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Women Perceive Barriers to Corporate Advancement as Self-imposed

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The purpose of this study is to address a disconnect between women's perceptions of their advancement potential / barriers to success in upper echelon corporate roles and their actual level of representation within such roles in companies in the S&P 500. This study involves the use of semi-structured phone interviews with 13 women in an organization in the S&P 500, who have been identified by organizational leadership as having high advancement potential. The results are evaluated using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to ensure an understanding of respondents' experiences and perceptions in connection with their own process of meaning-making. In the findings, the participants' responses indicate a disconnect between primarily positive perceptions on advancement opportunities for women, low levels of gender bias, and diversity initiatives and the actual outcomes regarding numbers of women in top leadership roles. Further, participants consistently espouse a strong sense of personal responsibility and a perception that barriers they encounter are self-imposed. This is consistent with an overall institutional narrative that organizational initiatives have mitigated the problem of women's barriers to advancement in the corporate pipeline, which serves to reinforce the illusion of an equitable and effective meritocracy. By drawing on a phenomenological research design and prioritizing the experiences and perceptions of women on the edge of advancement into upper echelon corporate roles, it becomes evident that corporate narratives and diversity initiatives may be serving to reinforce, rather than ameliorate, the status quo of gender disparity in Corporate America. Both scholars and institutional stakeholders can build on the results of this study to move toward improving the corporate pipeline for women's advancement to executive-level roles.

Keywords: gender, women's advancement, corporate pipeline, stereotypic attribution bias

Despite improvements to women's overall representation in Corporate America, they remain underrepresented in the highest echelons of organizations. Similarly, women's career advancement progress often stalls at a middle-management level, and they are more likely than men to exit high-level leadership roles (Carter & Silva, 2010; Catalyst, 2011, Soares, Lebow, Wojnas, & Regis, 2011; Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019). Indeed, although women represent 57% of the overall workforce and approximately 46% of management, they are underrepresented in the upper echelons of organizations with women representing approximately 15% of Fortune 500 executive officers, 11% of corporate top earners, 21% in board seats, and only 5.2% in the role of CEO (Catalyst, 2017). In addition to this issue—which clearly constitutes a broken pipeline in terms of women's advancement to the executive level, top earner positions—many women report feeling that, given the prevalence of an extreme work culture and institutional advancement initiatives, any barriers they face are self-imposed (DeSimone, 2020; Harris, 2017; Hewlett & Luce, 2007; Thornton, 2016).

Harris (2017) and Sandler (2014) studies confirmed that negative self-limiting ideologies prevent women from appreciating their full professional advancement potential. DeSimone's (2020) study of Fortune 500 female leaders found that when asked about barriers to advancement, a predominant self-responsibility, sense of career ownership narrative was prevalent. The attitude that women themselves are responsible for their stalled career progress dovetails with similar issues, including stereotypic attribution bias perpetuating an unhealthy professional pipeline for women in corporate careers in the United States.

As of June 2019, only 25 women (5%) were serving as CEOs of Fortune 500 companies (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019; Catalyst, 2019a). Women also represent 11.0% of top earners, 21.2% of board seat holders, and 26.5% of executive/senior-level officials and managers (Catalyst, 2019b). Conversely, women made up 46.9% of the overall U.S. labor force in 2018, up from around 16% in the 1970s and 26% in the 1980s (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). This is despite research that shows

companies benefit in tangible ways from having more women on the top-management teams (Lyngsie & Foss, 2017),

Lyngsie and Foss's (2017) study found that companies benefit from having more women on the top-management team whereby more women are associated with more entrepreneurial outcomes including more products and services are profitably launched. More notable than women's lack of upper echelon representation, however, is the fact that narratives in Corporate America, alongside the prevalence of diversity initiatives, propagate an assumption that organizations are functioning as effective meritocracies (Burke & Major, 2014; Pape, 2020). Burke and Major (2014) challenged the legitimacy of meritocracy in male-typed domains where gender stereotypes create limitations for woman in roles that are "...the most prestigious, high-paying and sought after (p. 217). This illusion of effective and equitable advancement opportunities for women often leaves them feeling as if their failure to advance can only be attributed to internal, rather than external, factors (DeSimone, 2020).

Many researchers note a host of structural and institutional obstacles that serve to stifle women's professional advancement. (Burke & Major, 2014; Heilman, 2012; D Hentschel, Heilman, & Peus, 2019; Matsa & Miller, 2013). Scholars contend that male-dominated work culture and the extreme work model at the executive level plays a major role in creating a lack of fit feeling for women who then see their lack of advancement as self-imposed (Burke & Major, 2014; DeSimone, 2020, Ezzedeen, Budworth & Baker, 2015; Heilman, 2012; Hewlett & Luce, 2007).

Numerous external push and internal pull variables have been identified in the literature as correlating with women's workforce exit and lack of advancement. Push variables are those external, social, and organizational variables that most commonly emerge in the research correlated with pushing women out of the workforce or clogging the advancement pipeline for highly qualified women. Pull variables are those internal, personal variables emerging in the research and literature that pull women away from attaining their professional potentials such as delaying promotion or slow tracking for motherhood, work-life balance, and lack of desire for power.

The most frequent external variables identified in the literature as being associated with pushing women out of the workforce or derailing women's advancement include lack of mentoring and sponsorship (Hom, Roberson, & Ellis, 2008; Meyers, 2015; McDonald & Westphal, 2013); exclusion from informal networks (Cook & Glass, 2014; Fain, 2011; Kulich, Lorenzi-Cioldi, Iacoviello, Faniko, & Ryan, 2015), lack of flexibility (Klettner, Clarke, & Boersma, 2016; Waumsley, & Houston, 2009; Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013), motherhood penalties (England, Bearak, Budig, & Hodges, 2016; Kmec, Huffman, & Penner, 2013; Kricheli-Katz, 2012; Stone, & Hernandez, 2013), gender stereotyping (Burke & Major, 2013; Branson, Chen, & Redenbaugh 2013; Heilman, 2012), the male-centered work ethos (Cabrera, 2009; Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Gregory, 2016; Kelly, Ammons, Chermack, & Moen, 2010;

Widera, Chang & Chen, 2010) and the glass ceiling (Cook & Glass, 2014; Fain, 2011; Kulich et al., 2015; Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Sabharwal, 2013) which represents the unseen and unreachable barriers that inhibit women and minorities from rising to the highest corporate levels regardless of their qualifications or achievements.

The most frequent internal pull variables in the literature correlated with women's exit from the workforce or advancement derailment include opting-out or slow-tracking related to motherhood (Belkin, 2003; Grether, & Wiese, 2016; & Sealy, 2017) work-life balance or conflict (Deery, & Jago, 2015; Catalyst, 2015; Williams, & Dolkas, 2012;) and lack of desire for promotion or low desire for power (Paxton & Hughes, 2016; Schuh, Bark, Van Quaquebeke, Hossiep, Frieg, & Van Dick, 2014).

Whereas there is extensive research identifying variables associated with women's barriers in the workplace, what has been examined less closely is an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of highly educated and qualified women on the verge of achieving the highest levels of corporate leadership. More specifically, further research is required in terms of women's perceptions and attributions of the barriers they encounter while working in traditionally male-dominated corporate roles. To address this lacuna, the purpose of this phenomenological study is to ascertain women's perceptions and lived experiences concerning their potential for advancement in the corporate pipeline, their organizations' diversity initiatives, and the existence or nonexistence of a functioning meritocracy. After providing a literature review including extant research on variables that influence women's workforce decision making and stereotypic attribution bias, this article includes the methodology of the present study, presents results concerning women's perspectives on self-imposed barriers, and offers recommendations for institutional implications and avenues for future research.

Literature Review

Extensive extant research has addressed negative consequences resulting from the fact that highly qualified women, identified as high potential earners, continue to lag their male counterparts in advancement, compensation, and career satisfaction at every stage of their careers (Carter & Silva, 2010; Fortin, 2015). As noted, the research indicates a host of external push and internal pull variables have been identified in the literature as correlating with women's workforce exit and the broken pipeline from mid to top-level advancement. However, both institutional and scholarly narratives surrounding this broken pipeline contribute to women's tendency to perceive their inability to advance as self-imposed (Kim et al., 2018).

The most frequent internal pull variables in the literature correlated with women's exit from the workforce or advancement derailment include opting-out or slow-tracking related to motherhood (Belkin, 2003; Grether, & Wiese, 2016; Harman, & Sealy, 2017) work-life balance or conflict (Deery, &

Jago, 2015; Catalyst, 2015; Williams, & Dolkas, 2012;) and lack of desire for promotion or low desire for power (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Paxton & Hughes, 2016; Schuh, Bark, Van Quaquebeke, Hossiep, Frieg, & Van Dick, 2014). Historically, these pull variables have garnered a great deal of social traction (Williams & Dolkas, 2017) and are often the focus of the corporate, societal, and media narratives associated with women's lack of representation at the highest, top-earner levels. Harman and Sealy (2017) explained that these seemingly internal variables are the result of external, contextual factors, such as identity-fit barriers, lack of support, and work-life conflict. The pull or opt-out narrative fails to address the full complexity of the issue by placing the blame for women's lack of representation on the women themselves, while failing to address the many entrenched social and organizational barriers women encounter in male-typed domains (Burke & Major, 2014; Heilman, 2012; Matsa & Miller, 2013; Williams & Dempsey, 2014; Williams & Dolkas, 2017).

While explanations that attribute women's lack of advancement to internal factors like motherhood and work-life balance are prevalent in the media and in institutional narratives, many researchers have also focused on external variables that derail women's advancement, including lack of mentoring and sponsorship (Meyers, 2015); exclusion from informal networks (Cook & Glass, 2014); lack of flexibility (Waumsley & Houston, 2009); motherhood penalties (Kmec et al., 2013); gender stereotyping (Branson et al., 2013; Heilman, 2012); male-centered work ethos (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014); and the glass ceiling (Kulich et al., 2015; Sabharwal, 2013).

While such perspectives are useful, it is also important to avoid the creation of a false dichotomy and to consider the broken pipeline of women's advancement in Corporate America in a holistic manner that accounts for the complexity of the situation in relation to the presence of a well-entrenched extreme commitment "24/7" (Hewlett & Luce, 2007, p. 54) work culture (DeSimone, 2020; Hewlett & Luce, 2007; Thornton, 2016). For example, the understanding of motherhood as a pull variable runs contrary to the notion that the extreme work model forces this choice thereby rendering it a push variable. Indeed, failure to fully embrace this extreme work culture has often been interpreted as a pull variable, and women are consequently assumed to have a low desire for power or promotion (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Paxton & Hughes, 2016; Schuh et al., 2014). More in-depth, qualitative interpretations are necessary to challenge this potentially oversimplified interpretation.

The presence of androcentric bias, whereby men and masculine traits are viewed as the default, in corporate culture is also necessary to consider. Burke and Major (2014) contended that descriptive stereotyping results in negative expectations and evaluations of women's performance in male-typed domains. Foster (2017) noted that institutionalized androcentrism causes women to suffer gender-specific forms of status subordination. Heilman (2012) has found that "lack of fit" (p. 115) narratives perpetuate an organizational expectation that women are not

equipped for, or likely to attain, success in top leadership roles. The proportion of men in an organization influences the extent to which stereotypically male qualities and behaviors are valued, and that women represent such a low proportion top-earner, executive positions serve to normalize the attributes seen as necessary for success at the highest echelons as those which are stereotypically masculine (Burke & Major, 2014).

In a meta-analysis of gender stereotypes and bias, Koch, D'Mello, and Sackett. (2015) found that men were overwhelmingly preferred for male-dominated jobs—that is: those jobs historically held by men—and that male raters exhibited greater gender-role congruity bias than did female raters when evaluating women in male-typed job domains. Koch et al. (2015) and Burke and Major (2014) contended that the incongruence between stereotypical gender traits and the gender stereotype of a job results in increased gender bias, particularly in masculine-typed jobs.

Similarly, Williams and Dempsey (2014) addressed a pattern of language differences among men and women which create barriers to success; for example, women are described as *lucky* when positive outcomes result from their leadership (p. 29-30), whereas men with similar outcomes are described as *skilled* and highly competent (p. 29-30). This perpetuates the problem of an illusion of meritocracy that is flawed resulting in placing the blame for women's lack of representation at the highest echelons on the women themselves, failing to address culture, structures, and policies which result in male privilege in the workforce (Burke & Major, 2014). Therefore, understanding power and privilege is critical in examining the role of corporate culture as a barrier to women's perceptions of, and experience in, navigating the corporate pipeline to upper-level leadership roles.

These gendered stereotypes for achievement in upper-echelon leadership positions also influence the likelihood of potential top-earners to engage in positive or negative attribution patterns. Sekaquaptewa and Espinoza (2004) defined stereotypic explanatory bias as the tendency to spontaneously provide explanations for stereotype-inconsistent, but not stereotype-consistent, behaviors perpetuating bias. Thus, given the prevalence of women in middle-management as compared to upper echelon roles, it is more likely that individuals feel compelled to provide a spontaneous explanation for a woman's advancement to a CEO role than they would for her failure to advance through the corporate pipeline.

Similarly, LaCosse, Sekaquaptewa, and Bennet (2016) studied stereotypic attribution bias (SAB) within the context of the STEM field, defining the phenomenon as the tendency to spontaneously generate external reasons for men's setbacks as opposed to internal attributions for women's setbacks. LaCosse et al. (2016) conducted a longitudinal study to assess SAB over time with regard to the specific outcomes of perceived belonging in STEM and postgraduate intentions to stay in STEM and found that, when first tested, all participants, regardless of gender, showed a tendency to engage in SAB and that, among women, a

perceived negative environment increased women's tendency toward internal attribution.

Arguing the importance of stereotype threat in studies of organizational psychology, Casad and Bryant (2016) identified a gap in research within a workplace context and recommended further assessment of stereotyping and attendant issues in diversity and inclusion initiatives in workplace settings. While extant work has addressed issues concerning push and pull variables, the drives of an extreme work culture, and the potential explanatory and attributive effects of gendered stereotyping, notably absent in the literature is an in-depth, detailed understanding of the lived experience of highly qualified women on the verge of achieving success at the highest levels in corporate organizations and their relative experience navigating a gendered corporate workforce.

Methods

To address the gap in extant literature concerning women's lived experience and perceptions of external and internal barriers to their career advancement, this phenomenological study draws on the results of individual, semi-structured phone interviews with 13 participants from a company in the S&P 500. It employed two primary research questions: (a) What factors do women feel impact their career advancement? And (b) How do women feel about their leadership potential in the organization? A range of open-ended exploratory questions with additional prompting sub-questions was utilized as needed, enabling study participants to open up about their experiences, beliefs, and perceptions related to their corporate advancement opportunities. This methodology was appropriate for better understanding the lived experience of mid-level, corporate women navigating the Fortune 500 landscape. Creswell (2013) has illustrated that we conduct qualitative research "when we want to empower individuals to share their stories..." (p. 48).

Furthermore, Creswell (2013) described hermeneutical phenomenology as research oriented towards the lived experience of participants and the researcher's interpretation of these expressed experiences. Oakley (1981) remained one of the most cited articles when discussing phenomenology and the feminist epistemology challenging the masculine assumptions of "proper interviews". Oakley challenged the "objective, standardized, and detached approach" (p. 41) asserting that better-understanding people through interviewing was "best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship" (p. 41).

The researcher in this study utilized Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in order to better understand not only the content but also the complexity of meaning in respondents' experiences (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013) which was appropriate given existing oversimplified explanations for women's workforce decisions. The interview questions prompted reflection from the participants resulting in explanations of their experience in their words. As Chan, Fund

and Chien (2013) explained, IPA enables the rich descriptions of human experiences with an emphasis on the importance of individual account.

The interpretive approach was important though, to not only give voice to participants, but also, to make sense of their responses. Larkin and Thompson (2012) noted the importance of making sense of or offering an interpretation that is grounded in the accounts while using "psychological concepts to extend beyond them" (p. 101). Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, therefore, allows for "clarifying and elucidating a Phenomenon" (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p 193). As such, with IPA, our interpretations are, amongst other things, attempts to understand "how we have come to be situated in the world in the particular ways we find ourselves" (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 198).

Sampling

The targeted participants in this study included women occupying mid- to high-level management positions in a Fortune 500 company in the Midwest. Purposive sampling was conducted to recruit participants via the researchers' professional connections. The purposive sampling process resulted in a population of women occupying mid- to high-level management positions (in the organization studied, these were defined as senior manager and director level roles) in a Fortune 500 company in the Midwest. The purposive sampling technique was a deliberate choice of participants based upon the similar qualities the participant possesses, in this case, women identified as high potential in the same Fortune 500 company. Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016) examined the validity and efficacy of purposive sampling emphasizing it is appropriate for qualitative research in the identification and selection of "information-rich cases" (p. 2) where the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can provide meaningful information by virtue of their knowledge and experience.

Etikan et.al. (2016) emphasized that this form of sampling focuses on candidates who share similar traits or specific characteristics like similar educational backgrounds, jobs, or life experiences (p. 3). The women in the study were relatively homogenous demographically in terms of the level of education; most holding a Master's in Business Administration (MBA), similar years of experience (more than 15 in most cases), and all working in similar jobs in the same Fortune 500 company, and all had been identified by organizational leadership as having high advancement potential.

In the organization under investigation, their executive leadership team of 11 included three women (27%) and eight men. Of their 12-member Board of Directors, there were three women (25%). The women in the study were relatively homogenous demographically in terms of the level of education (mostly MBAs; 11 of 13), years of experience (more than 15 in most cases), race (mostly white with two of 13 self-identifying as Hispanic), age (mid-30s to mid-40s) marital status (9 married, two divorced, two single), and parental status (11 of 13 have

children). The phone interviews included 10-12 discussion questions and ranged in duration from 55 to 75 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using NoNotes call recording and transcription platform, and results were interpreted using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and categorized with affective, values, and narrative-based coding methodologies. To ensure confidentiality, participants chose their own pseudonyms after providing their consent to participate, and coded data is stored securely.

The use of IPA was significant in that it facilitated a connection between individuals' experiences and their meaning-making relative to their experiences in navigating corporate advancement. Interview questions were designed in order to prompt reflection and to encourage participants to provide explanations of their experience in their own words, which was particularly fitting in connection with this study's aim of understanding women's tendency toward internal and external attribution of their career progress and barriers experienced. Gender Socialization Theory served as the primary theoretical framework in data analysis to evaluate the behavior and attitudes considered appropriate for a given gender, and how those expectations create both descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes and biases, which (as addressed in the literature review section), has not been examined in depth within the context of women in Fortune 500 management roles.

Results

After transcribing and coding the interviews saturation was reached with narratives, examples, and general answers to questions recurring and common themes emerging. The intent was to remain open to any themes or similar response clusters that emerging (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014) while using formal coding protocols as part of the data analysis process (Saldana, 2013). Upon completion of the interviews, the recordings were transcribed and the data from the audio interviews were captured in Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel. Where it was coded for key phrases and relevant emerging themes. Two methods of coding (Saldana, 2013) proved appropriate based on the transcribed data; Affective Methods: Emotional Coding and Values Coding.

Affective coding methods "investigate subjective qualities of the human experience" (Saldana, 2013, p. 105) making it appropriate for analyzing and categorizing the data. Saldana (2013) noted that emotional coding which taps into participants' feelings provides "deep insights into the participants' perspectives, worldview, and life conditions" (p. 106). Creswell (2013) has noted that we conduct qualitative research "when we want to empower individuals to share their stories..." (p. 48). Affective coding methods "investigate subjective qualities of the human experience" (Saldana, 2013, p. 105) making it appropriate for analyzing and categorizing the data. Saldana (2013) noted that emotional coding which taps into participants' feelings provides "deep insights into the participants' perspectives, worldview, and life conditions" (p. 106). Values coding reflects participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs which

were suitable for this study as value represents the importance attributed to oneself, others, things, and our surroundings (Saldana, 2013). Corporate culture and social-cultural norms are highly relevant concepts in relation to the lived experience of participants navigating the workplace.

The data analysis revealed that the women interviewed tend to compartmentalize professional barriers to advancement as personal or self-imposed rather than organizational or societal in nature. Their responses also indicate the presence of a strong personal responsibility narrative related to career advancement. Additionally, participant responses suggested that such narratives are reinforced consistently in organizational messaging and training programs. Study participants consistently referenced these messages and programs as evidence of their internal sense of control over their careers. Women in the study also addressed the extreme work model of constant availability, ability to relocate on-demand, and prioritizing work and the company as inevitable at corporate executive levels; many women identified this phenomenon as a major barrier to advancement and a central antecedent to career slow-tracking.

Internal Attribution and Personal Responsibility Narratives

Regarding the second interview question—which addressed what barriers, if any, participants had experienced or had to overcome and asked why participants feel those barriers remain present in their workplace—respondents reflected a predominant sense of self-responsibility and career ownership narrative. For example, the respondents used language connoting and explicitly clarifying personal ownership; Carli noted that "you own your career" and Jess asserted "I am in charge of my own domain." Although women expressed barriers of work-family balance and the need for flexibility, they did so within the context of what they perceived to be self-imposed barriers. Joan reported that:

I would say if I wouldn't have personally taken steps back because of it being the right thing for me personally at the time, I would be much higher in the organization than I am now but I'm okay with that. I had a two-year-old and a six-month-old when I joined the company. I've personally chosen to take a step back so that I could manage everything.

The participants employed language regarding personal choice, which serves to propagate the narrative of self-imposed barriers. Similarly, Julie noted that:

I think the barriers I've talked with you about that I'm kind of self-imposing, right? I don't feel like I'm being or going to be held back or that I'm going to stall out or tap out unless it's potentially maybe temporarily of my own accord due to family needs and requirements.

Again, balancing work and family is articulated within the construct of a self-imposed barrier.

Even in instances when participants acknowledged gender stereotyping, the barrier seemed to have been internalized. For example, in referencing her first experience with the company in a role working with mostly men, Jana noted:

So I had to overcome in my own mind that it was okay to be female, that even in leadership I was not expected to always have male traits, that I could actually be a whole person, a whole human being that I am and not have to pretend to not be one thing or the other. So, I think it was an internal barrier that I put on myself for a while. And it probably took me the first ten years of my career to get over that. Now I'm over that but I do remember having to go through that.

While some participants did address the presence of extreme work culture and stereotyped expectations for men and women, their responses were most frequently connected with similar notions of personal choices and ownership over career decisions, rather than based on a focus on entrenched stereotypes surrounding a male work ethos.

Institutional Initiatives, Stereotypic Gender Bias, and Extreme Work Culture

The first interview question asked: Does everyone in the organization at your level need to prove themselves the same? Do you feel some people are judged more unfavorably for their mistakes? Is the playing field equal? In response, participants expressed the perception that organizational gender bias is improving overall as a result of diversity initiatives and clear performance expectations. Importantly, participants' responses to this question and the tendency to focus on training consistently related to reinforcements of the self-responsibility narrative. For example, several women specifically mentioned participating in Landmark Personal & Professional Growth Training and noted this program's message of empowering women to achieve success. Nicole explained:

One of my colleagues had recommended it to me. It was a very strong leadership concept really. Kind of, focused on what excuses are you making or what barriers are you putting in your own way to attain success? I think that was probably one of the most eye-opening courses that I took.

Overall, participants expressed that gender bias was "getting better" in Corporate America, and only about one quarter of participants directly addressed their experiences with gender bias. However, several participants noted feeling judged for being emotional and seen as wearing their heart on their sleeve, at times when they felt their behavior was exhibiting passion and commitment rather than being overly emotional. Kristina noted:

But the one place that I think there is a bit of judgment is around being emotional. I know many women at my level who have potentially the same... I want to call it an issue, the same trait that I do. I wear my heart on my sleeve and it is a passion more than anything else. But I think it is seen as emotional because I'm a woman. I think that people judge that in a way that I wish they didn't do; they probably shouldn't.

Likewise, Jana described an experience early in her tenure with the company, which she described as a "very stereotypical male, very tough environment." She noted that, in that environment, "I

didn't feel that I could be feminine in terms of like basic—you know, the traditional types of feminine traits like being too emotional or showing a lot of emotion at work."

Even though few participants explicitly addressed experiences with gender bias, they did address a prevalent preference for agentic over communal traits in leadership. Interview questions concerning the attributes or competencies associated with being a strong leader in the organization—prompted a detailed discussion from participants on the very specific, well-defined, and organizationally universal traits associated with top leadership in organizations. In response to this question, every participant noted a blend of traits including traditional hard business skills, such as meeting financial outcomes, and soft business skills, such as communicating well and working well with others, were necessary for advancement.

Although participants noted the non-gendered nature of such ideal behaviors for all employees, approximately half of the study participants brought up Color Wheel Personality Training, which correlates certain personality traits with certain colors. Those with red personalities, for example, are seen as having strong leadership qualities defined using agentic words like assertive, determined, risk-taking, take-charge, and self-assured. In contrast, those with blue personalities are seen as more detail-oriented, data-driven, and precise. Yellow personalities are defined using communal words like kind and inclusive. All participants who mentioned this color wheel noted that red was emphasized as the most desirable personality type for leadership. Kate noted: "I feel like they're highly dominantly red as far as personality-wise." Some participants reported that, if they were not "red" enough by nature, they would exaggerate that part of their personality at work, Kate noted:

Friday night I'm exhausted because I pushed so hard to be redder at work, but it's because the preferred color is red and I'm not red, so I'm okay with who I am, but I know from a work standpoint I should be viewed as more red. So, I pump it up.

Although participants in the study expressed, they did not see gender as a factor in terms of organizational perceptions of their leadership abilities, the color wheel discussion suggests that, even in a corporate culture that values diversity in leadership, there remain stereotypical beliefs and values related to the ideal leader, and the most valued traits have been typically associated with men.

The participants expressed the prevalence of extreme work culture as the most common barrier to their advancement and a catalyst for their experiences with career slow tracking. The respondents often addressed the extreme work model associated with executive-level leadership as resulting in a lack of work-family balance. Participants saw this extreme work culture as inevitable at senior levels and as such, noted this as a major advancement barrier. When asked about promotional aspirations, Jess noted: "So, that next level up, I'm not aspiring to be there for a long time." She explained further that "I want to maintain

my work-life balance, and I don't believe I would be happy with...if I was working at that the next level of what it would do to my family." When asked whether there was anything that could change that would make that next level of leadership an option, Jess responded: "Honestly the expectations of that role would have to decrease, right? At least where we work...those people are working, you know, 24/7, you're on call all the time, and that's not a tradeoff I'm willing to make."

While this type of personal choice narrative has gained a great deal of traction in the media, with headlines asserting that women are making the choice to slow track or exit their careers to have more time at home with their children, many professional women don't view this as a choice. Carli asserted: "it's funny. It's...you don't really make choices. I think that the most interesting thing when you, you know, have children in general, there's things you just have to do." Likewise, the extreme hours and expectations of constant availability are perceived to create health and wellness concerns among women. Regarding being promoted to the next level, Nicole responded:

Nope. I've made it very clear I have no desire. When I went to higher levels of leadership, it was just too much of an emotional toll on me. It would consume me. It would...take over everything. I took a big step back a couple of years for my own personal health, kind of, like said, this is not what I want to do.

Overall, despite references to an extreme work model, stereotypic associations between gender and desired leadership qualities, bias against emotional behaviors, and experiences with barriers to advancement, these results indicate a disconnect between women's perception of—and predominantly self-imposed justifications for—barriers to advancement and their actual level of representation in top-echelon roles.

Discussion

Describing their barriers to advancement, women in this study primarily used organizational jargon relative to leadership advancement that has been well integrated into the corporate culture. For example, when asked about barriers to advancement, women compartmentalized professional barriers as personal, frequently using words like "self-imposed" rather than articulating any organizational or societal influences. This persistent personal responsibility narrative related to career advancement is reinforced consistently in organizational messaging as well as in advancement and training programs. A distinct disassociation emerged in participants' responses among the corporate environment, outcomes, and perceived barriers.

Participants interpreted the many corporate diversity initiatives, training programs, and women's leadership development initiatives implemented over the past decade as a commitment to addressing inequity and advancing women through the corporate pipeline, even when the same participants noted concerns with advancing to the next level because of extreme work expectations and work-life balance considerations. Overall, participants did not perceive the culture as a constraint but rather

perceived their personal inability or desire to meet the extreme time demands at the executive level as the barrier.

When viewed in conjunction with the quantifiable reality of the executive landscape, including executive leadership statistics in this organization - which, despite many noted diversity and inclusion initiatives, remains vertically segregated with women well represented in mid-level management while top-level leadership roles remain largely male—a disconnect emerges. The findings in this study results draw attention to a significant and troubling divide between women's perceptions of their ability to advance and the existence of an effective meritocracy, and the actual vertical segregation in the S&P 500. Indeed, despite many initiatives implemented by executive-level leadership, the organization included in this study is not statistically dissimilar from the overall figures of S&P 500 companies. Interestingly, the findings of this study suggest that, rather than materially addressing the issue of disproportionate representation, these initiatives create an illusion of meritocracy and perpetuate an incorrect belief that women are as likely as their male counterparts to advance to executive-level leadership.

To address this issue, further research is necessary focused on women's perceptions of self-imposed barriers in relation to their trust in organizational initiatives alongside the actual impact of such programs by conducting similar phenomenological research with a broader array of women and with larger sample sizes. Further, the results of this study indicate that problems associated with extreme work culture are not yet being sufficiently addressed, are perpetuating diverging expectations of men and women, and must be addressed at the organizational level and within the context of the corporate culture. Likewise, as current diversity initiatives, according to the results of this study, maybe reinforcing rather than mitigating the effects of the broken pipeline of women's advancement to upper echelon positions, it is necessary to continue research on the ways in which women's perceptions of Corporate America, their advancement potential, and an equitable meritocracy diverge from women's actual representation in those strata.

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