

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SUCCESS: WOMEN WHO MADE IT TO THE C-
SUITE DESPITE BARRIERS

by

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ABSTRACT

BETTYE HOLMES SMITH

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SUCCESS: WOMEN WHO MADE IT TO THE C-SUITE DESPITE BARRIERS

Under the direction of JEFFREY MOORE, PhD

Multiple researchers have explored avenues to achieve gender diversity in leadership, primarily by studying the barriers to success for aspiring women leaders. Despite barriers, a small group of women have risen to the top positions of US corporations, demonstrating that there is a path to success and highlighting an opportunity to address leadership diversity differently. Whereas most research on gender diversity in leadership focuses on the barriers women encounter, this qualitative phenomenological study focused on how women can succeed. By leveraging Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to explore systems that enabled a phenomenal group of women to advance to the C-suite, this study's findings highlight paths to success for aspiring women leaders and opportunities for organizations to establish cultures that enable support, learning, and advocacy for women's career advancement, thereby enhancing gender diversity in leadership.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

If it's lonely at the top, it's a lot lonelier when you're a woman.

—Lindsay Kaplan (2023)

This quote from Lindsay Kaplan—the chief executive officer (CEO) and cofounder of Chief, a private membership network established to connect and support women executives—speaks to the state of women in the C-suite of American corporations. Wolper (2016) highlighted the scarce representation of women in the C-suite, noting that only one in 20 women occupy the CEO position in American corporations. According to Gautam (2018), women comprise 51% of the US workforce and hold 36% of first- or midlevel positions, 20% of board seats, and 6% of CEO positions. Flabbi et al. (2019) suggested that women are almost ten times less represented than men in top positions of corporations. In a survey of human resources executives, 62% of the respondents indicated that although there has been some improvement, there are still opportunities to advance more women to the C-suite (Korn Ferry & the Conference Board, 2019). Getting more women to the C-suite will support efforts to achieve gender diversity in leadership, particularly in the upper echelon of American corporations.

Gender diversity in leadership matters because it influences organizational innovation and performance, economic performance, and lower-level employees, especially aspiring women leaders. According to Hunt et al. (2015), organizations with higher gender diversity at the executive leadership level financially outperform others in their industry by 15%. Hence, gender diversity in the upper echelons of corporate

leadership is an essential element of success for American corporations. Ruiz-Jiménez and Ruiz-Arroyo (2016) studied the effects of gender diversity at top executive levels on organizations' innovative performance and concluded that gender diversity in executive leadership impacts the relationship between knowledge combination capacity, innovation, and performance. Wu et al. (2022) studied gender diversity in organizations' top management teams and boards of directors and the impact on performance. The results revealed that organizations with highly diverse top management teams and boards of directors experience more organizational innovation, which leads to increased performance (Wu et al., 2022). Field et al. (2023) indicated that achieving gender equity can impact the economy by potentially adding \$4.3 trillion to the US economy and \$28 trillion (26%) to the global gross domestic product in 2025, which is the size of the US and Chinese combined economies.

In addition to positively influencing organizational and economic performance, Schrand et al. (2018) indicated that it is vital to include women in executive leadership positions to serve as role models for lower-level women, encouraging them to pursue higher-level opportunities. Carter (2019) agreed that diversity in leadership inspires achievements by lower-level employees by signaling (nonverbally) that success is possible. Schrand et al.'s and Carter's perspectives align with the critical objective of the present study: to increase the number of successful executive and C-suite women who can serve as role models and provide a support network for other women.

Multiple researchers (Bilimoria, 2008; Diehl, 2016; Dwivedi, 2018; Hill, 2016; Madsen, 2018; Matsa, 2011) have studied barriers to success for women and how these barriers influence the career decisions and trajectories of women who aspire to leadership

positions, especially at the executive levels of organizations. With these persistent barriers, men remain more likely to emerge as leaders and advance to senior leadership positions than women (Shabliy et al., 2020). Despite the barriers, a small group of women have risen to the top positions of American corporations and achieved C-suite status, demonstrating a path to success. These women's successes highlight an opportunity to address leadership diversity differently. Whereas most research on gender equity in leadership focuses on the challenges and barriers women encounter on their professional journeys, this research addresses enablers of gender diversity in leadership. Specifically, the study focuses on women who achieved executive-level status at a top US defense corporation and C-suite status at the same corporation or another one.

This study examined systems that influenced executives' experiences, allowing them to successfully maneuver in complex corporate environments and succeed in reaching the top positions in corporate America. The researcher leveraged Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a framework to understand better the influences of various environmental systems on women's experiences on their journey to the top positions in their organizations. The premise of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory is that to understand a developing individual, one must examine and understand the person in the context of the environments and relationships in which they exist and how various interconnected systems influence the developing person. For this study, the developing executive was the person of interest.

Systems that enable women to achieve C-suite status successfully, despite barriers, represent a phenomenon and an opportunity to extend the research on gender diversity in leadership. Therefore, the researcher conducted a phenomenological study to

explore how a group of women experienced a common phenomenon and advanced to the C-suite of their organizations. The phenomenon of interest was enabling systems. Therefore, the study aimed to understand how these systems influenced women's experiences and career outcomes and share the findings with aspiring women executives and their organizations.

Background of the Study

Lindsay Kaplan and Carolyn Childers, cofounders of Chief, established an organization that aims to build a supportive community for women executives and change the face of leadership (Chuba, 2023). The researcher has a similar interest in supporting women leaders and executives. As a former corporate executive with extensive experience in US defense corporations, specifically with the corporation of interest in this study, the researcher has spent enormous effort developing and implementing plans to address gender diversity in leadership and advance more leaders, especially underrepresented and qualified women and minorities.

The researcher strongly believes that successful women have an opportunity and a responsibility to support and help other women succeed because they did not succeed independently. Hence, the researcher was prompted to explore paths to success for women who aspire to leadership, especially at the executive level. The researcher's experience with the defense industry and one of the top US defense corporations helped define the scope of this research while acknowledging the limitations, risks, and potential biases.

This study focuses on a top American corporation whose primary customer is the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). US defense corporations are for-profit organizations

that provide products and services to DoD customers. US defense corporations' primary business goal is to provide innovative solutions that differentiate them from their competitors and create a competitive business advantage. Therefore, these companies must continually deliver value-based solutions that meet customers' needs and enable a competitive advantage. Porter (2015) indicated that strategy differentiates companies from their competition, which involves making decisions that distinguish an organization in meeting its stakeholders' needs.

According to Priyono (2022), an organization's strategy must include a path for integrating or connecting its dynamic capabilities with open innovation. López and Oliver (2023) argued that strategists must incorporate innovation as a critical success factor to boost competitiveness in dynamic and ever-changing markets. Given this criticality, Hakovirta et al. (2023) studied the relationship between diversity and innovation, concluding that diversity in executive management team composition is a lever an organization can use to create value for itself and its stakeholders. A recent study by Zhang and Gaudiano (2023) highlighted that despite the evidence that companies with greater gender representation in leadership outperform companies with fewer women, men still dominate the senior and executive levels of companies across various industries.

Statement of the Problem

Although studies have demonstrated that gender diversity in leadership is an essential element of success for American corporations, currently, the United States lags behind the global average (24%) for women in leadership at 21%. China's figure is 51% (Serafin, 2013). Hence, there are still opportunities to increase gender representation in leadership. Most of the existing literature that addresses gender diversity in leadership focuses on the barriers to women's advancement in leadership versus highlighting a path to success for women who aspire to executive leadership.

Although a few studies have focused on elements of success for women leaders, limited research addresses the positive aspect of gender diversity in leadership, especially at the executive level. Since some women have successfully advanced to top executive positions in American corporations, there is an opportunity to positively address the topic of gender diversity in leadership by exploring the different systems that influenced women's experiences and enabled them to succeed. This study addresses a research gap by exploring different systems of people, relationships, and interactions that influence women's experiences and enable them to maneuver, advance, and succeed in complex environments, thereby identifying solutions that lead to success for aspiring women leaders and executives, and positively addressing gender diversity in leadership.

History of the Problem

Several studies have addressed persistent and significant barriers to success, the reasons, and how they limit women's progression and advancement in corporate leadership. Multiple researchers have conducted extensive research and highlighted barriers that impede women's career advancement and limit their ability to attain

executive-level leadership positions in corporate America. Bilimoria (2008) addressed organizational structures, policies, and practices as barriers to inclusivity and sustained success for women. Hill (2016) identified sex discrimination, caregiving, women's choices, a lack of effective networks and mentors, stereotypes, and gender biases as barriers to success for women who aspire to achieve leadership. In a global study, Haile et al. (2016) concluded that organizational sexual harassment, gender stereotypes, failure to capitalize on women's talents, organizational policies and practices, cultural beliefs and values, male chauvinism, gender pay inequities, and a lack of job-related training are barriers that *qualified* women face in their quest for senior and executive-level positions. Diehl (2016) extended the research on gender barriers by looking beyond internal organizational barriers and exploring how gendered societal structures influence processes and decision-making, creating multiple barriers for aspiring female leaders.

Information is abundant on barriers to women's success and how they pose risks to achieving gender diversity in leadership and, therefore, risks to organizational innovation and performance. However, there remains a scarcity of research addressing the success stories of women in leadership, especially at the top levels of American corporations. Specifically, there is limited information on how multiple women have succeeded in achieving C-suite status despite the barriers.

Current Status of the Problem

Researchers continue to conduct extensive studies to explore the topic of gender diversity in leadership, primarily focusing on the challenges women encounter in their quest to advance to the executive levels of American corporations. However, some researchers have extended the research to explore ways to overcome barriers and help

women succeed. For example, Matsa (2011) examined why women (and minorities) face challenges with breaking into the inner circle of corporate leadership at the executive and board levels and identified mentoring, having role models, and external engagements as factors that may influence decision-making and executive views regarding corporate leadership prospects. Madsen (2018) highlighted the need for women to be aware of invisible barriers and take the appropriate actions to overcome them. Dwivedi (2018) identified male-typed schema for capability assessments and stereotypical views as barriers to women's success and focused the discussion on the opportunity for men to serve as organizational agents to counter stereotypical views and be gender-inclusive gatekeepers to help women succeed in American corporations. Valerio (2022) examined the role of consulting psychologists in supporting women in leadership and suggested developing more inclusive leadership and implementing evidence-based innovations in talent management and human resources to help women succeed.

Theory and Action Related to the Problem

Lichtenstein et al. (2006) defined *leadership* as a dynamic process resulting from the adaptive needs of complex organizations. The word *complex* characterizes the American corporation that employed this study's participants in terms of its organizational policies, processes, and systems, as well as its stakeholders, its challenges, the environments in which it operates, and its requirements for profitability and competitive advantage in an ever-changing world. The organizational complexities require an adaptive culture and solutions that address current demands and business challenges while positioning the organization for future growth and a sustained competitive advantage. These two scenarios are often in conflict. However, Lichtenstein

et al. (2006) indicated that leadership arises from such conflicts as a product of interaction, tension, and exchanges regarding changes in perception and understanding and a dynamic of adaptive leadership.

Heifetz et al. (2009) indicated that adaptive leadership refers to change that enables the capacity to thrive, and such a style is essential to effectively mobilizing new strategies and ideas in new environments. Heifetz et al. identified the following characteristics of an adaptive culture: 1) name the elephants in the room, meaning no issue is too sensitive, and no question is off-limits; 2) share responsibilities for the organization's future, regardless of titles and roles; 3) value independent judgment from high-level executives and managers; 4) build leadership capacity; and 5) institutionalize reflection and continuous learning.

Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) state that adaptive leadership emerges from interactions, struggles, or tensions among people over conflicting needs, ideas, and preferences. In adaptive leadership, the leader encourages followers to tackle problems differently, including changing their perspectives and views, modifying their communication, and changing their problem-solving approaches (Heifetz et al., 2009). The adaptive leadership theory provides a lens through which to explore American corporations' complex organizational culture, challenges, and solutions.

This adaptive and complex view of leadership suggests a distributed view of leadership (Gronn, 2002) where the sole responsibility of leadership does not reside with a single individual in the corporation, as other organizational members are empowered to lead. This is the case in the top US defense corporation that employed 11 phenomenal

women who emerged as empowered leaders and advanced to executive and C-suite positions.

An adaptive leadership practice provides adaptive solutions for enabling women to succeed in complex environments and advance to the top positions of corporations, highlighting a path to success. Adaptive leadership also provides lessons for organizations on establishing an adaptive culture that facilitates distributive leadership, as well as a culture of support, learning, career advancement, and advocacy for aspiring women executives. Leveraging adaptive leadership to advance more women to leadership—specifically, the upper echelons of organizations—supports efforts to increase gender diversity in leadership.

Need for Further Study of the Problem

According to the recent Women in the Workplace Report, there have been modest gains over the years, with an increase from 17% to 28% for women in senior executive positions from 2015 and 2023; however, there is a risk to achieving gender parity (Field et al., 2023). Therefore, there is a need to explore new ways to address gender diversity in leadership. Research that examines the path to success for aspiring female executives is different and more positive. By changing the approach to focusing less on the barriers and more on the enabling systems, researchers may fill a research gap and positively address the topic of gender diversity in leadership. In doing so, the researcher can provide information that enhances the understanding of systems that enable success, valuable information for aspiring women executives and their organizations, and potential solutions that address C-suite pipeline problems for women.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to understand better how multiple systems of support, learning, and career advancement influenced the experiences of current and former women from a top US defense corporation and enabled them to achieve C-suite status. Multiple researchers have studied systems of support, learning, and career development. Regarding support systems, Block (2016) explored the opportunity that successful women have to help other women by serving as sponsors, coaches, counselors, advocates, role models, and guides for the next generation of women leaders. In a case study involving aspiring women CEOs, Dwivedi (2018) explored the role of men as gatekeepers to actively engage in hiring, selecting, and socializing incoming women executives and managing expectations, particularly regarding male-typed schema about women's abilities to lead.

Regarding professional development and learning systems, Kotlyar et al. (2015) studied how peer coaching influences leadership development as a form of career community. Martínez-Martínez et al. (2021) explored how authentic leadership programs can help women advance in their careers by breaking through glass ceilings while assisting organizations to address challenges with gender diversity in leadership. Martín-Peña et al. (2023) explored factors that can limit and facilitate professional development for women executives and influence various career alternatives. The researchers examined personal and organizational factors correlating with career development and trajectories.

Regarding career advancement, Kuntz and Livingston (2020) explored factors that influence women's career trajectories while examining the relationships between

mentoring, executive coaching, and sponsorship. The results indicated that networking support, executive coaching, and mentorship can positively influence career advancement for women in leadership. Helms et al. (2016) extended the literature regarding developing and advancing women leaders by addressing the role of mentorship and sponsorship in career advancement, delineating between the two. The research concluded that mentoring is beneficial; however, women need sponsorship and mentorship to advance their careers. In examining these areas, the researcher explored how the studied executives handled challenges and advanced in various environments, persevered and overcame obstacles in the face of adversity, and how their decision-making strategies influenced their careers on their journey to the C-suite.

Research Questions

The central research question is: How did specific systems influence the experiences of current and former women from a top US defense corporation and enable them to achieve C-suite status?

Theoretical Framework

This research leveraged Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a framework and lens to examine and interpret the influences of various systems on a group of executive women as they progressed in their careers. This phenomenological study involved an interpretive framework to understand better how 11 women experienced a particular phenomenon that enabled them to achieve C-suite status in an American corporation.

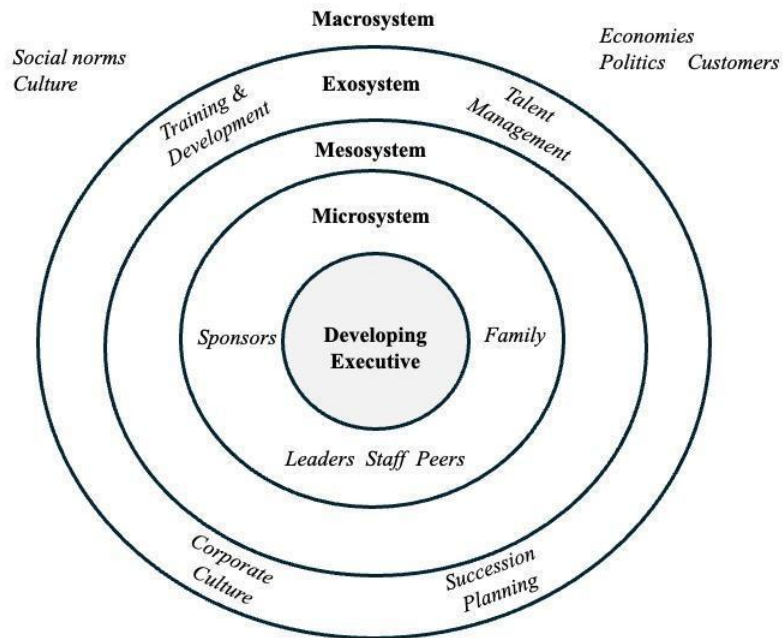
Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theoretical model shows a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next. The model includes the developing person in the center, with concentric circles around it. The microsystem is closest to the center, representing the immediate environment in which the developing person (i.e., the executive) interacts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem includes family, friends, mentors, coaches, role models, leaders, peers, followers, staff, and others with whom the developing person regularly interacts. The microsystem also includes the individual's workplace. The mesosystem is next to the microsystem, representing environments where the person actively participates and interrelationships between two or more microsystems occur (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The exosystem is next to the mesosystem. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the exosystem represents the environment where the developing person is not directly participating but may affect or be affected by what happens in that

environment, including corporate culture, talent planning, and succession planning. The macrosystem is next to the exosystem and involves the larger cultural context and societal norms and beliefs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The chronosystem (added later) is the final component of the model, examining how time influences the developing person (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

This research leveraged Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to explore the influence of various systems on experiences and career outcomes for developing executives, as depicted in Figure 1 below. With the developing executive at the center of the model, the researcher used Bronfenbrenner's theory as a framework to explore the relationship between the person and their environment and examine the diverse interactions between the different people and the environment.

Figure 1

Systems That Influence Developing Executives



These C-suite women experienced a common phenomenon—namely, various systems influenced their experiences and enabled them to succeed. Therefore, the researcher explored the phenomenon to understand how multiple systems influence the developing executive. The researcher asked the participants to share their lived experiences within support, learning, and career advancement systems. Specifically, the researcher explored the following questions to understand how these systems influence the developing executive:

- How do women executives describe their experiences with support systems?
- How do women executives describe their experiences with learning systems?
- How do women executives describe their experiences with career advancement systems?

Conceptual Framework

The researcher employed a conceptual framework that involves three components to explore the research problem: the existing literature on the research topic, the researcher's experience and knowledge of the research problem and phenomenon, and the participants' responses to qualitative interview questions regarding their lived experiences. The researcher reviewed and synthesized the literature on gender diversity in leadership, including support, learning and professional development, and career advancement systems that have influenced women's experiences. The researcher also reviewed and synthesized studies that have leveraged Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to explore developing individuals. Additionally, the researcher used personal experiences and knowledge of the research topic and problem to inform the research while incorporating reflexivity and other methods to ensure research integrity and take measures to mitigate the risk of bias. Finally, the researcher leveraged Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as the framework to interpret the data collected from the participants regarding their experiences on their journey to the top positions in their organizations.

Approach of the Study

The three primary approaches to research are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods; however, the first is the most appropriate approach based on the nature of the research problem. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research is appropriate for situations where the researcher intends to study things in their natural setting and try to make sense of phenomena based on the meanings that the participants provide. In the present context, this study involves interpreting and attempting to make

sense of women's lived experiences relative to a phenomenon. Rowan and Huston (1997) suggested that quantitative research offers little about social and psychological dynamics. On the contrary, qualitative researchers design studies to observe social interactions and better understand people's perspectives and experiences, including why they behave and act as they do (Rowan & Huston, 1997).

This study employed a phenomenological inquiry design to explore the central research question and phenomenon of interest. Research designs are types of inquiry for a given study, and there are various types of inquiries for the three major approaches (Creswell, 2018; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). The major ones are phenomenology, narratives, grounded theory, ethnographies, and case studies (Lewis, 2015; Korstjens and Moser, 2017). The type of design a researcher chooses depends on the research focus and problems.

Phenomenological research, which has its roots in philosophy and psychology, explores and attempts to describe the common meaning of the lived experiences of multiple individuals around a specific phenomenon by listening to their stories regarding their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Neubauer et al. (2019) suggested that phenomenology is unique in that it serves to help individuals learn from the lived experiences of others. Phenomenologists explore what all participants have in common as they experience a specific phenomenon, including what they experienced and how they experienced it (Neubauer et al., 2019).

There are two significant types of phenomenology: hermeneutical and transcendental phenomenology. According to Creswell (2018), hermeneutical phenomenology focuses on lived experiences, starting with identifying a phenomenon

that aligns with the researcher's area of concern. Once the researcher identifies the phenomenon, they identify associated themes that constitute the nature of the lived experience and then write a description to provide the meaning of the lived experience. According to Greening (2019), Moustakas's transcendental phenomenology involves the following procedures: identifying the phenomenon of interest, bracketing out the researcher's experiences with the phenomenon, collecting data from multiple individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, analyzing the data by reducing information from collected data to significant statements and combining statements into themes, and developing both textual and structural descriptions that convey the essence of the phenomenon.

This study employed transcendental phenomenology. The phenomenon for this research involves systems that influenced women's experiences and enabled them to achieve C-suite status in American corporations. The researcher has experience with the phenomenon and, therefore, employed bracketing to focus on the participants' experiences instead of hers. Bracketing is "putting aside one's presuppositions and what one knows about a phenomenon of study so that one can see it without imposing past knowledge or experiences upon it" (Beck, 2013, p. 134). For this study, bracketing included notetaking, journaling, and creating a space to reflect on the participant responses, how the researcher experienced the interviews, and what the researcher needed to do to separate personal feelings and experiences and focus on the participants' responses and experiences.

Procedures

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the influences of specific systems on women executives' career experiences on their journey to the C-suite. The study focuses on current and former women who achieved executive-level status at a top US defense corporation and later achieved C-suite status at that company or another one. Butina et al. (2015) indicated that phenomenological research is appropriate when the study focuses on understanding the essence of participants' experiences and the research problem involves describing the essence of a lived phenomenon.

According to Butina et al. (2015), some of the critical features of a phenomenological study are researchers explore how participants describe, perceive, and make sense of their experiences; data collection involves in-depth participant interviews; data analysis focuses on explaining what individuals experienced and how they experienced it; and the study results provide a detailed description of the essence of the phenomenon. The procedures the researcher implemented for this research were purposeful data sampling, data collection via one-on-one interviews, data analysis, data interpretation, data validity and reliability via member checking, and report writing.

Data Sampling

Sampling involves selecting or searching for participants who can inform the research. According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), in qualitative research, sampling occurs deliberately via various strategies, including purposive, criterion, theoretical, convenience, and snowball. For this study, the researcher employed criterion sampling, which involves selecting participants according to predetermined criteria of importance.

The criterion for participation was that the participant was a woman who reached the executive level at a top US defense company and progressed to the C-suite of that corporation or another corporation. For this phenomenological study, all the women must have experienced the stated phenomenon—namely, systems that enabled them to succeed—and be willing to share stories of their experiences.

The researcher identified women who met the established criteria from social media, company websites, and other professional networks. Based on the initial inquiry of the various sources, the researcher identified 21 women who met the criteria and invited 18 to participate because the researcher needed the contact information for three individuals. Of the 18 invitees, 13 responded affirmatively, but only 11 engaged and participated in the interviews. Therefore, the data sample comprised 61% of the known participants in the pool.

Data Collection

According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), the three most commonly used data collection methods for qualitative research are interviews, observations, and focus groups. For phenomenology research, where the researcher's purpose is to elicit the participant's experiences, perceptions, or perspectives, in-depth interviews are the most appropriate method of data collection (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). For phenomenological studies, Greening (2019) suggested that researchers collect data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon via in-depth interviews. Polkinghorne (1989) recommended that researchers interview between 5 and 25 individuals who have experienced the phenomenon and ask what they have experienced and what situations

have influenced their experiences. The researcher interviewed 11 individuals who experienced a common phenomenon for this phenomenological study.

This study employed one-on-one qualitative interviews, using open-ended questions to generate data relevant to the research questions. According to Korstjens and Moser (2017), the qualitative researcher should use broad, open-ended questions to thoroughly explore the phenomenon of interest. Belotto (2018) suggested using unstructured, open-ended questions because they allow the researcher to elicit the same core information from all participants while allowing the researcher to probe as the participants share their experiences. For this study, the researcher partnered with the committee chair and established three open-ended questions to allow participants to share stories of their lived career experiences and inform the research and phenomenon.

The Anderson University (AU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the two sets of questions/research instruments for this qualitative research: demographic and interview questions. The researcher used the first instrument to collect demographic information that might be helpful in the data analysis and interpretation procedures, including ethnicity, educational experience, and industry experience. The researcher used the second research instrument for the one-on-one interviews—with the following broad and open-ended questions, in addition to subquestions, to guide the discussion:

- What experiences brought you here?
- What experiences kept you here?
- What strategies did you use for decision-making?

The researcher used the same IRB-approved instruments for all participant interviews.

Both instruments are in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), data analysis is the process by which the researcher makes sense of the data; therefore, the researcher must be immersed in the process. Stuckey (2015) suggested three steps to facilitate good qualitative data analysis: 1) reading through the data to create a storyline, 2) categorizing data into codes, and 3) using memos for clarification and interpretation. For phenomenology analysis, the purpose is to interpret and describe the meaning of participants' experiences by identifying major themes (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), the result of a phenomenological study is a detailed description of the major themes that provide the meaning of the participants' lived experiences.

Stuckey (2015) indicated that the data analysis process involves multiple steps, including reviewing, transcribing, sanitizing the data collected from recorded participant interviews, and coding the data. Coding is the process of organizing and sorting qualitative data so that the researcher can easily categorize data that are similar in meaning (Stuckey, 2015). C. Maher (2018) described coding as categorizing and labeling data segments with a short name (a code) and using the codes to sort the data and better understand what is happening or has happened in the environment. Codes can be predetermined (a priori), emergent, or combined (Stuckey, 2015).

For this study, the first step of the data analysis process involved the researcher reviewing the participants' interview responses collected via Zoom audio and handwritten notes. Then, the researcher used the Otter.ai transcription software to transcribe the audio data, comparing the transcribed files with the handwritten notes for data integrity. Afterward, the researcher organized the transcribed and handwritten files

(by participant) in preparation for data analysis. The researcher also reviewed transcribed files for accuracy and sanitized the files to remove identifiable information and provide pseudonyms for the participants. The researcher labeled the sanitized files according to the (pseudonymed) participant. Next, the researcher loaded participants' responses into an Excel spreadsheet and labeled the responses (by participant).

Stuckey (2015) stressed the importance of keeping the research purpose and question in mind and suggested that researchers think about the research question and the big picture—the storyline and meta-narrative—before starting the coding process, asking, “What is the data telling me, and how does it relate to my research question?” Hence, the researcher reviewed the data (individually and collectively) multiple times, identifying common participant responses. Next, the researcher hand-coded the data using the most appropriate descriptors for common responses, using the participants' words. After coding the data, the researcher reviewed the coded data and identified themes to categorize and convey emerging findings relative to the research question and phenomenon. According to Belotto (2018), after the researcher identifies codes to label words and sentences with similar meanings, the researcher must also assess the codes, identify how multiple codes are linked, and categorize the themes into broad categories to leverage to convey the phenomenon's essence.

The result of phenomenological research is a detailed description of the major themes that emerged to explain the participants' lived experiences (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The researcher used these themes to convey significant findings relative to the research question and phenomenon, describing the phenomenon's essence in terms of

what the women experienced regarding the phenomenon and how it influenced their experiences on the journey to the C-suite.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it extends the research on gender diversity in leadership by focusing on a path to success for women who aspire to occupy the top positions in American corporations. This study focused on enablers rather than barriers to success. Specifically, this research explores systems that positively influence and enable success for aspiring women executives. In contrast, most existing studies on gender diversity in leadership have focused on obstacles and impediments to women's advancement. Hence, there is limited research that is positively focused. This scarcity of positively focused research represents a gap and an opportunity to extend the research on gender diversity in leadership.

This research is also significant because it aims to enhance the understanding of how various ecological systems enable success, particularly for aspiring female executives. Understanding this phenomenon helps identify a path to success for aspiring female executives and opportunities to increase gender representation in leadership. This representation matters because it influences organizational innovation and performance, economic performance, and lower-level employees, especially aspiring women executives.

Uniqueness and Compatibility of the Research

This study employed an alternative approach to researching gender diversity in leadership by exploring enablers of success (rather than barriers to success) to understand how they influence women's experiences on their journey to top corporate leadership positions. Additionally, this study leverages Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as the lens to explore how these systems influence developing executives. To the

researcher's knowledge, other researchers have not previously applied Bronfenbrenner's theory to understand how various systems influence developing executives.

Contribution to Knowledge, Theory, and Practice

This research aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on gender diversity in leadership. Specifically, the researcher proposes a new approach to researching the topic of gender diversity in leadership by exploring the path to success for aspiring women executives. This study extends the research on factors or systems that influence women's experiences and enable them to achieve and attain executive leadership levels, thereby increasing gender diversity and representation in leadership.

This study demonstrates how researchers can use Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to explore how various systems of people, relationships, and environments influence executive women's experiences and outcomes. Additionally, this research contributes to efforts to increase gender parity and diversity in leadership by providing findings regarding enabling systems and lessons learned from successful women executives to aspiring women leaders and executives and their organizations.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this research was its scope. This study focused on a single industry—the US defense industry—and a single American corporation for executive-level attainment. However, some participants achieved C-suite status after leaving that organization. These limitations represent opportunities for additional research to explore a similar phenomenon in other industries and companies. Therefore, the participants' experiences and research findings may differ for different companies and industries.

Assumptions

A primary assumption was that the research participants would provide accurate information regarding their lived experiences, ideas, and perspectives. Another assumption was that the researcher had potential biases, given her experience with the organization of interest and some research participants. Therefore, the researcher incorporated steps to mitigate risks to research integrity due to biases. Specifically, the researcher included research reflexivity in the study.

Reflexivity is the researcher's continual and critical self-evaluation of their situation and position regarding the research and acknowledgment of the potential impact on the research process or outcome (Berger, 2015). According to Berger, researchers need to understand the role of the self in creating knowledge and be aware of their biases, beliefs, and personal experiences and their impact on their research. Per Dodgson (2019), the researcher also employed an audit trail strategy that included extensive notes on key assumptions and decisions and transcribed interview notes so that other dissertation committee members could provide independent reviews of coded data and themes (as needed) to enhance credibility and mitigate risks to research integrity. Additionally, the researcher employed bracketing to challenge presuppositions regarding the phenomenon of investigation (Beck, 2013).

Parameters

The study was limited to a single industry—the US defense industry—and focused on a specific American corporation that operates in that industry. It focused on only executive-level women, so the participant pool did not include nonexecutive women. Additionally, the research did not include male participants.

Definitions of Terms

The following definitions clarify the study's terminology and ensure consistency in interpretation and understanding throughout this dissertation.

Advocacy: Intentional activities initiated by leaders or individuals in positions of power to influence outcomes (Velasco et al., 2022).

C-suite: A corporation's most senior executives, including the CEO and their direct reports (Guadalupe et al., 2014).

Defense Industry: A group of companies that provide goods and services to the DoD (Guajardo, 2020).

Executive: A member of a company or corporation's top management team (Guadalupe et al., 2014).

Gender Diversity: Equitable female representation in a specific area of interest, e.g., leadership or corporate boards (Yao, 2023).

Industry: A distinct group of profit-making enterprises (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Mentorship is a relationship of personal nurturing in which one individual (mentor) helps another individual (mentee) by providing professional advice and counsel (Helms et al., 2016).

Sponsorship: A relationship that goes beyond advice and counsel and involves senior executives leveraging their influence and positions of power to advocate for someone's advancement (Helms et al., 2016).

Summary and Forecast

This introductory chapter presented an overview of the study by describing the research's background, purpose, approach, significance, delimitations, limitations, and vocabulary. Chapter 2 constructs the study's theoretical framework via a literature review related to the research questions. Chapter 3 describes the research design employed to conduct the study, particularly the data collection and analysis methodology. Chapter 4 presents the study results in the form of data generated and analyzed through the application of the research design. Chapter 5 discusses study findings and conclusions related to the research questions and reviewed literature. This concluding chapter also addresses the implications of the findings for practice, research, and leadership.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter reviews and references literature related to this study's purpose and research questions. This phenomenological study aimed to understand how multiple systems influenced the experiences of current and former women from a top US defense corporation and enabled them to achieve C-suite status at that company or another company. This study's phenomenon of interest is multiple systems influencing executives' experiences and helping them succeed. The researcher's methodology for exploring this phenomenon involved using the following questions to explore and understand how these systems influenced these executive women's experiences:

- How do women executives describe their experiences with support systems?
- How do women executives describe their experiences with learning systems?
- How do women executives describe their experiences with career advancement systems?

The researcher leveraged Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as the framework to explore and understand this phenomenon. Given the focus and purpose of the research, this section contains reviews and references to literature related to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and literature on various systems that influence women's career experiences. This chapter also includes synthesizing the literature and critiques of the studies referenced.

Organization of Review

This section describes Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as the framework the researcher leveraged to explore and understand the phenomenon. After the

detailed framework, there is a literature review and references to relevant studies that have used Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to explore systems that influence individuals' experiences or outcomes. Since the researcher explored a phenomenon related to three enabling systems—support networks, professional development and learning, and career advancement—this chapter includes literature reviews and references pertaining to these systems.

After a description of the theoretical framework, the literature review is divided into the following four sections:

- Studies that leveraged Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.
- Research and theory about support networks for women leaders and executives.
- Research and theory about professional development and learning for women leaders and executives.
- Research and theory about career advancement for women leaders and executives.

A summary analysis of prominent themes and findings in the reviewed literature is at the end of the chapter.

Theoretical Framework

The researcher leveraged Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as the lens to explore the research question and phenomenon—namely, systems that influence women's experiences and enable them to achieve C-suite status in top US defense corporations successfully. Bronfenbrenner (1979) theorized that an individual's development is influenced by various interconnected environmental systems, from the person's immediate environment to the broader societal culture. Bronfenbrenner modeled the theory as a nested structure of concentric circles, with the developing individual or

person of interest in the center, surrounded by four systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, all of which influence the developing individual differently.

This research leveraged an adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to explore various systems of influence for developing executives and how the systems influenced the developing executives' experiences and career outcomes. Figure 1 depicts the adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model, with the developing executive at the center of the model, including their personal characteristics, qualifications, experiences, competencies, education, values, and beliefs.

The first level of Bronfenbrenner's model is the microsystem, representing the immediate environment in which the developing individual operates. Bronfenbrenner (1979) stated that the microsystem has the most potent influence over the developing person. In the adapted model, the microsystem represents the people the executive regularly engages (e.g., family, leaders, peers, staff [followers], mentors, and sponsors) and the relationships among the people and the environments in which the executive operates. The developing executive's environment includes the company's headquarters, home office, field offices, and workplaces where the person's teams operate. For the developing executive, the microsystem is where most of the executive's interactions occur, and according to Bronfenbrenner (1979), this is part of the ecological system that wields the most influence over the developing executive. Hence, the researcher's goal was to explore the influence of the microsystem participants, such as family members, leaders, staff, mentors, sponsors, and the workplace environment on the developing executive.

The mesosystem is the second level of the model, and it represents environments where the person actively participates and where interactions and interrelations occur between two or more microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For this adapted ecological systems model, the mesosystem includes communication, interactions, and interrelatedness between microsystem components, including the engagement, communication, and interactions between the developing executive's leader, peers, mentors, sponsors, and even family and friends in their environments. The researcher aimed to determine how these interactions and the interrelatedness among the microsystem components influenced the experiences of the executives.

The exosystem is the next level, representing environments the developing individual may affect or be affected by; however, the person does not actively engage in the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the adapted model, the exosystem includes people, functional groups, and environments with which the developing executive does not immediately or regularly interact; however, they do affect the executive—for example, the company's talent management process, learning and development, succession planning, corporate culture, the board of directors, and the industry in which the company operates. The researcher explored how these programmatic efforts, relationships, and interactions influenced the experiences of the sampled executive women.

The macrosystem is the outermost level of the model, representing societal norms, culture, beliefs, economics, politics, and more (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For the developing executive, this environment is the most distant; however, there are potential environmental influences on the corporation that could directly or indirectly affect the

developing executive's microsystem. These influences include legal and ethics challenges, beliefs about women in leadership, focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion or corporate social responsibility, or customers' perspectives, priorities, budgets, and spending. The chronosystem is the final component of the model, which Bronfenbrenner (1986) added later to indicate how time influences the developing person.

Review of Research About Leveraging Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems

Theory

Multiple studies have used Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to explore how various environmental systems influence individuals, situations, and outcomes. Although these studies have focused on different environmental domains, industries, and countries, some aspects apply to this study. Specifically, these studies have leveraged Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to explore systems influencing individuals' experiences and outcomes.

In the healthcare industry, Hines-Martin et al. (2009) leveraged Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework to study and better understand recruitment and retention in nursing and healthcare—specifically exploring how environmental systems, including community structures and processes, influence minority individuals. Their research provided a more in-depth understanding of community systems, processes, and patterns influencing success in increasing recruitment and retention rates.

Researchers have also used Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework in the field of education. Price and McCallum (2015) leveraged Bronfenbrenner's model to examine ecological factors influencing teachers' well-being and fitness in their interpretive qualitative study. The study included 120 purposefully selected participant teachers from

South Australia's preservice and middle schools to respond to a survey with two questions regarding what is important to them as teachers. From the student's perspective, McLinden (2017) leveraged Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a lens to assess the proximal and distal influences on part-time students' experiences in higher education. The framework helped the researcher frame and better understand the different sources of influences on part-time students' learning experiences over time.

Other researchers have also leveraged Bronfenbrenner's framework and model to explore and understand how various processes and systems influence individuals' experiences as they migrate and adapt to new cultural environments. Dryden-Peterson et al. (2017) used the framework to explore how local and global resource and support systems influenced the educational success of Somali refugees in Kenya. Babatunde-Sowole et al. (2016) used an adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's model to examine interactive processes between African migrant women and their environments and reveal the links between the individual's inner resources, family resources, external systems, and the larger environment. Additionally, Cigrand et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study that explored the experiences of immigrants and refugees who migrated to the United States, examining their experiences before, during, and after the journey and their mental health and counseling needs. The researchers leveraged Bronfenbrenner's process-person-context-time (PPCT) model to understand the migrants' experiences as they moved through various cultures and systems, exploring the process or dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments, the person or individual's characteristics, the context or environmental systems around the person, and time. The

researchers presented thematic findings using Bronfenbrenner's framework to provide an understanding of the migrants' experiences.

Researchers have also leveraged Bronfenbrenner's theory to explore various aspects of leadership and organizations. Sanders (2019) used the theory as a framework for exploring authentic leadership in the church, examining different factors and facets of the ecological system that directly influence the developing leader over time. Moore et al. (2020) leveraged the theory as a lens to explore and better understand inclusive organizations, examining the different levels of influence and coordination needed to establish an inclusive work environment for Sephora.

The above-referenced studies are relevant to this research because they provide insight into how researchers have leveraged Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to explore how various systems influence individuals' experiences and research outcomes.

Review of Research and Theory About Support Systems for Women

Researchers such as Neal (2007) have contended that one of the most valuable aspects of having a support network is to help individuals maneuver in new or uncharted territory while retaining authenticity. Neal provided a detailed account of how successful female executives supported a rising female executive, including how they regularly engaged as mentors, coaches, and career counselors for the female executive when she was at a career crossroad and needed wisdom from seasoned executives. This study highlights the importance of a seasoned executive support network to provide wisdom and guidance for rising and aspiring executive women.

Block (2016) made a case for successful women helping other women succeed by highlighting how serving as mentors to other women helps address the underrepresentation of women in leadership in higher education. In this case study, Block contended that successful women have the opportunity and responsibility to help other women by serving as sponsors, coaches, counselors, advocates, role models, and guides for the next generation of women leaders. Block acknowledged that men can and should mentor women while stressing the importance of successful women leading the way. One of Block's colleagues stated, "We need to be sending the elevator back down to pick up other women" (p. 8).

Dashper (2019) conducted a case study on the events industry to explore the paradoxical nature of women's mentoring programs, examining the positive and negative influences of women-only mentoring on career success. Dashper employed a theoretical framework that included concepts related to paradox, gender neutrality, and gender fatigue and explored workplace norms for successful workers and leaders (which can be masculine-oriented), gender stereotypes, masculine discourses of success, and the challenges that women encounter as they try to identify mentors who will champion their careers. From a paradoxical perspective, the researcher questioned whether mentoring programs geared toward women mentors reinforce masculine discourse in work environments while helping women grow their networks and access opportunities. Although the findings indicate that mentoring benefits mentors and mentees, some participants noted that establishing gendered mentoring programs sends the wrong message—namely, that women-only mentoring programs suggest that women are weak and need special attention compared to their male counterparts.

Using a qualitative comparative analysis, Dwivedi (2018) addressed the role of men as a part of the support network, exploring the role male predecessor CEOs can play in helping women succeed as CEOs. In this case study of top American corporations, the researchers considered two ways men can help women succeed by serving as gatekeepers: 1) actively engage in hiring, selecting, and socializing incoming women executives and 2) set and manage expectations regarding the role, particularly as it relates to male-typed schema about women's abilities to lead. The researchers acknowledged the existence of stereotypes and male-typed leadership schemas as pervasive barriers for women who aspire to top leadership positions in corporations; however, they contended that male predecessors could play a vital role in countering these perspectives by serving as inclusionary gatekeepers. The researchers suggested the predecessor's tenure, presence, and power, combined with the female's origin, inherited performance conditions, and power to shape outcomes, could be a recipe for success in helping women succeed as CEOs (Dwivedi, 2018). The researchers conducted studies over 20 years with mixed results, indicating that certain enabling factors and local conditions set the conditions for male predecessors to effectively serve as gatekeepers to support female succession to CEO positions.

Moser and Branscombe (2022) studied the impact of male allyship on women's experiences in male-dominated work environments. The study assessed whether men's commitment to be allies for women in environments such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), where women are underrepresented, will reduce identity threats and help organizations retain women. The researchers conducted three quantitative studies in which they hypothesized that the presence of male allies for

women in male-dominated environments such as STEM reduces the effects of underrepresentation, including feeling isolated and lacking support. The research results supported the hypothesis, demonstrating that commitment to male allyship positively influences women's experiences and the retention of women in male-dominated environments (Moser & Branscombe, 2022).

Park et al. (2023) explored the topic of women's support networks by studying the influences of personal and social networks on women's organizational effectiveness. Based on survey results from 974 married female manager participants, the study concluded that supportive leadership and positive spillover between work and family positively influence female managers' organizational effectiveness. Park et al.'s study provides a better understanding of the positive spillover between work and family as a mediator between family social support and organizational effectiveness.

Brock and Rowlands (2019) explored the emotional component of success for women who made it to the C-suite of organizations in the United States and the United Kingdom. Leveraging an electronic survey as the research instrument, the researchers explored the careers of 50 senior executives, mainly in the United States. The researchers examined the problem via three main research questions: 1) the positive and negative emotions that women express regarding their journey, 2) the patterns that define their lives, and 3) change recommendations for future leaders. The findings indicated that positive emotions dominated, despite sacrifices and negative emotions; women experienced excitement, gratitude, and pride that overshadowed feelings of sometimes feeling overwhelmed. Regarding life patterns, Brock and Rowlands's (2019) findings revealed that most women expected and pivoted to senior leadership roles early in their

careers, they were placed in or applied for jobs for which they had potential, and they attributed success to hard work, teamwork, persistence, resilience, and risk-taking. Recommendations for future female leaders involve women supporting and helping build confidence in other women (Brock & Rowlands, 2019).

Review of Research About Professional Development for Women

Kotlyar et al. (2015) explored how peer coaching, as a form of career community, influences leadership development. This study posited that career development often occurs beyond a person's immediate workplace via support networks (often self-organized) and personal and peer coaching. Leveraging a qualitative approach, the researcher used interviews to gather responses from 17 middle- and upper-level managers who shared their experiences on how peer and personal coaching influenced their development over 12 months. The findings indicated that personal and peer coaching each deliver a distinct value vital to leadership and that a learning environment is also crucial for development (Kotlyar et al., 2015).

Walsh et al. (2016) used a qualitative study to explore what organizations can do to develop, advance, and retain more women in leadership positions. The researchers conducted interviews with 20 female executives in the hospitality industry in the United States. The goal was to understand better the opportunities companies have to invest in developing and advancing women's careers and retaining female talent. The researchers leveraged a social exchange framework, focusing on the perceived organizational support component, to explain how a company's investment in the working relationship with women can influence advancement and retention. Based on emergent themes, the

researchers proposed a work-exchange model that focuses on professional career development for women.

Martínez-Martínez et al. (2021) explored how authentic leadership programs can help women advance in their careers by breaking through glass ceilings while assisting organizations to address challenges with gender diversity in leadership. The researchers used a mixed-methods approach and an existing ALD program to examine the effectiveness of the program's techniques, tools, and processes to help women enhance their leadership skills and styles required for career advancement. The results showed how a development program such as ALD can catalyze authentic leadership, improve women's self-concept, raise self-efficacy and self-development, and lead women to take control of their careers (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2021).

In a recent study, Martín-Peña et al. (2023) explored factors that can limit and facilitate professional development for women executives and how these factors influence various career alternatives. The researchers examined personal factors such as personalities, skills, and training; organizational factors such as leadership, culture, networks, and support; and social factors such as gender stereotypes and public policies. The researchers identified three alternatives for career development—internal promotions, external promotion, and entrepreneurship—and modeled a multicriteria decision-making model using the various factors. The results demonstrated a strong correlation between organizational factors and internal promotions and between personal factors and internal promotions. There was also a strong correlation between training and development, education, and entrepreneurship as a preferred career alternative.

Additionally, there was a strong correlation between public policies, work-life balance, and entrepreneurship (Martín-Peña, 2023).

Clarke (2011) explored development programs for high-potential women to advance their careers and address the underrepresentation of women in management positions in organizations. The researcher used a qualitative approach involving phone interviews with High Impact Women in Leadership Program participants. The 17 participants were senior- and lower-level managers whom organizations had identified as having high leadership potential. The findings suggested the following: Women-only development programs support increasing women's self-confidence, learning new skills, and learning from others. Organizational culture and career choices also influence women's career advancement (Clarke, 2011).

In a study of Fortune Global 500 companies, Maher and Hastings (2023) examined executive coaching as a solution to gender diversity in leadership. This qualitative study involved interviews with seven executive coaches from the United Kingdom who had experience driving gender diversity in leadership. For this research, Maher and Hastings explored the following questions: 1) What approaches do coaches use to ensure alignment with the coach and the organization? 2) What frameworks do coaches use to support leaders? 3) What is the efficacy of the coaching framework? According to Maher and Hastings, emergent themes for this research were 1) the problem space is more significant than gender, 2) researchers must consider humanity before frameworks, and 3) success is not a simple notion. Based on the findings, executive coaching can be an avenue for professional development and, therefore, for achieving

gender diversity in leadership. However, the success of executive coaching depends on the people and situations.

Review of Research and Theory About Career Advancement for Women

Helms et al. (2016) extended the literature regarding developing and advancing women leaders by addressing the role of mentorship and sponsorship in career advancement, delineating between the two. Helms et al. conducted a qualitative study to explore the extent to which women in leadership distinguish between mentoring and sponsoring. The authors invited 29 women to participate in one of two focus groups, where the researchers asked women 12 questions designed to assess their perspectives and understanding of mentoring and sponsoring. Helms et al. suggested that mentoring involves a relationship of personal nurturing, helping individuals understand the informal organizational rules, and providing advice and counsel from mentor to mentee. Sponsorship, on the other hand, goes beyond advice and counsel and involves senior executives leveraging their influence and positions of power to advocate for someone's advancement. The research results aligned with the women's perspectives on mentoring and sponsoring and supported the notion that mentoring is beneficial. However, it is not enough to influence career advancement; women need sponsorship to advance their careers (Helms et al., 2016).

Using a mixed-methods approach, Kuntz and Livingston (2020) explored factors influencing women's career trajectories in New Zealand while examining the relationships between mentoring, executive coaching, and sponsorship. The researchers gathered data from 159 participants via online surveys to assess factors influencing their satisfaction with mentoring, coaching, and sponsoring and how these leadership

development initiatives influenced their career experiences. The researchers then extracted additional information from the responses to better understand the factors that helped or hindered their career progression. Although the study focused on women leaders in New Zealand, the challenges and opportunities are similar for women in executive positions in American corporations. Similar to the focus of the present research, this study focused on the positive aspects of addressing gender representation in leadership. The results indicated that networking support, executive coaching, and mentorship can positively influence career advancement for women in leadership. The study demonstrated a strong correlation between sponsorship satisfaction and career success, a slight association between executive coaching and success, and beliefs that women mostly attribute their success to personal drive (Kuntz & Livingston, 2020). The correlation between sponsorship and career success aligns with the findings of previous studies on factors that influence career success for women.

Mousa et al. (2021) explored how organizational strategies, practices, and policies advance women's careers. Like the current research, the researchers did not focus on barriers but rather on solutions to career advancement for women. Rather than focusing on ways to change the individual, the researchers explored ways organizations could leverage various interventions to support career advancement for women, specifically in healthcare leadership. The research used meta-synthesis to perform a systematic review and meta-synthesis of data from 91 studies from a mixture of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods in 13 countries and 16 sectors, including healthcare, government, academia, sports, finance, and information technology. The results concluded that the following categories of strategies were ones that organizations could leverage to support

women's career advancement: 1) organizational processes, 2) awareness and engagement, 3) mentoring and networking, 4) leadership engagement, and 5) support tools (Mousa et al., 2021).

Mousa, Skouteris, et al. (2022) extended their prior research on the influence of organizational interventions on women's career advancement to explore how organizational practices and conditions work together to advance women. Using a qualitative approach with a grounded theory method, these researchers built a model to leverage to explain how conditions work together to create a culture that advances women's careers. The researchers examined the experiences of 28 women in healthcare leadership and identified the following four elements as required for an organizational culture that advances women's careers: 1) identifying and actively addressing systemic barriers, 2) challenging gendered assumptions and expectations of leadership, 3) providing mentorship to shape women's career opportunities, and 4) determining how conditions influence women's credibility so that they can internalize a leadership identity (Mousa et al., 2022).

Using a qualitative research approach, Sexton et al. (2014) phenomenologically explored the career trajectories of 20 women who achieved CEO status at hospitals by exploring various inflection points on their journeys and how they influenced these women's careers. The researchers identified 25 inflection points in the following areas: education and training, experience, career management, family, networking, mentorship, and sponsorship. Additional findings were as follows: 1) inflection points differed based on functional area, 2) inflection points were more pronounced earlier in women's careers,

and 3) the two common inflection points for women were obtaining a graduate degree and having Chief Operating Officer (COO) experience.

In another related study, Mousa, Teede, et al. (2022) examined prioritizing organizational interventions to advance women in leadership. The team used data from three existing sources for the survey that they launched using Delphi processes. The results of the studies suggested the following prioritization for organizational efforts to advance women in leadership: 1) a committed and supportive leadership team that takes actions required for a positive and equitable culture; 2) improved governance that promotes transparency regarding promotion processes; 3) formal and informal mentoring opportunities for women, with training for mentors; 4) active leadership and development opportunities; and 5) flexible working arrangements (Mousa et al., 2022).

Spencer et al. (2019) examined factors that influenced the careers of 57 current and former female CEOs and advanced them to the top positions of their organizations. Specifically, researchers from Korn Ferry and the Rockefeller Foundation partnered to explore the lives of women who made it to the top, investigating what helped and hindered their progress on their journey to the CEO position. Spencer et al. presented the findings regarding what the organization can do and what women can do. In terms of the organization, the findings suggest organizations do the following: 1) have a strong purpose and a good culture, 2) put women in core operational business roles early, 3) use midcareer moves (rotational and stretch assignment) to broaden leadership skills, 4) leverage mentoring to nurture leadership potential in women by putting them in roles and giving them experiences that prepare them for the CEO role, 5) update thinking and language about leadership to eliminate masculine speak or male gender typing for senior

roles like CEO, and 6) have robust, objective assessment and succession planning processes (Spencer et al., 2019). In terms of women, the findings recommend the following: 1) start with a quantitative degree and an operational job; 2) do not act like a man or support sexist behavior; 3) do not hide your light, which includes making career aspirations known and networking internally and externally; and 4) persist despite setbacks and disappointments (Spencer et al., 2019).

The Korn Ferry Institute studied former and current CEOs of Fortune 1000 companies across diverse domains to assess what factors drove women (6% of the total number of CEOs) to the top positions of these corporations (Stevenson, 2018). For this qualitative study, Korn Ferry researchers conducted structured interviews with 57 CEO participants. They asked questions about critical events such as pivotal moments and setbacks that influenced (enabled or hindered) their career advancement and compared results against their Korn Ferry CEO benchmark (Stevenson, 2018). Some of the key findings are as follows:

- The women CEOs did not set out to become CEOs.
- More than 40% had STEM degrees.
- The women CEOs were driven by challenge and motivated by purpose.
- The women were confident yet humble, realizing they could not succeed independently.

Jackson and Bouchard (2019) explored the critical success factors for a successful career in the executive ranks of US federal government services. The scope of the study was African American women. Although the results identified mentoring as a critical success factor for African American women advancing to senior management and

leadership positions, they focused on the differences in how Whites experienced mentoring compared to minorities by analyzing the career trajectories of the participants (Jackson & Bouchard, 2019). Some key research findings from prior research were as follows: 1) high-potential White managers experienced career success much earlier than minorities, 2) high-potential minorities had mentoring relationships and corporate sponsors, 3) successful minority executives had close relationships with mentors who helped them build confidence and competence, and 4) minorities who engaged in fundamental mentoring relationships had careers that peaked in management. Based on their findings, Jackson and Bouchard suggested that mentoring supports career progression and that mentors can support their mentees or protégées by helping them connect with sponsors.

Although the research is dated, Walsh and Borkowski (1999) provided relevant information on the criticality of mentoring relationships and how they influence career mobility while assessing the role of gender in the mentoring equation. Walsh and Borkowski described mentoring as more than counseling and advice, noting it is an opportunity to shape careers by building skills and competencies, modeling professional behaviors, and providing the political sponsorship needed for career progression. With a quantitative approach, the researchers used a survey of 323 participants to assess the impact of mentoring on career development in the healthcare industry. The results concluded that women are more likely to engage in formal mentoring relationships than men, mentoring positively influences career development, and although gender differences influence the decision to engage in mentoring, the expected outcomes of mentoring are similar between women and men (Walsh & Borkowski, 1999).

Using data and lessons learned from multiple case studies, Mattis (2001) of the Catalyst Group provided a comprehensive set of recommended actions and behaviors that organizational executives and middle managers can leverage to advance more women to leadership positions in the business. Catalyst is known for its research that focuses on ways organizations can eliminate barriers and leverage opportunities to advance more women to leadership. One of Catalyst's critical findings at the time of the article's publication was that success in advancing women depends on commitment from the organization's upper echelon. According to Mattis, some of the critical roles of senior executives in advancing women in corporate positions are as follows: 1) communicating the business case; 2) providing resources for benchmarking; 3) building commitment, ownership, and sponsorship for action; 4) providing strategic direction; 5) establishing accountability; 6) sponsoring women for leadership positions; and 7) implementing succession planning processes. In addition to providing recommended actions, the Catalyst Group also provided case studies to reflect organizations that had successfully implemented the recommended actions. Although the study is dated, the recommendations are still relevant.

Wyatt and Silvester (2015) leveraged the attribution theoretical framework to explore career progression, focusing on the commonalities and differences in experiences between White senior managers and Black and minority ethnic (BME) leaders in the United Kingdom. According to attribution theory, individuals engage in sense-making when encountering surprising or threatening situations to render more predictability and control (Wyatt & Silvester, 2015). Using a qualitative approach, the researchers interviewed 40 participants, 20 White and 20 BMEs. The researchers identified similar

themes from both groups—visibility, networks, development, and leader support. However, the two diverged on what the thematic areas meant—that is, how these influenced their experiences and how they experienced specific incidents during their career progression. The researchers concluded that career progression differs for some groups—in this case, BME leaders, impacting the sense-making and maneuverability of the career labyrinth.

Summary of Findings and Themes Within Reviewed Literature

This section provided a literature review and references regarding studies that have leveraged Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory to explore systems that influence individuals’ experiences or outcomes, as well as reviews on the following systems of influence: support, learning, and career advancement. The literature review represents the theoretical framework for viewing the research questions and the phenomenon the study addresses. This section summarizes prominent themes and findings within the framework, which will be a basis for comparing study findings to relevant literature in Chapter 5.

Summary of Themes/Findings About Support Systems for Women

Finding: Successful Women Can Help Other Women Succeed

The first emergent theme relative to support systems is that successful women are essential sources of support for other aspiring women. According to Neal (2007) and Block (2016), these seasoned executives can serve as role models, mentors, coaches, sponsors, and advocates for aspiring female leaders and executives. In studying how emotions influence success regarding career advancement, participants’

recommendations for future female leaders involved women providing support to and helping to build confidence in other women (Brock & Rowlands, 2019).

Finding: Men Can Serve as Allies to Influence Women's Success

A key finding regarding support systems is that men can serve as inclusionary gatekeepers to challenge stereotypical thinking and male-typed schema for leadership. According to Dwivedi (2018), these executive men have the tenure, presence, and power to influence women's career trajectories. Moser and Branscombe's (2022) findings also supported the hypothesis that commitment to male allyship positively influences women's experiences and retention of women in male-dominated environments.

Finding: Gendered Mentoring Send the Wrong Message

A key finding from a paradoxical study that Dashper (2019) conducted is that programs geared toward female mentors reinforce masculine discourse in work environments. Some participants noted that establishing gendered mentoring programs sends the wrong message—namely, that women are weak and need special attention compared to their male counterparts.

Summary of Themes/Findings About Professional Development for Women

Finding: Coaching Influences Professional Development

Coaching emerged as a critical theme and finding. Specifically, research findings from Kotlyar et al. (2015) indicated that coaching is essential for preparing women for executive positions. Maher and Hastings (2023) also suggested that coaching drives gender diversity in leadership.

Finding: Professional Development Programs Can Influence Career

Development

A second key finding is that established leadership development programs catalyze leadership and motivate women to take control of their careers (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2021). Clarke's (2011) study of women-only development programs also revealed that such programs support increasing women's self-confidence, learning new skills, and learning from others. Organizational culture and career choices also influence women's career advancement (Clarke, 2011).

Summary of Themes/Findings About Career Advancement for Women

Finding: Mentoring Influences Career Advancement for Women

The first theme and finding regarding career advancement is the criticality for women to have and leverage mentoring relationships for career advancement. Multiple researchers, including Kuntz and Livingston (2020), have highlighted that mentoring positively influences career advancement.

Finding: Sponsorship Influences Career Advancement for Women

Sponsorship is also a theme and a critical finding. Researchers such as Helms et al. (2016) have noted that mentoring differs from sponsoring and that more than mentoring is needed, as women need senior executives to advocate for their promotions to leadership and executive positions and provide advice and counsel.

Finding: Organizations Influence Career Advancement for Women

Mousa et al. (2021) identified the following organizational interventions to support women's career advancement: organizational processes, awareness and engagement, mentoring and networking, leadership engagement, and support tools.

Mousa, Teede, et al. (2022) suggested the following prioritization for organizational efforts to advance women in leadership: 1) a committed and supportive leadership team that takes actions required for a positive and equitable culture, 2) improved governance that promotes transparency regarding promotion processes, 3) formal and informal mentoring opportunities for women, with training for mentors, 4) active leadership and development opportunities, and 5) flexible working arrangements. Mousa, Skouteris, et al. (2022) identified the following four elements as required for an organizational culture that advances women's careers: 1) identifying and actively addressing systemic barriers, 2) challenging gendered assumptions and expectations of leadership, 3) providing mentorship to shape women's career opportunities, and 4) determining how conditions influence women's credibility so that they can internalize a leadership identity.

According to Spencer et al. (2019), organizations and women share responsibilities for advancing women's careers. The findings suggest that organizations can provide a culture with opportunities for experience, learning, mentoring, and preparedness for the CEO role. Additionally, women can take action to ensure readiness regarding educational degrees and gaining operational experience, demonstrate nonmasculine behaviors, have zero tolerance for abusive behaviors, network, and persist (Spencer et al., 2019). Regarding education and experience, Sexton et al. (2014) noted the importance of having advanced degrees and COO experience for women's advancement to CEO status.

Forecast of Chapter 3

Chapter 2 provided details of the theoretical framework for viewing the research question, with a comprehensive literature review and references related to the study's

purpose and research questions—namely, systems that influence executive women’s experiences and enable them to achieve C-suite status in top US defense corporations. Chapter 3 will provide the study’s methodology and include a reiteration of the research purpose, the research design and plan, and the procedures for data sampling, data collection, data analysis, validity, and interpretation of findings.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

According to Flabbi et al. (2019), women are almost ten times less represented than men in the top positions of corporations. Getting more women into the C-suite will support efforts to achieve gender diversity in leadership, particularly in the upper echelon of American corporations. Gender diversity in leadership matters because it influences organizational innovation and performance, economic performance, and the performance of other aspiring female leaders. Having women in executive and C-suite positions encourages, motivates, and inspires other women to pursue higher levels. Highlighting the experiences of successful C-suite women demonstrates that there is a path to success for aspiring female leaders and executives. Whereas most research on gender diversity has focused on the barriers to success, this study focused on the path to success for aspiring female executives.

Despite the barriers, some women have successfully advanced to the top positions of American corporations. This study explored the lived experiences of these women and the systems that influenced and enabled their success. Therefore, the researcher used a qualitative approach and phenomenological design to explore the research questions and the phenomenon these women experienced on their journey to the C-suite.

Introduction

The researcher seeks meaning in the world in which she lives and operates and, therefore, chose a qualitative research approach, using a phenomenological design to explore and understand the phenomenon that enabled women to achieve executive and C-

suite status at a top US defense corporation. Given the three primary approaches to research—qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods—the researcher opted to use a qualitative approach, which is more suitable for exploring, deepening one’s understanding of experiences, and ascribing meaning to social or human situations (Creswell, 2018; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

Because this research aimed to explore and better understand how a phenomenon influenced the lived experiences of a group of women and enabled them to achieve executive and C-suite status, phenomenology was the most suitable methodology (Greening, 2019). According to Manen (2007), phenomenology provides a deeper understanding of lived experiences and helps people see meaning in the world. Phenomenology helps the researcher make sense of people’s experiences (Patton, 2020).

For this study, the researcher used a phenomenological design to explore lived experiences with regard to a phenomenon—namely, systems that enabled these women to achieve C-suite status at American corporations. Beck (2021) suggested that phenomenology allows a privileged view of the meaning of certain experiences and allows researchers to understand the participants’ perspectives.

This qualitative approach and phenomenological design shaped many aspects of the design process, including the study’s title, the research problem and questions, and the methods the researcher chose to conduct the study. The qualitative methods included purposeful, yet criterion-based, data sampling; data collection via one-on-one interviews with participants; inductive and deductive data analyses of participant responses to questions; data interpretation from data coding and themes; and data validation via member checking.

Research Purpose

This study aims to understand better how multiple systems—support, learning, and career advancement—influenced the experiences of current and former women from a top US defense corporation and enabled them to achieve C-suite status. In examining these areas, the researcher explored how these executives handled challenges, including how they managed and maneuvered in situations involving barriers, how they persevered, overcame obstacles, and achieved success despite adversity, and their decision-making strategies on their journey to the C-suite. The researcher leveraged Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory as a framework to better understand the influences of various environmental systems on women’s experiences on their journey to the top positions in their organizations. The premise of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theory is that to understand a developing individual, one must examine and understand the person in the context of the environments and relationships in which the person exists and how various interconnected systems influence the developing person. For this study, the developing executive is the person of interest.

This research’s key objective is to better understand how various ecological systems enabled executives to achieve C-suite status as they operated and interacted in various environments. Other research objectives are as follows:

- To provide helpful information from successful women executives to aspiring women executives on how to engage and interact in various environments and achieve success.
- To contribute to the current literature on gender diversity in leadership.

- To extend the research relative to the applicability of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to this research, which will examine systems that influence women's ability to achieve executive-level status.

Research Question

The central research question for this study is as follows: How did specific systems influence the experiences of current and former women from a top US defense corporation and enable them to achieve C-suite status? The phenomenon for this study is that multiple systems influenced the executives' experiences and enabled them to succeed. The methodology involved the researcher's use of the following questions to explore and understand better how these systems influenced the developing executive:

- How do women executives describe their experiences with support systems?
- How do women executives describe their experiences with learning systems?
- How do women executives describe their experiences with career advancement systems?

According to Korstjens and Moser (2017), the research question can change during the research process because data collection and analysis can sharpen the researcher's lens. However, the changes should not be drastic; they should sharpen the research focus.

Research Design

The three primary approaches to research are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods; the qualitative method was the most appropriate approach based on the nature of the research problem. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research is appropriate for situations where the researcher intends to study things in their natural

setting and try to make sense of phenomena based on the meanings that the participants provide. This study involves interpreting and attempting to make sense of women's lived experiences relative to a phenomenon. Rowan and Huston (1997) suggested that quantitative research contributes little to social and psychological dynamics. On the contrary, qualitative research is specifically designed to observe social interactions and better understand people's perspectives and experiences, including why they behave and act as they do (Rowan & Huston, 1997).

Research designs are types of inquiry for a given study, and there are various types of inquiries for the three research approaches (Creswell, 2018; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). There are multiple research designs; however, phenomenology, narratives, grounded theory, ethnographies, and case studies are the major ones (Korstjens and Moser, 2017; Lewis, 2015). The type of design a researcher chooses depends on the research focus and problems. This study employed a phenomenological inquiry design to explore the questions and phenomena associated with this study.

Nature of the Methodology

Phenomenological research, which has its roots in philosophy and psychology, explores and attempts to describe the common meaning of the lived experiences of multiple individuals around a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Neubauer et al. (2019) suggested that phenomenology is unique in that it serves to help individuals learn from others' lived experiences. Phenomenologists explore what all participants have in common as they experience a specific phenomenon, including what they experienced and how they experienced it (Neubauer et al., 2019). For phenomenological studies, the researcher explores and describes a phenomenon that individuals have

experienced by listening to the stories that they share regarding their lived experiences (Creswell, 2018).

Appropriateness of the Methodology to the Research

Butina et al. (2015) indicated that phenomenological research is appropriate when research focuses on understanding the essence of participants' experiences and the research problem involves describing the essence of a lived phenomenon. According to Butina et al., some of the critical features of a phenomenological study are the researcher explores how participants describe, perceive, and make sense of their experiences; data collection involves in-depth participant interviews; data analysis focuses on explaining what individuals experienced and how they experienced it; and the study results provide a detailed description of the essence of the phenomenon.

There are two significant types of phenomenology: hermeneutical and transcendental phenomenology. According to Creswell (2018), hermeneutical phenomenology focuses on lived experiences, starting with identifying a phenomenon that aligns with a researcher's area of concern. Next, they identify associated themes that constitute the nature of the lived experience and then proceed to write a description to provide the meaning of the lived experience. According to Greening (2019), Moustakas's transcendental phenomenology involves the following procedures: identifying the phenomenon of interest, bracketing out the researcher's experiences with the phenomenon, collecting data from multiple individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, analyzing the data by reducing information from collected data to significant statements and combining statements into themes, and developing both textual and structural descriptions that convey the essence of the phenomenon.

This study employed transcendental phenomenology. The phenomenon involved systems that enable women to achieve C-suite status in American corporations despite barriers. The researcher has experience with the phenomenon and, therefore, employed bracketing to focus on the participants' experiences rather than hers.

Research Plan

This section provides the detailed plan the researcher employed for this study. An essential element of the plan is the researcher's worldview, which is "a basic set of beliefs that guide actions" (Creswell, 2018, p. 5). The researcher conducted this study using a worldview of social constructivism. Social constructivists seek meaning in the world in which they live and operate, and they generally use open-ended questions to engage with those they seek to interpret and understand (Kahlke, 2014). Another component of the plan is the research design, and (as previously noted) the researcher used a transcendental phenomenological research design, which involved identifying the phenomenon of interest, bracketing out the researcher's experiences with the phenomenon, collecting data from multiple individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, analyzing the data by reducing information from collected data to significant statements and combining statements into themes; and develop both textual and structural descriptions that convey the phenomenon's essence (Greening, 2019).

The plan also identified and described the essential procedural methods used: participant sampling and selection, data collection, data analysis (including coding and identification of major themes), interpretation, and validity. Additionally, the plan describes the researcher's roles, responsibilities, and biases (with associated mitigation

plans). Lastly, the plan includes methods to ensure the data's validity and trustworthiness and the research process.

Selection and Description of Population

Sampling is selecting or searching for participants who can inform the research. According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), in qualitative research, sampling occurs deliberately via various strategies, including purposive, criterion, theoretical, convenience, and snowball. For this study, the researchers employed criterion sampling, which involves selecting participants according to predetermined criteria of importance.

The criteria for participation were that the participant was a woman who reached the executive level at a top US defense company and progressed to the C-suite of that corporation or another. For this phenomenological study, all the women had to have experienced the stated phenomenon—namely, systems that enabled them to succeed—and be willing to share stories of their experiences about the phenomenon.

Sample Selection and Description

According to Korstjens and Moser (2017), qualitative research uses smaller sample sizes because the findings are not meant to be generalized. Moser and Korstjens (2018) suggested the following sample sizes for qualitative studies—ethnographic: 25–50 interviews and observations, including four to six focus group discussions; phenomenological: fewer than ten interviews; grounded theory: 20–30 interviews; and content analysis: 15–20 interviews or three to four focus groups.

The researcher identified women who met the established criteria from various sources, including social media, company websites, and other professional networks. Based on the initial inquiry of the various sources, the researcher indicated that the total

number of individuals who met the criteria was between 20 and 30 and set a goal to engage at least 50% of the available pool of participants, which would be 10–15. Upon further inquiry, the researcher concluded that 21 people met the criteria. Of the women that met the criteria, one was Asian American (4.7%), one was Hispanic American (4.7%), seven were African American (33%), and the remaining 12 were Caucasian American (57%).

All the invited participants were women. The education levels of the invitees ranged from bachelor's to doctorate. The invited participants' industry experience ranged from 25 to 44 years.

Communication With the Sample

Upon receiving approval from the AU IRB, the researcher began recruiting participants for the study. The recruitment process began with the researcher sending direct messages via LinkedIn to individuals who met the established criteria. In the message, the researcher introduced herself and the research by summarizing the proposed study and offering to provide more information via email if the individual was interested.

Upon receiving affirmative participation responses from 13 of the 18 invitees via LinkedIn messaging, the researcher requested email and other contact information. Eleven of the 13 provided email addresses, and the researcher sent a copy of the consent form and interview questions to each of them or their delegate (e.g., executive assistant, technical assistant, or communications representative). The researcher then requested available timeslots from the individual or the delegate within a given timeframe to conduct a 1-hour one-on-one interview.

After agreeing on the interview date and time, the researcher scheduled a Zoom meeting and sent the Zoom link to the participant or her delegate. In that email, the researcher requested that the executive participant read, sign, and submit the consent form before the interview commences.

Response Rate

Phenomenological studies can have participant pools as small as three to four or as large as 10–15 (Creswell, 2018). Polkinghorne (1989) recommended that researchers interview between 5 and 25 individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, asking what they have experienced and what situations have influenced their experiences.

Table 1 below presents a list of phenomenological studies with different sample sizes.

Table 1

Sample Sizes for Qualitative Studies

Study	Researchers	Sample Size
Key Stakeholders’ Lived Experiences While Implementing an Aligned Curriculum: A Phenomenological Study	Aguas (2020)	12 participants
An Exploration of Leadership in Virtual Communities of Practice	Chrisentary and Baret (2015)	15 leaders
Experiences of Advisors/Mentors in Developing Leadership Emergence in a Post Conflict, Marginalized Society: A Phenomenological Study	Pyzdrowski (2017)	10 participants
Global Leadership Development: A Phenomenological Study	Subrahmanyam (2019)	12 corporate executives
May I See Your ID, Please? An Explorative Study of the Professional Identity of Undergraduate Medical Education Leaders	Sundberg et al. (2017)	14 educational leaders

The researcher invited 18 of 21 women who met the criteria to participate in the study (three women had no contact information). One of the 18 women was Hispanic American (5.5%), ten were African American (38.9%), and 10 were Caucasian American (55.6%). Thirteen of the 18 agreed to participate; however, only 11 actively engaged in the research because two of the initial 13 did not follow up on requests for email addresses after multiple requests. The final number of participants is acceptable based on suggestions from research scholars regarding the sample size (Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Polkinghorne, 1989). Of the 11 participants, five were African American (45.5%), five were Caucasian American (45.5%), and one was Hispanic American (9%). The final response rate for the study was 11 of 18 (61%), which was greater than the desired 50% response rate.

Data Collection

According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), the three most frequently used data collection methods for qualitative research are interviews, observations, and focus groups. For phenomenology research, where the researcher's purpose is to elicit the participant's experiences, perceptions, or perspectives, in-depth interviews constitute the most appropriate data collection method (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

This study employed one-on-one qualitative interviews, using open-ended questions to generate data relevant to the research questions. According to Korstjens and Moser (2017), the qualitative researcher should use broad, open-ended questions to thoroughly explore the phenomenon of interest. Belotto (2018) suggested using unstructured, open-ended questions because it allows the researcher to elicit the same core information from all participants while probing them to share their experiences.

For phenomenological studies, Greening (2019) suggested that researchers use Moustakas's approach and collect data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon via in-depth interviews. Polkinghorne (1989) recommended that researchers interview between 5 and 25 individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, asking what they have experienced and what situations have influenced their experiences. The researcher interviewed 11 individuals who experienced a common phenomenon for this phenomenological study.

Nature of Phenomenological Data Collection

Researchers (Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Percy et al., 2015) have indicated that phenomenology is appropriate for researchers who aim to explore what all participants have in common as they experience a specific phenomenon. Percy et al. suggested that researchers use a phenomenology design to investigate the lived experiences of various psychological phenomena, including attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. Phenomenological research examines and attempts to describe the common meaning of the lived experiences of multiple individuals around a specific phenomenon by listening to the stories of such experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Some of the issues involved in data collection for phenomenology involve bracketing the researcher's experiences, access to participants, and the interview logistics or scheduling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bracketing is "putting aside one's presuppositions and what one knows about a phenomenon being studied so that one can see it without imposing past knowledge or experiences upon it" (Beck, 2013, p. 134). The researcher bracketed experiences to focus on the participants. For this study, bracketing

included notetaking, journaling, and creating a space to reflect on the participant responses, how the researcher experienced the interviews, and what the researcher needed to do to separate personal feelings and experiences and focus on the participants' responses and experiences.

For this phenomenological study, the researcher conducted singular interviews with each participant and agreed to follow up with participants if needed. To manage scheduling risks, the researcher engaged with the executive's delegate to schedule the interviews.

Appropriateness of the Technique. According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), in-depth interviews are the most appropriate method of data collection for phenomenological research when the researcher's purpose is to elicit the participant's experiences, perceptions, or perspectives. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), collecting data via interviews allows the researcher to elicit input and perspectives from individuals with experience with the phenomenon. For this qualitative study, the AU IRB approved the proposed phenomenological research design that would employ one-on-one virtual interviews with a pool of participants as an appropriate data collection method.

Development of Reliable/Valid/Trustworthy Materials/Instruments. Unlike quantitative research, which relies on questionnaires and instruments that other researchers establish, the researcher is the instrument for qualitative studies; therefore, they collect and interpret data (Creswell, 2018; Dodgson, 2019). For this study, the researcher established two forms of questions or pseudo instruments (hereafter called instruments) for data collection: demographic questions and broad, open-ended interview questions. The purpose of the demographic questions was to capture data about

participants that would allow the researcher to review and analyze the responses by ethnicity, education level, years in the industry, and position title, providing insight into similarities and differences based on the demographic factors. For this study, the researcher partnered with the committee chair and established three open-ended questions to allow participants to share stories of their lived career experiences and inform the research and phenomenon.

The IRB approved the two instruments for this qualitative research. The researcher used the first instrument to collect demographic information that might be helpful in the data analysis and interpretation procedures, including ethnicity, educational experience, and industry experience. The researcher used the second research instrument for the one-on-one interviews, using the following broad and open-ended questions with subquestions to guide the discussion:

- What experiences brought you here?
- What experiences kept you here?
- What strategies did you use for decision-making?

The researcher used the same IRB-approved instruments for all participant interviews. Both instruments are in Appendix A.

Procedure. Interviewing is one of the three most frequently used methods of data collection for qualitative research, where the goal is to help the researcher collect information that would ascribe meaning to the participants' lived experiences (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). This study's data collection involved virtual one-on-one qualitative interviews with each selected participant. The researcher used three high-level open-ended questions to gather views and opinions regarding the career experiences of the

female executive participants. The researcher conducted the interview sessions via Zoom, using video and audio recordings and handwritten notes to capture the participants' responses.

The first step in the data collection process involved the researcher contacting the participants or their delegates to describe the study and briefly request participation. After confirming the participant's interest and availability, the researcher shared goals, expected outcomes, interview questions, and the consent form, requesting review and submittal of the signed consent form prior to the interview commencing. Next, the researcher worked with the participant or her delegate to schedule a 1-hour interview with the participant using Zoom and backup instructions in case plans changed.

For each one-on-one interview, the researcher logged into Zoom and introduced the session by providing the interview guidelines and expectations at the beginning of each interview. Afterward, the researcher collected demographic information using a preestablished IRB-approved research instrument. The researcher then conducted the interview using the same research instrument with the interview questions and subquestions. This approach ensured that each participant had equal opportunity to respond to the same questions and allowed for potential question probing (e.g., "tell me more") to ensure clarity and detail.

Data Analysis

According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), data analysis is the process by which the researcher makes sense of data; therefore, the researcher must be totally immersed in the process. Stuckey (2015) suggested three steps to facilitate good qualitative data analysis: 1) reading through the data to create a storyline, 2) categorizing data into codes, and 3) using memos for clarification and interpretation. For phenomenology analysis, the purpose is to interpret and describe the meaning of participants' experiences by identifying major themes (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). According to Moser and Korstjens, the end result of a phenomenological study is a detailed description of the major themes that provide the meaning of the participants' lived experiences.

Nature of Thematic Analysis via Coding

Stuckey (2015) indicated the data analysis process involves multiple steps, including reviewing the data, transcribing and sanitizing the data collected from recorded participant interviews, and coding the data. Coding is the process of organizing and sorting qualitative data so that the researcher can easily categorize data that is similar in meaning (Stuckey, 2015). Maher (2018) described coding as categorizing and labeling data segments with a short name (a code) and using the codes to sort the data and better understand what is happening or has happened in the environment being studied. Codes can be predetermined (a priori), emergent, or combined (Stuckey, 2015).

For this study, the first step of the data analysis process involved the researcher reviewing the participants' interview responses collected via Zoom audio and handwritten notes. Then, the researcher used the Otter.ai transcription software to transcribe the audio data, comparing the transcribed files with the handwritten notes for

data integrity. After transcribing the audio data, the researcher organized the transcribed and handwritten files (by participant) in preparation for data analysis. The researcher also reviewed transcribed files for accuracy and sanitized the files to remove identifiable information and provide pseudonyms for the participants. Afterward, the researcher labeled the sanitized files according to the (pseudonymed) participant. Next, the researcher loaded participants' responses into an Excel spreadsheet and labeled the responses (by participant).

Stuckey (2015) stressed the importance of keeping the research purpose and question in mind and suggested that researchers think about the research question and the big picture—the storyline and the meta-narrative—before starting the coding process, asking, “What are the data telling me and how does it relate to my research question?” Doing so will help when the researcher develops themes to link to the storyline. Hence, the researcher reviewed the data (individually and collectively) multiple times, identifying common participant responses. Next, the researcher hand-coded the data using the most appropriate descriptors for common responses, using the participants' words. The researcher reviewed the coded data and identified themes to categorize and convey emerging findings relative to the research question and phenomenon. According to Belotto (2018), after the researcher identifies codes to label words and sentences with similar meanings, the researcher must also assess the codes, identify how multiple codes are linked, and categorize the themes into broad categories to leverage to convey the phenomenon's essence.

Application to the Data. According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), the result of a phenomenological study is a detailed description of the major themes that provide the

meaning of the participants' lived experiences. The themes resulting from data analysis informed the research question and phenomenon. Specifically, the researcher used these themes to convey emerging findings relative to the research question and phenomenon, describing the phenomenon's essence in terms of what the women experienced regarding the phenomenon and how it influenced their experience on the journey to the C-suite. For this study, the researcher used these themes to understand how these women executives experienced specific systems, per the emerging themes, and how these systems influenced their executive experiences.

Validity/Trustworthiness/Triangulation. According to Maher et al. (2018), trustworthiness is essential for evaluating qualitative studies. To ensure trustworthiness in research, Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggested the following criteria: 1) credibility to ensure the research measures the intent and captures the reality of the participants, 2) transferability to ensure it can be applied and therefore transferred to other environments, 3) dependability to ensure that another researcher can repeat the research, and 4) confirmability to manage the risk of researcher bias.

Member checking is one method for checking the trustworthiness and validity of qualitative research findings; some consider it the gold standard for qualitative research (Motulsky, 2021). According to Schwandt et al. (2007), member checking is a process researchers employ to solicit participant feedback on significant research findings. According to Motulsky, member checking aims to validate, verify, and assess the trustworthiness of the researcher's interpretation of the data. Therefore, the researcher incorporated validity via member checking into the research design.

Cope (2014) suggested that a common criticism of qualitative research is that it is subjective and subject to researcher bias; therefore, qualitative researchers must employ strategies to enhance research credibility. According to Cope, a key strategy qualitative researchers can employ to enhance credibility is maintaining an audit trail of notes and materials that details the decisions and assumptions about processes (e.g., data collection or analysis) that other researchers can use to review and confirm results. For this study, the researcher maintained an audit trail, documenting the research assumptions, steps, and decisions for key procedural steps (such as data sampling, data collection, and analysis), and engaged other research committee members to check the codes, themes, and findings derived independently. Doing so helped to mitigate the risks of potential researcher biases.

Role of the Researcher

Dodgson (2019) indicated that the researcher is the instrument for qualitative studies and that readers need to get to know them because the researcher makes a difference in the findings. Korstjens (2017) reiterated this notion, indicating that qualitative researchers influence the research process and the findings. Therefore, the qualitative researcher's role requires empathy while establishing distance to avoid bias. According to Korstjens (2017), the researcher must empathize with participants to build trust. Maher (2018) stated that the researcher must constantly engage with the data to ensure rigorous and fruitful analysis. The researcher conducted the study according to the established research design and constantly interacted with the participants and data. The researcher's role included performing purposeful sampling for participant selection, interviewing participants for data collection, conducting data analysis and interpretation,

and describing and presenting the findings that address the research problem and phenomenon.

Qualifications. The researcher for this study is an African American woman enrolled as a doctoral student at AU, pursuing a PhD in leadership with a business concentration. Her bachelor's and master's degrees are in electrical engineering, and she is a former corporate executive with over three decades of experience providing engineering expertise and organizational leadership for Fortune 500 companies that support the US aerospace and defense industry. The company studied was her employer, and she advanced to the executive level of the corporation before departing to launch a leadership consulting business.

The researcher started the leadership business to help aspiring women leaders and executives advance in complex environments such as the defense industry by providing training, development, mentoring, and networking opportunities. The desire to help other women prompted the researcher to pursue this study, which explores the path to success for aspiring women executives through the stories of successful women executives. The researcher's background, interest, and passion made her uniquely qualified to conduct this study.

Biases. Korstjens (2017) suggested that qualitative researchers demonstrate an awareness of biases potentially affecting data collection. Because of prior experience and familiarity with the organization, industry, and participants, the researcher incorporated steps to mitigate risks to research integrity due to biases. Specifically, the researcher included research reflexivity in the study. According to Berger (2015), researchers need to understand the role of the self in creating knowledge and be aware of their biases,

beliefs, and personal experiences and their impact on research. The researcher's continual and critical self-evaluation of their situation and position regarding the research and acknowledgment of the potential impact on the research process or outcome is called reflexivity (Berger, 2015). Dodgson (2019) suggested that reflexivity influences the quality of the research—specifically, the quality depends on the researcher's awareness and ability to articulate similarities and differences in their shared experiences with the participants. To that end, the researcher incorporated reflexivity into this qualitative study. Specifically, the researcher engaged in notetaking throughout the process and set aside time to reflect on personal experiences and background with the research organization and participants and how to avoid incorporating personal feelings and experiences into the research. The researcher also employed an audit trail strategy that included extensive notes on key assumptions and decisions and transcribed interview notes so that other dissertation committee members could provide independent reviews of coded data and themes (as needed) to enhance credibility and mitigate risks to research integrity. The researcher also incorporated member checking for data validation, allowing the participants to confirm the accuracy of their responses to the research questions.

Responsibilities. Per guidance from experienced researchers (Korstjens, 2017; Maher, 2018), the researcher constantly engaged with the participants to build trust and ensure rigorous and fruitful analysis of the data. The researcher's responsibilities involved identifying the research problem, purpose, and questions, developing the research proposal, establishing the study approach, selecting the appropriate research design, designing the research instruments, and submitting the proposed study for IRB approval. Upon receipt of IRB approval, the researcher's responsibilities included

establishing the participation criteria, purposefully selecting participants, establishing the interview protocol, and performing data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Other core researcher responsibilities included describing and presenting the research findings. Throughout the research, the researcher was the primary interface for the research participants and was, therefore, responsible for ensuring that the interviews, premeetings, and postdiscussions occurred in a safe and nonthreatening manner. The researcher was also responsible for working with the IRB, committee chair, and other university faculty to ensure ethics and integrity in the research.

Timeline

The researcher identified a research topic of interest and developed the research question and purpose of the multiple-semester course as a student in the AU Ph.D. in Leadership Program. As a critical step in the process, the researcher worked with the faculty to develop a research proposal, which identified the research question, approach, design, and instruments. Upon faculty approval, the researcher submitted the proposal to the IRB for approval to proceed with the study. Shortly after receiving IRB approval, research commenced per the proposed plan, where the researcher selected and contacted participants and conducted data collection via interviews over several months. Afterward, the researcher conducted data analysis for several more months before proceeding to validation via member checking. The next procedural step of the process was a report of the significant research findings.

Summary/Coherency of Design

Validity/Trustworthiness

A qualitative approach was the most appropriate to address the research purpose, which explored the lived experiences of women who achieved C-suite status at a top US defense corporation. A phenomenological research design was also appropriate, as the study explored these women's experiences around a common phenomenon—systems that enabled their success. The researcher selected participants for this research via purposeful sampling because they could inform the research for this study. These were women who became executives at a top US defense corporation and progressed to C-suite positions at that company or another company.

The data collection involved one-on-one interviews with each participant. This method is appropriate because it allows the researcher to elicit responses to unstructured, open-ended questions that the AU IRB approved for this study. According to Belotto (2018), using unstructured interviews allows the researcher to elicit the same core information from all participants while probing them to share their experiences. The researcher conducted the interviews via Zoom while also capturing information via notetaking. Shortly after the interview, the researcher used Otter.ai to transcribe the Zoom audio data, which she later sanitized to remove personally identifiable participant data and replaced the participants' names with pseudonyms. The researcher reviewed the transcriptions and note files, organized the sanitized data files for analysis, disposed of the raw video and audio files after the data transcription process, and stored the sanitized data in a secure location that only the researcher could access.

Stuckey (2015) indicated that the data analysis process involves multiple steps, with the first step involving transcribing and sanitizing the data collected from participant interviews and the second step being data coding. According to Stuckey (2015), coding is the process of organizing and sorting qualitative data so that the researcher can easily categorize data that is similar in meaning. Maher (2018) describes coding as categorizing and labeling data segments with a short name (a code) and using the codes to sort the data and better understand what is happening or has happened in the environment being studied. Codes can be predetermined (a priori), emergent, or combined (Stuckey, 2015).

For the data analysis procedure, the researcher used data coding. This process involved identifying significant statements from participants' responses and coding and labeling those with commonality with a word or phrase in the participant's voice that best described the responses. Next, the researcher searched for themes across the coded data and aligned the coded data to a small number of themes or categories. Table 2 below presents an example of coding derived from four participants' responses to the interview question, "What experiences got you here?"

Table 2*Coding Example*

Code		Responses		
College experience	College experience	College preparation	Military (college) experience	College STEM degree
Great mentors	Great mentors	Great mentors	Leaders who took me under their wings	Mentors
The company's leadership development program	The company's leadership development program	Management training	Leadership training	The company's leadership training and development

The researcher reviewed the coded data and identified themes to categorize and convey emerging findings relative to the research question and phenomenon. According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), the result of a phenomenological study is a detailed description of the major themes that provide the meaning of the participants' lived experiences. Hence, the themes are the results of the data analysis procedure, and they inform the research question and phenomenon, which are the enabling systems that influenced these women's experiences.

According to Motulsky (2021), member checking can help assess the trustworthiness of the researcher's interpretation of the data. Therefore, the researcher incorporated this validity method into the research design, presenting the themes to a subset of the participants to determine whether they accurately captured and portrayed their shared experiences.

From a reliability perspective, this study included secondary researchers, such as committee members, to review and cross-check the codes, themes, and findings that were derived independently. Cutcliffe and McKenna (1999) suggested that engaging a secondary researcher when generating themes from qualitative data can enhance the method's validity and mitigate the risks of researcher bias. Finally, the researcher incorporated reflexivity into the study to address potential biases due to her background and experiences with the organization and participants.

Limitations

The limitations of this research are related to the scope of the study. The study focuses on a single industry, the US defense industry. The study also focuses on a single organization—a top US defense corporation. Additionally, the study focuses on the top tier of corporate executives, the C-suite. The findings for other industries, corporations, nonprofit organizations, and lower leadership levels may differ from the findings reported in this dissertation. These limitations represent opportunities to extend the research on systems that enable success for executive women in defense and nondefense American corporations and nonprofit organizations, as well as the research on gender diversity in leadership.

Forecast of Chapter 4

Chapter 3 provided the methodology this study employed. A qualitative approach was the most appropriate to address the research purpose, exploring the lived experiences of women who achieved C-suite status at a top US defense corporation. A phenomenological research design was also appropriate, as the study explored these women's experiences around a common phenomenon: systems that enabled their success.

The researcher selected participants for this research via purposeful yet criterion-based sampling. They were women who became executives at a top US defense corporation and progressed to C-suite positions at that company or another one. These women were selected because they could inform the research for this study. The data collection involved one-on-one interviews with each of the participants. This method was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to elicit responses to unstructured, open-ended questions that the AU IRB approved for this study. For the data analysis procedure, the researcher used data coding and identified themes to inform the research question and phenomenon.

Chapter 4 will present the results of the data analysis procedure and describe the phenomenon's essence. In doing so, the researcher will describe what the women experienced regarding the phenomenon and how it influenced their experience on the journey to the C-suite.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This study aimed to explore and understand how multiple systems influenced the experiences of current and former women from a top US defense corporation and enabled them to achieve C-suite status. The researcher leveraged Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a framework to explore and understand the influences of various environmental systems on the experiences of 11 phenomenal women on their journey to the top positions in their organizations. The premise of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory is that to understand a developing individual, one must examine and understand the person in the context of the environments and relationships in which the person exists and how various interconnected systems influence the developing person.

The central research question for this study is as follows: How did specific systems influence the experiences of current and former women from a top US defense corporation and enable them to achieve C-suite status? The phenomenon of this study is multiple systems influencing the executives' experiences and enabling them to succeed. The methodology involved the researcher's use of the following questions to explore and understand better how these systems influenced the developing executive:

- How do women executives describe their experiences with support systems?
- How do women executives describe their experiences with learning systems?
- How do women executives describe their experiences with career advancement systems?

The qualitative research used a phenomenological design, employing the data collection methods of one-on-one qualitative interviews with 11 female executives who agreed to participate. The study also included a literature review of related research and theory regarding systems that enable women to succeed and how other studies have leveraged Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as the framework and lens to explore the research question.

This chapter summarizes the data generated by this phenomenological study, including four significant findings that emerged in response to the research. These findings holistically address the three questions highlighted above.

Presentation and Summary of Data

Descriptive Data About the Sample

The research focused on women who achieved executive-level status at a top US defense corporation and advanced to C-suite status at that corporation or another. The researcher used purposeful sampling and established criteria for participation in the study—namely, women who became executives before or during their tenure at a top US defense corporation and advanced to the C-suite of that corporation or another.

Respondents

Thirteen of the 18 invitees agreed to participate in the study. However, two of the initial 13 did not follow up on requests for email addresses after multiple requests. Therefore, only 11 of the 18 invited women participated in the study, resulting in a response rate of 61%. Table 3 below provides demographic information about the respondents who participated in this study.

Table 3*Respondents' Demographic Data*

Pseudoname	Ethnicity	Gender	Highest Education	Industry Experience
PhenomOne	Caucasian American	Woman	Doctorate (JD)	37
PhenomTwo	Caucasian American	Woman	Bachelor's	31
PhenomThree	African American	Woman	Master's (MBA)	25
PhenomFour	Hispanic American	Woman	Master's (MBA)	35
PhenomFive	African American	Woman	Doctorate (MD)	26
PhenomSix	African American	Woman	Master's (MBA)	44
PhenomSeven	African American	Woman	Bachelor's	41
PhenomEight	Caucasian American	Woman	Master's (MS)	34
PhenomNine	Caucasian American	Woman	Master's (MBA)	32
PhenomTen	Caucasian American	Woman	Master's (MS)	35
PhenomEleven	African American	Woman	Bachelor's	37

All the respondents were women. Of the 11 participants, five were African American (45.5%), five were Caucasian American (45.5%), and one was Hispanic American (9%). The participants' industry experience ranged from 25 to 44 years. The average number of years in the industry (mean) was 34, and the median number of years in the industry was 35. Ten of the 11 participants (91%) had worked for multiple employers, while one (9%) had worked for the same corporation for her entire career.

The education levels of the invitees ranged from bachelor's to doctorate. Three of the 11 participants (27%) held bachelor of science degrees in the STEM field. Six (55%) held master's degrees, including two with master of science degrees and four with a master of business administration (MBA). Two of the 11 participants (18%) held doctorate degrees (18%): one medical doctor and one juris doctor.

Informed Consent

The researcher provided an informed consent form to each of the invited participants via email, stressing the rights of research participants, requesting that they read the form and contact her if they had questions or concerns, and notifying them of the requirement to provide signed forms prior to the start of the data collection or the one-on-one interviews. None of the participants expressed concerns regarding the informed consent forms. All 11 participants signed and submitted their forms, signifying their agreement to participate in the research voluntarily before the start of data collection. Upon receipt, the researcher thanked the participants and stored the forms in a folder before collecting data via the one-on-one interviews with the 11 female executives. Appendix B contains the approved informed consent form for this study.

Data Collection via One-on-One Interviews

Based on Polkinghorne's (1989) sample size recommendations to interview between 5 and 25 individuals who have experienced a phenomenon, the researcher interviewed 11 participants—using the following broad and open-ended questions, with subquestions as needed, to explore the participants' lived experiences relative to the phenomenon of interest.:

- What experiences got you here?
- What experiences kept you here?
- What strategies did you use for decision-making?

Appendices B and C contain this study's demographic, approved interview questions, and subquestions.

Data Analysis Using Thematic Coding

After collecting the data via one-on-one participant interviews, the researcher performed data analysis. Stuckey (2015) indicated that data analysis is a multistep process that includes reviewing, transcribing, sanitizing, and coding the collected data. For this study, the researcher reviewed the recorded interviews multiple times, transcribed the audio data using Otter.ai, sanitized the data to remove personally identifiable information and correct errors, and stored the sanitized data in an Excel spreadsheet. Next, the researcher coded the data. Table 4 below summarizes the coded data that resulted from significant participant responses to the three interview questions.

Table 4*Coded Data*

Questions	Codes			
What experiences got you here?	College experience	Advocates	Sponsors who gave me a try	Great mentors
	Manager took a risk and hired me	Great leaders helped me understand what I could do	Having bosses that trusted me	The company's leadership development program
	Hard work	Do any work	Personal branding	Understanding the organization's culture and protocols
	Faith in God	He gave up his career for me	Emotional intelligence	Learning to deal with and live with abusive behaviors
What experiences kept you here?	The company's commitment to diversity and inclusion making people feel like they belong	Enjoying what I do	A desire to help others	Trusted relationships with a few people
	A desire to make it better for others coming behind me	Had to work to support my family	Remaining positive despite the barriers	
What strategies did you use for decision-making?	Consider impacts to family	Consider personal risks and being able to live with myself	Choose a career or role with purpose	Challenge assumptions about advocacy and support

The coding process produced 27 codes from more than 260 significant participant responses to the three questions. The 27 coded responses are as follows: 16 responses for the first question, seven for the second, and four for the third, all of which the researcher presented in the participants' words. The researcher reviewed the coded dataset and identified three major themed categories to which the 27 coded data mapped. The three emergent themes were support, learning, and career advancement. The researcher mapped each of the 27 codes to at least one theme—some responses aligned to multiple themes. For example, “great mentors” aligned with support and learning. Similarly, “the manager took a risk and hired me” mapped to support and career advancement. Table 5 below represents the refined themes that resulted from the final stage of data coding.

Table 5*Refined Themes*

Systems	Subcategories						
Support Networks (Support)	Advocates	Sponsors who gave me a try	Manager who took a risk on me	Great mentors	Great leaders helped me understand what I could do	Having bosses that trusted me	Faith in God
Professional Development (Learning)	College experience	Stretch and challenging assignments	Exposure to multiple leaders, environments, and cultures	The company's leadership development	Understanding the organization's protocols and culture	Learning to deal with and live with abusive behaviors	Challenging assumptions about support
Career Advancement							
How did I choose?	Considered impacts to family	Choose a career or role with purpose	Considered personal risk and being able to live with myself				
How did I progress (internal influence)?	Hard work	Do any work	Personal branding	Emotional intelligence			
How did I progress (external influence)?	Manager took a risk and hired me	Sponsors gave me a try					

Data Validity via Member Checking

After completing the thematic coding and mapping, the researcher employed member checking to ensure data validity. The researcher invited four participants (36%) to engage in the member check process. Three invitees (27%) responded and agreed to participate. Therefore, the researcher set up three separate Zoom sessions with the women who agreed to participate and recorded each session.

During the member check session, the researcher communicated the purpose, described the process, and shared the model that depicted the refined themes from the coding component of the data analysis process. The researcher requested that the participants provide feedback on the model, including recommendations for changes to the preferred model. The member check participants reviewed the information and agreed unanimously that the three themed areas—support, learning, and career advancement—were the appropriate categories of systems that influenced their experiences and enabled them to succeed. Each participant also recommended adding or modifying the wording of one or more subcategories of the three themed areas.

The researcher incorporated the participants' recommendations and updated the model as shown in Table 6 below, which shows three emergent themes with subcategories after member checking. These themes represent the participants' responses to the central research question: How did specific systems influence the experiences of current and former women from a top US defense corporation and enable them to achieve C-suite status? These themes indicate the following systems that influenced these executive women's experiences and enabled them to successfully achieve C-suite status: support, learning, and career advancement systems.

Table 6

Emergent Themes (Post-Member Check)

Systems		Subcategories						
Support	Advocates	Sponsors who gave me a try	Manager who took a risk on me	Great mentors	Great leaders helped me understand what I could do	Having bosses that trusted me	Faith in God	
Learning	College experience	Stretch and challenging assignments	<i>Teammates, peers, and staff</i>	Exposure to multiple leaders, environments, and cultures	The company's leadership development	Understanding the organization's protocols, culture, and <i>what's important to the company</i>	Learning to deal with and live with abusive behaviors	Challenging <i>and validating</i> assumptions about support <i>and advocacy</i>
Career Advancement								
	How did I choose?	Considered impacts to family	Choose a career or role with purpose.	Considered personal risk and being able to live with myself				
	How I progressed (internal influence)	Hard work	Do any work.	Personal branding	Emotional intelligence	<i>Self-awareness</i>		
	How I progressed (external influence)	Manager took a risk and hired me	Sponsors gave me a try					

Note. Italicized entries represent updates per member check feedback.

Findings Related to the Research Question

Table 7 summarizes four significant findings that emerged from the research. The first three findings map directly to the research questions. Finding 1.0 addresses the first question: How do women executives describe their experiences with support systems? Finding 2.0 addresses the second question: How do women executives describe their

experiences with learning systems? Finding 3 addresses the third question: How do women executives describe their experiences with career advancement systems? A fourth finding related to advocacy emerged, and it spans the other three systems with more significant influence. The ensuing sections will detail all these findings, using significant participant quotes.

Table 7

Significant Research Findings

Research Finding	Description
<i>Finding 1.0 Support Systems</i>	Women experienced support from various sources—leaders, mentors, family, and God—influencing their experiences by providing the advice, counsel, and moral support they needed to maneuver, adapt, and thrive in complex and challenging environments.
<i>Finding 2.0 Learning Systems</i>	The company’s robust talent management program provided opportunities to enhance women’s learning agility and executive readiness via the company’s leadership development programs, stretch assignments, and other training options.
<i>Finding 3.0 Career Advancement Systems</i>	Participants’ career advancement resulted from difficult and purposeful choices and strategic actions based on internal and external loci of influence.
<i>Finding 4.0 Advocacy</i>	Women experienced advocacy from various sources—men and women, leaders, and customers—that produced job and learning opportunities, exposure to decision-makers, career sheltering, and progression.

Finding 1.0: Support Systems

Each of the 11 participants shared intriguing stories about what got them to the C-suite and how they maintained their status. Although all the stories were unique, all 11 women made it clear that they did not get there or stay there on their own. Each named multiple individuals who provided the support they needed to effectively engage, maneuver, adapt, pivot, and survive in complex, challenging, and changing corporate environments. They described support from various sources, including leaders, mentors, family, and (many of them mentioned) God. Table 8 includes some significant quotes participants shared regarding support systems and how they influenced their careers.

Table 8

Support System Quotes

Categories	Quotes
Leaders believed in participants and took a chance on them.	“My leader believed in me.” “I had great leaders who helped me understand what I could be.” “She saw in me what I did not see in myself.” “A leader took a chance on me.” “A man took a chance on me, and he gave me credit for the work.”
Mentors provided career advice and counsel that influenced participants’ experiences.	“I had great mentors.” “I had amazing mentors.” “My mentor suggested I spread my wings. She said, ‘It’s time if you want to keep progressing.’” “My mentor called me in and told me to take a job because it would look good on my resume.”
Family members provided encouragement and sacrificial support that enhanced participants’ experiences.	“My spouse was in education. He was willing to stay put.” “My spouse gave up his corporate role for me.” The participant’s father said, “How will you ever realize your potential if you don’t push yourself beyond what you believe is possible?” The participant’s mother said, “Don’t tell yourself you failed because you’re Black. Your mind is as good as anybody’s, and anything is possible in this world.” “I remember my mommy said, “Don’t let them steal your joy.”
Faith in God was a source of support for participants.	“I had crazy faith in God.” “My belief in God” (in response to “What experiences got you here?”) “My faith in the Lord to remove barriers” (in response to “What experiences kept you here?”) “My spiritual plan helped me deal with the negativity in the environment. I relied on Psalms 110 [God will make your enemies your footstool].”

Leaders Believed in Participants and Took a Chance on Them. Multiple participants described their direct leaders and other leaders in their organizations as supportive, aware of their potential, and as willing to give them a chance, even when they (the participants) were unsure they were. Some identified their direct leaders as critical sources of support and encouragement. One stated, “I had superb bosses.” Another stated,

“My leader believed in me.” However, other participants shared stories of how individuals other than their leaders opened doors of opportunity for them. One woman shared, “A wonderful woman brought me along.” Another shared how a woman said, “I want you to be on my team.” Another noted, “I had multiple people say if you ever need a job, call me.”

Some participants discussed leaders as individuals who focused on their potential rather than their state when they did not quite meet the requirements. Hence, several discussed leaders who gave them a chance when they felt unprepared. One woman stated, “I had great leaders who helped me understand what I could be.” One woman said, “She saw in me what I did not see in myself.” Another noted that “a leader took a chance on me,” while another stated, “A manager took a chance and hired me.” One woman discussed how an executive said to another executive with a role for which she was not fully qualified, “Give her a try.”

Multiple participants named the same woman executive as one who advocated for other women. Two participants indicated that this executive created opportunities for them, while another indicated she was a mentor who advised her on opportunities.

Mentors Provided Career Advice and Counsel That Influenced Participants’ Experiences. The topic of mentorship was prevalent in the discussions. All but one participant discussed their relationships with mentors. In these discussions, women shared situations where their mentors provided career advice and helped them maneuver in the complex corporate business environment. Participants shared great admiration for their mentors, whom they credited for helping them learn the business, helping them understand the unwritten rules of corporate America, and advising them on strategies for

engaging with senior executives, dealing with undesirable behaviors, and making career moves. One stated, “I had great mentors.” Another noted, “I had amazing mentors.”

One participant shared how a female leader served as a mentor and helped her adapt and succeed when she transferred from the business area to the corporate environment. According to this woman, the corporate environment’s expectations for dress and decorum were vastly different from those of the business operating areas. In addition to written policies, rules, and guidelines, the company had unwritten and unspoken rules, especially regarding dress codes. This participant shared,

I had a female vice president who helped me maneuver in the corporate culture.

When I went to corporate with my best pantsuit and sandals, she gave me a monetary award for my performance, which was much more than the normal amount. She said, ‘This should be enough to cover the costs of buying a suit in the appropriate corporate colors [black, blue, or gray] and some closed-toe shoes. It should also be enough to do something with that hair.

This participant expressed gratitude for this mentor, who cared enough to help her maneuver in the corporate environment.

Family Members Provided Encouragement and Sacrificial Support That Enhanced Participants’ Experiences. Multiple women shared stories of supportive family members who encouraged them during some of their most challenging seasons and of spouses who made career sacrifices so they could succeed. Some shared stories of supportive spouses who sacrificed their careers to enable them (the women) to continue their career progression. One woman shared that she and her spouse had careers; however, hers was moving faster. She exclaimed, “My spouse gave up his corporate role

for me. My career was progressing faster.” Another shared how her journey involved moving every two to three years. Regarding her family’s support, she noted, “I was willing to make sacrifices. I had no children, and my spouse was in education. He was willing to stay put.”

Most women shared stories of challenging times, and several indicated that what helped them persevere were reminders or words of encouragement from their parents. One executive shared how her father encouraged her to be her best and “leave nothing on the table.” This participant shared how her father motivated her by stating, “How will you ever realize your potential if you don’t push yourself beyond what you believe is possible?” She indicated that his words guide her work ethic, which involves giving her all no matter the challenge. Another executive shared how her mother encouraged and reminded her of who she was and what she possessed when she dealt with an abusive situation and thought she had failed. Her mother stated, “Don’t tell yourself you failed because you’re Black. Your mind is as good as anybody’s, and anything is possible in this world.” Another executive shared, “When dealing with negativity, I remembered that my Mommy said, ‘Don’t let them still be your joy.’”

God Was a Source of Support for Participants. When discussing what got them to the top positions and what kept them in the game, several women pointed to God as a source of support and help to persevere amid challenges. When one executive described the stories of her career advancement, which had many twists and turns, she paused and stated, “I had crazy faith in God.” Another participant responded with “my belief in God” when asked what got her here. When asked what experiences kept the individual in their position, one participant said, “My faith in the Lord to remove

barriers.” Another executive discussed how she faced many obstacles in the environment where she operated; however, she shared, “My spiritual plan helped me deal with the negativity in the environment. I relied on Psalms 110 [God will make your enemies your footstool].”

These women acknowledged that reliance on oneself was insufficient to succeed in complex and challenging corporate environments. They provided compelling stories of how their diverse support network of leaders, mentors, family, and God influenced their lives by helping them achieve monumental success.

Finding 2.0: Learning Systems

The second research finding is that the company’s robust talent management program influenced women’s learning agility and executive readiness by providing women with learning opportunities via the company’s leadership development program, stretch assignments, and training on business acumen, corporate culture, protocol, and expectations. Table 9 includes some significant quotes participants shared regarding learning systems and how they influenced their experiences.

Table 9*Learning System Quotes*

Category	Quotes
The company's talent management program provided various learning opportunities via world-class leadership development programs.	<p>"The company's talent management program is what got me here."</p> <p>"The company provided diversity and inclusion (D&I), leadership, and management training. The company was a standard."</p> <p>"The company established norms for performing work and was good at developing both leaders and technical experts."</p> <p>"What got me here was training and development through the company's leadership development program."</p>
Stretch and challenging assignments provided learning agility and readiness for career progression.	<p>"Stepping into the unknown is where I received my greatest learning. It is where I discovered resilience and learning agility."</p> <p>"Stretch assignments got me here."</p> <p>"I was enriched. I learned new products and serviced new customers."</p> <p>"I stayed in the role until I learned it. Then a new leader pulled me into a new role to run an engineering organization."</p>
Understanding the company's culture, protocol, and expectations enhanced learning and led to success.	<p>"I learned that performance is essential. Success means performing and delivering for the customer."</p> <p>"What got me here was listening to the customers and understanding corporate expectations."</p> <p>"I learned to read the audience and adjust."</p> <p>"I learned to deal with senior leaders in a nonthreatening manner."</p> <p>"I learned the importance of knowing how to reframe."</p>
Learning to remain focused while dealing with challenges, including undesirable and abusive behaviors, was vital to success.	<p>"Stay focused on what success is and what it means. Don't get wrapped up in all the stuff."</p> <p>"I was on assignment."</p> <p>"Don't wear other people's judgment or stupidity."</p>
Challenging assumptions about support provided crucial learning experiences.	<p>"I learned not to make assumptions about support."</p> <p>"Some women supported me, and others didn't."</p> <p>"I learned men can be allies."</p> <p>"I learned all men with power are not against you. They just need to know what's in it for them to make them look good."</p>

The Company's Talent Management Program Provided Various Learning Opportunities via World-Class Leadership Development Programs. Multiple participants discussed the company's focus on talent management and how its robust program facilitates talent and opportunity identification, training and development needs, leadership and executive development at multiple levels, and how to leverage it to meet organizational and business needs. Many participants discussed their roles and how various aspects of the program led to their career advancement to the C-suite. One executive stated, "The company's talent management program is what got me here." She discussed the company's culture of learning and its focus on talent management and development, especially for its leaders.

A significant component of the company's program involves investing in leadership training and development. To that end, they established an industry-renowned leadership model and a world-class leadership center that is an industry standard. These women received formal training and on-the-job learning opportunities as a part of this strategy. When asked what experiences got her here, one executive stated, "The company provided D&I, leadership, and management training. The company was a standard." Another executive shared, "What got me here was training and development through the company's leadership development program." One of the participants who became an executive at the company and a C-suite executive at another indicated, "The company's culture and its focus on leadership development are what got me here. The company established norms for performing work and was good at developing leaders and technical experts." Other executives who left the company to become C-suite executives at other companies shared similar sentiments.

The company's robust talent management program involves attracting, developing, and training leaders and individual contributors they can leverage to maintain a competitive business advantage. Therefore, the company actively recruits high-potential leaders and STEM professionals. Hence, many participants shared how their educational experiences got them started in the business. As some women reflected on what got them to their executive and C-suite positions, they credited their educational experiences.

Some participants indicated they were prepared to engage as leaders before becoming employees. One executive stated, "I had a leadership position right out of college. Someone thought I could manage people because of my educational institution." According to this executive, the company purposefully engaged with specific academic institutions to produce students ready to assume leadership roles upon graduation. Another executive indicated that she was leadership-ready upon graduation from a military college. In sharing her story, she began with how a military college scholarship led to a leadership opportunity in the military, where she was a military officer. During her tenure as an officer, she had opportunities that helped her develop technical, research and development, and leadership skills, all of which were valuable to the corporation. Therefore, the company hired her into a leadership role without her skills as a practitioner. Therefore, she started her corporate career on Day One, which she attributes to her military education.

Some executives discussed the competitive defense industry and how having a skilled STEM workforce can be a competitive discriminator. One participant shared, "What got me started was that I was a poor kid who needed to pay for college. So, I was an intern and a co-op student. I got a STEM degree and a security clearance." One C-

suite executive stated, “My college degree led to my engineering career.” In addition to STEM, some executives shared the importance of understanding the numbers and how they affect the business’s profit and loss. To stay in the game, one executive stated, “I got an MBA to better understand the business in terms of rates and numbers.” This executive’s MBA and on-the-job learning led to a C-suite position.

Stretching and Challenging Assignments Provided Learning Agility and Readiness for Career Progression. Another component of the company’s talent development program involved providing challenging assignments to provide the skills and experiences required for career advancement. These stretch or rotational assignments were generally outside the person’s core domain of expertise. However, they provided growth and exposure to other organizations, business areas, and leaders. These phenomenal women had a learning orientation and welcomed new and challenging assignments, often requiring them to leave their comfort zones to pursue success. One executive shared that she was often in unfamiliar territory, which was not always comfortable. However, she stated, “Stepping into the unknown is where I received my greatest learning. It is where I discovered resilience and learned agility.”

One leader stated, “Stretch assignments got me here.” These assignments often required leaders to stretch and extend beyond what was comfortable and into new roles and to take on these roles regularly. One woman stated, “I had different jobs and options to change organizations and departments.” Regarding these roles, one leader exclaimed, “I had on-the-job learning.” While performing rotational assignments, one woman noted, “Trusted leaders helped me and taught me the business.” These rotational assignments generally prepared women for more significant roles. Regarding rotational assignments,

one participant stated, “I stayed in a role until I learned it. Then, a new leader pulled me into a new role to run an engineering organization.”

Accepting stretch assignments sometimes meant relocating to different regions for some time. One executive stated, “I moved every three to four years to different business units, states, [and] heritage companies with different cultures.” She stated why she chose to relocate: “I was enriched. I learned new products and serviced new customers.” This participant indicated that she always said yes to the assignments, even if it meant moving. When asked why, she stated, “If I said no, the bus would stop coming by.”

One participant reflected on her career: “I changed jobs every two to three years—except for life events such as marriage and childbirth, when I would stay in a role longer.” She indicated that her journey involved taking risks, which meant going out of her domain and taking a leap of faith. When asked about her rationale for moving so often, this executive explained, “I was building proficiency and skills via each of these diverse roles.” These women viewed every assignment, challenge, and opportunity as meaningful on their journey to success.

Understanding the Company’s Culture, Protocol, and Expectations

Enhanced Learning and Led to Success. Learning the company culture was critical for these women’s success, including how and where they fit and how the company expected them to engage and communicate with leaders and stakeholders at various levels. The company set clear expectations for its leaders, and these women demonstrated that they understood these expectations and the company’s culture and protocol. Multiple women shared their lessons from maneuvering in complex, often politically charged corporate environments. Some focused on the importance of garnering support from leaders. One

woman stated, “Your boss plays an important role. For those above you, make sure there’s something in it for them.” Another woman stated, “It would be very hard to depend on people above you unless there was something in it for them. If it advances their agenda, they will support you.”

Multiple paths exist in large, complex environments, but few lead to the C-suite. Those who got there understood which roads would lead to success early in their careers. One executive stated, “I learned the only way to get ahead in the company was to run programs, not be at corporate headquarters.” Another stated, “I learned that performance is essential. Success means performing and delivering for the customer.” Moreover, another individual said, “What got me here was listening to the customers and understanding corporate expectations.”

These women shared how vital relationships are to success. Therefore, they learned to readily adapt to leaders and changes in the environment, including changes in the leadership ranks. One participant stated, “I learned that your future could change when your leader changes.” To that end, another participant stressed the importance of adapting to various leaders in the audience. One woman stated, “I learned to read the audience and adjust.” Another said, “I learned to deal with senior leaders in a nonthreatening manner. I learned the importance of knowing how to reframe.”

Learning to Remain Focused While Dealing With Challenges, Including Undesirable Abusive Behaviors, Was Vital to Success. These women’s stories highlighted their learning orientation and ability to remain focused, even in challenging situations. This focus helped them persevere, demonstrate resilience when facing obstacles, and seek learning opportunities amid challenges. Multiple women

acknowledged that their journey included failures, in addition to successes. However, they viewed failures as opportunities to learn. One individual said, “I learned from failures.” Another stated, “I learned from mistakes versus stopping or being stopped.” Multiple women credited the company’s culture for their perspective on failure, noting they operated in environments where they could fail safely and learn from the experience.

None of these women told stories that were problem-free; however, none shared from a victim’s perspective. On the contrary, they shared stories of overcoming and becoming courageous leaders. Several women shared stories of dealing with undesirable and, at times, abusive behaviors from men and women. Those who shared these stories were overcomers who shared lessons learned regarding dealing with undesirable situations while remaining focused on their goals. One executive shared, “Stay focused on what success is and what it means. Don’t get wrapped up in all the stuff.”

Multiple participants shared the challenges they experienced while working in the defense industry, which is historically male-dominated. Multiple women shared stories of unwanted touches from men, inappropriate language from male leaders, the feeling of exclusion, and bullying. One executive shared,

I recall being the only female and being called “skirt.” Women were not able to wear pants. I recall being called by the secretary and asked, “Are you getting my coffee? Are you taking the notes?” Men regularly patted me on my rear end.

This executive indicated that she sometimes felt women had no avenue to challenge the situations, which motivated her to pursue executive leadership, become a mentor, and become the voice for other women. She became a corporate executive, a leader of the corporation’s women’s leadership, and eventually, a C-suite executive.

Other participants shared stories of dealing with inappropriate language from their leaders. One stated, “A male VP told me, ‘You have to stop telling people you’re Black. Tell them you’re of African descent. It sounds more exotic. People are uncomfortable with Black people.’” One participant shared, “I never felt like I was a part of the corporation. My boss would say, ‘As long as it doesn’t hurt my guys [her male colleagues].’”

Some women discussed dealing with inequity in organizations. One executive discussed a situation where her male peers were selected for promotions, although she outperformed them. One woman shared, “I was never paid what my peers were paid.” Another stated, “I thought performance was enough, but it wasn’t. Men still got promoted over me ... I learned to accept the ‘good old boys.’” One executive recalled, “I had to do a presentation where I thought I had commitment for support, but I got chewed out by the leader. A female VP, a mentor, nurtured me and advised me on how to deal with them.” She said she learned to “understand the situation, but don’t let the situation control you.”

One executive shared a story about overcoming bullying. She stated, “I dealt with a man who bullied me for years. He was on my boss’s staff and [was] a member of the senior leadership team, which caused me to be fearful for the first time in my career.” She explained how she finally got the courage to break free. She said, “He berated me in front of my team, and I thought about how my team must think of me as a leader.” Thinking about the team’s view of her leadership motivated her to muster up the courage to confront him. She noted how her courage freed her of his bullying and fear. That day was pivotal for this C-suite executive, marking the beginning of her journey as a fearless leader.

When asked how they persevered, one executive stated, “I was on assignment.” Another executive shared, “I was energized to change the perceptions.” One executive’s advice to aspiring women executives for dealing with undesirable and abusive behaviors was, “Don’t get emotional. State the facts.” Another stated, “Don’t wear other people’s judgment or stupidity.”

Challenging Assumptions About Support Provided Crucial Learning

Experiences. Multiple participants shared how they learned that support could come from unexpected sources and how vital it is to challenge assumptions about who will and will not support them. One woman stated, “I learned not to make assumptions about support.” One shared, “Some women supported me, and others didn’t.” Another stated, “Some women who were perceived as having made it were not helpful.” Another noted, “Women were not nice to each other. We were mean to each other. Women saw other women as competition for the limited opportunities.”

Some women were advocates and encouraged others, men and women, to support the participants. One participant shared a story of how her female mentor suggested her new male leader let her go to another role in a new business area, and he obliged, stating, “Go. I don’t want to hold you back.” Her new leader’s advocacy led to a progressive movement that eventually landed her in a C-suite position and marked the beginning of a new friendship with a male advocate who has continued to provide opportunities for her.

One participant shared, “An African American woman helped me, a Hispanic immigrant, find my first job, and an African American man gave me a chance when I was facing a layoff.” This participant discussed how important it was to be humble enough to accept support from anyone willing to provide it and how this perspective served her

well. She recounted her introduction to corporate, stating, “This [African American] man took a chance on me and chose me over other people for a position where I had little experience. Others had more experience than I did.” She indicated that she became a corporate executive because of his actions, eventually becoming the corporation’s first Hispanic woman VP.

Finding 3.0: Career Advancement

The third significant finding is that women experienced career advancement through difficult and purposeful choices and strategic actions based on internal and external influences. Specifically, the participants’ stories paint a picture of a complex, multifaceted career advancement system that influenced their experiences, enabling them to progress to the top positions of American corporations. One aspect of the system involves the executive’s choice—specifically, how the individual makes decisions. The second component refers to internal drivers that influence the executive’s career progression. The final component deals with external influences from the executive’s leader, mentor, or sponsor on the executive’s career progression. The three career advancement components collectively influenced the executives’ experiences and career outcomes. Table 10 contains significant quotes from participants about career advancement.

Table 10*Career Advancement Quotes*

Categories	Quotes
Participants were purposeful in choosing their careers.	<p>“Choose a career with purpose. I chose a career that involves delivering products to keep people safe.”</p> <p>“I had to decide whether to make a career plan or a life plan. I had a career plan and a spiritual plan, which is what was in my heart and my mind, and my spiritual plan was the priority.”</p> <p>“I used good judgment and made decisions that were legal, moral, and ethical.”</p>
Participants made difficult decisions and personal sacrifices for their careers.	<p>“I left the position and moved my family because of a lack of diversity in the area.”</p> <p>“I made a decision to leave my dream job for my family.”</p> <p>“I made decisions based on what worked for the family.”</p> <p>“I made personal sacrifices.”</p> <p>“I was willing to make sacrifices. I had no children, and my spouse was in education. He was willing to stay put.”</p>
Participants’ perspectives and approach to work influenced their career advancement.	<p>“I worked hard.”</p> <p>“I never said no. I took assignments others wouldn’t take.”</p> <p>“I changed jobs every two to three years—except for life events such as marriage and childbirth, when I would stay in a role longer.”</p>
Personal branding influenced participants’ career progression.	<p>“I took the jobs that no one else would. I took the ‘scraps.’ I learned to use the scraps for career moves.”</p> <p>“I was building proficiency and skills via each of these diverse roles.”</p> <p>“My brand, work, and experience got me the jobs.”</p> <p>“My diversity was almost like a brand. My diversity was a benefit in many ways because how can you forget the Black female?”</p>
Key advocates influenced participants’ career advancement.	<p>“I got a call from the CEO saying, ‘I want you to take the senior vice president role,’ a C-suite position when I was thinking about retiring.</p> <p>“I didn’t have to interview. Someone said, ‘Hey, we’ve got this job.’”</p>

Participants Were Purposeful in Choosing Their Careers. In telling their stories of career advancement, all the women shared their criteria and strategies for choosing and making decisions. Two participants indicated that they never declined a job

offer. However, most had strict criteria for choosing or accepting job offers and career paths, including meaningful and purposeful careers and positions. One executive stated, “I had to decide whether to make a career plan or a life plan. I had a career plan and a spiritual plan, which is what was in my heart and my mind, and my spiritual plan was the priority.” Another executive shared, “Choose a career with purpose. I chose a career that involves delivering products to keep people safe.” An executive stated, “Don’t be a token.” Another stated, “Make sure you align to a company or culture that is ethical.” One woman shared the following criteria for choosing and indicated that she often shares this with other aspiring women executives: “Stay true to your convictions. Be true to who you are.”

Participants Made Difficult Decisions and Personal Sacrifices for Their Careers. One surprising discovery in listening to the participants’ stories is that none indicated that they accepted or declined jobs or made career moves based on whether it would get them to the C-suite. They all discussed success and what it meant. However, none indicated that success meant making it to the C-suite.

Most female executives shared stories about their dilemmas and difficult decisions throughout their careers. In making these tough decisions, some participants shared that they often sought advice and counsel from mentors and others on critical decisions. One participant stated, “I had trusted advisors.” Another participant stated, “I had a board of advisors to help me evaluate roles.”

These women’s situations were different, as were their decisions and sacrifices. One person said, “I made personal sacrifices.” Another stated, “I was willing to make personal sacrifices.” The participants’ family situations were different, but all the women

shared that they had spouses at some point in their careers. Some remained married, while others did not; some had children, while others did not. Several women shared that they had more flexibility because they did not have children. One participant who had a family stated, “I made decisions based on what worked for the family.” One stated, “I left the position and moved my family because of a lack of diversity in the area.” Another stated, “I made a decision to leave my dream job for my family.” Other individuals shared situations where they declined offers or made it clear that they would decline offers that required them to move and relocate their families.

Participants’ Perspectives and Approaches to Work Influenced Their Career Advancement. The participants were women with a strong work ethic. They worked hard, and many took assignments that others would not take. One woman stated, “I worked hard.” Another exclaimed, “I never said no. I took assignments others wouldn’t take.” One participant shared, “I thought I had to do anything to get noticed, so I took the jobs that no one else would. I took the ‘scraps.’” This woman also shared how her strategy to accept scraps—the jobs no one else wanted—resulted in career advancement. She shared, “I learned to use the scraps for career moves.”

Personal Branding Influenced Participants’ Career Advancement. Some of these women discussed the role of branding in their careers and how branding played a role in their career advancement. Organizational and personal branding are prevalent in competitive corporations and the defense industry. Branding is the process of creating a brand identity. It involves defining and promoting what you stand for as an individual and a professional. Branding sets companies, organizations, and individuals apart from their competitors. Therefore, individuals identified and promoted qualities, skills, or

experiences to differentiate themselves from others. Hence, some women discussed how their brands became discriminators in competitive corporate and industry environments. One executive stated, “My brand, work, and experience got me the jobs.” Another discussed branding in terms of her diversity and how it became a discriminator. She stated, “My diversity was almost like a brand. My diversity was a benefit in many ways because how can you forget the Black female?” These women’s brands set them apart from their competitors, including men and women.

Key Advocates Influenced Participants’ Career Advancement. Multiple participants shared stories of how advocates watched over their careers, assessed their readiness, and advised them to take certain positions, many of which were stepping stones to executive and C-suite status. Multiple participants indicated their advocates thought they were ready when they did not believe it. One participant recalled a conversation with her leader where she shared, “I said, ‘I’m not ready,’ and she said, ‘You will never feel that you’re ready.’ I trusted her, so I took the job.” One woman stated, “My mentor suggested I spread my wings. She said, ‘It’s time if you want to keep progressing.’”

One executive stated, “I had good leaders who said you need to take this job.” This C-suite executive shared a situation where her leader presented a job that was out of her core domain (engineering), and initially, she did not want it. However, she trusted her leader and decided to take it. Performing the job led to a promotion to an executive position. Multiple participants indicated that the corporation’s CEOs advocated for and sponsored them. One participant shared, “The CEO called and asked me to take the position, and I accepted it out of loyalty.”

Finding 4.0: Advocacy

The fourth research finding was that women experienced advocacy from various sources on multiple levels, which provided exposure to decision-makers, career sheltering, learning and job opportunities, and career progression. Table 11 below provides some significant quotes participants shared regarding advocacy and how they influenced their experiences.

Table 11

Advocacy Quotes

Categories	Quotes
Advocacy from various sources provided learning and career opportunities.	<p>“I had sponsors who were women and men.”</p> <p>“I had wonderful women who brought me along. She said, ‘I want you to be on my team.’”</p> <p>“Trusted leaders helped me and taught me the business.”</p> <p>“I had multiple people say if you ever need a job, call me.”</p>
Some men were allies and advocates.	<p>“I learned men can be allies.”</p> <p>“I learned all men with power are not against you. They just need to know what’s in it for them to make them look good.”</p> <p>“My biggest breaks came from White men. I would not be where I am today without them giving me a chance when I was not quite there.”</p>
Customer advocacy influenced career and business growth.	<p>A male advocate said, “Go. I don’t want to hold you back.”</p> <p>“My customer was a big supporter of women and one who was a big supporter of African Americans.”</p> <p>“My customer became my mentor. I developed a rapport with the customer that developed into a friendship and then mentorship.”</p> <p>“The company used my relationships with customers to get more business.”</p>
Advocacy provided access to key decision-makers.	<p>“My mentor, a woman, put me in roles that exposed me to C-suite executives.”</p> <p>“I was always positioned in the room with senior leadership.”</p> <p>“I had an instant connection to the CEO and strong connections to the C-suite leaders.”</p>
Advocacy provided career sheltering for women.	<p>“My network sheltered me.”</p> <p>“Because of these advocates, I only had to interview for a position once in my entire career.”</p> <p>“As I reflected on my career, I realized much had been given to me. My advocates gave me opportunities and also encouraged others to give me opportunities.”</p> <p>“I didn’t have to interview. Someone said, ‘Hey, we’ve got this job.’”</p>

Advocacy From Various Sources Provided Learning and Career

Opportunities. In sharing their stories, all participants discussed how various advocates influenced their experiences by providing opportunities to learn the business, take on new roles, and experience new career opportunities. The words advocate and advocacy surfaced more than 20 times in these participants' stories. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines an advocate as "one who defends or maintains the cause of someone or something; or one who promotes the interest of a cause."

Sometimes, the participants referred to their designated managers and leaders as advocates. At other times, they used the term advocacy to describe support rendered by other leaders, mentors, or sponsors; at times, they used the two terms interchangeably. Some participants distinguished between mentors and sponsors and the level of influence they provided. One participant, however, noted, "Sponsors can make something happen for you, but mentors cannot always do that."

Helms et al. (2016) delineated between mentorship and sponsorship in career advancement, suggesting that mentoring involves a relationship of personal nurturing, advice, and counsel from mentor to mentee, while sponsorship involves senior executives leveraging their influence and positions of power. Although these executives experienced advocacy on multiple levels and from many sources, sponsorship, as defined by Helms et al., was the predominant influence for these women. These advocates' support resulted in new roles, career opportunities, exposure to decision-makers, and sheltering in the corporate environment. Therefore, advocacy in this paper refers to sponsorship.

A vital and consistent theme across all participants' stories that spanned the three enabling systems (support, learning, and career advancement) was advocacy. These

phenomenal women continuously pointed to advocates—leaders in positions of power and influence—who provided opportunities (or influenced others to do so), sponsoring promotions, position selections, and career advancement.

Some Men Were Allies and Advocates. One of the critical points that multiple women shared was that some men were advocates, which was a unique experience for women working in what has traditionally been a White male-dominated environment. Multiple women shared their perspectives on men as allies and advocates. One executive indicated, “I had women and men sponsors.” One woman shared, “A man took a chance on me and gave me credit for the work. I learned that men can be allies.” Another woman stated, “I learned all men with power are not against you. They just need to know what’s in it for them to make them look good.” However, another participant stated, “My biggest breaks came from White men. I would not be where I am today without them giving me a chance when I was not quite there.”

Some women shared stories of men giving them opportunities when women did not. One woman said, “As women, we were mean to each other.” She said, “We saw other women as the competition for a few opportunities.” She shared how a man offered her an opportunity when others would not give her a chance. In doing so, she stated, “I learned that men can be allies.” Leveraging men as allies led to senior leadership roles, executive roles, and a C-suite position for this woman when the corporation divested a significant business entity.

Customer Advocacy Influenced Career and Business Growth. Advocates were not always company or corporate members. One executive repeatedly pointed to her customers as her advocates. This participant stated, “My customer was a big supporter of

women and one who was a big supporter of African Americans.” This executive stated, “The company used my relationships with customers to get more business.” This woman’s ability to develop and sustain enduring relationships with new and existing customers. According to this executive, customer relationships turned into friendships and mentorships. These relationships led to extensive business growth and the corporation’s decision to promote her to the C-suite as the first woman and African American to lead a significant business area for the corporation.

Advocacy Provided Access to Decision-Makers. For some women, advocacy provided access to and exposure to senior executives and decision-makers. One participant stated, “My mentor, a woman, put me in roles that exposed me to C-suite executives.” One stated, “I was always positioned in the room with senior leadership.” Another participant stated, “I had an instant connection to the CEO and strong connections to the C-suite leaders.” Another participant noted, “The CEO was my sponsor.” One participant indicated, “I got a call from the CEO who said I want you to take the senior vice president role, a C-suite position.” For these women, advocacy provided them with exposure to individuals in positions of power and influence, and these decision-makers sponsored the women for crucial positions, which led to their career advancement.

Advocacy Provided Career Sheltering. According to most participants, advocacy provided career protection, advice on corporate maneuvering, and support when they dealt with challenges. One executive stated, “My network sheltered me.” Another mentioned, “The senior vice president took me under his wings.” Many participants stated they had leaders who looked out for them. Most participants said

experienced leaders helped them maneuver in the corporate environment. An executive said, “My mentor called me in and told me to take a job because it would look good on my resume.”

One executive shared a story of her boss’s support in dealing with challenges from her male peers. She shared a situation where she was making strides in her efforts to grow and expand the business and how her male colleagues tried to stop her; however, she stated, “I had a boss who believed in what I was doing.” Because of her boss’s advocacy, she could continue her pursuits and build a profitable business area. She later replaced her boss as the executive leader of the business.

Multiple women discussed how their supporters provided career protection. One executive stated, “I had wonderful women who brought me along. She said, ‘I want you to be on my team.’” This executive’s advocacy changed the trajectory of the participant’s life, causing her to pivot into a new business domain and into leadership. Another participant stated, “I had sponsorship from the CIO [Chief Information Officer], who created opportunities for me.” Another participant stated, “As I reflected on my career, I realized much had been given to me. My advocates gave me opportunities and also encouraged others to give me opportunities.” This participant indicated that in working for the company for more than two decades, she only had a handful of leaders, all of whom were advocates. When asked to clarify, the participant stated, “Because of these advocates, I only had to interview for a position once in my entire career.” Two other participants also indicated that they only had to interview for one position during their careers. Only interviewing once in one’s career is a rarity in corporate America, where

individuals generally interview and compete with other candidates for a limited number of positions.

According to these women's stories, advocacy provided rare opportunities not afforded to the general workforce, including job and learning opportunities, access to the upper echelon of corporate leadership, and career sheltering.

Summary of Results

This qualitative research explored the lived experiences of 11 women who experienced a common phenomenon on their journeys to the C-suite—namely, systems that influenced their experiences and enabled success. The research produced the following four significant findings that address the research question: How did specific systems influence the experiences of current and former women from a top US defense corporation and enable them to achieve C-suite status?

- F1 (Support Systems): Women experienced support from various sources—including leaders, mentors, family, and God—that provided the advice, counsel, and moral support they needed to maneuver, adapt, and thrive in complex and challenging environments.
- F2 (Learning Systems): The company's robust talent management program, which included various learning and leadership development opportunities, influenced the executive women's experiences.
- F3 (Career Advancement Systems): The participants' career advancement occurred via difficult and purposeful choices and strategic actions based on internal and external loci of influence.

- F4 (Advocacy): The women experienced advocacy from various sources that produced job opportunities, learning, exposure to decision-makers, career sheltering, and progression.

Table 12 below maps the four significant findings from F1 to F4 to the three research questions. Based on this table, the findings holistically address the central research question and the subquestions. The table shows a one-to-one mapping for the first three findings and questions. However, the fourth finding (advocacy) maps to and addresses all the research questions.

Table 12

Significant Findings Mapped to Research Questions

	F1 Support Systems	F2 Learning Systems	F3 Career Advancement	F4 Advocacy
Q1: How do women executives describe their experiences with support systems?	X			X
Q2: How do women executives describe their experiences with learning systems?		X		X
Q3: How do women executives describe their experiences with career advancement systems?			X	X

Adaptive Leadership Emerged

The study’s findings highlight the company’s role in enabling these women to succeed. Specifically, the company’s adaptive culture played a significant role in the participants’ development into executive and C-suite status while operating in complex and rapidly changing environments. The corporation’s need for adaptive solutions to

address current business demands and challenges while positioning for future growth and a sustained competitive advantage facilitated the establishment of a robust talent management system. This system features a world-class leadership development program that produces top leadership talent to address its adaptive business needs. Lichtenstein et al. (2006) indicated that leadership arises from conflicts as a product of interaction, tension, and exchanges—a dynamic of adaptive leadership. In this case, 11 phenomenal women emerged as top leadership talent from their organization's efforts to address complex and conflictive business challenges.

Heifetz et al. (2009) suggested that adaptive leadership is about change that enables the capacity to thrive, and such is the case with these phenomenal women and their organizations. The characteristics that Heifetz et al. identified for adaptive cultures were evident in the organization where these women operated. The organization embraced and practiced adaptive leadership, which provided a culture that embodied support for aspiring women leaders and executives via active leadership engagement, mentorship, sponsorship, and advocacy. The company's culture also reflected continuous learning via a formal leadership development program, challenging and rotational assignments, on-the-job learning, and exposure to various leaders, protocols, and environments. Additionally, the culture included support for various career advancement opportunities. This adaptive culture enabled the participants to thrive. By developing and empowering these women to learn and lead, the organization increased its capacity to maintain a competitive advantage.

These executives operated in complex corporate environments in which the organization embraced distributed leadership, where the sole leadership responsibility did

not reside with a single individual in the corporation (Gronn, 2002). On the contrary, the organization's adaptive leadership practices provided a culture in which 11 phenomenal women experienced support, learning, career advancement, and advocacy. Consequently, the women emerged as empowered leaders who made significant contributions to the business and industry and progressed to top positions in a US defense corporation, highlighting a path to success for women who aspire to advance to the top positions of American corporations.

Forecast of Chapter 5

Chapter 5 is the next and final chapter of this dissertation. It will discuss the findings related to the theoretical framework and the literature review in Chapter 2, outline interpretations and conclusions based on the findings, implications for professional practice, recommendations for implementation (if appropriate), and indications for further research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Overview

This study aimed to explore and understand how multiple systems influenced the experiences of current and former women from a top US defense corporation and enabled them to achieve C-suite status in that company or another one. In examining these areas, this researcher explored how these executives engaged, adapted, and maneuvered in complex environments, how these phenomenal women could persevere, overcome obstacles, and achieve success, and how their decision-making strategies influenced their experiences on their journey to the C-suite.

This qualitative research employed a phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of 11 C-suite executive women who experienced a common phenomenon on their journeys to the top positions of US defense corporations. The phenomenon of interest was various systems that influenced these executive women's experiences and enabled them to achieve C-suite status in their organizations. The central research question is as follows: How did specific systems influence the experiences of current and former women from a top US defense corporation and enable them to achieve C-suite status?

The researcher leveraged Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a framework to better understand the influences of various environmental systems on women's experiences on their journey to the top positions in their organizations. The premise of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory is that to understand a developing individual, one must examine and understand the person in the context of the environments and

relationships in which the person exists and how various interconnected systems influence the developing person.

The study is significant to research regarding gender diversity in leadership because it identifies a path to success for women who aspire to achieve executive and C-suite-level status in their organizations. Although there has been progress, there are still opportunities to do more to help women advance to the top levels of American corporations and achieve gender parity in leadership. There is abundant research on the barriers women face in their efforts to progress to top leadership positions; however, there is limited literature on the success stories. This study explored an alternative to barrier-focused research, highlighting a path to success for aspiring female leaders and executives.

In exploring the lived experiences of 11 women who achieved executive status at a specific US defense corporation and became C-suite executives at that company or another one, the data indicate a path to success. This research explored systems that influence and enable success and produced four significant findings that aspiring women executives, organizational leaders, and research scholars can leverage to achieve gender diversity in leadership. These findings are summarized in this chapter.

Summary of the Study

Chapter 1 introduced the research by describing the background, purpose, approach, significance, delimitations and limitations, and study vocabulary. In this first chapter, the researcher introduced the problem statement regarding the lack of gender diversity in leadership, noting that gender diversity in leadership matters because it influences organizational innovation and performance, economic performance, and

lower-level employees, especially aspiring women leaders. The researcher indicated that most research on gender equity in leadership focuses on the challenges and barriers women encounter on their professional journeys. However, this research addressed the enablers of gender diversity in leadership. Specifically, the researcher noted that this study focused on the success stories of women who achieved executive-level status at a top US defense corporation and C-suite status at the same or a different corporation.

Chapter 2 reviewed literature about theory and research related to systems that enable women executives to succeed, including those related to support networks, professional development, and career advancement. The researcher leveraged Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as the framework for exploring the research question. Therefore, Chapter 2 also reviewed Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework and the literature about other studies that have done the same to explore how various systems influence individuals' lived experiences and outcomes.

Chapter 3 detailed the study's design, including the researcher's decision to use a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of women executives around a common phenomenon. In Chapter 3, the researcher described the study's qualitative methods—which included purposeful, yet criterion-based, data sampling; data collection via one-on-one interviews with participants; thematic data analysis of participants' responses to questions; data interpretation from data coding and themes; and data validation via member checking.

Chapter 4 presented and summarized the data the study generated in alignment with the research question. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as the theoretical lens of exploration, the research produced four significant findings regarding

the central research question: How did specific systems influence the experiences of current and former women from a top US defense corporation and enable them to achieve C-suite status? The study generated the following four significant findings in response to the study's exploration of the phenomenon of interest: systems of support, learning, career advancement, and advocacy influenced women's experiences and enabled them to achieve C-suite status:

- Finding 1 (Support Systems): Women experienced support from various sources—including leaders, mentors, family, and God—that influenced their experiences by providing the advice, counsel, and moral support needed to maneuver, adapt, and thrive in complex and challenging environments.
- Finding 2 (Learning Systems): The company's robust talent management program influenced women's experiences by providing opportunities for various learning and leadership development activities.
- Finding 3 (Career Advancement Systems): Participants experienced career advancement as difficult and purposeful choices and strategic actions based on internal and external loci of influence.
- Finding 4 (Advocacy): The women experienced advocacy from various sources that produced job opportunities, learning, exposure to decision-makers, career sheltering, and progression.

This final chapter summarizes the findings related to the research purpose and the reviewed literature. It also outlines the study's conclusions and implications for practice, leadership for the advancement of learning and service, and research.

Summary of Major Findings

Three of the four significant findings related to how support, learning, and career advancement systems influenced some women's experiences and enabled them to achieve top positions in US defense corporations. Additionally, the research produced a fourth finding—advocacy—as a vital influencer of women's success, providing career opportunities, access to key decision-makers, and career sheltering. For this study, advocacy referred to sponsorship from individuals in positions of power who could authorize or make something happen for these women's careers beyond providing advice and counseling as mentors do. Whereas there was one-to-one mapping of findings to the three research questions, the fourth finding (advocacy) mapped to and addressed all the research questions.

The study's four significant findings holistically addressed the central research question and the following subquestions the researcher used to explore the phenomenon of interest: 1) How do women executives describe their experiences with support systems? 2) How do women executives describe their experiences with learning systems? and 3) How do women executives describe their experiences with career advancement systems?

Conclusions Related to Research Purpose

Study Finding/Conclusions About Question 1: How Do Women Executives Describe Their Experiences With Support Systems?

The first research finding demonstrates that women received support from various supporters who influenced their experiences by providing the advice, counsel, and moral support they needed to maneuver, adapt, and thrive in complex and challenging

environments. These supporters included leaders, mentors, family, and God. Participants indicated that leaders believed in and took a chance on them, while mentors provided valuable career advice and counsel. The women's family members provided encouragement and sacrificial support, while faith in God was an additional source of support that influenced these women's experiences. The fourth research finding indicates that women experienced advocacy from various sources on multiple levels. These advocates were individuals in positions of power and influence who could make something happen for these women. Advocates were men and women who sponsored job opportunities, exposure to key decision-makers, career protection, and progression. In addition to corporate leaders and executives, women also had customers as advocates who influenced their careers and business growth.

Comparison of Findings and Conclusions About Question 1 to the Literature

The finding aligns with research by Neal (2007) and Block (2016), who suggested there are benefits for seasoned executives to serve as role models, mentors, coaches, sponsors, and advocates for aspiring women leaders and executives. Block noted that successful women help others succeed by serving as mentors to other women, addressing the underrepresentation of women in leadership in higher education. In this case study, Block concluded that successful women have an opportunity and responsibility to help other women by serving as sponsors, coaches, counselors, advocates, role models, and guides for the next generation of women leaders. Block acknowledged that men could and should mentor women while stressing the importance of successful women leading the way. Moreover, the researcher contended that one of the most valuable aspects of

having a support network is to help individuals maneuver in new or uncharted territory while retaining authenticity.

The findings from the current study align with those from Neal's (2007) study, which highlighted the importance of a seasoned executive support network to provide wisdom and guidance for rising and aspiring executive women. Additionally, this significant finding regarding support aligns with those of a study that Brock and Rowlands (2019) conducted that explored how emotions influence success regarding career advancement. The conclusions of this study included recommendations for support from women to other women to help build confidence in aspiring women leaders.

Additionally, the findings regarding male advocacy align with those of Dwivedi (2018), who produced a key finding relative to support systems: men can serve as inclusionary gatekeepers for aspiring female CEOs by challenging stereotypical thinking and male-typed schema for leadership. According to Dwivedi, these senior executive men have the tenure, presence, and power to influence women's career trajectories. Moser and Branscombe's (2022) findings also supported the hypothesis that commitment to male allyship positively influences women's experiences and retention of women in male-dominated environments.

Study Finding/Conclusions About Question 2: How Do Women Executives Describe Their Experiences With Learning Systems?

The second research finding suggests that the company of interest's robust talent management program influenced the participants' learning agility and executive readiness by providing them with learning opportunities via the company's leadership development program, stretch assignments, and training on business acumen, corporate

culture, protocol, and expectations. Additionally, the fourth finding demonstrates that the women experienced advocacy from various sources on multiple levels, which provided unique learning and job opportunities.

Comparison of Findings and Conclusions About Question 2 to the Literature

These findings regarding learning systems align with suggestions from Walsh et al. (2016) and Martínez-Martínez et al. (2021). Walsh et al. proposed a work-exchange model that focuses on professional development for women, similar to the company of interest's rotational assignments. Martínez-Martínez et al. produced results that elucidated how a development program such as ALD can catalyze authentic leadership, improve women's self-concept, and raise self-efficacy and self-development—similar to the company of interest's model for leadership development programs.

Additionally, a study by Clarke (2011) that explored learning and development programs indicated that women-only development programs support increasing women's self-confidence, learning new skills, and learning from others. Organizational culture and career choices also influence women's career advancement (Clarke, 2011).

The findings regarding learning systems do not align with Dashper's (2019) paradoxical study, which suggests that programs geared toward female mentors reinforce masculine discourse in work environments. Dashper arrived at this conclusion based on feedback from some participants who noted that establishing gendered mentoring programs sends the wrong message—namely, that women are weak and need special attention compared to their male counterparts.

Findings regarding the company of interest's talent management program and learning culture align with Spencer et al. (2019), which concluded that organizations and

women share responsibilities for advancing women's careers. The findings suggest that organizations can provide a culture with opportunities for experience, learning, mentoring, and preparedness for the CEO role. Additionally, women can take action to ensure readiness regarding educational degrees and gaining operational experience, demonstrate nonmasculine behaviors, have zero tolerance for abusive behaviors, network, and persist (Spencer et al., 2019).

In the literature review, coaching emerged as a critical theme. Specifically, research findings from Kotlyar et al. (2015) revealed that coaching is essential for preparing women for executive positions. Maher and Hastings (2023) also suggested that coaching drives gender diversity in leadership. However, coaching did not emerge as a theme or finding in this research.

Study Finding/Conclusions About Question 3: How Do Women Executives Describe Their Experiences With Career Advancement Systems?

The third research finding indicates that women experienced career advancement through difficult and purposeful choices and strategic actions based on internal and external loci of influence. In choosing, women made difficult decisions, and some made personal sacrifices for their careers. Women's perspectives on work influenced their approach to work and, therefore, their career progression. Additionally, the fourth research finding indicates that women experienced advocacy from various sources on multiple levels, which provided exposure to decision-makers, career sheltering, and career progression.

Comparison of Findings and Conclusions About Question 3 to the Literature

The finding regarding career advancement aligns with research by Helms et al. (2016) regarding the role of mentorship and sponsorship in career advancement, delineating between the two. Their research results aligned with their perspectives on mentoring and sponsoring, supporting the notion that mentoring is beneficial; however, it is not enough to influence career advancement; women need sponsorship to advance in their careers.

The finding also aligns with results produced by Kuntz and Livingston (2020), who explored factors influencing women's career trajectories in New Zealand while examining the relationships between mentoring, executive coaching, and sponsorship. The results indicate that networking support, executive coaching, and mentorship can positively influence career advancement for women in leadership. The study demonstrated a strong correlation between sponsorship satisfaction and career success, a slight association between executive coaching and success, and that women mostly attribute their success to personal drive (Kuntz & Livingston, 2020).

This present study's finding also aligns with Mousa et al.'s (2021), Mousa, Skouteris, et al.'s (2022), and Mousa, Teede, et al.'s (2022) regarding the role of organizations in advancing women's careers. Mousa et al. (2021) identified the following organizational interventions to support women's career advancement: organizational processes, awareness and engagement, mentoring and networking, leadership engagement, and support tools. Mousa, Teede, et al. (2022) suggested the following prioritization for organizational efforts to advance women in leadership: 1) a committed and supportive leadership team that takes actions required for a positive and equitable

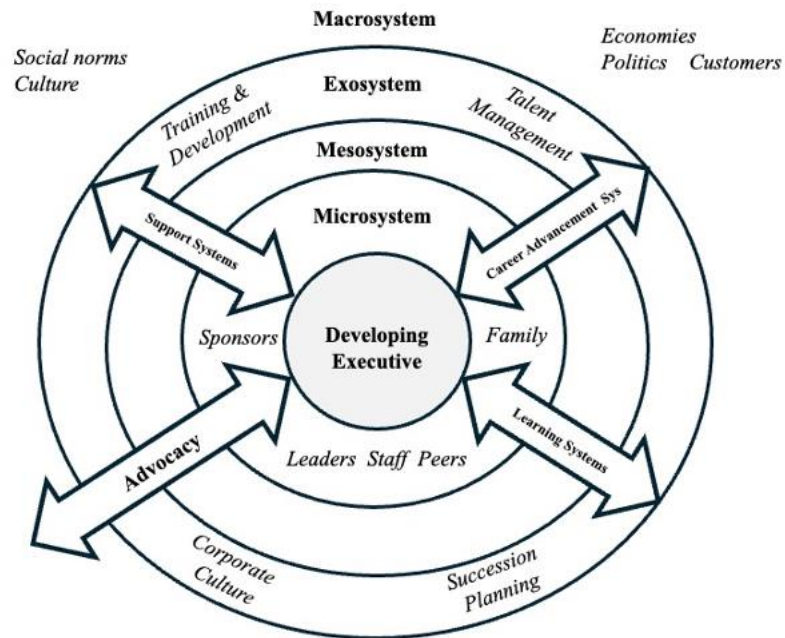
culture; 2) improved governance that promotes transparency regarding promotions processes; 3) formal and informal mentoring opportunities for women, with training for mentors; 4) active leadership and development opportunities; and 5) flexible working arrangements. Mousa, Skouteris, et al. (2022) identified the following four elements as required for an organizational culture that advances women's careers: 1) identifying and actively addressing systemic barriers, 2) challenging gendered assumptions and expectations of leadership, 3) providing mentorship to shape women's career opportunities, and 4) determining how conditions influence women's credibility so that they can internalize a leadership identity.

Discussion of Findings

The research findings support Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which suggests that various systems influence an individual's development, from the person's immediate environment to the broader societal culture. Figure 2 depicts the enabling systems model for the developing executive, illustrating how multiple ecological systems influenced these women's experiences and career outcomes. With the developing executive at the center of the model, the findings indicate that various people, relationships, and environments in the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem influenced the developing executives' experiences and enabled them to succeed and achieve C-suite status.

Figure 2

Enabling Systems Model for Developing Executives



For these executive women, the microsystem level involved family members, leaders, mentors, sponsors, advocates, and the corporate environment in which they operated. According to the findings, the executives' connections and interactions with individuals in the microsystem played a vital role in their development. Some women shared stories of how their superb bosses and amazing mentors guided their careers and provided advice and wise counsel that propelled them into substantial roles. They described situations in which their leaders and mentors saw something in them that they could not or did not see and how these individuals strongly encouraged them to take leaps of faith and leave their comfort zones when they did not feel ready, resulting in pivotal career moments.

Many shared how their decision to heed advice from their advocates led to promotions and changed the trajectory of their careers. Some shared how their mentors helped them maneuver and adapt to new and complex environments with unspoken and unwritten rules regarding attire, corporate protocol, and senior executive engagement. Others discussed how various leaders helped them manage complex relationships and deal with sometimes abusive behaviors, encouraging them to stay focused and perform despite challenges. Most of the participants shared how their families influenced their experiences. Some shared stories of encouragement and sacrificial support from spouses, while others discussed how family members and trusted advisors influenced their decision-making. The findings indicate that the microsystem environment had the most significant influence on the executive's career, which supports Bronfenbrenner's (1979) assertion that the microsystem has the most potent influence over the developing person.

The findings also demonstrate that advocacy played a critical role in these women's development and advancement to the top positions of their organizations. This advocacy involved effective engagement, communication, and interactions among various leaders, mentors, and sponsors, which occurred at the mesosystem level. Advocates engaged and acted on behalf of these executive women to provide job and learning opportunities, career sheltering, access to decision-makers, and career progression. Participants shared many stories of how advocates gave them opportunities, encouraged other leaders to take a risk on them and provide opportunities, or encouraged them to accept roles that prepared and propelled them to the C-suite. Hence, interactions at the microsystem level influenced these executive's experiences and outcomes.

Additionally, the findings indicate that exosystem components such as the company's talent management program, world-class leadership development programs, succession planning, and professional development via stretch and rotational assignments influenced the women's development by providing learning agility and readiness for career advancement. Multiple participants shared stories about the company's leadership development program and developmental assignments that provided accelerated progression and exposure to different business operating units, customers, cultures, and leaders, demonstrating the ecosystems' impact on these women's experiences and career outcomes.

Although the macrosystem represents the most distant environment from the developing executive, the findings indicate that various aspects of the macrosystem (directly and indirectly) influenced these women executives—including, but not limited to, economics, beliefs (e.g., about women in leadership), customers, industry, and culture. One participant indicated that she was a poor girl, and a STEM career and internships helped, which is what started her career. Customers also influenced women's experiences; for instance, a customer who advocated for women and minorities resulted in a participant's career and business growth and a mentoring relationship.

Cultural and societal beliefs also influenced these women's experiences. Regarding culture, Hofstede stated, "Organizational culture reflects work values that are informed by national culture and are shaped by the actions and understandings of their members" (Hatch, 2018, p. 203). Hofstede theorized that national culture informs and, therefore, becomes a part of any organizational culture that operates within its domain because individuals are a part of and go between national and organizational cultures,

carrying their cultures with them (Hatch, 2018). Such is the case for many of these women, who shared stories that involved undesirable and abusive behaviors that stemmed from their colleagues' beliefs about women in the workplace.

Relationship to the Literature

The study's findings align with the literature regarding systems and factors that influence women's experiences and enable them to succeed in the work environment, as well as with other studies that have leveraged Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a framework for exploring how various systems influence individuals' experiences and research outcomes. Sanders (2019) used Bronfenbrenner's theory as a framework for exploring authentic leadership in the church, examining various factors and facets of the ecological system that directly influence the developing leader over time. Moore et al. (2020) leveraged Bronfenbrenner's theory as a lens to explore and better understand inclusive organizations, examining the different levels of influence and coordination needed to establish an inclusive work environment at Sephora.

Conclusions

The findings from this study are consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which suggests that various systems influence the developing individual. Specifically, the research demonstrates that various systems of people, relationships, and environments, at multiple levels, influenced women's experiences and enabled them to advance to executive-level positions in a top US defense corporation and then to the C-suite of that company or another one.

Discussion of Implications

The findings of this study further inform fields of study and behavior associated with gender diversity in leadership. The findings have particular implications for practice, research, and related leadership.

Implications for Practice

This study is significant because it supports efforts to achieve gender diversity in leadership by highlighting a path to success for women who aspire to occupy the top positions in American corporations. This study focused on enablers rather than barriers to success, which has been the predominant focus of previous studies. Specifically, this research explored systems that positively influence and enable the success of aspiring female executives. Hence, this research filled a gap and provided an opportunity to extend the research on gender diversity in leadership.

This research is also significant because it is targeted at enhancing the understanding of how various ecological systems enable success, particularly for aspiring female executives. Understanding this phenomenon will help identify a path to success for aspiring female executives and opportunities to increase gender representation in leadership. This representation matters because it influences organizational innovation and performance, economic performance, and lower-level employees, especially aspiring women executives.

Implications for Leadership

This research has implications for both adaptive and authentic leadership. Adaptive leadership from a task or operational perspective is the first implication. Specifically, the research connects to adaptive leadership for complex and rapidly

changing environments that require adaptive moves, thinking, and solutions to deliver on existing commitments while innovating for the future to sustain a competitive advantage.

Implementing adaptive leadership involves establishing adaptive spaces in complex environments that enable women to succeed, thrive, and advance in American corporations. An adaptive culture enables systems that advance leadership, executive, and C-suite levels. Adaptive leadership provides opportunities for organizations to establish adaptive cultures that facilitate distributive leadership and systems of support, learning, career advancement, and advocacy for aspiring women executives. Leveraging adaptive leadership to advance more women to leadership—specifically, the upper echelons of organizations—supports efforts to increase gender diversity in leadership.

An additional implication of this research is authentic leadership from a relational perspective. Specifically, this research highlights authentic leadership as an avenue for building trusting relationships with leaders, mentors, sponsors, and advocates from various sources to provide valuable career advice, counsel, connections, exposure to decision-makers, career protection, and advancement. This level of support generates success, encouraging and motivating other aspiring women by highlighting a path to success. These success stories should enhance efforts to increase gender diversity in leadership.

Limitations for Research

A limitation of this study is that the research focused on a single industry—the US defense industry. The research also focused on a single corporation of interest where women’s executive careers began. These limitations represent opportunities for additional research to explore a similar phenomenon in other industries and companies. A

recommendation for future research is to broaden the scope to explore a similar phenomenon in nondefense or commercial industries, other nonprofit organizations, and smaller companies.

Future Research Opportunities

A recommendation for future research is to explore adaptive leadership and authentic leadership in C-suite executives of different organizations and industries. An additional recommendation is to broaden the scope of the existing research to include different industries and different types of organizations (e.g., commercial and nonprofit organizations, as well as smaller companies). However, the same methodology should be used to explore a similar research problem or phenomenon and compare results across these new areas for differences, similarities, and opportunities to address gender diversity in leadership.

Summary and Concluding Remarks

Summary

This final chapter presented and summarized the significant findings related to the research that explored the lived experiences of 11 women who achieved executive status at a specific US defense corporation and became C-suite executives at that company or another one. Specifically, this research explored a phenomenon that involved systems that influenced these executive women's experiences and enabled their success. This chapter also included conclusions based on the findings (how they addressed the research questions and compared to the literature); discussions of the findings via the theoretical framework; implications for practice, research, and leadership; and future research recommendations.

The chapter summarized the four significant research findings that emerged in Chapter 4. Specifically, the study's four significant findings relate to systems that influenced women's experiences: support, learning, career advancement, and advocacy. These findings holistically addressed the central research question and the subquestions.

A discussion of conclusions relative to how the findings addressed each research question and how they compared to the literature concluded that the findings addressed all research questions and aligned with the literature. There was a one-to-one mapping of the first three findings—support, learning, and career advancement—to the three research questions. However, the fourth finding on advocacy mapped to and addressed all the research questions.

Next, this chapter discussed the findings, leveraging Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model as the framework. The research findings are consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which suggests that various systems influence the developing individual. Specifically, the research demonstrates that various systems of people, relationships, and environments, at multiple levels, influenced women's experiences and enabled them to advance to executive-level positions in a top US defense corporation and then to the C-suite of that company or another one.

Finally, this chapter also discussed the study's implications for practice, leadership, and the advancement of research. This research is significant for multiple reasons, including its applicability to efforts to support gender diversity in leadership and enhance understanding regarding how various environmental systems (factors) influence women's experiences.

Concluding Remarks

This dissertation reflects a tremendous learning opportunity that involved exploring the lives of 11 phenomenal women who shared stories of courage, resilience, perseverance, and humility. Their stories demonstrated the criticality of learning agility and the vitality of adaptive leadership as individuals rotated to different environments where they encountered constant changes in complex environments that required them to quickly adapt to new environments, leaders, peers, employees, and customers. The participants highlighted the need for resilience and courage to overcome and how purposeful choosing and remaining focused were crucial for advancement. Although these women reached the top of their organizations, they remained humble, acknowledging the need for robust support networks and the importance of establishing and maintaining enduring relationships with individuals who can provide encouragement, mentorship, and sponsorship. They shared amazing stories of advocacy, demonstrating that they did not achieve success on their own and that they had help from many sources. I pray their stories will encourage, motivate, and inspire other women (and men) to pursue learning, be resilient, and demonstrate authentic and adaptive leadership in complex and challenging situations. Additionally, I hope that an enhanced understanding of systems that influence developing leaders and executives' experiences—support, learning, career advancement, and advocacy—will benefit aspiring women leaders and executives and their organizations, resulting in the advancement of more women to the upper echelon of corporations.

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APPENDIX A

Research Instruments

Demographic Questions

The researcher will collect the following demographic information for each of the research participants:

1. Last Name, First Name
2. Highest level of education.
3. Years of experience in the industry.
4. Years of employment with the current corporation.
5. Years in the current role.

Interview Questions

This researcher will conduct one-on-one interviews with each of the participants to collect their responses to the following questions about their career backgrounds and lived experiences as corporate and C-suite executives at top US defense corporations:

1. What experiences got you here?
2. What experiences kept you here?
3. What strategies and criteria did you use for decision-making?

During the participant narratives, the researcher will be asking and listening to responses using sub-questions that align with the three central questions as follows:

1. “What experiences got you here?” Tell me about your career journey, including the following:
 - Notable educational achievements?
 - Notable career assignments?
 - Notable career successes? Failures?

- Role models - women, men, or both?
 - Professional development and training – company sponsored? personal investment?
 - Career advancement - key assignments, selections, promotions?
2. What experiences kept you here? Tell me what caused you to persevere and stick with this career journey.
- Compensation?
 - Mentors, coaches, sponsors?
 - Support network – family, friends?
 - Professional network?
 - Special relationships – career sponsors, key decision-makers
 - Corporate policies/practices – talent development? promotions and advancements? succession planning? DEI commitment?
 - Barriers encountered – resources and support to manage and overcome them?
3. What strategies and criteria did you use for decision-making? Tell me about some of your personal decisions, professional decisions, and complex decisions, and the strategies and criteria you used to make the decisions.
- Notable personal decisions - strategies and criteria used to make them?
 - Notable professional decisions - strategies and criteria used to make them?
 - Barriers encountered - strategies, resources, or support you used to help you manage, maneuver and/or overcome them?
 - What strategies, resources, or support did you use to help you manage, maneuver and/or overcome these barriers?

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form



INFORMED CONSENT FOR

The Phenomenology of Success: Women who made it to the C-suite despite barriers

You are invited to participate in a research study to explore gender diversity at top U.S. Defense corporations by examining the lived experiences of a phenomenon of women who achieved executive and C-suite status in these organizations, despite barriers. Your data will be anonymously reported and will be kept confidential.

This study is being conducted by Bettye H. Smith, a student in Anderson University's Ph.D. in Leadership Program. You were selected as a possible participant based on your ability to purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and the central phenomenon that deals with women who have achieved senior executive-level status and can share information about their lived experiences as members of the top executive teams for top U.S. corporations that support the U.S. Department of Defense.

If you decide to participate, I will email you or your administrative assistant to schedule the one-on-one research interview. This meeting will be virtual via the Zoom platform, where the session will be recorded. The interview session will last for one hour. If a follow-up meeting is needed to clarify some of your responses, I will contact you or your administrative assistant to set up a second session, which will take only one hour or less.

Participation in this study may involve potential discomforts as you share and reflect on your experiences as a corporate executive. Please let me know if you feel uncomfortable during the interview, and I will pause or stop the interview.

Any information concerning this study that can identify you will remain confidential. The data collected via your responses will be anonymized in the results, so you will be assigned a dummy or pseudo name to protect your identity in the research results. Only I will handle the raw data collected in the study. All data will be stored on a private computer drive that will be encrypted and safeguarded.

The recorded audio data from the interviews will be transcribed for data processing and analysis. Once the transcription is complete, the recordings will be destroyed. All data that is collected as a part of this research study will not be retained more than three months after the research is complete.

You may withdraw from participation at any time without penalty and withdraw any data collected about you as long as that data is identifiable. Your decision on whether or not to participate will not jeopardize your future relations with Anderson University. If you have any questions, I invite you to ask them now. If you have questions later, please contact me and I will be happy to answer them. You will be provided a copy of this form to keep.

For more information regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chairs of the Human Subjects Committee/Institutional Review Board by phone or e-mail. The HSC Chairs, Dr. Joni Criswell and Dr. Robert Franklin can be reached at (864) 231-2000 or through email at hsc@andersonuniversity.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE.

Participant's signature Date

Investigator's signature Date

Print Name

Print Name