‘A WOMAN’S PLACE’: EXPLORING THE LEADERSHIP JOURNEYS OF WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT USING INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The phrase ‘a woman’s place’ has been used to assert there are roles or locations socially acceptable for women to occupy, inferring there are places or positions where they do not belong. While it could be dismissed as an outdated expression, a saying that reflects old-fashioned views no longer held, women who aspire to leadership in government organizations still experience the alienating effects of the phrase that implies they do not belong. This study sought to understand the lived experiences of nine women who successfully navigated a path to executive leadership in Utah state government. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to understand their first-person lived experience of being a leader in an environment where a dominant majority of leadership positions are held by men. By using social role theory and role congruity theory as the theoretical framework, data analysis showed that through their experiences, the women relied upon persistence and resilience to pursue a career path where leadership developmental opportunities echoed the labyrinth metaphor rather than the traditional metaphor of a career ladder. Embedded in these experiences was a struggle for visibility and voice, where the women were confronted with being socially excluded. Listening to the stories of these women showed how their grit and determination helped them succeed as a leader.

Recommendations for practice and future research were grounded in their narratives and in the research literature, with the goal of moving to a point where the phrase ‘a woman’s place’ will no longer haunt the experience of women leaders within government organizations.

*Keywords*: women, leadership, public sector, Utah, representative bureaucracy, role congruity theory, social role theory
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Chapter One: Introduction

‘A woman’s place’ is a colloquial expression used to infer social roles or settings deemed appropriate for women. Its use comes with the implication there are situations and activities considered socially unacceptable for women. While it could be dismissed as an outdated expression, a saying that reflects old-fashioned views no longer held, women who aspire to leadership in the workplace still experience the alienating effects of the phrase that imply they do not belong.

Despite the continual increase of women in the workforce since the 1960s, women in contemporary society experience disparate treatment in their career as they progress and become leaders (Alkadry & Tower, 2014; Hoobler, Lemmon, & Wayne, 2011; Hoyt, 2010; Kossek, Su, & Wu, 2017). While this is true in both the private and public sectors (Alkadry & Tower, 2014), this study narrowed its focus to the government sphere. Employment data for the public sector captured the gendered nature of leadership, with men holding a significant majority (70%) of executive leadership positions (Caceres-Rodriguez, 2013; Sabharwal, 2013). This matters because the social roles women are expected to adhere to impacts their career progression experiences. While women have attained the requisite education and work experience, areas previously used to rationalize the lack of advancement, they still struggle to receive an equal opportunity to lead (Alkadry & Tower, 2014; Connell, 2006; Riccucci & Van Ryzin, 2017).

The problem guiding this research was the need to understand the experiences of women leaders who are under-represented within government organizations. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of women as executive leaders in Utah state government. Understanding how Utah women experienced being a leader within the state bureaucracy was needed to inform current conversations on how government organizations could
support the career progression of women to equalize women’s presence in leadership roles. Understanding women’s experiences of being a leader was also needed to increase awareness of strategies women have used to support their advancement. To facilitate this research, the theoretical framework relied on social role theory and role congruity theory from the field of social psychology. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology was used to capture the first person, “as-lived” experience of these Utah women leaders.

This chapter begins by providing context and background for the study. The focus then shifts to an exploration of the significance of the problem at national and local levels while also considering the significance of an aging workforce. The purpose statement and research questions are presented to frame and ground the research, followed by the theoretical framework used to explore the problem of practice. Finally, the research is placed within a personal context through the researcher’s positionality statement as it relates to the study’s problem of practice.

**Context and Background**

The national discussion about women and leadership took on more significance with Hillary Clinton’s campaign for president in the 2016 U. S. election cycle (Cohen, 2016). Her presence stimulated considerable debate and anticipation, in part because of the potential that Americans could elect the first female president (Cohen, 2016). Many considered the idea of a woman president as larger than the individual herself because it held considerable symbolic and societal implications (Alkadry & Tower, 2014). Having a woman at the head of the nation’s government as President of the United States would be the ultimate challenge to the gender stereotype that women are less capable to lead, an issue that continues to plague the career progression experiences of women bureaucrats (Caceres-Rodriguez, 2013; Smith, 2014).
Within the context of public organizations, understanding the lived experiences of women leaders was needed because “it matters that women be able to read about, listen to, and discuss other women’s lives and experiences” (Burnier, 2003, p. 52). Being a leader is more than a hypothetical theory—it is a first-person lived experience (Souba, 2014), and there was a need for research that provided “women administrators a chance to learn from other women’s work experiences while helping them make sense of their own lived realities” (Burnier, 2003, p. 52). Unfortunately, the “accounts of women’s experience as public administrators and leaders have been slow to find their way into the literature of public administration” (Burnier, 2003, p. 37). Therefore, there was a need to hear and learn from women reflecting in their own words how they experienced leadership (Glass & Cook, 2016).

Understanding other’s career progression experiences can be particularly useful for women in the public sector who want to be considered for leadership roles yet encounter the discouraging reality that they will have fewer opportunities than their male colleagues to advance (Choi, 2011; Hamidullah, Riccucci, & Pandey, 2015). Women’s lack of presence in leadership directly contradicts the goal of representative bureaucracy that embraces a diverse government workforce (Kingsley, 1944). This incongruity between the goal and reality contributes to the frustration felt by women who expect diversity will be embraced at all levels, including leadership (Bowling, Kelleher, Jones, & Wright, 2006; Mastracci & Bowman, 2015).

American democracy relies on the construct of representation (Smith & Monaghan, 2013; Van Ryzin, Riccucci, & Li, 2016). Modern government bureaucracies embody this construct through the theory of representative bureaucracy (Riccucci & Van Ryzin, 2017). Representative bureaucracy (Kingsley, 1944; Meier, 1975) encourages government agencies to employ a workforce that shares demographic characteristics with the community it serves (Bradbury &
Kellough, 2011; Clark, Jr., Ochs, & Frazier, 2013). It is grounded in the concept that a person is shaped by their social experiences and therefore the social experiences of the government’s workforce matter (Roman, 2015). As a result, representative bureaucracy supports the hiring of a diverse body of experiences with the intent of those experiences being used to inform the programs and services provided by government (Hamidullah et al., 2015). Smith (2014) argued that the presence of a diverse government workforce not only “implies equal access to government positions promoting empowerment and connection with government in diverse communities…[it] can also signal the inclusion of group interests, attitudes and experiences in government decision-making and build government legitimacy” (p. 479).

Based on the ideal of a representative bureaucracy, one would assume that the social experiences of women would be considered beneficial and welcomed at all levels of a government organization, including administrative (or executive-level) leadership; however, researchers have noted the difficulty women face in achieving top administrative leadership positions and suggest it may be related to societal expectations (Lange & Nelson, 2016; O’Neil & Hopkins, 2015; Smith, 2014). Social role theory explores these societal expectations, suggesting that gender stereotypes are a result of women and men internalizing social norms and cues that are gendered (Hamidullah et al., 2015).

“Expectations are learned through experience” (Roman, 2015, p. 638) and experience teaches women they should be “relationship oriented, warm, kind, and interpersonally sensitive” or communal (Caleo & Heilman, 2014, p. 217). Likewise, experience reinforces the expectation that men are agentic, or “achievement oriented, dominant, aggressive, and ambitious” (Caleo & Heilman, 2014, p. 217). Individuals internalize these gender roles which become standards against which they relate “their experience of other people’s expectations” (Eagly & Wood,
In fact, gender roles continue to influence social expectations in the division in labor between women and men, particularly in the workforce (Eagly, 1987, 2007; Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Closely linked to social role theory is role congruity theory. Role congruity theory posits that leadership behaviors such as assertiveness and dominance are considered agentic or masculine (Smith, 2014). When women demonstrate leadership behaviors such as assertiveness or dominance, those traits are suddenly considered undesirable or socially unacceptable (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The prejudice generated by this dissonance directly impacts how women experience leadership.

“Women experience a greater difficulty than men in attaining top leadership roles and are viewed as less effective in these roles” (Hoyt, 2014, p. 75). Once women do achieve a leadership role, they more frequently report encountering antipathy and skepticism from staff, who exhibit an attitude of “you only got the job because you are a woman” (Faulkner, 2015, p. 424). Women leaders express frustration that they must continually deal with staff and peers who try to undermine their efforts and prevent them from performing their responsibilities (Faulkner, 2015; Seo, Huang, & Han, 2017).

If the government workforce is expected to model a diverse workforce by employing those who mirror the public it serves, and rules and regulations have been legislated in an effort to reduce or eliminate bias, then it is particularly disconcerting that women administrative leaders continue to experience bias against their leadership. Yet women who advance in government organizations continue to encounter environments of gender bias (Alkadry & Tower, 2014; Smith, 2014). These environments of bias may be less overt due to the increased legislation; however, cumulatively they impact the way in which women experience career
advancement and can impact the way they approach possible leadership opportunities (Hamidullah et al., 2015).

**Significance of the Problem**

The problem of practice for this research was the need to understand the experiences of women leaders who were under-represented within government organizations. The need was addressed by exploring how women who worked for the state of Utah experienced career progression and how they made sense of their experience of being a leader. By creating a space where, “women’s actual voices are foregrounded rather than absent or muted, or where historically men’s voices stood in for everyone’s” (Burnier, 2003, p. 52), this research contributed to empowering women administrators who can benefit from learning from other women’s experiences. The state of Utah was considered particularly compelling for this research because of the impact the state’s socially conservative culture has on gender-based expectations and how those expectations play out in the experiences of Utah women leaders (Madsen, February 2015).

The need to understand the lived experiences of women as it relates to the power of leadership has significant implications at national and local levels (Burns, 1978). Burnier (2003) offers that “power is the ability to take one’s place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one’s part matter” (p. 38). She points out that it is particularly true in the “discipline of public administration, where women have struggled for both place and recognition in the practice and discourse of government administration” (Burnier, 2003, p. 38).

Over 21.8 million people in the United States are considered government employees, with local governments employing over 13.8 million people, state governments employing 5.3 million people and the federal government employing approximately 2.7 million people.
(Willhide, 2014). It is not an inconsequential number, particularly when one considers research that shows women in the bureaucracy experience limited opportunities for advancement and leadership (Alkadry & Tower, 2014; Smith & Monaghan, 2013). This underscores the need to understand how women leaders experience and interpret their career progression because it provides insight on the workplace experience for half of the government’s workforce. The need to understand the subjective experiences of women leaders could contribute to identifying leadership development strategies that contributed to their career progression. The need to understand their experiences could also benefit government organizations in their efforts to attract and retain women leaders by incorporating strategies that reinforce a supportive organizational culture.

**National Significance**

Since the 1960s, there has been an increase in the number of women in the American workforce (Hoyt & Simon, 2016). As a result, “coming to grips with a more diverse workforce, gender being a central feature of diversity, has become more important” (Burke & Major, 2014, p. 28). The problem with the representation of women in the government’s workforce is “not their overall numbers, but rather how these numbers are distributed across the different hierarchical levels” (Alkadry & Tower, 2014, p. 109).

In fact, the distribution of leadership positions held by women in government organizations is quite discouraging (Alkadry & Tower, 2014). Women comprise half of the workforce and have gained the necessary education and experiences to be promotable, yet they experience greater difficulty in reaching elite administrative leadership positions and tend to be concentrated in lower-level positions of the bureaucracy (Alkadry & Tower, 2014; Bowling et al., 2006; Hoyt, 2014; Hoyt & Simon, 2016; Smith & Monaghan, 2013). Although recent social
changes have allowed for a shift in the roles considered socially appropriate for a woman to assume, there is continued resistance to the idea of a woman leader. This persistent ambivalence highlights the need to learn from the lived experiences of individual women who have successfully navigated a career path that Eagly and Carli (2007) labeled a ‘leadership labyrinth’ (p. 2).

Federal employment data shows the percentage of federal agencies with women as top leaders at 30% in 2012, with men holding a significant majority of administrative leadership positions (D’Agostino, 2015). Federal employees who hold executive leadership positions are classified as Senior Executive Service (SES). According to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, members of the SES:

- possess the well-honed executive skills and share a broad perspective on government and a public service commitment that is grounded in the Constitution. These members serve in key positions just below the top Presidential appointees and serve as the major link between the appointees and the rest of the Federal workforce (US OPM website, 2017).

Although there has been a steady rise of women in the SES, men still occupy almost 70% of SES positions (Wynen, Op de Beeck, & Ruebens, 2015). Such disproportion speaks to a clear presence of gender disparity. This influences the career expectations of women by sending a message of what roles and positions they can expect to be considered for (Wynen et al., 2015).

To understand potential contributors to this phenomenon, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (2015) analyzed federal workforce data to determine the representation of women in the senior grade levels GS13 to GS15, considered the primary talent pool for promotions to SES positions. At the GS13 level, women comprised 39.76% of the employees. At the GS14 level, their representation drops to 38.68% and at the GS15 level, only 33.42% are women.
These numbers capture one aspect of women’s career progression and demonstrate that the higher women go in the organization, the fewer there are (Alkadry & Tower, 2014).

The trend for women in leadership in the federal government is particularly disheartening because the federal government is consistently recognized as being “on the leading edge of diversity in their workforce” (Choi, 2011, p. 30). Executive orders, formal initiatives, and legislative acts have mandated federal employment data be tracked, reported, and made available for public scrutiny (Wynen et al., 2015). Yet, despite these concerted efforts, women report still experiencing the alienating effects of social based norms that reinforce the message they do not belong (Kossek et al., 2017).

Clearly, each woman’s career experience is unique; however, there is a need to learn from the reflections of women leaders on how they experienced navigating a path to leadership. Learning from their experiences in their own words can provide insight and point out potential strategies that may resonate with other women who can then use this information to respond to their own situation. Understanding the experiences of others can also provide women with a more realistic understanding of what to anticipate as they navigate their own personal leadership labyrinth.

Local Significance

The setting for this research is the state of Utah. Recognized by a 2012 Gallup national survey as the “best state to live” (Witters, 2012), it was ranked “the worst state in the U.S. for women” (Frohlich, Kent, & Hess, 2014). A contributing factor may lie in the social culture of Utah.

The state of Utah has a “distinctive cultural population” (Thackeray, 2016, p. 49). National political experts and pollsters agree that Utahns are more conservative than other
Americans (Bernick, 2001). Religion dominates many aspects of the social culture of the state (Canham, 2012; Thackeray, 2016). Approximately 62% of Utahns are reported to be members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), which is headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah (Canham, 2012). Considered one of the most religiously homogenous states in the nation, “Utah is the only state with a majority population belonging to a single church” (Institute for Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, 2001). While only 41.6% of Utahns identify as active in the LDS church, the tenets and doctrines of the LDS faith greatly influence Utah culture and daily life (Canham, 2012). The LDS faith also influences the politics of the state, with approximately 80% of the members of Utah’s Legislature self-identifying as LDS (Bernick, 2006; Davidson, 2012).

Of particular note for this research is the faith’s influence on what roles are considered as socially appropriate for women. Women in the LDS faith are expected to focus their “efforts and influence to the roles of wife, mother, daughter, sister, aunt and friend” (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints website, 2017, “Women in the Church,” para. 1). They are discouraged from engaging in employment outside of the home, instructed that they have the “greater responsibility for home and children and nurturing” (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints website, 2017, “Women in the Church,” para. 1).

Such gender-based role expectations do not stay confined to the religious and personal sphere. Instead, they permeate the culture and workforce of the entire state (Canham, 2012). A report on the status of Utah women in 2004 by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IPWR) noted:

For the majority of Utah women, the religious culture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS), with members constituting 70-80 percent of the total state
population, is a primary influence in their lives. With the LDS faith as a key influence, the Mormon values of family, motherhood, and male authority reach deep into public arenas. (p. iii)

The report goes on to state, “all Utah women continue to face serious obstacles to achieving equality with men and to attain a standing equal to the average for women in the United States” (IWPR, 2001, p. 7).

A research and policy brief published by the Utah Women & Leadership Project (Madsen, February 2015) analyzed data from Utah women on the topic of women leaders. The report reinforced how Utahns struggle with the idea of women in leadership due to the “mindset that women should not be leaders” and the “perception that men are better leaders” (Madsen, February 2015, p. 1). The report noted the influence of the “LDS culture of women being supporters and not leaders” (Madsen, February 2015, p. 1). Women in Utah feel an overwhelming “lack of belief in their own worth and power” and “feel more comfortable in support roles” (Madsen, February 2015, p. 1).

In addition, Utah women are encouraged to “get married before finishing college” and experience a “lack of encouragement or support for women to get degrees” (Madsen, February 2015, p. 1). Women who work outside of the home often experience “reduced networking because men separate themselves in the workplace” (Madsen, February 2015, p. 1), limiting the ability to create and foster the relationships needed to advance within an organization. Ultimately, women are faced with very “narrow views of what a ‘good woman’ should do and how she should behave, particularly in Utah” (Madsen, February 2015, p. 4).

Gendered expectations are clearly present for women who live and work in Utah. Women who pursue leadership opportunities do so despite social norms that discourage women
in leadership roles. Studying the career progression of Utah women leaders provided valuable insights into how these women experienced a path to leadership while navigating cultural and social expectations.

**Significance of an Aging Workforce**

According to a 2016 report on government employees, up to 40 percent will be eligible to retire within the next five years (Miller, 2016). Researchers and the popular media have labeled this mass exodus a *silver tsunami* (Maciag, 2013, 2014; Miller, 2016) and it is considered a significant workforce concern. While there is no expectation that men be forced to leave in order to advance women into top leadership positions (Alkadry & Tower, 2014), as natural turnover occurs women could be hired or promoted into these vacant positions. While the loss of institutional knowledge that will result from this silver tsunami certainly creates cause for concern, it also creates opportunities for women to be more equally represented in top leadership positions. “The public sector today faces a great opportunity to capitalize on the many retirements that are scheduled to occur over the next decade in order to correct the imbalance in representation across government’s many levels, agencies, and occupations” (Alkadry & Tower, 2014, p. 128).

In summary, the need to understand the experiences of women leaders has significance at national and local levels. Learning from the experiences of women who have successfully navigated a path to leadership is needed to inform personal and organizational training and leadership development strategies for women. This becomes particularly relevant given the trends of an aging workforce where a large number of employees will soon be eligible to retire (Alkadry & Tower, 2014; Miller, 2016). If “having women in leadership positions is important
for society, organizations, and individuals” (Smith, 2014, p. 481), then it is important to understand and learn from their career progression experiences.

**Methodological Approach**

A key element of this qualitative study was not simply to relate the experiences of the research participants but to extract rich descriptions that capture career progression as a lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). To facilitate this, the methodology selected was interpretative phenomenological analysis, or IPA. When using an IPA orientation, research participants are selected because “they can grant us access to a particular perspective on the phenomena under study” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 49). The phenomena for this research was to understand what is the experience of women leaders.

Adopting an IPA approach allowed for the opportunity to understand the experience of being a leader from an “as-lived” perspective. Being a leader is not theoretical; it is experienced from a first-person point of view (Souba, 2014). Because IPA relies on the first-person, “as-lived” perspective, using an IPA approach acknowledged that being a leader is not "computational, linear, or formulaic” (Souba, 2014, p. 78); rather IPA recognized the opportunity to understand how a leader experiences leadership.

In order to truly understand what female leaders face, an important component of leadership research must include their lived personal experiences (Wilkinson & Blackmore, 2008). This provides a “subjective understanding of women’s experiences in leadership roles,” rather than focusing on “micro-studies of individual development” (Greer, 2015, p. 54). By incorporating an IPA methodology, this study sought to understand what is the lived experience of women who are executive leaders in Utah state government.
To understand the participants’ perceptions of their career advancement experiences, the central research question for this research was: How do women describe their experience ascending to an executive-level leadership position within the government of Utah? The goal was to learn from the lived experience of women who had achieved a top administrative leadership position. Social role theory and role congruity theory were used to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of women leaders within Utah state government.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this research relied on social role theory and role congruity theory from the field of social psychology. Social role theory addresses the gendered division of labor based on social expectations, particularly in the workforce (Eagly, 1987, 2007; Eagly & Wood, 2012). Role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) focuses more on context, where individuals experience prejudice when they “attempt to enter a social role for which they are stereotypically mismatched” (Hoyt, 2012, p. 87).

**Social Role Theory**

Social role theory refers to the different roles men and women occupy in society (Eagly, 1987). It maintains that societal expectations, rather than gender, are what drives different behaviors for men and women (Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995; Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Through experience, women learn the socially appropriate gender roles they are expected to adopt (Roman, 2015). Women internalize “gender roles as self-standards against which they regulate their own behavior as well as their experience of other people’s expectations that provide social regulatory mechanisms” (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 459).
According to social role theory, there are two primary behaviors: communal and agentic. Communal characteristics are related to the care of others, interpersonal sensitivity, or being emotionally expressive (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In contrast, agentic behaviors are associated with being independent, controlling and assertive (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These expected behaviors feed into gendered social roles that result in stereotypes where women feel pressured to display communal characteristics while men are to be more agentic (Koenig & Eagly, 2014).

When gender-based stereotypes extend into the work place, women experience first-hand the presence and influence of social expectations. Gender roles reinforce the historical division in labor between women and men and directly influence women’s career progression experiences (Eagly, 1997, 2007; Eagly & Wood, 2012). One way this occurs is by the organizational roles women consider to be accessible to them, with women defining accessibility as the number of other women who are already in that role (Seo et al., 2017).

**Role Congruity Theory**

Role congruity theory extends social role theory by considering the relationship between gender roles and other roles, particularly leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Role congruity theory addresses the contradiction of female leadership with stereotyped gender roles (Lemoine, Aggarwal, & Steed, 2016; Wolfram, Mohr, & Schyns, 2007). Leadership behaviors such as assertiveness and dominance are traditionally considered agentic, or masculine (Smith, 2014). Through gender stereotyping, leadership is essentially merged with being a man, rendering women leaders as invisible (Eagly & Chin, 2010; Hoobler et al., 2011; Hoyt, 2012; Jackson, Engstrom, & Emmers-Sommer, 2007; Smith, 2010).

This masculine standard of leadership reinforces stereotypic expectations that women “take care” and men “take charge” (Hoyt & Simon, 2016). As a result, when a woman is in a
leadership role, she creates dissonance in one of two ways: either by exhibiting behaviors inconsistent with the female gender role or by behaving inconsistent with expected leadership behaviors (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hoyt, 2012). The dissonance created by women leaders often results in women being treated as less qualified than men to be leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Lemoine et al., 2016) or being considered as less effective leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hoyt, 2012).

Role congruity theory acknowledges that gender bias still exists and “sends powerful social cues creating differentiated workplace experiences” for women (Kossek et al., 2017, p. 235). Thus, women’s career experiences are embedded in social contexts that have directly impacted their progression to leadership (Kossek et al., 2017). While research has looked at the external aspects of prejudice towards women, there is a growing body of research that has documented how women internally experience these biases (Bell, 2015; Burnier, 2003; Chinyamurindi, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Faulkner, 2015; Glass & Cook, 2016; Greer, 2015; Kossek et al., 2017; Pheko, 2014; Seo et al., 2017; Weyer, 2007).

Women leaders are keenly aware of the gendered social expectations placed on them and how those expectations feed into negative stereotypes regarding their leadership ability (Eagly, Gartzia, & Carli, 2014; Sabharwal, 2013). Women leaders have acknowledged frequently encountering prejudices that men do not face (Powell, 2014) and have found it more difficult than their male peers to be considered a good leader (Streets & Nguyen, 2014). They feel more isolated from other women colleagues and often experience a ‘solos’ status (Streets & Nguyen, 2014). Women also report experiencing backlash and being penalized by others for appearing to seek power (Eagly et al., 2014; Eagly & Koenig, 2014). Collectively, the research shows that
“women leaders navigate a labyrinth of hidden biases that can affect their careers in subtle, often unacknowledged ways” (Eagly & Koenig, 2014, p. 4).

In conclusion, social role theory and role congruity theory comprised the theoretical framework of this research. Together they provided a lens to understand the lived experiences of women leaders in Utah state government. The next section provides definitions of key terms to clarify their use and meaning in the context of this research.

Definition of Key Terminology

In addition to social role theory and role congruity theory, there are several other key terms used throughout this study. This section offers definitions of as a point of reference.

Active representation - where “an individual (or administrator) is expected to press for the interests and desires of those whom he is presumed to represent, whether they be the whole people or some segment of the people” (Mosher, 1968, p. 12)

Administrative leadership - non-elected leaders in the public sector with career administrative positions, rather than political or policy-making positions, and the accompanying processes and networks that lead, manage, and guide government

Agentic characteristics – used to describe a tendency to be assertive, controlling, dominant, or self-confident (Eagly & Karau, 2002)

Communal characteristics – used to describe behaviors concerned with the welfare of others such as affectionate, helpful, interpersonally sensitive, or gentle (Eagly & Karau, 2002)

Discretionary power - the ability of public employees to determine how to apply rules and distribute resources (Lipsky, 1969)

Gender stereotype – generalizations based on observations of people in sex-typical social roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002)
Passive representation - has a sociological focus where representation is considered by the “source of origin of individuals and the degree to which, collectively, they mirror the total society” (Mosher, 1968, p. 12)

Prejudice – arises when the perceiver judges behavior from a member of a social group to be inconsistent with stereotyped social roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002)

Public administration - both an academic discipline and a field of practice that oversees governmental functions and focuses on agency organization and workings

Public sector - government workers at the federal, state or local level who are paid by taxes and fees collected from private citizens and corporations; while the term often includes non-profit organizations, for the purposes of this research non-profit organizations are not included

Top-level - related to those in the highest position or with the highest level of authority

Women leaders - women who exercise leadership within the public sector, such as higher education, government or military

Positionality Statement

Positionality is a way to “acknowledge the complex and relational roles of race, class, gender, and other socially constructed identifiers in being” (Parsons, 2008, p. 1129). While I am a researcher in this study, I am also a practitioner who has worked as a leader in a local government within the state of Utah. This personal experience influenced my perspective on the need for more women leaders in government organizations. The need for more women at the top has been stimulated by the increased media attention on women leaders through such efforts as the “Lean In” movement (Sandberg, 2013). As national conversations on the topic of women and leadership have gained popularity, they provided a space for me and my peers to voice our concerns on the notable absence of women leaders in government organizations.
Within the state of Utah, those holding top leadership positions rarely represent the gender diversity of the community. This has resulted in a void where women’s voices are often marginalized or ignored. I have observed as gendered role expectations routinely influence promotion decisions. Female colleagues with more than the requisite education and experience have been repeatedly denied promotions and leadership opportunities in favor of less experienced and less educated men. When challenged, the justification offered has been that men are the primary income earners and that a woman’s income should supplement, not supplant, that of her husband. Seeing women’s workforce contributions repeatedly minimized and watching as their voices were silenced created a desire to raise attention to this issue.

Controlling for Positionality

Acknowledging bias and articulating how to address bias in this study is critical to creating research with integrity (Maxwell, 2005). Personal and professional experiences have reinforced my commitment to the tenets of a representative bureaucracy, which could lead to bias that needs to be accounted for and controlled in a research setting. The theory of representative bureaucracy validates my personal commitment to the advancement of women to administrative leadership positions in government organizations. Rather than expecting I can (or should) eliminate this bias, specific actions were incorporated into the data collection and analysis process to minimize its influence (Maxwell, 2005).

Another bias could be manifest through the process of othering (Briscoe, 2005). The term is intended to convey the power a researcher has to subordinate certain groups. In the pursuit of advocating for the development of women leaders, I needed to be attentive of not marginalizing the support or influence of men. Men can be important advocates and mentors for
women and it was important to acknowledge the role they played in supporting women in their leadership journey.

Positionality influences the questions asked, the assumptions made of research participants, and how findings are interpreted (Banks, 2007). To address this, the work of others who have conducted research on the topic of women leaders in government was reviewed to ensure the selection of research participants, research questions, data collection and data analysis processes were all grounded in proven methodologies. This provided balance to the research and ensured consideration of all sides of the issue.

Briscoe (2005) noted that a researcher’s positioning within society, which influences one’s history and experiences, impacts the meaning observed in their work. In this respect, I needed to remain mindful of my assumptions. I intentionally incorporated methods to control the projecting of my positionality onto the experiences of others, particularly during the data collection and analysis process. Being a member of the group that was the focus for this study, it was important to remain mindful that my social identity differed from that of the research participants. Incorporating a reflective practice such as journaling into the research process (Fennell & Arnot, 2008) provided a method where I could critically examine how my positionality and assumptions were influencing the data analysis process. A final tool was the use of soliciting feedback through the incorporation of peer reviews into the process. This provided an opportunity to identify areas where I perhaps made assumptions or failed to consider other possibilities.

**Conclusion**

The phrase ‘a woman’s place’ demonstrates the gender inequity women face when trying to achieve leadership positions. The problem explored in this research was the need to
understand the experiences of women leaders who are under-represented within government organizations. The significance of this problem was demonstrated at the national and local levels. The study’s purpose focused on understanding the lived experiences of women who are executive leaders in Utah state government. This qualitative research used a theoretical framework that incorporated social role theory and role congruity theory from the field of social psychology. Finally, researcher bias was explored and methods to control for bias were noted. The next chapter provides a review and analysis of the relevant literature on social role theory and role congruity theory, representative bureaucracy, the gendered nature of government organizations, and the current demographics of administrative leadership.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The number of women participating in the workforce has increased since the 1960s, yet women who pursue administrative leadership roles still experience the segregating effect of the phrase ‘a woman’s place’ (Hoyt, 2010). While women have acquired the necessary education and experience for leadership roles, relatively few women have successfully realized that journey (Connell, 2006). While this does not mean career advancement for women is impossible, it certainly acknowledges that it is more challenging.

To support the inquiry into what is the experience of women administrative leaders, a review of the literature was conducted that focused on four key themes. Each theme contributed to this research by providing context to the environment within which women leaders in government must operate. The first section centers on the theoretical framework of social role theory and role congruity theory and reviews the key elements of both theories. The second section places the theoretical framework within the context of the government’s workforce and shows why a discussion on gender is relevant in government organizations. Specifically, it linked the social experiences of government employees to the idea of a representative bureaucracy which emphasizes the need for government employing a workforce that mirrors—and theoretically shares—experiences with the public it serves (Clark, Jr. et al., 2013; Dolan, 2002).

The third section demonstrates how gender roles have structurally influenced public organizations to create gendered agencies and institutions. This section also explores the way gendered institutions impact the way women in government experience career progression. The final section focuses on administrative leadership within government organizations and examines its gendered nature. The chapter concludes by reviewing research that shows how women
bureaucrats embody the intersection of gender, representative bureaucracy, and administrative leadership and offers insight on the subjective experiences of women who have achieved administrative leadership positions.

**Social Role Theory and Role Congruity Theory**

In research, the role of a theoretical framework is to “provide a needed lens that helps filter the data and develop defensible interpretations” (Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. 12). The problem of practice guiding this research is the need to understand the experiences of women leaders who are under-represented within government organizations. To better understand the stated problem of practice, this research looks to social role theory and role congruity theory from the field of social psychology to provide the theoretical framework. Together, these two theories provide a scholarly lens through which the lived experiences of women leaders in a government organization were explored.

**Social Role Theory**

In the 1960s and 1970s, gender began to emerge as a “significant political, social and psychological issue” (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 460). It was in that environment that Carole Gilligan (1982) authored *In a Different Voice*, where she disagreed with the moral development theories of Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, and Lawrence Kohlberg. She claimed the models they offered were male-oriented and did not consider the female voice. Gilligan (1982) felt that a thriving society should value and integrate both male and female perspectives. Today, her work is credited with advancing scholarly research on why gender matters (Hamidullah et al., 2015).

Building on Gilligan’s work, Alice Eagly (1987) offered social role theory to explain the division of labor and the subsequent roles occupied in society by women and men. Social role theory posits that women and men behave differently not because of genetic differences but
rather from gendered societal expectations (Eagly, 1987; Hamidullah et al., 2015). “Eagly used gender roles as a term for the social roles that society designates to men and women. Gender stereotypes are stereotypes that people believe about men and women” (Dulin, 2007, p. 105). Eagly (1987) showed that through social interactions and experiences, women learn that they are to be communal or concerned primarily with the welfare of others. In contrast, men are socialized to be assertive, confident, and controlling, also referred to as agentic (Eagly, 1987).

Social role theory explains that societal cues and norms are internalized and ultimately influence how women and men view their own actions and the actions of others (Eagly, 1987). Based on their social experiences, people internalize gender roles (Eagly & Wood, 2012). This leads to gender becoming “deeply intertwined with social hierarchies and leadership status” (Seo et al., 2017, p. 39). Gender stereotypes, then, become “shared expectations about appropriate qualities or behaviors” (Eagly, 1987, p. 13). Bronars (2015) notes that “these expected behaviors are learned from experiences based on social and organizational structures, social relationships, and how people cooperate with each other within those social and organizational structures” (p. 14).

Social role theory utilizes a structural rather than cultural approach that helps explain the structural pressures organizations exert on reinforcing stereotypic gender roles (Koenig & Eagly, 2014). When these stereotypes extend into the workplace, they become a powerful force that influence the division of labor and inform what is considered as socially appropriate roles and experiences in the workforce (Hamidullah et al., 2015; Hoyt, 2014; Isaac, Kaatz, & Carnes, 2012; Metz & Kulik, 2014). Gender stereotypes place men in top levels of leadership, which reinforces and “artificially promote[s] men’s status and competencies in organizations” and “strengthens occupational segregation in the contemporary labor force” (Seo et al., 2017, p. 37).
The persistence of organizations to have men dominate leadership positions “enables a masculine culture to become more prevalent across organizations” (Seo et al., 2017, p. 39).

Conformity to gender-role expectations is prevalent in the workforce and nonconformity results in real penalties (Caleo & Heilman, 2014; Dulin, 2007; Thackeray, 2016). Eagly and Wood (2012) found that “the sanctions for role-inconsistent behavior may be overt (e.g., losing a job) or subtle (e.g., being ignored, receiving disapproving looks)” (p. 468). Other research found that when women do not conform to the gendered stereotype that men are to be the leaders, they report being “judged more harshly and are usually evaluated more negatively than men in the same roles” (Dulin, 2007, p. 108).

Thackeray (2016) found that “subtle and obvious communications of [social] expectations are delivered both verbally and non-verbally through signals of approval or disapproval. When an individual dares to step into areas of non-conformity, the rewards must be carefully measured against the costs” (p. 24). On a personal level, as gender stereotypes become internalized, women report struggling with the feeling they are less qualified and that they lack the needed abilities and characteristics to perform male gender-typed jobs (Heilman, 2012).

Research on social role theory has historically relied on objective measures such as hiring statistics, performance evaluations, or the perspectives of employees to determine the workplace experiences of women (Eagly & Wood, 2012). However, more recent research has looked to the subjective experiences of women to understand their perspectives and career progression strategies and how gender stereotypes are experienced in the workplace (Caleo & Heilman, 2014; Chinyamurindi, 2016; Faulkner, 2015; Glass & Cook, 2016; Heilman, 2012; Pheko, 2014; Seo et al., 2017). Research focusing on the internal experience of women leaders found that women report facing an unwelcoming work environment where they have fewer mentors and are
excluded from influential male-dominated networks (Glass & Cook, 2016; Kossek et al., 2017; Metz & Kulik, 2014; O’Neil & Hopkins, 2015; Sabharwal, 2013). O’Neil and Hopkins (2015) found that when women see few (or no) woman leaders in their organization, they are more likely to question the value of their own skills and abilities and struggle more over the decision of whether to pursue advancement to an upper-level position.

Research conducted by Isaac et al. (2012) used social role theory as a way to understand how women leaders experience gender bias in the workforce. Their research incorporated the metaphor of a ‘glass ceiling,’ which refers to invisible barriers women experience to their career advancement. Isaac et al. (2012) argued that “upon closer inspection a ceiling is revealed—made up of biased judgments women collectively experience as they work to advance” (p. 80). They concluded that although women may be effective leaders, these biased experiences create an environment that makes it difficult for them to succeed (Isaac et al., 2012).

**Role Congruity Theory**

Role congruity theory extends social role theory by building on the concepts of prejudice and stereotypes within the workforce (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Gender stereotypes are continually at play in the work environment and shape the career experiences of women (Streets & Nguyen, 2014). Research on role congruity theory exposes how gender-based stereotypes of leadership impact the way women experience being a leader, which often results in two forms of prejudice. The first is that women are perceived as less capable than men to be leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Lemoine et al., 2016). The second is prejudice towards women when they exhibit leadership behaviors.

While men are expected to exhibit leadership (or agentic) characteristics, when women exhibit the same behaviors they are viewed as ineffective or undesirable (Eagly & Karau, 2002;
Hoyt, 2012). Jamieson (1995) referred to this as the “double bind” where women are expected to adhere to socially acceptable feminine behaviors while being held to masculine standards of leadership. “Women, quite simply, are not supposed to excel at jobs and tasks that are designated for males in our culture” (Heilman, 2001, p. 667).

Greer (2015) relied on role congruity theory to understand women’s perceptions of how their gender achieved congruity with the other roles they hold, such as leadership. She found that “in most instances leadership and female gender roles did not achieve a high degree of congruity” (Greer, 2015, p. 8). To cope with role incongruity, women reported that they learned to simply accept there will be negative attitudes about them (Greer, 2015).

Role congruity theory has also been used to examine its practical application on women’s experiences, particularly on “both follower’s perceptions of leaders and the leaders’ perceptions of themselves” (Greer, 2015, p. 11). Other research that incorporates individual women’s subjective experiences of leadership has documented the implicit bias experienced by female leaders where women frequently face stereotyped-based discrimination or prejudice towards their leadership (Hoyt, 2014; Kossek et al., 2017; Wilkinson & Blackmore, 2008). Kossek et al. (2017) found that while “overt forms of biases have been reduced…implicit bias persists in workplace systems” (p. 235). Such bias “sends powerful social cues creating differentiated workplace experiences for stigmatized groups” (Kossek et al., 2017, p. 235).

“Members of marginalized social groups are keenly aware of the pervasive stereotypes surrounding their social group and are aware that others may treat them accordingly” (Hoyt, 2014, p. 80). The research literature confirms that women are clearly cognizant of gendered social norms and, as a result, the way they experience advancement to leadership is vastly different than their male colleagues (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Anderson (2013) found that “the
additional stress that women face as a result of being a member of a marginalized group in the workplace can leave female workers exhausted, burned out, and disillusioned” (p. 5). Women in professional and leadership roles express feeling “doubly burdened” by the masculine standards associated with being a leader while also trying to comply with feminine role expectations (Alkadry & Tower, 2008, p. 144).

The challenge of gender stereotypes has been a “constant theme in public administration, where studies indicate that women must not only work harder and longer to prove themselves but are often judged by higher standards” (Hamidullah et al., 2015, p. 257). “When a female manager is promoted and finds herself in an environment dominated by men, it sends the message that ‘women don’t belong here’ and that she is an exception to the rule” (Anderson, 2013, p. 3). There is ample evidence that when women cross the lines of traditional roles and behave in agentic ways, they experience backlash and hostility because they have violated a gender role that is reserved for men (Burke & Major, 2014; Eagly et al., 2014; Eagly & Koenig, 2014; Hoyt, 2014; Kossek et al., 2017; Seo et al., 2017). As a result, some women report feeling that just being female interferes with their job advancement (Lange & Nelson, 2016).

The cumulative impact of women’s workplace experiences provides a clear message that discourages them from pursuing leadership roles. While responses to such negative stereotypes may be different for each woman, it is clear “successful leaders are able to successfully navigate these biases” (Hoyt, 2014, p. 80). Understanding the experiences of women who fill these critical roles is needed if government organizations are to increase the number of women in leadership roles. The next section illustrates how the concept of a representative bureaucracy embraces women’s social experiences and considers such experiences to be beneficial when working in the public sector.
Representative Bureaucracy

The term public sector encompasses a large group of government organizations at the federal, state and local levels. It includes agencies related to national defense as well as services that focus on education. This broad range of bureaucratic entities employs a workforce of over 21.8 million people who are responsible for the oversight and administration of hundreds of programs, policies and regulations (Willhide, 2014). Although not-for-profit organizations are often considered a part of the public sector, for the purposes of this research the context is limited to those who work directly for a government entity.

To understand how women experience career progression in government organizations, it is beneficial to first understand the environment in which they work. Although the complexity of government organizations will not be covered here, a key element considered to influence the work environment is the concept of representative bureaucracy. The evolution of this theory and its influence on the government workforce is provided, followed by an exploration of two key elements related to representative bureaucracy: representation and discretionary authority.

History of Representative Bureaucracy

J. Donald Kingsley (1944) is credited with suggesting that a public workforce should mirror those it serves (Brudney, Herbert, & Wright, 2000; Clark, Jr. et al., 2013; Meier, 1975). At the time, Kingsley’s focus was on the British Civil Service and social class was viewed as the primary demographic characteristic. Kingsley’s (1944) position was that

the democratic State cannot afford to exclude any considerable body of its citizens from full participation in its affairs. It requires at every point that superior insight and wisdom which is the peculiar product of the pooling of diverse streams and experience. In this lies the strength of representative government. (p. 166)
Kingsley (1944) also reasoned for the need to expand the role and representation of women within the civil service, arguing that the exclusion of women from public service conflicted with the concept of democracy. He focused on the blatant legal and social discrimination against women and argued that it prevented government from realizing the benefit of their participation (Kingsley, 1944). He concluded that “bureaucracies, to be democratic, must be representative of the groups they serve” (Kingsley, 1944, p. 305).

Intrigued by the concept of a representative bureaucracy, David Levitan (1946) shared the idea with scholars in the United States. He argued certain demographic characteristics provide unique social experiences and that the public would be more accepting of government work if those doing the work shared similar demographic characteristics (Meier, 1975; Saidel & Loscocco, 2005; Selden, Brudney, & Kellough, 1998; Sowa & Selden, 2003). Van Riper (1958) supported this argument, claiming the bureaucracy needed to encourage the advancement of women and minorities to benefit from their social experiences.

**Passive, Symbolic, and Active Representation**

Mosher (1968) is credited with linking the social experiences of government employees to their decisions and actions. He noted that representation could be passive, symbolic, or active. He offered that passive representation occurs when the government workforce shares demographic characteristics with the citizens of the community (Elias, 2013; Krislov, 1974; Meier, 1975; Mosher, 1968; Smith, 2014). Passive representation leads to symbolic representation, where the diverse physical characteristics of the government workforce (such as gender) serve to symbolically represent fairness (Pitkin, 1967). Symbolic representation is considered to influence the perceived legitimacy of government “without any action taken by the bureaucrat” (Gade & Wilkins, 2013, p. 267). Finally, active representation occurs when an
individual bureaucrat intentionally “presses the interest and desires of those whom he is presumed to represent” (Mosher, 1968, p. 14). In this way, a diverse bureaucracy intentionally contributes to decisions that collectively reflect the social experiences, values, and interests of a diverse citizenry.

The concept of representation resonated with scholars and practitioners alike and in 1978, the United States Civil Service Reform Act was created that required the federal workforce reflect the nation’s demographic diversity (Public Law No. 95-454, October 13, 1978). Since that time, the goal of a diverse public workforce has been embraced and expanded upon within the public administration literature where the combined social experiences of a diverse workforce is considered to provide a democratic symbol of opportunity and access (Hairston, 2014; Keiser, Wilkins, Meier, & Holland, 2002; Sabharwal, 2013; Saidel & Loscocco, 2005; Smith & Monaghan, 2013).

**Discretionary Authority**

While elected officials are chosen by the public to represent the community’s interests, these officials rely on public employees (bureaucrats) to oversee the day-to-day distribution of public resources for the common good of the community. When citizens and bureaucrats interact, the exchange is based on the bureaucrat having and exercising discretion (Hairston, 2014; Meier & Bohte, 2001). Michael Lipsky (1980) coined the phrase “street-level bureaucrat” to describe the discretionary power used by front-line public employees to determine how they apply rules and distribute resources. Since then, scholars of public administration have acknowledged discretion is crucial to the operation of public organizations and point out that discretionary use of power has been established as essential within the American political system.
(Brudney et al., 2000; Kennedy, 2013; Meier & Bohte, 2001; Scott, 1997; Selden et al., 1998; Sowa & Selden, 2003).

Social experiences inform an individual’s values and beliefs (Weick, 1995). When public employees share demographic characteristics with the community, it is assumed they share similar social experiences (Roman, 2015). This assumption supports the use of discretion because it incorporates the experiences and interests of the public (Bradbury & Kellough, 2011; Hamidullah et al., 2015; Meier, 1975; Roman, 2015). The link between representation and discretionary use of authority by public administrators has been used to support the legitimacy of a democracy (Roman, 2015). “Because bureaucracies serve as a critical link between elected representatives and the populace they serve, how clients perceive…these agencies or the legitimacy of bureaucratic decisions has important implications for democratic governance” (Gade & Wilkins, 2013, p. 269).

As population projections for the United States predict more diversity among Americans than in the past (Cohn & Caumont, 2016), hiring decisions that support a diverse workforce play an important role in the perceived legitimacy of government (Sneed, 2007). Yet federal employment data shows that women and minorities continue to be heavily concentrated in lower-level positions, which are commonly clerical and blue-collar jobs (Alkadry & Tower, 2014), and are significantly under-represented in high-level professional positions (Clark, Jr. et al., 2013; Hsieh & Winslow, 2006). These continued occupational differences between men and women “create ‘glass walls’—barriers to lateral movement and career growth in lower-paying or non-mission-critical occupations—which may require agencies to examine their approaches to recruitment, work assignment, and leadership development” (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2011, p. i).
Presence makes a difference (Cohen, 2016; Elias, 2013; Hamidullah et al., 2015; Selden et al., 1998). As Mosher (1982) pointed out, the individuals who comprise the leadership ranks of public service need to represent all groups of the community in order to support the democratic ideal that government be ‘by the people.’ The problem is that women bureaucrats and their social experiences tend to be confined to positions and organizations considered gender appropriate. The next section will review the research literature to demonstrate the influence of gender on the structure of government organizations and the way such structures impact how women experience career progression.

**Impact of Gender on Government Institutions**

In 1985, Lowi categorized government agencies into distributive, regulatory or redistributive organizations. Distributive agencies deal with the general population and include agencies such as recreation, parks, and transportation while regulatory agencies, such as taxing entities, law enforcement, or environmental agencies, focus on implementing control and regulatory policies (Lowi, 1985). Redistributive agencies reallocate money and services and include agencies such as education, health, or welfare (Lowi, 1985).

In 2002, Stivers used Lowi’s (1985) typology to bring attention to the gendered environments in government organizations (Hamidullah et al., 2015; Mastracci, Guy, & Newman, 2012; Portillo & Dehart-Davis, 2009). Stivers (2002) believed government organizations adopt and sustain masculine and feminine divisions of labor. She pointed out how gender had influenced the structure of government institutions and showed that gender was embedded in organizational activities within government agencies (Hamidullah et al., 2015; Saidel & Loscocco, 2005; Stivers, 2002).
Government agencies that she identified as ‘masculine’ were predominantly distributive and regulatory agencies that included defense, transportation, taxes, the economy, and the budget (Saidel & Loscocco, 2005). Agencies considered as ‘feminine’ included redistributive agencies such as social work, aging, education, health care, children and family, women’s rights, and disabilities (Saidel & Loscocco, 2005; Stivers, 2002). Through the lens of social role theory, the communal characteristics of “taking care” corresponded to government agencies considered feminine and agentic characteristics of “taking charge” are manifested in masculine government organizations (Stivers, 2002).

The insight provided by Stivers (2002) influenced a considerable body of research in the field of public administration that reinforced gendered organizations exist at federal, state and municipal levels of government (Fox & Schumann, 2001; Glass & Cook, 2016; Hamidullah et al., 2015; Keiser, Wilkins, Meier, & Holland, 2002; Kim, 2004; Mani, 1997; Portillo & De-Hart Davis, 2009; Saidel & Loscocco, 2005; Smith & Monaghan, 2013). As a result, gender has found to play a significant role in the way government organizations are structured and staffed (Keiser et al., 2002; Sabharwal, 2013). Of particular interest for this research is how gendered government agencies impact the career progression of women due to departments and divisions adopting and sustaining masculine and feminine divisions of labor (Alkadry & Tower, 2014; Connell, 2006; Smith & Monaghan, 2013).

While it is acceptable for men to work in either a masculine or feminine organization and be promoted in either, it is expected women will work, and be promoted, in predominantly female organizations (Alkadry & Tower, 2014; Connell, 2006) which are likely to be redistributive agencies (D’Agostino, 2015). Much of the work in redistributive agencies focuses on children and families, civil rights, the aging, or health care, all of which tend to be considered
feminine policy contexts. These agencies are also much less involved in policy-making decisions, which reinforces gender stereotypes and horizontal segregation (Bowling, et al., 2006; D’Agostino, 2015; Glass & Cook, 2016; Hamidullah et al., 2015; Jacobson, Palus, & Bowling, 2009; Keiser et al., 2002; Kim, 2004; Mani, 1997; Riccucci & Saidel, 1997; Sabharwal, 2013; Smith & Monaghan, 2013; Sneed, 2007).

Smith (2014) noted that continued gender-based segregation is a concern, particularly when the “gender of the policy context remains a strong factor in determining the types of agencies women hold leadership positions” (Smith, 2014, p. 490). Such reinforcement of gender-role stereotypes contributes to the difficulty women experience when trying to advance to administrative leadership positions, particularly if they work in regulatory or distributive agencies which are considered masculine (Burrell, 1997; Connell, 2006; Fox & Schumann, 2001; Smith, 2014). It also increases the pressure women feel to assume roles considered gender-appropriate, which strengthens discrimination based on socially acceptable divisions of labor and concepts of power for women and men (Glass & Cook, 2016; Hamidullah et al., 2015; Jacobson et al., 2009; Keiser et al., 2002; Kim, 2004; Mani, 1997; Smith & Monaghan, 2013; Sneed, 2007).

Research has found several consequences of gendered organizations for women. Hoyt (2012) found that in gendered organizations, women experience fewer opportunities for development, are given reduced responsibilities in the same jobs, and receive little encouragement or formal training (Hoyt, 2012). Because women are under-represented at the executive levels, they also report experiencing greater difficulty in accessing social networks, both professional and informal (Kossek et al., 2017).
Glass and Cook (2016) point out “a great deal of evidence suggests that women in male-dominated jobs experience less peer and work-related support than their male peers” (p. 53). The implication is that the chances of a woman advancing to leadership is largely dependent upon the organization in which she works (Alkadry & Tower, 2014; Fox & Schumann, 2001; Smith, 2014; Sneed, 2007). Considering the “significant and far-reaching decisions being made by elite-level leaders in government” the fact that women hold comparatively few influential leadership positions outside of redistributive agencies “is a serious topic for public concern” (Sneed, 2007, p. 880).

Through a review of the literature, this section has shown how gender has influenced the structure of government organizations as well as the career progression opportunities for women which impacts their ability to inform public policy. The final section of this chapter addresses administrative leadership shows how the gendered nature of administrative leadership influences the experiences of women who are trying to advance. It will conclude by exploring how women who have successfully achieved administrative leadership roles embody the intersection of gender, leadership, and representative bureaucracy within the context of government.

**Administrative Leadership**

The goal of public administration is to competently and responsibly use public authority in order to achieve good governance (Jacobson et al., 2009). Public sector leaders must conduct their business in a setting that, by its very nature, is more visible to public scrutiny and oversight while also adhering to the bureaucratic controls set in place by legislative laws, rules and procedures (Ingraham, 1993; Van Slyke & Alexander, 2006). While private companies evaluate successful leadership by relying on market indicators such as profit margins and stock prices, the outcomes of government are often noneconomic by definition and more difficult to measure.
Performance measures have been introduced into the public sector to track and quantify government’s success and rely on outcome data as a substitute for the market indicators used in the private sector. Although these measures may be useful as guides for budget decisions and to reinforce public accountability, they offer little in the way of providing a useful framework to understand leadership (Ingraham, 1993; Van Wart, 2013).

A recent report from Pew Research Center (2015) shows that the American public is deeply cynical about government. “Public trust in the government remains near historic lows. Only 19% of Americans today say they can trust the government in Washington to do what is right ‘just about always’ (3%) or ‘most of the time’ (16%)” (Pew, 2015, p. 1). The report goes on to state that only 20% consider the federal government as being competently managed and 55% feel that “ordinary Americans” could more adeptly handle problems at the national level (Pew, 2015, p. 2).

Given the challenges and lack of trust faced by public leaders, a review of the current state of administrative leadership may help to identify possible gaps or trends that may be contributing to the situation. One area to consider is the gendered nature of administrative leadership. Rather than asking “what” leadership looks like in public administration, perhaps the more relevant question is “who” leadership looks like.

**Gendered Nature of Administrative Leadership**

Federal employment data shows an increase in the percentage of federal agencies with women as top leaders increasing from 22% in 2008 to 30% in 2012 (D’Agostino, 2015). While women comprise half of the government workforce, the positions women hold are consistently in lower paying, clerical jobs (Alkadry & Tower, 2014; Clark, Jr. et al., 2013; Kim, 2004; Smith & Monaghan, 2013). Legislation, such as affirmative action measures, has tried to influence
change and while affirmative action may be a tool to help women get in the door, most women do not consider it as a successful tool for promotion or retention (Bell, 2015; Kim, 2004).

Although the public sector has been a source of employment for women, Clark, Jr. et al. (2013) called it “disheartening” that 30 years after the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 was ratified, “the demographic profile of the federal workforce indicates that women and people of color remain concentrated at the lower level, while White men occupy the bulk of middle-management and senior leadership positions” (p. 76).

Historicity is important and plays a valuable role in shaping the way we see and define leadership. During the Woodrow Wilson administration (1913-1921), a photo was required with the submission of a government employment application. The practice facilitated the intentional exclusion and restriction on the advancement of women and minorities within the federal government (Clark, Jr. et al., 2013). While such overt practices are no longer legal, demographic profiles of administrative leaders show that echoes of this practice remain.

While women filled administrative leadership roles during the 1920s to support the war effort, once the war was over and the men returned home, those leadership opportunities quickly disappeared (McGuire, 2012). Since then, men have consistently retained a hold on a significant majority of the top administrative leadership positions (Alkadry & Tower, 2014; Connell, 2006; Fox & Schumann, 2001). Lambert and Quinn (2011) point out that public administration continues to be “a male domain that has failed to appreciate women’s contributions” (p. 787). Although women have held positions of leadership and championed important pieces of legislation throughout the history of public administration, the history books tend to ignore or minimize those contributions (Burrell, 1997; McGuire, 2012).
One poignant example of how women’s contributions have been pushed to the shadows is Mary Anderson, the longtime director of the U. S. Department of Labor’s Women’s Bureau. Her story, told by McGuire (2012), spotlights the 1920s and provides a reminder that the narrative of a male-dominated leadership tradition is incomplete without valuing the contributions of women. During the 1920s, women progressives such as Mary Anderson achieved groundbreaking and significant legislation that established minimum wage, worker’s rights, and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (McGuire, 2012). As a predominant public administrator, Ms. Anderson acknowledged the “lingering sexual prejudice” that she and other women faced from federal government employers (McGuire, 2012).

This echoes the experience captured in Guy’s (2000) “The Amazing Miss Burchfield,” which tells the story of Dr. Laverne Burchfield. She was a woman from the 1930s who “should be viewed as a public administration founder but is not. She was at the eye of a movement, yet she was invisible” (Guy, 2000, p. 11). Although she had earned a doctorate, Laverne Burchfield was referred to as Miss Burchfield and her “career was constrained profoundly by gender” (Burnier, 2003). Unfortunately, few students of public administration ever hear of the experiences or contributions of these women (McGuire, 2012). When women who held positions of power are absent from the history books, it sends the message that their contributions are not valued and makes it more difficult for women to see themselves fitting into a leadership role (Hamidullah et al., 2015).

**The Intersection of Gender and Administrative Leadership**

Women leaders are at the intersection of gender and administrative leadership within government agencies. Women’s inclusion in leadership positions in the government’s workforce has been slow in coming, particularly when compared to their representation in the general
population (Fox & Schumann, 2001). Although these women have passed through the proverbial ‘glass ceiling,’ they experience subtle forms of discrimination by often having less organizational power than men as measured by less authority in decision making and being under-represented in top leadership levels (Portillo & DeHart-Davis, 2009; Sabharwal, 2013).

In 2011, a report by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board acknowledged that “sex-based discrimination and stereotypes have not yet completely disappeared” (p. ii) from federal employment and that continued occupational differences have contributed to “women being less likely than men to be employed in high-paying occupations and supervisory positions” (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2011, p. ii). While women have comparable education, work experience, and performance ratings, they “remain under-represented at the highest levels of pay…as well as in supervisory and executive roles” (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2011, p. 34).

To determine whether women were not advancing due to poor performance, Lewis (1997) analyzed the performance ratings of employees in senior level positions. Lewis (1997) concluded that at every grade level women received higher performance ratings but were not being promoted at the same rate as White men. In repeated studies of government employees (Bishu & Alkadry, 2016), the same theme appears; namely, “women must not only work harder and longer to prove themselves but are often judged by higher standards” (Hamidullah et al., 2015, p. 257).

Other research on women in administrative leadership shows that women who advance into administrative leadership report feeling unwelcome, in part because they are going against social expectations of the appropriate role for women (Alkadry & Tower, 2008). Glass and Cook (2016) found women in leadership consider themselves as ‘outsiders on the inside’ (p. 53).
They also found that “women who attain leadership positions are less likely to enjoy social and professional network ties to organizational elites, a resource known to increase one’s influence over the organization” (Glass & Cook, 2016, p. 53). Greer (2015) noted that women who accept leadership positions find it difficult to develop positive relationships with their colleagues and experience frustration with the lack of peer support.

An important element of social networking is mentoring (Fox & Schumann, 2001; Pheko, 2014). Unfortunately, “women have to overcome greater barriers when acquiring a mentor than do men” (Pheko, 2014, p. 3). Fox and Schumann (2001) noted that most mentoring opportunities occurred between same-sex mentors. With significantly fewer women as potential mentors, it is more difficult for women to establish mentor relationships (Hoyt, 2012). Fox and Schumann (2001) wrote, “if mentors continue to choose protégés who share similar characteristics and aspirations, this may pose greater challenges for women” (p. 390). The combined impact is that women perceive a lack of workplace support and experience isolation in their positions (Glass & Cook, 2016; Jacobson et al., 2009; Pheko, 2014).

Women leaders also face questions of competency. Women report feeling judged as less competent simply because of their gender, rather than being evaluated on their work experience or skills (Lange & Nelson, 2016). Sabharwal (2013) notes that “women in senior positions who breach the glass ceiling often experience resistance and doubt from male colleagues who do not like to take orders from women” (p. 8). Glass and Cook (2016) found women feel as if they are “under constant scrutiny to outperform their male peers” (p. 53).

One woman shared, “my feeling was that I was perceived as maybe irrelevant or underestimated and I would say that was really hard on the confidence and the emotion. I’m very perspective and so I don’t think I was wrong” (Soklaridis et al., 2017, p. 261). Others share
experiencing “problems of asserting authority in managing” where there are those “who display negative and patronizing attitudes” towards women leaders (Faulkner, 2015, p. 425). In Faulkner’s (2015) research, one woman described the “disrespect to women in authority as ‘not being given a chance to finish your point, constantly interrupting, and not keeping you informed on issues you should know so as to purposely make trouble’” (p. 425). The result of these cumulative experiences is that women leaders in government perceive their career opportunities as limited (Wynen et al., 2015). In summary, women “view the path to advancement as more stressful, have lower career longevity and satisfaction, and receive less recognition compared to men” (Kossek et al., 2017, p. 230).

While women hold more upper-level leadership positions than they did 30 years ago, in order to achieve the democratic ideal of a representative bureaucracy it is critical that more women join the ranks of leadership (Smith, 2014). Unfortunately, research has uncovered that some women feel gender-based stereotypes are so engrained that it has led some “to the conclusion that this is ‘the way it is’ in our current society, and that as women, we need to adapt and not dwell on things that are not going to change” (Soklaridis et al., 2017, p. 261). When women’s career experiences steer them to roles considered gender appropriate, it perpetuates the divisions of labor and power that reinforce occupational segregation (Fox & Schumann, 2001; Keiser et al., 2002). The perpetuation of this situation “calls into question what the underlying powers and social constructs are that sustain a system where, despite decades of legal changes and greater awareness, little has changed” (McEldowney, Bobrowski, & Gramberg, 2009, p. 29).

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the major themes that inform the discussion of female administrative leaders in government positions. These included social role theory and role
congruity theory, representative bureaucracy, gendered public organizations, and administrative leadership. Together, these concepts contextualize the environment within which women work to advance to administrative leadership. The next chapter offers an outline of the methodology used in this research.
Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand what is the lived experiences of women as executive leaders in Utah state government. This chapter explains the research approach and methodology used by outlining the study’s procedural elements, including participant selection, research procedures, data collection, storage, and management, as well as methods for data analysis. The chapter addresses ethical considerations, including the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness while acknowledging potential researcher bias. The chapter concludes by identifying limitations related to the research.

Research Strategy

This research explored and sought to understand what is the experience of women leaders who are under-represented within government organizations. A qualitative approach was used to capture personal insights through thick description. A quantitative approach would not have allowed for the subtle complexities associated with the diverse experiences this research hoped to illuminate. Through systematic inquiry, the end goal was to produce additional knowledge about the participants lived experiences. Because of this, it was important to ensure alignment between the various research components. A core element that informed other key research decisions was the researcher’s philosophical assumptions towards the research, also referred to as paradigm.

Philosophical Assumptions

A paradigm is a group of philosophical assumptions about the social world that offer a way of framing and organizing research (Ponterotto, 2005). This study relied on a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm which assumes that individuals strive to understand the world through the varied meanings they apply to their experiences (Creswell, 2009). The constructivists-
interpretivists’ ontology (or the nature of being and reality), acknowledges “beliefs rather than facts form the basis of perception” (Merriam, 1991, p. 48). The participants’ view and interpretation of the phenomena was the goal of the researcher, who approached the research with the philosophical viewpoint that there is not a single true reality (Butin, 2010; Ponterotto, 2005). To interpret the participant’s experience, the constructivist-interpretivist relies on a hermeneutical approach that asserts the meaning of an experience is hidden. An individual may be unaware of the meaning attached to a lived experience; however, through the interaction and dialogue between the researcher and the participant, deep reflection can surface and “bring to consciousness” the meaning of the phenomenon (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129).

Constructivists-interpretivists’ epistemological stance (or the process of how we know what we know and how we understand and interpret the world), maintains that knowledge is co-created between the researcher and participants (Ponterotto, 2005) and that together “truths are created, not discovered” (Hansen, 2004, p. 131). Finally, a constructivist-interpretivist axiology acknowledges that the researcher’s values cannot be separated from the research process. Instead, researchers are encouraged to “acknowledge, describe, and ‘bracket’ his or her values, but not eliminate them” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131). This research explored the multiple realities for women leaders and was strengthened by the alignment between the epistemology, ontology, and axiology of the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm and the central research question.

**Research Question**

The knowledge produced by this research was influenced by the questions asked and the methods used to answer those questions (Merriam, 1991). The central research question of this study was: How do women describe their experience ascending to an executive-level leadership position within the government of Utah? While quantitative research strategies are useful for
testing theories and the causal or correlational relationship between variables (Creswell, 2009; Ponterotto, 2005) such an approach would not have provided the opportunity for reflection necessary to address the question. Instead, a qualitative approach was deemed more appropriate to understand the lived experiences of women leaders.

**Qualitative Research Approach**

Qualitative researchers are attracted to the complexity and meaning of social interactions within a specific context (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Ponterotto, 2005). As a result, the focus is on understanding and representing the lived human experience within a context that encompasses both history and language (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). For the purpose of this study, qualitative research methods best aligned with the research goals of exploring and understanding the experiences and meaning making that occurs for women leaders in government. The goal was to locate and share the meaning within the lived experiences of an individual or a group rather than to test a theory or explain causation (Creswell, 2009; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Because the research was unique to a small group of individuals who share a specific context, there was no assumption or claim that the results are generalizable to a larger population.

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

This research explored key experiences within each participant’s ascent to leadership by adopting Smith’s (1996) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which aligned with the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm and the research question. While phenomenology is a well-established philosophical approach, it has only been since the 1990s when IPA was introduced by Jonathan Smith as an applied research methodology within the field of psychology (Dowling, 2007; Shinebourne, 2011).
IPA focuses on understanding the lived experience of participants while acknowledging the interpretive process that occurs is influenced by the researcher's own view of the world. By selecting this type of research, a researcher acknowledges she or he cannot completely eradicate their own perspective and therefore do not make claims that they can. Instead, they employ self-reflection in an effort to bracket their own views “to understand and represent their informants’ experiences and actions more adequately than would be otherwise possible” (Elliott et al., 1999, p. 216). In the purest sense, experience is elusive because it is only acknowledged after the fact (Smith et al., 2009). “People are physical and psychological entities. They do things in the world, they reflect on what they do, and those actions have meaningful, existential consequences” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 34).

The philosophical underpinnings supporting phenomenology are based on the work of four major philosophers: Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre (Smith et al., 2009). Each contributed to IPA’s evolution through refinement of three core elements of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. As a result, an IPA approach allows for these elements to become tools for the researcher to understand the meaning people assign to their lived experiences.

**Phenomenology.** The phenomenological aspect of IPA reflects the researcher’s interest in the study of ‘being’ or experience (Larkin, 2013). Edwin Husserl (1859-1938), a German philosopher, emphasized the need to integrate a reflective process to understand the lived experience. He believed that “experience should be examined in the way that it occurs, and in its own terms” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12) independent of any assumptions or prejudices of the researcher (Dowling, 2007). Husserl believed that before a researcher could successfully focus on the perceptions of another, they must first ‘bracket,’ or put to one side, their own assumptions
of the world (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl, who was also a mathematician, intentionally used the mathematical term of bracketing to call out the need to separate out certain elements and treat them independently (Smith et al., 2009). Subsequent philosophers and researchers have adopted the term *epoché* to describe the process. *Epoché* is a Greek word meaning to “refrain from judgment or stay away from the everyday, commonplace way of perceiving things” (Dowling, 2007, p. 132).

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a student of Husserl, was more focused on the hermeneutic aspects of phenomenology. Heidegger found Husserl’s arguments “too theoretical, too abstract” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 16). In response, he offered the concept of *Dasein*, which addresses the ontological question of existence itself and literally translated means ‘there-being’ (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger also introduced the concept of *intersubjectivity*, or our relatedness to each other or to something (Smith et al., 2009).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) expanded on IPA and the idea of intersubjectivity by positing “we can never share entirely the other’s experience, because their experience belongs to their own embodied position in the world” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 19). Merleau-Ponty viewed the body as being the source of experience, claiming that “the body shapes the fundamental character of our knowing about the world” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 19), a view that has particular relevance to research focused on women’s experiences.

Finally, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) is recognized by providing two major contributions to IPA. First, he claimed that we are continually developing as human beings. “The self is not a pre-existing entity to be discovered, but rather an ongoing project to be unfurled” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 19). Secondly, Sartre advocated for the idea of *nothingness*, where “things that are absent are as important as those that are present in defining who we are and how we see the
world” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 19). Sartre believed relationships and the context of those relationships played a critical role in how we interpret our experiences.

**Hermeneutics.** IPA research is also grounded in hermeneutics, or the theory of interpretation. Hermeneutics recognizes the role of the researcher in making sense or interpreting the experience of participants (Smith et al., 2009). While hermeneutics was originally concerned with the correct interpretation of biblical texts, it has evolved to now provide a philosophical foundation for the interpretation of other written documents. Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre all contested that Husserl's bracketing could never be achieved because we always bring our own values and experiences to our observations. At best, we attempt to interpret a participant’s experiences (Larkin, 2013). The implication is that a phenomenon may have visible or obvious meanings, while simultaneously having hidden or obscured meanings (Smith et al., 2009).

*Double hermeneutics* (Smith & Osborn, 2003) is considered a significant aspect of IPA research and involves the researcher “trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (Smith, 2011). Double hermeneutics requires interpretation. To make sense of the meaning a participant is relating about their experience, the IPA researcher must interpret what is shared by assuming a dual role of being “both like and unlike the participant” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). While the researcher may draw upon her or his everyday experiences to understand the participant, ultimately the researcher is not the participant and must rely on the meaning the participant attaches to the experience. The interpretation involved in double hermeneutics sets “the participant’s meaning-making as first-order, while the researcher’s sense-making is second-order” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 36).
**Idiography.** Finally, idiography refers to a researcher's focus on a particular phenomenon. IPA research focuses on exploring and understanding the meaning given to a certain experience by a person or a group of people in a specific context. Idiography is not intended to establish generalizations but rather centers the researcher’s attention on understanding the meaning a certain person gives to a particular event or experience. Because of this, IPA tends to use small, purposively-selected samples, acknowledging that an individual can provide a personal and unique perspective of a given phenomenon. While IPA is an interpretive process, by incorporating an idiographic approach the personal perspectives of participants are placed in a specific context. After a thorough examination of each individual case, common themes can then be identified among a group of similarly situated cases.

**Rationale for Selecting IPA**

The appeal and benefit of IPA as a research methodology is the focus it provides on the participant's voice and the opportunity to explore something that is important to the participant (Shinebourne, 2011). This is best done when the researcher truly understands the phenomenon. In fact, DeFelice and Janesick (2015) claim it works best “when the researcher and the researched have firsthand experience” (p. 1579).

This study explored how women in government organizations experience leadership. Souba (2014) noted that “a phenomenological inquiry into leadership does not study the properties and attributes of leaders, but rather the fundamental structures of human ‘being’ that makes it possible to be a leader in the first place” (p. 78). Because of this, an IPA methodology was appropriate for this research because it supported understanding the as-lived experience of women leaders and provided a forum where their voices and perspectives could be heard.
A primary goal of this research was to acknowledge and learn from women who have experienced leadership while working in Utah government. There is much to be learned from the experiences of these women, both individually and collectively. Each woman has had personal experiences within the social and cultural context of working for a government organization in the state of Utah. This study sought to identify whether there were shared common experiences across each unique case. IPA allowed for themes to emerge and became useful to support understanding of how women experienced advancement to a leadership position.

It should be noted that while social role theory and role congruity theory have been identified as the theories informing this research, when using IPA, the role of the theoretical framework is in the background. For this research, this meant that as themes were identified in the data, the researcher was aware of and noted conceptual links to social role theory and role congruity theory; however, these theories did not guide the interpretation and initial theme identification process.

**Participants**

IPA research is focused on understanding the lived experiences of a small group of individuals who can speak profoundly about a particular phenomenon. This influences the individuals identified for data collection. Because the group for this research was small and homogenous, it was necessary to identify the common characteristics the participants are expected to share.

**Sample Characteristics**

This study defined its population as women in top-level leadership positions who worked for the State of Utah government. The three relevant demographic variables included gender,
current employment in upper-level leadership, and current employment by the government entity officially identified as the State of Utah.

**Sampling Procedures**

Methods commonly used to identify potential participants for IPA research are purposeful sampling and snowballing techniques (Sadler, Lee, Lim, & Fullerton, 2010; Smith et al., 2009). Purposeful sampling is where the researcher obtains referrals from those familiar with the potential participants or is able to reach out to personal and professional contacts (Smith et al., 2009). Snowballing techniques describe the researcher obtaining a referral from the participants or others who may fit the research criteria (Smith et al., 2009). A combination of purposeful sampling and snowballing techniques were used to identify nine participants. Participants were selected who worked in a variety of divisions, departments, or agencies within the State of Utah.

The participant pool was confined to those who currently work for the State of Utah. In 2013, the State of Utah employed 16,132 individuals as part of their core workforce with an additional 7,599 individuals considered as non-core, for a total of 23,731 employees (State of Utah Workforce Profile, 2013). These individuals are geographically located throughout the state and work in over 26 different departments or agencies.

**Research Site Access**

To gain access to the research site, the State of Utah’s Department of Human Resource Management Director was contacted. The Department of Human Resource Management (DHRM) is the central agency that maintains a comprehensive employee database for all employees for the State of Utah. An initial introductory phone call and the follow-up conversation referenced the Research Site Permission Letter (Appendix A), which noted that all
participation was voluntary, that no incentives would be provided to participants, and that the agencies where the participants work would not be identified. Further, the Research Site Permission Letter (Appendix A) included a copy of the Informed Consent Document (Appendix D), detailing the research, its importance, and how the data would be collected, managed, and stored. The Informed Consent Document (Appendix D) also outlined the steps taken to ensure confidentiality of the participants, including the use of pseudonyms which were chosen by the participants.

**Participant Recruitment and Selection**

Once permission from the research site was obtained, a list of potential participants provided by DHRM received an Introductory Participant Email that described the study (Appendix B). Women interested in learning more about the study were encouraged to contact the researcher directly using the email address or phone number provided in the introductory email.

Potential participants who expressed an interest in participating in the research were contacted individually, which provided an opportunity to begin making a personal connection (Smith et al., 2009). During the initial contact, the researcher provided an overview of the research and reviewed the Informed Consent Document. Each woman was informed that her involvement was voluntary, that no incentives would be provided for participation, and that she could withdraw at any time. Questions about the research process were answered. Each potential participant was then emailed an Informed Consent Document (Appendix D) and was asked to read, sign and return the form to the researcher.

Along with the Informed Consent Document, potential participants were also asked to complete a Participant Background Survey (Appendix C). This short survey requested
demographic information from potential participants such as their preferred contact information, job title, the years they have worked for government, how long have worked in their current organization, how many years they have been in a leadership position, their occupation, and their level of education. This information assured participants meet the three demographic characteristics required for inclusion: gender, leadership position and employment with the State of Utah. The survey also provided background information and additional reference information that was incorporated into the interview process. As individuals agreed to participate, face-to-face interviews were scheduled at a time and location convenient to the participant. Once nine participants were identified, participant recruitment ceased.

**Pilot Interview**

Larkin (2013) encourages incorporating interview questions that focus on understanding experiences within a particular context. When using a semi-structured interview, questions are designed to be exploratory and focus on meaning and sense-making of a particular experience. This format provides structure to the interview to ensure the relevant areas are covered, while also providing flexibility to allow for the participant to share insights and reflections (Smith et al., 2009).

Once approval was received from Northeastern’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), a pilot field test was conducted with an individual who represented the characteristics of the participants to evaluate and validate the interview protocol (Appendix E). This also provided the researcher an opportunity to refine her interviewing skills. The interview pilot participant was informed that her involvement was voluntary and that she could stop or withdraw from the interview at any time. The pilot interview was audio recorded using a digital recording device.
Based on feedback and insights gained through the pilot, interview questions were refined, although the overall scope of the interview remained the same.

**Data Collection**

As noted previously, IPA research is best suited for research that has a small sample size where participants are willing to share their personal accounts and the researcher can become familiar with the participants and their contexts (Larkin, 2013). Qualitative researchers have found interviews to be a useful technique to collect information that cannot be directly observed (Patton, 1990). Many qualitative researchers prefer one or more in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the participants to create a verbatim record that captures the rich and detailed first-hand experience of the research participant (Rafique & Hunt, 2015). Semi-structured formats create a setting where participants can freely express their stories and share more intimate aspects of their experiences without strict adherence to scripts (Brinkman, 2013; Kvale & Brinkman, 2008). This conversational approach requires that the researcher listen carefully to what participants say and acknowledge that the meanings attached to experiences are placed within the context of cultural and social norms (Crotty, 1998; Warren, 2002).

Merriam (1998) encourages questions that focus more on the process rather than a particular result. With that in mind, the interview questions were crafted in a way to understand the leadership journey of each participant without prejudice towards preconceived expectations. Interview questions were designed to encourage dialogue and prompts were used during the interview to gently encourage participants to elaborate or reflect on important points. Due to the conversational nature of the interview, the questions were adjusted to facilitate the natural progression of the interview and the participants’ experiences. The complete Interview Protocol is included in Appendix E.
Data collection for this research relied on information obtained during one in-depth, face-to-face interview with each research participant that lasted 45-60 minutes (Appendix E). While there was minimal risk to the women who participated when discussing their leadership experiences, it was acknowledged that participants could become uncomfortable sharing their experiences. As such, each woman was informed of her right to skip a question, stop, or withdraw at any point in the process. After receiving participant permission, the researcher initiated an audio recording of the interviews to capture verbatim the leadership journey of each woman. To supplement the recording, the researcher also took field notes during and after the interview to capture observations, insights or impressions.

Immediately following the interview, the researcher compiled her field notes and downloaded the audio file to a secured personal server. The interview was then transcribed by a professional transcription service. The researcher kept a reflective journal to capture analytical insights along with emotions or impressions that occurred during the data collection and analysis process. This tool assisted in bracketing and setting aside the researcher’s prejudices and assumptions while considering the meaning the participants gave to their experiences (Rafique & Hunt, 2015).

**Data Storage and Management**

A physical list of the participants, their chosen pseudonym, and the agency they worked for was securely stored in a location separate from the data. The audio files created during the interviews and the written verbatim transcripts were securely stored electronically on the researcher’s personal computer using the pseudonym selected by the participant. Any personally identifying information that was noted during the interviews was redacted or otherwise anonymized.
To ensure confidentiality, all files were kept using a password protected personal computer and were backed up on the researcher’s secured and password-protected personal cloud server. All physical documents, including signed consent forms and field notes, were stored in a locked cabinet at the researcher’s home. Once the audio file from each interview was downloaded to the researcher’s personal computer and transcribed, the original file on the audio recording device was destroyed.

All data will continue to be securely maintained for seven years after the completion of the research. At that time, all data will be safely destroyed. The privacy and confidentiality of the research participants was maintained throughout the thesis. If the data is used for any other publication, including journal articles or presentations, the researcher will follow IRB rules that may include notifying the participants.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis in IPA encourages repeatedly reviewing the material with the goal of identifying patterns of meaning or themes that are shared in an organized narrative in the analysis section (Larkin, 2013). To minimize unintended influence, the IPA researcher incorporates reflective practices into the data analysis process. Taking a cyclical approach to the data, *epoché* or bracketing is used by the researcher to surface influences from her or his own culture, context, and history to get to the essence of the participant’s sense-making of the phenomenon (Larkin, 2013; Smith et al., 2009).

Data analysis for this research followed Smith et al.’s (2009) five-step data analysis process. Step one included reading and re-reading the data. Step two involved initial noting of the data, marking on the transcript any items of interest. Step three focused on identifying the developing emergent themes. Step four entailed searching for connections across emergent
themes. Step five commenced after each interview had been thoroughly assessed and involved identifying overarching or superordinate themes between all the interviews. It was during this stage that consideration was given to how the emerging themes conceptually aligned or diverged with social role theory and role congruity theory.

Before the five-step method began, the interview data was prepared for analysis. The interview was transcribed verbatim and included everything spoken by all who were present and non-verbal communications such as significant pauses, laughter, etc. The transcript was then formatted to include line-numbering and wide left-hand and right-hand margins which assisted in the coding phase (Shaw, 2010).

The first step in IPA analysis required the researcher to first immerse herself in the original data by reading and re-reading the verbatim transcript. The purpose of this first stage of analysis was to ensure the participant was the primary focus. During the first reading, the researcher listened to the recorded interview while reading the transcript to ensure accuracy while also reinforcing the voice and presence of the participant in the analysis process (Rafique & Hunt, 2015; Smith et al., 2009). At this stage, the researcher made annotations or interpretative memos on the physical copy of the transcript to identify preliminary ideas and impressions to “bracket them off for a while” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 82).

During the second step, the researcher conducted a close, line-by-line analysis of the transcript. This step required the researcher pay attention to the language used by the participant in order to create descriptive summaries that documented initial analytical insights and items of interest while also continuing to make conceptual notes on the data (Patton, 2002; Smith et al., 2009). The researcher incorporated context sensitivity in the interpretive process to look at how
and why the events or experiences shared were relevant within the context of the participant’s lived world (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Smith et al., 2009).

The third step involved identifying emerging themes and required the researcher to distill the volume of data while also maintaining the complexity of patterns, connections, and interrelationships (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003). To ground emerging themes, the researcher included quotes found in the narrative (Punzi, 2015), which provided a space for the voices of the participants (Shinebourne, 2011).

During step four, the researcher reviewed the emerging themes to identify patterns and connections and determined how the themes fit together, all the time being guided by the research question and the scope of the research (Smith et al., 2009). As a result, some initial themes were discarded. The goal during this stage was to keep an open mind while creating a structure that brought together the most interesting and relevant aspects of the participant’s experiences.

After repeating the first four steps for each participant, step five involved a cross-participant analysis to identify patterns across each woman’s experiences. The researcher determined whether there were connections across participants and whether certain themes were more dominant than others. At times, themes in one interview provided insight for themes in another interview.

At this stage, the researcher renamed or relabeled themes with to respect the unique experiences of the participants while acknowledging higher order concepts that may be shared between them (Smith et al., 2009). Throughout this process, the researcher’s reflective journal was used to foster awareness of how prior experiences influenced the interpretation of findings. Reflective journals, as well as concept maps, notes, and drawings have all been used in
qualitative studies to provide an audit trail that documents the decisions made by the researcher (Cotterill, Sanders, & Collins, 2010; Kelston, 2012; Rafique & Hunt, 2015; Shinebourne, 2011).

**Protection of Human Subjects**

It was not expected that this research would cause harm to the participants. However, it was important to acknowledge ethical issues related to working with human subjects. While there were no physical, legal, economic, social or psychological harm involved in participating with this research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), protecting the identities of the participants involved in this research was critical.

It was noted that there was potential for harm to the careers should any of the women’s shared experiences be viewed as negative or potentially embarrassing to them or to their organization. The researcher took this seriously and had taken an NIH Human Subject Training to ensure understanding of the issues that should be addressed while conducting research. The researcher’s sensitivity to this concern was evident in her conformance to Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards and practices that demonstrated compliance with the ethical research guidelines and principles.

Adopting procedures to protect identity and ensure confidentiality of the research participants began when the researcher shared the study’s purpose and scope with the participants and asked for their informed consent. Each woman received a written Informed Consent Document (Appendix D) which detailed further protocols and highlighted the right to withdraw at any time. Each woman was asked to sign an Informed Consent Document and was provided a scanned copy of the signed document. The researcher explained the actions taken to protect the participant’s identity to ensure anonymity.
Participants were informed that the name of the agency for which they work would not be identified. Additionally, participants were informed of the likely outcome of data analysis, including verbatim quotes in published documents such as the final thesis, journal articles, presentations or other research (Smith et al., 2009). To ensure confidentiality, as part of the Participant Background Survey (Appendix C) each woman was asked to select a pseudonym that was used throughout the research (Creswell, 2013).

The identities of all participants remained confidential throughout the research process, relying on the participant-generated pseudonyms. All electronic correspondence to the participants was sent from the researcher’s private university email account. Ethical considerations also required that the researcher ensured a safe and non-critical environment during data collection. Although the researcher shared a similar background, she was sensitive to the power imbalance that can occur between a qualitative researcher and her participants.

**Trustworthiness**

Plummer-D’Amato (2008) wrote that trustworthiness “exists when the findings of a qualitative study represent reality” (p. 123). Qualitative research requires different strategies than quantitative research to ensure the accuracy of the findings and confirm the research is believable and rigorous (Creswell, 2013). To enhance the trustworthiness of the data collected in interviews, member-checking was used. After each interview was transcribed, the researcher shared the transcription with each participant via email. Participants were invited to review the transcript and offer clarification or corrections. This opportunity to review the interview transcription data provided a chance for participants to ensure their information was accurately presented (Creswell, 2013).
Credibility was further increased using thick descriptions in the presentation of findings which included quotations and specific examples from the data to support the researcher’s findings (Kelston, 2012). Smith et al. (2009) recommend including a number of verbatim extracts from a number of participants to support thematic decisions. This gives participants a voice in the research while also providing the reader an opportunity to evaluate the interpretations being made (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, to be trustworthy the data analysis should go beyond merely repeating what participants said to providing an interpretation of what it means (Smith et al., 2009). Data analysis should identify something interesting or useful about individual participants as well as what is important about the themes that they share (Smith et al., 2009).

**Potential Researcher Bias**

Accounting for personal bias is a necessary part of conducting qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When a researcher acknowledges her own background and motivations, it allows readers to arrive at their own conclusions regarding the trustworthiness of the research. The focus of this study was the leadership journey of women who work for the State of Utah government. The researcher’s interest in this topic was based on her personal experience as a woman leader who had advanced to a top-level position within a government organization in Utah. A section in Chapter 1 on the researcher’s positionality has been included where the researcher shared her experiences and biases about the research topic. By providing this information, the reader can determine whether the data analysis was conducted in a way that considers the researcher’s bias and remains true to the voice of the participants.

The researcher also incorporated bracketing throughout the data collection and analysis process. To bracket the researcher’s experiences and assumptions, self-reflection was actively
incorporated through journaling. This step captured the researcher’s insights and assumptions and allowed for them to be set aside while reflecting on the meaning the participants gave to their experiences. While the researcher has experienced her own leadership journey, the ability to resist assuming how participants interpret their experiences provided an opportunity to gain additional insight.

**Research Limitations**

There were two main limitations to this study. The first was that it is only representative of the experiences and sense-making of the individuals who participated. Within IPA, there is more focus on the ability of the research to be transferable rather than generalizable. The concept of transferability describes the ability of other researchers to apply the results of the research to their own situations to try and provide a realistic representation (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Those who agreed to participate in a study related to women in leadership may have strong feelings about the topic that may skew the results. The experiences of these participants cannot be misconstrued to represent the experiences of all women leaders working for the State of Utah. By providing detailed or ‘thick’ descriptions, other researchers can determine whether the findings of this study may apply in other settings.

The second limitation was the assumption that participants freely shared and honestly portrayed their lived experiences. To capture the complexity of the participant’s experiences, the expectation was that each participant candidly shared her experiences without filtering or diminishing them. The researcher was aware that there could be experiences that may be unpleasant or difficult to discuss. Recognizing that each woman had a different comfort level discussing her experiences and feelings, the researcher incorporated techniques to create a connection with each participant. This included creating a comfortable and confidential
atmosphere to encourage honest and open answers (Tracy, 2012). The strength of this research was ultimately dependent upon the information provided by the participants.

**Conclusion**

Selecting a qualitative research method, and IPA in particular, provided an opportunity to understand how a person experiences a particular phenomenon. As experiences are gathered and analyzed, the researcher begins to make sense of the participant’s experiences. Smith et al. (2009) credit IPA as a method that allows a researcher to explore a significant experience in a person’s life with the goal of understanding how it is viewed as significant. Haynes (2016) noted that qualitative research “is motivated by reverence for the distinct ways that individuals understand the world” (p. 67). A distinctive feature and strength of incorporating is in its approach that “returns people’s perspectives and experiences to the forefront” (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 118) instead of “pushing ‘people’ to one side” (p. 108).

This chapter aligned the researcher’s philosophical assumptions, the research question and the research methodology. The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm was shown to align with the research question and qualitative methodology. IPA and its philosophical underpinnings were discussed.

Study processes, including participant selection, research procedures, data collection, storage, and management, as well as the data analysis methods were described. The chapter also identified steps taken to address ethical considerations, trustworthiness and potential researcher bias, while acknowledging the limitations related to the proposed research. The next chapter will explore the findings of the research framed around superordinate themes and subthemes that were identified from the corpus of the interview data.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of women as they journeyed to become an executive leader in Utah state government. Obtaining information about each woman’s career progression was done by asking questions about their leadership journey. The analysis of the interview data yielded patterns, or three superordinate themes and eight corresponding sub-themes. The superordinate themes were: 1) Exposure to Leadership, 2) Becoming a Leader, and 3) Being a Leader. Superordinate themes were identified as those recurring in the interview data for all nine participants.

Related to each superordinate theme were additional sub-themes. Sub-themes were identified as those recurring in the interview data of at least six of the nine participants. Within the first superordinate theme of Exposure to Leadership, there were three sub-themes: 1.1 Creating a Philosophy of What Leaders Do, 1.2 Support from Others, and 1.3 Making a Difference in the Community. The second superordinate theme of Becoming a Leader included two sub-themes: 2.1 Career Path and 2.2 Defining Experiences. Finally, the third superordinate theme of Being a Leader involved three sub-themes: 3.1 Developing Own Style, 3.2 Navigating Gender, and 3.3 Developing Others.

All themes contributed to answering the research question, “How do women describe their experiences ascending to an executive-level position within the government of Utah?” The goal was to learn from the lived experiences of women who had achieved a top administrative leadership position within the organization. The findings are summarized in Table 1, which provides a list of the superordinate and sub-themes identified during the data analysis process. Table 1 also displays the presence of the superordinate themes and sub-themes for each participant.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Themes and Subthemes</th>
<th>Beatrice</th>
<th>Em</th>
<th>Gretchen</th>
<th>Jillian</th>
<th>Lee</th>
<th>Linda</th>
<th>LiveLarge</th>
<th>Lucy</th>
<th>Rachel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.0 Exposure to leadership</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Learning what leaders do</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Support from others</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Making a difference</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0 Becoming a leader</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Career path</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
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<td>YES</td>
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<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Defining experiences</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
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<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.0 Being a leader</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
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<td>YES</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Developing own style</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
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<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Navigating gender</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
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<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Developing others</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exposure to Leadership

One of the foundational aspects of the leadership journey for each woman was reflecting on experiences that contributed to her personal understanding of being a leader. As a result, the first superordinate theme that emerged from the research reflects the experiences shared by each woman of learning about leadership through the examples of those around them. Exposure to leadership refers to examples the women identified as a reference point that informed their own definition of leadership, whether they offered an example of good leadership, bad leadership, or a lack of leadership.

Under the superordinate theme of Exposure to Leadership, data analysis identified three topics that occurred consistently across the nine participants. The first was observing and identifying what leaders do, or do not do, as a way to understand the act of leadership. A second topic was the support from others, both individuals from work as well as family members. A
third topic related to the desire to make a difference in the community. Making a difference was emphasized as having a significant influence in the early stages of leadership development and continued to be a reference point throughout their leadership journeys. As a result, the three subthemes associated with the superordinate theme of Exposure to Leadership include: Creating a Philosophy of What Leaders Do, Support From Others, and Making a Difference in the Community.

Beatrice shared how she was exposed to senior leadership during her work with the military. She realized, “I really got to see a kind of leadership at this level that was twenty years beyond where I was career wise.” LiveLarge worked for someone whom she considered to be a “powerful leader.” She felt a true leader should not be intimidated by the strengths or abilities of those with whom they worked and shared her insight:

I learned so much from his strong leadership. I would say that the core ingredient there was that he was a very intelligent person, and he also had very high self-esteem, which enabled him to surround himself with people with strong, good personalities who would confront his bad ideas, and who would coach him to be his best self, you know? It was a joyous journey that way.

Gretchen’s arrived at the same conclusion that leaders should not be intimidated by those on their team, but through a very different type of experience. She remembered one boss for whom she worked as being jealous of her skill set, “I think that person always struggled a little bit with, ‘I need her, but she’s running circles around me or has relationships I don’t have. I’m jealous of that.’ But he needed me.”

Em remembered a supervisor who provided no leadership. “[He] didn’t give me any direction. He was kind of checked out…if I brought him something he was like, ‘That sounds
great.’ But there wasn’t any sense of direction of where I should go or how he could help me succeed.”

Creating a Philosophy of What Leaders Do

As each woman shared her leadership journey, opinions were offered of what a leader does. Several of the examples were personal in nature, while others occurred within the work setting. Based on their experiences, all participants perceived that leaders were action oriented and were not content with the status quo. To move an organization forward, leaders make difficult decisions that are a result of listening, compromise, and negotiation. At the same time, leaders were perceived as being aware of the needs of people they lead and the impact their decisions can have. Rachel recalled:

There was a time when I hurt a friend’s feelings. I told her somebody else could have a job she had initially gotten assigned...and I was like, “Okay. No, you’re not good enough for that. Let me get somebody else,” and then I saw her face and I remember that I thought I was being taught a lesson. “Oh my gosh, so that’s what leaders are—they’re really influential. They make these choices and these decisions.” Anyway, just don’t forget that.

This example was an important lesson for Rachel because she realized that leaders could make decisions that could hurt people. She remembered struggling between balancing the rationale for her decision with the impact it had on her friend.

While working in the military, Beatrice came to appreciate that leaders take care of the whole person. She shared an example of when she was pregnant with her first child:

There was a like a field exercise going on we were going to observe, and all the technical people were supposed to go, so I had to go. It was…organized by this retired
Marine…and at the end of every cable in the planning process there was a paragraph that said, “Dr. Smith will be eight months pregnant at this time. We need to make accommodations to assure that she has everything she needs and if we’re going go on a live range we need body armor that will accommodate her pregnancy.” And it wasn’t a poke. It was like, “We’re going take care of you.” It was amazing. Really the amount of support…it was not something I expected. Having my babies in that environment, I did not expect to have the overwhelming support that I did…and I really try to take that with me in my sort of philosophy of leadership that we care about the whole person.

Beatrice did not expect to have the support she received, which could have been as a result of a stereotype she had of the military being impersonal or that she did not anticipate men would show concern for her pregnancy. Yet, the support she received made an impact on her and informed her personal philosophy of leadership.

Linda’s philosophy of what leaders do began with her involvement with her local Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Her experience as a PTA president taught her the importance of listening and finding ways to compromise where she learned to, “finesse some type of a compromise or agreement where they feel like they’ve been heard and yet, ‘We’re going to go with a different logo on the t-shirt—I hope that’s okay.’” While Linda was reluctant to consider these to be leadership skills, she began to appreciate the importance of acknowledging the concerns of others, while being willing to make the final decision. “So I started to develop, I shouldn’t say develop leadership skills, I started to learn more about what it takes to work with people and be effective. That’s kind of when that started.”

Gretchen’s leadership philosophy was deeply connected to a personal drive to fix and improve things. “I guess you could manage things status quo, but I don’t think you lead things
by just saying, ‘Oh, we’re good right here.’ I just don’t see leaders being like that. That’s a manager.” This closely aligned with the way Jillian viewed leadership, “I do think a leader has to make difficult decisions…I think that a lot of leaders tend to embrace the status quo and I think making difficult decisions helps you move forward…as an organization.” Jillian perceived a difference between having the title of a leader and providing actual leadership, which to her was more action oriented. Rachel echoed that opinion, “When you’re in the leadership job…you need to decide, you need to act, you need to do…make things happen.” Combined, these comments reinforced the sense-making these women had about leaders which was an expectation of challenging the way things were currently done and to take action.

Support from Others

As participants were asked when they felt support in their leadership journey and from whom they felt support, they appeared to make sense of the concept of support in context to both their work and personal life. Several of the women reflected on examples of being placed in a challenging situation when they were relatively inexperienced, but perceived their mentors trusted and had confidence in them and were available should they run into problems. The confidence and trust of their mentors was very important to them. Some participants felt mentors intentionally exposed them to developmental experiences and were then willing to help them process those experiences, sometimes sharing examples from the mentor’s own leadership journey. Others found support from mentors, parents, or friends who encouraged the women to continue their education, run for an elected office, or pursue a personal goal.

For example, Rachel shared her experience from when she was in her first week at a new job and was expected to testify to a legislative committee. She put in long hours in preparation for the assignment and when it came time for her to testify, she recalled feeling very nervous.
Her boss told her, “You need to know you know more about this than any of those lawmakers do, and you’re ready.” Her supervisor did not attend the meeting and Rachel interpreted that to mean that her boss trusted her. Along with his trust, she felt he “graced” her with confidence. Even after that event, Rachel felt the continued support of this supervisor. She shared, “he guided me along the way. He is the one who believed…and he has been my touchstone throughout my career.”

Lee had an experience similar to Rachel’s where she was inexperienced but had the support of a mentor where she worked who trusted her and placed her in a challenging situation. At the time, Lee was working for a partner at a law firm. “The day I passed the bar, the next day I was in court. I mean, he threw me right in. He was a great mentor and very supportive, even very supportive when I left.”

As Lee reflected on her leadership journey, she felt she had benefited from having “lots of mentors.” When she considered the support she had received, she offered, “When I struggled, it seemed like there always was somebody that I found to be supportive and who kept me grounded to see that I could do it, and then I’ve tried to do that with other people.” She identified her first mentor as her best friend’s mother. “[She] was so well-read and worldly, in my mind, of knowing a lot about the world, and that just wasn’t my experience in my family, and so she was really a great role model for me.” Lee remembered how she joined this friend’s mother and a group of other high school students to travel all over Europe for a month. “That was one of the major changes, in my mind, to see there was more than this little ecosystem that I’d grown up in, that there was more that I could be and experience.”

Several women noted the support of male supervisors. Gretchen offered how one of her supervisors had encouraged her to return to school to build upon her associate’s degree, and
arranged for the organization to pay her tuition. Gretchen commented, “That really helped me. He really saw a lot of potential in me and knew that more education would just help me…That really stands out for me.” Gretchen noted the positive impact her male supervisor had in supporting her professional development. Her supervisor used his authority to help her with both her education and career. She used this example as a way to illustrate how men can be a powerful source of support in a woman’s career. Additionally, Gretchen shared a time when she was given the assignment to work on a project with another agency:

The person who was in charge of this whole thing from the agency side was a male. Me and my supervisor went to the kickoff meeting. This person, no matter who asked him the question, would look at my male supervisor and never looked at me, never once looked at me in the meeting even if I asked him the question. We went back to the office, and my supervisor said, “Well, he isn’t going to be able to do that again. I’m not going with you anymore. You’re in charge of this assignment, and he’s going to have to learn how to deal with you.”

When Gretchen was asked whether her supervisor noticed the behavior of the agency representative, she replied:

Oh, yeah, it was real obvious. He said, “I’m not going with you anymore. You’re capable, and he’s going to have to deal with you.” I felt very supported because that’s the first time that had ever happened to me that blatantly. I just felt very supported. “I have your back. You’re competent. You go do it.” The most supported I ever felt by a supervisor was that one. I still think about him all the time.

In this example, Gretchen reflected this was the first time she had experienced being blatantly ignored because she was female. She used this experience to make sense of how she
perceived men could observe sexist behaviors from other men and use their authority to show support for a woman. Through his support of her, Gretchen’s supervisor was able to counter the sexist behavior of the agency lead without actually calling attention to the person.

Em shared that early in her career she had a peer who was more veteran to the unit who pulled her aside and provided her tips on how to be more effective. “That was the first experience I had with somebody who was willing to take me on as somebody to coach and develop and mentor.” Something that stood out for Em is that this gentleman treated her as an equal. She offered, “I’ve been really fortunate in my career to have several people like that.”

Later in her career, Em had another supervisor who “was always trying to help me develop skills and opportunities and leadership opportunities.” Em recognized not all supervisors provide developmental opportunities. “Sometimes bosses don’t like their subordinates to do that because they are worried about being overshadowed. I never, ever got the feeling. I never felt that I overshadow him in any way.” Em perceived that her supervisor was self-confident and was not threatened by her success. She valued the time and effort he made to intentionally prepare her to be a future leader in the organization.

One interesting example of support provided by Lucy was the way she felt the community supported her as a single mother. “Everyone realized that after six months of spending nights until 11 o’ clock at night sometimes at these community [meetings] that when I started to bring my son, it humanized me to the community. And they were great.”

Some women shared examples from their personal life as an additional source of support. Jillian pointed out that in addition to her husband being willing to “sacrifice to support her career,” it was her women friends who “convinced me to have the courage to [run for public office] and to put my name on the line.” Em acknowledged the role her parents played in raising
her to “be independent, to make me feel like I could achieve anything.” Rachel shared how she has had “many, many strong women role models in addition to great men role models who encourage the women... and even to the extent how my dad encouraged my mom’s own leadership, and...my own leadership.”

Lucy shared the example of when someone outside of her family saw the potential of what she could become. She was 13 and playing club volleyball when she was approached by her coach who felt she had the capacity play in a more competitive league. Although she was inexperienced and it would cost the family $2,500 for her to participate, her father was willing to support her. “‘But if you do this and she [the coach] tells you to go in an hour early, you ask her to stay after an hour as well. You work hard to do this.’ So by mid-season, I started.” Lucy perceived this example showed the importance of her father being willing to invest in her. He realized she was young and unskilled, but Lucy interpreted his support as more a lesson about his expectation that she be willing to work hard to earn something she wanted. The value of hard work continued to be a theme that resonated for Lucy through her leadership journey.

While most of the women felt they had the support of others, not everyone felt they had a mentor. Linda acknowledged the support of her husband and children, and even the people in the organizations with whom she worked; however, she noted, “I can’t think of a mentor though. It’s not like there was someone that watched me along the way or said, ‘This is great you should be doing this,’ or ‘Hey you could be doing this.’” LiveLarge always felt supported in her career, yet when someone designated herself or himself as her mentor, she thought, “I didn’t choose you. It was odd.”

**Making a Difference in the Community**
The ability to make a difference played an important role in the leadership journey for many of the participants. The women shared how they were motivated by the satisfaction and pride they experienced from contributing to the community. Several of the women shared how their career choices intentionally sought out opportunities to provide public service.

Rachel, for example, claimed that her “ultimate calling is to be in public service…I didn’t know how to articulate that public policy was my passion. I believed that service was my calling.” She shared how she had an opportunity to be hired as a student worker to organize a statewide summit, “and from there … anyway, I never left. I stayed there almost indefinitely. I’d found my calling.”

LiveLarge expressed a similar drive to contribute to the community, “I love engaging a community and big causes that I think will have a long-term community benefit, to make it a better place. Here in my current role…it’s very high-level, inspirational values rather than month-to-month bottom line sales goals.” Linda also found purpose by working to improve the community. She acknowledged that some pursue leadership for power or prestige; however, she felt there were better results when leadership was pursued to better the community or solve a problem.

Jillian considered contributing to the community good as personally fulfilling. She identified herself with the value she was able to bring to the community and the satisfaction of doing work that improved people’s lives. She shared:

… I loved emphasizing feeling like I was a part of something that was more important than myself and it felt like we were part of a cause. Probably that experience is what helped me love public service because it was just so sincere and genuine and it was all about creating a great community and making a difference in people’s lives. I felt like I had the
best job in the whole world [laughs] because you’re getting paid [emphasis] to work on things that I felt like were important and meaningful and relevant.

Contributing to the greater good has also been a crucial motivator for Beatrice throughout her leadership journey. Early in the interview she shared, “my parents really instilled in me the ‘giving back’ piece, that being part of civil society is important. I think we’ve lost a little bit of that flavor of ‘You’re doing this because you’re contributing to the greater good.’” One of the things Beatrice found satisfying about her time working with the military was that “it wasn’t about individual recognition. It was, you’re a part of an organization that has a broader mission than you, and that’s what you’re contributing to.”

For Lucy, making a difference was more closely aligned with her cultural heritage. Lucy had recently run for and won an elected office. At the same time, she was looking to start a new job, which provided a significant salary increase. Being a single mother, the increase in salary was important.

When Lucy asked her father what to do if she had to decide between the elected office or the new job, he offered, “If you have to make a choice, you take the office.” Lucy recalls, “He told me, ‘For a female, Polynesian, to make it in [this community]. Lucy, there’s going to be other things that will come, but you take the office.’ He was looking long term.” Lucy’s sense-making about her father’s comment was that her achievement was bigger than just her. She represented her cultural community as well as the citizens who lived in her district and being in an elected office was a source of visibility and pride that went beyond just her and her immediate family.

Conclusions
The superordinate theme of Exposure to Leadership included the three subthemes of learning what leaders do, support from others, and making a difference. All women reflected on experiences or examples that contributed to their making meaning of what it is that leaders do. These experiences provided context for the participants that informed their understanding of the nuance between leaders in title only and leaders who demonstrated leadership.

Each woman used the environment she was in and the examples available to her to begin to build her own understanding of leadership. Some women looked to those whom they admired and identified skills or behaviors that they wanted to emulate, while others used their examples to articulate what they did not do as a leader. Based on their experiences, participants perceived that leaders should be self-confident and not easily intimidated by those on their team. For them, effective leaders were intentional, engaged, encouraged different perspectives, and were committed to the success of their staff by providing direction and guidance.

Every woman interviewed felt there were people in her personal or professional life who supported her. These developmental relationships helped the women navigate challenges by sharing insights and wisdom, or offering friendship and encouragement. Within professional settings, participants reflected on mentors who were often male supervisors. These male allies were perceived as supporting the women as they gained experience and self-confidence. Each woman also reflected on what it meant as she began to consider herself a leader, which emerged as the next superordinate theme of becoming a leader.

**Becoming a Leader**

An analysis of the interview data showed that a second aspect of the leadership journey shared by participants was the way each woman approached the process of defining what it meant for her as she began to consider herself a leader. This lead to the second superordinate
theme of Becoming a Leader, which included experiences that every participant shared that had meaning and relevance to their own leadership journey. Within this superordinate theme were two subthemes of Career Path and Defining Experiences.

The subtheme of Career Path captured the examples each woman shared in making her career choices. Through advancement to different positions with increased responsibilities, each woman described what it was like for her to begin to see herself as a leader. The subtheme Defining Experiences was used to convey experiences that many of the women had that were identified as being a defining moment for them in their career.

Within the superordinate theme of Becoming a Leader, each woman shared an example of when she started to see herself as a leader. For some participants, viewing oneself as a leader occurred as they assumed their current position, while for others it had occurred earlier in their career. Beatrice, for example, felt graduate school had not adequately prepared her to become a leader, “I don’t think you get that training in graduate school. I don’t feel like that was emphasized or valued.” When asked specifically about her own leadership journey, Beatrice offered, “until I came here to this position, I wouldn’t have thought of myself as a leader. I feel like I was growing into those skills…and I think that that title is a hard thing to grow into.”

Beatrice later shared, “I think being in the military context where there were such incredible leaders…I’ve always felt like I had a lot to learn on the leadership front.” Pointing to those she had worked alongside while employed with the military showed how Beatrice was comparing her own leadership abilities to those who had received formal training in a very structured environment. She went on to offer that although she had credentials that were valued, she considered them to be more helpful in navigating potential gender bias rather than contributing to her own sense-making of being a leader:
[In the military] …having a Ph.D. gave me rank, and in a system that was very hierarchal. So, I wasn’t 30—I was the equivalent of a colonel, and because they’re so title oriented, you know, the officers, everybody, wear their rank on their sleeve, right? They always introduced me as Dr. Smith. It was very formal in that way. It provided a certain level of innate respect that you don’t get in civilian organizations…an ingrained acknowledgment that…we know you’re bringing something to the table because you have the doctorate, and that’s not something everyone around the table has. I think that was really helpful in getting over some of the gender crap that you might have had otherwise.

Like Beatrice, LiveLarge expressed concern with not receiving training on how to be a leader. LiveLarge had intended a career as a journalist where she expected to work independently. Instead, she assumed positions and sought out experiences that put her in a leadership role. She struggled to commit to becoming a leader, in part because she felt she had no training or preparation, “For me, it was a long path of embracing myself as a leader.” Rather than asking for help, she relied on observation as a way for her to learn how to lead. In time, she sought out an executive coach, which she felt was helpful. LiveLarge shared:

I wanted to be efficient about learning from all the research that’s been done rather than just stumbling along. Then, it became a much more efficient and joyous process because I embraced it as a way of achieving success and as an art that I don’t think I had up until then.

For Gretchen, seeing herself as a leader was more of a result of how she felt others saw her, “I think leadership just happened to me…I was always the smartest kid in the class. I think when you’re smart, people always just gravitate to you being the leader. That just happens…” Gretchen claimed she was just herself, and then realized, “Oh, people are waiting for
me…because I wasn’t trying to be the leader. I didn’t aspire for that.” In her current position as an executive leader within the organization, Gretchen realized that her role was different:

I’ve always had roles where I just fixed things…this job isn’t like that. You don’t really realize how different it is until you get in it. The challenges I deal with now are not really solvable challenges…it took me a while to figure out that. For the first little while I’m like, “I’m not solving anything, so I’m not doing a good job.”

Gretchen began to realize that there were different skills that were needed from her at this higher level of the organization. “The transition to this job, I think, was the hardest one I’ve ever had… It took me a while to really figure out because I wasn’t believing in myself…” Gretchen had been accustomed to dealing with urgent issues and changing her focus to dealing with strategic priorities was unfamiliar to her. She shared during this time she “never felt…comfortable in my own skin…[but] I feel like I’m coming through that now.” Gretchen’s leadership journey caused her to reflect on her skills and redefine what she did that was of value to the organization.

To help Gretchen figure out how to become a leader, she intentionally surrounded herself with mentors and an executive coach to help her develop those skills she felt were needed. She lamented that with each advancement in her career, she had fewer people around her she could turn to because of her position as the boss. She acknowledged, “Everyone always says it’s lonely at the top. It’s so true. Every level I’ve moved up, you just lose a few more friends.” Gretchen perceived that the price for advancement was losing those personal relationships. At the same time, she had placed expectations on herself that she should appear as competent and confident to her team. This resulted in the loss of personal relationships due to alienating herself from those with whom she may have normally turned to for support or advice.
In contrast, Linda struggled to see herself as a leader. At the beginning of the interview, she asked, “Do you have a whole section on imposter syndrome? [laughs] I hope that’s something we’ll be talking about.” When asked why she felt that way, she offered, “I keep telling people this is the first job I’ve had where I’ve worked full-time. That’s why I joked about the imposter syndrome; this is the first real job…I’ve just worked a series of part-time jobs.”

Linda reflected that she had been an elected official and was very involved in the community, starting with her work with the PTA:

I would say, as strange as it sounds, there were things that I was starting to learn and pick up on then about leadership and how something that you think is so innocuous as getting parents together or volunteering in schools, and not political this is just going to be fun. Then, it’s like, “Oh my gosh! Really?!” Just the working with people.

As Linda reflected on her leadership journey, she resisted identifying the skillset she was developing as demonstrating leadership. While she initially felt she was involved in doing something that would be fun, upon reflection she realized it had turned into work and in the process had learned valuable lessons while dealing with minor issues. She specifically mentioned learning how to effectively work with people, but minimized the value of that skill, perhaps due to the context of it being a volunteer experience rather than learned through full-time employment.

Lucy described how she was always comfortable taking the lead and coming up with ideas when interacting with her extended family. “I remember my cousins, we would all laugh about the fact that I was the bossy cousin…it always ended up being fun but I was so bossy about it back then.” For Lucy, being bossy as a young girl was her way of demonstrating leadership at a very young age.
Rachel drew inspiration for becoming a leader through literary and historical role models. She was drawn to strong, resilient characters and identified herself with those who had experienced defeat, but whose persistent belief in oneself eventually resulted in victory. She found particular inspiration reading about Abraham Lincoln:

I’ll never forget what I took away when I read about [him] was how many times he lost before he won, and so, that persistence of keep on trying. Because I would run for all the student council offices or whatever. I think I lost the first few times I ran…but I would keep on doing the work and then it kind of hit me and then I did win…Then it was all of a sudden, “Well, Rachel’s a leader.” But I was like, “How funny, ‘cause I wasn’t.”

Career Path

Embedded in the journey of becoming a leader were reflections on specific career experiences that participants shared to demonstrate lessons learned. These lessons involved disappointment, uncertainty about career plans, or complete changes in career goals. As the women began to assume leadership roles, they started to see themselves, and their skill sets, differently.

Em shared an experience where she had identified a certain position within the organization that she aspired to and felt she had demonstrated the needed skills to achieve her goal. She had been mentored by her supervisor and was ready to fill his role when he was advanced to another organization. She remembered, “I felt like he prepared me to move up in the organization. When he left his position …I felt really well positioned to take on his vacancy.” When prompted about being able to step into that role, Em clarified that she did not get the promotion:
No, it was devastating. After all of this, I was there for five, six years and I wasn’t
selected. That was personally devastating to me because everybody just assumed that
she’s demonstrated excellent leadership…she’s done this, she’s done that. Everybody
likes her—at least that’s what I thought. It was a reality check to recognize that I wasn’t
selected because I didn’t have the type of connections that the ultimate candidate had…
Sometimes it’s just the circumstances.

As Em shared how this experience was “personally devastating” to her, she inferred that
it was difficult, and perhaps even embarrassing, for her to not be selected for a role that was
assumed by her and by others to be hers. Rather than become discouraged or disengaged, Em
reflected on what she could have done differently and turned it into an opportunity to learn how
she might improve for a future role. Em reached out to the woman who had been selected for the
position she had wanted and asked for help so she could successfully advance to an executive
level position within the organization.

Several women interviewed shared that their career path was not linear or intentional.
Gretchen shared how she struggled with college right out of high school. She was unsure what
she wanted to do for a career. She transitioned to going to school part-time after she found a
full-time job within the State of Utah. She recalled, “That was my first state job. I’ve been here
ever since then.” Gretchen was accustomed to being able to figure things out and this appeared
to be a frustrating stage for her. Fortunately, she was able to find a position with an organization
where she was able to create a rewarding career.

Jillian’s career path included a combination of elected and appointed positions. She
shared that she won an elected office and was there for 12 years. During those years, Jillian
served as chair or vice chair of the council. “I think that’s where I maybe shifted from being a
staff person to me being a leader of an organization and where I learned leadership skills.”

Jillian learned to become a leader while on-the-job, rather than through formal trainings or mentoring. During this time, Jillian began to see herself as a leader.

Lucy’s path to considering herself as a leader began while she was running a successful business in the private sector. “Business was okay…I just didn’t know what I wanted to do. I was working 80 hours; the overhead was $4,000 a month and you know, I was doing well…I was just unsure it was worth it all.” As a single mother, her decision to take a position with a government organization was largely based in the flexibility it provided her to be available for her young son. Lucy also acknowledged the importance of education in her career. “Education is freedom for anyone, for any woman of color. Education is your absolute freedom token.”

As she advanced to leadership positions within the organization, Lucy found inspiration from her cultural heritage knowing that others before her were leaders and that, as a leader, she was a source of inspiration to young women.

You know my cultural background, and we are so rooted in all the leaders that came before us. So I’m not a maverick. I’m a maverick of today, but this has been done before. I’m creating a wake that I hope young women, like young girls, look and say I want to do that. And there’s not a “how,” it’s kind of just jump in and do it.

Lee’s path to leadership also involved an intentional decision to pursue employment with an organization that she felt would provide her the flexibility she wanted in her personal life.

When I asked the law firm if they had maternity leave, I saw the body language, and that wasn’t really something that they supported. I’d already experienced that and I knew that’s not where I wanted to go because I knew I wanted to have a family, and I wanted
something that would allow me to have some work-life balance to make that possible. I
didn’t want the job to own me.

Lee went on to share that in her experience, government organizations are more open to
women in the role of an attorney. Government organizations often limit the number of hours
merit employees work in a given week, which would appeal to those who desire flexibility.

Lee sarcastically joked that she was not able to keep a job, pointing to the number of jobs
that she has held. She has not lost a job because she did not have the skills or could not produce;
in fact, just the opposite. “Most of the jobs have not been anything that I’ve proactively
sought…[it] has been someone coming to me, and it’s been men coming to me, and pulling me
to a different position.”

Lee was often recruited into positions that required her to turn an organization around or
provide strategic direction. As she reflected on her career path, Lee shared how she was often
reluctant to move into the new position she was being asked to fill. It was as if she had enjoyed
building a team and being a part of that team, only to repeatedly have that taken from her by
being assigned to a different challenge. There was a sense that while she could hold staff
accountable, provide strategic direction, and build a team, she resented that being in an appointed
position made her feel as if she had little choice in decisions that impacted her career.

In contrast, LiveLarge approached her career through what she called a combination of
“intention and luck.” While originally intending a long career in journalism, LiveLarge was
encouraged to apply for a position with a state agency. She shared that it allowed her to, “take
another look at myself and my skills and understand that this might be very interesting. It started
this whole path.” She went on to say:
I think that happens with a lot of people…it’s not a linear path. We may think we know who we are when we graduate from college and take those first jobs, but we learn so much about ourselves once we’re actually in the work place, and we find what gets the adrenaline going and what makes us feel proud. So, I went through that learning curve, and getting to know myself.

Similar to the experiences of LiveLarge, Beatrice had identified a career path and then had a change of heart. “About halfway through my Ph.D. I sort of had this ‘come to Jesus’ moment [laughs]…that academia was not the right fit for me.” Beatrice recalled that the realization, “really made me kind of pivot. I am much better at this…and I find it much more satisfying.”

Linda questioned whether she even had a career. “I don’t feel like I have this career…I just feel like, ‘Do I really have a career?’ I just did stuff…I just don’t feel like there was ever…zero intentionality.” When asked whether that related back to the beginning of the interview where she wanted to talk about the imposter syndrome, Linda remarked:

Someday someone’s going to say, “Wait a minute… who are you?” On the other side of that, though, is that all of these little experiences I’ve had have given me this really rich background that I could not have asked for better training to be where I’m at right now…I have all of that package. I just don’t think I could have been better prepared. This whole ...I just feel like an imposter sometimes. “Alright, I’m all you got,” so I’ve got to pretend like I am the person that knows what’s going on. I do have a lot of experience to pull on but it was not ever mapped out.
For Linda, a career involved intention and full-time employment. As a result, she viewed the various positions she had held as not being a legitimate career because they were part-time and not intentionally planned and pursued.

**Defining Experiences**

As participants reflected on their leadership journey, almost every woman shared an experience or challenge they considered to be a defining moment in their leadership journey. These experiences often provided the women an opportunity to rely on their own strengths or skills and ultimately strengthened their self-confidence. One example is the experience Gretchen had when she had been in a new position for just two weeks. She was summoned to a meeting with a group of high-powered legislators, along with her boss and a representative from the governor’s office. A different state agency had blamed her organization for miscalculating the funds needed to implement an approved project. Gretchen remembered:

They went to the paper; it hit the paper that morning. It was one of the most unprofessional meetings I’ve ever been in…it was ugly. I remember when they got done talking and they looked us like, “Okay, explain yourself;” and everyone on my side of the table just sat there. I’m sitting there going, “I’m the one that calculated all that. I guess I better say something.” I just started talking and I just started explaining what our process is, and then pretty soon I had people jumping in.

Gretchen shared that in the end, her agency received an apology from the legislators. “That apology was when…I questioned my own capability and competency a lot less. It gave me a lot of confidence…I felt really good about myself after that. That moment will always stand out…it was defining for me.” Although Gretchen was at the meeting with those more senior in rank, she took the lead in explaining what had happened. When it was realized that
Gretchen was correct and that the other agency had accused them unfairly, Gretchen gained confidence in her own abilities.

Em shared a similar experience of starting in a new position in an organization. “I knew that there were budget challenges, I didn’t know it was $6,000,000 of budget challenges.” Part of her new responsibility was to find a way to address the organization’s deficit. After a week of being on the job, she was asked to attend a subcommittee meeting with legislators to be introduced:

It’ll take two minutes, then you are done…I go there, I’m introduced and I am sitting there for about 30 minutes being questioned about the agency and the agency’s lack of transparency, lack of data, lack of outcomes, lack of accountability to this committee, their budget failures. I was totally unprepared to say the least. That situation really cemented for me that you never go to any important meeting like that where your agency’s budget, reputation, whatever it is, is at risk without doing your homework. It would have been fine if I had done my homework and I was more prepared…That was a defining moment for me.

A defining experience Linda shared was after she had been elected to public office, she was approached by another elected official who asked for her help to resolve a 20-year problem with the ambulance system. Linda remembered, “I said, ‘I’m in. I’ll do whatever it takes.’ We formed a small committee…and we just hashed out the stuff behind closed doors. We agreed we’re going to put everything on the table. It was contentious.” The process took time and many verbalized their doubt that it could be done. Linda was quoted in the local newspaper as saying:
We’re not going to talk about, “Can we make this work?” we’re going to say, “This will work, let’s decide how it’s going to work.” Failure is no longer an option. We are not going to go another 20 years where you’ve got someone that doesn’t make it to the hospital in time because we were digging in our heels on some political issue.

By working with her friend, they were able to create a model system that has been replicated by other communities. She went on to share:

I had a phone call from…I get a little emotional about this…my friend had called me…he said, “My son and daughter…their baby stopped breathing. They had paramedics onsite within minutes. You and I did that.” It’s things like that that you have to go in, and you give up a lot, and know that it will be better when it’s done and it was. That’s probably my proudest moment.

This experience cemented for Linda that she could make a difference by being willing to work through difficult challenges and being willing to compromise and negotiate, all while keeping an eye focused on the end-goal. For her, the “payday” was when she realized that her efforts had helped save a life.

When asked about a challenge she had experienced, Lucy choose to share a more personal example of a time she was involved in a toxic relationship. As she reflected on that experience, Lucy remembered, “No one really knew my personal challenges. No one ever knows the shoes you walk through. Right? But I just stuck it out.” She shared, “The bad things and the challenge have actually been the things that I hold onto that remind me of where to never get back or ever feel like again.”

Lucy felt that as a result of going through this defining experience, she now had a better perspective on work-related issues. “Yeah, so personnel issues? That’s the problem? Are you
kidding me? [laughs] Fine, I’ll go to HR. I’ll go through a grievance. Alright.” Lucy’s reflection on her personal experience showed how it had become a point of reference for her in numerous ways. Not only was she determined not to question her abilities or her strengths again, she used that experience to realize issues at work are insignificant to what she had been through and that she had the ability to handle whatever challenge she may face.

Beatrice remembered attending a conference earlier in her career while she was working with the military:

[It was] the first day that I had to wear maternity clothes, I was at a conference and I was the only woman there. I’m in this maternity dress and I looked around, and I was like, “I am who I am, right? I am a woman. This is who I am and why am I trying to hide it? Why would I try to wear a suit over this?” There was no point in doing that.

As Beatrice reflected on that experience, she shared the insight she had gained:

I think that really helped me try to think in terms of what do I bring to the table, because I’m a woman and because of my background and my scientific expertise and stuff that none of these people have, right? Like holding on to that piece that I have something different to bring to the table and that’s okay. I’m never going to look like anybody else at this table, but that’s okay. I’m holding down the fort to compete from this perspective, and I think that helps.

Beatrice accepted and embraced her different-ness—her woman-ness—and learned to value her contributions as being something that no one else could offer.

**Conclusions**

The leadership journey for these women evolved as they considered the behaviors and skills they had observed from leaders in their environment. As the women began making sense
of their experiences, they started to recognize how they were developing leadership skills. For most, this was an independent struggle without the benefit of intentional leadership training or formal development being made available to them. The women expressed doubt regarding their own skill set and even minimized the value of their skills. Participants were sometimes tentative about their own skills because they were comparing themselves to veteran leaders. Other times, the women questioned their skills because of the context in which the skills were acquired.

As participants began to make sense of becoming a leader, they reflected on experiences where they began to test how it felt to be a leader. This process was often the result of successfully navigating challenges, disappointments, and struggles. Overall, the women collectively shared a sense of self-confidence, even when things did not go as planned.

A sense of resilience came through for these women where they continued to optimistically look for ways to improve their skills in order to advance. Defining experiences provided the women an opportunity to be challenged, which gave context for them to see themselves acting as a leader. It was not necessary that others were aware of the situation or challenge for it to have an impact on the women; rather, it was more important the women interpreted the experience as demonstrating how their actions and behaviors aligned with their emerging identity as a leader.

These experiences also helped the women define how they wanted to be seen as a leader. For some, it was important to be seen as competent and confident; others valued being seen as a leader who could successfully advocate for the organization. Independently, these lessons provided meaning to the women as each began to make sense of herself as a leader within her own environment. During this stage of the leadership journey, the women had started to accept
they could be a leader. They recognized the skills and relationships they had developed were of value to the organization.

As the women began to assume leadership positions, they perceived others treated them differently. This preferential behavior was associated with now having the title of leader. The women realized that positional leadership, or having a formal title as leader, made a difference to others and to themselves. It legitimized others perceiving them as a leader and helped the women embrace their evolving identity as a leader.

Education was both overtly and subtly referenced as a contributing to the legitimacy of being a leader. Several women pointed out they had pursued education in a particular field, intending to spend their careers there; however, leadership opportunities became available that required the women to reevaluate their education and skills in order to pursue these unanticipated options. This resulted in an unplanned, unintentional, and frequently non-linear path to leadership. Although the women were often taking risks and stepping out of their comfort zone with regard to the subject area in which they were working, they were developing more confidence in their leadership skills which they viewed as transferrable. During this stage, each woman was becoming more comfortable in being a leader, which is the third and final superordinate theme.

**Being a Leader**

The third superordinate theme identified in the data analysis was Being a Leader. The difference between Becoming a Leader and Being a Leader involved how the women viewed themselves in relation to leading. Becoming a Leader involved participants learning how to be comfortable with being a leader and gaining a sense of self-confidence, often through defining experiences. As an executive leader within the organization, each woman shared experiences of
the meaning they give to being a leader, which informed the third and final superordinate theme of Being a Leader. This superordinate theme included three subthemes that focused on how participants 3.1) Developed Their Own Style, 3.2) Navigated Gender, and 3.3) Developed Others.

As participants became more comfortable being a leader, they developed more clarity on connecting their definition of leadership with their own actions. Rachel shared her view of being a leader as an analogy of setting a table:

Well, I think a lot about how important it is to...so you set this table. That’s an influence a leader has that’s really powerful that’s not always talked about. I mean, you decide who’s in the room and who’s at the table. So, if you’ve already done that, then making sure that the people who came, then speak and are heard. You didn’t just set it to hear yourself talk, and then have everybody there to just say, “And, I’ve decided...” You could have done that in the confines of your own office.

Rachel’s analogy implied the idea of a hostess welcoming guests for a meal and a conversation. The table itself becomes a metaphor for power, and Rachel sees a leader as the hostess who has the power to decide who is invited and who is at the table. In addition, her analogy implies a gathering where a proper hostess does not dominate the conversation, but rather listens to and draws out the ideas, opinions, and experiences of those who are at the table.

As a leader, Lee was frequently recruited to positions where she had to hold people in the organization accountable. She recalled some of the intimidation tactics that were used on her, “That was really tough. I had my car keyed. I had my tires slit. I had to be walked out to my car in the parking lot for a period of time.” Rather than making her back down, however, the intimidation tactics caused Lee to strengthen her resolve, determined that she would not be
frightened away from doing what she felt was right. Her willingness to stick to her decisions in
the face of vandalism and at the risk of her own safety took courage and reinforced her
confidence to make and stand by difficult decisions, no matter the outcome.

As Jillian reflected on the time she had served in public office, she shared lessons she had
learned about what it meant to her to be a leader. Jillian considered a leader to be someone who
makes difficult decisions; however, she also learned that it was not always easy to know what
was the right decision. “I probably developed a thicker skin through that process. But there’s
just going to be times where…you can’t please everyone. I learned to accept that…there were
going to be people who were disappointed with hard decisions.”

Jillian learned to become comfortable with the ambiguity involved with being a leader
and accept the disappointment from others when she made difficult decisions. Although she was
driven by a desire to improve the community, Jillian learned there was not clear agreement on
what that meant. As a leader, she developed the ability to withstand criticism and disagreement,
becoming more confident in living with her decisions. She also learned that being a leader
sometimes meant letting go. She shared her experience after the elected official she was working
for lost an election:

So…um…there’s been disappointing times, when you believe in someone and you feel
like you’re doing good work and there’s things incomplete. Those were hard times to
just accept that it’s time to move on. I’ve had some depressive days, you know,
I…there’s been some days where you just gotta cry.

The election loss became personal for Jillian. At the time, she was not ready to leave her
job and it was emotionally difficult for her to let go. It was also painful for her to watch what
she had worked on be undone. To help her maintain perspective, she reminded herself of the
temporary nature of being in an appointed position, “I joke all the time that we have a job for three years, you know? [laughs] So, what do we want to do for three years? So, it’s good. I think I’m wiser each time.”

One of the key lessons that Beatrice learned as a leader was how to build a team that allowed her and her organization be successful. She shared:

I think probably women think about this more, is how you build a team around you that compensates for things like, there’s some people who are only going to listen to a man. And in this community, there are some people that if you’re Mormon you’re going to be taken more seriously. So how do I build a team that allows my organization to be successful? . . . Figuring out how to build a team, and I think that’s a piece of leadership that I’ve been able to embrace more explicitly here as well. It’s who do I need on my team? Not just from a skills perspective, but to be functional in the environment that we’re in. And I think that’s a hard leadership lesson to learn.

Beatrice went on to share an example of when she was at an event and she was the only one excluded from sitting at the dais. Her deputy director asked why she was not included. She replied:

“Well, I don’t know how to ask in a way that isn’t aggressive of like why I’m left out of it.” And he said, “Well, that will never happen again.” He can have the conversation where I’m not in the room with the right people and say, “This is crap,” and he said in a very nice way, which I would never be able to get out. [laughs]

Being excluded was not only an affront to Beatrice, but also to her organization. She acknowledged that if she were to challenge why she was left out, she would not be as effective in communicating her message as her deputy was, perhaps due to the intensity of how she felt about
being excluded. Beatrice also recognized that her gender might be a problem for some and that she needed allies to help her navigate those situations.

**Developing Own Leadership Style**

Participants were asked whether they felt they had changed as a leader. As each woman responded, many spoke to the way they approached being a leader. Linda shared how being a leader changed the way she approached conflict. She started by dealing with minor issues, like t-shirt logos with the PTA, and over time she gained the confidence to deal with and negotiate more complex issues:

I avoided conflict like the plague…but the city council experience and the planning/zoning experience, it built up until one year on the city council I was getting ready for the meeting and my husband’s going, “This is a pretty hot topic.” I said, “I know. Bring it on, I am ready for this. Boy, I can’t wait.” He’s going, “Who are you?” “I know, right?”

Interviewer: You changed.

I would call people out…If anything I have developed a lot of confidence in that, and in myself. I still see myself as, “Are you really doing this?” …but I don’t shy away from those conflicts like I used to. I’m a completely different person in that regard.

Rachel shared that when she was younger, she viewed leadership as acting and doing. As she’s developed her own leadership style, she is now more trusting of her instincts yet also gives herself time to listen before acting. She also has felt more effective in creating relationships with other leaders in the organization by openly sharing aspects of herself that others may wonder about, but are reluctant to ask. Rachel offers the following as an example:
I think that helps, is to be really direct with who you are. It helps the person not have to figure it out on their own, and to say, “Tell me more about your culture. I realize I’m not of the dominant religion.” Or I’ll say, “I realize I’m not a Utahn, tell me more about that.” I put it out there like, “I realize I’m not of this place and from here. I realize that. Yet, I’m committed to this work and I want to be effective in serving you….and to serve you best, we need to build a relationship. So how can I help you trust me? Because I’m trusting that we have something in common. We care about people. We care about communities.’’

Rachel felt others appreciate her genuineness and she viewed it as a way to create relationships based in sharing a common goal of helping the community.

Em considered her style of being a leader as a collaborative effort, rather than individual, where achieving a certain mission or vision was accomplished as a result of the organization working together. She went on to say:

With that in mind, any failures or challenges, I never took as a personal shortcoming and any successes I never took as this was my personal accomplishment. It was always that we were able to do this because we worked together. It’s my preferred style of leadership…I’ve also had to teach myself that there is ultimately some decisions that you just have to make and you just got to make them on your own and you can’t sit around and talk about it, and that was hard for me to do initially.

Em reflected on how various experiences helped her grow and develop her leadership style. As she advanced in the organization, Em had opportunities to observe other leaders and compare her own leadership style to theirs. During those times, she realized her approach would be different, but acknowledged that the leadership style seemed to work for that person.
In an effort to understand and clarify her own leadership style, LiveLarge worked with an executive coach. She went through a six-week challenge where she told her coach, “You and I need to go on a journey to find the best of me as a leader so I can deliver that out to this team every day.” As a result, LiveLarge felt that she was able to embrace her best qualities as a leader and learned to manage the qualities that she did not like about herself. She shared, “I learned to predict for my team members the patterns, leadership patterns that they’ll experience from me so that they’re not thrown off by them. So, I was pretty transparent…” By openly sharing with her team what she had learned about herself, she intentionally created a positive work environment where she felt her team could grow and be successful.

Other participants offered insights as to their leadership style. Lucy acknowledged that her leadership style was based in her personal drive to achieve and to win. She offered, “I don’t know if I can ever go into a position that isn’t leadership, that isn’t hard, that I don’t have to work really, really hard at.” Beatrice, on the other hand, took pride that she had provided a family-friendly work environment and was deeply committed to the professional development of her team. Beatrice was also proud that she had worked to ensure equity in pay between the men and women on her team. Finally, Jillian emphasized that her leadership style was embedded in the respect she has for government employees:

That’s why I wanted to go back to government…is I am not a cynic [emphasis] about public service. I can’t watch House of Cards; I can’t watch Scandal. There was one on the other night that my husband and I watched and I hated it and it’s because it’s just so cynical and I am not a cynic. I think these employees … are so sincere about doing good work, every one of them [emphasis], you know? So, I hope they know that in my leadership style.
Navigating Gender

All but one participant specifically brought up gender during their interview. Although there was only one question that directly mentioned women (Interview Protocol – Question #7: What advice would you give to women who are interested in a leadership position in this organization?), participants often volunteered that it was something they had to navigate.

Em did not feel that being a woman was a problem for her. “I’ve never felt that my gender was a shortcoming in any way. In fact, I viewed it as an asset that I could bring a different perspective.” The other women had a different experience.

Rachel observed that men were often given credit for something that she said. While she feels her frustration may be juvenile, she claims, “Except it happens all the time. Like, ‘Oh my gosh, I just said that.’ So that happens all the time…” Rachel noticed that when she interacted with someone one-on-one, she did not feel she was treated differently because she was a woman; however, she had seen it happen when she is in a group. She offered, “sometimes even my own staff will notice a little bit that…. there’s certain staff who feel more comfortable giving credit to a man than a woman.”

Rachel perceived the female voice was regarded and credited less than male voices. She also experienced that familiarity with male colleagues seemed to be distanced simply due to gender. In her opinion, the men exhibiting this exclusionary behavior were unaware they were ignoring the contributions of the women on the team.

Lucy felt another person on the leadership team intentionally minimized her role as a leader in the organization. While she acknowledged it was not harassment, she felt his behavior towards her was demeaning. His treatment of her made her feel as if he considered her nothing more than a “glorified note taker… I hate feeling that way.”
As she processed how his treatment made her question her abilities and her value to the organization, Lucy reflected how experiences like this help to remind her that others can only take her confidence from her if she lets them. She went on to say, “and then I have to realize, you know, I don’t know his journey...He’s got that Mormon culture hanging over his head. . .I don’t have that, you know? And I can’t hold it against him.” She felt his tactics of ignoring her and publicly excluding her showed he did not value her or her contributions. Lucy decided to deal with his hurtful behavior by realizing she did not know his motivations. She felt there was more benefit to her to use such experiences to remember that what she brings to the organization is important and valued.

Lucy is also an elected official. She shared that as she ran for office, she was asked by other women how she was able to juggle being a single mother, working full time, and being an elected official. Lucy responded with her personal philosophy which was not about trying to achieve balance, but rather focusing on being present where she was at, “If you can be present at all pieces of your life, that’s balance. You will find happiness in that. It’s just prioritizing.”

LiveLarge shared an experience of working in a different organization with a man who had not previously worked with a female peer. She shared that he, “just didn’t know how to work with me. I made him uncomfortable, and he responded to his discomfort by undermining me in amazing ways over a long period of time.” Although this peer respected what she brought to the team, he did not know how to deal with a female peer, “so he responded like boys sometimes do, to be kind of a bully.” When asked how she handled his behavior, LiveLarge offered:

It diminished me quite a bit, surprisingly, because I was pretty far along in my career and quite self-confident. But it gives me a lot of empathy for people who find themselves
having to work with a bully all the time, or a harasser, and he wasn’t that, but it still takes you by surprise even if you’re fully confident and everything else. It really undermined my confidence, it reduced my effectiveness in ways I’m still surprised by because I allowed it to discombobulate me and second guess myself. And you can’t do creative, bold things when you’re thinking, “Well, maybe I’m stupid.” I was only operating on half of my capacity, at best. Half. I was always second guessing myself, and I was always recovering after having been shut down on a good idea. I was just always in recovery mode rather than leadership.

The actions of this peer impacted LiveLarge in the way she felt about herself and her skills. Although she saw his behavior as juvenile, it still disoriented her sense of self and made her question and doubt her own abilities. She was in a state of trying to regain control of her confidence, but found it difficult to lead when she was personally struggling.

She referenced “recovery” several times and later shared, “I so vividly remember being the victim of bad leadership” which conveyed an image of being repeatedly injured emotionally. LiveLarge acknowledged that the treatment by this peer still haunts her. She decided to use the experience as a learning opportunity of what not to do. Since leaving that organization, LiveLarge has taken intentional actions to develop her best qualities as a leader.

During Lee’s interview, she shared she never felt her skills or abilities were discredited because of her gender; however, she did feel that being a woman did impact whether a peer who was male was willing to meet with her alone with the door closed, or travel with her. When probed about her claim that she felt culture was part of the reason, she replied:

In my law firm in Las Vegas, there were a lot of LDS attorneys. Even though it was in Las Vegas, there were a lot of LDS attorneys in this law firm, and so I think that [the
LDS] culture of taking care that you don’t get in a relationship with someone that’s not your spouse, and so sometimes, you know, maybe feeling that they don’t want to be perceived as someone that may be having that, so they’re just going to avoid it, so that’s my experience of the culture.

When asked whether she felt it had impacted her career or her advancement opportunities, Lee replied, “Not in that job, because the people that felt uncomfortable were not the ones making the decisions about my promotion.” She pointed out an aspect of the conservative religious culture where the perceptions of behavior are important. She highlighted the religious cultural expectation of avoiding the creation of relationships with anyone of the opposite sex other than one’s spouse where such relationships are discouraged and considered inappropriate. To avoid that perception, many men intentionally avoid being alone with a woman. Lee shared her perception that this behavior extended into the work environment.

Jillian shared that she experienced being discounted by the community’s businessmen although she was in a leadership position as an elected official. She offered, “And even on the city council, the business leaders would always go to the men [pause] and…and that would often bother me. Like, did they not see that maybe I am strategic?” She shared a specific example of when she felt disrespected. “I can remember I was pregnant with my third child when I was chair of the city council and some of the business leaders would say things to me like, ‘How’s Momma today?’ Or just kind of degrading comments…” Jillian felt that although she was a leader, she was acting outside of her social role and her woman-ness was treated as something negative. She interpreted the sarcastic emphasis on the word “Momma” as a way to underscore that her role as a mother did not align with her being a government leader, and felt the exchange was intended to remind her she was different and did not belong. Her experience was very
different than how Beatrice was treated when she worked for the military and felt support from the team she was working with during her pregnancy.

Jillian also pointed out the composition of the state legislature. “I guess the one thing, maybe an elephant in the room, would be the legislature who is really short on women. That’s going to be interesting just to see how they interface…with women.” When it was noted that many of the state legislators have a business background, Jillian’s previous experience with men in the business community caused her to be tentative about how she would navigate working with that group.

Gretchen shared that she struggles with “the whole gender thing.” She stated, “I think women can push it too far, and then it hurts the cause. You also should be doing something, but I don’t know what that something really is…I personally haven’t found where the middle ground is on that.” She went on to offer:

I just think women have to work harder than men. I think you have to just work hard and then bump it up a notch…You just have to be good, better than the men, and then they can’t live without you versus, “I’m female and you don’t have enough [women], and so I should get that promotion,” you know what I mean?

When Gretchen was asked about being left out of decisions because she was a woman, she relayed the following:

I remember going to meet with a new legislator. There was me, Todd, and Melissa. He did give me the courtesy of some eye contact and talked with me because he knew I was the director. He gave Todd the most, and he didn’t look at Melissa at all. You have those moments still. They still happen, but I don’t feel like I’m left out of decisions. Usually I’m the ranking authority in those meetings, so I can’t really be left out.
When she shared a similar experience that occurred during a customer meeting when she was not present, Gretchen was asked whether she debriefed with Melissa as how to handle that type of situation in the future. While Gretchen did not coach Melissa on what to do, she had prepared herself on how she would handle that situation in the future. There was a follow-up meeting with the same customer agency and Gretchen was prepared to address the representative’s behavior, should it occur. “I’m like, ‘Oh, I’m so ready for that moment.’ I was ready. He didn’t do it…I think preparing for him has probably prepared me [for] when it happens again…because it will, it will.”

Gretchen also shared experiences related to gender that surprised her, “I’m not LDS [Latter-Day Saint], but…I’ve been confronted…with instances where men will deal with and put up with poor performance from men because they’re the sole breadwinner. It sets my hair on fire.” Gretchen had a male employee on her team who was not doing a good job and was going to be terminated. She shared the following:

When Melissa told a few male counterparts on her senior leadership team that we were going to be letting him go, two of them said, “Well, did you know that he doesn’t want his wife to work after she comes back after the baby?” Yeah, I’m like, “What?!” So we’re going to hang on to poor performing men because of a religious cultural preference where a really good superstar female could be doing that job. Really?!” That really made me angry. That’s just not a gender issue because a superstar male could’ve taken that job, too.

She later reflected, “How do you break through that kind of culture where people literally are like, ‘If I give this job to a woman, I’m taking a job away from a breadwinning man?’” Gretchen acknowledged this dynamic most likely occurred more frequently than she realized.
It probably just is happening subtly. They’re just not saying it out loud like these two people did. I’m sure they left and they’re still going to make a hiring decision tomorrow with that in mind because it’s religiously who they are. I don’t know how to break that. Gretchen acknowledged she is challenging a culture embedded in a religious belief that she does not share and is unsure how she can prevent it from influencing future employee issues.

Beatrice shared her experiences related to gender. She acknowledged, “There are some people that are misogynistic.” Beatrice went on to share an example of how she had a colleague who would not listen or respond to her. She had hired a retired Marine as her deputy and together they decided to test this colleague who was ignoring her. Beatrice would first send an email to the colleague and then wait a week. After receiving no response, her deputy would then copy the text from her email and send it to the colleague. Her deputy would receive a response back within an hour.

When asked how she felt when the colleague would ignore her, Beatrice responded, “Well, it made me feel like this guy’s an asshole right? It’s not about me. To me, that was like, this is not about me. This is your issue.” Beatrice felt that the behavior of this colleague was due to her gender, but she also recognized that it could also be due to personality. Ultimately, Beatrice acknowledged, “There are people who are jerks, and you know, I can’t work with him, so I work around him.”

But there are times that Beatrice has struggled. She shared her feelings about her experiences in her current position:

So, in this world I’m left out of a lot of things. It’s been really interesting. I genuinely think that sometimes I’m forgotten—that [my boss] forgets that I have this skill set. I mean I’ve been told that...he’s said to me, “You know you don’t tell us how awesome
you are every time you open your mouth and we sometimes forget what an asset we have…”

Beatrice went on to share examples of when she has travelled with a group of her peers where they were invited to ride in the car with the boss, but that she is never included. “There are things like that that happen where it’s hard for me to tell why. Is it, I’m not part of the old boy’s network? I think I make people uncomfortable.” When asked to speculate whether she has been excluded because of her style, she responded:

I think partly style, partly because I’m a single woman, and I’m not Mormon, so I don’t fit, right? Which I enjoy, because I can do things that you can’t do if you’re supposed to fit, right? And that, I mean definitely working in [the military] I didn’t fit and…it gave me many opportunities I wouldn’t have had if … I was more traditional. That wasn’t my experience in the [military], but it’s definitely been my experience here.

Beatrice pointed out she has worked in male-dominated environments before and felt valued for her credentials and the unique perspective she brought to the conversation; however, in this environment she feels forgotten and excluded because she does not fit the mold of being male, married, and Mormon.

**Developing Others**

Participants were asked whether they had used their role as a leader to support or help others. Many shared examples of how they had helped other women, while the others emphasized that they focused on providing equal support and opportunities to both men and women.

LiveLarge recognized her preference of providing informal mentoring. She looks for “strong women” with whom she feels share a common interest or passion. She acknowledged,
“I’m really proud to have made a contribution by connecting [several women] to an opportunity that worked out right, and where they’ve just ended up flourishing.” As LiveLarge considered the future, she stated:

I won’t be in this role forever and I do think a little bit about ...what are the best ways for me to continue to show that leadership when I’m not doing this full time? I don’t know what those are yet, but I would love to find a way to continue mentoring...because it’s so rewarding.

Linda’s examples of developing women to assume leadership roles were linked to her desire to leave an organization “in really good hands, because I feel this protective ownership of the organization.” Although Linda was somewhat reluctant to acknowledge her role as a mentor, “Yeah, I don’t want it to sound like...like I’m all that,” she offered multiple examples of where she had identified someone whom she felt could be the next leader of the organization and then intentionally worked to develop that person by providing them with experiences and exposure.

When Jillian was asked about developing others, she acknowledged that it was a challenge for her:

That is a really tough question that I am wrestling with, is how to be a mentor...um...and how to help women in the workplace. Since I arrived in this job, I have had emails from some of the women in the department saying, “It’s so great to have a woman director and could we have some women leadership sessions?” And I haven’t quite figured out how to do that. I feel like I’m a mentor to anyone who wants my advice or help, man or woman, but I feel like I should be making an extra concerted effort, but I’m not quite sure how that looks.
Throughout Jillian’s leadership journey she never identified a mentor or someone who coached her along the way. The lack of an example may be part of the reason why it was more difficult for Jillian to identify what to do. While she valued the work of government employees and wants to be supportive, she was uncertain how to help women develop leadership skills.

Em was very intentional in the way she has approached developing members of her team for leadership. She actively encouraged her management staff to look at the potential of people on the team and “think about opportunities for leadership, like serving on a committee, or being the chair of something.” One of the tools she has created is a leadership academy that is designed to develop future leaders for her organization. She also changed the culture of the organization by insisting that every vacant position be filled through external recruitments.

I also told them that if you are going to move up, you better be competitive because we are [going to] open up these jobs to everybody; we are not just going do internal recruitments and everybody hated that. That was me pulling rank, me saying that we are going do it this way. “We want the best candidate. If you think you are the best candidate then you shouldn’t worry that we’ve opened it up to anybody, that you should be able to compete. If you think you need a little help, we have a leadership academy.”

Em has found the leadership academy has been a helpful tool for her team that has spread throughout the state to come together and learn from each other. She has also emphasized her value of personal development by including in every interview a question that asks whether the candidate has completed any type of leadership or personal development training. Those who can show they have made an effort to improve themselves are the individuals who are given opportunity for promotions.

Conclusions
All of the women interviewed served in an appointed position, which brought a level of vulnerability to their job. They served at the pleasure of the elected official and realized when the elected official was no longer in office, there was a risk they may not be retained by the incoming administration. They also understood they were expected to serve wherever they were placed. As the women were moved to different positions or had to leave an organization altogether, they learned that leadership at their level included accepting a sense of loss. This sometimes meant no longer having a job they truly loved and believed in, other times it meant no longer working with a team they had built or losing daily contact with staff with whom they had created deep connections.

Relationships were important to these women leaders. They took pride in building and being a part of a team. They consistently described their preferred leadership style as working and collaborating with others. Being collaborative allowed the women to strengthen relationships and incorporate the thoughts and ideas of others, which they felt resulted in better decisions. It also allowed them to share successes and failures with the team, which served as a valuable mechanism for strengthening their resilience.

These women leaders actively encouraged input from others to create a team decision. As a leader, they felt it was important to encourage and listen to the advice and opinions of others. In fact, the women recognized a core aspect of the power of a leader was being able to determine whose voice was heard.

That being said, the women realized there were times they had to make difficult decisions alone. They perceived that being a leader required they make and stand by difficult decisions, despite receiving pushback, criticism, or being intimidated. Through their experiences, the women had become comfortable with ambiguity, recognizing there may not always be one right
answer. They had come to accept there would be those who would be disappointed with their decisions. They had learned to trust their own decisions and had developed the confidence to remain firm while handling conflict.

Several women identified that being a leader meant creating an environment where they and their team could succeed. For some, a supportive environment meant being transparent about their own leadership style, while others were committed to creating a work environment that accommodated both the professional and the personal needs of team members. To be an effective leader, some participants turned to professional support, often in the form of an executive coach. The coach served as a confidante who provided the women a safe place where they could process situations, explore options, and work through self-doubt.

As participants reflected on their leadership journey and what it meant to them to be a leader, they shared uncomfortable situations they felt occurred because they were a woman. While one participant perceived being a woman allowed her to bring a different perspective to the conversation, most other participants interpreted being female as the reason for being ignored, forgotten, bullied, demeaned, and discounted. Participants struggled with feeling frustrated as male peers were given credit for their ideas, and then internalized that frustration as being juvenile or immature. Because the nature of the gender bias was frequently subtle, the women often chose to adapt to the environment rather than bring attention to the behavior. To navigate these biases, the women relied on hard work and “being better than the men.”

These women experienced hurt, anger, and disappointment as they were minimized, ridiculed, or excluded. For some, the sexist behavior impacted them long after the situation was over and required intentional actions on their part to remind them of their strengths and value.
Going through these experiences increased resilience yet did not eradicate the memory of how they felt.

A majority of the women attributed the LDS religious culture as causative to their being excluded or forgotten. They perceived that LDS religious teachings which dictated the social interactions between men and women had been used by some men as a guideline of how they should interact with women in all social settings, including work. The women experienced a subtle but distinct separation of the sexes and felt socially excluded by some men. To successfully navigate the environment, some women felt they needed to intentionally hire staff who were male and LDS. The women also attributed a social culture grounded in the LDS religion as influencing workplace attitudes of tolerance towards poor performing men as well as giving men employment preference.

Despite these challenges, a concern was raised about bringing attention to “the whole gender thing.” Women were often unsure what they could or should do to support women advance to leadership. One women focused on ensuring gender equity on hiring panels, which she perceived had resulted in an increase of women being hired. Yet most women indicated they focused on the skills needed for the job and did not hire women into positions simply to equalize the numbers. Many even shared examples of how they supported both women and men on their team.

Finally, looking beyond themselves, many of the women shared a desire to mentor and develop others. They considered supporting and developing others as being an essential aspect of how they viewed themselves as a leader. While most accomplished this through informal mentor relationships, one woman had formalized her efforts to develop and train potential leaders in her organization by creating a leadership academy. As the women shared the
satisfaction they felt when they left an organization with competent leadership in place to
continue their work, many reflected on how they found it personally rewarding to contribute to
the development of others.

**Conclusion**

The research question for this study was “How do women describe their experiences
ascending to an executive-level position within the government of Utah?” Through analyzing
the interview data, three superordinate themes emerged that are grounded in the real-life
experiences of women leaders who work for the State of Utah. The themes captured the
continuum of the women’s leadership journeys, beginning with being exposed to leadership.
The leadership journey then progressed as the women started to see themselves as becoming a
leader, which was the second superordinate theme. Finally, having advanced to an executive
leadership position, each woman reflected on what it meant to her to be a leader, which became
the third superordinate theme. Together, the themes reflect the women’s experiences of gradual
but determined progress towards being a leader.

For the nine women who shared their stories, the leadership journey was an incremental
process that occurred over a period of time. There were stops and starts; periods of growth and
times of setbacks. As the women began to observe and create their own understanding of what
leaders do, each woman shared how her journey began grounded in supportive relationships.
The women identified the importance of support they received from others in their personal and
professional life, with family members and mentors playing a key role in the women developing
confidence in their abilities.

As the women developed their understanding of leaders and leadership, they began to
internalize what becoming a leader meant for them. This was a time of growing into seeing
oneself as a leader, where the women went through defining experiences that provided them a setting where they were able to successfully demonstrate to themselves and to others they could navigate a difficult situation. During this time, the women noted that although they sometimes may have had the title of leader, it did not guarantee that they felt like a leader. Defining experiences served to provide the women a context where they could begin identifying themselves as a leader.

Throughout the process, these women owned their journey. They took responsibility for their own development and did not expect others to rescue them. They developed resilience and self-confidence by looking to themselves to navigate setbacks or challenges. While some women pursued advancement opportunities based on being asked, there were times they pursued a leadership role without having all of the qualifications. They had learned advancement was not necessarily dependent upon possessing all of the stated skill sets in a recruitment notice. As the women reflected on the risks and positions they had taken, they acknowledged that it had resulted in a non-linear career path that was frequently based more on opportunities than intent.

As a whole, the women preferred to focus on the support they had received rather than on detractors to their journey. When the women did acknowledge challenges, it was often in context to their gender. The majority of women expressed being challenged by interpersonal dynamics where they experienced sexist behavior from men, often manifest as being blatantly ignored.

The women consistently responded to those challenges by refusing to let the attitudes of others define them. Instead, the women focused on their sense of self, consciously reminding themselves of their skills and accomplishments. The women recognized that the inappropriate behaviors were exhibited by only some of the men in the workplace, and readily pointed out how
male supervisors were many times allies and played the role of a mentor who provided support and advocated for them throughout their careers.

Perhaps to counter the bias they experienced, the women relied on their education and hard work to internalize and legitimatize their role as a leader. They voiced frustration with the lack of formal leadership training and development made available to them. Perhaps they considered formal leadership training as a tool that would have expedited or validated the leadership skills they were developing. It may also have been viewed as a way for the organization to acknowledge them as being a leader and as someone whose development was worth the investment of resources.

Finally, many of the women were driven by a desire to make a difference in the community. These nine women consistently voiced their preference for a communal leadership style where relationships with those inside and outside of the organization were important. As they worked to improve themselves and their organization, they were committed to bringing others along and provided continued leadership development for those around them through formal and informal methods.

The next chapter will focus on connecting the findings of this study with the research literature. The theoretical framework of social role theory and role congruity theory will be revisited in context of the research findings. Finally, implications for practice and recommendations for future research will be provided.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of women as executive leaders in Utah state government. Much of current research focuses on women not being able to advance. In contrast, this research focused on learning from women who have successfully navigated a path to executive leadership to gain a deeper understanding of what worked, while acknowledging the challenges or barriers they faced as part of their lived experience.

Being a leader is experienced from a first-person point of view (Souba, 2014). As such, an IPA approach was used to provide a forum where the voices and perspectives of women leaders could be heard as they explored how they experienced leadership (Shinebourne, 2011). Social role theory and role congruity theory provided the theoretical context for this research. Using a combination of the IPA methodology and the theoretical lens of social role theory and role congruity theory, three themes were identified that include Exposure to Leadership, Becoming a Leader, and Being a Leader.

In this final chapter, each of the three findings are discussed and situated within the context of the extant literature to determine whether the findings support or contradict previous research. Following a discussion of the findings, recommendations for practice will be presented. The chapter will conclude by offering recommendations for future research.

**Exposure to Leadership**

As the women reflected on examples they used to inform their leadership journey, they explored how their experiences provided context for creating a philosophy of what it is that leaders do. They gave considerable meaning to the support they received from others, reflecting on how important it was in their personal and professional growth to have people around them who provided encouragement and counsel. Even at this early stage, many of the women
acknowledged that a core element in their leadership journey was grounded in a desire to make a difference in the community or contribute to the community good.

Being persistent provided a foundation for all of the women in their leadership journey. The women demonstrated persistence in the way they were able to recover from setbacks and disappointments. Instead of giving up, they reflected on their experiences to learn what they needed to do differently. Being able to quickly regain their balance served the women well throughout all stages of their leadership journey.

As the women gained confidence in their ability to respond to mistakes and victories, they became more resilient. This was consistent with the findings of Hoyt and Simon (2017) who noted that the way women respond often correlates “to the extent to which women see themselves as having, or being able to develop, leadership abilities—including leadership self-efficacy, power, and mindsets about whether leadership abilities can be developed or not” (p. 18). This sense of self, or self-efficacy, served to help the women navigate disappoints and frustrations, which was supported with research that underscored that the way that women view themselves and their abilities helps to buffer them from the effect of threats (Simon & Hoyt, 2012).

Women in leadership roles experience a threat of being treated poorly or judged because of a negative stereotype associated with being a woman (Hoyt & Simon, 2017). These threats “can undermine women’s sense of belonging in a field, self-confidence, job attitudes, and their motivation and desire to pursue success within the field” (Hoyt & Simon, 2017, p. 17). Hoyt and Simon (2017) found relationships “can both increase a sense of social belonging and inoculate people’s sense of self against identity threats” (p. 18).
Relationships with mentors, role models, and other trusted allies were a valuable source of emotional reinforcement for the participants, which is consistent with research literature. Fleig-Palmer and Schoorman (2011) identified mentoring as one of the oldest forms of knowledge transfer. Mentors and role models have been shown to provide inspiration and even protection to women in leadership (Hoyt & Simon, 2017; Simon & Hoyt, 2012). Williams and Dempsey (2017) found that interpersonal relationships such as mentors, role models, or social networks strengthen a woman’s resilience.

Not surprisingly, when the women talked about their mentors within the work environment, they were predominantly men. Research by Alkadry and Tower (2014) reinforces that leadership positions within the government bureaucracy are iconic of a White patriarchy, so it was not surprising that the exposure these women had to leadership was more frequently through the lens of male supervisors. These men played a powerful role in the women’s lives and often were viewed as cornerstones for the women as they developed self-efficacy; however, despite their support, these male allies could not relate to or share the experiences these women had with workplace dynamics related to their gender.

Women were often on their own when it came to figuring out how to respond to gender dynamics in the workplace. They shared examples of determination and grit as they worked through or around biases and social isolation. Research by Noe, Greenberger, and Wang (2002) emphasized the value of women having access to female mentors because women “may be best suited to prepare their female protégés for the unique source of stress that women face in the workplace, such as discrimination, social isolation, and coping with work-family conflict” (p. 164).
It should be noted that although the women acknowledged their experiences and frustrations with gender bias, they were generous with their time to help others. Many shared how they found it personally fulfilling to support the growth and advancement of others. This was contrary to some research that claimed women do not support others once they have arrived at the top (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Yet research by Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb (2013) counters that powerful women recognize the leadership potential in other women and are valuable anchors by providing developmental relationships.

While developmental relationships with mentors contributed to the women’s ability to persist, it became apparent that the women also took strength from trusted relationships they created both inside and outside of the organization. Examples of such relationships were shown as the women spoke of intentionally creating a team, supporting the leadership development of others, and nurturing subordinates. This relational approach to leadership is supported in the research literature that has attributed woman as having a communal approach to leading (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Iverson, Allan, & Gordon, 2017; Stivers, 2002).

Although the women acknowledged a preference for a communal leadership style, they were comfortable assuming an agentic leadership style when it was necessary. Interestingly, none of the women articulated any consequences as a result of assuming more masculine behaviors such as when they had to discipline staff, address budget deficits, or implement strategic organizational change. This is contrary to the well-documented research that reinforces the social costs women experience when they display agentic behaviors (Caleo & Heilman, 2014; Hoyt, 2017; Krause, 2017).

In summary, the first finding reflects how the women were persistent and developed resilience to deal with challenges and setbacks. They relied on relationships with mentors and
others as they developed their identity as a leader. Although they experienced issues related to being a woman, they were resilient and used strategies to adapt to their environment. Their resilience and persistence served as a foundation as they transitioned to becoming a leader, which is the second finding.

**Becoming a Leader**

Singer (2004) proposed that individuals use their experiences to craft identities from the narratives they tell themselves and others. As the women began to see themselves as a leader, they recognized the unintentional nature of their career path. This was important enough to them that they felt a need to acknowledge how many times they were asked to apply for positions for which they either had never considered or did not feel qualified.

This was in contrast to other examples they provided where they intentionally pursued positions for which they knew they did not meet all of the qualifications. During this stage of the leadership journey, the women reflected on defining experiences that crystalized for them their capacity to be a leader. These defining experiences provided valuable context for the women and were a lens they used to gauge whether the way they responded to these events aligned their emerging identity as a leader.

In 2007, Eagly and Carli popularized the metaphor *leadership labyrinth* to demonstrate how the path to leadership for women was indirect, uncertain, and complex. The findings of this study support that research. The women who shared their leadership journey gave repeated examples of how their careers followed opportunities rather than intent. Their experiences did not align with the traditional (and perhaps outdated) metaphor of a career ladder that sets an expectation of a neatly planned and regularly followed schedule of advancement. Instead, these
women trusted their instincts and followed advancement opportunities where and when they found them.

Participants shared how early work challenges and pre-leadership experiences became crucible moments, often providing the backdrop for valuable lessons. Challenges and setbacks were seen by the participants as opportunities to learn. Participants often found it useful to process these experiences with trusted mentors and role models, which was consistent with research that documents the importance of learning from challenging work experiences (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013). This relational approach to learning also reinforced that they were not alone.

One particularly useful exercise was when mentors were willing to share their own experiences and process with the women how they arrived at certain decisions. Given the lack of formal training that the women received to be a leader, these exchanges often become the closest thing the women had to leadership training. While there was organizational support for the women to obtain graduate-level education, there was no offer of leadership development or training. This was consistent with research that showed leadership development for women is frequently self-initiated (Hairston, 2014; Reinhold, 2005; Trent, 2007).

As the women began to internalize their sense of being a leader, their confidence increased in their decision-making skills. As the women persistently worked through challenges, they began to craft their leadership identity and see themselves as a leader. This was supported with research by Ibarra and Petriglieri (2017) who showed how becoming a leader involves “relational and social processes through which one comes to see oneself, and is seen by others, as a leader” (p. 32). They went on to say that “receiving validation for one’s self-view as a leader
bolsters self-confidence, which increases one’s motivation to lead and seek new opportunities to practice leadership,” (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2017, p. 32).

Hoyt and Simon (2017) acknowledged that some of the difficulty women face in leadership often begins with the struggle of “being perceived by others as a leader” (p. 6). This echoed the research by Ibarra, Kolb and Ely (2013) that explored the process of internalizing a sense of seeing oneself as a leader. They found that “integrating leadership into one’s core identity is particularly challenging for women, who must establish credibility in a culture that is deeply conflicted about whether, when, and how they should exercise authority” (Ibarra, Kolb, & Ely, 2013, p. 5).

The women reinforced their resilience and resolve by incrementally learning from their successes and failures alike. This aligned with the research conducted by Madsen (2008) who argued that the iterative process “leads to trusting yourself and your leadership capabilities. This in turn, leads to increased confidence, both in yourself and those you lead” (p. 276). Cloninger (2017) also found leadership to be “an iterative process. What is accomplished is internalized and builds capacity” (p. 108).

Successfully navigating challenging situations became useful training grounds as the women developed the necessary political savvy to survive. Being politically savvy requires that one be aware of the power structures within the work environment, including the organization’s culture and its key players and how they interrelate (Williams & Dempsey, 2017). Eagly and Carli (2007) referred to it as “building social capital” (p. 173), which is a phrase commonly used in the literature on sociological theory (Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, 1988; Loury, 1977).

Politically savvy or social capital is considered a critical skill for anyone navigating a path to leadership and requires that one create relationships throughout the organization, while
also being cognizant of the unwritten rules or unspoken signals conveyed between key players. This skill had both benefits and consequences. While the women developed a heightened sense of awareness to social cues necessary for political savvy, they would also become more aware of social cues that conveyed gender bias. The women had to rely in their resilience to be aware of, but work through, the bias. This was a particularly sensitive aspect of a woman leader’s development because gender biases can “disrupt the learning cycle at the heart of becoming a leader” (Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013, p. 4).

Consistent with the research literature, the women shared how they were often encouraged to apply for a position for which they did not feel qualified or would not have considered (Cloninger, 2017; Worth, 2015). Following these recommendations often resulted in pursuing positions that were in a field very different than their graduate degree, which possibly explains why they felt unqualified. Interestingly, there was inconsistency in this area as several of the women highlighted pursuing positions for which they knew they did not have all of the qualifications. This inconsistency resulted in a hybrid of women needing to be asked for some positions, while also showing tenacity to go for leadership positions for which they were interested. It was likely the women felt their leadership skills were transferrable and of more value for the position they were pursuing than having agency-specific experience.

Pursuing these advancement opportunities frequently meant the women accepted positions that would be considered risky, where a significant budget deficit needed to be fixed or where an agency was at risk of federal sanctions if not brought into compliance. The research literature refers to this as the “glass cliff” (Ryan & Haslam, 2005) and is described as a phenomenon where women are selected to fill a leadership role where the outcome is considered uncertain. Hoyt and Simon (2017) noted this dynamic is “partially driven by the fact that men
are given preferential access to more desirable, stable leadership positions” (p. 12). Extending the glass analogy, Ryan et al. (2016) referred to men’s privileged access to more desirable leadership positions as the “glass cushion” (p. 12).

One unexpected element of the women’s leadership labyrinth was how government was intentionally selected as the field of choice. For some women in this research, working for a government organization aligned with their personal value of contributing to the community good. For others, government was perceived as being a more supportive of work-life balance.

In the literature, the value of contributing to the community good is referred to as public service motivation. Over the last 25 years, research around the motivation or desire to contribute to society (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008) has been closely linked to the field of public administration and has been identified as a desirable attribute for those applying for positions in the public sector (Bozeman & Su, 2015). It should be noted that this attribute can be particularly useful in recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce, which is an important ideal within public organizations.

Central to American democracy is the construct of representation. The theory of representative bureaucracy embodies this idea by encouraging government agencies to hire and promote those who reflect the demographic characteristics of the community it serves to inform government policies, programs, and services (Bradbury & Kellough, 2011; Clark, Jr., Ochs, & Frazier, 2013; Kingsley, 1944; Meier, 1975; Riccucci & Van Ryzin, 2017; Smith & Monaghan, 2013; Van Ryzin, Riccucci, & Li, 2016). Smith (2014) supports this argument by showing that the presence of a diverse government workforce enhances the legitimacy of government by demonstrating an inclusive approach to decision making and public policy. Unfortunately, research has noted the difficulty women face in achieving top administrative leadership positions
where public policies and important decisions are made (Lange & Nelson, 2016; O’Neil & Hopkins, 2015; Smith, 2014).

There are over 21.8 million people in the United States who work as government employees, with approximately 47.9% being women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Yet public sector employment data demonstrates the gendered nature of leadership within government organizations, with men holding a dominant majority (70%) of the executive leadership positions (Caceres-Rodriguez, 2013; Sabharwal, 2015). Such disproportion clearly shows gender disparity and sends the message that a majority of leadership positions are inaccessible to women (Alkadry & Tower, 2014; Connell, 2006; Riccucci & Van Ryzin, 2017; Wynen et al., 2015).

That being said, within this research there were women participants who intentionally selected government as a place of employment because they perceived government as being a more receptive environment to balance personal and work demands. This was referred to in the research literature as achieving work-life balance (Ezra & Deckman, 1996; Feeney & Stritch, 2017; Phipps & Prieto, 2016). Participants expressed the importance of a career that allowed them opportunities for personal time. For example, during her interview, Lee shared her decision to work for government was because “I wanted something that would allow me to have some work-life balance…I didn’t want the job to own me.”

The women perhaps perceived that achieving a balance between work demands and their personal life was easier when working in the public sector because merit positions within government organizations are often limited to a 40-hour work week. This would certainly appeal to those who wanted time for both work and personal obligations. Wadsworth and Facer (2016) found that government agencies that support family-friendly policies are “important components of creating a healthy work environment and are positively related to work outcomes for public
employees and organizations” (p. 1). Cloninger (2017) echoed this, by noting that it was critical for “women to be able to hold space in both work and family spheres” (p. 108).

In Chapter Two, the concept of gendered organizations within government institutions was explored. Gendered organizations are based on the research by Stivers (2002) that claimed it is more likely for women to be advanced to leadership in feminine agencies. The concept of women being in leadership positions feminine agencies was substantiated by this research. Of the nine women interviewed, six worked for agencies that would be classified by Stivers (2002) as gender appropriate or feminine. As Em pointed out, “We’re within Human Services and we are also with youth, and so females seem to be more attracted to working with young people.”

Admittedly, this study has a very small sample size; nevertheless, for this research gender was substantiated as influencing the way government organizations are lead (Glass & Cook, 2016; Hamidullah et al., 2015; Sabharwal, 2013; Saidel & Loscocco, 2005; Stivers, 2002). This supports the traditional gendered organizations of government agencies where it is expected that women are more communal and thus it is acceptable for them to serve in positions in leadership that provide care for the elderly or youth (Caleo & Heilman, 2014; Koenig & Eagly, 2104).

Placing this within the context of a representative bureaucracy highlights the limited access organizations have to the social experiences of half of the community as they develop public policy. It also reduces access for both genders to women mentors and role models at the top.

In summary, as the women navigated their path to leadership, they showed a willingness to pursue career opportunities outside of their area of expertise, including accepting positions that may have been considered risky. They used challenging experiences as a way to further refine their leadership identity. Choosing a career in government was an intentional decision that allowed the women to either contribute to the community good, or have a more flexible schedule
to allow for both personal and work demands. Consistent with research, the women often were leaders in agencies considered feminine.

**Being a Leader**

The final superordinate theme in the leadership journey for these nine women was the first-hand experience of being a leader. Souba (2014) noted that being a leader is a first-person lived experience. Therefore, research that focuses on the lived experience of women provides “women administrators a chance to learn from other women’s work experiences while helping them make sense of their own lived realities” (Burnier, 2003, p. 52). Within the context of public organizations, understanding the lived experiences of women leaders is needed because “it matters that women be able to read about, listen to, and discuss other women’s lives and experiences” (Burnier, 2003, p. 52). By listening to their stories as told in their own voice, the lived experience emerged of what it was like being both a leader and a woman.

Research has shown that women experience leadership differently than men (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Storberg-Walker & Haber-Curran, 2017). Social role theory and role congruity theory have been used to explain how bias and prejudice create a different work environment for women because of the dissonance their presence creates when they assume leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hoyt, 2014; Roman, 2015; Seo et al., 2017; Streets & Nguyen, 2014). While it is frequently used to explain why women are held back and are unable to advance (Eagly & Karau, 2002), in this research role congruity theory was useful in understanding the biases experienced by women who had successfully achieved a top leadership position that they attributed to their gender.

The contextual dynamics of experiences and the work environment played a vital role in how the women saw themselves as a leader. Accepting the title and responsibility of being a
leader did not guarantee the women embraced their self-identity as a leader. Instead, it was a gradual process and involved each woman identifying the values that were important to her and incorporating those values into her own leadership style.

Context often meant navigating subtle biases related to being a woman. Although they had achieved a top leadership position, the women shared examples of social exclusion from men, often in the form of being ignored or forgotten, or watching the credit for their ideas or work be given to men. There was simply no getting around it—for the women in this research their gender mattered.

Embedded throughout their leadership journeys were examples of how being a woman influenced workplace interactions, which supported research that women in administrative leadership continue to experience environments of gender bias despite the rules and regulations meant to address it (Alkadry & Tower, 2014; Smith, 2014). While the bias may have been less overt due to the increased legislation, the cumulative effect of the subtle messaging that they did not belong impacted the way women experienced career advancement to leadership and reinforced that the phrase ‘a woman’s place’ may not be as outdated as one would hope (Hamidullah et al., 2015).

The women watched as recognition for their work was given to their male peers or as they experienced social exclusion by being sidelined or forgotten. They experienced having their ideas initially ignored, only to have men then offer the same idea and get the credit and even accolades for their contributions. This has been referred to by some as the “stolen idea” phenomena, or the “butterfly syndrome” where an idea sits on the table as a caterpillar until a man picks it up and turns it into a butterfly (Williams & Dempsey, 2017, p. xvi). The struggle these women experienced to be heard and acknowledged was not a unique experience, with other
research documenting similar results (Burnier, 2003; Faulkner, 2015; Gillian, 1982; Soklaridis et al., 2017; Storberg-Walker & Haber-Curran, 2017). Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned intentionally developing a support network with other women in similar executive leadership positions in the organization, which could provide an opportunity to confirm whether others were experiencing similar dynamics and if so, how to initiate a change in the culture.

Instead, to counter biased behaviors, the women focused on proving themselves by working harder and being better than their male peers (Hoyt & Simon, 2017). This was the experience of Gretchen who shared, “I just think women have to work harder than men…and then bump it up a notch because if you’re really, really good at what you do…then they can’t live without you.” This echoed the research that addressed gendered social norms, where women leaders have to navigate an organizational culture where their contributions are ignored and minimized (Greer, 2015; Hoyt, 2014; Kossek et al., 2017; Powell, 2014; Streets & Nguyen, 2014; Wilkinson & Blackmore, 2008).

Research has documented that over time, this systematically chips away at one’s self-confidence (Sabharwal, 2013; Soklaridis et al., 2017). These subtle but insidious forms of social exclusion possibly contributed to the women questioning their skills and explained why the women were at times reluctant to take risks and apply for positions where they felt they did not meet all qualifications. Despite experiencing gender biases or subtle messaging that they did not belong, these women were persistent and navigated around or through these gendered social cues to become successful leaders.

It should be noted, however, that when additional effort is rewarded with being ignored or forgotten, it should come as no surprise that women experience leadership as “more stressful, have lower career longevity and satisfaction, and receive less recognition compared to men”
While persistence and resilience can mitigate the cumulative impact of having to prove oneself, over time the consequence of constantly feeling the need to work harder and repeatedly prove oneself can be exhausting and result in overall job dissatisfaction (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997; Steel, 2010; Williams & Dempsey, 2017).

Hoyt & Simon (2017) explored the influence other important belief systems can have on reinforcing or undermining gender bias in leadership. Extending their research, a religious culture can influence gendered social expectations and reinforce gender bias that restricts access for women to leadership opportunities. Within the context of this research, women of all ages within the state of Utah are directly or indirectly influenced by the LDS religion that advocates a social culture where women are discouraged from working outside of the home or taking active leadership roles in the business and government organizations (IWPR, 2001; Madsen, January 2015).

Going against these gendered social norms can have real consequences. As mentioned previously, “when an individual dares to step into areas of non-conformity, the rewards must be carefully measured against the costs” (Thackeray, 2016, p. 24). For the unprepared or unsupported, the subtle cues embedded in gender bias can be enough to discourage one from even trying.

As women in this study encountered gender biases, they showed resilience by adapting to their environment and adopting strategies that minimized or avoided conflict. Ayman and Korabik (2010) refer to this as a contingent leadership style and have found it to be effective for leaders navigating difficult cultural environments. Unfortunately, adopting such strategy is only a short-term solution and does not provide an opportunity for an organization to address a culture change that may be needed to create a work environment that embraces women in leadership.

It was interesting to note that the women did not use their positional power to bring attention to or actively change the gender bias embedded within the organizational culture. This is not uncommon. In fact, Soklaridis et al. (2017) found that while women may be frustrated with being overlooked or underestimated, they “have come to the conclusion that this is ‘the way it is’ in our current society, and that as women, we need to adapt and not dwell on things that are not going to change” (p. 261).

Although this research focused on those who succeeded, there are most likely many examples of women who decided the social penalties were not worth the cost. This is particularly disconcerting when looking through the lens of representative bureaucracy. The silencing of women’s voices is in direct conflict with the goal of creating a public sphere where the social experiences and voices that represent the diversity of the community are to be welcomed. When women’s voices are silenced, due to deliberate or unintentional strategies of being ignored or forgotten, any effort to further the ideal of a representative bureaucracy is stunted.

**Conclusion**

The research question guiding this study was, “How do women describe their experience ascending to an executive-level leadership position within the government of Utah?” The answer to this question was found by listening to the way these women made meaning of their leadership journey. Embedded in their life experiences were stories of being resilient and pursuing advancement opportunities where they could be found, all while trying to maintain a position of visibility where their voices could be heard and acknowledged. As the women shared
their truth as they experienced it, they offered examples of challenges and successes that were significant to them that had helped them craft narratives and make meaning of what being a leader meant to them.

Each of the three findings were supported by the research literature; however, due to the focus of this study being on women who had achieved a leadership position, research that emphasized the inability of women to advance was not as relevant. Instead, the findings focused on strategies the women found useful in their path to leadership. For these nine women, their leadership journey required persistence and resilience, particularly in the face of subtle sexism and gender bias. They relied on personal fortitude and political savvy to navigate through or around detractors, bullies, and jerks, which highlighted the dual role of men in their experiences.

While men were often part of the problem, they were certainly part of the solution. The men who supported women having equal opportunities to lead and helped them prepare to be successful were an invaluable source of support. The women were aware of and appreciated how these men intentionally used their political and positional power to expand the opportunities for them to advance to the upper echelons of government.

The research reinforced that at least for women in Utah government, the metaphor of a ladder to describe career advancement is outdated. Providing a different metaphor, such as a career labyrinth, helped manage expectations and gave permission for these women to focus on using their strengths to determine when and where to work. Simply stated, the constant upward progression was an unrealistic expectation that, quite frankly, was no longer applicable.

In conclusion, women who had first-hand experience of advancing to a top leader position within a government organization were the ones who best understood the challenges and demands that had to be faced. There was no map or guidebook for these women to rely on to
navigate their leadership journey. None of the women implied their leadership journey was easy or smooth, yet each had found a way to successfully navigate a path to the top. The next section offers recommendations for practice which are intended to support both women who are interested in pursuing a position of leadership as well as government organizations that support more women in top leadership roles.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Although not every woman wants to be a leader, those who do should be given the chance. Based on the findings of this study and the research literature, there are implications for women and men to understand the leadership pathways women navigate. While the experiences of the women involved in this research were situated within a government organization in the state of Utah, the findings may be useful in other government settings to mitigate some of the contextual factors that can negatively impact women’s pathway to leadership. The intent of this section is to offer grounded and informed recommendations that can support the advancement of women to leadership positions within the public sector. Also included are specific actions that I can take to share the recommendations of this research.

The first recommendation for women is to take to heart the benefit of having people “in their corner” who can support their leadership journey. There is considerable benefit of having a support network in one’s personal life and in a professional setting. Whether it be friends, family members, role models, sponsors, mentors, champions, or an executive coach, the main goal is finding strength by having a network of support with individuals who can augment the learning and development process and offer encouragement when having to navigate frustrations or setbacks. This includes intentionally reaching out and creating relationships with other women leaders in the organization who could provide support and encouragement. Such relationships
would offer an opportunity to explore similarity in experiences and help determine how to best create awareness or effect change in the organizational culture.

A second recommendation for women is to be aware of the leadership stories of women who have come before them. Being aware of the challenges or barriers other women have faced can help women manage expectations and not be caught off-guard, particularly when they encounter gender bias. Learning from the experiences of others can also help clarify for women what to ask for as they are promoted. For example, they may want to specifically request leadership training opportunities or access to an executive coach to help reinforce their leadership identity.

On a personal level, I can help women become more aware of the importance of a support network through a number of specific actions. At the most basic level, I can play the role of a support network by being a mentor and role model to the women and men with whom I work and sharing with them my own leadership journey as well as the stories of other women leaders. I can talk to colleagues and friends who are leaders within the organization and encourage them to be more intentional in mentoring women and be deliberate in recognizing the contributions of women in our organization.

Anyone participating in a meeting who witnesses the “butterfly syndrome” can mitigate the effect of someone taking credit for another’s idea by calling attention to the person who originated the idea and allowing them to receive recognition for their contributions. Men and women alike can pay attention to those who are included in recognition events or activities and ensure that those who should be included have a seat on the dais. I can personally create awareness of this dynamic within my own sphere of influence by modeling it and recognizing
the person who originally offered idea. I can share this strategy with colleagues and peers and ask for their help to ensure credit is given where due.

For organizations, there are also recommendations for practice. The first is to become aware of the barriers and challenges women face through subtle bias. Intentional action can be taken to counter the effect of gender-based sexism and promote an environment that does not silence or marginalize the contributions of women. As an organization becomes aware that women frequently experience social exclusion in the workplace by being ignored or forgotten, intentional actions can be taken to reinforce equal recognition and participation. One example is ensuring equal representation from men and women on hiring panels.

With this in mind, organizations can also decide to become more intentional in their leadership development and training efforts. Although there may be leadership training available on-line, it would be more advantageous to work with the human resources section to strategically identify the leadership skills that are valued in the organization and develop leadership academies such as the one Em created that can serve as a place to encourage dialogue and create relationships while reinforcing a standard expectation of leadership skills. Another option could be to identify formal leadership development opportunities for those in top executive positions (i.e., Harvard Business School) and either pay for the trainings outright or offer to tuition reimbursement as a method to pay for the training.

When considering how I can assist in sharing the recommendations of this research at an organizational level, one strategy I can implement is to share the results with the human resources department of the research site and assist in developing and presenting curriculum that can be incorporated into manager and leadership trainings within the organization. I can also share with the human resources department of my own organization the recommendations of this
research so they can have a heightened awareness of the subtle gender biases women experience on their path to leadership and identify strategies to ensure women are given credit for and recognized for their contributions.

Research has pointed out the benefits of women having access to women-only leadership trainings, particularly when the conversations are with those who are in a similar position (Madsen, 2008). Several years ago, I started a Women’s Leadership Forum within my own organization to support intentional conversations around the development of women as leaders. I could share my findings in that venue and encourage women to create a support network while also being a part of other women’s support networks. I could offer to the research site the framework and curriculum for the Women’s Leadership Forum that would incorporate the findings of this research. Sharing the value of women-only leadership trainings with other government organizations and assisting with creating curriculum that addresses their specific organizational culture could be a valuable tool and support efforts to recruit and retain female leadership talent.

Being in a formal leadership role brings with it many expectations and demands. One of those expectations is preparing and developing the next generation of leaders. Organizations can play a more pro-active role in formalizing the expectation that those in leadership should mentor both women and men in the organization. Creating relationships of trust where leaders can share how decisions were made, or process stories of successes as well as failures, can be a powerful learning and development activity for those who hope to advance. Organizations can articulate and reinforce that expectation by providing formal training on how to successfully mentor others.

It becomes a powerful message when those in top leadership model the expectation of formal and informal mentoring of both genders; however, this may require open dialogue about
concerns related to gender. Such conversations can be respectfully addressed and include brainstorming for options that allow equal opportunities for both women and men. This can include discussions around representative bureaucracy and the philosophical and practical benefits of having a diverse workforce at all levels of the organization.

As leadership in government organizations are made more aware of the gender dynamics that women face in the work environment, there can be an intentional commitment to create a tipping point with women in leadership. Given the ‘silver tsunami’ that is expected to impact government organizations, it behooves all who are committed to public service to ensure those who follow have the skills to succeed. Having more women at the top provides women in the proverbial pipeline with someone to talk to help navigate gender-related obstacles and provide visibility and could increase the retention of high-potential women.

Finally, one of the most impactful actions an organization can do is recognize and point to the leadership that the women contribute. This is a subtle yet powerful way to interrupt gender bias and shift social expectations regarding women as leaders. A specific strategy is to nominate women for awards and recognition can ensure that their work is considered alongside that of men.

Actions I can take at a more global level is to share the findings of this research through appropriate academic and practitioner venues. For example, I can share the findings at a monthly meeting of the local American Society of Public Administrators (ASPA) organization and encourage a candid conversation about the current state of our organizational cultures and how they influence the advancement of women within public organizations. I could work with local universities and share my research with faculty who teach in the Masters of Public Administration programs and ask for opportunities to share my findings with students who are
learning about working in a public organization. I can also submit material to be published in newsletters as well as academic journals. Finally, I can submit proposals to participate in national conferences that focus on women leadership development and public leadership.

Removing the invisibility cloak for women in leadership allows young girls and young women to see more women in top leadership and provides role models to which they can aspire. As women in positions of power become normalized, a powerful message is also sent to young boys and young men that women’s contributions are respected and valued. When government organizations acknowledge the contributions of women, it challenges the assumptions that have linked leadership with men with real life examples of the strong and brave women who have provided leadership to organizations and have given powerful contributions to the community.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the conclusions and recommendations for practice, several opportunities for future research were identified. The first group of recommendations relate to research focused on government organizations. One area could be to conduct a similar study with other levels of government organizations within the state of Utah to see if the experiences of the women at the state level are similar or different from the experiences of women at within counties, municipalities, and special districts. This could be strengthened by incorporating an additional element of exploring the intersectionality of leadership with gender and other identities, such as race, age, sexual orientation, etc. Finally, it would be beneficial to conduct research exploring the concept of representative bureaucracy within government organizations and identify useful strategies to further advance diversity throughout the government’s workforce.

Another potential focus for future research relates to leadership training and development. One possible topic would be to identify those government organizations that have
intentionally created leadership development designed specifically for women to determine whether the women felt the training supported their career advancement. While the women in this study acknowledged their education as supporting their leadership efforts, only one woman offered that the organization helped pay for it. Future research could also explore whether government organizations offer tuition reimbursement as a benefit and if so, does it play a role in supporting the retention and advancement of women.

A final group of recommendations for future research relate to the role of men in government organizations. Additional research could explore the experience of men who were mentors to women leaders to learn more about their philosophy of supporting women as they advance in their career. It could be informative to learn whether these men had witnessed sexist behaviors from their peers and how they decided to deal with those behaviors. Another possibility would be to conduct a similar study where the focus was learning about the leadership journeys of men to compare what their experiences were like and how they were similar or different from those of women. It would be particularly interesting to learn from men who worked for women leaders to see how that experience informed or changed their perceptions on women’s ability to lead and if it influenced the way they supported other women to advance.

While this research has helped to create or expand awareness on the experiences women in Utah state government face on their leadership journey, it has underscored the need for additional action. Recent national discussions have certainly created a heightened awareness on the importance of listening to the voices and experiences of women. Perhaps through continued efforts there will be a time in the not so distant future where the phrase ‘a woman’s place’ will no longer haunt the experience of women leaders within government organizations.
April 18, 2017

Dear [State Director, Department of Human Resources],

My name is April Townsend and I am a graduate student at Northeastern University’s Doctorate of Education program. I am in the early stages of my dissertation research on women who have advanced to executive-level leadership positions while working for the State of Utah. I am writing to request your permission to contact potential participants for this research.

To provide a bit more context, the purpose of this research is to explore and understand the leadership journey of women in government. I am interested in exploring women’s career paths to leadership and the advancement strategies perceived to support their career progression. I am also interested in learning of any role women may see themselves playing in advocating for other women to advance to leadership positions. My goal is to better understand what strategies women and government organizations could intentionally incorporate to support women in their leadership journey.

I would like to interview 8-10 women who work for the State of Utah and are in top-level leadership positions to learn more about their leadership journey. With your permission, I would contact potential participants via email to invite them to participate for an interview. The interviews would take place during the spring/summer and would be conducted at a time and location that is convenient to the participant. I have attached the email I would send to potential participants as well as the informed consent form I would ask participants to sign. It is important for you to note that all of my research is under the supervision of Dr. Randell E. Trammell, a faculty member of Northeastern University, serving as Principal Investigator.

I’d like to will follow up with a telephone call in the next week to discuss any questions you may have or any additional information you may need from me to obtain permission to interview State of Utah employees. If you have any questions about this research, you are welcome to contact me at townsend.a@husky.neu.edu or at XXX-XXX-XXXX. Additionally, you may reach out to Dr. Randell E. Trammell at r.trammell@northeastern.edu, or at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Thank you for considering this request.

Best regards,

April Townsend

Attachments: Participant Introductory Email
Informed Consent Document
Appendix B
Introductory Participant Email

Dear [Female Leader in State of Utah],

My name is April Townsend and I am a graduate student in Northeastern University’s Doctorate of Education program in Boston, Massachusetts. I am currently working on my dissertation thesis on women who have advanced to executive-level leadership positions within the State of Utah.

The purpose of this research is to understand the leadership journey of women who are executive leaders in Utah state government. My goal is to better understand what strategies women and government organizations could intentionally incorporate to support women in their leadership journey.

As part of this research, I plan to interview 8-10 women who are in top-level leadership positions in Utah State government. You have been identified as a possible participant for this research because you are a woman who has advanced to a top-leadership position in the State of Utah. I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

If you choose to participate, you will have three interactions with me. First, I will email you a brief background survey that will ask a few questions about your background and your career progression. To protect your identity, I will ask you to select a pseudonym that will be used throughout the course of the research. The email will also include a consent form that clearly identifies what you are agreeing to. If you agree to participate, I would ask you to sign and return the consent form and background survey. At any point, you are welcome to ask any questions you may have about the process.

The second interaction would be scheduled after receiving your signed consent form and completed questionnaire. For this interaction, I would like to arrange a time and location convenient for you to meet face-to-face for approximately 45-60 minutes. This meeting will be an interview to talk more in-depth about your experiences of advancing to a top leadership position. With your permission, I would like to audio record our discussion so I can accurately reflect and capture what is discussed. During the interview, I will be collecting personal observations of verbal and non-verbal communications to capture information that would be lost in the transcription process. I will be using a professional transcription service to transcribe the interview. I will be the only person to analyze the transcript and I will use the pseudonym you select throughout the entire process to protect your identity.
For the third and final interaction, I will provide you with the transcript of our interview. You will have the opportunity to review a copy of the transcript to determine whether I captured the intention and meaning of your thoughts and feelings during the interview, as well as clarify any inaccuracies or points of confusion. You will also have the opportunity at that time to share any additional information. For this interaction, you can choose to meet in person or it can take place using email. The total time expected for these interactions is approximately two hours.

Again, your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, or decide to withdraw at any time, you may do so without any consequences. To withdraw from the research, you can call or email me and I will remove you from the study.

It is important for you to note that all of my research is under the supervision of Dr. Randell E. Trammell, a faculty member of Northeastern University, serving as Principal Investigator. I am happy to answer any questions you have related to this process. Additionally, you may reach out to Dr. Randell E. Trammell at r.trammell@northeastern.edu, or at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Thank you for considering this invitation to participate. Please let me know if you are interested. You can contact me at townsend.a@husky.neu.edu or at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Sincerely,

April Townsend
Appendix C
Participant Background Survey

Thank you for considering the invitation to participate in this research which focuses on women leaders within the State of Utah. I’d like to ask you just a few questions about your work and leadership experience as well as ask you some demographic information. This background survey should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

1. Please select a pseudonym that you would like to be used to identify and quote you throughout this research: ___________________________

2. What is your current title? _________________________

3. How many years have you worked in a government organization?
   a. 0-5 years
   b. 6-10 years
   c. 11-15 years
   d. 16-20 years
   e. More than 20 years

4. How long have you been in a leadership position?
   a. 0-5 years
   b. 6-10 years
   c. 11-15 years
   d. 16-20 years
   e. More than 20 years

5. How long have you been in your current position?
   a. 0-5 years
   b. 6-10 years
   c. 11-15 years
   d. 16-20 years
   e. More than 20 years

6. How long have you lived in Utah?
   a. 1-5 years
   b. 6-10 years
   c. over 10 years
   d. over 10 years, because I was born and raised in Utah

7. What is your age range?
   a. 20-29 years old
   b. 30-39 years old
   c. 40-49 years old
   d. 50-59 years old
e. 60-69 years old  
f. More than 70 years old

8. What is the highest degree or education level you have attained?  
   a. Bachelor’s degree  
   b. Master’s degree  
   c. Doctoral degree

9. What race/ethnicity do you identify with:  
   a. White  
   b. Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish  
   c. Black or African American  
   d. American Indian and Alaska Native  
   e. Asian  
   f. Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander  
   g. Two or more races  
   h. Some other race

10. What is the number of staff you oversee?  
    a. Less than 50  
    b. 50-99  
    c. 100-249  
    d. 250-499  
    e. 500-999  
    f. 1,000-1,499  
    g. 1,500-2,000  
    h. More than 2,000

11. On a scale of 1-5, with 1 = mostly female employees, 3 = an even mix of female/male employees and 5 = mostly male employees, how would you describe the gender diversity:  
    (1 = mostly female; 3 = even mix; 5 = mostly male)

   Of supervisors you’ve had during your career at the State of Utah  1 2 3 4 5
   The current ratio of leadership in your department  1 2 3 4 5
   The staff you supervise  1 2 3 4 5

11. On a scale of 1-5 with 1 = very rarely and 5 = very often, do you do the following:  
    (1 = very rarely; 3 = rarely; 5 = very often)

   Determine priorities for the organization  1 2 3 4 5
   Provide policy ideas that are implemented  1 2 3 4 5
   Make high level budgetary decisions  1 2 3 4 5
   Make or considerably influence senior level hiring decisions  1 2 3 4 5
   Make or considerably influence mid-level hiring decisions  1 2 3 4 5
   Identify and strongly recruit women for senior level positions  1 2 3 4 5
   Identify and strongly recruit women for mid-level positions  1 2 3 4 5
12. On a scale of 1-5 with 1=never and 5=very often, have you felt left out of a decision, activity, promotion or event by your male counterparts? (1=never; 3=sometimes; 5=very often)

1 2 3 4 5

13. What is the preferred email and phone you would like for me to use when contacting you?
   Email: ______________________
   Phone: ______________________
Appendix D
Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Investigator Name:  Principal Investigator - Dr. Randell Trammel
Student Researcher - April Townsend

Title of Project:  ‘A Woman’s Place’: Exploring the Leadership Journeys of Women in Government Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

I am inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study and I will also review it with you in-person if you decide to participate. At any point, you may ask me any questions that you have. When you are ready to decide, you can contact me and let me know if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, I will ask you to sign this statement and will provide you with a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

Women who are in top-level leadership positions within the State of Utah government are being invited to participate in this study. The experiences of 8-10 women will be collected through individual interviews to understand their leadership journey. This will include exploring a variety of perspectives to identify various paths women take to leadership. The main criteria for inclusion for this research are women in top-level leadership positions who work for the State of Utah government. Age, ethnicity/race, socio-economic status, education, and health will not determine or limit inclusion in this study. However, some demographic information will be collected and used to describe the group of participants. I will also take field notes as part of this study.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore the career progression to leadership for women who work in government organizations. The research will explore women’s perspectives of their path to leadership. The specific site for this research is the State of Utah government.

What will I be asked to do?

As the researcher, I will be looking for you to participate in the following ways:
1. Complete a brief questionnaire about your background and your career progression.
2. Identify a pseudonym to be used throughout the course of the research.
3. Participate in an audio-recorded 45-60 minute face-to-face, in-depth interview to talk about your experiences of advancing to a top leadership position.
4. Participate in a member-check process to verify the interview transcript and the interpretation of the interview.

**Where will this take place and how much time will it take?**

Completing the background questionnaire will take approximately 10-15 minutes. Individual interviews will take approximately 45-60 minutes. The interviews will take place at a time and location that is mutually agreed upon between each participant and myself.

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

There are no known significant risks involved in being a participant in this study.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There are no direct benefits for your participation in the study. However, the information learned from the study may provide valuable insights to government organizations on effective methods to support women’s progression to leadership positions. Your participation and experiences could potentially assist in identifying strategies that may benefit other women who want to advance to leadership.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your participation in the study will be completely confidential. All participants will be asked to identify a pseudonym that will be used throughout the research process and the agency you work in will not be identified. As the researcher, only I will be aware of each participant’s identity. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way.

The data collected for this study, including audiotapes, will be kept by me and will not be shared with others. All audiotapes will be destroyed following the completion of the research. In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. I would only permit people authorized by organizations such as Northeastern University to view the study data.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**

You are not required to take part in this study. If you do not want to participate, you do not have to sign this form.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

There are no known significant risks involved in being a participant in this study.
**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your participation or non-participation will in no way affect other relationships. You may discontinue your participation in this research program at any time without penalty or cost.

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

You can contact me (April Townsend) at townsend.a@husky.neu.edu, or by calling XXX-XXX-XXXX or my advisor, Dr. Randell Trammell at r.trammell@northeastern.edu, or by calling XXX-XXX-XXXX.

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

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator, Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Boston, MA 0211; Phone: 617.390.3450; or Email: k.skophammer@northeastern.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

There is no compensation for participation in this study.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

There is no cost to participate in this study.

**I agree to take part in this research.**

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<th>Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent</th>
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Appendix E
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Time of interview:
Date:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of women who are under-represented as executive leaders in Utah State government. Data collection will include individual interviews lasting 45-60 minutes with women who currently or have previously been a top-level leader within the State of Utah.

**Part I: Objective** - Build rapport, describe the study, and answer any questions. The researcher will review the Informed Consent Document and provide a copy of the signed document previously submitted to the researcher.

> Thank you for being willing to participate in this research. You have been invited to participate because you have been identified as a woman who holds a top-level leadership position in Utah State government. My research focuses on the exploring women’s career paths to leadership. As a result of this research, I hope to better understand what strategies government organizations could intentionally incorporate to support women in their leadership journey.

> Because your responses are important and I want to make sure I capture our conversation accurately, I’d like your permission to audio record this meeting. I will also be taking some written notes during the interview. Is this acceptable to you? *(If the participant agrees, thank the participant and initiate recording).*

> I assure you that all your responses will be kept confidential. I will only use the pseudonym you selected to identify you or quote anything that you share. I will be transcribing the audio recording, so no one else will hear our conversation.

> Before we get started, do you have any questions for me about the interview process, the Informed Consent Document or the purpose of this research? I expect that this interview will last 45-60 minutes. Are you ready to begin?
Part II: Objective - Ask the participant to share her leadership journey experiences in her own words, including her perception of those experiences.

I would like to hear about your leadership journey in your own words. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about key career experiences you have had while working in a government organization.

1. You indicate that you have worked for government for XX years. What drew you to public service?

2. How did your leadership journey begin?

3. Can you share an example of a time when you felt supported in your efforts to advance? Who supported you most? What about a time when you didn’t feel supported? What was that like for you?

4. Has there been a time when you have used your role to support or help others? Could you tell me more about that?

5. Can you share a story or an experience about a challenge you have faced? (Prompt: Is there another example you’d like to share?)

6. How do you feel you have changed as a leader? Has being in an executive-level position made a difference in how you see yourself? What about the way you feel other people see you?

7. What advice would you give to women who are interested in a leadership position in this organization?

Part III: Objective - Conclude the interview. Thank the participant for her time and provide another opportunity to add to the previous discussion or answer any questions she may have as a result of the interview.

Those are all the questions that I have. Before we wrap up, is there anything else you would like to add? Do you have any questions for me?

Again, thank you for being willing to participate in this research study. I will email you once I have the transcript and narrative ready for your review. At that time, you can let me know if you would prefer to meet in person or provide your feedback via email.
References


Worth, N. (2016). Who we are at work: Millennial women, everyday inequalities and insecure work. *Gender, Place & Culture, 23*(9), 1302-1314.