesting because you would think it was Karl, but it's probably James [CEO]. James and I are very, very similar thinkers and workers. The way we, again, I'd like to think I am a glass half full. I'd also like to think I'm a realist. Whereas Karl is a complete optimist. That's why we work so well together. Karl comes in and this is the greatest thing that's ever happened to the company and this meeting that he's had. I'm more like, “Okay, let's get into the details.” James and I are both very, very data oriented, too. I like data. I think gut feeling is very important, but I like data and data almost never lets you down. James and I are very similar in that aspect. I probably relate to him the most.

Marina feels that the newest member of the TMT not only shares her competencies, but she also believes the “dynamic” he has brought to the TMT has positively impacted the entire team:

[He] is my bud. He is a great guy. He...adds a whole different dynamic to the team in a good way. In a very good way. He's got a little bit of the intuition, get to the point, let's not play games kind of stuff that I like, and so he's been a fabulous addition to the team.

Roslyn most identified with the CEO and CMO because the three are “all relatively aligned on things.” There have been recent shifts among the other members of the TMT that Roslyn believes have increased the group identity and, as a result, she said that now, “I think we all see things the same way. We all recognize what needs to be done.” However, she went on to say that, “I think some of us are more comfortable being transparent about our thinking and soliciting input.” When asked to clarify who was more transparent, a competency she prides
herself on, she identified herself and the CMO. She then shared an unsolicited story about a problem that arose because of a TMT member’s lack of transparency. The social identification with the CMO, combined with the story about problems that arose when a peer was not transparent, reinforce the support Roslyn finds from sharing competencies with a TMT peer.

Danielle identified the CFO as someone who supports her by serving as a safe sounding board for her ideas. He then partners with her, leveraging their shared and differential expertise, to fine tune her ideas. He then validates her ideas by actively advocating for them:

> Our CFO here is awesome too. I mean I can go up there with a number and say, "If we come to an agreement on the number…", he's the one that's takes it away and does smart stuff around how we can make this happen and if we can make it happen.

Lisa and Fiona were outliers to the emphasis on competence-driven identification. Fiona felt she had the greatest opportunity to learn from the CEO, and that he was most effective at making her feel included, though she made no reference to shared competencies:

> The CEO just because we interact more together, and he's very inclusive to make sure I'm included on the things that I need to be included on, and what's going on, and I'm very appreciative of that and I've learned a lot from him, which is always good to have someone you can learn from.

While Lisa did not seem to seek out or receive support on the TMT from anyone in particular, she also felt she had the greatest opportunity to learn from the CEO:

> I will tell you. It's really interesting. It depends on ... Yes, I would say I am impressed with all of the leaders on this team. Their contributions and the paths that they have laid [here] are so impressive. I just have a ton of respect for them. I think ... I'm just impressed with all of them. I just adore Eric. He's my boss and I think that... He has a different
perspective on things than I do where he says, "Is this a friendly fire or is this not a friendly fire?" Which is never been in my thought process before so he's teaching me that. It's kind of funny because I never really took that position before and I think I needed to. I just really believe in people doing the right thing. I just never really took it that way.

Though Lisa did not discuss shared competencies as a source of social identification, failure to see things the same way is the reason she gave for absence of solidarity:

I kind of giggle but it's not funny. The guy that just stared four weeks ago ... I don't know. I don't want to say that I see things differently but I have been injecting corrections to him. It could be just that he's learning, right? I don't know that yet.

Though several women raised the topic of gender solidarity in response to the question of who they most identified with on the TMT, only Julia mentioned a TMT peer. Though she referenced “a lot of things she and I identify with just because” they are both women, she most identifies with the CEO because they are “very aligned in terms of our thought process. We're on the same page, which is great, on most all topics.” Though gender was not a primary source of social identification on the TMT, it was an issue that resonated with the majority of the participants, and thus frames the final sub-theme.

**Encouraged by gender identification.** Even though no question was asked about gender, and few of the participants had experience with female TMT peers, the notion of gender as a basis for social identification was contextualized by more than half of the participants. Some who raised the topic talked about the comfort or encouragement they find from confiding in women outside of the TMT. One turned to a woman outside the company for TMT advice. Of the four women who have ever served on a TMT with another woman, only one was silent about the
topic. Of interest given the questions about work history, only one participant mentioned a negative gender experience with a woman at a prior employer who felt threatened by her.

Though Danielle did not necessarily identify with the other woman on her TMT, she feels as though that woman appreciates having a second woman on the TMT. “I think having a female at the table - she's really appreciated it.”

When asked who they most identified with on the TMT, several participants who did not have a female peer volunteered positive female peer relationships in their past or with women at a different level in the organization. Though she safeguards confidential issues, Katrina turns to the next highest ranking woman, who is not a TMT member, as her “sounding board”:

Actually our controller too sometimes, although I try, like most stuff she knows because she sees everything, but if it's stuff that I kind of want to get like a sounding board for, like a vetting process, I talk to her.

For Marina, the answer was clear cut and immediate: she had the greatest sense of peer identification when there were two women on the TMT, and she now misses that solidarity:

There was just more of a sharing of things that you were feeling about certain situations that you could go sit down and go, “God, I don't know what we're going to do about this. We need to think about this” and I just have less of that closeness and that ... What women do with each other. The intuitive, the more emotional side of how are we going to deal with these issues as opposed to the more rigid, and it's not militaristic because that's not the culture here, but it's a more ...

In a subsequent comment, Marina reiterated the sense of loss she feels without the gender balance she once enjoyed on the TMT:
I liked it so much more when there was a balance. I really liked it when I had a close working relationship with the other woman that was [on the TMT]…So, it was a big loss for me to have that, not to have her anymore.

Celia found solidarity in the past with a woman she viewed as a peer, even though, on paper, the woman reported to her:

I think in the past, those days, it was a little harder. I was younger but also you had a little more drama on those teams. Also, I wasn't the only female, well I was on the Alliance team. I wasn't on the Accel team. There were some other people and that ... not that I minded. I had a peer. She worked for me but she really was a peer. It just ended up because the way she came in the company. They had to report to me. She clearly was a peer. Her name was Denise and I still keep in really close contact with her. She was so bright and so good. One of the best female relationships I've had at that level. Completely not threatened. Again, like these people here just want to get the job done. Totally get it. That's not always what you run into. You got to be able to deal with that. It happens. I'm fine with that. I'm okay with that.

Earlier in her career at her current firm, Julia felt excluded from TMT meetings she should have been invited to based on the relevance of her expertise. Concerned that gender was the reason she was treated as an out-group member, and lacking a female peer at her firm, she reached out to a female executive in healthcare at another firm for advice:

"Hey, I need help with navigating the good ol' boy network. Would you mind mentoring me?" She was gracious. I think whatever was in me that knew that this was something I had to take responsibility for and make work, and I had to make that work. She agreed to do so, and was just incredibly helpful to me in that relationship. That, in combination
with being pretty vocal about it, that was probably the point where I feel like things ...

That was a one-time thing and it never happened again. From that point on, I was at the table.

The story had a happy ending as Julia has never felt he has never again felt excluded by anyone on her TMT.

Lisa, in her description of a prior experience, said: "So we all just collaborate together and band together. And I can't figure out if the banding together thing is a female thing or a nurse thing. I think people they like to be part of a group or something, and it's almost innate that you attract to these people."

Both Lisa and Danielle discussed their commitment to gender solidarity by giving back to, and encouraging, the next generation of women in their field. Danielle is speaking on industry panels for women and trying to figure out to reach the next generation to help them have an easier path than she did. "That's one of the things that I would love to help some younger girls figure out. It sounds really easy when you talk about it, but it's not easy."

Lisa has found several ways to encourage the next generation of women. First, she teaches in nursing programs at two different colleges. Second, she welcomes the opportunity to mentor other women and allows very young women to shadow her:

I have gone out of my way to, any time someone reaches out in an email or an introduction. I just had one the other day from a high school student, this young lady, said, "My mom told me about what you did for a living. I'd love to come and shadow you." Are you kidding me? I'm like, "Fricking, come on. Let's do something...The point is - someone did it for me. I'm glad to do that for you. I always tell them, "You have to do this for someone else. You have to."
Conclusion

Five superordinate themes emerged from this study of the experiences of TMT women in healthcare. The themes capture the continuum of identity issues from personal identity construction to positive social identification within and, sometimes, beyond the TMT. Following that spectrum, the first superordinate theme to emerge was the *pride each participant identified in their unique identity* as a result of feeling exceptionally competent, and then taking pride from those differentiated competencies. A combination of factors contributed to the *sense of empowerment to uncover that unique identity* that the participants experienced. A combination of liberation from personal enablers, as well as gains in confidence from trust at the highest organizational levels, fueled that sense of empowerment. The third superordinate theme, *passion for the work*, emerged from the passion all of the participants expressed for the firm’s mission or the people involved with that mission, and from the pure sense of joy most of them described for their work.

The fourth and fifth superordinate themes contextualize the social identity experiences of the participants. Despite the potential for faultlines because the women were in a distinct minority on their TMT, each *felt included on the TMT*. This fourth superordinate theme was supported by the absence of outgroups experienced by any of the participants, each of whom felt valued by their peers on the TMT. The majority also expressed a strong sense of mutual respect among the members of the TMT. The final superordinate theme, *supported by social identification*, addresses the extent to which participants identified in meaningful ways with peers on the TMT, and the extent to which they sought encouragement from other women, on or off the TMT.
The next chapter provides context and support for these themes based on the extant literature, including the theoretical framework. In addition, implications for practice and suggestions for future research are addressed in Chapter Five.
Chapter Five: Analysis, Implications, and Recommendations

TMTs are charged with setting an organization’s strategic direction and balancing the competing demands for limited resources. Though multiple dimensions of TMT diversity have been explored as mediators of these critical TMT roles, the paucity of women on TMTs (Noland, Moran, & Kotschwar, 2016) means we know little about gender diversity, particularly from the perspective of women on those TMTs. Thus, the research question underlying this study was

_How do women on the top management team of a healthcare organization make sense of their experience when they are one of only a few women on the TMT?_

This chapter reviews the contributions of the study in terms of implications for: theory, the relevant extant literature, and practice. The practical implications are discussed for both organizations and their TMTs, and for the women who serve or aspire to serve on TMTs. These discussions are followed by the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

**Implications for Theory**

In two separate studies that explored the paucity of women on TMTs, the authors identified the impact of social categorization on one’s sense of identity as a potential mediator of women’s experience on TMTs (Desivilya & Palgi, 2014: Ellemers, Rink, Derk, & Ryan, 2012). Given this author’s focus on women who represent a distinct minority of a TMT’s membership, social identity (SIT) and social categorization (SCT) theories were selected for the theoretical framework. The sense of self combines both the ways we differentiate ourselves from others and the ways we see ourselves fitting into the group(s) we identify with, or our personal identity and our social identity, respectively. Rather than separate and distinct constructs, the five superordinate themes that emerged from this study reflect a self-identity continuum that is displayed in Table 3.
Table 3

*SIT Continuum of Research-derived Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-ordinate Theme</th>
<th>Subordinate Theme</th>
<th>Personal</th>
<th>Interrelated</th>
<th>Social</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Pride in unique identity</td>
<td>1.1 Felt exceptional because of differentiated competencies</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2 Sense of pride from personal contributions</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Empowered to uncover self-identity</td>
<td>2.1 Liberation due to Personal enablers</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2 Confidence from trust at highest level</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.3 Self-doubts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Passion for the work</td>
<td>3.1 MW: Passion for mission/people</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.2 Experienced joy from work</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Felt included on TMT</td>
<td>4.1 Felt valued by TMT</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.2 Mutual respect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Supported by social identification</td>
<td>5.1 Competence-driven social identification</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.2 Encouraged by gender social identification</td>
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_Pride in unique identity._ The identity literature emphasizes the importance of self-concept as a precursor to social identification and categorization (Amiot, De la Sablonniere, Terry, & Smith, 2007; Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). The self to social-self process, however, is both comparative and context-specific (Amiot, De la Sablonniere, Terry, & Smith, 2007; Wilkinson, 1998). Consistent with the literature, the first theme, *pride in unique identity*, emphasizes the importance the participants placed on their sense of self. First, the emphasis on differentiation in the subordinate theme *self-worth enhanced by differentiated competencies* reinforces the notion in the literature that self-image reflects a comparison to others. The experience of the participants further reinforces the import of such relational
benchmarks as the comparison to others enhances the participants’ perceived value of their unique identity. This is captured in the second sub-theme, a *sense of pride from personal contributions*.

**Empowered to uncover self-identity.** The fluidity of self-categorization based on context is a foundational SIT/SCT construct (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Turner et al., 1994). Conflicts can arise, however, when individuals perceive a disconnect between their self-identity and the desired attributes of a particular group they belong to (DeJordy, 2008). DeJordy (2008) defined covering as behaviors individuals employ when they sense a need to suppress aspects of their unique identity in order to conform to a group’s social identity.

In contrast to such a need to cover, the second theme, *empowered to uncover self-identity*, captures the sense of identity empowerment experienced by the participants. Two subordinate themes provide context. First, *liberation due to personal enablers* emphasizes the impact from personal and familial identity. Second, *confidence from trust at the highest levels* reflects a work-derived sense of personal identity, in particular the confidence to be unique in a work group setting.

The ability to juggle multiple identity roles is generally viewed as advantageous and fairly easy to accomplish, but role conflicts can pose a threat, particularly if differences between the roles are deemed significant (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The third sub-theme, *confidence threatened by self-doubts*, affirmed the negative impact of identity conflicts as self-doubts were expressed by the majority of participants.

**Passion for the work.** One stream in the meaningful work field explores the processes or mechanisms through which people find meaning in work, in particular the extent to which the process is driven by a focus on self or through communion with others (Rosso et al., 2010). The
interrelationship between sense of self and social identity that emerged from this study in the third subordinate theme, *passion for the work*, reinforced the SIT premise that social-categorization is important to self-concept (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). All of the participants felt a strong personal connection to the work that their organization and/or its employees were doing. Comments made by the participants suggested that strong feeling about the collective work of the firm and/or its employees enhanced how employees felt about their identity, suggesting that the work-driven social identity enhanced their self-concept. This identity link is exemplified by Sissy’s statement that “You do not have to pay me for this job because if I can change the outcome for one cancer patient - that's all. It's a life well lived if I've done it.”

*Felt Included on TMT.* The context-specific tenet of SIT (Hogg et al., 1996) was reinforced by the comparative comments made by several participants. While all *felt included on the TMT*, several described prior experiences where they felt left out of the group. The notion of in-groups versus out-groups is a foundational concept in SCT (Tajfel et al., 1971), though defining the difference between the two is complicated. In particular, the context-specific nature of social categorization means that defining the difference between the two relies upon social cues (Hornsey, 2008). Consistent with Allport’s (1979) suggestion that one such signal of in-group status is the use of the word “we” (p. 31), virtually all of the participants described their collective TMT interactions using the “we” pronoun. The emphasis on “we” is notable, given the focus of the questions on individual experience, and would seem to provide further support for the linkage between the use of “we” and a sense of inclusion.

*Supported by social identification.* While highly visible social categories, like gender, are more likely to inform categorization into in and out groups, it is only salient to the extent that it motivates an individual to align with or distance themselves from a group (Tafel & Turner,
The final theme that emerged from the interviews was the support each participant identified based on solidarity with others, particularly based on shared competencies with another TMT member. Gender, though discussed by slightly more than half the participants, was far less dominant as a subordinate theme. While six of the participants clearly felt encouraged by gender identification, Marina was the only participant who experienced a gender-based group identification on a TMT. This outcome may be influenced by the fact that only four participants had experience with fellow women TMT members. However, the other two who currently have fellow women on the TMT did not seem to identify with the other women. Instead, they, too, emphasized identification based on similar style or competencies. The research implications, including literature links between each theme and SIT, are addressed next.

Implications for Research

Given the paucity of women on TMTs, we know little about the experience of those trailblazing women. The goal of this study was to address that gap by exploring the experience of women in a distinct gender minority on a healthcare industry TMT. Despite the current gap, a number of the findings affirm or contrast with findings in the extant literature.

Empowered to Uncover Self-identity. A key finding that emerged from the study was the sense of empowerment all of the participants felt to uncover their self-identity and the sense of liberation from personal enablers they experienced. Marina was the only participant who described a need to alter her preferred, very direct style, in favor of a less confrontational approach. This contrasts with the finding of Ellemers et al. (2012) that gendered leadership in organizations is still relatively common and may generate organizational pressures that impact how senior women self-categorize, how they behave at work, and, as a result, the life choices they make.
The participants in this researcher’s study also identified *confidence from trust at highest level* as important to their TMT experience. Tina, for example, felt that as long as your “leader has confidence in you…you can always make things work and find ways to be successful.” Similarly, Sissy felt that the CEOs trust in her made her “feel more empowered to venture out” and take risks without fearing the response from her peers. The criticality of strong executive support was echoed in a study by Kumra and Vinnicombe (2010) that identified the positive impact on women’s success from the confidence of “influential others” (p. 530).

**Felt Included on TMT.** Of particular interest in this study was the potential that women in a distinct minority on a healthcare TMT might feel excluded and, as a result, struggle to contribute to the TMT. In contrast to any evidence that study participants felt excluded, each experienced *affirmation when valued by the TMT*, a sub-theme. The participants’ descriptions of how they felt socially accepted and valued for their unique contributions is consistent with Shore et al.’s (2011) definition of an inclusive environment. This finding also lends support to Prime and Salib’s (2014) practical research, which identified inclusion as resulting from environments in which one was able to feel both distinct from, but similar to, others in a work group.

The universal sense of inclusion identified by the participants in this researcher’s study stands in contrast, however, to an all-too-common sense of exclusion Glass and Cook (2016) found in a study of top executive women. All of the participant in this study felt *valued by their TMT peers* and all but one felt *respect for and from their TMT peers*, two sub-themes. Several of the Glass and Cook participants, on the other hand, identified a sense of feeling left out of peer networks and key executive meetings. The unifying link between the two studies is the emphasis executive women put on the importance of *confidence from trust at the highest levels*. This subordinate theme, which emerged from all interviews for the underlying study, echoes the Glass
and Cook finding that the sense of exclusion can be overcome if the executive has the support of the board of directors and/or a powerful sponsor” (p. 61).

**Supported by social identification.** Few of the participants discussed gender with respect to the TMT. Instead, the participants, in the aggregate, clearly found their competency-derived identity drove their peer identification on the TMT. The absence of faultlines, combined with the minimal discussion of gender, is consistent with the research by Van Knippenberg et al. (2011) which found that, when gender differences were salient, strong faultlines tended to form.

**Implications for Practice**

Pressures are mounting, internally and externally, for organizations to do a better job of improving the gender diversity of executive management. Many firms, however, struggle both to retain talented women and to move more of them up the organizational pipeline. The search for answers for clients provided the original impetus that led to this study. The research findings suggest that there are a number of things organizations can do to retain senior women and to enhance their TMT experience, as well as a few things women might do to improve their opportunity to join a TMT and to feel positive about the opportunity once there.

**Recommendations for Organizations and their TMTs.** The dilemmas of retaining more women and moving more up the organizational latter are inter-related: firms must retain women in order to promote them and, once added to the TMT, firms must retain these executive women in order to improve gender balance. New research continues to contradict historical wisdom about what influences engagement and retention. A recent Deloitte study (Brown, Bersin, Gosling, & Sloan, 2016) identified five issues that matter to employees. Three of these are remarkably consistent with the issues this study found matter to TMT women, namely: meaningful work, an inclusive work environment that is empowering and supportive, and trust in
organizational leadership. Further, while old school approaches to engagement and retention emphasize the relationship an employee has with a direct supervisor, this study, the Deloitte study, and a survey by TINYpulse (“Seven vital trends”, 2013) suggest that peer relationships matter as much, if not more. The resulting recommendations for organizations and their TMTs fall into the categories of: enhancing women’s sense of empowerment, cultivating a TMT culture of inclusion, and strengthening the link between mission and meaning.

**Recommendation #1: Enhance women’s sense of empowerment.** The findings from this study suggest that women’s sense of empowerment is linked to both positive feelings about their unique identity and the liberation to uncover that identity at work. While one category of liberators reflected personal life circumstances such as age or a supportive spouse, the other reflected organizational dynamics, namely confidence from trust of the board, CEO, or an influential TMT member. Strategies to build this type of confidence at both the TMT and pipeline level will be discussed, along with recommendations for minimizing the self-doubts that can impair confidence.

*Enhance confidence from trust at a high level.* One option for enhancing confidence-driven empowerment is to ensure that women invited to join the TMT already have trust from a pre-existing TMT or board relationships, as was the case for several of the participants. Given the paucity of senior women, however, this approach may have limited applicability. Another option is to focus on strategies that quickly build trust at the highest level. Given the number of study participants who referenced a board relationship, organizations might ensure that women on the TMT have the opportunity to present to, and network with, the board early in their tenure in order to build trust. CEOs are also encouraged to extend the time and effort to build a trusted
relationship with women who join the TMT, particularly if there are few, if any, other women on the team.

*Develop pipeline strategies.* Longer term, organizations are encouraged to implement strategies likely to build this type of trusted relationships by asking members of the TMT to sponsor high potential women who are currently one or two levels below the TMT. Formal sponsorship programs are now considered a best practice for increasing the ranks of executive women (Lean In & McKinsey, 2015). A key reason sponsors appear so effective is that it puts executives in a position where they have the knowledge and relationships to advocate for the promotion of the women they sponsor. This is how several participants made it to the TMT.

Similar to the advice for onboarding new women on the TMT, Broadbridge (2010) suggested that organizations can increase the exposure of high potential women in the pipeline to members of the TMT, perhaps by having them give presentations at TMT meetings. Another option that this researcher has found effective is to include active learning projects in leadership development programs that pairs a TMT sponsor with one or more high potential women he or she may not have had exposure to. Ideally, the project should be one that the TMT sponsor has a vested interest in, as it is more likely to increase the interaction between the project group and the executive.

Organizations also have an opportunity to help women build social capital and develop impression management strategies by creating women’s networking groups that are high impact. Though these networking groups often fail to attract high potential women, this consultant has seen a number of firms succeed by using the networks as a vehicle to fund and implement very effective executive presence programs. Firms that involve top executives as sponsors of the
women’s networks, and involve those networks in meaningful organizational assignments, have successfully used them to help women build social capital.

Executive coaching to battle self-doubts. Despite successful track records and generally high levels of confidence, many of the participants expressed lingering self-doubts. Perhaps because of other enablers, such as trust from the CEO or a supportive spouse, these self-doubts did not derail any of the participants. Other women on TMTs, however, might not have those enablers in their arsenal, or the self-doubts might pose a greater threat to their confidence. Executive coaching, a tool used by many CEOs, is a viable strategy for helping women voice their fears and concerns, and for helping them manage self-doubts. It might be particularly effective for onboarding new TMT members as transitions, particularly if one is part of a gender minority, can be intimidating. The coaching should include communication and impression management training, which several researchers (Glass & Cook, 2016; Pfeffer, 2016) have suggested can benefit executive women in particular.

Recommendation #2: Cultivating a TMT culture of inclusion. A positive finding of this study was the extent to which all participants felt included as a member of the TMT. Each claimed solidarity based on competencies, a job-related characteristic. This solidarity seemed to minimize the potential for women who were an "only" on the TMT to feel like an outsider. Organizations might consider an onboarding strategy that pairs a woman joining the TMT with a peer mentor who has a similar competency profile.

TMTs are also encouraged to consider strategies designed to foster, or maintain, a sense of inclusion as the demographic heterogeneity of the TMT increases. A tool used with increasing frequency among large organizations is diversity and inclusion (D&I) training, but D&I training has much baggage and may be as harmful as it is helpful (Dobbin, Kim, & Kalev, 2011; Kalev,
Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). Instead, TMTs are encouraged to focus on building cultural competence, specifically including implicit bias training (Devine, Forscher, Austin, & Cox, 2013). It is worth noting that implicit bias is not a male problem, and women on TMTs are as likely to need and benefit from the training as their male peers (Ellemers et al., 2012). Many women on TMTs may be unaware that they have implicit biases about gender that can negatively impact other women who join the TMT or women in the pipeline.

Recommendation #3: Strengthening the link between mission and meaning. All of the participants felt a sense of passion for their firm’s mission and/or its employees, and most experienced a sense of joy from their work. While it might be easy to treat this finding as a by-product unique to the care-giving focus of healthcare entities, Brown et al. (2016) found that ‘topics such as ‘mission,’ ‘values,’ and ‘contribution to society’ are driving engagement more than ever.” Thus, all organizations are encouraged to make explicit to women on, or joining, the TMT the greater good the firm generates and the link between that good work and the responsibilities of the TMT member. Study participants derived meaning in multiple ways. While some emphasized unique clinical responsibilities, others emphasized efforts that could apply in any organization. Examples included TMT members who felt passionate about ensuring other employees appreciated the firm’s good work, or that other employees had the tools and resources they needed to execute the mission. Other firms might, as an example, involve women on the TMT in their philanthropic or sustainability endeavors as a way to provide a link between mission and meaning.

Recommendations for women. To a certain extent, the recommendations for women mirror those for organizations. These can be particularly valuable for women either seeking to enhance their TMT readiness earlier in their careers or for women considering joining the TMT.
of another firm. While hard work and excellence may be necessary for women to achieve a role at the top, they are unlikely to be sufficient. In addition to recommendations for building social capital and developing impression management tools, women are encouraged to take the initiative to develop differentiated expertise.

**Recommendation #4: Differentiated expertise.** A key finding affirmed by this study was the sense of pride each of the participants described as a result of their differentiated competence. That pride contributed to a personal sense of empowerment and enhanced the feeling of inclusion that resulted from feeling valued and needed by the TMT. This researcher has also found that women who develop differentiated expertise are better positioned to negotiate the flexibility, financial rewards, or promotions that enhance one’s sense of liberation and empowerment. Similarly, Baker and Cangemi (2016) found in a recent study that executive women identified “developing unique skills and expertise” (p. 35) as a valuable success strategy. Thus, women seeking executive leadership roles are encouraged to begin building expertise early in their careers, and to take ongoing steps to maintain differentiated skills.

**Recommendation #5: Build social capital.** As valuable as expertise and hard work are, they are rarely sufficient. Many of the participants in this study credited “who they knew” for their current TMT role. Evidence suggests that too few women focus on the type of highly influential and effective external networks (Broadbridge, 2010) that can lead to a TMT role or can enhance their sense of empowerment once on the TMT. A favorite anonymous quote of this researcher is, “it’s not who knows you; it’s who knows what you can do.”

Women on, or aspiring to join, a TMT are encouraged to take specific steps to build their external network. Consider joining industry-specific associations for executive women to build your national network, such as the networking focused *Women Business Leaders* for women
healthcare executives. It may also be worthwhile to join not-for-profit boards that attract other leading executives in the community to build an influential local network.

**Recommendation #6: Engage in impression management.** In addition to developing expertise and building social capital, women need to master the art of effectively communicating that expertise and their organizational commitment. Evidence suggests a high correlation between leaders in the U.S. and assertiveness (Pfeffer, 2016). Training can help. Stanford Business School, for example, offers a course in “Acting with Power” because those forced behaviors can become habits and feel more natural over time (Pfeffer, 2016). Women are encouraged to take advantage of leadership communication training offered by their firm and/or to seek out external opportunities for Executive Presence training. Depending on personal aspirations and budget, women might hire an executive coach on their own. Developing impression management strategies may enhance the likelihood of promotion and help women on a TMT build or maintain positive peer perceptions.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

This IPA study delved into the experiences of ten women on the TMTs of ten different organizations. While this research design does not enable generalizations, each of the women is acknowledged as an expert in her own experience, and each is treated as a separate case. To enable meaningful cross-analyses of these cases, the participants were intentionally selected from a relatively narrow set of criteria. Those criteria, and the aggregate participant profile, define the primary limitations of the study, and pave the way for future research opportunities.

**Participant characteristics.** The participant profile, for example, represents a mix of women from private and publicly traded, for-profit firms; only one participant is from a not-for-profit (NFP). A future study might find different results if, for example, all participants work in
NFP organizations or, alternatively, only in either private or publicly traded firms. The same can be said about the blend of participants from providers and technology firms. A study of women from the same industry subsection, or from a subsection not explored like health insurers or pharmaceutical firms, might yield very different results. All of the represented firms are domiciled in the southeastern region of the U.S. Results might vary in other geographies, particularly cultures outside of the U.S.

A meaningful implication of the research was the absence of out-groups. This finding may have been influenced by the participants’ TMT tenure as the preponderance of women had tenure of three years or longer. A sense of exclusion might be more common when women first join a TMT, or among women who left a TMT, voluntarily or involuntarily. The insights gained from a study of women less integrated with their TMT might yield valuable insights. For example, the most vulnerable time for women on a TMT may be those first few months after they are added to the executive team. An exploration of the experiences of women during the first six months after joining a TMT might significantly enhance the TMT insight gained from this study.

Only one of the participants was promoted through the ranks of the organization; the others joined the TMT during the startup phase or were hired from the outside. The context for women’s experience on the TMT might be very different if all participants had been promoted through the ranks. Given the narrowing funnel of women at each successive layer of management, the most valuable insight for exploring gender pipeline problems might be to focus on long-term employees who have managed to make it to the TMT. Thus, future researchers might want to focus on the experience of women who make it to the TMT after several internal promotions.
Similarly, groups with high levels of conflict are more likely to experience faultlines based on social categorization (Randel, 2002; Turner et al., 1994). Gender, as a highly visible identity, has the potential to exacerbate out-group driven conflict (Tafel & Turner, 1986). The participants, however, uniformly described low levels of conflict, and virtually no unproductive conflict on their current TMTs. Future researchers might want to identify participants who have experienced significant conflict on the TMT in order to better understand its impact on participants’ social identity.

Broadbridge (2010) suggested additional research was warranted in order to understand how senior women access social capital when they are “not in such a minority status at senior levels” (p. 828). Of particular interest to this researcher is the extent to which choosing different networking strategies might be beneficial to TMT women in a gender minority. Only one participant in the current study mentioned relying upon a more homogenous or “expressive” network at the TMT level, but she described how turning to another woman enabled her to survive and thrive during a particularly hostile period. While research suggests instrumental networks may help a woman reach the TMT (Broadbridge, 2010), perhaps expressive networks are necessary to thrive in a less-than-inclusive TMT culture. Thus, future research might explore the different types of networks women on TMTs use both before and after joining a TMT.

All of the participants in this study felt empowered by trust from a very high level, such as the CEO or board. For many of the participants, that trust preceded the TMT relationship. A few of the participants, however, implemented intentional strategies to earn that trust. A number of the comments made seem consistent with Singh et al.’s (2002) impression management recommendations. For example, Sissy reached out to each new TMT member “the minute they joined the company” with the result that she became “their go-to” for any questions they had or
help they needed. An in-depth analysis of the impression management techniques used successfully by women to achieve a TMT role, as well as to thrive once on the TMT, might provide invaluable insight to women who aspire to join a TMT.

The participants made minimal references to gender barriers they experienced at any point in their career paths, and only Danielle mentioned a potential gender barrier in her appointment to the TMT, a barrier that her sponsor on the TMT eliminated. This void may merely reflect the absence of a question or probe that explored gender barriers, rather than the absence of barriers. Given the heavy emphasis participants accorded to the impact of trust from someone at the highest level, combined with the positive impact on potential barriers that Danielle experienced because of her sponsor, future researchers might want to specifically explore the impact of gender barriers on the path to the TMT, as well as the impact of a sponsor or advocate in overcoming barriers.

An ongoing debate in the TMT literature is the relative importance of job-related versus non-job related heterogeneity (Homberg & Bui, 2013; Naranjo-Gil et al., 2008; Nielsen & Nielsen, 2013). While this study did not attempt to evaluate the impact of TMT heterogeneity, the participants uniformly identified their unique competencies, an aspect of job-related differences, as their greatest contribution to the TMT. That said, the paucity of women on TMTs has made it difficult to study gender heterogeneity (Nielsen, 2010; Ruiz-Jiménez, del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes, & Ruiz-Arroyo, 2014). Marina was the only participant to identify her gender-differentiated “voice” as a valuable contribution to the TMT. She was also one of the few participants who have served on TMTs with multiple women. Thus, this researcher echoes the call by Nielsen (2010) to further explore the relative impact of gender diversity versus cognitive diversity.
Organizational dynamics. In addition to exploring alternative participant characteristics or experiences, further insight may come from exploring organizational dynamics. For example, it might be valuable to explore the impact of organizational culture. All of the participants seemed to view their current organization as different from other organizations where they had worked. A question that this differentiation raises is whether it is the organization and its TMT that have engendered such positive feelings, or the position of power and influence the women hold at this firm. An alternative to the purposeful sampling methodology used in this study might be to include criteria on organizational culture.

Though not a focus of this study, the participants all seemed to find meaning from their work. While this might result from the organizational culture, it might also reflect the link between a healthcare industry mission and a key component of meaningful work (MW) that Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski (2010) describe as “other-oriented actions or experiences [that] serve to broaden or expand the self in some meaningful way” (114). The interrelationship between sense of self and social identity that emerged from this study seemed linked for many to their firm’s patient or caregiver mission. A similar study in a different industry, particularly a sector not characterized by such an “other-oriented” mission, might yield very different results. Thus, future researchers might want to explore the potential link between TMT inclusivity, organizational mission, and MW.

Conclusion

The most common enablers of TMT inclusiveness among the participants in the study were: pre-existing TMT relationship, a high level of confidence from the CEO and/or the board, and a sense of social identification with another TMT member based on shared competencies. In the aggregate, these results suggest that organizations can take proactive steps to minimize the
heterogeneity problems predicted in the literature. In particular, steps to create an inclusive TMT culture and to build the sense of empowerment women on the TMT have, may serve as a bridge to the best of both worlds, namely TMTs able to meld the benefits of both heterogeneity and homogeneity.
References


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Appendix A

Format and Script for Interviews

Structured Introductory Interviews (By Phone)

In the first interview, the researcher will establish the nature of the research project, the role of the participant, seek consent to participate using the written consent form, thank the participant, and collect relevant biographical information. While the focus of this interview includes taking care of the relevant details, its most important function is to establish a rapport with the participant.

I will first ask the participant to sign the Informed Consent form. Next, I will explain that all information collected will be anonymous and will ask the participant for a pseudonym that will be used throughout all interviews. After requesting informal permission to tape the interview, I will turn on the recorder (if that permission is granted), and ask again for permission to record with that agreement then on tape.

Script. Good morning. My name is Corbette Doyle and I am a doctoral candidate in education at Northeastern University.

Thank you for agreeing to this conversation and for agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose of my research is to gain insight into the impact of gender diversity on members of top management teams. To that end, I am collecting stories about women who sit on the TMT of a healthcare organization where women represent a distinct minority of the TMT

This conversation is a precursor to the primary interview, which will take approximately one hour. The purpose of this fifteen-minute conversation is to make sure you are comfortable participating in this research project and to get to know more about you so that I am able to tailor my questions to reflect your background.
Background Questions. Each candidate will be asked the questions outlined below.

1. Please tell me about your educational background and why you chose the healthcare industry.

2. Please describe your career path up to, and including, a description of your current role.
   a. If not addressed: how long have you been on the TMT?
   b. How long have you been at the firm?

3. Would you characterize your current role as a line role with P&L responsibilities or a staff role that supports those in P&L roles?

4. I would welcome the opportunity to conduct the primary interview in person between now and _ _ _ _. The goal is to complete the interview in 60-minutes. Is it possible to hold 90-minutes on your calendar in case the interview goes longer than anticipated? If that is acceptable to you, where and when would be a convenient time for that interview?

5. I will share the transcripts and initial findings with you for your review. Can you provide a secure email address I can use for the transmission of those documents?

Semi-structured Interviews (60-90 minutes, in-person when possible)

Script. Good morning. My name is Corbette Doyle and, as you know, I am a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University. You previously agreed to allow me to record the interview. May I have permission to record this interview as well?

Interview Questions.

1. Can you describe your experience on the TMT?

2. In general, as a professional, what do you perceive as your greatest contribution to
other teams you have been on?

3. Can you compare or contrast that with your contributions to the TMT?

4. Can you talk about who you most identify with on the TMT and why?

**Checklist (topics to probe if not addressed by participant):**

- **Experience:**
  - Engagement: *Can you describe your interactions with the TMT members?*
  - Inclusion: *It sounded like there may have been a time when you didn’t feel like a full member of the team. Can you expand on that?*

- **TMT Contributions:**
  - Unique: *Can you describe how your contributions to the TMT are unique or different from other members of the TMT?*
  - Value: *Do you feel those contributions are valued by the TMT?*
    - Contrast: *Can you contrast a time when you felt your contributions were valued by the TMT to one in which you felt they were not valued?*
    - Comfort: *Can you describe a time when you hesitated to share an idea with the TMT? What was happening? How did it make you feel?*

- **Identity:**
  - Solidarity: *Who do you find yourself agreeing with most often? Why?*
  - Conflict: *Whom are you most comfortable disagreeing with? Why do you think you feel that way?*
    - *Can you discuss a situation where you felt uncomfortable voicing dissent? Who was involved?*
**Closing.** Thank you for participating in this interview. Once the transcripts have been completed and I have verified that they match the audio recordings, I will send them to you for your review. This will give you an opportunity to ensure the words mirror your intent, and to ensure there is nothing in the transcript you feel should be deleted. If possible, I would welcome an additional 15-minute conversation to finalize the transcript and give you an opportunity to add anything that, in hindsight, you would like to add to your comments. This can also be accomplished by email, if you prefer.
Appendix B

Informed Consent (Optional Signature)

Northeastern University, Department of Continuing Professional Studies
Title of project: The Experience of Women in the Minority on a Top Management Team: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
Principal investigator: Dr. Tova Sanders
Northeastern university student researcher: Corbette Doyle

Request to participate in research:
We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you would prefer not to.

Why are you being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to participate in this study because you are an executive woman on the top management team of a healthcare organization.

Why is this research being done?
The purpose of this research study is to explore the experiences of women on the top management team of healthcare organizations when there are only one or two women on the team.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in the study, we will ask you to participate in a brief information-gathering interview, and to then participate in a 60 - 90 minute semi-structured interview to capture insight about your experiences on the top management team. The first interview will take place by phone; the second interview will take place in person, if at all possible. If that is not convenient, then it will take place as a phone or Go-to-Meeting interview. There will be one additional follow-up phone call or email interaction to give you an opportunity to review the transcript and make any revisions or delete any information you view as too sensitive, even in an anonymous format.

When will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The researcher intends to apply the study procedures outlined below. Ideally, the two interviews and the validation follow up will take place this summer, at dates and times convenient for you.

1. Informal initial interview to get to know you: 15 to 20 minutes
   - Discuss the study, respond to questions, and obtain your consent.
• Collect background and biographical information
• Schedule the formal interview

2. Semi structured data collection interview: 60 to 90 minutes
• Conduct a formal interview either in person or via a phone or GoToMeeting interview.

3. Validation and debriefing session: 15 minutes
• Each participant will receive a copy of their transcript via a secured attachment to an email
• The participant will review the transcript and provide feedback on revisions needed. The feedback can take place via email correspondence or by phone, based on the preference of the participant.

4. Source of data collection:
• Personal interviews
• Audio tapes, transcriptions from those audio tapes, and researcher notes

### Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

There will be no personal or physical risk to you. All data collected will be held in strict confidence. You will be assigned a pseudonym, and your identity, location, and employer will be eliminated from all transcripts and any subsequent documentation create it. Should you inadvertently mention the names of people or organizations, each will be assigned a pseudonym. All of the data Data collected will be managed and stored safely. No documents with your name or a key to your pseudonym will be stored in the cloud. All information that identifies you as an individual, including audio tapes, will be destroyed as soon as the dissertation has been completed. The anonymous, type written material will be retained for a period of seven years and then destroyed. You will be allowed to read the transcript interview once it has been described to check it for validity or compromising material. You are allowed to withdraw from the study at any time.

### Well I benefit from participating in this research?

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, it is hoped that insight gained from this research may inform the integration of women into healthcare top management teams.

### Who will see the information about me?

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on the study will see any information linking you to comments made. No reports are publications will use information that can identify you, or any individual who participates in the study, in any way.

A pseudonym will be assigned immediately to each participant. Only one document will be created that cross-references actual participants with those pseudonyms. The data collected in the
interview notes, audio tapes, and transcript well only reference pseudonyms, and not actual names. All identifying information, including audio tapes, will be stored securely on an external hard drive, kept at the researchers home, and not stored in a publicly-accessible office or in the cloud. Anonymous information will be stored securely in compressed files on the researchers home computer and on an external hard drive. No unauthorized persons will be allowed to read the data collected or materials affiliated with it. In rare instances, the Institutional Review Board at Northeastern University might request access to the original transcripts.

**Can I stop my participation in the study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to purchase a paid if you do not want to, and you can refuse to answer any questions. Even if you begin the study, you may quit it anytime. Your participation or nonparticipation will not affect your relationship with Northeastern University or any other organization.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

Please contact the researcher, Corbette Doyle at 615–504–6090 or by email at doyle.cor@husky.neu.com You may also contact the principal investigator, Dr Tova Sanders, at t.sanders@neu.edu.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact: Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subjects Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115 (617) 373-4588 irb@neu.edu You may also call anonymously if you wish.

**You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project.**

**I Agree to participate in this research.**

_______________________________ Date: __________
Optional signature or participant

_______________________________
Printed name of person above

_______________________________ Date: __________
Signature of person who explained the study To the participant above and obtained consent

_______________________________
Printed name of person above