

Vantage Points: Variables that Influence Female Ascent to Veterans Administration Leadership

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Doctor of Social Work

by Meredith E. Moore

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Vantage Points: Variables that Influence Female Ascent to Veterans Administration Leadership

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### STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The Veterans Administration (VA) is the nation's largest healthcare system and employs more than 12,000 Masters of Social Work degreed practitioners in its hospitals and clinics (Veterans Administration, 2017). While its hiring practices are legislated by the Civil Rights Reform Act of 1978, the VA's Senior Executive Service (SES) staff has a sharp disparity between genders when compared to its prominently female workforce. In its Veterans Health Administration, sixty percent of the workforce is female yet women occupy only thirty-six percent of SES positions, thirty-five percent of managerial Grade Scale (GS) 13-15 positions, and forty-three percent of "white collar" jobs (Veterans Administration, 2016).

Researchers have had limited success in identifying the variables that shape female succession to SES roles. The presence of vague presumptions regarding female SES experiences (e.g. perceived female SES job satisfaction due to the absence of reports indicating female SES

job dissatisfaction) and the absence of substantial data from female SES leaders create challenges for the identification of advantageous leadership attributes for female SES aspirants. This study's proximal goal was to garner a greater emic understanding of the leadership variables which female SES leaders identify as influential in organizational ascension. A secondary goal was to utilize these data in educating social workers who may be future female VA leadership candidates thereby enhancing their ability to ascend to leadership roles. A distal goal was to use this transferred knowledge to improve the number of females in VA SES leadership positions. A mixed methods approach utilizing implicit leadership theory (ILT) was implored to explore these topics.

#### SUMMARY OF THE INVESTIGATION

Participants indicated that non-personal factors exerted a high level of influence on female leaders however noted that personal characteristics and the negative experiences of female SES leadership had little perceived influence on female leaders. Military culture was found to be of moderate influence on female SES leadership while peer mentorship demonstrated low influence. These perspectives suggest that non-personal factors, military culture, and peer mentorship had the greatest influence on females attempting to access VA SES leadership positions while personal factors and negative female SES leadership experiences were minimally influential.

Signature of Investigator Meredith E. Moore

Date March 8, 2018

## Dedication

My family and friends have traversed this journey and remained steadfast throughout my academic travels. Your support of my educational pursuits is treasured.

To my husband Tony Shue: Your love, adaptability, and appreciation of the importance of this work will not be forgotten. There are not enough words to express my gratitude.

To my children Jade Imani, Paris Aaliyah, and Landon Barry: I am excited that you were able to learn alongside me. You are inquisitive children whose interest in Mom's homework was always appreciated. I hope to see you grow and lead in many marvelous ways.

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And finally, to my late father Barry Moore: You supported all of my life endeavors. Your belief that this brown-eyed girl could be anything that she wanted to be consistently inspired me to complete this work. Blessings to you in heaven, Dad.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION, SPECIFIC AIMS, AND RELEVANCE

### Overview

The VA is the nation's largest healthcare system and employs more than 12,000 Master of Social Work (MSW) degreed practitioners in its hospitals and clinics (Veterans Administration, 2017). While its hiring practices are legislated by the Civil Rights Reform Act of 1978, the VA's Senior Executive Service (SES) staff has a sharp disparity between sexes when compared to its prominently female workforce. Its stated commitment to "a federal service which is reflective of the nation's diversity" (Dolan, 2004, p. 301) is notably incongruent with present SES minority representation.

Workforce research trends note the country has a desire for leadership "which reflects the face of America" (Witherspoon, 2010, p. 102). Sixty percent of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) workforce is female yet women retain only thirty-six percent of SES positions, thirty-five percent of managerial Grade Scale (GS) 13-15 positions, and forty-three percent of white collar jobs (Veterans Administration, 2016). A US Merit Systems Protection Board report found that subtle presumptions (e.g. females lacked interest in leadership) and stereotypes (e.g. females were weaker leaders than males) held by managers were possible barriers for female advancement within the organization (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2008). Often described as workplaces with "sticky floor" (Sanchez-Huchles & Davis, 2010, p.173), "glass ceiling," or "labyrinth" architectural infrastructures (Eagly & Carli, 2003, p.808), these misconceptions regarding female leaders limit the progression of female staff to leadership positions.

## **Gender and SES**

Presumptions about familial roles and the work-life balance of women (Hermann, 2014) have been hypothesized as factors which may impact their ability to ascend the promotional ladder to reach the “O level of CEO, CFO, or CIO” rung (Cheung & Halpern, 2010, p. 182). Lips and Keener (2007) find that the VA’s unbalanced gender leadership demographics parallel the active duty military’s female leadership statistics (Lips & Keener). The literature is rife with studies exploring the tensions associated with gender integration of women in the military (Heinecken, 2017) and their need to “claim space” (Van Breda, 2016, p.20) among the officer ranks. Lips and Keener reported that some respondents found leadership in a military-associated institution to be unfeminine. As the organizational missions of the VA and Department of Defense differ, these findings may not hold value when considering the kaleidoscopic needs of modern veterans.

Whitehead, Czarnogorski, Wright, Hayes, and Haskell (2014) suggest that because the VA organization’s clientele is prominently male, male leadership candidates may be more qualified due to their first-hand familiarity with their gender’s needs. Much of the VA’s internal research regarding disparity concerns has focused on redesigning women’s healthcare programs (Veterans Administration, 2017); however these organizational goals devised to improve service provision to female veterans have not led to a decrease in the gender disparity in staff leadership (Whitehead, Czarnogorski, Wright, Hayes, & Haskell, 2014). Evolutions in VA policies and practices regarding gender equity appear to be supported by female researchers however they reference the need to engage leadership in addressing these concerns for clientele, not employees (Bastian, Mattocks, Rosen, Hamilton, Bean-Mayberry, Sadler, & Yano, 2015).

According to Gurley (2015), some female SES staff report that they embrace a dual psyche which minimizes any traits typically associated with their gender, such as defeminizing their appearance by wearing unisex attire, in order to achieve executive success. Although formal internal SES surveys claim that the transparent barrier for organizational advancement may be permeated by individuals with appropriate experience, education, and past performance, individualized independent surveys have not supported these assertions (Alexander, 1994). Some female Associate Directors have accepted temporary appointments to Acting SES positions in order to pave their way to possible permanent future leadership roles (Veterans Administration, 2017). While these women, some of whom are social workers, fulfill SES responsibilities during temporary vacancies and re-assignments of governing officials, their contributions have been minimalized and cynically disparaged by commentary reporting they are *acting like* not *acting as* Directors (Veterans Administration, 2017).

Uchendu (2014) observed that the VA's established goals to "eliminate silos and other barriers that spur inequities" (p.512) acknowledge the organization's gender imbalance in SES leadership. Previous SES interviews found that reasons for female underrepresentation resulted from female leadership candidates' lack of education, mentoring, leadership development, training (Hairston, 2012), as well as support from current SES leaders (Murray, 2015). While these interviews yielded some insights, Dickerson's (2010) earlier study observed that there continues to be a notable ignorance regarding specific desirable leadership components for future female SES aspirants.

### **Multi-Dimensional Perspectives**

## **Political**

Until recent decades, women were not highly represented in government organizations and leadership. The presidential candidacy of former Democratic Representative Geraldine Ferraro caused Americans to re-consider the impact of women in SES roles (Simon & Hoyt, 2008). Oft aligned with more liberal political attitudes, female candidates were notably reliant on support from other minority groups when addressing present political leadership norms (Simon & Hoyt, 2008). These more liberal political attitudes also align with the social work code of ethics (NASW, 2017).

Due to the public's negative assessment of female federal leadership candidates, many women are relegated to concession prize roles with reduced visibility and minimal executive privileges (Simon & Hoyt, 2008). Some females accept leadership positions with nominal leadership titles, but few leadership opportunities or responsibilities (Veterans Administration, 2017). "Velvet ghetto" positions (Simon & Hoyt, 2008, p.518) in less powerful departments such as human resources and education also have been provided to women seeking federal leadership roles. These positions have reportedly been offered in an effort to appease female staff and offer low promotion and authority opportunities (Simon & Hoyt, 2008).

A May 2017 Presidential press release reported President Donald Trump's proposed 2018 fiscal year budget reserves \$186.5 billion dollars for VA care (Veterans Administration, 2017). VA Secretary David Shulkin stated that this requested budget increase of 5.5% "reflects the ongoing strong commitment of the President to provide the services and benefits that our nation's Veterans have earned" (Veterans Administration, 2017). This proposal encompasses discretionary funding and advance appropriations for 2019 medical care, includes 82 legislative



proposals for enhanced care, and suggests a 7% increased budget of \$505M to expand access gender specific healthcare for women (Veterans Administration, 2017).

Additional verbiage in this VA press release spoke in generalities about improving the veteran experience, however the only leadership-related annotation reflected a \$159.6M request for the Office of Inspector General to “enhance oversight and in fulfilling its statutory mission of making recommendations that will help VA improve the care and services it provides” (Veterans Administration, 2017). Although these broad fiscal and leadership goals serve as an outline for an initial funding request, they fail to denote the specific means by which current leadership will disperse, manage, and account for these resources. These documents may fulfill the basic goal of disclosing organizational planning, but the language of this report neither responds directly to the gender disparity in VA leadership nor allocates fiscal resources to closing the gap.

### **Socio-Cultural**

Women are the lead caregiver in sixty percent of families and often are tasked with parenting responsibilities (Hunt & Reinhard, 2015). This important leadership role has been undervalued, minimized, and presumed to be obligatory. In American culture, these traditional roles of caretaking and homemaking have characteristically been viewed as competitive and non-complementary with leadership roles. As women, including social workers, demonstrate an increasing presence in workforce leadership roles, this duality could be considered a multi-tasking strength rather than a performance-related weakness.

### **Scope of Impact**

The absence of information regarding female SES leadership experiences is felt at the micro level as female VA staff attempt to chart their professional development paths. Thus,

females aspiring to VA SES leadership positions lack access to strategies which have promoted success for current female SES leaders. As social workers are among the females aspiring to leadership positions, additional information regarding these strategies may enhance their ability to reach these roles. This deficit also impacts the practitioners' confidence levels in the organization's support of female promotion (Gurley, 2015).

VA clients are affected at a mezzo level by the organization's pre-dominantly male leadership staff who enact decisions regarding its operations, policies, and practices (Uchendu, 2014). The homogeneity of this male influenced groupthink ripples to the secondary customer pool of veteran families, veteran service organizations, allying professionals, and stakeholders. Veterans considering VA employment and volunteer opportunities also may find this primarily male leadership faction to be an all too familiar flashback to their enlisted days.

At a macro-organizational level, underrepresentation of women in VA SES leadership may influence the education of the facility's current social work interns and residents who are the future leaders of tomorrow. The VA offers stipendiary MSW internships in hopes to train its future VHA social workers. The gender inequity in VA leadership may make future VHA employment less appealing to students. VHA proudly reports that seventy percent of our nation's currently practicing physicians completed some portion of their residency at one of their facilities (Veterans Administration, 2017). As many physicians utilize their clinical training experiences as a foundation for their professional practices, the indirect impact felt due to the underrepresentation of female leadership may resonate in their international post-graduate professional practices.

Without a clearer understanding of the challenges female SES leaders face in accessing leadership roles and knowledge of the desirable attributes which support women in ascending to

federal executive leadership roles, the organization's predominantly male leadership statistics are likely to remain unchanged. This limitation may not only influence the female SES aspirant, but also may affect her colleagues and clientele. Compared to other medical facilities, non-government institutions, and international industries, the VA's competitive position also may be restricted by these gender-limiting leadership factors as this lack of diversification decreases opportunities to cultivate a balanced organization (Lips & Keener, 2007).

The values outlined in the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2017) espouse another incentive for change and diversification. Its tenets promoting social justice and the dignity and worth of the person support exploration of this phenomenon. Gender-related leadership challenges at the VA warrant further research.

### **Aims**

This study examines the personal characteristics which mitigate the promotion of female VA leadership candidates to SES roles. Specifically, this research will seek to obtain first-hand reports from current female SES and senior leaders at the Lebanon VA Medical Center in order to acquire a greater understanding of the gender disparity leadership phenomenon. The overarching goal of this research is to attain an increased understanding of the factors that challenge females in ascending to leadership positions within the VA organization. A better understanding of these leadership dynamics may help propel more social workers to VA leadership positions.

These aims consider the individual female social worker's need to improve her leadership knowledge while honing skills which strategically support accessing successive organizational leadership roles. In mezzo-level social work practice, this work seeks to identify and differentiate

historically unique leader characteristics for use in educating the social work community regarding variables which may equalize the gender disparity in VA leadership. In a broader macro-level application, these aims target the empowerment of all female social workers by using the experiential expertise of their female leadership predecessors to enact policy changes which promote gender equity in VA leadership.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions are addressed:

1. What variables are identified as factors that influence the ascension of female candidates into SES positions?
2. Does the patriarchal imprint of military culture affect VA leadership and the advancement of female SES candidates?
3. How might leadership factors deemed valuable for organizational ascension by current female SES leaders be utilized to educate potential leaders?
4. How might this education facilitate the objective representation of women in federal SES positions?

These questions were designed to address the challenges of micro-level female social work practitioners whose current professional experiences and leadership aspirations may be influenced by gender-related factors. Mezzo-level implications consider the cultural aspects of gender, military, and government hierarchy in relation to the progression of female social workers who currently serve in leadership roles at government organizations. These research

questions are important for macro-level social work as they consider how social workers advocate for policies which support female ascension to any organizational leadership role.

### **Problem Statement**

Many hypotheses (e.g. societal norms, conservative cultures, etc.) have been proposed as reasons for the marginalization of VA female leadership. Little research has identified variables that shape female succession to SES roles. This absence results in a lack of training materials to prepare female social workers for ascension to leadership positions. Delineating the factors which build, propel, and support future female VA leaders is requisite for improving the gender's representation in SES positions.

The presence of vague presumptions regarding female SES experiences (e.g. perceived female SES job satisfaction due to lack of reports indicating female SES job dissatisfaction) and the absence of substantial data from first-hand reports of female SES leaders limit the delineation of advantageous leadership attributes for female SES aspirants. This study's proximal goal is to garner a greater emic understanding of the leadership variables which female SES leaders identify as influential in organizational ascension. A secondary goal is to utilize these data in educating social workers who may be future female VA leadership candidates thereby enhancing their ability to ascend to leadership roles. A distal goal is to use this transferred knowledge to improve the number of females in VA SES leadership positions.

### **Relevance in Social Work Education, Leadership, and Practice**

#### **Education and Leadership**

VHA supports a strong MSW internship program which not only provides stipend-funded positions, but also offers a bevy of educational experiences via training in its facilities and

community-based programs (Veterans Administration, 2017). For MSW interns who identify professional goals aligning with a leadership tract, a clear definition of these desirable leadership traits should be available for use in the creation of their learning contracts. Additionally, as approximately 83% of individuals with social work degrees are reported to be women (Fischl, 2013), female MSW interns and field instructors should prioritize this leadership knowledge when constructing practicum field learning plans. Learning of the VA organizational needs and demands from a female leadership perspective may better prepare MSW students for the transition from their internships to their professional paths which may include careers with leadership roles.

As MSW graduates trained at the VA may choose to practice outside of this government institution, the ramifications of research which identifies and utilizes leadership enhancing traits would also impact professional practice experiences for women employed in the public sector. As the social work profession possesses a global influence, female social workers in international venues may find this leadership knowledge influential to their work. This work also supports ethical practice standards which align with the profession's gender-empowering Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017).

### **Leadership and the Code**

Social work's national mission is "to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (NASW, 2017, p.1). The social work Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) is assembled on the "core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence" (p. 3) which outline the profession's practices and principals. These standards support the valuation and

equity of females in the workforce not only as leaders, but as individuals who impact the personal and professional lives of others. This study may move us closer to the ideals espoused in the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017).

At a micro level, the examination of the factors which promote ascension of female VA staff to SES positions supports the inherent equality that all human beings should be afforded. Gender should be considered a species characteristic, not a defining factor which skews promotion outcomes. In an ideal world, leadership would be defined by an individual's ability to lead. A leader's fundamental value should be interpreted based on their virtues, not an individual's gender.

Implementation of gender-attuned leadership approaches in the federal government would likely enhance the motivation of female staff to consider leadership roles. Local VA medical centers would benefit from this research as it offers insight into the current status of leader-staff relationships. These data would help identify aspects for improvement and the development of educational programs for female staff to assist in future career progression. These changes may also transform the organizational climate into a more gender-equitable culture.

At the national level, mezzo changes would impact the VA's relationship with other entities and the government's overall communication style. The advancement of female employees including social workers to SES roles would no longer be considered a national anomaly but more so a commonplace practice. Knowledge gained could benefit females and other vulnerable or oppressed groups.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES

### **Literature Review**

Numerous theoretical approaches, such as trait leadership theory (Stodgill, 1948) and authentic leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006), are used to consider factors which influence female ascent to leadership positions. While many perspectives demonstrate value and application to the experiences of female VA leaders, Goffman's (1961) work on organizational institutions, Lipsky's (2010) examination of bureaucracies, and Lord's implicit leadership theory (ILT) (1985) appear to inform best this study's research variables.

Historically, the terms *leadership* and *management* have been inaccurately interchanged due to misperceived connotations regarding their meanings. While the word *management* addresses the organization and structuring of tasks, the word *leadership* defines the qualities and skills required of an individual overseeing an organization's human resources. Although the social work profession values human capital, social workers are not noted in the literature (Dickerson, 2000) to be the predominant profession of VA leaders.

Professional labels which connote elevated power, such as *Coordinator*, are increasingly common in the VA organization, however seem titular in nature (Veterans Administration, 2017). While offering the appearance of increased influence and leadership, these titles tend to accompany additional collateral responsibilities without commensurate remuneration, promotion, or leadership responsibilities (Veterans Administration, 2017). Historical literature which examines effective leadership variables and delineates their implications for evidenced-based social work practice and leadership are explored by this research.



## **Socio-Cognitive Perspectives**

Social cognition theory (Lord, DeVader, & Alliger, 1986) and social interchange theory (Veggio, 1979) have been influential models in understanding leader-worker relationships. Elder's (1998) life course perspective explains the transition of women from volunteerism to professional roles. When considering an individual's beliefs regarding women achieving leadership roles, Bandura's social learning theory (1977) examines self-efficacy expectations using four realms including emotional response, performance accomplishment, verbal impact, and vicarious learning. These arenas have been utilized in considering academic achievement, professional positional uncertainty, and work roles (Ancis & Phillips, 1996). Social networking techniques are also believed to have originated from this schema (Ancis & Phillips, 1996).

Trait leadership theory (Stodgill, 1948) was initially embraced due to its fundamental belief that effective leadership is attributed to a leader's individual characteristics. These theorists argued that an individual's character crafts his leadership path, progression, and proclivities (Stodgill, 1948). Lord, DeVager, and Alliger (1986) found that trait leadership theory also espouses that intelligence and dominance demonstrate stronger relationships with leader emergence and leadership predictors. Testing of the theory led to its decreased favor due to substantial variability (Mann, 2010).

Social judgment research seeks to derive meaning from the resonance of the leader's traits, the organization, and its employees (McElwee, Dunning, Tan, & Hollman, 2001). McElwee, Dunning, Tan, and Hollman (2001) note that social judgment theory considers fluid conceptualization of factors which promote success in various arenas. Byrne (1971) reports that idiosyncratic, self-serving leaders are "people who tend to like others who are similar to

themselves” (p.112). This statement highlights that the role of egocentricity should be examined when considering leadership intentions via a social judgment lens.

### **Values-Oriented Perspectives**

Values-centered theories have gained popularity during the violent world events of the past several decades as society appears to be searching for a solution to global chaos. Zhu, Zheng, Riggio, and Zhang (2015) suggest that ethics and morality have emerged as significant considerations which exceeded the prioritization of other factors, such as business acumen and skill acquisition. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) identify altruism, honesty, and fairness as seminal attributes which are closely evaluated and honed by prosperity-seeking organizations. Zhu, Zheng, Riggio, and Zhang assert that the differentiation between the demonstration of moral actions as a person or a leader also became a more closely scrutinized criterion.

Bass and Riggio’s (2006) authentic leadership theory demonstrates increased prominence as a theoretical approach due to its broad focus on group achievement rather than individual successes. Zhou, Ma, Cheng, and Xia (2014) define authenticity as “the root construct underlying other positive forms of leadership” (p.1272). Authentic leadership approaches allow for greater versatility in adapting to a social group’s cultural customs, norms, rules, and traditions (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Bass and Riggio (2006) note that egocentric foci on self- achievement and power are eclipsed by a true vestment in leadership approaches which promote the betterment of the whole. These authors observe that external and internal loci of moderation are also monitored in authentic leadership approaches in order to assess the leader’s moral compass. Zhu, Zheng, Riggio, and Zhang (2015) further assert that while authentic leaders are influenced and perhaps

bolstered by their organizational mission statements and philosophies, intrinsic values typically guide their decision-making processes.

According to servant leadership theory (Greenleaf & Spears, 2002), the natural desire to serve others channels a conscious charge to lead. These leadership motives subliminally minimize pursuit of formal leadership roles due to the humility associated with the servant role. Many tenets operationalized by this theoretical approach, such as healing and stewardship, embody attributes of faith-based leaders. Russell and Stone (2002) indicate that application of the servant leadership approaches requires leaders to attain self-regulation and personal moral management before guiding others.

Fry's spiritual leadership theory (2003) is a branch of servant leadership which offers a honed focus on beneficence and "spiritual survival" (p. 2015). Endorsement of faith-based beliefs surrounding an altruistic vision centers followers in their meaning and calling (Fry, 2003). These spiritual leadership theories correlate with the secular social work profession's tenets and that of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017). The adoption of these leadership approaches by governmental institutions however seems unlikely as their philosophies run counter to current pragmatic leadership practices.

### **Philosophical Leadership Perspectives**

Ethics-related theories were the foundational cornerstone in constructing transformational leadership approaches (Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999). Burns (1978) asserts that transformational leaders elevate morality by aligning moral values with those of the workplace. Avolio, Bass, and Jung (1999) indicate that this dynamic theory inspires workers to apply a moral approach to their workplace behaviors. While transformational leadership could be misaligned with a negative

cause, by and large this theory's applications appear to promote positive industrial and personal growth.

Bass's (1999) transformational leadership is a highly researched theoretical model which considers commitment, empowerment, role clarity, and vision (Westerberg, Hyvonen, & Tavelin, 2012). It also aligns with the social work profession's values while considering minority leadership challenges. The NASW Code of Ethics (2017) values of integrity and the importance of human relationships are echoed in the transformational theoretical approach. Its stratified objectives have been measured by Avolio and Bass's (2004) Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire tool which considers leadership factors such as coaching, mistake monitoring, rewards achievement, trust building, and the level of involvement or avoidance.

A recently conceptualized branch of transformational leadership incorporates Aristotle's philosophies as defining leadership traits (Riggio, Zhu, Reina, & Maroosis, 2010). Its first cardinal virtue of prudence focuses on insight, knowledge, and wisdom (Riggio, Zhu, Reina, & Maroosis, 2010). Riggio, Zhu, Reina, and Maroosis (2010) believe this approach endorses the ability to balance ideals when enacting decisions in order to promote beneficence and minimize malfeasance. Fortitude requires leaders to act ethically and virtuously regardless of consequence while temperance aligns a leader's emotional regulation and physical self-control (Riggio, Zhu, Reina, & Maroosis, 2010). The value of justice is subdivided into the categories of general justice and particular justice to demark the divide between laws and policies versus principles and applications (Riggio, Zhu, Reina, & Maroosis, 2010). This theoretical perspective echoes the current VA leadership charge to consider "principles over policies" when challenged by an ethical concern (Veterans Administration, 2017).

## **Theoretical Approaches**

### **Schematic Leadership Categorization Approaches**

When considering which theories best align with VA female leadership needs, schematic leadership categorization theories (Lord & Maher, 1990) appeared most salient. According to Lord and Maher (1990), these theoretical approaches define expressed characteristics to promote leadership success in environments which naturally generate bias based on race or gender. Forsyth, Heiney, and Wright (1997) submit that these cognitive theories possess biases that “result from discrepancies between individuals’ stereotypes about women and their implicit prototypes of leaders” (p. 99). Ritter and Lord (2007) note that comparison of present leaders to their predecessors resulted in “erroneous generalizations of leader characteristics and associated underlying attributions” (p. 1683). Leadership categorization theories synthesize findings of traits, values, and philosophical predecessors into an approach which is relevant in the current SES federal leadership structure and social work practice.

### **Implicit Leadership Theory**

Implicit leadership theory (ILT) (Lord & Maher, 1990), defined as “the study of the schema that people use in identifying and labeling others as a leader” (p. 3), is a research approach which has received consistent attention during the past few decades. Its examination of individuals’ conceptualizations of leaders allows researchers to attain a clearer understanding of a leader’s emergence, effectiveness, and relationship with employees. Empirical studies have considered ILT and its connection to authentic leadership practices noting that components of authenticity which influence leadership performance feedback may in fact be components of ILT (Nichols & Erakovich, 2013).

Lord and Maher (1990) assert that individualized knowledge structures are formed in ILT based on a person's perceptions of an ideal leader. This schema continually evolves as new experiences arise and mutate with each additional leadership encounter. Information regarding these interactions and experiences is automatically added to the pre-existing knowledge structure thereby influencing the follower's feelings and ideas regarding the leader. The pre-existing life experiences, work characteristics, and values of followers also formulate their individualized knowledge structures. It is not uncommon for followers to share overlapping leader perceptions however no one individual possesses a perspective which identically replicates another follower's schema (Lord & Maher, 1990).

Lord, Foti, DeVader, and Alliger (1984) posit that in ILT, followers unconsciously compare cognitions of current leaders to a prototypical historic leader in order to construct a perception of the current leader. Lord (1985) adds that ILT utilizes this schema as a framework for examining organizational settings and leadership as employees' prior expectations and leadership prototypes shape their present perceptions of executive leaders. Weick (1995) describes these leadership schemas as "the dynamic, cognitive knowledge structures used by individuals to interpret incoming information regarding managerial leadership" which are "thought to be essential elements of organizational sense making" (p.322).

Lord and Maher (1990) indicate that ILT provides organization members with a structure for processing leadership experiences while developing a cognitive platform for honing leadership behaviors. Lam, Huang, and Chan (2014) observe that the manner in which leaders share information with subordinates impacts the performance level of employees. Ritter and Lord (2007) posit that as prior leadership experiences are stored and accessed when similar

experiences are encountered with future leaders, transference implications are also considered by  
ILT.

Avery, McKay, and Volpone's (2016) ILT research considers the maleficent effects of stigma and perceptions of leader aptitude noting that when leaders are considered to be substandard, patrons infer these characteristics about the quality of their businesses' products and services. Donia, Raja, Panaccio and Wang (2016) found that this unjustified correlation can penalize organizations due to false perceptual contamination. Conversely, leaders who appear to have motivating ILT orientations with their subordinates have been observed to cast a positive light on their organizations' reputation (Donia, Raja, Panaccio, & Wang, 2016).

Nichols and Erakovich (2013) aver that the greatest ILT predictor of a follower's preferences for a particular leader should be the follower's conceptualization of an ideal leader. Ehrhart (2012) implores this theoretical approach to examine followership, self-esteem, and self-construal. This research employs the Rosenberg Self Esteem scale (1965) and an additional collaboratively designed leadership style preference measure (Ehrhart & Klein, 2001). These measures validated the hypothesized assertion that followers' self-concepts would demonstrate both positive and negative sensitivity to charismatic leadership styles noting that followers with a positive conceptualization of a leader reported increased feelings of self-worth and value (Ehrhart, 2012).

The specific dimensions of charisma, sensitivity, and dedication (Yukl, Gordon, & Taber, 2002), tyranny, masculinity, attractiveness, intelligence, and strength (Offerman, Kennedy, & Wirtz, 1994) have demonstrated modest prominence in ILT research. Bligh, Kohles, and Pillai (2011) found that the contributions of followers to the formation of leadership relationships and leadership efficacy have even been considered to have romanticized undertones. These authors

also noted that some individuals view the development of the leader-follower relationship as a courtship with “leadership as a sense making activity that is primarily ‘in the eye of the beholder’” (Bligh, Kohles, & Pillai, 2011, p.1058). Information processing via Implicit Followership Theories has emerged as a recent ILT derivative which considers socio-cognitive approaches to both the leader and follower perspectives (Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tram-Quon, & Topakas, 2013).

ILT has been examined in relation to affect and role model effectiveness (Hoyt, Burnette, & Innella, 2012) and the role of personality in the selection process for formal leadership positions (Carnes, Houghton, & Ellison, 2015). Ho (2012) noted a differing level of impact between spontaneously and deliberately processed information in correlation to leader relationships and the followers’ feelings of malevolence and sensitivity. Implications of the goodness of fit between a supervisor and supervisee have been valued as equally important as the fit of employee to job (Ho, 2014).

In an intercultural context, Stock and Özbek-Potthoff (2014) postulated that a leader’s underfulfillment of subordinates’ expectations harms their leader identification. These researchers assert that employee satisfaction is of equal importance to the fit (e.g. skill competency) of an employee to the job. Ramirez (2014) examined acculturation and bi-culturality using ILT. Findings noted that cultural familiarity and similarity to a leader improved the followers’ alliance to that individual (Ramirez, 2014). Gender culture may promote similar female follower loyalties to female leaders however no study reporting such findings was located in the literature. Close consideration was given to reports of female SES leaders regarding their own specific experiences with other female leaders as the female culture within the VA culture is an insular minority subset.



In ILT studies, no single methodology is used to define the divide between individualism and collectivism in follower identity. This versatile approach is intentional as followers may have individual and group experiences with a leader. Collective and individual impressions of a leader are cultivated based on these exchanges. Even less clear are the implications of ILT in regards to female VA leadership and factors that impact the ascension of females to these positions.

Bullough and de Luque (2015) presented an empirical study on the viability of ILT as a possible predictor of women's leadership participation. This study examined the impact of two continuous independent variables on charismatic qualities noting positive effects in political and business leadership contexts (Bullough & de Luque, 2015). Outcomes demonstrated a negative correlation to self-protective factors in political leadership participation (Bullough & de Luque, 2015).

Implicit and explicit dominance behaviors have also been examined from a non-empowerment perspective. Williams and Tiedens (2015) observed that in female leaders, implicit dominance behaviors, (e.g. eye contact and body posturing) were perceived differently than explicit dominance behaviors (e.g. direct demands). Williams and Tiedens's (2015) ILT meta-analysis regarding the phenomenon of *backlash* validated perceptions that female leaders who demonstrate dominant, agentic, or assertive behaviors may feel penalized.

This backlash analysis additionally observed decreased likability of leaders, perceptions of reduced leader competence, and challenges in securing promotion or executive support (Williams & Tiedens, 2015). The authors suggested backlash avoidance tactics stating that "women might be better served by making strategic decisions about when it makes sense to push hard for a desired outcome" (Williams & Tiedens, 2015, p. 23). While characteristics which are

not stereotypically considered female leader traits (e.g. competitiveness) have been considered norm violators, Williams and Tiedens (2015) asserted that the agentic trait of dominance and more feminized trait of assertiveness are derivatives of the same personal characteristic. While these traits have been historically deemed orthogonal in nature (Boyce & Herd, 2003), this perception is not supported by current ILT research (Williams & Tiedens, 2015).

Challenging gender-associated leadership traits is a key application of ILT as it contemplates the beliefs about appropriate gender roles for men and women and their centrality in the establishment of an individual's sense of stability and social order (Williams & Tiedens, 2015). Weidner (2012) conducted a generalizability analysis of research that explores race and gender in relation to leadership positions. Findings indicated that while these atheoretical characteristics may appear important, this research was inconclusive. Weidner (2012) recommended further exploration to ascertain true correlations between these variables and leader-member exchanges (LMX).

**Leader-member exchanges.** Leader-member exchanges (LMX) are a crucial component in evaluating staff responses to leadership schemas (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). The unique dyads formed in supervisor-employee relationships and their overlaps in job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and overall well-being may be evaluated with LMX (Lord & Maher, 1990). Lord and Maher (1990) highlighted that the possibility of a leader-staff synergistic feedback loop is considered to be an enhancing ILT aspect of leadership relationships.

LMX also notes the distinction between implicit and explicit leadership factors and their impact on organizational leadership. Implicit biases (e.g. belief that masculinity is a quality possessed by successful leaders) covertly exist and tacitly influence followers (Lord & Maher, 1990). Lord and Maher (1990) asserted that explicit leadership biases (e.g. belief that a politician

of one's own party affiliation is the best leader) are more overtly expressed and noted by followers. These LMX biases shape perspectives due to subordinates' work attitudes and the perceived rewards of the present leader (Lord & Maher, 1990). Lord avowed that, "if leadership resides, at least in part, in the minds of followers, then it is imperative to discover what the followers are thinking" (2001, p.551).

Previous research hypotheses on LMX have posited correlations between positive dyadic influence of leaders and followers due to emotional intelligence (Clarke & Mahadi, 2017), creativity (Jiang & Yang, 2015), and self-disclosure (Gong, Farh, & Chattopadhyay, 2012). Tremblay, Hill, and Aube (2017) found that affective organizational commitment was a tertiary LMX component which revealed the importance of the person-organizational fit in strengthening a subordinate's commitment to a leader. Yang, Ding, and Lo (2016) examined the relationship of ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behaviors in LMX. Results noted that LMX support the fundamental value of self-efficacy (Yang, Ding, & Lo, 2016).

Bryman (2001) noted that perceived matching is another key ILT factor which involves staging the incumbent leader based on comparisons with the predecessor's traits. When subordinates encounter a new supervisor, they possess pre-conceived ideas and expectations of this new leader based on their experiences with their prior leader. Epitropaki and Martin (2005) maintained that the concept of a leader cumulatively evolves using the pre-existent ideology with new data superimposed on it. These categorization theories noted that LMXs mature based on past leader experiences, the organization's socialization, and the increased sophistication of the members' perceptions of leader identity. Bryman (2001) observed that ILT may be generalized to varying cultures due to strong data supporting its multi-cultural applications.

**Cognitive categorization factors.** Cognitive categorization factors use employee survey results to revisit favorable leadership outcomes (Rosch & Lloyd, 1978). This process requires that leaders re-examine areas of performance and skills which were rated as ineffective in the leader-member relationship. Weiss and Adler (1981) contended that these cognitive categories may lack cohesiveness due to the complex nature of the respondents' cognitive constructs. It also may be challenging to ascertain if a collective perspective exists or if individual perceptions are merely blended into an imprecise mean (Weiss & Adler, 1981).

Engle and Lord (1997) examined the relationship amongst cognitive categorization factors, LMX, and perceived similarities in field setting. Using the various ILT domains, these researchers considered congruence and the concept of *liking* (Engle & Lord, 1997). Engle and Lord (1997) found that in performance evaluations, LMX was positively correlated with role clarity while being negatively correlated with job turnover. Additionally, these authors averred that leader expectations, self-fulfilling prophecies, and the maturation of leadership processes are additional concepts for LMX evaluation (Engle & Lord, 1997).

Conversely, the literature also notes that cognitive categorization factors and LMX may provoke unethical behaviors (Liu, Lin, & Hu, 2013) in some individuals who attempt to act with reciprocity due to self-protective motives (Bernerth, Walker, & Harris, 2016). Findings regarding the negative impact of LMX noted emotionally exhausted employees (Kim & Park, 2015) and abusive supervision (Chen & Wang, 2017) as factors which hindered workplace justice. The powerful nature of social dominance in subordinate perceptions of minority leaders was also noted to be a LMX bias predictor (Hoyt & Simon, 2016).

Bierema (2016) outlined the troubling notion of the "ideal (male) leader" (p. 1), noting a LMX double bind for females. The author examined leaders who wished to avoid conforming to

male leadership gender stereotypes but experienced discomfort in being firmly ensconced in their true gender identity roles. Bierema (2016) further asserted that striving for gender equity in leadership may also perpetuate a negative follower impression thus perpetuating the White male leadership privilege. This internal strife is an omnipresent factor when evaluating the impact of LMX in female VA leadership.

**Reciprocal influence model.** In the reciprocal influence model, Lord and Maher (1990) noted that social perception “is conceptualized as a sense-making process that mediates between the behaviors of one dyadic partner and the response of the other. It is the interpretation of the behavior, not the behavior per se, that impacts leadership” (p.1997). This model noted that these relationships not only influence leader behavior, but also impact the subordinates’ foundational behaviors and their perceptions of the leaders (Lord & Maher, 1990). These informational exchanges influence leadership decisions and future social interactions while echoing social worker-client exchanges.

Perceived attitudinal similarities and implicit performance traits such as conscientiousness, receptiveness to suggestions, and qualifications for a job can be rated via a seventeen item reciprocal influence functional relationship LMX scale (Engle & Lord, 1997). Engle and Lord’s (1997) application of this tool yielded coefficient alphas of .90 from the supervisors’ perspectives and .86 from the employees’ perspectives. Their findings also noted that supervisors whose implicit leadership approaches demonstrated high fidelity to the organization’s norms had higher LMX and *liking* ratings (Engle & Lord, 1997). Additionally, LMX studies by Saltz (2004) have noted that dissimilarity of leaders and followers may actually expose differences which bolster joint success.

The reciprocal influence model has considered the effects of leadership relationships and organizational innovation with linear regression analysis results positing increased leadership creativity in non-bureaucratic organizations (Pučėtaitė, Novelskaitė, & Markūnaitė, 2014). Hoyt and Simon (2016) found the role of organizational patriotism in the evaluation of gender minority leaders was negatively correlated with minority respondents when compared to non-minority evaluations. Melwani, Mueller, and Overbeck (2012) extended ILT research beyond the previously considered variables of personality traits and demographic characteristics, noting that discrete emotions, such as contempt and compassion, demonstrated internal and external validity when considered in settings with group leadership approaches.

Schoel, Bluemke, Mueller, and Stallberg (2011) described self-esteem and uncertainty as moderating factors which can be asymmetrically distributed when autocratic leadership practices prevail. Leader-leader exchanges were noted to promote employee empowerment with increased subordinate job satisfaction and performance when upward leadership relations were strong (Zhou, Wang, Chen, & Shi, 2012). Vidyanthi, Erdogan, Anand, Liden, and Chaudhry (2014) highlighted the significance of reciprocal influence in LMX when the employee is engaged with leaders at the task and organizational level. These results suggested that higher alignment with the upper leadership yielded higher fidelity in subordinates (Vidyanthi, Erdogan, Anand, Liden, and Chaudhry, 2014).

Saltz's (2004) longitudinal studies of ILT were inconclusive in delineating the best projection of supervisory-supervisee personality matching but noted a symbiotic effect. In the federal government, the implications for future social work research applying this theory include a more intricate understanding of the influence of the SES-subordinate relationship on female staff promotion. The application of ILT to female VA leadership experiences helped obtain an

understanding of the role of leader gender in LMX and reciprocal influence in government organizations. This research may also benefit the VA organization by using the positive attributes of current female SES leaders as fundamental factors in training the next generation of social work leaders.

### **Organizational Theories**

Goffman (1961) considered organizational infrastructures including those of military, healthcare, and residential settings. Among his astute observations was the fact that these “total institutions” (Goffman, 1961, p.1) share common components including the confined space inhabited by their citizenry and the rigid scheduling utilized to maintain even the most basic of human needs, such as eating, sleeping, and leisure time. Clearly defined barriers of high walls and gates as well as the physical structure of the buildings themselves reinforce the institutional rigidity.

In these settings, conformity is expected and defined as mortification whereby “total institutions mold new inhabitants and disciplines them to follow the rhythm and rules” (Goffman, 1961, p. 8). Intentional indoctrination and eradication of civilian mindsets, individual identities, and non-conformist habits are expected so that the organization itself develops an anthropomorphic identity. Goffman’s analysis, while decades old, maintains applicability to the current VA organization due to its self-contained customs, culture, and conformist tendencies.

Lipsky’s (2010) examination of bureaucratic organizations noted that the staff and leadership of public organizations (e.g. government agencies and healthcare providers) are faced with the arduous challenge of addressing vast human demands with ambiguously defined leadership and limited resources. This author elaborated on this concept noting that “the best

illustrations of the myth of human interaction in public services is provided by the transformation in the health field of the word *care* from a verb to a noun” (Lipsky, 2010, p.72). Lipsky further allocated responsibility for this shift to the “politicians and administrators (who) regularly discuss levels and amounts of care that will be provided, but rarely who will care” (2010, p. 72). This description of human resources and his classification of social workers as “street level bureaucrats” (Lipsky, 2010, p.72) supported observations regarding the bureaucratic controls and advocacy-related challenges associated with the VA and its leadership. The theories of Goffman and Lipsky added depth to the structural analysis of the VA organization’s influence on the ascension of females to leadership roles.

### **Application**

In this study, the theoretical applications of ILT were considered in relation to the unique factors influencing the ascent of female aspirants to VA SES roles. The acquisition of a SES leadership position, not an elevated title, was this research’s focus. Interviews were conducted with full-time, permanent female VA leadership staff of Grade-Scale (GS) 12-1 rank or higher to elicit their experiences regarding LMX and perceptions of the reciprocal influence model in promotion to SES roles. These data were used to glean an understanding of the protective and risk factors associated with supervisor-supervisee relationships and the promotion of female leadership staff. In exploring this phenomenon, the variables of gender, military cultural influence, and dyadic supervisory exchanges were explored using a mixed methods approach.

Powell (2017) noted that the perceptions of stereotypical masculine and feminine traits vary when these behaviors are demonstrated by male and female individuals. This variance underscored the crucial ILT role of individualized perception which was considered when examining the variables influencing VA female SES leaders. Alipour, Mohommad, and



Martinez (2017) asserted that temporality is another ILT contextual factor which must be considered when examining VA female leadership. As the national political climate may influence participants' feelings, their knowledge schemas regarding a particular leader also may be swayed by unrelated world events which coincide with a particular LMX. For the design of this study, a time-limited interview period was created in order to minimize such influences. Consideration was provided for significant world events, such as terrorism, which may have unduly influenced a participant's perception of a leadership experience.

While many theories have influenced leadership practices in government settings, the work of Goffman (1961) on total institutions sets the organizational backdrop for a study of female VA leaders. Lipsky's *Street Level Bureaucracy* (2010) defined the human capital and this social work researcher's role in unearthing new knowledge regarding female leadership experiences within this organization. ILT offered a relational framework whereby female leadership, LMX, follower schemata, and the cultural nuances may be examined using a social work lens.

The VA is a complicated institution with complex leadership structures. The socio-cognitive and trait leadership theoretical approaches overlooked the important dyadic nature of the leader-follower relationship. Values-oriented theories offered humanistic insights on leadership tenets, but appeared to offer a myopic consideration focused on the leaders' personae. Philosophical leadership perspectives offered morality-centered reflections on best leadership practices but appeared disconnected from the pragmatic operationalization of government leadership practices.

This study was guided by this researcher's understanding of the VA and its need for a balanced examination that viewed its organizational context, bureaucratic infrastructure, and

leader-follower relationships as influential factors which affect female VA staff ascension to SES roles. The works of Goffman, Lord, and Lipsky demonstrate pertinence and utility thus were used as the theoretical foundation for research on this topic.

The furtherance of social work leadership opportunities and the erudition of future social workers were central to this research. Social workers possess the critical scholarship, professional dexterity, and relational acumen which appear to be advantageous and utilitarian in leadership roles. As the VA is an organization whose paramount goal is to ameliorate the suffering of veterans by offering individualized, exceptional treatment, the promotion of social workers in leadership positions appears to be a well-suited agenda which would bolster the organization's credo.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### Study Design

#### Context/Organizational Setting

The VA is a tripartite organization that addresses burial, benefit, and healthcare needs for over nine million veterans each year (Veterans Administration, 2017). Its VHA is the country's largest healthcare system and oversees the daily operations of 1,245 healthcare facilities including 170 medical centers and 1,065 outpatient clinics (Veterans Administration, 2017). Central Pennsylvania contains two of its medical centers and over ten community-based outpatient clinics.

Amongst these facilities is the Lebanon VA Medical Center (VAMC) which employs over 1,400 individuals including 67 licensed social workers (Veterans Administration, 2017). Over twenty percent of the Lebanon VAMC's employees are veterans and their dual customer/employee roles uniquely influence the organization's operations (Veterans Administration, 2017). The VA's culture mirrors that of its customers' militaristic heritage. Its formal patriarchal structure and practices, such as use of military time, tour of duty as a day's work, and linguistics, are interwoven in the daily organizational communications. The local facility is the lowest tier in a multilayer bureaucratic organization that receives regional and national oversight.

#### Purpose of the Study

The social work profession supports and promotes equality and well-being for its practitioners and clientele. Its presence is a palpable undercurrent felt throughout the VA organization and its healthcare teams. The consideration of a social worker as a leader is a less notable conceptualization at the VA with exception of the Social Work Chief position and occasional clinical care leadership roles.

*Social work* and *leader* should be considered symbiotic terms associated with organizational leadership roles (Northouse, 2018); however social workers have long been considered the ground level responders to the imminent needs of disenfranchised and underprivileged individuals. While this level of social work practice is valuable and necessary, it does not eliminate the need for social workers in leadership positions to exact policies and practices for the individuals fulfilling front-line, direct-care services and their recipients. Social workers possess unique operational knowledge bases and diversified professional skills due to their attunement to the human, system, and person-in-environment perspectives. Use of these vantage points to lead individuals, organizations, and each other would be of great benefit to the VA and the social work profession.

This study seeks to gain a greater understanding of the leadership qualities most frequently utilized by females in VA leadership roles. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit female participants who shared their experiences related to their ascension to Senior Executive Service (SES) positions. Participants were asked to discuss factors which have been influential in attaining these roles. Critical case inquiry strategies were exercised in order to garner a positivist understanding of female VA leadership phenomena (Creswell, 2012). Exploratory interviews were guided by a standard survey. Comparative data analysis was used to identify themes regarding female VA leadership experiences.

## **Foundational Praxes and Organizational Leadership Program**

This research was a continuation of a yearlong exploration of the VA's policies, leadership practices, and bureaucratic infrastructures. This learning opportunity was structured in two consecutive praxis experiences. It entailed a macro analysis of leadership in the VA organization and later honed its focus to the unique experiences of minority leaders. Praxis experiences included opportunities to meet with VA SES and senior leaders in order to assess executive leadership styles. Experiences also included the opportunity to meet with minority leaders in various VA roles and divisions in order to assess their perspectives on the challenges facing gender and ethnic minority leaders.

In both praxes, a blended analytical approach with a grounded theoretical framework was utilized to examine the contextual and organizational culture while considering the impact of the evolving national leadership on gender and minority leadership. Praxis products included a literature review and the completion of an environmental scan detailing observations regarding the landscape of minority leadership at the Lebanon VAMC. Cumulative outcomes of these studies included obtaining an enhanced understanding of the organizational culture, its leadership approaches, the decision-making process utilized by VA executives, and the implications for social workers.

Praxis studies coincided with this author's appointment to the VA's Lebanon Leadership Program (LLP). LLP performance goals dovetailed with those of this author's praxis studies. A short-term, year-long LLP goal targeted enhancing this author's understanding of the VA's organizational and administrative structure and leadership. A longer-term goal was to diversify this author's professional experiences in order to support attainment of a leadership position in federal service within a five-year timeframe. This dissertation work extended praxes research by

continuing to examine factors influencing the ascension to VA leadership roles while honing the focus to consider specifically the experiences of women in SES and senior leader positions.

## **Participants and Recruitment**

### **Study Site**

Participants were recruited from employees of the Lebanon VAMC which is located in central Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania, one of America's founding colonies, had a 2015 estimated population of 12,779,000 with a relatively equitable gender distribution of 48.9% male residents and 51.1% female residents (US Census, 2017). Since the 2010 Census, comparative statistical findings note a half-decade population growth of approximately 79,000 residents with a median state resident age of 41 (US Census, 2017). The Commonwealth's racial distribution assessment identifies 83.5% of residents as Caucasian, 12.2% as African American, and 6.4% as Hispanic (US Census, 2017).

Central Pennsylvania is saturated with German and Dutch traditions which are embraced by many of its natives. Change tends to be slowly achieved due to the communities' security in their conservative heritage. The Susquehanna Valley is also influenced by its Plain sect, Amish, and Mennonite communities whose religiously-centered values and simple lifestyles cast a conservative shadow upon the region's political landscape (Pennsylvania, 2017).

In 1813, Lebanon County, Pennsylvania was created by an Act of the Assembly (Lebanon, 2017). Its 2010 census population of 120,327 residents incorporates twenty-six municipalities and seven boroughs spanning 362.9 square miles (US Census, 2017). The county is a conservative, working-class community known for its Pennsylvania Dutch heritage and farming industry. Lebanon County's gender distribution mirrors that of the state however its

racial distribution reflects a higher Caucasian population of 88.1% with 7.2% parties reporting Latino heritage and 2.9% parties identifying as African American in race (US Census, 2017).

The Lebanon VAMC is located in central Pennsylvania and is one of 1,245 medical facilities in the Veterans Health Administration system (Veterans Administration, 2017). As a member of the VISN 4 Stars and Stripes territory, it serves a nine county catchment area with its hospital and six community based outpatient clinics. In FY 15-16, 55% of its \$303M operational budget funded 1,457 full time employees including 67 social workers who provided services to 44,832 veterans (Veterans Administration, 2017). Its campus is centrally situated in an open green space with symmetrical landscaping. The brick hospital buildings and their surroundings are decorated with patriotic flags and emblems bearing each military branch's insignia.

### **Method of Subject Selection**

A convenience sample of participants was recruited from current SES and senior leadership staff at the Lebanon VAMC. Prospective participants were identified using the facility staff directory. As an employee, this author had access to SES and senior staff phone and email listings which supported the identification of prospective subjects. The potential participants' pre-existing knowledge of this author due to work-related interactions also appeared to be influential. Networking opportunities based on professional responsibilities also provided valuable information on potential participants.

Subject recruitment targeted twelve prospective candidates, approximately ten percent of the local organization's total SES and Senior leaders. An executive approval committee reviewed all prospective participants. Snowball recruitment tactics would have been considered if this author had not been able to independently recruit a substantial number of participants. No printed or formal advertisements were used to solicit participation.

The principal investigator contacted potential participants via telephone. These parties were asked to participate in half-hour interviews that explored their experiences in accessing promotion to SES roles. Participants were advised that an immediate decision regarding their participation response was not required and that they could change their participation commitment if they wished to do so.

### **Characteristics of the Sample Population**

The ideal participant pool was six to twelve individuals who were currently employed in VA SES positions. This study included individuals who identified as female and were SES or senior leadership staff with eligibility to access promotion to SES roles. As this research considered individuals who were perceived as female and identified as women, males and individuals who identified themselves as men were excluded from the study. All participants were adults who were eighteen years of age or older.

All participants were full-time, permanent employees of the VA and retained at least a Grade-Scale (GS) 12-1 rank. This study excluded individuals who were below the GS 12-1 rank as they are not considered senior staff who are eligible for leadership positions. This study also excluded any federal employees who lacked full-time appointment or permanent employment.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

No vulnerable subjects including individuals who were minors, pregnant, imprisoned, or who had a known behavioral health condition were involved in this study. In accordance with VA policies regarding dual relationships, parties who served in an immediate supervisory role to this author or participated in a client/ therapist clinical relationship with this author were not



considered as participants. No information was deliberately withheld from the participants with the exception of the other participants' identities.

All participants were advised of the study's purpose via a verbal explanation and the written informed consent document. Participants were also advised of their rights including their ability to withdraw from participation at any time. As participation in this study was voluntary, declination of participation was the alternative option. Contact information for this author was provided to all participants. All individuals were advised that they may contact this author at any time to glean information on the status of this study and its outcomes, as available. Withdrawal from the study did not exclude individuals from receiving reports about its status and findings.

Participants were not compensated monetarily due to VA prohibitions regarding such rewards. Participants were advised that an anonymous donation will be made to NASW in honor of the participants' contributions to the social work research field. Verbal appreciation expressed by this author on behalf of the social work research community served as a non-monetary remuneration. No academic credit was associated with this study.

### **Informed Consent**

An initial verbal consent was obtained via telephone in advance of the interview. An informed consent document (Appendix A) was distributed to each participant and the principal researcher remained available to answer any questions. Participants had an opportunity to review the written consent form and consider the intent of the study in advance of the interview. Participants were provided the opportunity to ask questions and receive an informed answer from this author.

Participants were asked to sign the consent form. Participants could decline doing so if they wished to reduce any concerns about any potential risk due to identity disclosure. Written or verbal consent and their active participation in the interviews were considered their agreement to participate.

### **Consent Document**

The informed consent form was devised to advise participants about the study's parameters in order to assist them in ascertaining their willingness to participate. This form notified them of the purpose of the study and the targeted subject population. The informed consent document outlined the benefits of this research which included accessing first-hand accounts of female SES and senior VA leaders in order to gain an increased understanding of their perceptions of factors which influence progression to SES leadership positions.

This study's research approach used an initial phone contact followed by an approximately thirty-minute face-to-face interview. Participants were informed that their interviews would be recorded to assure researcher accuracy when documenting participant responses. This researcher explained that these recordings would be solely used by the principal researcher then transcribed into written notes then immediately destroyed. Participants were advised that they may request that audio recordings not be used in the data collection process if they were not comfortable with this documentation modality.

The consent form offered to share additional information regarding the study, its methods, and findings. It imparted the principal investigator's contact information and invited future communication and inquiries. This document closed with the Institutional Approval of the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

## **Potential Risks and Protections**

The only potential identified risk of this study was the possible concern of participants regarding employer retribution for interview participation. All data were collected during approved breaks such as lunch time, and thus did not interfere with time that was allocated for professional duties or responsibilities. Interviews were completed in off-station locations (e.g. a local park) during times not associated with the assigned tour of duty of the participant or researcher.

Participants were advised that senior leadership within the organization had been apprised of this research project. Participants were also informed that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from participation at any time without concern of consequence. They could opt to omit responses to any or all questions that they did not wish to answer.

## **Confidentiality of Data**

All participants were advised that their interview was randomly assigned an identity number thus no personal data were correlated with their responses. All information received was kept and stored confidentially in password protected files on this author's personal computer. All handwritten notes and audio recordings were transcribed into a file on this author's personal computer. Original handwritten notes were scanned and sent to the password protected email of this author, then immediately destroyed. No data were kept on any work-associated devices. No information with subject identifiers was released. In compliance with federal law, all computer data will be maintained for a minimum of three years.

## **Data Collection**

### **Methods and Procedures**

This study utilized a mixed methods research approach to collect quantitative and qualitative data via individual, face-to-face interviews. Basic demographic data were also collected including the respondents' age, education, years of employment, and time in leadership roles. This information was also examined to note any patterns regarding factors which influence female ascension to VA SES leadership roles.

Opportunistic, maximum variation sampling strategies which consider the participants' leadership importance were utilized when designing the structured interview (Padgett, 2008). This author attempted to include participants of varying ages, years of service, and educational backgrounds. Senior leaders in a variety of departments were asked to consider participation.

Interviews were audio recorded with participant consent and transcribed for analysis. Handwritten descriptive and reflective notes were recorded on a legal pad throughout the interviews. These notes were scanned and emailed to a password protected personal email account to assure that a backup copy of all data exists.

Notations made during each interview recorded verbal and nonverbal responses to the interview questions. Changes in each respondent's appearance, demeanor, and response style were noted. Handwritten notes were utilized as the sole data-recording methodology in cases of participant declination of audio-recorded interviews or if technological recording issues arose. Any recorded interviews were deleted immediately after transcription.

Each interview was allocated a thirty-minute timeframe in conjunction with the time allocated for the lunch break of the participant and researcher. Due to the semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol, participants could exceed this timeframe thus data recording would continue, as able. The date of each interview, its start and end time, and the randomly assigned interview number were noted at the end of each interview document.

### **Interview Tool**

This survey included quantitative and qualitative questions which solicited participants' perspectives regarding their leadership experiences. The guide deliberately used quantitative questions which were followed by qualitative questions to obtain an increased understanding of the interviewees' responses. The qualitative questions added depth and meaning to this research and allowed for cross-checking the quantitative responses using another methodological approach.

A structured interview form (Appendix B) was created to guide the interview process. Spontaneous probing questions were utilized to clarify the participants' responses. Thirteen interview questions formatted in a typed Word document guided the interview. The interview guide collected both quantitative and qualitative data regarding the participants' perspectives on the experiences of female VA leaders.

Three of these questions queried atheoretical data and five questions solicited ordinal, Likert scale, pre-determined responses. The four scaled responses for these questions ranged from options of *not influential* to *highly influential*. Many ordinal response questions were paired with an open-ended question in order to invite elaboration on the scaled answer score of the ordinal question. Each qualitative question invited nominal responses of single word answers or open-ended statements.

Several questions sought the participants' opinions on the influence of personal and non-personal characteristics on the advancement of females aspiring to SES positions. Additional open-ended questions sought opinions on the benefits of learning from current SES leaders. Single word response questions sought terms to describe characteristics of leadership experiences and valuable attributes for female leadership aspirants. A theoretical questions solicited each participants' ages, levels of education, years of VA employment, and time in leadership roles. This demographic data were solicited to identify any additional leadership trends.

### **Transcription**

Handwritten interview notations were carefully written to reflect emphasis, punctuation, pauses, and other non-semantic vocalizations. As shorthand abbreviations were used by this author throughout the data recording process, these notes were transcribed into full text in a Word document which used Times New Roman size 12 font, double spaced typeset, and formatting with a broad right margin. Non-expressive observations, such as the interlacing of fingers, were parenthetically noted in italicized print and embedded sequentially in the text at the times of their occurrences. In cases where recording was permitted, these written notes were compared to the transcribed recordings in order to assure fidelity to the respondents' responses (Padgett, 2008).

The research tool chronicled all questions in bold print. Correlating responses were recorded directly beneath the questions. Handwritten notes were cross-referenced with the typed transcription to assure no errors or autocorrected terms exist. This multi-layer transcription

process was essential in assuring data fidelity and the validity of data transformation (Padgett, 2008).

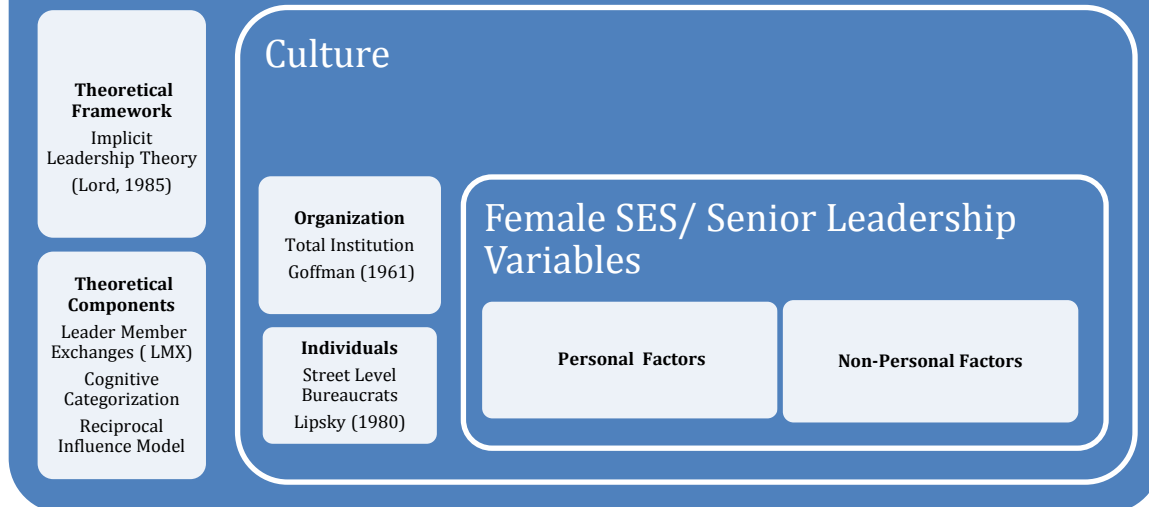
### **Measures**

Personal and non-personal factors were the study's independent variables. Their relationship to SES and senior leadership experiences were analyzed. An ILT (Lord & Mayer, 1990) framework was implored with particular attention directed to LMX, cognitive categorization, and the reciprocal influence model.

This tool used a Likert scale to collect quantitative data. Each quantitative question offered gradated response options ranging from one to four. The lowest scale rating was *not influential* which was scored as one. The next scale rating of two corresponded with the response of *marginally influential*. The third scale rating was labelled *moderately influential* and was scored as three. The final and highest score of four correlated with the *highly influential* response.

### **Table 1: Relationship of the Theoretical Structure and Research Approach**

## Variables Influencing the Ascent of VA Female SES Leadership



### Coding and Analysis

#### Quantitative Coding

Analysis entailed using the numerically assigned value response of each Likert scale response as its coded value. A code of 99 was assign to any missing data. A refusal to respond was coded as 0.

#### Qualitative Coding

Observation field notes were examined in sentence form with notations regarding verbal terms and non-verbal behavioral patterns logged in the document's right margin adjacent to the correlating typed transcription. The intersection of these observations with those of the structured interviews were considered following the separate analysis and synthesis of each data set. Qualitative interview data were openly coded using a tripartite process supported by grounded theory analytical approaches (Creswell, 2012).



Initial transcription analysis coded each sentence as a unit. Open codes were listed adjacent to each sentence in the document's margins using lowercase typeset. The second axial step cogitated the codes' themes by reviewing one paragraph at a time. Thematic notations were then placed in bold text beside the initial codes. The final selective step of this analysis used color to highlight emerging themes. Thematic labels correlated assigned colors with terms which conveyed this author's connotation of each color, such as pairing the term *politics* with the color red.

A code book was utilized to record and organize each level of coding data. Memo writing on the original handwritten notes was used to demark initial thematic considerations. All data and coding were reviewed on at least three separate occasions to ensure transcription fidelity and trustworthiness. Auditability was possible due to the multiple methods of documentation (Padgett, 2008). The methodological triangulation between quantitative and qualitative research methodologies also enhanced the rigor of the study (Creswell, 2012).

### **Benefits of the Study**

Study results offer a greater emic understanding of the leadership variables which female SES leaders identify as influential in organizational ascension. These data can be used to educate future female social work leadership candidates, thereby enhancing their ability to ascend to leadership roles. Over time, knowledge transferred in this way may improve the statistical representation of women in VA SES leadership positions.

Participants appeared to be individually empowered by the discussion of this topic which influenced their own personal workplace relationships and promoted self-advocacy. VAMC staff could benefit from this research as it offered insight into the current perceptions of female SES

staff regarding factors which affect organizational ascension. Data from this research would be useful in transforming the organizational climate into a more gender-equitable culture.

### **Weaknesses of this Study**

The rigidity of the VA's infrastructure and layers of bureaucratic red tape presented challenges in preparing this study. Identifying participants required leadership advisement and approval (e.g. executive review and approval of the proposed research candidates) which exercised some attempted influence and control on this study. Locating subjects who were not advised of this research via their participation in the approval committee was another unique and perhaps vulnerable aspect of the study design.

### **Reflexivity**

In order to support the study's evolution, this author periodically departed from the data to gain a better understanding of the work and its findings (H. Girvin, personal communication, November 14, 2016). This cognitive distance assisted this author in formulating a more definite theoretical grounding while identifying gaps for possible future exploration. This removed perspective additionally allowed this author to consider any fundamental personal beliefs about the research topic.

Attention to positionality was important due to this writer's unique access to SES leadership (H. Girvin, personal communication, November 14, 2016). As this dual researcher-employee role may be construed as a chance to operationalize influence or bias on this author's professional performance, this author exercised great caution in delineating boundaries that demonstrated the true separation of the employee and researcher roles. If participants appeared to be challenged in separating these roles, they were respectfully re-directed.

Identification of the data saturation point via consultation with the Dissertation Chair and committee members was implored to develop an improved understanding of the research process (H. Girvin, personal communication, November 14, 2016). Mindfulness of ethical considerations regarding privileged knowledge garnered via non-research-related means was also promoted by sustaining an ongoing internal dialogue. Self-reflective journaling was vital in order to maintain this self-awareness (Creswell, 2012). Understanding the anthropomorphic aspects of a research study was also a crucial reflexivity tool.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### Findings

#### Overview

This research obtained first-hand perspectives of female SES VA leaders regarding their perceptions of factors which influence the ascent of females to VA SES leadership roles. Twelve prospective candidates were initially identified and invited to participate. Female VA SES leaders with a minimum of GS-12 rating met the inclusion criteria. Of the twelve potential participants, seven individuals completed interviews within the designated timeframe.

All participants who completed the survey provided consent and completed the entire interview. No one opted to omit responses to any of the questions. None of the individuals contacted the principal investigator to request that their responses be excluded from the study. All participants were given a copy of the informed consent document.

Of the non-participants, potential participant ten did not respond to two interview invitations. Potential participant eleven initially offered verbal commitment to participate. Despite numerous attempts to schedule this candidate's interview, a mutually convenient interview appointment was not identified during the data collection timeframe. Potential participant twelve retired from VA employment before an interview could be secured thereby becoming ineligible for participation.

Potential participant eight voiced a willingness to participate, but was promoted to a position in an indirect professional supervisory role to this researcher. She was excluded from eligibility due to organizational regulations which prohibit supervisor-subordinate interactions

beyond those directly related to professional duties. These organizational sanctions were known and considered during the study's design.

Due to the researcher's professional promotion and resulting departmental change during the data collection timeframe, prospective participant nine was excluded from consideration as this individual became a direct supervisor to the researcher. None of these professional staffing changes placed the researcher in a supervisory role to any of the participants. These personnel logistics had been considered when establishing the inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants.

### **Interview Conditions**

All interviews for this study were conducted as per IRB protocol guidelines in non-VA affiliated locations during off duty timeframes. Interviews were completed during a fifty-five day timeframe between September 28, 2017 and November 29, 2017. Five interviews occurred during afternoon hours over approved lunchbreaks. One interview was conducted during the morning on a day when both the participant and investigator were off duty. Another interview occurred during the evening hours after the assigned Tour of Duty (TOD) of the participant and investigator.

As the VA's organizational infrastructure mirrors that of the military (Schroeder & Powell, 2017), all personnel are assigned a defined shift which is their designated TOD. Although many VA professional and leadership staff are considered salaried employees, all personnel are expected to adhere to a TOD delineated in military time (e.g. 1500-2300) which includes exact reporting and departure time. The organization's time and attendance policies require that any work completed outside of an employee's TOD receive prior supervisory

authorization. Staff are frequently reminded that nonadherence to these protocols may result in disciplinary action as such deviations are viewed as intentional misuse of government resources (e.g. funds and labor) (Veterans Administration, 2017).

In support of these data collection methods, all participants were allowed to propose the best time and date for their interviews. The interview timespans ranged from fifteen to forty minutes and the allocated timeframe for each interview was approximately thirty minutes. The interview's start and end times were annotated on the survey tool. The length of each interview was determined based on the subjects' responses. This brief interview format was intentionally utilized to mirror the VA's cultural emphasis on efficiency, precision, and valuation of time.

### **Characteristics of the Study Population**

Participants were asked five questions at the conclusion of the survey (Appendix B) to learn data regarding the participant pools' composition. Question nine (Appendix B) asked respondents to share their ages. Five response options were offered with each option spanning a ten year interval. Response options included one meaning ages of 19 to 29 years, two meaning 30 to 39 years, three meaning 40 to 49 years, four meaning 50 to 59 years, and five meaning 60 to 69 years. The final response option of six meaning 70 years of age or older intentionally did not have a range of ten years as most individuals in federal service retire by age 80.

Question ten (Appendix B) asked participants to identify their highest level of academic achievement. Response options included one meaning completion of a high school degree, two meaning completion of a post-high school certification, three meaning completion of an associate's degree, four meaning completion of a bachelor's degree, five meaning completion of a master's degree, and six meaning completion of a doctoral degree. As a minimum of a high

school degree is a requirement for SES VA leadership positions, no other academic achievements were offered as a response option.

Question 11 (Appendix B) requested participants share information regarding their length of VA employment. Five response options with ten year ranges were offered for this question. Response options included one meaning one to ten years, two meaning 11 to 20 years, three meaning 21 to 30 years, four meaning 31 to 40 years, and five meaning 41 to 50 years. The final response option for question 11 indicated more than 50 years of VA employment. No option was offered for less than a year of VA employment as participants were required to be permanent, non-probationary VA employees. In current SES leadership roles, this probationary status spans a minimum of a year of VA employment.

Question 12 (Appendix B) asked participants to indicate the number of years that they have served in leadership positions. Five response options with five year ranges were offered. Response options included one meaning one to five years, two meaning six to ten years, three meaning 11 to 15 years, and four meaning 16 to 20 years. The last response option offered for this question indicated more than 20 years in a leadership position. Question 13 (Appendix B) requested that participants disclose the number of years they have served in SES leadership positions. The same response options offered for question 12 were provided for question 13.

## **Age**

In response to question nine (Appendix B), which inquired about the participants' ages, four individuals provided an answer of three indicating an age between 40 and 49 years old. Three respondents provided an answer of four indicating an age between 50 and 59 years old. No

respondents selected other numeric options, thus the overall participant pool ranged in age from 40 to 59 years of age.

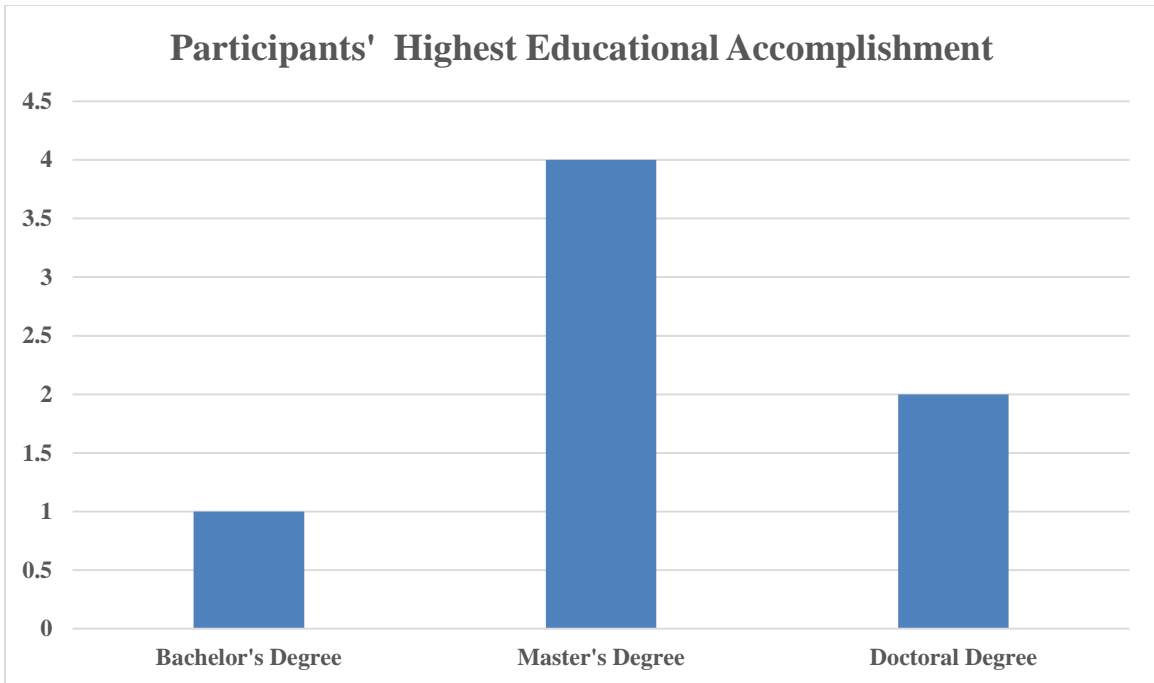
## **Education**

Question 10 (Appendix B) inquired about the formal educational levels of each participant. The six response choices for this question ranged from 1, “completion of a high school degree” to 6, “completion of a doctoral degree.” Options for educational experience outside of these parameters were excluded as response choices because the present VA SES candidacy criteria require a minimum of a high school degree.

All participants are college graduates (as represented in table two) with a bachelor’s degree, master’s degree, or doctoral degree. Four subjects provided a response of five which reflected their completion of a master's level degree. Two subjects reported responses of six which correspond with doctoral degree completion. One individual shared a response of four, noting bachelor's degree completion.

### **Table 2: Appendix B, Question 10**





### **Years of VA Employment**

Question 11 (Appendix B) examined the participants' length of VA employment. As many VA employees dedicate their entire careers to federal service, the range of response options included decade-long timespans which corresponded with numbers ranging from one to six with one meaning one to ten years of service and six meaning 51 or more years of service. All respondents offered a response of one or two thus noting an overall VA employment range of one to 20 years. The majority of participants had less than 11 years of VA employment; only one individual provided a numeric response of two.

It is of note that some of the excluded prospective participants and candidates who did not participate were known to have a longer period of VA employment. Questions for the purpose of this research did not include time of employment with other federal agencies or total time in military service. For VA employees, time served in other branches of federal service and active duty military are considered when determining an individual's overall VA rank, grade,

scale, and eligibility for promotion. During the interviews, none of the participants disclosed alternative federal or military service.

### **Years in Leadership and SES Leadership Positions**

Question 12 (Appendix B) considered the participants' overall time in formally identified leadership positions. The criteria for leadership positions, such as Chief, Director, or Clinical Manager, included positions where personnel oversight was a key aspect of the role. Options for response included one meaning one to five years in a leadership position, two meaning six to ten years in a leadership position, three meaning 11 to 15 years in a leadership position, four meaning 16 to 20 years in a leadership position, and five meaning over 20 years in a leadership position. Five respondents selected a numeric response of one which indicated attainment of one to five years of service in a leadership position. Two participants selected a numeric response of two which corresponds to six to ten years in a leadership position. No other response options were selected for this question.

The final survey question (Appendix B) asked the participants' time in a SES leadership position. Response options for question 13 duplicated the options provided for question 12. Five respondents chose a value of one which reflects one to five years of SES leadership experience. Two respondents chose a numeric response which corresponds to six to ten years of SES leadership experience.

Only participant four provided different value responses for questions 12 and 13 (Appendix B). This difference in response appears to indicate that this participant accumulated leadership experience prior to her VA employment. The questions were constructed so respondents could differentiate between time in formal staff leadership positions and time in

positions which managed tasks, but did not meet the study's definition of leadership. It is of note that interview data reflect that all respondents currently serve in positions with formal nomenclature associated with leadership titles, such as Director, Coordinator, Manager, or Chief.

## **Blended Research Approach**

### **Overview**

This survey (Appendix B) collected both qualitative and quantitative data. All quantitative questions were followed by a related qualitative question which required respondents to elaborate on their quantitative responses. The first five questions (Appendix B) offered four response options which categorized the participants' specific experiences as highly influential, moderately influential, marginally influential, or not influential. Each response option was labelled with a decreasing numeric value from four to one. The same qualitative question which requested that participants provide an explanation for their initial numeric response followed each of these quantitative questions.

Two additional qualitative questions (Appendix B) requested two, one-word responses to elicit the respondents' personal perceptions of leadership. These questions were included in the research tool to solicit brief responses which add depth and richness to the data. One open-ended qualitative question was utilized to complete the blended research portion of the tool. This question was designed to capture any spontaneous thoughts or observations inspired by the previous questions.

## Quantitative Data

Study participants were asked five questions (Appendix B) which collected quantitative responses. Four predetermined responses were offered which queried the participants' increasing valuation of influence. Responses to these questions correlated with four assigned numeric response options of increasing value. A verbal response of "not influential" was assigned a numeric value of one, and a response of "marginally influential" was assigned the numeric value of two. A "moderately influential" response was assigned a numeric value of three, and a "highly influential" rating was assigned the numeric value of four. Any refused responses would be scored as 99 and any responses of "none" would be assigned a value of zero. All participants' responses fell in the response range of one to four.

Question one (Appendix B) asked participants to determine the extent that personal characteristics (e.g. gender, appearance, etc.) influence the advancement of aspiring female leaders to VA SES position. Question two (Appendix B) invited participants to utilize their knowledge of the progression of females to VA leadership roles to determine the extent that non-personal factors (e.g. years of employment, rank, etc.) influence the advancement of aspiring female leaders to SES positions. Question three (Appendix B) asked participants to determine the extent that military culture influences the progression of females to VA leadership positions. Question four (Appendix B) probed the extent to which participants find SES mentorship beneficial to aspiring female leaders. Question five (Appendix B) asked participants to report the extent to which knowledge retained by female SES leaders regarding factors influencing the advancement of female VA leadership may negatively impact aspiring female leaders.

Question one (Appendix B) asked the participants' about the degree that personal characteristics, such as gender and appearance, influenced the advancement of aspiring female leaders. Responses to question one varied with only one participant selecting option three and two participants selected options one, two, and four. These variations reflect no consistent trend of perceived influence. Question two (Appendix B) probed the participants' beliefs regarding the influence of non-personal factors, such as rank and grade, on the advancement of females to SES positions. Three participants chose option one meaning highly influential, and four participants chose option two meaning moderately influential. None of the participants selected options three or four thus indicating a high degree of perceived influence.

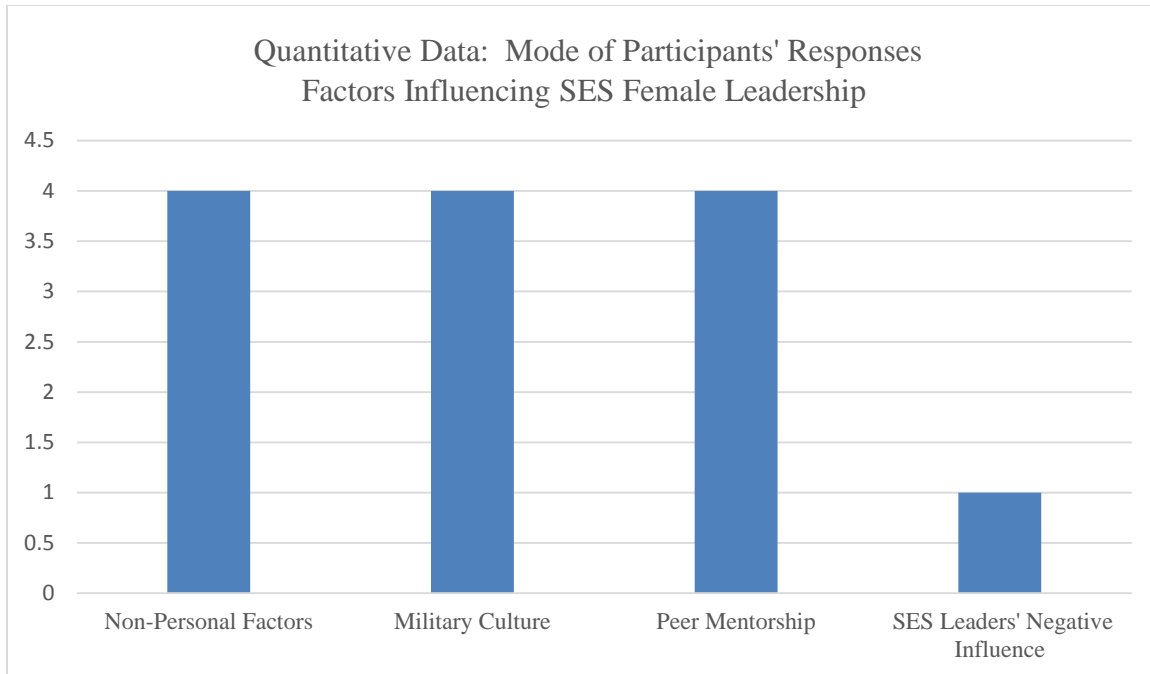
Question three (Appendix B) asks participants to examine the influence of military culture on female leadership progression. The frequency of numeric responses continues to be the determination of interpretative significance. Question three yielded three responses for option one meaning highly influential, two responses for option two meaning moderately influential, and two responses for option three meaning marginally influential. No respondents selected a response of option four meaning not influential. Overall, military culture was of moderate perceived influence to females aspiring to VA SES leadership.

Question four (Appendix B) explored the utility of accessing female SES peer mentorship and its perceived influence on the ascension to leadership positions. Three of the participants selected option four meaning highly influential. None of the participants selected option one meaning not influential. Option two meaning moderately influential and option three meaning marginally influential each received two responses. The scattering of responses does not reflect a pattern of perceived influence due to peer mentorship.

Question five (Appendix B) asks, “(t)o what degree you think that the knowledge retained by female SES leaders regarding factors influencing the advancement of female VA leadership may negatively impact aspiring female leaders?” In response to this question, four participants selected option four meaning not influential. All other response options received one response suggesting that while some participants found the knowledge retained by current female SES leaders to have a negative influence on aspiring female leaders, most participants found this information to have little perceived negative influence.

Mode data (as represented in table 3) for questions two, three, and four noted a slightly higher value than mean and median measures. Question five’s mode data reflect the respondents’ belief that knowledge retained by current female SES leaders has little negative influence on their ascent to female SES positions. As question one had no noted response pattern, no mode was detected. These data appear to reflect that non-personal factors, military culture, and peer mentorship have greatest influence.

**Table 3 : Mode Responses to Quantitative Questions**



## **Qualitative Data**

### **Sequenced Responses**

The qualitative questions described above are sequenced, and labelled as 1a, 2a, 3a, 4a, and 5a. The questions were exploratory in nature and prompted participants to share additional information related to the study's research questions. Participants' responses to the qualitative questions varied in length and content. All qualitative responses elaborated on the quantitative question responses. None of the participants' responses to the qualitative questions contradicted answers they provided to the quantitative questions. This correlation demonstrates the reliability of the survey's design and supports the validity of this research tool.

Each respondent appeared to have a different level of participation interest which may have influenced the length and content of their responses. All participants were interviewed

during a timeframe within twenty-four hours of their last TOD, therefore all individuals recently worked in their VA SES leadership positions. This interview design was intentional so that participants' responses were offered in the context of their recent professional experiences. This survey strategy attempted to avoid interviews which would be a removed reflection (e.g. participation while on extended leave, FMLA, etc.) from their SES leadership experiences.

Proximity to the organization and the participants' first-hand leadership experiences were important to this research in order to access authentic, visceral participant responses. The qualitative response options provided participants with an opportunity to reflect personally on each question. These reflections helped identify shared female SES leadership characteristics and validated each participant's individualization.

### **Primary Analysis with Keyword Application**

All qualitative responses were evaluated through a tripartite sequenced analysis process. In step one, this researcher examined each sentence independently and assigned a keyword to summarize its content. Over 20 terms emerged as keywords in this first analytical step. Keywords were selected to capture the meanings of the respondents' reports and were extracted from the respondents' verbatim reports. The words demonstrating the greatest frequency are interpreted by the researcher to have greater significance.

In response to question 1a (Appendix B), which requested details about the influential aspects of personal characteristics, the keyword *appearance* appeared four times and the keyword *humor* appeared twice. All other keywords only appeared once. The keywords *appearance* and *humor* were notable as they underscored the influential aspects of a leader's physical and emotional characteristics.



Question 2a (Appendix B) solicited information about the influence of non-personal factors. A variety of new keywords emerged for each sentence however some terms which emerged in response to question 1a also appeared in response to question 2a. For this question, the term *gender* is used four times and the terms *actions* and *accomplishments* occurred twice. The frequency of the keyword *gender* appears to validate the respondents' categorization of gender as a non-circumstantial factor. The frequency of the keywords *actions* and *accomplishments* appear to demonstrate the respondents' overlapping beliefs that a leader's behaviors and endeavors contribute to their SES leadership successes.

Question 3a (Appendix B) asks participants to examine the influence of military culture on the ascension of females to leadership positions. The repetition of keywords continues to be the benchmark of interpretative significance. Responses for question 3a included terms found in previous responses. Participants responded with *culture* seven times, *military* six times, and *gender* four times. These reoccurring keywords, while associated with the research, were redundant as they replicated words in the question. This repetition does not present any unique insights however appears to emphasize the participants' acknowledgment of the question's significance.

Question 4a's (Appendix B) exploration of the benefits of female peer mentorship on prospective female SES leaders received a greater variation in response terms. The keyword *knowledge* appeared three times and the keyword *stuck* appeared two times. The first term appears to confirm the participants' valuation of the wisdom imparted by peer mentors. Two participants' use of the keyword *stuck* appears to expose the belief that peer mentorship may not demonstrate great value in leadership motility.

Three keywords had repeated occurrences in response to question 5a's (Appendix B) vetting of the negative influence of current female SES leaders on aspiring female leaders. Participants responded with the keyword *gender* three times and keywords *communication* and *negative* two times. Each of these keywords was affiliated with two separate respondents' answers. These words appeared to reflect the act of intra-gender sharing. In a detailed analysis of each sentence, the keyword *negative* did not appear to imply that current SES leaders had a negative influence on the respondents. It appeared to reoccur when participants repeated the survey question.

### **Secondary Analysis Considering Paragraphical Themes**

The second phase of qualitative data analysis considered paragraphical themes of the participants' responses. In response to question 1a (Appendix B), the keywords *gender* and *appearances* occurred most frequently. Question 2a (Appendix B) yielded some new keyword descriptors, such as the term *inhumanity*. For this question, the keywords *gender*, *abilities*, and *values* presented on more than one occasion. These terms appear to address the ongoing examination of female capacities in leadership. These keywords also appear to extend beyond the basic tenets of a leader to consider the implicitness of a leader's morality and ethics.

Question 3a (Appendix B) yielded five reoccurring keywords with *culture* emerging five times and *gender* and *heritage* emerging three times. The keywords *linguistics* and *personality* each had two appearances. The keywords *heritage* and *linguistics* appear to highlight the significance of organizational and gender cultures. In response to question 4a (Appendix B), the keyword *knowledge* surfaced three times and the term *stuck* surfaced twice. In question 5a (Appendix B), the keyword *gender* was utilized three times and the keywords *communication*

and *negative* were noted twice. The presence of the keyword *communication* appears to echo the prior question's keyword which valued language.

### **Tertiary Analysis with Color Application**

The final step of qualitative analysis utilized colors to connote overall thematic trends. In reviewing the response labels from the first two analytical steps, there appeared to be keywords which focused on negative, neutral, and positive perceptions of female leadership experiences. Although some terms, such as *culture*, *power*, and *gender* may connote varying perceptions, the researcher revisited the participants' answers to help delineate the essence of their intended meanings.

Keywords with negative connotations were coded in blue as these terms' syntactic connotation cast a negative overtone. Terms which were neutral in value were coded with a grey color as they did not demonstrate generativity or regression and suggested a stagnant state. Words with positive, future-focused connotations were coded in yellow as this color is associated with light and growth.

The keyword *inhumanity* was a thematic term which was coded blue due to its negative connotations. It was derived from a paragraphical summarization of individual sentences coded with the keywords *uncertainty*, *commodity*, and *anonymous*. All of these keywords connoted an ominous theme which did not appear to support the ascent of aspiring female SES leaders.

The keyword *structure* was a thematic summary of a paragraph which included sentences coded with the keywords *infrastructure*, *position*, and *time*. As these collective terms did not present a strong positive or negative value, they were coded grey. These terms, while relevant to

the experiences of female VA SES leaders, demonstrated no particular movement towards or against the progression of aspiring female leaders.

*Awareness* was a keyword coded yellow due to its suggestion of enlightenment and knowledge. The paragraph with this keyword was composed of sentences coded with the keywords *voice*, *worthy*, and *change*. As the overarching theme of this paragraph promoted progression and empowerment, its terminology appeared to contain positive sentiments which support the progression of females to VA SES leadership.

### **Color Distribution of Final Keyword Analysis**

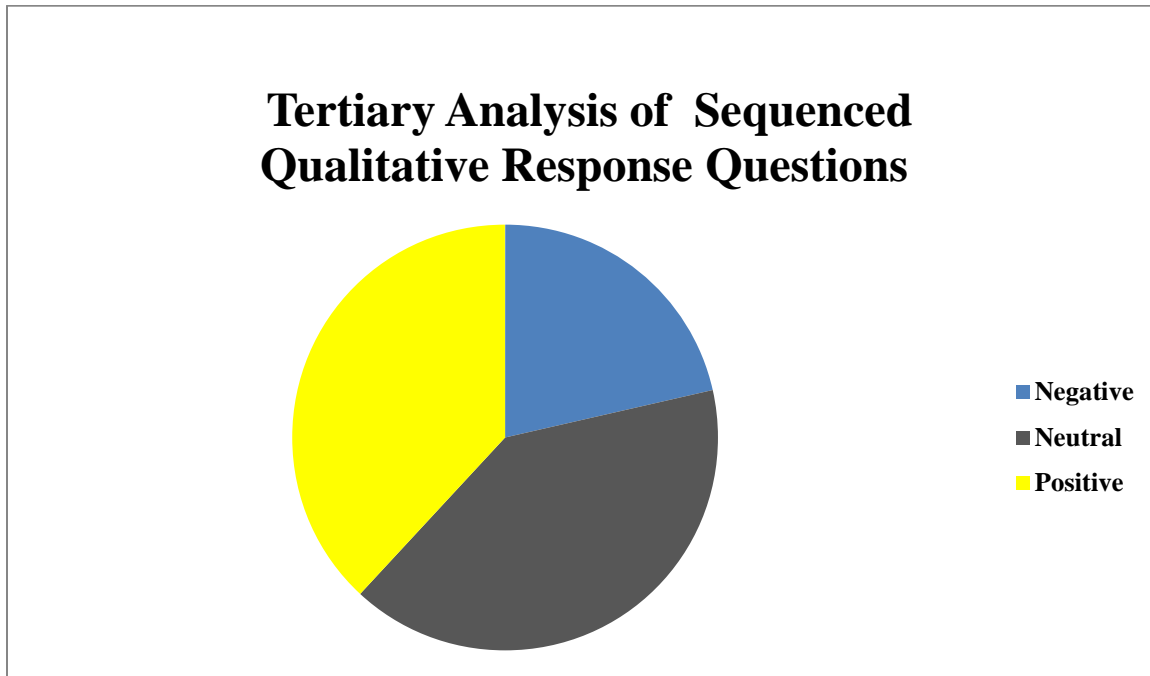
In this color analysis application, (represented in table 4), the color blue was used for nine coding responses, the color grey was used seventeen times, and the color yellow had sixteen applications. This color analysis reflects a slightly higher prevalence of neutral responses and suggests that negative responses were least prominent. These findings demonstrate some of the inherent resilience of the participating female leaders.

While participants could have offered pessimistic sentiments, their responses migrated towards neutral and optimistic terminology. The keyword *feelings* was used to thematically code a paragraph containing sentences with the keywords *humor*, *affinity*, and *encouragement*. While the keyword *feelings* may conjure both positive and negative emotional states, the sentence codes clearly aligned with the affirmative interpretation of the term.

These tripartite analyses mirrored the participants' personal presentations which contained a resilient exterior sustained by an optimistic interior. Social desirability was not a concern when interpreting this data set. Based on the researcher's interactions with each participant and the environmental scans completed during all interviews, it is surmised that all

participants acted without forethought or deliberate manipulation of their responses. The authentic yet contrasting presentations of each respondent lent credibility to the belief that resilience is a fundamental trait cultivated in female SES leadership.

**Table 4: Color Analysis of Qualitative Data**



### **Individual Word Response Questions**

Questions six and seven (Appendix B) asked participants to provide two, one-word responses sharing individual words that describe perceptions of their VA female leadership experiences. Both questions offered insight into individual perceptions of the topics. Neither question deliberately mandated respondents to use a particular part of speech (e.g. noun, verb, etc.) when selecting their answers.

Question six (Appendix B) asked participants to provide terms which best describe their experiences as a female VA SES leader. For this question, the terms *tough* and *uphill* were noted

twice. Table 5 offers a visual depiction of the collection of descriptive terminology participants offered in response to this question. It appears that most participants chose descriptive adjectives or adverbs which semantically fit with the term *experiences*. The term *honor* was the only response offered which could be considered a noun or verb.

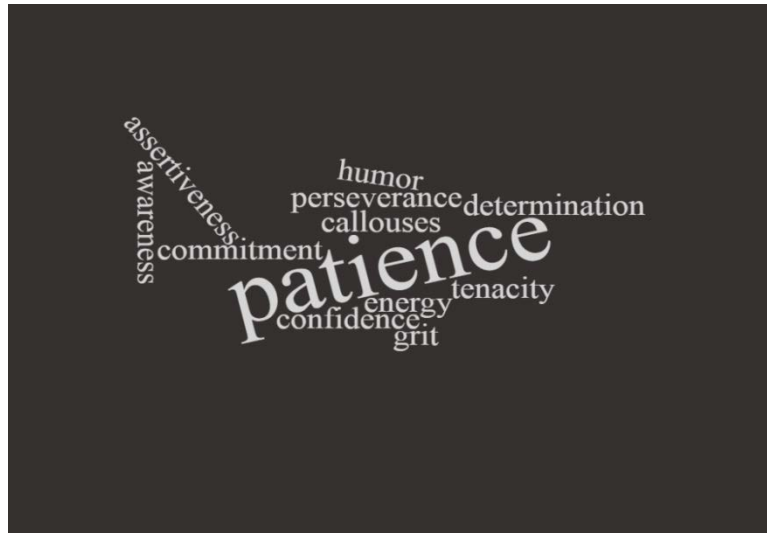
**Table 5:**

**Question Six (Appendix B) Word Cloud: Terms Describing Participants' Experiences as a Female VA Leader**



Question seven ( Appendix B) requested that participants provide two, one-word descriptions of the characteristics they identify as most valuable to aspiring female VA leaders. In response to the seventh question, three respondents chose the term *patience*. As noted in Table 6, all other terms were only used once. This question yielded more responses which were nouns including the terms *energy*, *commitment*, and *callouses*. As respondents were likely divulging attributes which propelled their own personal successes, a greater variation in grammatical parts of speech emerged in the responses due to the participants' individualized leadership experiences.

**Table 6: Question Seven (Appendix B) Word Cloud: Most Valuable Characteristics for Aspiring Female VA Leaders**



### **Self-Directed Question Responses**

Question eight (Appendix B) solicited open-ended responses which allowed participants to provide additional information regarding their perceptions of female VA leadership experiences. Responses were coded using the same tripartite methodology utilized with the sequenced questions offered earlier in the survey (Appendix B). The terms *knowledge*, *feelings*, and *value* each were thematically coded twice thus demonstrating an equal presence in the response data. As these terms were used more than once, they are considered keywords. These keywords conjure the essence of an emboldened individual who possesses a balance of erudition, emotion, and merit.

This self-directed response option summarized the survey in a participant-guided manner. It was intentionally placed at the end of the survey in order to empower participants to share terminology which best represents their feelings. Its design provided respondents with the

flexibility and freedom to share spontaneously information that was significant to them. This methodological consideration allowed this research to be conducted in a way which reflects the social work core values (NASW, 2017). The attributes identified by participants appeared to reflect first-hand experiences related to their advancement to VA SES leadership roles.



## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

### **Overview**

The term *government* connotes ideas of an anachronistic hierarchy topped by leaders with integrity and fortified by confidentiality and expectations of unfaltering employee loyalty. Obscured in its bureaucratic shadows and compromising its structural integrity is the issue of gender inequity in leadership. This research chartered unknown, opaque, and arguably trepidatious territory by considering the marginalization of female leadership in American federal institutions. Ironically, the treatment of females in the workplace received elevated media coverage during this study thus reinforcing the value and necessity of this work. This research brought female SES leadership experiences from the VA's mammoth shadows to inform other social workers on this previously opaque topic.

### **Summary of the Findings**

Participants indicated that personal characteristics (e.g. gender and appearance) had little influence on the advancement of aspiring female leaders however noted that non-personal factors (e.g. rank and grade) exerted a high level of influence. Military culture was found to be of moderate influence on female SES leadership. Participants had varying perspectives on the influence of peer mentorship however overall indicated that it had low influence. Participants noted that the negative experiences of female SES leadership had little perceived influence on female leadership aspirants. These perspectives suggest that non-personal factors, military culture, and peer mentorship had the greatest influence on females attempting to access VA SES leadership positions while personal factors and negative female SES leadership experiences were minimally influential.

Qualitative data analysis initially yielded thematic terms of *appearance* and *humor* which highlighted the influential aspects of the female SES leaders' characteristics. The keywords *actions* and *accomplishments* alluded to the participations' valuation of the behaviors of female SES leadership while the keywords *knowledge* and *communication* appeared to validate the importance of sharing wisdom. These keywords overlap with social work values and tenets.

Secondary analysis noted paragraphical themes with *gender*, *appearances*, *abilities*, and *values* emerging as the most frequently occurring keywords. These terms appear to reflect the implicit aspects of a leader's morality and ethics. Additional prominent keywords of *culture*, *gender*, and *heritage* underscored the importance of organizational and gender cultures.

Tertiary color analysis of all keywords indicated that terms with neutral connotations demonstrated a slightly higher prevalence than those with positive connotations. Terms with negative connotations were least prominent. These findings may reflect the participants' understanding of the SES leadership benefits of minimizing negative commentary. These findings also demonstrate the resourcefulness and resilience of female SES leaders. These attributes would be valuable to social workers who aspire to VA SES leadership.

### **Strengths of the Study**

#### **Grounded Theoretical Design that Supports Data Generalizability**

This research offered grounded theoretical findings from first-hand reports of female VA SES leaders. Its consideration of female SES leadership and the VA's bureaucratic, institutional influence (Goffman, 1961; Lipsky, 2010) using an implicit leadership theoretical perspective (Lord & Maher, 1990) appeared to be a previously unapplied approach. A thorough review of the literature failed to identify other studies that employed this method and particular framework.

The privileged opportunity to access current female VA SES leaders fortified the study by allowing the researcher to obtain rich, personal accounts. As these data were collected from female SES leaders at a VA facility located in a conservative American community, findings appeared generalizable to the experiences of other female SES leaders at VA facilities with similar demographics. These findings may be used to enhance social worker knowledge and their access to female SES leadership.

### **Participant Identification Method**

Previous research on female federal leadership provided considerable weight to the VA's traditional nomenclature regarding leaders' titles. As noted in chapter 4, titular labels were not the measure utilized for leader identification. Participants' formal professional titles were recorded during data collection, but considered as collateral, anecdotal information.

The utilization of the numeric federal grade-scale (GS) ratings as inclusion criteria assured that all participants had similar vantage points for reflecting on their female leadership experiences. Participants were identified based on their GS assignment which denotes their seniority and time in federal service. Several potential participants had similar nominal titles, such as Chief, however their GS rating differentiated their actual qualifications. As inclusion criteria required participants to possess at least a GS 12 rating, this quantitative identifier contracted the sample pool. Social Workers with GS 12 ratings are considered VA senior staff thus this inclusion criteria demonstrates great relevance to the social work profession. Several potential participants initially identified based on their titular leadership titles were excluded as their GS rating did not meet inclusion criteria.

## **Data Collection Methodologies**

**Humanistic approach.** Another strength of this work was its data collection methods which implored personal, verbal exchanges. Due to the magnitude of the VA, depersonalization of employees is an unfortunate phenomenon which is commonplace within the organization. Convenient, generalized digital exchanges are the preferred communication method in this monolithic organization. Since VA staff receive a barrage of impersonal electronic surveys, the oral interview experience offered a different tactic for accessing respondents' perspectives.

As the VA culture favors formal, institutional exchanges, the pliable, humanistic aspects of this research approach were a contrasting departure from the organization's rigid communication tendencies (Uchendu, 2014). Benefits ranged from the humanizing of participants to improving data quality. Professional ethics are at the core of all social work values (NASW, 2017) and were central to this research.

The live interview process facilitated intimate human interactions which tasked respondents with no responsibility for physically reporting their responses. An additional advantage to this methodological approach was the ability to collect peripheral observational data, including notations regarding the participants' facial expressions and physical gestures. These factors offer a possible explanation for the 100% question completion rate.

**Empowerment of participants.** This research methodology allowed participants to feel unique and valued due to the individual interview arrangements. Participants voiced comfort in this intimate, two-party informational exchange. Participants controlled what, when, where, and how information was collected. The individualized interview method may also have fostered increased participant disclosures when compared to surveys facilitated in group settings

(Holtzman, DeClerck, Turcotte, Lisi, & Woodworth, 2017). The participants' freedom to speak without forethought or self-censorship was another valuable factor of this research approach.

The benefits of in-person interviews have been touted as a clinically competent VA approach (Shudofsky & Ballan, 2017) due to their resilient, strengths-based approaches which emphasize the participants' unique characteristics. The success of this approach offered implications for social work clinical and research practice in other settings and was recommended for replication with other non-VA populations. Live individual interviews have been shown to minimize participant stress when compared to technologically facilitated or asynchronous interactions (Holtzman, DeClerck, Turcotte, Lisi, & Woodworth, 2017). Individual participants' interviews were also found to be strategic approaches which supported open communications and dispositions (Burt, Mackay, van der Heijden, & Verheijdt, 2017).

### **Participants' Familiarity with the Investigator**

Familiarity often decreases dis-ease by cultivating a safe environment which invites disclosure. Familiarity based simply on facial recognition may enhance participants' comfort in the interview process (Kramer, Young, & Burton, 2018). All study participants had prior professional knowledge or interactions with the researcher before receiving the invitation for study participation. As some participants were social workers, professional alliances may have motivated their participation. Due to the participants' familiarity with the investigator, this deliberate research design may have been viewed as another favorable research consideration (Unluer, 2012). Familiarity based on perceived shared work, personal, or gender characteristics may have propelled participants to commit to participation.

### **Participants' Alignment with Educational and Research Goals**

Erudition has few opponents. Individuals with knowledge of this researcher's educational goals may have chosen to participate in order to support the researcher's lifelong learner identity. Participants with an understanding of the study's goals may have opted to respond in furtherance of the edification of collective learning. Additionally, the participants' ability to be apprised of the study's outcomes allowed respondents to enhance their own knowledge. Empowerment by education was a strength of this study's design.

Stakeholder effect research (Ramos & Vaccaro, 2017) notes that the engagement of organizational leadership in research may assist in identifying key values and counterbalancing mission drift. Participants' commitment to research due to their alignment with its goals has been considered an advantageous phenomenological approach (Gallotti, Fairhurst, & Frith, 2017) as the shared interests of participants and researchers support communication. Participants' investment in the research's educational goals and mission may lead them to view the work as co-produced research (Darby, 2017) which validates participants due to the collaborative aspects of the interviews.

### **Participants' Alignment with the Researcher's Reputation**

Individuals with knowledge of the researcher's professional reputation due to prior interactions with the investigator may have participated due to their alignment with her professional traits. Participants with other knowledge of this researcher due to civic and community involvement may have found appreciation of her personal characteristics as a motivating factor for participation. Knowledge that the researcher is an aspiring VA leader also may have enhanced the participants' motivation.

### **Participants' Receptivity to the Research Topic**

All participants offered a positive response when being advised of the intended research topic and goals. Participant responses ranged from congratulatory accolades to verbalizations voicing relief that this topic was being examined. No potential or actual participants voiced any opposition to the topic or concerns regarding its relevance or appropriateness. Some VA administrative officials initially expressed reservations about the intent of this work. The administration's reluctance to endorse its completion originated in part from concerns about possible malintent. Leadership staff who were social workers and educational allies championed its approval.

### **Participants' Intrinsic Incentives**

Participants were not offered any monetary or other remunerative incentives for participation. The respondents' participation may have been altruistically motivated. To avoid skewing outcomes, participants were notified of the anonymous charitable donations made in their honor after all interviews were completed. The respondents' intrinsic motivation to participate fortified this research.

### **Gender Alignment**

As the research was conducted by and about females, gender alignment attributes were a strength of the study. The participants' vestment in the achievements of a female colleague may have been a motivating factor for participation. As some participants queried the gender of the investigator's dissertation chair, their awareness that a female Academe member was supporting this work was another potentially beneficial aspect.

The moderating role of gender in leader-member exchanges has been considered favorable in researcher-participant exchanges (Wang, Kim, & Milne, 2017). Shared researcher-participant gender characteristics may have supported the participants' participation in unstructured interview settings (Thorpe, Hawkes, Dune, Fileborn, Pitts, & Minichiello, 2018). One may assert that the participants' perceived gender alignment with the researcher may have led them to consider her more relatable and empathetic.

### **Weaknesses of the Study**

#### **Organizational Influence**

When conducting this research, there was a fine line between deliberate actions which would illuminate data and cautious, protective decisions that would reduce participant risk. Due to the innately regulatory nature of the VA, its policies and procedures exercised a fundamental control over the research process. The palpable, hypothesized professional risk that participation yielded to both the respondents and researcher was at the forefront of all investigative decisions.

This potential risk limited the researcher in venturing beyond primarily conservative questions. The researcher avoided questions about perceptions of the President and his beliefs regarding female leadership. Although such questions were tempting to ask, this research avoided any appearance of promoting insubordination to the participants' Commander in Chief. The paradox of the government's quasi-control over this research regarding power and females was not lost on the investigator.

#### **Participant Homogeneity**

Participant homogeneity allowed for a narrow depth due to the participants' shared professional and geographical characteristics. The lack of participant diversity may have produced a limitation in this research. The homogeneity of participants' ages and their time in



leadership positions was an impermeable fact. As no comparative data were collected regarding these same demographics for male VA SES leaders, the SES staff's ages and time in leadership positions may be similar regardless of gender. Increased variability in participants' ages and time in leadership positions may have yielded different outcomes due to a broader scope of cumulative life experiences.

### **Time Constraints in Data Collection**

This research utilized a sixty-day timeframe for data collection. Although this brief time interval protectively decreased the likelihood that participants had differing global influences during the interview process, its limited scope restricted the possibility of accessing additional participants who may have been available at a later date. The adverse influence of world events and the application of just-world thinking have demonstrated the ability to skew participants' perceptions (Sirois & Iyer, 2018). As the targeted participant pool was small in number (N=12), this limitation offers a minor impact on the outcomes of this work.

### **Political and Organizational Changes**

Loss of prospective participants due to organizational and personnel transitions was another unexpected challenge in this research. Historically, the VA has demonstrated general infrastructural stability at the beginning of each fiscal year. As this study was initiated at the beginning of the organizational year, greater consistency had been predicted. Since this research was conducted following the election of a new President with evolutionary political perspectives and national goals, many key federal government leaders, including those at the VA, changed.

These re-structuring efforts filtered down from the national level when the fiscal allocations for FY 17 were released on the first of October (Veterans Administration, 2017).

Altered funding streams allowed for more flexible administrative decisions at the local VA facility level thus resulting in increased job postings. These opportunities for positional changes which overlapped with the data collection period minimally impacted the potential participant pool.

In the VISN 4 region, funding had been allocated for infrastructural improvements including more technologically sophisticated laboratories at each VA (Veterans Administration, 2017). This plan was initially created so that unusual, infrequently used lab tests did not have to be sent to another facility at a larger VA (e.g. Philadelphia, Baltimore, etc.) as this diversion delayed processing and hindered the timely availability of test results. At the beginning of this fiscal year, VA Secretary Robert Shulkin identified suicide prevention as the organization's prioritized goal (Veterans Administration, 2017). In response to the Secretary's decree, funding for current "bricks and mortar" projects was re-appropriated towards enhancing behavioral health services by expanding staffing.

### **Infrastructural Transitions**

Two potential participants had to be recused from consideration due to their positional changes and the promotion of this writer. In a non-governmental organization with less stringent rules regarding exchanges between current and former supervisors and subordinates, more potential participants may have been able to participate in the study. The powerful control of government legislation prohibited this researcher in accessing certain participants.

VA policies exist which prohibit fraternization between supervisors and subordinates. These policies sanction non-professional interactions, such as exchanging gifts to acknowledge a life milestone (e.g. marriage, parenthood, etc.). These procedural restrictions demonstrated a

moderate impact on this research as its regulations eliminated seventeen percent of the identified prospective participant pool.

### **Participants' Gender Identification: Strategies and Fidelity Measures**

Use of participants' verbal self-disclosure as a gender identification strategy may be considered a fundamental weakness of this research. As our culture continues to evolve in its methods of defining gender, so does the VA organization. During the timeframe of this research, the VA's veteran enrollment form had a monumental amendment as it now queries applicants' gender specifications at time of birth, military enlistment, and application for VA benefits. This broadened consideration of gender fluidity demonstrates the VA's attempts to modernize its approaches in humanizing healthcare.

As the principal investigator had the opportunity to apply for promotion during the time of this research, she accessed requisite applicant disclosure forms during the data collection period. The gender identification methodology utilized for VA healthcare recipients is not currently being offered to present or potential VA employees. The staff demographic form only allows applicants to check a self-selected box indicating current gender identification. Verbalized self-disclosure of current gender was the method utilized when interviewing study participants. The choice to allow participants to vocally identify gender may have created a minor research limitation, if any.

### **Culture: VA and the Military**

The cultural fabric of the VA is one which publicly endorses gender neutrality however notably reinforces stereotypically male characteristics (Whitehead, Czarnogorski, Wright, Hayes, & Haskell, 2014). The male majority in VA leadership leaves female VA SES leaders as the

minority gender. Female SES VA leaders must decide if they wish to consider this minority status as a mere fact or embody it as an oppressive factor. As the VA intertwines the military traditions of its clientele in its daily operations, this culture of male predominance is reinforced due to the minority status of women in the military, its leadership, and veteran population. The gravity of this limitation is preponderant and highly influential to the participants, investigator, and research outcomes.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

#### **NASW and Professional Practice**

The National Association of Social Workers recently revised its *Code of Ethics* to align its guidance with contemporary professional practice needs (NASW, 2017). Amongst these modifications was an acknowledgment that the profession itself is not a dichotomous medium. Social work practitioners must consider context, ethics, and clinical best practices when ascertaining approaches to ameliorate societal disparities. This concept is poignant when considering gender and leadership as there are many nuances which influence each females' trajectory to VA SES leadership.

The purpose of the *Code* states, that “(e)thical decision making is a process. In situations when conflicting obligations arise, social workers may be faced with complex ethical dilemmas that have no simple answers” (NASW, 2017). It further avers that , “(s)ocial workers should take into consideration all the values, principles, and standards in this *Code* that are relevant to any situation in which ethical judgment is warranted” noting that “all decisions and actions should be consistent with the spirit as well as the letter of this *Code*” ( NASW, 2017). These revisions to our guiding *Code* suggest key implications for research on gender and leadership.

The foundational values of the profession's guiding organization appear unchanged however this rhetoric appears to acknowledge the limited number of unequivocal truths in social work practice. Much as the concept of gender has become more evolutionary and fluid, so should the consideration of the terms *female* and *leadership*. Characteristics stereotypically attributed to females will need to be reconsidered and reconceived. As society begins to acknowledge the myriad ways of gender definition and its influence on individuals, the conceptualization of a leadership will need to diversify.

Female SES leaders who demonstrate less stereotypically female characteristics and traits (e.g. they act less like women) may not have the same experiences as those individuals who embrace more androgynous personas which are more aligned with homogenetic characteristics customary of the military. The valuation of females in leadership at federal institutions, such as the VA, may require a broader gender lens and definition. Idealistically, the expansion of the gender dialogue would extinguish any discussion which indicates that gender alone pre-determines leadership suitability.

Society's tendency to categorize individuals makes the elimination of gender labels unlikely. Future social work researchers may wish to consider the gravity of gender as a preliminary research variable and determine whether it perpetuates a separatist's perspective. They also may ascertain if it is best to consider gender as a secondary atheoretical characteristic in order to avoid promoting the consideration of gender as a divisive leadership attribute.

### **Implications for Future Social Work Practice, Policy, Research, and Education**

This research tool demonstrated pliability, versatility, and simplicity in its application. Participants were receptive to the survey and excluded no responses thus yielding maximum

data. Its compact design and succinctness in execution present favorable qualities for its replication in other settings.

This survey instrument may be beneficially used for micro-analytical purposes to consider the experiences of female SES leaders at other VA facilities. Such interviews could collect meaningful data for comparative and trending analyses. Collective findings could then be extrapolated in crafting future social work leadership practice and policy recommendations. These data may also be beneficial in the development of female VA SES leadership trainings.

Additionally, this tool shows promise for mezzo-level application in social work leadership and gender research in other government settings, such as the military and federal institutions. As these government organizations are heavily laden with legislatively mandated infrastructural designs, interviews with female SES leaders in non-VA facilities would provide additional insight into factors facing female SES leadership in other divisions of the United States government. It would be of additional interest to ascertain if the experiences of female SES and social work leaders in non-veteran or military-associated divisions of government had similar gender-related SES leadership experiences.

Use of this research tool in macro-level application at non-government organizations would broaden social work research analysis to consider factors influencing female leadership in organizations without government affiliations. Any notable distinctions between the comparison groups may provide insight into ways to enhance female SES leadership experiences. Findings which note positive correlations may be recommended for future evidenced-based social work practice, research, and pedagogical considerations. As the topic of gender and leadership demonstrates relevance in all formal organizations, future exploration of these areas is recommended.

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION**

### **Perspectives on the Findings**

#### **Overview**

This research traversed diverse gender, leadership, and organizational terrains. Its survey collected unique data which offered insightful perspectives on the building blocks and pitfalls that participants encountered on their leadership journeys. Their individual and shared experiences propel social workers towards a clearer understanding of the path to female SES leadership.

This research was a preliminary step towards increasing the representation of social workers in female SES leadership. Developing a greater understanding of the female SES leadership dynamics may help propel social workers into more leadership roles. The incumbent female leaders' valuation of interrelatedness reflects their utilization of a strength well-recognized by professional social workers.

#### **Participants' Vantage Points**

This research required an analytical approach which objectively gathered data while humanizing the respondents' voices. The work balanced the emotional and political aspects of female VA SES leadership experiences while assuring these data were considered as more than esoteric information. This research was intentionally designed to avoid the re-inscription of a victim's narrative. Its solicitation of uncensored first-hand participant accounts promoted the use of the female voice as a conduit for change.

One may argue that the ongoing consideration of female leadership as a distinctive variable reinforces pre-existing, divisive gender stereotypes. Previous research has hypothesized that gender-focused research may perpetuate status incongruities, motivate prejudices, and

sabotage successes by fostering backlash against female leadership (Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012). Acknowledging a differentiating variable, such as gender, neither reinforces nor reduces its significance.

This researcher balanced the present study by assuring that its methodological approach is objective and avoids objectifying participants. One methodological approach utilized to support the reliability and validity of this work was the use of quantitative questions with subsequent qualitative questions. The sequenced qualitative questions, which asked questions similar to the preceding quantitative questions, received responses with content which echoed the responses to the initial quantitative questions. The survey tool's strategic design demonstrated its reliability as both sets of questions yielded consistent responses. This survey's validity was also established as the tool measured the intended variables without bias or distortion.

### **Validation of Participants' Freedom of Speech**

The interview tool (Appendix B) was structured to glean detailed research data using quantitative and qualitative questions. A valuable byproduct of this work was the participants' ability to speak candidly about an overlooked, under-discussed topic. Interviews connected with the participants' authenticity, candor, and at times, rancor. Participants four and six described answering the elaborative qualitative survey questions (Appendix B) as a liberating experience. This validating research approach exemplifies social work values (NASW, 2017) by empowering participants via their contributions. The emboldening of female participants via this research was an unexpected component of this work.



## **Commonalities in Female SES Leadership**

This research unveiled the innate relationality of females (Kray & Kennedy, 2017). Participants wove a resilient advocacy language through their interviews. The female leaders articulated genuine concerns for other female leaders using language with a nurturing undertone (Frey, Beesley, Abbott, & Kendrick, 2017). The research did not seek to relegate male leadership to a position of unimportance but aimed to understand female leadership experiences. As this work considered females in VA SES leadership, caution was used to assure that the participants' common inclusion criteria (e.g. female, SES, and leadership) did not morph into a false presumption of participant homogeneity. While some participant experiences were analogous in nature, none were fully duplicative.

Most participants were mid-aged, college-educated individuals with a minimum of one decade in leadership. While personal characteristics (e.g. appearance, style, etc.) were reported by participants to have minimal influence on their ascension to VA SES leadership roles, non-personal characteristics (e.g. rank, education, etc.) were believed to be very influential. This outcome appears to indicate that the participants' perceptions of female leadership characteristics are more likely determined by internal traits, not external traits. Based on the participants' collective responses, one may surmise that a female leader's persona establishes a stronger leadership impression than a female leader's physical presence.

Respondents voiced their belief that military culture provided moderate barriers in their ascension to female leadership while peer mentorship facilitated ascension albeit minimally. Prior research on professional female peer mentorship (Hill & Wheat, 2017; Kunze & Miller, 2017; Murrell & South-Paul, 2017) posited the positive benefits of these relationships among female leaders. The lack of the participants' strong endorsement of peer mentorship was a

surprising finding which may be indirectly related to the moderate influence of the military culture.

The VA's formal organizational communications and military culture may reduce the prevalence and appeal of peer mentorship relationships for female SES leaders. Schroeder and Powell (2017) suggest that limited female peer relationships in organizations with military culture originate from the blatantly gender-limiting recruitment advertisements which seek "the right man for the job." Overt and covert gender-related communications may deter females from seeking female solidarity due to these subliminally reductive messages.

Participants reported minimal negative influence by knowledge of female SES leadership experiences. It may be that the participants' intentional disassociation with negatively perceived experiences is a form of self-preservation (Francis, 2017). The participants' preferences to focus on positive information may indicate their belief that positive associations bridge them towards positive future outcomes (Hargons, Lantz, Reid-Marks, & Voelkel, 2017). Current female SES leaders may protectively avoid disclosing experiences to aspiring female leaders which may yield a negative influence. Overall, well-educated, seasoned female leaders with non-personal accolades and an acumen for military culture appear to have favorable characteristics which may assist in their ascent to VA SES leadership.

### **Communication Styles**

Participants spoke with striking, memorable verbiage and incorporated their own demeanor, knowledge, and personalities into the interview. Humor and sarcasm were common communication styles used by participants during these surveys. These stylistic approaches appeared to provide participants with a cathartic means to express their feelings.

Participant one established a humorous impression by stating, “People tell me that they introduce patients to me by my first name because I’m so friendly. I can’t be a friendly doctor?” Participant two shared her viewpoint on gender disparity with some sardonic laughter saying, “I see it every day, I don’t know how to explain it, but it’s ‘in the air’ - at meetings, in the hallways. I sound paranoid, don’t I?” The participants' use of laughter when discussing non-comical situations suggests that their humor may be masking a contrasting feeling in order to maintain a strong leadership veneer.

The survey’s (Appendix B) open-ended questions unveiled participants' concerns regarding how female leaders are perceived. Participant one used profanity when sharing her views stating, “I’ve been called a bitch and people get upset that I say ‘thank you’ and don’t consider it an insult.” Participant five offered a response which disparaged the President stating, “(f) emales have to be careful to talk about things in a way that builds the organization or you get labelled as a troublemaker. But Trump? Well, the rules don’t apply there!”

This study appeared to create a safe environment where participants felt able to express candidly perspectives that they could not voice freely in the context of their leadership roles. These open communication styles illuminate the participants’ comfort with the interview process. The mixed methods survey approach also allowed the participants greater freedom of speech.

The participants’ response styles did not adhere to the VA’s politically correct jargon and required no self-censorship. Their use of verbalizations accented by hand gestured air quotes, exaggerative facial expressions, and modern slang (e.g. “cold calling”) were a departure from their typically formalized communication styles. The participants’ informal interaction styles appeared easier and more genuine than that of their strategically planned professional

communications. One might surmise that use of these open authentic communications in the workplace may negatively influence the perception and progression of female VA SES leaders. The time and effort SES leaders dedicate to pre-emptively considering political correctness of interactions could be vested in more genuine and spontaneous exchanges.

### **Gender Perspectives**

The female SES leadership identity is a mosaic- a collection of experiences which may be assembled into a combined entity. Gender was an overarching formative influence across findings. Gender traits appeared to be an omnipresent theme in these collective data. Communication strategies, relationships, meeting behaviors, and personal demeanors were shaped by gender.

Several participants presented contrasting perceptions of female and male power paradigms. Participant one poignantly stated that "males don't challenge each other," then elaborated noting that males challenge females without reluctance. Some participants appeared to endorse the appropriation of stereotypical male qualities in order to succeed in the male-dominated leadership environment. As the word *female* encompasses the word *male*, it echoes participant three's statement that "females must do the work of males, and then do some more."

Participants also shared beliefs that females contribute to important decisions however often are not credited for their contributions. When offering her perspectives on gender inequity in leadership, participant two reported "there is a common mistaken belief that women [females] make the suggestions and men make the decisions." This statement alluded to a multi-tiered decisional hierarchy which offers increased credit or power to males.

The significance of the physical presence of a female leader in executive venues was another theme shared by participants. Participant two spoke of her female leadership experiences in executive meetings stating, “Everyone notices that there are few females in the room.” The physically observed gender imbalance in VA corporate settings visually depicts the participants’ feelings of perpetual separation from male leadership colleagues.

Participant four remarked that many females are “reluctant to spend too much time with 'the sisterhood' [other females at the VA] as others will notice and think that they [female leaders] are showing favoritism" to other females. One may surmise that this perception of female leadership relationships overlooks the benefits of peer relationships and dissuades solidarity among female SES leaders. It also may suggest that this perception requires female SES leaders to strive against female leadership misperceptions rather than towards their leadership goals.

Participant six appeared to imply that female leaders are reluctant to request assistance for fear of appearing ignorant. She notes that "females grasp nuggets of information then later return to the people [other females] that left the breadcrumb trail." Anticipated new VA initiatives, such as innovative grant-supported programs, are often announced in VA SES meetings. Female SES leaders may then selectively divulge this information to other females in order to provide them with valuable insider knowledge. Key stakeholders who initially share this information may be viewed as allies who are vesting in future female leaders. This stealth informational distribution strategy appears to be crafted in order to avoid the public scrutiny felt by some female VA SES leaders.

Participant three shared a contrasting perspective on the valuation of female SES leadership. She explained that as females must "work harder to get the same positions as males,"

some VAs are inclined to consider females for SES leadership roles as “they’ll [the VA will] get more bang for the buck.” In these adages, the participants appear to characterize female leadership struggles as challenges rather than adversities. The participants’ statements appear to emphasize that challenging experiences empower innately resilient female leaders.

### **The Symbiotic Relationship of the VA and Military**

Participant one stated that "military culture as a whole doesn't have straight up discrimination based on gender. I think that they [the leaders] are aware of it in the military, the VA, and all around." Although participant one reported that discrimination is not outwardly visible or tangible, her statement does validate its existence. Participant five noted that “females tend to be misconstrued,” explaining that “the VA and the military are less focused on feelings and more matter of fact.” Her perception of a unidimensional organizational culture which minimizes relational characteristics alludes to a source of female VA leadership struggles.

This participant further explained her perceptions of the benefits of female SES relationships noting that “females share the warnings.” Participant one’s observation that females develop intra-gender alliances parallels the unity developed amongst military troops. A serviceperson’s basic training instills surveillance techniques which promote hypervigilance for any pertinent threats. This heightened awareness appears to have been employed by female SES leadership as a survival tactic in a male dominated culture.

The gender biased aspects of military culture seem to have become a tolerated organizational norm. Participants appear to accept these cultural practices as immutable workplace factors which must be endured by female leaders. Lateral support appears more beneficial to aspiring formal SES leaders than hierarchical mentoring. This observation suggests

that female SES leaders tend to work within the constraints of the military culture while supporting each other in a complementary, noncompetitive manner.

## **Theoretical Positioning**

### **Implicit Leadership Theory**

Lord and Maher (1990)'s implicit leadership theory demonstrated great relevance (see Chapter 4) as the respondents' reports validated the relational aspects of female leaderships. Reciprocal influence model (Lord & Maher, 1990) applications were endorsed by participants as females processed interactions with other female leaders then internalized their influence. This female interrelatedness appears significant in ascending to VA SES leadership roles.

The hierarchy of the VA organization's staffing structure intrinsically supports leader-member exchanges (Lord & Maher, 1990). Participants voiced awareness of both the positive and negative influences of leader-member exchanges. They appeared to find female supervisor-supervisee interactions to be a positive paradigm of symbiotic learning. Participants also indicated that leader-member exchanges which shared valuable information enhanced their progression to SES leadership.

While the literature (Lord & Maher, 1990) identifies benefits in leader-leader exchanges, participants reported that both positive and negative peer exchanges made them feel vulnerable. One may surmise that there is greater comfort in SES female leadership learning via exchanges with a subordinate than in learning via exchanges with individuals in lateral or supervisory positions. These findings replicate the anachronistic institutional structures of the VA organization itself.

The role of gender appeared to create a maternal, nurturing, dyadic relationship between female leaders and their subordinates. When relating to other female leaders with similar rank, the participants' internalized view of their female peers as competitors emerged. Both positive and negative leader-leader interactions appeared to breed feelings of susceptibility. These insecure feelings may arise due to the participants' knowledge of the pre-existing challenges females face in their ascent to VA SES leadership positions. These feelings of uncertainty may inadvertently foster an unintentional competitiveness among female SES leaders.

Reciprocal influence model (Lord & Maher, 1990) also shaped this study's view of female SES leadership. Participants reported that female SES leaders evolve and change solely based on experiential exposures to leadership opportunities. The participants' opportunity to engage with others in venues where they were viewed as leaders appeared to enhance their self-validation and view of leadership successes.

Participants' responses appear to indicate that covert learning opportunities are more influential than intentional overt learning opportunities. Informal interactions with female SES leaders at charitable organizational events, such as exchanging ideas while volunteering at Veterans' Day festivities, appeared to provide aspiring leaders with opportunities for observation and learning. Connecting with other staff at other facility-supported events, such as bi-monthly blood drives, is another example of an equalizing venue where females may network and share knowledge. These interactive exchanges are a key aspect of social work practice.

Participants appeared to retain both implicit and explicit biases regarding their female leadership roles. The participants' explicit biases were more easily discerned as they referenced conscious attitudes and beliefs about the intersection of gender, leadership, and the VA. Respondents appeared comfortable voicing their perceptions of explicit biases in VA SES female



leadership however their reports regarding their perceptions of implicit biases were more veiled. Some participants appeared to be excavating these unconsciously internalized beliefs as the interviews progressed. Much as a tea bag is steeped in water, participants appeared saturated by their leadership environment and altered by these immersive experiences.

### **Total Institutions**

Goffman (1961)'s institutional analyses of organizations (see Chapter 2) remain germane in this research. Participants considered the VA's formal opaque communications, cumbersome staffing hierarchies, and archaic physical infrastructural designs to be impediments in ascending to female SES leadership. These institutional characteristics contradict the observed transparent, flexible nature of the female participants.

The VA's current anachronistic practices reinforce gender inequities prevalent during the era of Goffman's initial work by fostering a rigid leadership. Examples of this rigidity include the permanent break and lunch times assigned to most VA employees. These practices do not account for certain gender-associated needs which require greater flexibility, such as the breast-pumping needs of lactating mothers.

Participants echoed literature findings reporting that females must fight for leadership opportunities beyond mid-management shell positions with false, glossy titles (Lips & Keener, 2010). They also reported that organizational politics continue to confer titles to female SES leaders which do not connote their full worth and abilities. This unbalanced organizational scaffolding would likely benefit from a new blueprint designed by a female leadership architect. As females are represented as staff, leaders, and clientele, the organization's leadership should be overhauled to offer parity and reflect the demographics of its stakeholders.

Organizational temporality is an additional concern presented by participants. They reported that the VA does not appear to keep pace with the progression of female leadership in other organizations. One may suggest that the organization's current stagnant leadership limits its evolution as an entity.

## **Bureaucracy**

Lipsky (2010)'s examination of bureaucracies (see Chapter 2) aligned with the patriarchal characteristics which influence the advancement of females to VA SES leadership. Women in VA SES leadership work in buildings, infrastructures, organizations, and positions predominantly designed by men (Veterans Administration, 2017). These concrete and inflexible structures contrast with the innate interrelation style preferred by the female participants. Participant interviews were conversations, not interrogations, and did not assume the impersonal, minimalistic exchanges which are status quo within the VA organization. The participants' open participation in the research demonstrated their resistance to these rigid communication approaches.

The commoditization of human capital is a reality in government service. Personnel are key to the functioning of the organizational machine. While selecting desirable human resources is a preferred government hiring practice, all parties are expendable and replaceable. The relational aspects endorsed by the respondents contrasted with this reductive bureaucratic characteristic. If the female SES leadership identity evolved to include components of the non-workplace identity, it may improve the VA leadership exchanges.

A more humanistic leadership approach would likely be invited by female VA social workers and employees. As the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) supports the valuation of the

individual, the perceptions of VA SES female leaders would be likely be enhanced if use of their full identities (e.g. employee, parent, spouse, etc.) would be sanctioned as a beneficial VA leadership approach. Respondents appeared to view this relational approach as a strength among female leaders. Its absence at the VA may be viewed as a weakness within the organization. Local and global politics and collaborations are shaped by organizational views of power, relationality, and differences (Berger & Esguerra, 2017).

### **Researcher's Positionality**

#### **VA Employee's Perspective**

The duality of the researcher-employee identities required a conscious shift between both roles. Fidelity to the research design required an intentional separation of workplace and research observations. Although this study increased this researcher's sensitivity to workplace situations where gender biases were suspected, researcher objectivity prohibited these events from skewing study analyses. This researcher kept separate self-reflective journals at work and home so that personal, professional, and research observations could be distinctly maintained. Consistency in analysis with repetitive review of the careful theme abstractions and assignments also assured this fidelity.

Deliberate efforts were made to assure that participants encountered at the researcher's workplace were viewed collegially through a professional lens. Self-awareness was also exercised when interacting with candidates who opted not to participate in this study. The researcher's insider employee perspective may have appeared advantageous however it also created some complexities which required intentionality in clearly separating the employee and researcher roles.

### **Aspiring VA SES Leader's Perspective**

As an aspiring VA SES leader, the knowledge imparted by participants was also considered in context with my professional goals. During the study, this researcher was promoted to a senior position within the organization. This shift from a mid-level to senior VA position availed the researcher first-hand leader and member perspectives during the study. This promotion did not compromise the integrity of this research, but did bolster this researcher's confidence in cultivating the participants' receptivity to this study. It also enhanced this researcher's ability to consider the organization and its leadership from both the leader and member vantage points.

### **Female Perspective**

At the VA, gender is an omnipresent factor in all exchanges due to the formal salutatory greetings which pair the gender-associated prefixes (e.g. Mr. and Ms.) with a surname. As a female researcher interviewing female participants, I became more aware of my personal gender while doing this work. The minimization of the female leadership perspective should be expected in an organization whose clientele and staffing are infused by the military. Participants related that the acceptance of this reality does not convey their agreement with the phenomenon.

### **Research Challenges**

This research was challenging due to its examination of a politically-sensitive topic which involved my employer. It was a difficult journey that required the vigilant preservation of research fidelity while remaining professionally immersed in the research environment. Pragmatism and cautiousness were balanced when exploring this research topic. Due to the

sensitivity of the subject matter, vastness of the organization, and potential implications that a perceived misstep could cause to my employment and career, discretion remained a priority.

### **Future Research Recommendations**

In retrospect, videotaping these interviews to capture the participants' contrasting presentations would have added another dimension to the data. Although verbal interviews and visual observations were transcribed into text, the opportunity to revisit the interviews via recorded media may have uncovered additional insights into female VA SES leadership experiences. Documentation captured in video recordings also may have served as a valued reference tool for future comparative research on other female leadership experiences. Future social work research should expand the participant pool to consider female leadership in other federal agencies and in non-government organizations. Broadening the scope of participants would expand social work knowledge of female leadership experiences and enhance the understanding of the characteristics which support the ascension of females to leadership positions.

### **Implications for Future Social Work Practice**

Female SES leaders and social workers must identify effective strategies to permeate the VA's predominantly male leadership. Advocating for social justice by elevating the current VA administration's awareness of the importance of human relationships (NASW, 2017) would be one such approach. As the VA and NASW core values of integrity and competence (Veterans Administration, 2017; NASW, 2017) overlap, aspiring female social workers in these organizations may align in supporting the ascension of females to VA SES leadership positions. The dignity and worth of females would be reinforced by these efforts. Use of an activist's voice

rather than an observer's perspective is the embodiment of an advocate and the social work profession itself.

### **Implications for Future Social Work Policy**

Educating current VA SES leaders on the benefits of females in leadership is another proposed strategy which may influence organizational policymakers and policies. Identifying key stakeholders to examine the VA organization's adherence to Equal Opportunity Employment promotion practices is another means of supporting the female ascension to VA SES leadership. Aspiring female SES leaders must advocate at the local, state/VISN, and federal VA level via committee membership and advisory board membership. Their visibility and presence may permeate the current leadership hierarchies and create a physical presence which demonstrates the capabilities of female SES leaders.

### **Conclusion**

#### **Nomenclature: The Noun and the Verb of Research**

Although the VA's anthropomorphic nature was considered early in this work, the anthropomorphic nature of the research itself was initially overlooked. The research was personified due to the feelings that it embodied and generated. If it was not regularly nourished or rested, developmental implications arose. As the skeleton of this work matured, the research evolved from an *it* to a *she*.

The participants' personalities contributed to the multi-dimensional aspect of this vitalized work. Theoretical aspects of this work were animated by the participant's embodiment and demonstration of implicit leadership characteristics. The metamorphic aspect of the data collection via participant-researcher interactions mirrored schematic leadership categorization

(see Chapter two) approaches as each additional participant's responses evolved the researcher's pre-existing leadership schema.

Honoring the participants was a crucial aspect of this research process. The participants' voices validated the need for a VA platform where female voices may be heard. Their collective voices created an independent entity. The lack of a personified title for this work was indicative of the fact that the research is a blend of the characteristics and contributions of many females. One name would not give it justice.

## **Appendix A**

### **Informed Consent Form**

This form is provided to you to share information which may help you decide if you wish to participate in this study.

**The purpose of this study** is to gain an understanding of the factors that influence female VA employees in attaining Senior Executive Service (SES) positions.

**The benefits of this research** include accessing first-hand accounts of Senior and SES VA leaders in order to gain an increased understanding of their perceptions of factors which influence progression to SES leadership positions.

**The potential risks of participation in this study** include possible concerns about employer retribution for participation. Organizational leadership has been informed of this study and the fact that interviews will be conducted off station during times which do not conflict with the scheduled Tour of Duty of the principal researcher or interviewee. You may opt not to participate in the interview and may decline answering any or all of the questions. You also may withdraw from participation at any time.

**The methods of this study** include face-to-face interviews and phone contact to arrange these interviews. The interviews will be recorded to assure that the researcher accurately documents your responses. These recordings are for sole use by the principal researcher and will be transcribed into written notes and then destroyed. If you are not comfortable with the audio recording process, please advise me and I will not record.



**Participation in this study is voluntary.** You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time. In the event that you withdraw from participation, you may request that your responses be excluded from the final report.

**Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study.** No personal identifying data will be included in the report. If you have interest in the study, its methods, or findings, you may contact me at any time.

Institutional Approval: This study has been approved by the Millersville University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

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## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Questions**

**1. As a female leader at the VA, to what degree do you feel that personal characteristics (such as gender, appearance, etc.) influence the advancement of aspiring female leaders to Senior Executive Service (SES) positions?**

(Options for response: Highly influential, Moderately influential, Marginally influential, Not influential)

**1a. Will you please tell me more about why you selected this response?**

**2. Based on your knowledge of the progression of females to VA leadership roles, to what degree to you think that non-personal factors (such as years of service, Grade-Scale, rank, etc.) influence the advancement of aspiring female leaders to SES positions?**

(Options for response: Highly influential, Moderately influential, Marginally influential, Not influential)

**2a. Will you please tell me more about why you selected that response?**

**3. To what degree do you think that the military culture of the VA influences the progression of females to VA leadership positions?**

(Options for response: Highly influential, Moderately influential, Marginally influential, Not influential)

**3a. Will you please tell me more about why you selected that response?**

**4. To what degree do you think it would be useful to aspiring female leaders to learn from current SES leaders like you about how to “climb the ladder”?**

(Options for response: Highly influential, Moderately influential, Marginally influential, Not influential)

**4a. Will you please tell me more about why you selected this response?**

**5. To what degree you think that the knowledge retained by female SES leaders regarding factors influencing the advancement of female VA leadership may negatively impact aspiring female leaders?**

(Options for response: Highly influential, Moderately influential, Marginally influential, Not influential)

**5a. Will you please tell me more about why you selected that response?**

**6. What two words would you choose to best describe your experiences as a female VA leader?**

(Responses: a. \_\_\_\_\_ ; b \_\_\_\_\_ .)

**7. What two characteristics would you identify as most valuable to aspiring female VA leaders?**

(Responses: a. \_\_\_\_\_ ; b \_\_\_\_\_ .)

**8. Do you have any further information that you wish to share that you feel would be beneficial for the goals of this study?**

**9. Age**

(Options for response: 19-29; 30-39; 40-49; 50-59, 60-69, 70+)

**10. Highest Level of Completed Education**

(Options for response: High School, Post- High School Certification, Associate's Degree, Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree, Doctoral degree)

**11. Years of VA Employment**

(Options for response: 1-10; 11-20; 21-30; 31-40; 41-50; 51+)

**12. Years in Leadership Position**

(Options for response: 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 20+)

**13. Years in SES Leadership Position**

(Options for response: 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 20+)

**Date of interview**

**Start time:**

**Stop time:**

**Interview #:**

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