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Perceptions of Female Divinity Students Regarding Gender Bias and Career Aspirations

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Walden University
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Abstract

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by

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Master of Art in Human Behavior, National University 2010

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Gender bias plays a significant role in ministry and could prevent churches and congregations from benefitting from the values female ministers bring to the church in a leadership capacity. This bias can also prevent female ministers from accomplishing their career goals. The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of gender bias held by female Master of Divinity (MDiv) students and whether they perceive gender bias has an effect on their choice of a career as a ministerial leader. Social cognitive career theory provided the framework for the study. The research question focused on gathering the perceptions held by female students and the experiences these students had with gender bias while enrolled in MDiv programs. Social media and snowball sampling were used to recruit 14 female MDiv students who were currently enrolled or had recently graduated. Data sources included interviews and journaling. Persson's VSAIEEDC data analysis process indicated six themes: (a) Perceptions of influencers are both external and internal, (b) observations of traditional roles are limiting toward women, (c) lived experiences in MDiv programs are both positive and negative, (d) observations of gender bias in MDiv programs are frustrating and substantial, (e) observed effects on career choices are restrictive toward women, and (f) perceived measures needed for advancement are progressing slowly. The study's potential for positive social change may include a reduction in the experiences of gender bias within MDiv programs. Male ministers, congregations, and church leaders may also benefit from an improved understanding of how gender bias limits the value female ministers bring to the church.

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Dedication

I honor my grandmothers who have gone before me and encouraged future generations to be strong in our convictions. My mother, the late Anne Marie Glasse (1940–2012), who taught me to follow my dreams and believe in my ability to overcome any limitation I encounter. My daughter, Aria Anne Norton, who inspires me every day to work hard toward empowering future generations of women. I dedicate this dissertation to these incredible women in my life and all female leaders striving to improve society.

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To my family and friends, without your consistent encouragement and support, I would not have accomplished this goal. Your love got me through this journey, and my appreciation is immeasurable.

To my husband, Dr. Kevin C. Norton, you pushed me to realize this dream. You pushed me to stay focused. You pushed me to accomplish this goal. Without your love and support, I wouldn't be celebrating this accomplishment. I can't express how much I love you.

To my children, Aria Anne Norton and Zachary Miles Norton, you two have been my motivation to succeed. Your love, support, and understanding during this journey have kept me inspired to keep focused. God blessed me with you two, not just for me to raise but for me to see the beauty of the future. I love you both madly!

To God, You have never forsaken me, and my faith in you has always kept me. Thank you for blessing me time and time again.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

As women have become successful leaders in the workplace, they have endeavored to close the gender gap hindering them from holding leadership positions in the church (Tunheim & DuChene, 2016). Wong et al. (2017) posited that women in ministry experience gender inequality in various forms, which impacts their careers. The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of female students enrolled in a Master of Divinity (MDiv) program regarding gender bias and how they interpret gender bias as an influencer on their choice to pursue a ministerial career within a congregation. Lucht and Batschelet (2019) reported that women faced social and cultural barriers as they sought work in media industries not openly welcoming to women, such as journalism and broadcasting. Dos Santos (2018) explained that students tend to continue with their chosen career path based on the positive influence of their experience while studying and support from those in their career field. With a negative experience or a lack of support, the student would likely choose a different career path.

Chapter 1 includes the background of the study and information regarding female MDiv students and gender bias as they pursue a career in a traditionally male-dominated career field. I introduce the problem and purpose statements, as well as the research question addressed in this study. Also presented are descriptions of the relevant theory, conceptual framework, nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study.

Background

Gender bias has long been a factor that influences the path women choose for their professional careers. Ferguson (2015) conducted a quantitative study showing that gender plays an influential role in a female MDiv student's experience in seminary and the direction of her professional career. Although the study showed a direct correlation between female MDiv students' experiences and career aspirations, Ferguson did not provide insight into these participants' perceptions of gender bias. In addition, White, Asian American, and African American female church leaders have struggled with discriminatory practices related to gender (S. Davis & Brown, 2017; Tunheim & DuChene, 2016; Wong et al., 2017). Despite identifying a relationship between female church leaders and the challenges they faced due to gender bias, these researchers did not address the perceptions held by female church leaders or the influence on their career aspirations.

Men and women hold similar perceptions regarding life satisfaction and moral reasoning (Wong et al., 2017). People's perceptions based on gender bias could have significant implications on their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral state of mind. The present study provided insight into the female MDiv students' perceptions of gender bias and any influence this bias could have had on their chosen career paths.

This qualitative study represented a shift in methodology from a previously researched quantitative perspective of gender bias as an influence on the career paths of female MDiv students. Rather than identifying the relationship, this study was a means to provide a deeper understanding. A qualitative research paradigm was more appropriate to

explore the perceptions of gender bias held by these female students. In addition to qualitatively exploring female MDiv students' perceptions, I sought to understand how the participants believed MDiv programs could reduce the challenges female students might face due to gender bias. The findings of this study could offer insights that can benefit scholars and practitioners and current and future MDiv students worldwide in both academic and church settings.

Problem Statement

Gender bias is more positively associated with conserving traditional values and beliefs and more negatively associated with openness to change and self-enhancement (Mishra, 2020). Cultural, historical, and geographic norms impact gender inequality. Despite the efforts in the 20th and 21st centuries to address gender inequality via the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and the Equal Pay Act of 1963, implicit biases remain in areas such as organizational leadership and religion, continuing to adversely affect women pursuing careers in leadership positions (Braddy et al., 2020).

Most organizational leaders are unaware of the value women in key leadership positions offer the organization (Tunheim & DuChene, 2016). Gender-based stereotypes often direct men and women into opposing academic and career paths, adversely affecting female students' intentions to choose careers such as engineering after graduation (Balakrishnan & Low, 2016). Similarly, within religious denominations, the debate around accepting women into leadership positions has remained prevalent despite increasing numbers of clergywomen among religious leadership over the past 30 years

(Smarr et al., 2018). This debate is one factor preventing women of all races from climbing to the highest ranks in religious leadership (Smarr et al., 2018).

Of the topics studied related to clergy, leadership, and gender, Ferguson (2015) found that many were explorations of the professional identity of clergypersons and their seminary training and goals for their future ministries. Ferguson's quantitative study added to the literature regarding religious leadership through an examination of four factors—institutional type, educational debt, feelings of acceptance, and gender differences—related to those who graduate with an MDiv yet do not pursue a position of leadership within a congregation. Ferguson highlighted a need for a more substantial and in-depth understanding of MDiv students' paths upon graduation, recommending a mixed-methods study. I found that no qualitative research had focused on how female MDiv students perceive gender bias as an influencer on their chosen career path.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore how female students enrolled in an MDiv program perceive gender bias and whether they perceive this bias as affecting their choice to pursue a ministerial career within a congregation. This study gave voice to their experiences and highlighted the issues and challenges they face as women pursuing a career in a male-dominated field. I investigated female MDiv students' perceptions as to what barriers, if any, this bias has created and how the barriers might guide the students' vocational choices and ministry efforts. A generic qualitative approach was appropriate to address this gap in the research using semistructured individual interviews to inform this study.

Research Question

How do female students enrolled in a Master of Divinity (MDiv) program perceive gender bias, and do they perceive this bias as an influencer on their choice to pursue a ministerial career?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used in the study was Lent et al.'s (1994) social cognitive career theory (SCCT). The theory focuses on self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals and how these variables interact with individuals' gender, ethnicity, or social support network to develop their interests, guide their choices, and influence their occupational pursuits (Lent et al., 2000). SCCT suggests that people's career goals form within their sociocultural environment, with influence from opportunity, education, socioeconomic background, and social supports (Dos Santos, 2018). Dos Santos (2018) stated the theory also addresses how people understand their career interests, what career goals they set, and how they pursue those interests.

This theory was a lens to explore how female divinity students develop their career interests and career paths after earning their MDiv. SCCT also enabled insight into how these female MDiv students perceive gender bias and whether it influences their chosen career paths. The use of SCCT allowed for an exploration of how female MDiv students use self-efficacy, expected outcomes, and goals to determine their career path upon completing their degree program. Self-efficacy is individuals' belief that they can perform a specific action in a specific area, outcome expectations are the anticipated consequences associated with the specific action, and goals reflect the intention to

perform it (Ehrhardt & Sharif, 2019). Given SCCT's career-centric focus, self-efficacy, expected outcomes, and goals often lead to a change in career-related plans or strategies. The present study's focus was female MDiv students' belief in their ability to provide ministerial services to a population of those who share their religious beliefs. This study also addressed the students' anticipation that their goals and outcomes reflect their intention of successfully ministering to the population.

Nature of the Study

The purpose of this generic qualitative research study was to investigate female MDiv students' reports of their subjective perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections on their experiences. Qualitative methodology was appropriate to capture and provide a richer, more complete description of the participants' lived experiences. A qualitative approach provides the means to organize and interpret the data collected in a study without losing the richness and individuality of the participants' responses (Yates & Leggett, 2016), making it the most appropriate choice for this study. The research question was qualitative to gather female MDiv students' perceptions of gender bias via participant interviews regarding a specific external factor.

The nature of this study was generic qualitative inquiry. Percy et al. (2015) stated that qualitative study is ideal to investigate a population's attitudes or beliefs pertaining to an external factor. Gender bias is an external factor that influences people in many ways. Often, members of society unconsciously base decisions on whom to mentor, advise, admit, hire, or promote due to gender stereotypes (Rogus-Pulia et al., 2018). The qualitative approach allowed me to gather the participants' reflections on their

experiences with gender bias and how it might or might not have influenced their chosen career path after earning their MDiv.

In this research, I obtained insight into the participants' perceptions to better understand and interpret their experiences with gender bias and its influence on their chosen career paths. Therefore, a generic qualitative design was appropriate (see Robinson & Diale, 2017). The findings of generic qualitative research are descriptive and offer a broad range of opinions, ideas, and reflections providing rich information on the topic and the phenomenon (Percy et al., 2015).

The intent of this generic qualitative study was to explore how female MDiv students perceive bias as influencing their choice to pursue a ministerial career. The identification of potential participants occurred via social media platforms including LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram. Interested individuals underwent screening to verify they met the qualifications of being female and currently enrolled in or recently graduated from an MDiv program. I used snowball sampling, requesting participants' referrals to recruit new participants for Zoom videoconferencing interviews. Data analysis occurred to ascertain how participating students perceived gender bias as an influence on their career path. The SCCT conceptual framework provided a foundation for me to direct the study's purview, achieve data saturation, and answer the research question.

Data collection entailed conducting semistructured interviews with female MDiv students so they could share their experiences and voice any challenges they perceived they had to face as a result of gender bias. Data analysis occurred using the seven steps of

Persson's (2006) VSAIEEDC cognition-based model, allowing for reflexivity and rigor (Kennedy, 2016). The VSAIEEDC model involves identifying and comparing recurring patterns in the participants' perceptions (Persson, 2006). VSAIEEDC includes reviewing the data for variation, specification, abstraction, internal verification, external verification, demonstration, and conclusion (Kennedy, 2016).

Definitions

Gender bias: A viewpoint reflecting the difference in roles and responsibilities in society, family, and occupations, generating role expectations for each gender (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2016).

Ministerial career: A career consisting of providing service to, relating to, or characteristic of a minister of religion or the ministry (Day & McCrabb, 2020; Sturges, 2019).

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT): A social cognitive framework to explain the relationship between (a) the development of academic and career interests, (b) the formation of education and career choices, and (c) the pursuit of educational and career success (Lent et al., 2000).

VSAIEEDC: A cognition-based model for analyzing qualitative data allowing for reflexivity and rigor with seven steps: variation, specification, abstraction, internal verification, external verification, demonstration, and conclusion (Persson, 2006).

Assumptions

Assumptions are the aspects of a study that are presumed by the researcher to be true but have not be proven (Cypress, 2017). A study's transferability depends on

considering the assumptions researchers bring and how these assumptions can shape beliefs and influence the study (Davidson et al., 2017). The first assumption was that the participants would respond to the interview questions honestly without influence from the topic or interviewer. The second assumption was that the participants would have some understanding of what gender bias is and how it has impacted women throughout history. The third assumption was that all participants would understand and believe their interviews would be confidential and would respond honestly without fear of repercussions from their MDiv program administrators.

Scope and Delimitations

This study's scope focused on the perceptions of gender bias held by female MDiv students. The delimitation was that this study would not address any other aspect of their perceptions and experiences as MDiv students except as related to gender bias. There are instances when women do not recognize inequities within the career field and are unaware of the hidden gender bias they face in the workplace (Grover, 2015; Seron et al., 2018). Many women pursuing a career in a male-dominated career field perceive feminism as complaining and asking for special treatment, which minimizes their talent, experience, and individual achievement (Seron et al., 2018).

Limitations

A potential limitation was that this study focused only on female MDiv students of various religious faiths without comparisons. Ghazzawi et al. (2016) posited that there are minimal studies comparing different religions. Because each religion has a different basis for the nature of faith, differences in the participants' religious backgrounds could

have produced some discrepancies in the data, as variety often leads to different attitudes toward women in ministry. The variability in religious belief systems could have indicated influences based more on sociocultural beliefs than gender bias. Therefore, reconciling the differences between the faiths was a necessary consideration.

Another potential limitation was researcher bias. To minimize this limitation, I used a reflexive journal to capture my perceptions, reactions, and opinions regarding gender bias. This journal allowed me to focus the analysis on the data collected rather than any predetermined ideas and to remain transparent about preconceptions (see Williams et al., 2020). Reflexivity helped me set aside judgment and mitigate any preconceptions about gender bias and prior knowledge of the topic.

Significance

The findings could fill a gap in the literature in understanding the perceptions held by female MDiv students regarding gender bias. This study addressed an underresearched area of the female MDiv students' perceptions of the influence of gender bias on their chosen career field of ministry leadership (see Ferguson, 2015; Smarr et al., 2018). The results could provide needed insight into the notion of gender bias and whether female MDiv students perceive a relationship between the barriers they experience in striving to reach leadership positions in ministry and the choices they make to pursue alternate career paths (see Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

Significance to Practice

This study has practical application to other career fields. The findings may increase awareness of how women enrolled in traditionally male-dominated education

programs perceive gender bias to inform their experience and choices regarding a career in male-dominated fields. Other researchers could replicate this study to explore women's perceptions regarding gender bias across career fields.

Another practical application would be applying the expanded knowledge of religious leadership and theological education. The literature showed the factors associated with the educational experiences of female students in graduate programs globally (Myklebust, 2019). Leaders in higher education, organizations, government, and society could be interested in the findings, thereby promoting further research worldwide.

Significance to Social Change

Despite studying to be a leader within the religious field, female MDiv students could feel marginalized and decide not to pursue a position in religious leadership due to continued biased treatment (Ferguson, 2015). Although some women in leadership roles do not recognize the forms of gender bias around them (Seron et al., 2018), others are more aware of the bias they face and how it might influence their success in leadership roles. This study provided an opportunity for women to voice their perceptions of gender bias concerning their career aspirations after completing their MDiv. Participants' perceptions added to the body of literature and could serve as a pathway to improving female MDiv students' experiences and society's understanding of the phenomenon of gender bias.

Summary

Chapter 1 presented the central phenomenon that grounded the study, the research plan, and the study's background, research problem, purpose statement, and research

question. I provided definitions of key concepts and Lent et al.'s (2000) SCCT as the conceptual framework that provided the lens for this study. The study's goal was to fill the gap in the literature by exploring the perceptions of female MDiv students regarding gender bias and their career aspirations.

Chapter 2 includes an in-depth literature review to position the study within the body of knowledge on gender bias. The chapter presents a comprehensive explanation of the conceptual framework and the research approach for this study. Gender bias is a long-standing societal phenomenon. This study added to the literature and research exploring the influence of gender bias on women's career aspirations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Despite efforts over the last 40 years to address gender inequality, multiple issues remain in areas such as organizational leadership and religion (Easterly & Ricard, 2011). Gender inequality continues to create a social imbalance between members of society (Grover, 2015; Klingorová & Havlíček, 2015). Cultural, historical, and geographic norms have contributed to the effect of gender inequality on women (Myklebust, 2019). Although women have taken on more leadership roles, there remains an imbalance between the number of key leadership roles held by men and women (Tunheim & DuChene, 2016). Historically, gender-based stereotypes have often led men and women into opposing academic and career paths, discouraging female students from choosing careers in fields such as science, engineering, and math (Balakrishnan & Low, 2016). Similarly, within religious denominations, the debate around accepting women into leadership positions has remained prevalent despite the increase in clergywomen in spiritual leadership over the past 30 years (Smarr et al., 2018). Smarr et al. (2018) expounded this debate continues to prevent women of all races from advancing into the highest ranks of religious leadership.

Chapter 2 includes an evaluation of current and relevant literature on the perception of gender bias and women in the workplace, women in leadership roles, women in ministry, and female MDiv students' career choices. The chapter provides a comprehensive analysis and appraisal of current literature related to the following identifying criteria:

- Women in the workforce: The literature indicates that gender bias has influenced the history of women in the workplace and their pursuit of educational and career advancement.
- Women in leadership roles: Statistics and research on the impact of gender bias on the success of women in leadership positions appear.
- Women in ministerial leadership: The extant research provides a foundation for the development of women serving in a leadership role within various religions, presenting a history of the progression of women's role in the church, gender bias, and the rise to leadership positions.
- Female seminary experience: Research and statistics on the enrollment and performance of female students in seminary school are components of the reviewed literature.
- Chosen career paths: The literature review presents the statistics and direction female MDiv students choose in following a career path after completing seminary school. Although I was unable to find a significant amount of research focused on the influence of gender bias on ministerial career choices, the extant literature showed the impact of gender bias on women working in theology and throughout their educational pursuits.

Literature Review Strategies

To conduct this literature review, I performed searches to find pertinent peer-reviewed articles and dissertations. I used the Walden University Library to access databases, including ERIC, SAGE Journals, Thoreau, ProQuest, and EBSCOhost, and the

Google Scholar academic search engine. Although most of the literature used was published between 2016 and 2020, some theoretical and foundational research had publication dates before 2016. The keywords searched in combinations were *gender bias*, *seminary*, *higher education*, *clergy*, *leadership*, *gender*, *career choices*, *female divinity students*, *leadership roles*, *theological education*, and *educational attainment*. Chapter 2 includes a review of literature on the impact of gender bias on women in the workplace, women in leadership roles in historically male-dominated career fields, female MDiv students and their experiences with gender bias, and the impact of gender bias on their chosen career paths.

Exploring the experiences of female divinity students entailed reviewing the research on female students pursuing education in other male-dominated fields and their experience choosing male-dominated career fields. SCCT provided a framework for the cultural and social characteristics of gender bias on career choice and the experiences of female MDiv students. To provide a useful review of the literature, I used a writing strategy that began with a focus on the broad topic of the impact of gender inequality on women in leadership roles. I then narrowed the focus to the effect on women in ministerial leadership roles and female students in seminary school and the impact of gender inequality on those students' chosen career paths.

Conceptual Framework

SCCT is a theory to explain variables such as self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals and how these variables interact with individuals' gender, ethnicity, or social support network to develop their interests, guide their choices, and influence their

occupational pursuits (Lent et al., 2000). SCCT suggests that people's career goals form within their sociocultural environment, directly influenced by opportunity, education, socioeconomic background, and social supports (Dos Santos, 2018). SCCT enables the interpretation of how people understand their career interests, the career goals they identify based on those interests, and the path they choose to pursue their interests. This theory was used to present insights into how female divinity students develop their career interests and choose a career path after earning their MDiv. SCCT was the framework used to view the perspectives of how these female MDiv students perceive gender bias and whether it has any influence on their chosen career paths.

SCCT is an expansion of Bandura's social cognitive theory to consider how self-efficacy and self-concept influence the means of developing academic interests, choosing career paths, and achieving superior performance (Fouad & Santana, 2016; Lent et al., 2000). Bussey and Bandura (1999) posited that gender is a social concept rather than a biological one, with the sense of a person's gender created and accepted by the people in a society. In comparison, SCCT indicates that gender development is critical to describe how people cultivate their talents, conceptions of themselves and others, their social paths, and their occupational pursuits (Fouad & Santana, 2016; Lent et al., 2000). SCCT suggests that social, cultural, and financial backgrounds influence how people view themselves and their opportunities (Dos Santos, 2018). The self-efficacy and outcome expectations aspects of the SCCT framework allow for understanding gender roles, predicting how a woman's interests develop, and determining the career goals pursued from observing their environment and those surrounding them (Fouad & Santana, 2016;

Perrone et al., 2001). Women look to those similar to themselves and are encouraged by their actions, resulting in success and positive societal reactions; in contrast, women are discouraged by actions that result in failures and elicit adverse societal reactions (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). A woman might make career decisions based not on objective facts but on an understanding of those facts (Dos Santos, 2018). Through observations, women might learn that high ability does not equate to high achievement (Perrone et al., 2001). Lent et al. (1994) posited that although women might expect a positive outcome from working hard to accomplish their desired career goals, they might also avoid such action if they doubt their capabilities to withstand contextual barriers such as gender bias. Perrone et al. (2001) pointed out that career barriers such as gender bias interfere with the development of personal interests into career choices.

Women in the Workforce

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. As a result, women gained the right to equal access to higher education, better job positions, and more desirable careers (Kozan et al., 2020). However, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that women began to make strides in the job market (Shyu et al., 2020). The changes over the last few decades have reduced the barriers to educational and career attainments, allowing women to pursue higher levels of education and careers in fields previously dominated by men (Chowdhury & Gibson, 2019). The *Condition of Education 2020* showed that 60% of women compared to 40% of men earned master's degrees in 2017–2018 (Hussar et al., 2020). Although the number of women age 25 and older in the civilian workforce grew from 27% in 1996 to 41% in

2016 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017), women of this age group comprised only 30% of the civilian labor force in 2016. Despite women's growth in educational attainment and their increased participation in the workforce, they still hold fewer leadership roles than men (Gipson et al., 2017).

Chowdhury and Gibson (2019) posited that instead of holding onto traditional ideas that link women's success to the role of motherhood, well-educated women expect to have fulfilling careers of their own. The lingering worldview that the ideal worker is based on a man's ability to work long hours unhindered by family or childcare obligations hinders women's success. In 2017, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported a growth in women's earnings over time, from 62% of men's earnings in 1979 to 82% in 2016. Although society has become more accepting of women in the workforce, societal bias continues to affect the income earned by women, keeping their average salary lower than men's despite hours worked and education gained (Connor & Fiske, 2018). Research showed that women with higher education face multiple obstacles that prevent them from fulfilling their career goals (Kozan et al., 2020). Although obtaining higher education can prepare women to perform equally to men in many positions, Koch et al. (2014) found that this preparedness has not always transformed the workplace into a place of gender equity.

Women in Leadership Roles

Despite an increase of women in the workplace, gender equity remains an ongoing struggle woven into the culture of most professions, affecting hiring practices, salaries, promotions, and performance evaluations (Soklaridis et al., 2017). Workplace

culture impacts women vying for leadership positions in many professions (Kray & Kennedy, 2017). Even though half of the workforce is female, women hold only 5.8% of CEO positions, 21.2% of board seats, and 26.5% of executive or senior-level positions at S&P 500 and Fortune 500 companies (Catalyst, 2019). A Pew Research Center survey showed that most people see little to no difference in how men and women perform in leadership roles, with the exception that most felt that men performed better in the areas of negotiating and risk-taking (Fact Tank, 2018). Despite a reduction in the gender gap in recent years, the discrepancy remains and significantly impacts women pursuing leadership positions (Ruthig et al., 2017).

The gender gap impacts the positions women hold and the salaries they earn for these same positions. Kray and Kennedy (2017) reported that in 2015, women made 80 cents to every dollar earned by men, only about 19 cents more than they made in 1960. Research did not support the claim that women are not as efficient negotiators as men, despite the implications of gender stereotypes; rather, the traditional perception of women's performance undermines the evaluation of their ability (Kray and Kennedy, 2017). Although society has shown greater acceptance of women's capabilities as leaders, women still face significant challenges when seeking top leadership positions, preventing them from advancing as quickly or easily as their male counterparts (Gipson et al., 2017).

Despite the positive effects of organizational policy changes on the promotion of women, these changes have not addressed the cultural stereotypes affecting women pursuing advanced positions in various career fields such as hospital management, higher

education, and religious organizations (Soklaridis et al., 2017). Gender stereotypes affect the hiring of women into leadership positions based on the societal perceptions of women as more emotional than men (Brescoll, 2016). Brescoll (2016) reported that most Americans perceive women as unsuited to hold leadership positions in business and politics due to their overly emotional natures. The research on gender and power indicated that societal perceptions of how women and men should act impact the means of evaluating women for leadership positions (Kray and Kennedy, 2017; Rogus-Pulia, 2018). Gender stereotypes borne of historical perceptions, practices, values, and policies on what women should do and how they should act hinder the roles and performance of women in their chosen careers (Roberts & Brown, 2019; Soklaridis et al., 2017). Gender stereotypes also suggest that women are communal (e.g., friendly, warm, sensitive, supportive, nurturing), whereas men are agentic (e.g., assertive, aggressive, forceful, dominant, self-confident; Bongiorno et al., 2014; Hogue, 2016). The implication is that women do not possess the appropriate characteristic to be leaders.

Gender bias has been consistently prevalent throughout society (Grover, 2015). Despite gender stereotypes and bias, women are increasingly advancing to the highest leadership positions in some organizations, albeit in smaller numbers than men. However, there remain associations between men and leadership roles in many traditional or patriarchal organizations, such as religious organizations, as traditional beliefs suggest the need for leaders with authoritarian or dominant traits (Ferguson, 2015; Rhee & Sigler, 2015). Although gender stereotypes influence the acceptance of women in the workplace, they also affect women's views of themselves. Traditional bias indicates the expectation

for leaders to be decisive, assertive, and authoritative (Longman & Anderson, 2016). Because society perceives women as lacking these preconceived traits, it has been difficult for them to appear as leaders despite their efforts to receive recognition for their skills and talents (Ibarra et al., 2013). Organizational structures and work practices, designed when women were not prevalent in the workforce, include outdated assumptions about the traditional roles of men and women (Ibarra et al., 2013; Longman & Anderson, 2016). These dated structures and practices continue to make it difficult for women to achieve leadership roles, as the women of today do not fit into the same traditional roles (Rua et al., 2020).

Although research showed gender bias as an influencer on women occupying leadership positions, it also indicated that some women choose not to pursue leadership roles (Longman & Anderson, 2016). Lindqvist et al. (2019) determined that in addition to dealing with societal bias, women often decide that the costs of attaining a leadership role outweigh the benefit of the prestige and potential salary of a position in leadership. Studies conducted in the United States showed that women were concerned with work-life balance, favoring personal balance and flexibility in their work schedules (Edmunds et al., 2016; Longman & Anderson, 2016). Traditional male roles often cause women to feel they cannot perform their leadership responsibilities their way and must lead as men would (Longman & Anderson, 2016). Although women might not exhibit the same leadership traits as men, female leaders have made substantial contributions to organizations and businesses in career fields over the last few decades (Regan et al., 2018). Rhee and Sigler (2015) noted that women who take on masculine characteristics

and exhibit agentic behaviors are generally respected but not liked. Comparatively, when women exhibit communal behaviors, they are often liked but not respected. To be effective, women need to determine the style that suits them best rather than trying to follow the traditional model. Regan et al. (2018) stated that although women are different from men, these differences are strengths because women are more people oriented, inclusive, and empowering.

Women in Ministerial Leadership

The societal view of women remains based on religious, cultural, and institutional interpretations (Klingorová & Havlíček, 2015). The status of women in society reflects the status of women in religion. Klingorová and Havlíček (2015) asserted that religions uphold male dominance within social dynamics throughout the world. In the United States, although women's ordination became a consideration in the 1950s, it did not receive significant attention until a decade later (Tunheim & DuChene, 2016). Women now have the opportunity to be ordained and have become active in ministerial leadership; however, the church overall is still not united over whether women should be allowed to teach and minister to men (Cox, 2016; Smarr et al., 2018). In 1960, women comprised only 2.3% of the U.S. clergy, growing to 20.7% in 2016 (Campbell-Reed, 2018). Also, 80% of Catholic lay ministers were female, outnumbering male priests since 2015. Research on the Unitarian Universalist and United Church of Christ indicated that the number of clergywomen now equaled the number of clergymen, and the number of clergywomen in most mainline denominations had doubled since 1994 (Campbell-Reed, 2018). However, in 2017, women comprised fewer than 25% of seminary faculty and

deans and only 11% of seminary presidents. Although clergywomen have overcome many of the restrictions of traditional cultural beliefs, they struggle to advance to leadership positions and are a noticeable minority (Banks, 2018).

Women of other denominations face similar battles. Only 14% of Lutheran bishops are women; however, this percentage does not represent the more than 50% female population (Tunheim & DuChene, 2016). Although the Anglican Church voted to ordain women 20 years ago, there has been no action to advance an ordained woman to the role of bishop. In the United States, as of 2016, few religious organizations had placed a woman in their top leadership positions, and the majority of these organizations have never allowed a woman to serve in the highest leadership position (Sandstrom, 2016).

The number of ordained clergywomen among American denominations has increased over the last 4 decades (Campbell-Reed, 2018; Ferguson, 2015; Smarr et al., 2018). However, clergywomen continue to face obstacles and restrictions—such as clergymen abusing their power, congregations' attitudes driven by traditional beliefs, family dynamics, and the questioning of their self-worth or ability—due to policies and expectations supporting the advancement of clergymen (Davis, 2019; Smarr et al., 2018). Peus et al. (2015) reported that women's lack of advancement across various countries and professions is the consequence of gender stereotypes at the social systems level. The expectation is for religious leaders to be not only leaders but also mediators, teachers, and counselors (Burge & Williams, 2019). Followers of traditional cultural norms tend to assign the positions of mediator, teacher, and counselor to men instead of women (Wong

et al., 2017). Women are often consigned to the supportive role of students rather than teachers and listeners rather than counselors, making it difficult for clergywomen to perform in leadership roles within the church (Burge & Williams, 2019; Wong et al., 2017). Smarr et al. (2018) reported that clergywomen experienced feelings of resistance, doubt, and oppression at how clergymen reject female ministerial leadership.

The gender bias experienced by clergywomen is reflected by the behaviors of clergymen and often members of the congregation. In a study focused on Lutheran bishops, Tunheim and DuChene (2016) found that clergywomen felt the need to be twice as proficient to be viewed as capable as their male counterparts. Following the culture of religion, God is usually referenced using the term "He," which leads to a male-oriented belief that men are the proper leaders of the church. The roles available to women in ministry are dependent on the denomination and the church's view of women (Wong et al., 2017). Across various cultures and faiths, women are most likely to hold leadership positions in children's ministry, with their nurturing nature considered a natural fit.

Accepting female leadership in the Pentecostal church was not always a significant concern (Langford, 2017). During the 19th and 20th centuries, there was no debate on a leader's gender, with women holding power and authority through the anointing of the Holy Spirit. However, as the Pentecostal church aligned with more traditionalist Christian beliefs and became more structured, women holding leadership positions faced additional obstacles (Langford, 2017; Smarr et al., 2018).

Clergywomen of various denominations have expressed the obstacles they have met in their efforts to minister. Bumgardner (2015) interviewed 11 Seventh-Day

Adventist women clergy who reported some of the gender bias-related difficulties they experienced caused them to consider leaving their positions within the church. Although the Seventh-Day Adventist General Conference allows for ordaining female ministers, they face resistance and disapproval within their specific church leadership (Bumgardner, 2015). Adventist clergywomen are often overlooked and made to feel invisible among the male clergy members. Female ministers of varying denominations often find their voices not heard and their ideas disregarded, overlooked for advancement opportunities based on their gender (Bumgardner, 2016; Wigg-Stevenson, 2017; Wong et al., 2017).

Female Seminary Experience

Although some religions do not require their leaders to obtain a seminary education, religious organizations have become more professionalized overall, expecting more standardized credentials from their leaders (Cohall & Cooper, 2010; Ferguson, 2015). As such, many denominations require an MDiv for individuals wanting to serve at the highest level of religious leadership. MDiv curricula are standardized and accredited by the Association of Theological Schools, preparing students to lead members of their congregation to praise God and enact social change (Ferguson, 2015).

In addition to educating students on theology, Christian universities offer opportunities for training students to be leaders in Christian and secular organizations (Dzubinski, 2018). Although the Association of Theological Schools accredits MDiv programs, there is pressure to adopt the environmental conditions of the various religious denominations (Ferguson, 2015). Many denominations' cultural beliefs indicate that women are less confident, weaker, or more suited to nurturing roles, with perceptions of

women as not having any spiritual authority (Myklebust, 2019). MDiv students face the environmental and cultural beliefs of the denominations in which they work. Impacts on ministries include religious beliefs and an institutionalized system of social practices, leading to a different experience for men and women while doing fieldwork (Ferguson, 2015). Fieldwork adds to seminarians' personal experiences while pursuing an MDiv, impacting their interest in obtaining a ministerial career after graduation. In a study of clergywomen in the United States, Campbell-Reed (2018) found that over the last 20 years, women had grown to comprise 50% of the student population in the largest mainline seminaries. However, there is a discrepancy between the percentage of women enrolled in seminaries (50%) and those serving in pastoral leadership positions (approximately 30%).

Chosen Career Paths of Seminal Students

Except for education and medicine, most career fields in the United States are male-focused (Wajngurt & Sloan, 2019). However, even within medicine and education, men hold the vast majority of leadership positions (Shyu et al., 2020; Wajngurt & Sloan, 2019). It is also worth noting that, on average, men earn higher salaries than women for the same positions across career fields (Wajngurt & Sloan, 2019). Wages are not the only factors influencing a woman's chosen career. Gender stereotypes influence the trend of men and women choosing different career paths, directly reflected in higher education and the labor market (Tellhed et al., 2018). Fields of study in higher education still show lingering gender bias influencing those women who study a traditionally male-centric subject (Wajngurt & Sloan, 2019). Women who choose to deviate from the stereotypical

"feminine" fields and choose "masculine" fields of study could face gender bias deeply woven into the subject's culture, making them less confident in their abilities and increasing the feeling of marginalization (Dzubinski, 2018).

Although increasing numbers of women have sought an MDiv over the last few decades, ministry leadership does not reflect admissions numbers (Ferguson, 2015). Amid women's advancements in educational attainment, theological convictions concerning gender roles continue to deter women from pursuing or developing a leadership identity within the church (Longman & Anderson, 2016). The biblical doctrine, written by men and considered to be the word of God, continues to influence the depiction of gender roles and stereotypes believed by Christians (Davis, 2019; Longman & Anderson, 2016). The women enrolling in MDiv programs and seeking ordination go against these gender stereotypes, and the acceptance of women in religious leadership positions is growing. However, despite the voiced concerns about the lack of women in leadership positions, the deeply rooted beliefs and stereotypes regarding women influence the experiences and opportunities within the environments of theological education and ministerial leadership (Dahlvig & Longman, 2014).

Gender bias in a theological education environment is not new but is surprisingly still prevalent, often leaving female students with feelings of invisibility and without support (Dzubinski, 2018). Despite often experiencing gender bias in the conflicting environment of divinity school, female students work to excel and graduate with a chosen career path in mind. However, when faced with a lack of opportunities and recognition, women may change their original career paths. Longman and Anderson (2016) explained

that women's skills and perspectives as role models for students are lost when women are not included among the leaders in Christian higher education. The lack of opportunities, acceptance, and support available to female students may lead them to pursue careers in alternative fields.

Similarly, female seminary graduates are usually the last offered a leadership position to lead congregations or provide pulpit ministry (Smarr et al., 2018). Deasy (2016) found that upon graduation, female seminary students (42%) were less likely to be offered a job than male seminary students (32%). As a result, female MDiv graduates (38%) were more likely to seek ministerial opportunities outside the congregational setting than male MDiv graduates (22%).

Summary and Conclusion

The number of women entering religious leadership has continued to increase over the last 4 decades (Ferguson, 2015). This increase has given upcoming female seminarians more opportunities to perceive other female religious leaders as role models. Despite the bias women face, the number of women enrolling in MDiv programs in the United States and Canada has increased from 7% of all students in 1998 to 11% in 2017 (Campbell-Reed, 2018). Although the number of women enrolling in MDiv programs is growing and more women have taken on leadership roles throughout various religions, these accomplishments are neither easy nor without restrictions and hindrances due to male-controlled policies and various religious rules (Grover, 2015; Smarr et al., 2018). Dzubinski (2018) added to the body of literature, highlighting women's concerns in

developing confidence, facing gender bias, and understanding the academic world while pursuing Christian doctoral programs.

The purpose of the present study was to explore how female students enrolled in an MDiv program perceive gender bias and how they interpret this bias as influencing their choice to pursue a ministerial career within a congregation. This information could also give voice to their experiences and highlight the issues and challenges faced as women seeking leadership roles in a male-dominated field. This study was an investigation of perceptions of gender bias and how they might guide the students' vocational choices and ministry efforts.

Chapter 3: Research Method

A generic qualitative study using semistructured interviews was used to explore how female students enrolled in, or recently graduated from, an MDiv program perceive gender bias and how they perceive this bias as influencing their choice to pursue a ministerial career within a congregation. The collected data gave voice to participants' experiences and highlighted the issues and challenges they face as women pursuing a career in a traditionally male-dominated field. Chapter 3 presents the research methods and concepts that supported data analysis. The rationale for this study's design and supporting methods receives discussion, as do the participants' accounts. The chapter includes the population and sample characteristics with a description of the sampling procedures. I also discuss the interview protocol used to collect data and the means of data analysis. Ethical issues and limitations conclude the chapter, followed by a summary and transition to Chapter 4.

Research Design and Rationale

This study addressed the following research question: How do female students enrolled in a Master of Divinity (MDiv) program perceive gender bias, and do they perceive this bias as an influencer on their choice to pursue a ministerial career? This study's central phenomenon was how female MDiv students perceive gender bias as influencing the career path they choose after completing their education. Individuals' perceived gender bias relates to their gender identification, background, culture, and personal experiences (Tran et al., 2019).

The three approaches for conducting research are quantitative, mixed methods, and qualitative. Quantitative studies are suitable for examining relationships involving variables, trends, attitudes, or opinions regarding a phenomenon (Yates & Leggett, 2016). This method was inappropriate because I did not analyze variables or trends. Mixed-methods research involves both quantitative and qualitative methods in the same study. However, I did not use a survey tool or seek to examine relationships among variables. I did not compare data collected from a survey tool with data collected from the interview questions, so a mixed-methods design was inappropriate. This study explored the perceptions of gender bias held by female students enrolled in or recently graduated from an MDiv program. Qualitative research is appropriate when the intent is to represent participants' views and perspectives (Yin, 2016).

Qualitative research has several designs, including case study, narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, and ethnographic (Yates & Leggett, 2016). Case study research is a means to explain, explore, or describe a phenomenon using "how" or "why" questions (Yates & Leggett, 2016). Case studies allow for evaluating how a program works compared to its outcomes, exploring a situation and its effects, and describing a trend in a real-life environment. Case studies include multiple methods and multiple data sources to produce in-depth evaluations (Percy et al., 2015). I did not use multiple methods to gather data, so the case study design was not appropriate for this study.

A narrative design was another option. Narrative research is a form of storytelling, either in a biographical or autobiographical form, detailing the life

experiences of a single person or small group (Yates & Leggett, 2016). Because participants' experiences and stories would not have provided the multiple perspectives necessary to answer the research question in the current study, this approach was not appropriate.

A phenomenological research design focuses on the lived experiences of individuals who share a unique event (Yates & Leggett, 2016). This approach centers on the inner experience and the act of making sense of it (Percy et al., 2015). Phenomenological researchers are less interested in a participant's opinion or perception concerning the phenomenon than in the experience with the phenomenon; therefore, this approach was not appropriate for the current study.

Grounded theory research, another qualitative design, relies on collected data from people who share a common experience to develop a theory (Percy et al., 2015; Yates & Leggett, 2016). The intent of the current study was not to develop a theory based on the data. Therefore, the grounded theory design was not suitable.

An ethnographic design focuses on the shared customs, beliefs, behaviors, and practices of a social or cultural group (Percy et al., 2015). Ethnographic data collection occurs from in-depth interviews and direct observations (Yates & Leggett, 2016). Because I did not conduct direct observations or gather data on the participants' learned patterns of values or behaviors, this approach was also not ideal.

A generic qualitative design was appropriate for the study. Generic qualitative researchers seek to acquire the participants' reports of their subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections on their experiences of things in the outer world (Percy et al.,

2015). At its foundation, a generic qualitative study is a means to describe a phenomenon. The significance of using this design is to identify supporting insights on existing or new concepts that may help to explain social behavior and beliefs (Yin, 2016). In the current study, this approach allowed for rich and informative data on the broad range of opinions, ideas, and reflections held by the study participants on the phenomenon of gender bias (see Percy et al., 2015). Using a basic qualitative design helped me expand previous knowledge regarding the influence of gender bias. A generic qualitative design was the most appropriate approach for this study.

Role of the Researcher

My role in this study was first as the data collection instrument. This role included conducting the literature review relevant to the topic, developing the research question based on the literature, and designing and carrying out the interview protocol. As the researcher and sole interviewer, I interacted with the participants personally, demonstrating active listening skills, understanding, and acceptance to ensure the quality of the collected data (see Karagiozis, 2018). I explored the perceptions of female MDiv students regarding gender bias and women in leadership roles in ministry, educational pursuits, and career choices. I avoided manipulating the data by acknowledging my bias, actively engaging during the interviews, and remaining objective (see Karagiozis, 2018).

Data collection occurred via Zoom video-recorded semistructured interviews using open-ended questions. I asked follow-up questions to encourage the participants to expand on their perceptions, experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge of gender bias (see Rosenthal, 2016). I sought to understand how perceptions of gender bias

influenced the career paths the participants chose using open-ended questions and prompts.

Although I did not have any personal or professional relationships with the participants, as a woman, I have had experiences with gender bias and formed opinions as to its influence. I managed my perceptions and feelings during the data collection process by including peer-reviewed literature, member checking, and reflexive journaling. Reflexive journaling in qualitative research improves the credibility of the research and aids the understanding of the research (Dodgson, 2019). Every researcher holds preconceived beliefs, values, perceptions, assumptions, and ideas about the phenomenon under study. Reflexivity requires researchers to examine and explain their influence on a project (Williams et al., 2020). Transparency is a critical component of how a researcher's positionality, experiences, and assumptions about the phenomenon might inform the data collection and analysis processes (Dodgson, 2019).

Methodology

This generic descriptive qualitative study focused on gathering female MDiv students' perceptions regarding gender bias. A descriptive qualitative design is essential when looking to understand a poorly understood phenomenon from the participants' viewpoint (Kim et al., 2017). The current study contributed to the existing literature by providing information on how female MDiv students perceive gender bias as an influencer on their chosen career paths. The sole source of data was Zoom one-on-one interviews with female students currently enrolled in or recently graduated from an MDiv program.

The following sections present the participant selection logic, instrumentation, and researcher-developed instruments for the study. These sections also include the recruitment, participation, data collection, and data analysis procedures. I describe these critical elements in sufficient depth so that other researchers can replicate the study.

Participant Selection Logic

Female students currently enrolled in or recently graduated from an MDiv program were eligible to participate in this study. Daly et al. (2019) posited that recruitment does not follow one specific, comprehensive format. For the current study, recruitment occurred by posting the recruitment flyer on social media platforms and asking approved individuals to suggest additional participants.

Participants selected for the study provided a rich account of descriptive data others may find similar to their experiences, allowing for transferability to other sample populations (see Hadi & Closs, 2016). Participants were female and currently enrolled in or recently graduated from an MDiv program. Neither age nor religious affiliation precluded participants from participating in this study. There is no set sample size to determine when qualitative research will reach saturation (Vasileiou et al., 2018). The goal is not to recruit a certain number of participants but to achieve data saturation. The qualitative sample size is not preset but determined when saturation has occurred (Bellamy et al., 2016).

In the current study, recruitment continued until data saturation occurred. Initial communication with potential participants followed after they contacted me via email or through social media direct messaging. Participant selection occurred via social media

and snowball sampling. After screening to confirm they met the study requirements, participants received an electronic informed consent letter. This letter presented the study's title and purpose, the participants' rights, confidentiality, data management/results storage and destruction, and the IRB approval number (07-15-21-0739501).

Instrumentation

I developed the semistructured interview protocol to include open-ended questions aligned with the problem statement, purpose statement, and research question. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions and probes to elicit thick, rich, and purposeful data on how female MDiv students perceive gender bias as an influencer on their chosen career path. Yeong et al. (2018) posited that rich qualitative data would provide researchers with a better understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions.

I allowed 60 to 90 minutes for each interview, audio recording each to ensure the validity of the data collected and reported. After transcribing the recording, I sent each participant her transcript for review to ensure the accuracy of the information and observations. Having participants cross-check the transcripts is a means to maintain the study's trustworthiness and confirm the data reflected the participants' voices rather than the researcher's (Graneheim et al., 2017).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Participant recruitment occurred via social media and snowball sampling. Initial participants received requests to identify and recommend additional individuals who met

the requirements of being female students currently enrolled in or recently graduated from an MDiv program. The interview protocol required participants to discuss their perceptions of gender bias and whether they felt they had encountered such bias. Participants also discussed how they perceived gender bias as an influencer on their chosen career path after completing their MDiv program.

I conducted semistructured interviews with open-ended questions as the source of this study's data. I transcribed the recorded interviews using Microsoft Word. Upon completing the transcription process, I sent the transcripts in an Adobe Acrobat format for participants' review. The participants were able to confirm the accuracy of the transcripts before I began data analysis. Upon completing the transcript review process and returning any edits or other information they chose to provide, participants received an email thanking them for participating in the study. When I received the reviewed transcripts, I began analyzing the data using the VSAIEEDC model of analysis.

Data Analysis Plan

The plan chosen to analyze collected data must be deliberate and appropriate to each study's research method. The approach used in the current study was the cognition-based model, VSAIEEDC, to analyze the data allowing for reflexivity and rigor (see Kennedy, 2016). Designed by Persson (2006), the VSAIEEDC process has seven steps: variation, specification, abstraction, internal verification, external verification, demonstration, and conclusion. Persson proposed the model to bridge the gap between traditional generic qualitative data analysis and quantitative analysis.

This VSAIEEDC process is a cognition-based model involving recognizing and comparing recurring patterns (Kennedy, 2016). This model follows three perspectives: postpositivist, postmodernist, and pragmatic. In the current study, I followed the seven steps of the VSAIEEDC model using the postmodernist perspective:

1. Variation: Scan the data collected during the interviews to identify the various perceptions within the data.
2. Specification: Identify categories that emerge from similar and different perspectives.
3. Abstraction: Integrate the participants' multiple perspectives by evaluating the shared words, descriptions, and phrases.
4. Internal verification: Examine personal biases and determine whether they are logical and feasible according to the constructs gleaned from the data.
5. External verification: Relate the findings from the data to existing theory or published reports.
6. Demonstration: Using charts or graphs, display the emergent coded themes through cross-comparison of the data collected from participant interviews.
7. Conclusion: Evaluate the results and determine whether analyzing the data deeper will produce more information.

Following the VSAIEEDC model of data analysis, I read each interview transcript to identify the perceptions presented by each participant, which I subsequently coded to identify the themes. I reviewed additional transcripts and identified participants' similar and differing perceptions. The third data analysis step involved breaking down each

theme by evaluating similar words, descriptions, and phrases used by multiple participants. I incorporated reflexive journaling by considering personal bias and preconceived notions regarding the phenomenon against the constructs identified from the data. The findings underwent comparison to the literature to determine whether they supported previous research. Next, I reported and interpreted the findings. I displayed the coded themes using charts and graphs to reflect the comparison across all participants. These charts enabled comparing the participants' perceptions regarding gender bias, with the findings focused on answering the research question and identifying their relationship with gender bias.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research is a necessity. A researcher must ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to demonstrate trustworthiness in the findings. Addressing these concerns is essential to ensuring the research study's quality, validity, and rigor (Sundler et al., 2019).

Credibility means that participants' perceptions relayed through their stories are believable (Williams et al., 2020). Well-presented credibility of the data and the meaningfulness of the findings depends on credibility (Sundler et al., 2019). To ensure credibility, I used transcripts of the recorded interviews with female MDiv students and reflexive journaling to ensure the results were organic and not influenced by researcher bias. As credibility requires the researcher to stay neutral and not present alternate realities in describing the participants' experiences and perceptions, the data presented must be unedited (Sundler et al., 2019).

The transferability of a study allows readers to apply the findings to other populations and contexts (Williams et al., 2020). Transferability is not directly related to the research method but to a study's results (Sundler et al., 2019). Nonprobability sampling was the approach used to garner substantive data, establishing transferability. The researcher's responsibility is to provide a thorough description of the research process and those who participated (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Through this description, the reader will be able to determine if the study is replicable in another setting.

Participant selection was via purposive and snowball sampling, with sufficient interviews to achieve data saturation. Fusch and Ness (2015) posited that there is no uniform way to achieve data saturation since each study is unique; therefore, there is no required sample size to guarantee saturation in qualitative studies. Guest et al. (2020) identified saturation as the point when no new data emerge. The goal was to recruit 15 to 20 female MDiv students. Ultimately, 18 successful interviews occurred. In the end, 14 participants' transcripts qualified. Each one-on-one session included the same set of questions to garner the participants' perceptions of gender bias as an influencer on their chosen career paths.

The dependability of a research study reflects consistency throughout the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). If the research study is dependable, similar findings should emerge if replicated under similar parameters (Hays et al., 2016). Documenting the research design, methodology, implementation, data collection process, and reflexivity journal increased the dependability of this study (see Moon et al., 2016).

Confirmability in a study allows transparency of the research path when the study undergoes auditing (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Confirmability occurs when the results accurately reflect the participants' reflections and perspectives without interference from the researcher (Hays et al., 2016). I ensured credibility in this study by triangulating the data, using a reflexive journal, maintaining an audit trail (detailed notes), and executing member checking.

Ethical Procedures

This research study occurred following ethical guidelines. The research design addressed the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, with these factors lending to the study's trustworthiness (see Hays et al., 2016). In addition to the design, responsible treatment of the human participants and the data collected from the interviews is critical in qualitative research.

Before recruiting participants, I submitted a proposal to the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Obtaining IRB approval ensures that the treatment of human participants takes precedence over any findings derived from the study (Maxwell, 2019). Respecting the participants, their perceptions, and the data collected is a means to safeguard the study's validity. This study occurred following the ethical procedures set in place to protect participants. The participants received an informed consent form indicating the title and purpose of the study, the participants' rights, methods of maintaining confidentiality, and a request for permission to record the interview. The informed consent form also presented data management, storage, and destruction procedures. I secured all interview recordings and transcripts on an encrypted thumb

drive stored in a locked cabinet. All personal information related to the participant is in a fireproof safe, kept in a separate cabinet from the encrypted thumb drive. After maintaining the material for five years as required, I will shred all printed documents and delete all electronic data.

Each interview occurred via Zoom at a time convenient for the participant. Each interview began with a brief review of the signed informed consent form. I reminded the participant that I would record the interview without personally identifiable information. Each MDiv student knew that participation was voluntary. She could opt out of the study at any time. If a participant had chosen to withdraw, her related data and records would not have been part of the analysis. The recordings underwent verbatim transcription, and each participant could review the transcripts to verify the accurate capture of their words and perspectives.

All interview data had an identification number rather than a name to ensure confidentiality. This number appeared on the recording, all written documents, and all notes corresponding to the participant. Each participant received an Adobe Acrobat file of the transcript via email for member checking, with a request to check the document for accuracy. Member checking strengthens the data because the researcher and participant might have different views and interpretations (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Validity and accuracy require a researcher to maintain transparency and authenticity when handling the data (Graneheim et al., 2017).

Summary

Chapter 3 presented the rationale for the selected research methodology and design, data collection instrument, and data analysis plan. This generic qualitative study was designed to explore female MDiv students' perceptions of gender bias in general and their perceptions regarding gender bias as an influencer on their chosen career paths in particular. This chapter presented the aspects of a generic qualitative study and the process used to analyze the study's findings. The chapter also included the researcher's role, recruitment method, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4 will include a discussion of the data and study findings. There will be a summary and discussion of the data collection process and a presentation of the results.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore how female students enrolled in or recently graduated from an MDiv program perceive gender bias and whether they perceive this bias as affecting their choice to pursue a ministerial career within a congregation. Chapter 4 contains a discussion of data collection procedures and the study findings. The data collection and analysis process showed how they led to the study's findings. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the results and a transition to Chapter 5.

Demographics

Participant demographics relevant to the study included gender, age, and religious preference. The year the participants started their MDiv programs and the year they expected to graduate or did graduate provided a frame of reference for their experience with gender bias while pursuing their MDiv degree. The study intended to interview female participants to solicit their perceptions. However, I failed to consider that gender is no longer a binary concept. Lindqvist et al. (2019) explained that including gender as a demographic characteristic with only two options is discriminatory against those who do not define themselves as male or female. Because I did not consider this, I was surprised when 93% (n = 13) of the participants self-identified as cis-female and 7% (n = 1) self-identified as trans-female.

I assigned each participant a code (P1, P2, P3, P4, etc.) to anonymize the data collected, ensuring privacy and confidentiality. All data collected from the interviews, including the demographic questionnaire and the transcripts, had codes as identifiers. The

numeric codes were the only identifiers used throughout the data collection and analysis processes (see Table 1).

Table 1

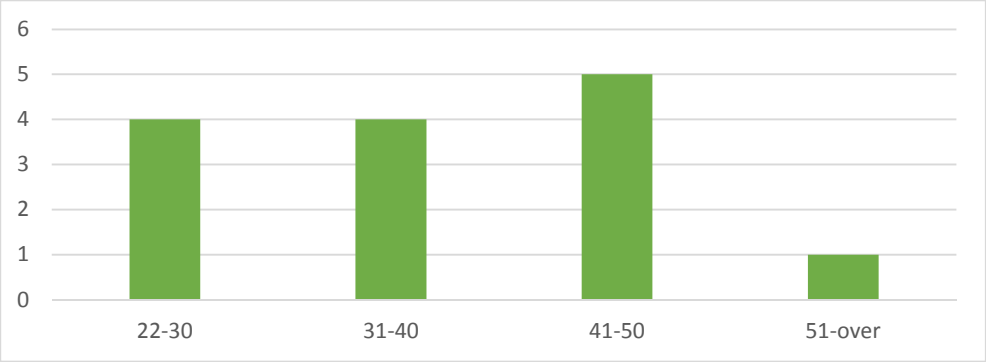
Participant Demographics

Participant code	Gender	Age range	Religious preference	Start year	Completion year
P1	Cis-female	41–50	Baptist/Pentecostal	2017	2021
P2	Cis-female	31–40	United Methodist	2018	2022
P3	Cis-female	22–30	Presbyterian/PCUSA	2019	2022
P4	Cis-female	41–50	Episcopalian	2019	2022
P5	Cis-female	41–50	Christian	2013	2016
P6	Cis-female	41–50	Christian/ nondenomination	2015	2018
P7	Cis-female	22–30	Christian/PCUSA	2020	2024
P8	Cis-female	31–40	Protestant	2020	2023
P9	Cis-female	22–30	Presbyterian/PCUSA	2019	2023
P10	Cis-female	31–40	Egalitarian/Presbyterian	2021	2023
P11	Cis-female	31–40	Christian/ nondenomination	2017	2022
P12	Trans-female	41–50	Christian	2019	2022
P13	Cis-female	22–30	Christian	2015	2018
P14	Cis-female	51–over	None	2020	2024

The demographic questionnaire indicated 29% of the participants were 22 to 30 years old, 29% were between 31 and 40, and 7% were 51 and over, with the largest group (36%) between 41 and 50 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

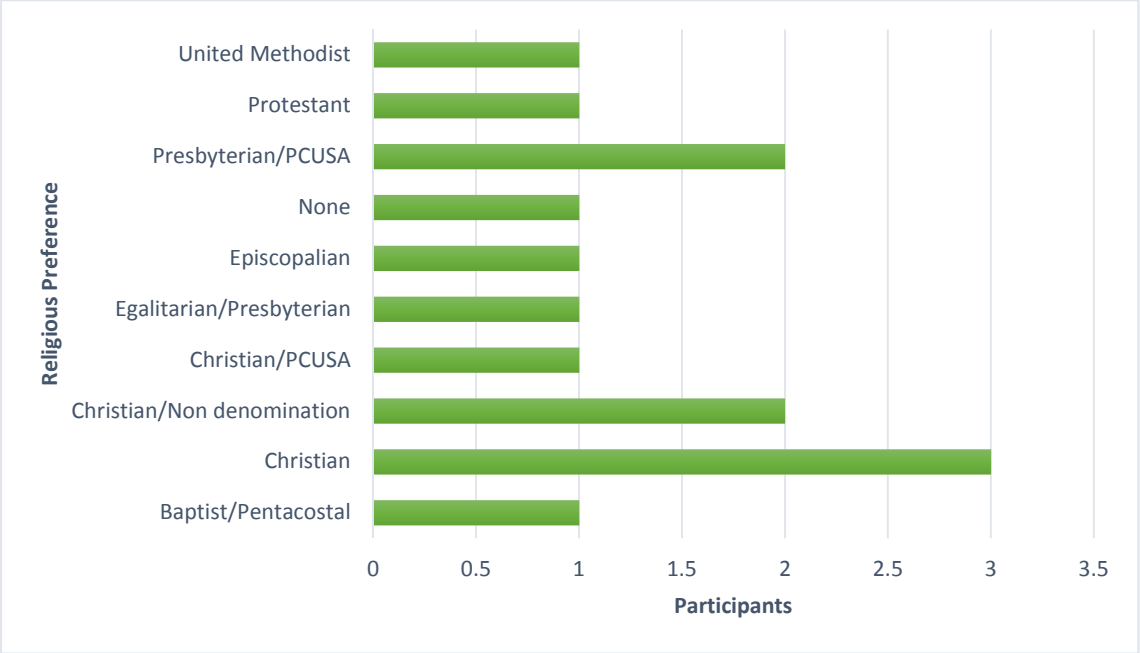
Participant Count by Age Range



The demographic data also indicated the participants' preferred religious denominations (see Figure 2). Although 57% identified a specific religious preference, 36% reported the general religion of Christianity. All but one participant identified as Christian.

Figure 2

Religious Preferences



Data Collection

Data collection began on October 13, 2021, following Walden University IRB approval (Approval No. 07-15-21-0739501). The data collection phase ended on January 11, 2022, when data from the interviews did not produce any new themes, indicating saturation. Evidence of data saturation emerged with P6's interview, as her responses to the open-ended questions were similar to those of the prior participants. I followed the data collection process as presented in Chapter 3.

Interviews

All participant recruitment occurred via social media or snowball sampling. Many participants contacted me in response to a Facebook post and then sent an email expressing their interest in participating. I sent them the informed consent, which they

returned, providing their consent and interview availability. I maintained a log of the scheduled interviews that included the participant codes, date of interview, permission to record the interview, start and end times, and duration (see Table 2). The semistructured interviews ranged from 57 to 114 minutes, with 21% lasting just shy of 1 hour and 79% lasting over an hour.

Table 2

Semistructured Interview Log

Participant code	Interview date	Permission to record	Start time	End time	Duration (minutes)
P1	October 29, 2021	Yes	1:00 p.m.	2:07 p.m.	67
P2	November 6, 2021	Yes	3:30 p.m.	4:49 p.m.	89
P3	November 6, 2021	Yes	1:00 p.m.	1:57 p.m.	57
P4	November 10, 2021	Yes	7:00 p.m.	7:57 p.m.	57
P5	November 10, 2021	Yes	1:00 p.m.	2:20 p.m.	80
P6	November 18, 2021	Yes	9:30 a.m.	10:39 a.m.	69
P7	November 19, 2021	Yes	8:30 a.m.	9:34 a.m.	64
P8	November 29, 2021	Yes	10:00 a.m.	11:21 a.m.	81
P9	December 1, 2021	Yes	12:30 p.m.	1:46 p.m.	76
P10	December 17, 2021	Yes	10:00 a.m.	10:58 a.m.	58
P11	December 28, 2021	Yes	10:00 a.m.	11:54 a.m.	114
P12	December 30, 2021	Yes	3:00 p.m.	4:11 p.m.	71
P13	January 5, 2022	Yes	4:00 p.m.	5:15 p.m.	75
P14	January, 11, 2022	Yes	1:30 p.m.	2:38 p.m.	68

As the researcher, I was the data collection instrument. I collected and analyzed data from the 14 semistructured interviews conducted via Zoom, each scheduled at a time convenient to the participant's schedule. Most participants engaged in the interview from their homes or private space at their place of employment after work hours, which allowed them to answer the open-ended questions freely and comfortably. I recorded

each interview via Zoom and downloaded the file onto a password-protected thumb drive. I remained flexible and encouraged each participant to answer the questions as she wished. I used probing questions to persuade them to share more details to allow me to understand the meaning behind participants' responses.

Journaling

I began reflexive journaling after conducting the first interview. I used the journal as a resource to capture my thoughts and feelings after listening to the participants' perceptions. Researchers often begin journal entries by describing uncomfortable emotions from hearing participants' experiences (Meyer & Willis, 2019). Capturing these emotions allowed me to continue as a neutral researcher without introducing any preconceived ideas about the participants or their perceptions of gender bias.

Transcript Review

Each interview underwent recording and transcription. Participants could review their transcripts to confirm the accurate capture of their words and meanings. Most participants (79%) were not interested in reading the transcripts, as the transcripts were too long and inconvenient to read. Those who did (21%) stated that they briefly reviewed the transcripts but had no revisions. However, each participant expressed an interest in reading the study results. The interview transcript review did not impact the quality of the study. The following section presents the data analysis using the seven-step VSAIEEDC cognition-based process.

Data Analysis

Data collection occurred via interviews and reflexive journaling. Upon conducting and transcribing all interviews, I began the analysis process with an in-depth scan of each transcript, seeking the similar and dissimilar perspectives in the participants' responses. The next step in the VSAIEEDC model was to identify the themes that emerged from the variations and similarities. I evaluated the words, descriptions, and phrases participants used to share their perspectives. This information allowed me to verify the similarities among participants' perspectives and examine whether the perspectives of gender bias were rational and practical. Using reflexive journaling, I compared my biases and preconceptions against the constructs identified from the data. I verified and supported the study's findings by relating them to the literature. Using the codes derived from the data, I extracted examples from the transcripts to provide support for the themes. Following the VSAIEEDC model's final step, I evaluated the results of the data analysis to determine whether further exploration would produce more information.

Instead of uploading the data into computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, I read through the material to become deeply familiar with the participants' perceptions. Reviewing the transcripts allowed me to identify similarities in the participants' perceptions regarding gender bias despite the variations in their MDiv programs. I extracted several terms and phrases related to their perceptions and began the coding process. Next, I combined the emerging patterns from the thematic analysis into six conceptual categories to answer the research question. The themes were (a) perceptions of influencers are both external and internal, (b) observations of traditional

roles are limiting toward women, (c) lived experiences in MDiv programs are both positive and negative, (d) observations of gender bias in MDiv programs are frustrating and substantial, (e) observed effects on career choices are restrictive toward women, and (f) perceived measures needed for advancement are progressing slowly. These themes receive detailed discussion in the Study Results section of this chapter.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in generic qualitative research refers to the quality, authenticity, and truthfulness of the study's findings (Cypress, 2017). Determining a study's trustworthiness requires considering credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Components of credibility include in-depth, extended interviews, reflexive journaling, and allowing the participants to review their interview transcripts to ensure their story is recorded accurately. Before each interview, I obtained consent from the participants via email. The interviews ranged from 57 to 114 minutes. I conducted and recorded each interview via Zoom and transcribed each recording into Microsoft Word. Throughout the data collection process, I kept a reflexive journal to enhance my understanding of the differences between the participant and me (see Meyer & Willis, 2019). I presented the participants with their transcripts to review to ensure they were comfortable with the captured data; however, most participants declined this request. As similar patterns began to emerge from participants' responses, I determined that I had

reached saturation after six interviews; therefore, I had achieved research quality and validity (see Hennink et al., 2017).

Transferability

Transferability indicates the relatability of a study's findings to other settings or populations (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In the current study, the data analysis process included a thick description of the behavior and experiences collected from the data and the research process. Thick description allows readers and other researchers to determine the transferability of this study's findings to another setting.

Dependability

Dependability is grounded in the consistency maintained in a study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To improve the current study's dependability, I ensured the accuracy of the transcribed interviews before I began coding the data. I documented the steps taken to determine and report the findings, the themes, and the codes derived from the data.

Confirmability

This study had confirmability, as the findings reflect only the participants' observations and perceptions. During the data collection process, I maintained a reflexive journal to capture my perceptions to remain impartial. To obtain clear and precise responses, I allowed the participants to speak freely and encouraged them to share their thoughts openly. I provided reassurance that any information shared would remain confidential so they would feel comfortable discussing their perceptions and observations.

Study Results

This generic qualitative study was a means to provide an in-depth understanding of the underlying reasons, perceptions, and observations behind the career aspirations of female MDiv students (see Rosenthal, 2016). A generic qualitative method was appropriate to fulfill the purpose of the study and collect data through interviews with female MDiv students. The study findings showed how female MDiv students perceive gender bias within their MDiv program and how it influences their career aspirations. I conducted interviews with the participants to better understand the perceptions and experiences of gender bias held by female MDiv students. The research question guiding this study was: How do female students enrolled in a Master of Divinity (MDiv) program perceive gender bias, and do they perceive this bias as an influencer on their choice to pursue a ministerial career?

The collected data showed that female MDiv students perceive gender bias throughout their program in various ways. The participants shared experiences that supported the existence of gender bias in the classroom. P3 stated

> I think that there's definitely some consciousness you know, saying there's going to be diversity, but then only talking about male theologians is definitely you're recognizing that there's other contributors to the conversation, but then not talking about those other contributors.

The participants reported that their experiences with bias were more prevalent within the student population than in the faculty. In support of this observation, P4 expressed

> I was really upset. I just felt like you know, man, I worked so hard and here I am, and I feel like I've earned my place here and then, like, some random dude with, you know, just by making a random comment can just make me feel like I don't belong.

Field experience is a required part of the MDiv degree program. The participants shared that their experience with gender bias was not limited to the program but also existed within their fieldwork placement. P3 explained

> it was like the third or fourth Sunday I was there, and they kept telling me that I was being too quiet, which is not a problem anyone has ever accused me of being or a problem I've ever had, and they kept saying, "We have to turn your microphone all the way up 'cause no one can hear you." And then [they] made a comment about, you know, women are just too quiet or something like that. I don't think anyone knew, like, no one in the congregation knew, but I felt really embarrassed by that, like, gosh, if I just spoke louder.

The participants' field experiences indicated what they could expect when completing their degree program and entering the professional world to provide ministerial service. P6 verified the difficulties female MDiv students could anticipate based on their experience with bias during their MDiv program when she said, "it becomes apparent either by looking at the church, um, who they've got on staff, or the description of the job that it's really men that they're seeking." In addition, P4 expressed

> I think men hire men and give men opportunities. There's, like, male networks, and I don't think people are necessarily trying to exclude women. And I think

> there's also kind of a sense that, like, you know, women are not pastoral; women are emotional.

The participating female MDiv students' perceptions showed they experienced gender bias within their MDiv program, and it was an influencer on their choice to pursue a ministerial career.

Theme 1: Perceptions of Influencers Are Both External and Internal

I began each interview by asking what influenced the participant to pursue an MDiv. The data indicated three initiators: a calling, to gain knowledge, and encouragement from others. Of the 14 participants, 72% sought an MDiv program due to what they referred to as a calling. For example, P9 stated, "So, when I first thought I was hearing God's call to go to seminary, I just assumed it was the guy sitting next to me and, like, the call got messed up and hit me instead of him." P6 reported, "I had a very specific moment that I was not looking for or expecting at all when I felt the Lord called me into ministry, and it was a very profound experience."

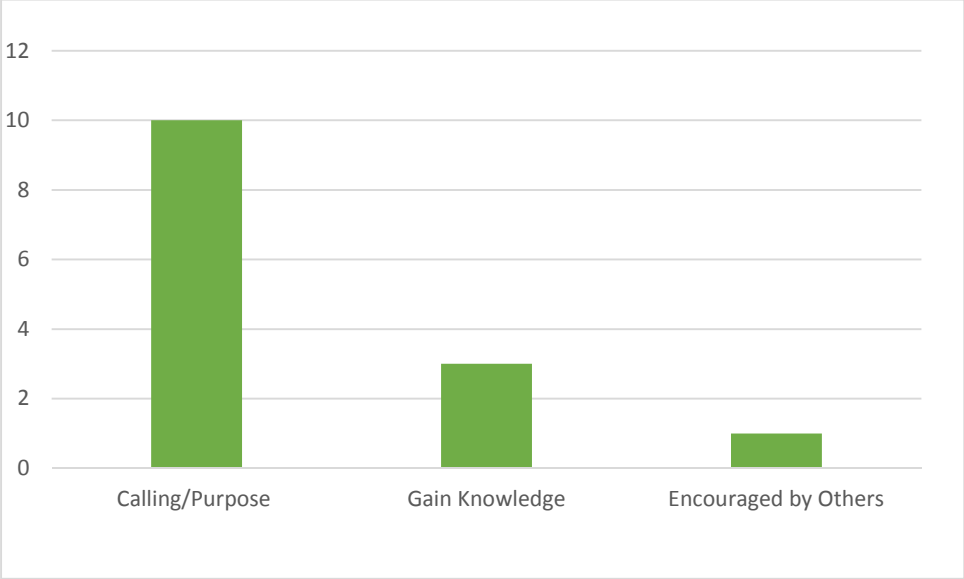
Although most participants reported a calling, 21% chose to pursue an MDiv due to a desire for additional knowledge. P2 stated, "I just kind of fell in love with teaching Sunday School doing VBS, and I wanted more knowledge. I had no desire to pursue congregational ministry." P11 reported, "Why I went to get my MDiv was to dig deeper into the scripture because I had come out of a very unhealthy, toxic marriage." The last initiator of encouragement from others applied to 7% of the participants (n = 1). P7 stated,

> So, my pastor, among two or three other people in my church who've known me for almost my entire [life], have spent probably the past 7 or 8 years making jokes at most Sunday services about have I started my seminary degree yet.

The participants' explanations of the initiators driving them to pursue an MDiv showed internal motivators, such as a spiritual calling, and external motivators, such as encouragement from others.

Figure 3

Initiator to Pursue a Master of Divinity



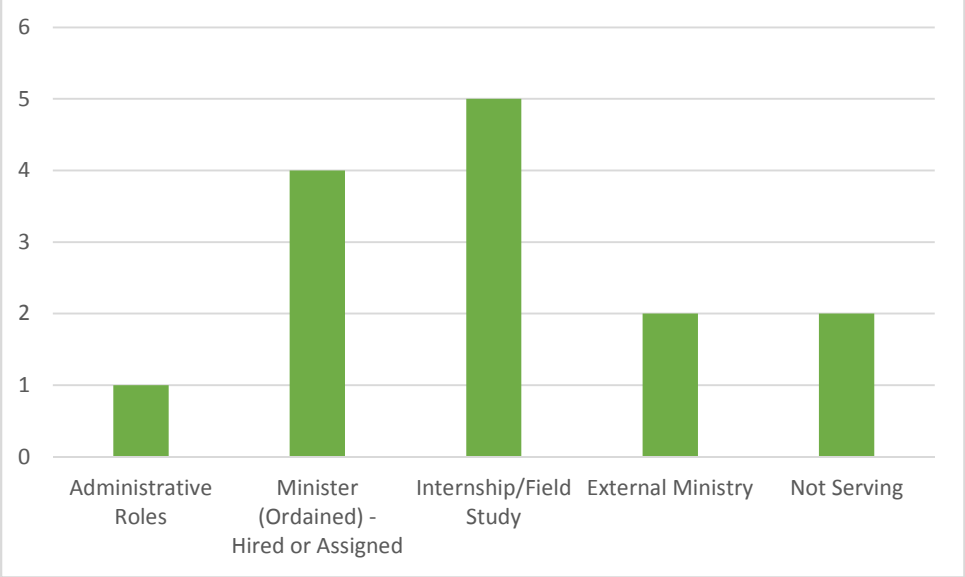
Theme 2: Observations of Traditional Roles Are Limiting Toward Women

The next focus of the research question and interview questions was the participants' role at the time of the interview. Depending on the education program, students complete a field study or internship. At the time of the interviews, 36% of the participants served in ministry as a part of their MDiv program. Figure 4 shows the distribution of the participants' roles during the interviews. Five participants (36%) were

served in their assigned field study or internship roles, 29% served as ordained ministers, 14% served in external ministry positions, such as a spiritual life coach, 7% served in an administrative role, and 14% were not serving in any ministerial role. In addition, 57% of the participants served in a position they considered their first choice in some capacity, while 21% did not serve in a role they would consider their first choice.

Figure 4

Role Serving at Time of Interview



The final initial question was a means to understand the traditional roles in which participants had observed women in ministry serving. The responses fell into two categories: behind the scenes in support roles and positions fully inclusive of women. For example, P11 explained, “So I’m nondenominational, and in my current faith, there are women in a lot of…I’m gonna put it like this: Women are doing the bulk of the work behind the scenes.” P14 stated, “Origins just the role for women, mule, no. You know, doing all the work right, doing all the work, not necessarily getting all the glory.” The

participants shared their observations of the traditional roles women served in ministry. These observations indicated a direct link between the difference in opinions on women's roles in ministry and the specific denomination and region. For example, P3 stated, "The United Methodist Church is one of the few churches that is fully inclusive of women. However, there are certain churches that are not wanting women to serve them." P9 reported,

> We also have a female pastor, but my home church is the oldest church, not just the oldest PC USA Church [Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)] but the oldest church in West Virginia, and she is the first female pastor in Martinsburg, in my town. And it wasn't until seeing her that I knew that I could do it myself.

The objective of an MDiv program is to prepare students to serve as ministerial leaders. Thus, it makes sense that most of the participants served in a role they considered to be their first choice.

Theme 3: Lived Experiences in MDiv Programs Are Both Positive and Negative

The interviews continued with inquiries into the participants' lived experiences in their MDiv program. The participants discussed the program benefits, the improvements needed, and their career aspirations. Among the benefits, several students expressed appreciation for being exposed to a diverse group of students and faculty members. P1 stated,

> I enjoyed it because I was in, um, I was in a company of a diverse group of people. It wasn't just all men, but there was [*sic*] women, but then there was also those who were part of the LBGTQ community.

P3 expressed, “There’s a bunch of different groups that you can be a part of on campus. You know, clubs and things like that, and I’ve really appreciated the spaces in which I’ve been allowed to grow up.”

Relationships were another program benefit. P2 shared, “I think it would have to be the relationships that I found there, the friendships that we have made, that I feel like will go past the classroom experiences and lead into as we’re serving together.” P11 explained, “My most enjoyable part has been connecting with other scholars of the work,” and P4 said, “I’ve met a lot of people who are younger than me in my divinity program, so I get to see their life experiences, and they’re a lot different than mine, which is great.”

Another program benefit that emerged from the data was the opportunity for MDiv students to explore various beliefs while developing their spiritual formation. P9 appreciated “being able to be exposed to different thought processes and having my own challenged,” and P8 stated, “I guess just figuring out what I believe is the most exciting part on a baseline level.” P1 expressed, “The one [benefit] was discovering spiritual formation and understanding about, um, your spiritual disciplines, and, um, the power of prayer.”

The third benefit pertained to gaining knowledge in relating theory to practice. The participants expressed their appreciation for the vast amount of knowledge they gained from the program. P13 stated, “My professors were just extraordinarily knowledgeable and helped me to think more deeply about the praxis side of the youth pastor.” P4 also reported this feeling, stating,

> I think I really enjoy the fact that even kind of the really, um, academic stuff seems to be, you know, kind of theoretical. I'm still able to sort of tie it into practical things, you know. And when I preach, I find myself thinking about these, you know, theological things that I've learned or historical things.

P7 stated, "At this point, I'm really just understanding and learning all of that history and foundational information."

Beyond the program benefits, participants discussed what they viewed as the needed improvements to their programs. MDiv programs are open to a diverse student population; however, the faculty is not quite as diverse. P1 confirmed the lack of diversity, saying,

> I need to see more women in leadership in that are, and not just one or two women. I need to see women and women of color, not just White space. I still felt like I was in a man's world, and I still had to abide by the man's rules. Even though they welcomed me into the Boy's Club. I still felt like I had to. So, I wasn't nurtured as a woman. Even though they provided information and books and lessons and discussions, that still wasn't enough. There's just not a big enough group of people who have sort of been through that to speak to that and be my mentor about—you know what it's like.

Other participants discussed improvements needed in their MDiv programs, such as intentional funding for the programs and the students, more organized peer support, and a wider variety of teachings. P5 stated, "I think they need to be intentional about giving people more money. I don't think people should go to divinity school and end up broke."

P12 expressed, “We don’t get the financing, and all of that has impacted the courses and the curriculum.” P7 explained,

> You may learn something that challenges what you grew up believing, or you know or not. So, for me, I have found that there are times we have a class conversation that I don’t know what to do with, I don’t know how to make sense of, um, that there is no real outlet to discuss that in a nonacademic setting. A debriefing space rather than being awesome together and asking all these tough questions and then leaving and having to process it on our own—I think that a lot of us could benefit from it. Something just so there’s support and being able to unpack all that, you know, the emotions that came up from that discussion.

P7 reported,

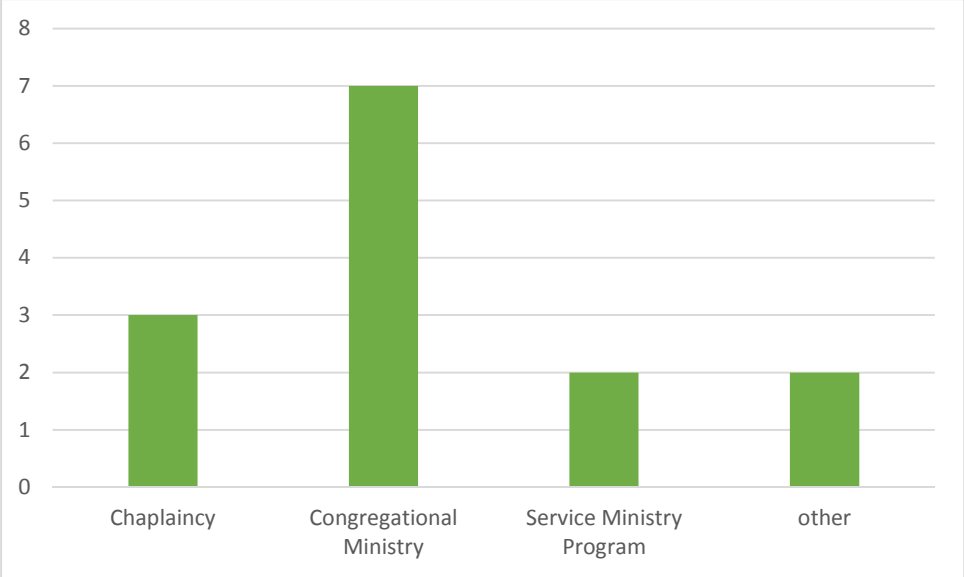
> There’s a heavy focus on theology and doctrine. I think I want to say it’s a 7-to-1 ratio for classes on those topics as compared to pastoral care ministry. And I see that as a major lacking point, because when it comes down to crisis and trauma and tragedy, the pastoral care piece is going to be a lot more important than being able to explain the Trinity or recite certain verses;

P8 explained, “They don’t really do all the pastoral care. Or we have one class and we’re very disappointed with the class that we have and, um, at the same time, we haven’t really been given a lot of guidance.” P10 expressed, “I think I would like them to consider picking textbooks that have better, um, that they’re sure don’t have any biases in them.”

During the interviews, participants discussed their career aspirations based on their lived experiences during their MDiv programs. All participants believed their experiences as MDiv students had, in some manner, influenced the direction they chose to pursue. Of the 14 study participants, seven either intended to or had already secured a position in congregational ministry, three intended to pursue a position in chaplaincy, two were interested in developing a service program outside of the church environment, and two were not interested in practicing ministry (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Career Aspirations



P3 explained,

I'm finding that I'm really drawn to chaplaincy over traditional ministry. I think what draws me about chaplaincy is it's a lot more like counseling. You know, you do a lot of talking, you do a lot of listening, but I think there's more opportunities to connect with people.

P14 reported, “What I really would like to do is go into prisons and teach people how to be spiritually and mentally free in spite of what they’re in the middle of, in spite of being physically captive.” Some of the participants who chose to pursue congregational ministry did not express the need to be a leader within church ministry. For example, P10 explained,

> I mean, I don’t specifically, like, have plans to do or search for, like, lead pastor roles, but I do think that I have gifts in a lot of the kind of assistant or associate pastor roles and would be looking more in that area, and that’s kind of more where I serve now, too.

P8 shared,

> I’m realizing, like, that there’s a big part of me that wants to be a pastor, but I’m very afraid of that because, honestly, a big part of it is…these gender bias issues, and it’s just ironic because I just left this industry that was very, very hard for women. And I thought I was going to— I didn’t realize that I was also going into an industry that’s maybe difficult for women. It must just be something that I’m supposed to go up against in life.

These statements showed that the participants’ experiences likely influenced their career choices. Similarly, P1 stated,

> I plan to take what I’ve learned to educate and to encourage my female clergy, but also provide, um, yeah, just that— just a way to encourage my female sisters, my sisters, and the Lord that are clergy to help them become well done and to crazy this invisible glass ceiling that is still there, even though they say it’s not there,

> but it's still there. It still exists, and we as women need not feel as if we have to play by man rules. We play by God's rules, not a male-dominant role, but by God's will. If we're supposed to be doing the same thing, the rule should be the word of God and not men rules, and how they interpret the scripture referencing women.

Ministerial service comes in various forms. Whereas some MDiv students choose to follow more traditional roles in ministry, others pursue more creative methods to provide ministry. For example, P5 shared,

> My desire is to eventually design a program that gives people the freedom to truly explore those different entities—mind, body, and spirit—and then work on that. It wouldn't be housed in a church because you and I both know that [there are] people that will step in a church that still need to be spiritually connected.

P7 explained,

> Right now, my heart really lies in a space between the intersection of spiritual and physical health. Where I feel like I can bring my whole self and we can talk about, "My physical body symptoms are x, y, and z, and I feel this mentally," and they're connected. I'm sure that will have an aspect of embodied spirituality, which could include yoga, meditation, and beyond, and another piece that will fit in somehow in kind of empowering and creating a safe space for queer youth.

These words provide examples of participants who chose to use the knowledge gained in their MDiv program to serve members of society by providing services people need rather than requiring them to come to church.

Theme 4: Observations of Gender Bias in Master of Divinity Programs Are Frustrating and Substantial

One of the most pertinent themes resulting from the interviews was participants' perceptions of gender bias as frustrating and substantial. Their observations are vital to this study, as experiences of gender bias during an MDiv program could directly influence female students' career aspirations. Several bias paradigms emerged from the data. Some participants provided examples of indirect or unconscious microaggressions. P2 shared,

> We have a professor, a retired clergyperson, and we meet in a small group with a bunch of interns, and it's a required class. And so, he interviewed me with my clergy learning partner to see what kind of, what I was doing at the Chapel, how it was going, what my goals were for the semester. And we were sitting there, and the interview was going great, and at the end of it, he says to me, "Just remember that you have three vocations: You're first a wife, your second is a mother, and your third is the church. So any church that you are going to be assigned to in the future will always come in third place, after your husband and your children."

Another example of this bias paradigm came from P9, who stated,

> There are still people on the seminary campus who are part of congregations and faith traditions that do not believe in female ordination, and it's sad, because they're not outright aggressions, but there are microaggressions. And this is partly why I still have yet to take the second New Testament class. I've been in seminary for 2 years. I still haven't taken the second half of the first-year courses

> because I've been nervous to be in, come to talk about some of the more problematic letters of Paul that talk about ordination with some members of my class that I know don't believe in female ordination, and I did not want to be a part of the class with them.

Subtle cases of bias were not the only paradigms collected from the data. P6 provided examples of dismissive and direct bias, explaining,

> There was a video of, um, [a] series about how to make sure that your life stays in balance and that you're still contributing to your family and, you know, your local church and not getting so overwhelmed by your studies. And every video was aimed at the man in ministry and the woman supporting him.

Whereas P6 referenced an indirect situation, P5 discussed a personal experience. She shared,

> One [faculty member] told me that I would leave divinity school—he was a pastor—I will leave divinity school and be a better dancer. Another one told me that, "You know how people sing before they preach? You should just probably dance before you preach so people can hear you."

The data indicated there are more male voices than female voices heard. An example provided by P8 was,

> There's this brilliant woman who's a professor who's there, and I'll say that there are more male professors. I really connected with her, for instance, and then she retired, and I've just had men since I've only had men since. It definitely has changed things for me, like, I think discussions we have. I'm not saying that a lot

> of my male professors aren't very open, and I can tell, you know, not misogynistic, but it still changes the dynamic in the classroom at times.

P12 provided another example that illustrated the depth of the situation. She said, "The principal job of a preacher is to offer hope to God's people. You can't do that if you always present God as someone who does not look like the little girl at the pew."

The data also showed more perceptions of bias among the students than the faculty. Participants felt that bias likely did not originate within the school or the program but with the students. P5 shared, "My perception is that it exists because we all come with biases. There was an attempt for many to dismantle it, so there were always attempts for people to hold onto it because it worked in their favor." Another example of this paradigm came from P13, who stated, "I think part of the bias comes from people of different backgrounds coming together and certain people in the classroom thinking differently about women in ministry." In addition, P14 stated, "Many people are coming from, you know, their traditional church backgrounds, and I feel like they bring it into the classroom."

Along with the bias paradigm, the data revealed the participant's feelings on the displays of gender bias observed in their MDiv programs. Their reactions included shock, embarrassment, frustration, and exhaustion. In their interviews, the participants provided insight into their experiences in the program and their assigned field study positions. For example, P2 shared,

> I have had congregants, people in the congregation, men especially, pushed the boundaries physically with me that they wouldn't do to a male pastor. Like,

> whether it be rubbing my shoulders or putting they hands around my waist or things of that nature that they do not do to the male pastors. So, they definitely get a little bit more handsy than they probably should, and it's typically older men. And raised in a Southern household where you just kind of keep the peace. And so, I don't have enough bark to my bite yet, and I think I'm gonna probably get there before I'm done with this degree because it's getting old, [and I'm] frustrated at them and frustrated with myself.

P10 explained, "I mean, sometimes it hurts when somebody basically says they think what you're doing isn't biblically supported." These feelings impacted the career aspirations of the MDiv students against the congregational ministry. For example, P13 shared,

> After experiencing a sermon presented by a male pastor who dismissed women as leaders, I think it made me very frustrated with the church and my internship that I had been doing was at a nonprofit that was affiliated with Glasse Youth Institute, and it made me want to work at nonprofits so much more than churches because of the gender bias that I had experienced.

The data indicated feelings of frustration, hurt, and similar emotions. In addition, the participants' words also showed that MDiv students could experience feelings leading them to engage in their program less, trust their contributions less, and make them more hesitant about their place in the program. P7 recalled asking a question in class and the teacher was seemingly uninterested in engaging in a discussion. She shared that shortly afterward, another student asked a similar question, and she recalled, "They're engaging

in about 10 minutes of dialogue together with the class on, um, the same topic, um, and that felt, um, disheartening to me. Like maybe I don't need to ask any more questions in this class."

Despite feelings of discouragement, the participants also shared examples of defiance, determination, and the need to fight for respect. Some female MDiv students feel disenchanted with the idea of congregational ministry due to the bias they have experienced; in turn, others develop the desire to push against the traditional views regarding women in ministry. P6 provided an example, saying, "It showed me that I was unique. It showed me that I might need to, uh, fight a little harder to be respected or seen as relevant." Similarly, P3 explained,

> I feel like I'm constantly having to prove myself just a little bit. I feel like I always have to be at the top of my game because someone somewhere is going to question me more than they're going to question, you know, the male student that I sit beside in class.

This sense of defiance is not shared by all of the female MDiv students. The experiences of bias not only influence female students' participation in their MDiv program but also impacts their career choices.

Theme 5: Observed Effects on Career Choices Are Restrictive Toward Women

Throughout the data collection process, the participants shared their perceptions of pursuing a career in the field of ministry. The bias they perceived had consequences on female ministers' career choices because of the gender bias in MDiv programs, female

students encounter situations where they feel unwanted or their calling is doubted. P2 provided an example of feeling unwelcome:

> In the Methodist Church, for instance, when it's time for at the end of their every year, you know, the church says, "Hey, we want to keep our pastor"; "Hey, we think it's time for our pastor to move along." And so, when a pastoral change is occurring, the bishop—typically, it's actually done at a lower level—says, "Hey, would you be willing to have a female pastor?" and they can say yes or no, and the bishop doesn't have to follow that. It's tough going into a situation [where] you know that you're not wanted or trusted.

When in settings where they are not supported or empowered, female MDiv students lose confidence in their skillset. P13 shared an example:

> So, I think for me in my career, being in churches and congregations that were continually not supporting women, it made me feel confused about what God called me to. And it made me question my calling, and it gave me a really limited imagination on my call. And it wasn't until I stepped into churches that affirmed women that I was able to imagine myself as a pastor, as a preacher, as a leader.
>
> And it was those times that then I felt more empowered to step into my gifts.

P13's words applied to the following finding. Although female MDiv students may believe in their calling, they lack a visual representation to encourage them to pursue a position of leadership in ministry. P5 shared,

> I think, if I'm honest, I knew I was supposed to do something more in ministry before I even looked at divinity schools. Um, I didn't want to do it. Part of it, of

> course, was the heaviness and responsibility that I had in my mind I associated with it. But the other part was I've never seen women that I know do the things that I believe God might want me to do.

P3 said the lack of self-reflection led her away from congregational ministry. She explained,

> Every committee I was on, every time I set up something to talk with a committee chair or reached out to a partner of the church, um, it was always a man I was talking to, and so I didn't see myself reflected in any of these roles. Whereas in college chaplaincy, in particular, I have seen myself in those roles.

Traditional gender bias impacts female ministers in much the same manner as women pursuing leadership positions in secular professional spaces. P4 addressed the correlation, stating,

> I feel like, you know, because there's just this pattern, you know, like women are the ones who offer childcare and that somebody has to if you want to have a family. If you want to have children, you know, somebody has to provide childcare, especially before children are school-aged. And so, the mom was always, you know, several years behind in her work experience and so in her, you know, and in her salary. So, you're always kind of a step behind, and you just kind of fall further behind.

In addition to the impact of bias on career paths, the data showed a link between gender bias and salary. P10 found her desire to pursue a ministerial career affected by the impact of gender bias on the salary offered to female ministers. She explained,

> Yeah, I mean, it slowed me down in terms of just trying to, like, I think, for a while there, I was like, well, maybe I just need to go back to teaching, like, do this for now until my kids are a certain age, and I'll go back to teaching 'cause this is not going to ever lead to a financial situation, like, I think I don't want to say hopeless, but just kind of being like, you know, accepting that I'm going to have so many limitations that I wouldn't have on other career tracks.

Due to the concerns hindering their advancement as leaders in the ministerial field, female MDiv students feel they need to work harder, prove themselves more qualified, or behave in a masculine manner. P7 explained, "I think there ends up being this subliminal message that women need to work harder to land in certain positions or to demonstrate that they are worthy of being heard or respected." P1 confirmed this perception, saying,

> You could get blackballed if you don't know how to say the right thing and [mind your] Ps and Qs and have a quote-unquote good integrity. That's like playing a game of chess. It's really like a game; it's no different. You gotta have the same street mentality, even in the church.

Although female MDiv students acknowledge their calling and pursue a degree in ministry to prepare for a ministerial leadership position, obtaining a leadership position is not as easy as they had hoped. Gender bias has affected men's views while conditioning women to accept rather than fight the imposed limitations. P10 provided an example:

> Yeah, I mean, I would say that, um, when you know that you're less likely to get certain positions, like pastoral positions or good pay, equitable pay, it might be

> tempting to just not pursue that path. And I think that's a big reason why I have not become a pastor yet is just, you know. I was a teacher before where there really wasn't gender bias in that situation, and I think when I really, you know, started to accept this call, I was kind of surprised, you know, how much harder it is for women. It's sad.

Similarly, P7 said, "I think that [gender bias] affects earning potential because women are not as blunt and bold in asking for what they want." These examples support the data, which showed that female MDiv students' perceptions are not only based on recent experiences of gender bias but also on traditional notions of gender roles.

Theme 6: Perceived Measures Needed for Advancement Are Progressing Slowly

Responses to the last few interview questions were specific to the measures needed for the advancement of women in ministry. MDiv students' perceptions of gender bias indicated a wide view of the actions needed to change the path for female ministers seeking leadership positions within the ministry. Pushing societal boundaries is necessary to change the roles open to female ministers. P12 discussed how broader acceptance would change society's acceptance of female ministers, stating,

> We must realize that the future is verified because of the future of Black people, right, that those that said Black could not be preachers, right? They shouldn't be taught to read or write. 'Cause it's right in God's eyes. The same idiotic, marginalizing, oppression of women and Black women in ministry.

P7 shared,

> I think [societal acceptance is] expanding. I think there's been a subtle or slow growth over the decades and even the centuries of accepting those voices. There have always been women in ministries from the dawn of time, and I think those voices are tending to be more and more heard.

Support for these examples is apparent in the increased number of female students attending MDiv programs.

The data also showed that innovation and change are needed. Society is moving forward, and changes are occurring worldwide. If churches want to continue reaching their members, they must also grow and implement new and innovative methods. For example, P3 explained,

> Ministry in and of itself is changing, you know? I've been able to get, uh, get away with perhaps doing some cool interesting things in ministry in my own experience. Um, not necessarily because I am a woman, but I really did resonate with that quote, like, I'm allowed to do these strange things because they expect strange things from women, and so I think this is really an opportunity for women to say, no, church can look like this and, you know, I mean, I think about experiential churches, you know, and inviting kids in and making it a little bit more playful, and I think that there can be a lot of freedom.

Currently, the old biases are still prevalent within church leadership and congregations. As new generations of individuals grow up, methods of engagement will need to change. An example from the data in support of this claim came from P2:

> We are seeing a lot of churches that are needing, um, they're needing innovation. They're needing to think outside the box if they are going to stay relevant, and it has been my experience with the women that I have met that we've been thinking outside the box our entire lives to get here. And we work hard, we multitask. I think we're going to see a lot more female pastors over time, um, because the church is changing and growing. There seems to be just an influx of women willing and called to do this work.

The increasing number of women pursuing degrees in ministry and seeking leadership roles is essential to the future of women in ministry. To effect the necessary change, radical women and men must achieve leadership roles within the Church. P1 stated,

> Since we have these radical women that are coming up now. You know, those women and more are helping the younger women, like, such as myself and younger, to be bold enough to stand and say, "I don't have to." And then you have the men that are bold enough to say, "We support you," openly, privately, and publicly.

Change depends greatly on future generations as they take their place in ministerial leadership. Female MDiv students identified the importance of self-reflection in encouraging them to seek their place among the leaders. P9 provided an example:

> I think more exposure is helpful. Like, I didn't know women could be pastors until I saw a woman as a pastor. I think it can help people find their voices when they see people like them in positions of leadership.

The perspectives of younger generations will transform views of women serving in ministry. P9 expressed optimism for the future when she stated,

> I'm hoping it looks bright because of a lot of the young women that I am, women and nonbinary people, that I am seeing in seminary right now. There's some amazing individuals that are my colleagues in ministry right now.

P13 also spoke of hope, saying, "I would hope that the future looks like more opportunities for women when they're younger to lean into their pastoral gifts."

Hope, however, is not enough. It is essential to change the systems that have allowed traditional gender biases to continue, and intentional actions are needed to institute these changes. For example, P10 stated,

> We're talking a lot about education today. I think it does start with really solid academic program that teach the theology well. And I think it takes both men and women and ministry to be very honest about their support and all of that will help kind of change the tide, and we have to be willing to talk about it theologically and not emotionally, too.

P11 also supported the need for continued education when she explained, "Like I've mentioned before, being intentional about effecting the change, expecting that I use that word right, or implementing the change. So, for me, it that just boils down to education." The data showed that female MDiv students value the education they are receiving and believe it is a critical part of female ministers' advancement.

The education of future female ministers is insufficient. What they do with the education they receive is what matters. The interview responses showed that developing

intentional, conscientious, and contemplative systems that include men is essential to raise awareness and eliminate the biases limiting women's advancement in church leadership. P7 stated,

> We need more male feminists who believe that female voices are important. I don't think that there can be one quick or easy individual answer. I think it needs to be that we as a community recognize what these voices could be.

The data collected from this study indicated that participants' perceptions aligned in more ways than not. Despite their random selection and differences, participants shared many of the same perceptions, leading to a collective view of what is needed to mitigate the effects of gender bias on women seeking leadership positions in ministry and the secular world.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented and summarized the data collection and data analysis processes of this generic qualitative study with 14 female MDiv students. The study was a means to answer the research question: How do female students enrolled in a Master of Divinity (MDiv) program perceive gender bias, and do they perceive this bias as an influencer on their choice to pursue a ministerial career? Six themes emerged from the in-depth semistructured interviews to present participants' perceptions of gender bias within their MDiv program and how they perceive gender bias as an influencer on their career choices. The six themes were: (a) Perceptions of influencers are both external and internal, (b) observations of traditional roles are limiting toward women, (c) lived experiences in MDiv programs are both positive and negative, (d) observations of gender

bias in MDiv programs are frustrating and substantial, (e) observed effects on career choices are restrictive toward women, and (f) perceived measures needed for advancement are progressing slowly. All 14 participants spoke to these themes and provided support for their observations or perceptions by sharing their experiences in their MDiv program.

Trustworthiness in a qualitative study depends on the methods used and the degree of confidence in collecting, interpreting, and reporting the data (Connelly, 2016). Establishing the study's trustworthiness required addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Chapter 5 presents interpretations of the findings compared to the literature review in Chapter 2. I will also describe how future researchers can extend the findings and advance the understanding of gender bias as perceived by female MDiv students and how they perceive gender bias to influence their career choices.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to understand how female students enrolled in or recently graduated from an MDiv program perceived gender bias and whether they perceived this bias as affecting their choice to pursue a ministerial career within a congregation. Qualitative methodology was appropriate to collect data and develop interventions to mitigate how gender bias influences female students while enrolled in an MDiv program (see Kim et al., 2017). Exploring female MDiv students' perceptions of gender bias indicated how they comprehend the world around them. The central phenomenon that grounded the study was how gender bias influences female MDiv students' career goals.

Semistructured interviews were the means to elicit thick, rich information. Through social media and snowball sampling, I recruited 18 female students who were currently enrolled or had recently graduated from an MDiv program. Although I conducted 18 interviews, four did not yield appropriate or sufficient data for this study. Indicators of data saturation began to appear after the ninth interview, which I confirmed upon reviewing the interview transcripts and my reflexive journal.

The semistructured interviews conducted via Zoom video conferencing included 17 open-ended questions developed from the literature review related to gender bias. Reflexive journaling helped me mitigate any researcher bias and keep a neutral frame of mind. Analyzing the collected data, maintaining a reflexive journal, and providing the opportunity for the participants to review their transcripts contributed to the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

The VSAIEEDC seven-step model is a cognition-based analysis method that involves variation, specification, abstraction, internal verification, external verification, demonstration, and conclusion (Kennedy, 2016; Persson, 2006). An in-depth VSAIEEDC analysis of interviews with 14 participants indicated six themes: (a) Perceptions of influencers are both external and internal, (b) observations of traditional roles are limiting toward women, (c) lived experiences in MDiv programs are both positive and negative, (d) observations of gender bias in MDiv programs are frustrating and substantial, (e) observed effects on career choices are restrictive toward women, and (f) perceived measures needed for advancement are progressing slowly.

Female MDiv students described their perceptions of gender bias based on outdated traditional views of the expected roles of women in ministry. Participants shared their experiences dealing with gender bias based on men's discriminatory behaviors borne from outdated views created by gender bias. The ministerial world has a long-standing history of roles women are expected to play or responsibilities they are allowed to assume. Society has changed, allowing women to find their voices and lean into their calling. However, women remain limited by the church's traditional views. In obtaining their education, female MDiv students have had to adjust their goals to pursue their dreams of serving in a ministerial capacity. Whether the changes require a different denomination or an environment outside of the church, these female students have determined that to minister means they have to make adjustments or sacrifices to their career choices. In this chapter, I discuss the interpretations of the findings, limitations of

the study, recommendations for further research, and implications for positive social change.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings in this generic qualitative study confirm and extend the body of knowledge related to gender bias compared to the peer-reviewed literature presented in Chapter 2. During the VSAIEEDC data analysis process, I observed no data contradicting the conceptual framework outlined in the scholarly literature. The research question was: How do female students enrolled in a Master of Divinity (MDiv) program perceive gender bias, and do they perceive this bias as an influencer on their choice to pursue a ministerial career? The data showed that female MDiv students exhibit self-efficacy by following their calling and enrolling in an MDiv program. The study also found that female MDiv students develop feelings of determination and defiance due to experiences with gender bias. MDiv students want to prove they have the ability, skills, and knowledge needed to serve in a leadership position in ministry.

The study's findings aligned with the conceptual framework's second concept that outcome expectations are the anticipated consequences of experiencing gender bias while enrolled in an MDiv program. The female students enrolled in an MDiv program to serve the population of their respective denominations. As a result of experiences with gender bias, these students felt the need to change faith denominations or serve in a ministerial capacity other than church ministry. Female students enrolled in an MDiv program to serve in a ministerial capacity and pursue a leadership position. However, the gender bias experiences they encountered altered that goal. This study showed that gender bias

creates barriers that make it challenging for women to contribute their leadership expertise and for women and men to appreciate female leaders (see Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

This study extended the existing literature on gender bias and MDiv programs. The 14 study participants confirmed that more women are enrolling in MDiv programs. The data also supported the literature showing that traditional gender bias influences how men and women view or accept female leaders in ministry (Ferguson, 2015; Rhee & Sigler, 2015). Bias experiences influence the women who seek an MDiv and desire a leadership role in ministry, leading them to question their leadership skills and talents (Ibarra et al., 2013). The outdated assumptions that women do not possess leadership traits often lead women to think they must work harder to prove they are capable and have the skills to be leaders in the church. Although traditional gender bias affects how society views women's ability to act in leadership roles, many women reject imposed roles. Female MDiv students believe they are "called" to serve and do not have to emulate the same traits exhibited traditionally by men to perform exceptionally as ministerial leaders. As congregational generations adapt to the growing diversity of society, churches must find more innovative methods of communicating with their congregations. Churches should be willing to let go of traditional gender roles and accept more female ministerial leaders.

Limitations of the Study

The primary goal of this generic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of female MDiv students regarding gender bias within their programs. A limitation was

eliciting the views of female students only. Another limitation was the lack of consideration for gender-fluid students.

A limitation identified in Chapter 1 was that the study did not differentiate between denominations. Individuals of different denominations vary in their views of traditional gender roles (Ghazzawi et al., 2016). Although the study provided data that female MDiv students of varying denominations held similar perceptions of gender bias, there was no consideration of how their denominations' traditional views influenced the participants' perceptions. An additional limitation to the study was related to the transcript review process. Because most participants did not review their interview transcripts, the study lacked further data confirmation.

Recommendations

This study contributed to the research by filling the gap in the literature regarding the perceptions of gender bias held by female MDiv students and whether they perceive gender bias as an influencer on their career aspirations (see Ferguson, 2015; Smarr et al., 2018). One of this study's benefits was gaining a deeper understanding of the leadership challenges of female ministers through the lens of their MDiv experience. The findings of this study could help MDiv program administrators understand these challenges and find ways to overcome them.

Additional qualitative studies of female MDiv students' perceptions of gender bias could provide more insight into how their experiences influence their career aspirations. Supplemental qualitative research studies involving female MDiv students focusing on faith denominations would add insight into how the gender bias experienced

by students influences how they perceive their leadership skills. The data collected could also provide MDiv programs with guidance for making changes or improvements, thereby offering an experience that makes female students feel supported and encouraged to pursue their chosen career paths.

Implications

Positive Social Change

Research about the perceptions held by female MDiv students regarding how gender bias influences their chosen career field of ministry leadership was limited, and studies that existed were quantitative rather than qualitative (Ferguson, 2015; Smarr et al., 2018). Quantitative researchers related gender differences to students who graduated with an MDiv yet did not pursue a leadership position in church ministry (Ferguson, 2015). The current study added to the body of knowledge by providing qualitative data on the perceptions held by female MDiv students regarding gender bias experiences during their programs and in their choice of careers.

Female ministers who have successfully obtained leadership positions have resisted traditional gender roles, demonstrating that women can serve as ministerial leaders within a congregation without having to exhibit masculine behaviors. In addition, these women's roles enable younger female generations to see themselves reflected in leadership positions, which encourages younger generations to believe in their ability to serve in a leadership capacity. This study showed that more positive social change could occur as more women pursue ministerial leadership roles, compelling congregations, and current leadership to adjust to the changing church environment.

Recommendations for Practice

This study filled the gap regarding how female MDiv students perceive gender bias and how it influences their career choices. The study findings provided men, women, MDiv programs, churches, and congregations with evidence to support new approaches to reduce gender bias toward women. The study also presented several suggestions for reducing the consequences of gender bias. Positive social change could result from increased awareness about how gender bias influences all aspects of ministry.

Conclusion

More women enroll in MDiv programs to obtain an education and pursue ministerial leadership roles upon program completion. Although welcoming a more diverse student population, MDiv programs have not addressed the concerns posed by gender bias. Despite female MDiv students receiving the same education as men, gender bias makes it more difficult for female students to pursue a ministerial career amid traditional beliefs that women lack the characteristics needed to provide service as a minister of religion (Day & McCrabb, 2020; Sturges, 2019). The encounters with gender bias experienced by female MDiv students discourage them from pursuing their career aspirations and deny church congregations the innovative approaches female ministers could bring to the church. As society changes and adopts new social trends or gender neutrality, the church must adapt and discover new ways of reaching the younger generations or risk becoming obsolete.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Research Participants Needed

Must be a *Female* student *currently enrolled in or recently graduated from a* Master of Divinity Program

- Purpose of the study: Perceptions of Gender Bias
- Interviews conducted via Zoom

Researcher: Monique Norton
Walden University Doctoral Student

Contact Information:

Appendix B: Screening Tool

Demographics Questionnaire

The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect some necessary background information about each participant.

1. Gender: ☐ Female ☐ Male
2. Age: ☐ 22–30 ☐ 31–40 ☐ 41–50 ☐ 51 and over
3. Do you have any religious preference? If yes, what is it? _____
4. What year did you start you MDiv program? _____
5. When is your anticipated graduation date? _____

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Introduction: My name is Monique on (date) with participant (assigned #). Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. I will be asking you some questions about your perceptions of gender bias related to your current status as a student in a Master of Divinity program. Specifically, I would like to know how you perceive gender bias as influencing your choice to pursue a ministerial career. There is no right or wrong way to answer these questions, as I want to hear about your experiences and feelings; I want to better understand your insight into gender bias.

Your answers to the interview questions can be as short or as long as you desire. The interview will be recorded. The interview is scheduled to last approximately 60-90 minutes. However, the length of the interview will depend on your responses to each interview question.

Interview Questions

1. Please describe what influenced you to pursue a Master of Divinity.
2. Please describe where you are serving in ministry and whether it is your first choice.
3. How long have you served in this capacity?
4. Describe for me a traditional role for women in your current (if different) faith tradition/denomination
5. Describe in what ways you have been enjoying your MDiv program.
6. Describe the most exciting part of your program and why it excites you.
7. Please share how you would like to see your MDiv program improved.

8. In as much detail as possible, describe what you plan to do once you have completed your program.
9. What is your perception of gender bias in your MDiv program?
10. Tell me about a time when you believe you experienced gender bias as an MDiv student.
11. How do you believe that experience affected you as an MDiv student?
12. Describe for me how you see the role that gender bias plays in women making career choices.
13. How do you believe gender has had any influence on your ministerial career choice?
14. Please describe the situation or circumstances in which you realized that your ministerial career choices would be influenced, impacted, or dictated by gender bias.
15. Describe what you think the future looks like for women in ministry.
16. Describe how you perceive gender bias affects your earning potential compared to your male counterparts in similar positions in which you serve.
17. Describe for me your remedy for gender bias/inequality in the field of ministry. In other words, what would it take to bring balance or equality in ministry?