

4-10-2024

The Lived Experience of Career Sponsorship of Canadian Female Executives

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

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by

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MA, Walden University, 2020

MBA, University of London, 2006

BA, McMaster University, 1994

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

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August 2023

Abstract

Women represent almost half of the Canadian labor population, but less than 6% of women advance to executive leadership. This is problematic because previous studies showed gender balance has been proven to be good for business, but with not enough women advancing in the leadership pipeline, business performance will continue to suffer. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Canadian female executives regarding how career sponsorship may have influenced their career advancement to executive management. Role congruity theory provided the framework for the study. Eleven Canadian female executives participated in semistructured interviews to share their personal lived experience of career sponsorship. Findings from the modified van Kaam data analysis indicated all female executives had multiple informal career sponsorship experiences and their sponsors helped advocate for and propel their career to executive leadership. Themes included sponsors are champions, sponsees lived up to expectations, sponsorship reciprocity, succession planning, paying it forward, and no-sponsor-no-advancement. Recommendations include urging executives and young professionals to forge an informal sponsorship to support gender balance in executive management. Findings may inspire positive social change by informing women and other professionals, organizations, and policymakers regarding the impact of career sponsorship.

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Dedication

“Women belong in all places where decisions are being made. It shouldn’t be that women are the exception.” (Ruth Bader Ginsburg)

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, our two children, my mother, my sisters, and my aunt. I also want to thank my extended family, friends, colleagues, sponsors, and mentors. It has been an arduous uphill journey that tested my patience daily and ability to finish such a milestone. I am the first in my family to achieve a PhD, and for that I am particularly proud. I hope more family members endeavor to pursue doctoral studies. I also dedicate this dissertation to women in leadership.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the immense support and direction from my dissertation chair, Dr. Jean Gordon; my cochair, Dr. Lisa Barrow; and my dissertation committee. I am grateful to my support team including my academic and doctoral colleagues who supported me through this most challenging feat. Lastly, thank you to the Walden staff for their support and direction in guiding me to achieve this most wonderful milestone.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

“To ascend the career ladder, one cannot do it alone” (Wells & Hancock, 2017, p. 130). Despite decades of efforts to balance gender at the executive level, women are still struggling for greater equality and access to the executive level in organizations. Women account for less than 6% of the top-tier positions in executive management (Hamori et al., 2022). Issues of equality and access also pose an economic problem because balancing female leadership could potentially boost the Canadian economy by \$150 billion by 2026 (Evans, 2017). In Canada, female executives are an underrepresented population; only 8.5% of Canada’s top 100-listed companies are led by female CEOs (Evans, 2017). Women are 30% less likely than men to be promoted beyond entry-level positions and 60% less likely to advance from middle to executive management (Evans, 2017). Women face hurdles in their careers, beginning with entry-level positions and continuing to the highest level. These barriers include role congruity, gender bias, cultural stereotypes, glass ceiling, glass cliff, queen bee syndrome, tall poppy syndrome, and leadership development. Levine et al. (2020) stated “sponsorship is perceived to be critical to high-level advancement and is experienced differently by women” (p. 1). The current qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of Canadian female executives related to career sponsorship and to understand how these women perceive career advancement considering the barriers they face in the workplace.

The cultural stereotype for the social role of women is seen as incongruent with the stereotype of the leader (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019; Braun et al., 2017), a

phenomenon that adds to organizational imbalance in the workplace. Role congruity and gender bias rebuke women when they are too feminine and communal as leaders, but also punish women if they demonstrate agentic leadership behavior like their male counterparts because women are seen as abrasive or arrogant (Spellman et al., 2018). At the core of this phenomenon is role congruity theory (RCT; Eagly & Karau, 2002), which states there are distinct societal roles for men and for women, with men acting as leaders and women acting as followers. Eagly and Karau (2002) conceptualized the incongruence of societal roles as a theory of role congruity. RCT describes the hurdles women face at work and promotes ways in which leadership development and training may help women overcome these hurdles (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

One form of leadership training that is gathering increasing attention is career sponsorship. A sponsor is a powerful executive leader who advocates critically on behalf of a more junior executive and can advance the career of a young professional (E. W. Patton et al., 2017). Sponsorship is distinct from mentorship; whereas mentors provide feedback, offer emotional support, and act as role models, the sponsor is invested in and committed to the career success of the protégé (Ang, 2018). The role of the mentor is to teach (Helms et al., 2016) while a sponsor advocates for career advancement (Ayyala et al., 2019). Sponsorship propels, protects, and advances women to executive management positions (Helms et al., 2016). Career sponsorship is designed to increase self-confidence and enhance the risk-taking ability of individuals who wish to advance in their careers (Hewlett et al., 2011; Singh & Vanka, 2020). Sponsorship is described as critical for career advancement (Levine et al., 2020).

Chapter 1 contains an introduction to the study, background information, problem statement, research question, and conceptual and theoretical framework on the organizational and gender barriers women face at work. The aim of the research was to understand whether leadership training such as career sponsorship may help advance female executives in Canada. This goal of this study was to create social change by exploring the impact of career sponsorship for women and how career sponsorship can enhance better relationships within organizations to initiate increased gender balance and sustainable representation at the executive level. Findings from this study may improve the ability of organizations to recruit, train, and retain top female professionals as well as understand what is needed to bring more female professionals into executive management.

Background

The underrepresentation of women in executive positions is due to barriers and biases that prevent women from advancing (Spellman et al., 2018). As women enter the workforce, they are underrepresented; this gender disparity becomes apparent the higher women rise in the ranks (Evans, 2017). Gender disparity is attributed to gender stereotypes because the social role of women is perceived as incongruent with the stereotype of the leader (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019; Braun et al., 2017). Some other barriers to women's advancement in the workplace include lack of access and an inability to navigate the rules of leadership. Concurrently, women also struggle to manage their organizational workload and their domestic responsibilities, also known as the double workplace (Evans, 2017) or the second unpaid shift for women (Spellman et al., 2018;

Verma et al., 2013). The importance of career and family balance is a priority for women who face typical workplace stereotypes that may interfere with their ability to achieve career success. Women also face inequities in comparison to their male counterparts in terms of expectations, salary, and status. In addition, women have a tendency not to pursue their career aspirations because they feel the pressure to choose between their obligations to family and career (Ang, 2018). Women who were raised in traditional family settings and taught to be communal as girls and not agentic like their brothers often feel this pressure distinctly (Eagly & Carli, 2007). As women enter the workplace, their feminine traits are still a part of their identity.

Another example of gender imbalance in which there is partiality in favor of men in Canada is the pay gap between men and women. Women who work full- or part-time earn \$0.87 for every dollar their male colleagues earn (Catalyst, 2023). Gender pay disparity is a real phenomenon because “a woman will earn approximately \$418,000 USD less than the average male over a 40-year career” (Spellman et al., 2018, p. 40). Women may be apprehensive to request fair compensation because they fear it may influence the organization’s hiring decision. Women often fail to negotiate a better salary (Spellman et al., 2018), which may be attributed to their lack of confidence in demonstrating agentic or risk behavior due to the common belief that women are communal in nature (Eagly & Karau, 2002). A 2017 report commissioned by McKinsey & Company (Devillard et al., 2017) stated increasing equality is not only the right thing to do but is also good business practice.

Women's career trajectory can be affected by their home and domestic responsibilities (Langdon & Klomegah, 2013; Spellman et al., 2018), which is problematic because companies reward the best opportunities to employees who can work the long hours (Gicheva, 2013; Spellman et al., 2018). Women typically rush home from work to manage the second unpaid domestic shift (Spellman et al., 2018; Verma et al., 2013) and cannot work long hours to advance their career. Consequently, some women find themselves in a precarious position of sacrificing career advancement for family because women face stronger work–family conflict. Consequently, women “exit the workforce in greater numbers” (Haveman & Beresford, 2012, p. 37). More work is needed to create further awareness of the institutional and systemic barriers women face and how to overcome them. Devillard et al. (2017) noted that women are 30% less likely than men to be promoted beyond entry-level, and an alarming 60% are less likely to advance from middle to executive management (Evans, 2017). This illustrates the issues that affect career advancement for women and make gender balance difficult to achieve.

Some organizations are exploring methods for addressing the gender gap through supporting career sponsorship programs because organizations realize the value and impact of sponsorship on career retention and job satisfaction. Career sponsorship is critical to advancement to top-level executive positions (Carbajal, 2018; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). Compared to women, men generally have greater access to sponsors who have power and influence to advocate for them in the workplace (Ang, 2018). Because sponsorship is generally reserved for men, women benefit less from sponsorship, thereby creating a gender gap in leadership (E. W. Patton et al., 2017). Sponsorship programs for

women are less prevalent and much less formalized, making it harder for women to find a sponsorship opportunity. Such limited opportunities to gain further training or access to advancement and leadership development create barriers and are the reason why some organizations focus on mentorship. Without leadership training such as career sponsorship, women could remain disadvantaged (Carbajal, 2018; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016).

Formal sponsorship refers to a formalized leadership development program offered by the organization. Individuals rising in the organization are matched with a sponsor. An informal sponsorship is officially recognized as a formalized sponsorship program. However, the relationship between the sponsor and the person being sponsored is essentially the same. The sponsor is a leader with power and influence to advance or promote the career of the individual being sponsored (Ang, 2018). The sponsor provides the needed direction, cover, advice, and clout to bring their sponsoree into the elite fold of the organization.

Understanding the different methods used to advance women in leadership roles may create a better perception of the importance of closing the gender gap in the workplace. Although many studies have addressed career mentorship (Helms et al., 2016; Hewlett, 2019; Perry & Parikh, 2019; Valerio & Sawyer, 2016), there was a need to understand the effects of sponsorship on the advancement of women to top leadership positions in corporations from the point of view of women who had been sponsored. More research was needed on how Canadian female executives perceive the impact of sponsorship and the effects of the experience for their career advancement goals.

Problem Statement

Women account for half of the workforce but represent less than 10% of executive personnel; only 3.3% of the Toronto Stock Exchange TSX-listed Canadian companies had a female CEO as of 2018 (Catalyst, 2019). In Canada, increased gender equality could boost the Canadian economy by \$150 billion by 2026 (Evans, 2017). Business performance is negatively affected by the gender inequality gap in executive leadership. The current study addressed the lived experiences of Canadian female executives and how sponsorship programs may have influenced their career advancement.

Women remain a minority within the executive business level despite decades of conversations, policies, and promises, leaving a dearth of equal representation in the workplace, which constitutes a serious business problem. A report by the Canadian Women's Foundation (2017) stated that "although 82% of women aged 25–54 now participate in Canada's workforce; they are still underrepresented in leadership roles" (p. 1). This translates to many women in the workforce who are not in a decision-making role and are not being fully harnessed at the highest levels of business, politics, public service, and civil society (Janjuha-Jivraj & Chisholm, 2016). Companies with underrepresentation and without gender balance in the C-suite are losing critical competitive advantage. In contrast, companies with a balanced mix of men and women at the board and executive levels perform better than companies without a gender balance at the top (Janjuha-Jivraj & Chisholm, 2016).

There was a gap in knowledge about career sponsorship and the impact of sponsorship on career advancement for Canadian female executives. There was a lack of information on the impact of career advancement for Canadian female executives; therefore, the current study was needed to describe the impact of career sponsorship on leadership development. The research problem indicated the need to explore the lived experiences of Canadian female executives related to career sponsorship and effect of sponsorship on career advancement. The underrepresentation of women beyond entry- and mid-level positions can be attributed to RCT, prejudice toward female leaders, and lack of access. Although leaders have made efforts to close the gender gap by appointing women to senior positions and improving career training programs, many barriers and biases remain (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Storberg-Walker & Habe-Curran, 2017), including the “perceived cultural mismatch between women and demands of leadership roles” (Gupta et al., 2020, p. 564).

Career sponsorship is an important tool that could help balance gender representation and support female advancement to top-level executive positions. Without this opportunity, women are disadvantaged (Carbajal, 2018; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). Career sponsorship has the potential to improve opportunities for women in top-level executive positions. Researchers have addressed mentorship and executive coaching for women aspiring to leadership positions (Helms et al., 2016; Hewlett, 2019; Perry & Parikh, 2019; Valerio & Sawyer, 2016); however, there was a gap in knowledge concerning the lived experiences of career sponsorship from the perspectives of Canadian female executives who had been sponsored. Information on career sponsorship may be

valuable for closing the gender gap in upper levels of Canadian corporations. The specific business management problem was that the gender gap in executive leadership persists and this inequality impacts business performance.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological hermeneutic study was to describe the lived experiences of career sponsorship from the perspectives of Canadian female executives who had been sponsored. The phenomenological approach was suitable because it allowed me to explore the lived experience of the research phenomenon (see Heotis, 2020) and to interpret the text, which is the essence of hermeneutic study. Understanding the impact of career sponsorship on the career journey of Canadian female executives may bring further insight into leadership development. The aim of the study was to bring awareness about career sponsorship in Canada to effect organizational change through improved development training opportunities for women.

The hermeneutic qualitative phenomenological approach focuses on lived experiences, but the current study was also conducted to evaluate whether RCT and gender bias affect career sponsorship and career advancement for women. Semistructured virtual interviews were conducted with Canadian female executives to explore their lived experiences to better comprehend how to increase female executive representation in business.

Research Question

The research question guiding this study addressed how career sponsorship impacted female career advancement to executive leadership for Canadian women. To

address the purpose of this study, the following research question was developed: How do Canadian female executives perceive the impact of career sponsorship on their career advancement?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was RCT (see Braun et al., 2017; Eagly & Karau, 2002). According to RCT, when the skills, traits, and behaviors of an individual overlap with the characteristics of the job role, the individual will be perceived as more competent in that role. In contrast, if the skills, traits, and behaviors are incongruous with the characteristics of the job role, prejudice is more likely to occur (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Within RCT, women in society are expected to be communal, nurturing, and submissive. In contrast, men can be agentic, fearless, and confident, with these qualities understood to be desirable assets for leadership. RCT posits that women are “viewed as less capable than men and [are] judged more harshly when they exhibit behaviors that contradict those expected of them” (Levine et al., 2020, p. 5). The result may be a perceived incongruity between the role of women in society and the role of women in executive positions. Female leaders may “be viewed less incongruent with behaviors displaying agentic traits or in contexts that communal traits are valued, but not both” (Wang et al., 2019, p. 758). This dichotomy is further intensified in career sponsorship because “women may be less likely to be seen by potential sponsors as effective leaders because of role congruity” (Levine et al., 2020, p. 6). The work of Eagly and Karau (2002) was premised on the historical work of Tajfel et al. (1979), who developed social

identity theory to explain how prejudice plays a role in social group dynamics. According to Eagly and Karau (2002),

a role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders proposes that perceived incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles leads to two forms of prejudice: (a) perceiving women less favorably than men as potential occupants of leadership roles, and (b) evaluating behavior that fulfills the prescription of a leader role less favorably when it is enacted by a woman.

Because of the perceived role incongruity between females and leaders as being two distinct roles, women are seen less favorably when they take on a leadership role. (p. 573)

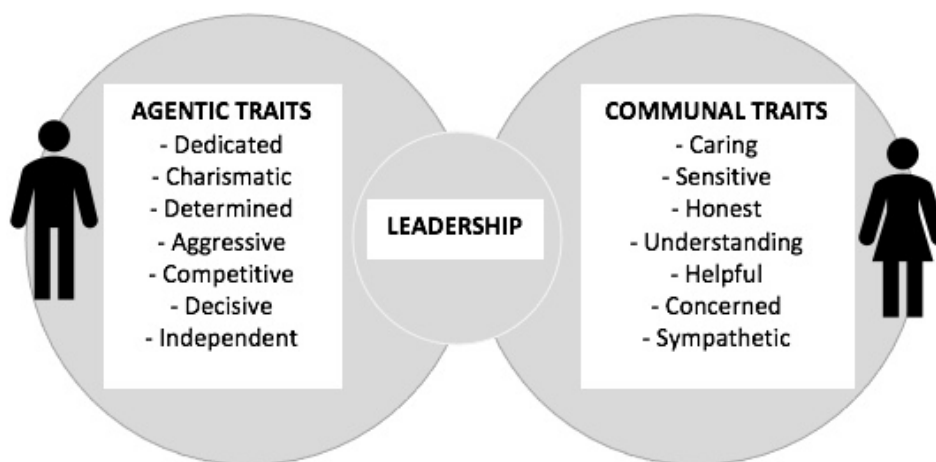
Eagly and Karau (2002) stated that “although women have gained increased access to supervisory and middle management positions, they remain quite rare as elite leaders and top executives” (p. 573). Eagly and Heilman (2016) posited that the absence of women in top leadership roles can be attributed to gender discrimination that stems from the masculine definition of leadership, which is defined in culturally masculine terms and disfavors women. The phenomenon is also referred to as the *think leader-think male* syndrome (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The barriers women face for career advancement result in women achieving less critical career capital that is needed for executive leadership roles than their male counterparts (Eagly & Heilman, 2016).

The conceptual framework of the current study was used to explore the experiences of career sponsorship and career advancement among Canadian female executives. The conceptual framework addressed the phenomenon of career sponsorship,

both formal and informal, by framing it in terms of the role of sponsorship in addressing gender discrimination/bias, sponsor selection, and other potential issues. A more detailed analysis of the framework is found in Chapter 2, but Figure 1 illustrates the intersection of agentic-male and communal-female traits of leadership and the dilemma women face with implicit gender bias and role incongruity.

Figure 1

Role Incongruity Theory



Note. Adapted from Eagly and Karau, 2002.

Other types of qualitative research include the grounded theory, case study, ethnographic, and narrative models. Grounded theory is focused on developing theory from fieldwork. Theory is generated inductively, and it arises from the data (M. Q. Patton, 2015). Case study research involves an in-depth approach using multiple perspectives to affect policy development and professional practice (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). This design was not suitable for the current study because the research question

did not address individual cases. Ethnographic research is suitable for a cultural group in which observation is the method of study. Narrative inquiry addresses how meaning is attached to the stories that are told of person's lived experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Narrative inquiry is best used for a longer storied study of life experiences and was not appropriate for a study on the career sponsorship experience. For the current study, the phenomenological approach was best suited to address the study's purpose and research question.

Social change could be impacted by sponsorship, allowing women to navigate potential gender discrimination, bias, and leadership hurdles through access to sponsors. The philosophical position of this research was a transformative worldview, according to which leadership development for female professionals has the potential to address gender imbalances. The goal of the study was to gain knowledge that was valid and truthful regarding the role of sponsorship in addressing gender imbalance in organizational leadership.

Nature of the Study

The qualitative approach was better suited for this research than the quantitative or mixed-methods approach because qualitative methodology allowed for a focus on the detailed descriptions and interpretations of the lived experiences of Canadian female executives. Within the qualitative tradition, researchers use various designs, such as ethnography, case study, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and phenomenology. The phenomenological approach was preferred for this study because phenomenology is used to interpret the outside world through the lived personal experience of the person and is

focused on “feelings as they are felt and experienced in the moment and understood and made sense of after they are felt and experienced” (Durdella, 2019, p. 106). A phenomenological approach contrasts with the ontological approach of the scientific method because phenomenology “attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgment, setting aside presuppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness, a readiness to see in an unfettered way” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41). Moustakas (1994, as cited in Bloomberg & Volpe) was a pioneer in phenomenology who focused on “how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (p. 106), opening a way to view phenomena with a fresh approach.

Within the phenomenological style, Husserl described “knowledge based on intuition and essence precedes empirical knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Husserl described two concepts of phenomenology: intentionality and bracketing (Moustakas, 1994). The hermeneutic approach to the current phenomenological inquiry was derived from Heidegger (2010), whose work was based on that of Husserl. The goal of the phenomenological approach is to understand the objective nature of the phenomenon underneath the subjective experience to be able to interpret its meanings (M. Q. Patton, 2015). Through the interview process, participants can reflect on and recount their lived human experience, which gives contextual meaning to their experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Husserl (1999) focused on the description of the lived experience and the importance of researchers to bracket their personal judgment, so it does not affect the research inquiry. Heidegger maintained that the interpretation of the data is as important as the results and is inseparable from the world. Heidegger’s hermeneutic

phenomenology is a qualitative phenomenological framework of inquiry that is used to find meaning behind the text and meaning behind appearances. The goal of the current study was to gain insight into the subjective experience of sponsorship among Canadian female executives to understand sponsorship's role in addressing issues relating to gender balance and career advancement for women in the workplace.

The hermeneutic approach is inductive in nature. Current participants described their lived experiences, and conclusions were drawn from what they said without preconceptions on my part. The interviewees brought multiple voices and stories about their sponsorship experience, which added varying perspectives. The hermeneutic process is a circular method of scientific understanding in which researchers put aside prejudgments to understand the transcript from the results, which leads to new prejudgments and knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). Although Husserl's phenomenological approach is more unyielding and a descriptive science of the lived experience, Heidegger's philosophical approach differs from Husserl in that it is ontological and centered on the method of interpretation (Suddick et al., 2020). The lived experiences and the interpretations of the transcriptions were the method of inquiry to gain deeper insight into the career sponsorship experiences of Canadian female executives in the current study.

Qualitative methodology was necessary for this study because the goal was to explore subjective perceptions of lived experiences. The purpose was not to make precise statistical comparisons or to achieve generalizability beyond the study sample, goals that would have been appropriate for a quantitative study. The premise of phenomenological

research is that meaning can be derived from the experience as lived (Peoples, 2020). Phenomenological research is designed to engage a few participants in conversation to find patterns of meaning for the selected phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

The social problem addressed in the study was the gender imbalance in executive positions in Canadian organizations. I used RCT to frame the investigation of sponsorship among female executives. Both formal and informal sponsorship were considered. Female executives in Canada were identified from internet searches, Canadian mail databases, the Canadian CEO email list, and Canadian-based industry and professional associations. Executives included the high-ranking executives in the organization, such as C-suite executives, presidents, vice presidents, executive directors, and directors. Participants were recruited through LinkedIn, with a search of Canadian female CEOs. The final sample of 11 participants was determined by the point of data saturation when no new information was being collected with more interviews.

Definitions

The key terms used in this study are defined here. Some definitions integral to the study and found in the literature review pertain to the issues women face in the workplace, but the focus of the study was on career sponsorship and not necessarily the barriers women may face. These terms advance the discussion on some of the matters women face in the workplace to find improved solutions to current problems:

C-suite: The highest-ranking positions in an organization, including CEO, chief financial officer (CFO), chief operating officer (COO), chief information officer (CIO), and similar leading positions (Fitzsimmons et al., 2014).

Double-bind dilemma: The contradictory predicament women in business face. Women are chided for being too female and communal for leadership, but if they are assertive and authoritative, they are viewed as too masculine and disliked. When women take care, they are liked but not as competent leaders, and when women take charge, they are viewed as competent leaders but are not liked by society for defying their communal congruent role (Catalyst, 2018).

Glass ceiling: A limit to a woman's career. The limit is called a ceiling because barriers stop women from advancing to top management because they are women. The ceiling is described as glass because it is invisible until it is encountered (Ganiyu et al., 2018).

Glass cliff: The risky precipice on which a woman sits when she has been nominated or has accepted a top management position when the organization is in financial crisis. Under normal circumstances, she would not have been nominated (Elsaid & Ursel, 2018).

Gender bias: Implicit prejudice against women (Madsen & Andrade, 2018). Gender bias is a form of discrimination. Implicit gender bias is an unconscious bias that occurs when an individual evaluates the other person. Understanding that unconscious gender bias exists, organizational leaders can rethink their decision-making strategies (Madsen & Andrade, 2018).

Intrapsychic barriers: Women's internal and unseen barriers that could come from early socialization to be communal, collaborative, and supportive (Ben-Noam, 2018).

Sponsorship: The enlistment of a powerful executive leader who advocates critically on behalf of a more junior executive and who can advance the careers of young professionals (E. W. Patton et al., 2017). A sponsorship is a special relationship in which the sponsor uses their influence to advocate for the career of the sponsoree, doing more than giving feedback and advice like a mentor (Ibarra et al., 2013).

Assumptions

Several assumptions were made for this study. The full, honest, and complete disclosure of the participants' answers was assumed. I assumed that the participants would remember their lived experiences and would describe them as accurately as possible. I acknowledged that some participants might be unable to recollect all details of their full lived experience. I also assumed that the qualitative phenomenological approach was the best design for addressing the research problem. Virtual interviews were preferred because they were easier and more efficient for the participants and me. I made every effort to maintain neutrality and set aside or bracket personal biases (see Peoples, 2020). I endeavored to set aside any personal bias and judgment to maintain neutrality. I assumed that participants would not be forced into answering in a particular way that was not their truthful recount of their lived experience. It is also assumed that the results would be interpreted without researcher bias. An additional assumption, based on the extensive

review of the literature, was that implicit gender bias and lack of access is pervasive in organizations and society, particularly for women seeking upper executive positions.

Scope and Delimitations

Delimitations are boundaries to a study set by the researcher. This qualitative phenomenological study was delimited to include only Canadian female executives who were sponsored as they advanced to their executive positions. The study was delimited to exclude mentorship. There is a difference between mentorship and sponsorship for the purpose of this research. Mentorship is more common than sponsorship. Sponsorship goes beyond mentorship because the sponsor is invested and committed to the career success of the protégé (Ang, 2018). In contrast, mentors provide feedback and emotional support, and they act as role models (Ang, 2018). The findings of the current study are not applicable to mentorship experiences. The research scope was limited to the Canadian market. The findings may not be transferable outside of Canada.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. The sample size consisted of 11 Canadian female executives who were currently in a C-suite, executive, or director position. Inclusion criteria also required the women to be in this role within the last 5 years because they would be able to recount their experience, which was considered current and valuable for the purposes of this research.

Because this was a qualitative and not a quantitative study, there were no statistical implications to the results. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable outside of the study sample. This limitation was mitigated by ensuring transferability, meaning

that readers in other settings may be able to gain insight into the findings from the thick description of the data. Because participants were chosen purposefully, there was a possibility of selection bias whereby participants were not representative of any larger population, although effort was made to include a Canadian-wide sample.

Another limitation may have been that some of the nuances of meaning might have been lost, including subtle cues in facial expressions and body language because the interviews were not conducted in person. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many meetings and conferences went fully virtual. I decided it would be best to conduct virtual interviews because in-person interviews might not have been feasible for the participants because of confidentiality and uncertainty of the lingering COVID-19 virus. The online interview format was preferred for health reasons but also for convenience. All interviews took place via video conferencing (Microsoft Teams). Although some subtle nuances of meaning might have been lost due to the virtual interview format, the benefit was the possible inclusion of a greater number of participants because the video interview was more flexible with schedules than in-person interviews. A virtual interview might also have been more conducive to creating an authentic and safe environment for participants to recount their lived experience in a confidential setting outside of their organization. Every effort was made to sense the moods and feelings of the participants and to make them aware that their interviews were confidential and protected. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the permission of the interviewees.

Another possible limitation was that some participants may have withheld information to protect their identity and position. Participants may have been concerned

about the effects of interviews on their careers. Every effort was made to assure participants of complete confidentiality and deidentification of the data. Participants were assured that all recordings would be guarded in a secure location and would be destroyed after the data were transcribed and the study was published, in accordance with Walden University's guidelines for handling data.

A limitation may have occurred if my unconscious biases influenced the interviews and the interpretation of the results. I made every effort to bracket personal views and remain neutral while engaging with the interviewee and keeping the interview an open and safe space for the participant. Debriefing the results helped remove some of these potential prejudices. At the same time, my role as the qualitative researcher was like that of a bricoleur, using numerous pieced-together methods, techniques, and interpretations to make sense of a complex situation (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The study may have been limited by difficulties in finding female executive leaders in Canada who had been sponsored. The goal was to generate a list of approximately 250 Canadian female executives. This limitation was mitigated by including informal as well as formal sponsorship experiences and not including participants personally known to me. Every effort was made to reflect on my biases so as not to influence the interviews or the results.

Significance

This hermeneutic qualitative phenomenological study may be significant because it added to the body of knowledge regarding the experience of career sponsorship among female executives in Canada. This study might encourage more sponsoring of women to

help other women overcome gender discrimination, bias, lack of leadership training, and lack of access to more executive opportunities. This study could also effect change by supporting female human capital, flexible family and work schedules, entrepreneurship opportunities, and leadership development (see Spellman et al., 2018). By gaining critical human capital, women will better qualify for leadership roles (Eagly & Heilman, 2016) and thrive in those roles. Women may feel more confident in their leadership capacity by having the sponsorship direction and reassurance to succeed.

Findings regarding the benefits of sponsorship have the potential to be shared with women's professional networks and other organizations that could help women rise to leadership in their organizations. Addressing potential gender discrimination in hiring practices at the executive level could improve the ability of organizations to retain top female talent and to recruit and train female professionals. This study may bring awareness for greater equality, diversity, and inclusion because Canadian women of color, underrepresented groups, and Indigenous women are critical to business in Canada.

The call for action also includes women of all ethnic and racial minority backgrounds to have greater access and support to the executive level, knowing women balance family responsibilities. Increased gender equality in the workplace could boost the Canadian economy by \$150 billion by 2026 (Evans, 2017). Women are good for business because "when more women lead, business performance improves" (Sutanto & Aveline, 2021, p. 2). Furthermore, Elias (2018) reported findings from a 2016 study by Catalyst in which "Fortune 500 companies with the highest representation of women board directors had higher financial performance on average than those with the lowest

representation of women” (p. 176). These findings show gender diversification at the executive and board levels helps businesses perform better.

Significance to Practice

The research may contribute to leadership and organizational change in business by extending the conversation, practice, training, and policies about female career development. Career sponsorship could be viewed as a tool for leadership training and development so female professionals could benefit from greater training, which may create greater gender representation at the executive level. Gender-balanced companies are good for business (Ely & Thomas, 2020; Evans, 2017). This study may effect change in the business sector as women advance in their career and businesses thrive.

Significance to Theory

This research added to the body of knowledge on career sponsorship and leadership development for female executives in business. The conceptual framework for this study was based on Eagly and Karau’s (2002) RCT of perceived prejudice toward female leaders, which favors male over female leaders. Eagly and Karau argued that leadership positions are associated with men and there is an incongruence of roles when women try to attain a leadership role. Female leaders are disadvantaged by role incongruence, which can limit their chances of advancing to executive leadership. Role incongruence is further exacerbated by the fact that “certain gender issues prevent women from reaching top positions, such as maternity, raising children, taking care of spouse, and balancing with family to name a few” (Rao, 2019, p. 99). Women are faced with family, societal, and professional pressures and may struggle to balance these competing

priorities throughout their career. The current also added to the discussion on bridging the gap between theory and practice, but further work is needed to support continued career sponsorship for women. In addition to contributing to RCT (Eagly & Karau, 2002), this research also contributed to social change by encouraging more women to take ownership of their careers and affect organizational leadership through their active and purposeful participation.

Significance to Social Change

This study may create positive social change by addressing gender disparity in executive management and describing the lived experiences of Canadian female executives related to career sponsorship to augment policy and practice. Change is slow and incremental, but effective; this research may move the conversation forward, especially in Canada. I will connect with local women's organizations, organizations (for profit, not for profit, and public) to raise awareness, present the findings, and engage in conversations about the importance of increased gender balance and diversity in the C-suite. The other message that supports good business practice is that "women can, and often do, perform well in leadership positions" (Rao, 2019, p. 100). Bringing more gender and diversity into the C-suite may also effect positive social change.

Summary and Transition

Chapter 1 contained the background, problem statement, purpose of the study, research question, interview questions, conceptual framework, assumption, limitations, and significance of the study. The business management problem addressed in this study was that the lack of gender parity in the C-suite is expensive. An increase of women in

executive management can be associated with an approximate 15% increase of profits (Haig, 2016). Companies with gender balance perform better because there is greater diversity and a wider perspective. Women have been known to take fewer risks than an all-male board and tend to consider social and environmental welfare in their leadership. Gender parity in the workplace may be enhanced when all colleagues in the organization are aware of the gender and cultural challenges women face in the office. Through increased knowledge development about the gendered differences, practice may be informed, and improved systems may be created.

Career sponsorship has the potential to create opportunities for women interested in advancing their career and achieving executive leadership. Sponsorship is not well understood or explored but has been shown to be effective in leadership development and propelling women beyond the glass ceiling to attain executive leadership positions. Other suggestions for increased gender parity could include more leadership training, more networking, organizational quotas, and social/cultural support groups to help women overcome these barriers. These concepts are discussed in further detail in Chapter 2, which also contains a review of the literature on RCT and the issues surrounding career sponsorship and career advancement. The review addresses the knowledge gap in the literature, the nature of career sponsorship, and the reasons career sponsorship could address the issue of female executive gender imbalance in Canada.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Gender inequality in organizations is still a problem after decades of discussion and action to try and balance gender at the executive level. Women account for 63.4% of total employees in Canada (Statista, 2022). In 2023, only six CEOs in Canada were women (Saldanha, 2023). Women have been underrepresented professionally because of the invisible barriers of unconscious gender bias and traditional male-dominated organizational structures that pose glass ceiling barriers to career advancement (Perry & Parikh, 2019). Women face structural and psychological barriers in trying to attain and maintain executive leadership positions (Brescoll, 2016). Still prevalent is the “stubborn linkage between leadership and maleness” (Keohane, 2020, p. 238), which adds to the challenges women face in the workplace and also influences their personal belief system.

Although much has been researched about gender inequality in executive management, there is a growing body of research on the importance of mentorship and career coaching for female career advancement. Although there is more knowledge and awareness regarding mentorship, there is less awareness and understanding of sponsorship. The focus of the current study was a scarcity of knowledge about the lived experiences of career sponsorship for Canadian female executives and how career sponsorship impacts women’s career advancement. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological hermeneutic study was to describe the lived experiences of career sponsorship from the perspectives of Canadian female executives who were sponsored. Chapter 2 contains a review of the recent literature on RCT, gender equality, glass

ceiling, and career coaching, and includes a discussion of how career sponsorship affects career development for female executives.

Role Incongruity Theory

Eagly and Karau's (2002) seminal work on RCT provided the theoretical foundation for the current study because it best described the inherent gender bias and prejudice toward women and the perceived incongruity between the female role and leader role. Eagly and Karau stated

a role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders proposes that perceived incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles leads to two forms of prejudice: (a) perceiving women less favorably than men as potential occupants of leadership roles and (b) evaluating behavior that fulfills the prescriptions of a leader role less favorably when it is enacted by a woman. One consequence is that attitudes are less positive toward female than male leaders and potential leaders. Other consequences are that it is more difficult for women to become leaders and to achieve success in leadership roles. Evidence from varied research paradigms substantiates that these consequences occur, especially in situations that heighten perceptions of incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles. (p. 573)

The prejudice toward female leaders' roles is so culturally and socially rooted that men are seen as agentic and women as communal, which affects public perception of how female leaders are viewed. Not only does society favor male agentic leaders over female communal leaders, but society also favors men over women when it comes to

promotions, salary, and career development (Eagly & Karau, 2002), including sponsorship. The incongruity of gender roles is why achieving female leadership is still difficult for many women. From an early age, girls are not socialized to self-promote, take risks, be authoritative, be assertive, and be tough. Girls and women are punished by gendered societal roles and conditioned into a caretaking style of leadership (Ben-Noam, 2018). Women are socially conditioned from birth to be caretakers and nurturers, starting with gender-based toys. Boys are rewarded for being adventurous, risk taking, and courageous when engaging with boy-based toys, while girl toys emphasize beauty, family, caretaking, and artistic expression. The repetitious and continuous forms of play with gender-based toys in the formative years create gender-based adults who favor one type of leader (adventurous) over the other (caretaking). However, recent movement in the toy industry is an indication that real change is incremental and happening; some toy companies are creating more gender-inclusive toys and removing some of the toys that conform to gender stereotypes. These actions help raise awareness and change perceptions about the ability of women to be effective leaders because the toys help address the issue of role incongruity between female agentic leaders and female communal supporters.

Agentic Versus Communal Leadership Traits

Leadership is seen as agentic, which is a stereotypically a trait in male leaders. According to Vial and Napier (2018),

[while] communality is appreciated as a nice “add-on” for leaders, it is stereotypically masculine attributes related to agency, such as competence and

assertiveness, that are valued as the defining qualities of the leader role, especially by men (who are often the gatekeepers to these roles). (p. 2)

A female's perceived role as a female agentic leader is incongruent to her supposed communal role, which leads to lower compensation and less opportunities for career advancement (Vial & Napier, 2018; Wang et al., 2019). Deep-seated, established cultural beliefs and stereotypes hinder women from advancing to executive leadership because society also underevaluates and underappreciates women, making their career path treacherous. Women are negatively perceived when displaying agentic traits as leaders because it is incongruent with cultural norms and stereotypes (Vial & Napier, 2018; Wang et al., 2019). Such attitudes lead to unconscious bias, male-dominated leadership, and organizational barriers that obstruct women from achieving professional advancement (Perry & Parikh, 2019).

Brescoll (2016) argued that organizations see women as less qualified than their male leaders because of society's perceptions of incongruent roles. Leadership is not viewed as feminine and is considered contrary to what women should behave like, so women are evaluated more harshly than their male counterparts (Brescoll, 2016; Vial & Napier, 2018). The gender stereotype is further perpetuated when there is prejudice toward female professionals as they advance further in leadership. Gender bias is implicit in society, and gender stereotypes will continue to circulate until organizations begin to incorporate and accept both masculine and feminine traits of leadership.

The problem of incongruity is exacerbated when women carry the load of the family and domestic duties of the household while juggling their career. Women carry

communal and domestic responsibilities and, because leadership is not perceived as communal, women might not be seen as leaders (Vial & Napier, 2018). Women may also not see themselves as leaders. For this reason, there is a perceived lack of fit between female communal traits and the traits required to be agentic leaders (Brescoll, 2016). There is a perceived gap in career leadership training or leadership opportunities. Women can experience negative criticism for demonstrating agentic leadership aspirations, meaning they do not display enough communal qualities, which is seen as violating a proscription against enacting dominance due to their lower status as women (Brescoll, 2016; Vial & Napier, 2018). Research suggested that women experience greater backlash when they exhibit dominance in the workplace, unlike men (Vial & Napier, 2018; Williams & Tiedens, 2016). These concerns affect how women conduct themselves because they may not want to be seen as too aggressive or unfavorable and may pull back from ambitious career opportunities because of cultural and gender bias. RCT affects the cultural rebuff women face in the organization and in the community.

Eagly and Karau's (2002) RCT demonstrates that women occupy a double bind because they are penalized for conforming to a leader agentic role and penalized again because their communal leadership style is not the acceptable leadership style (Kubu, 2018). Gender stereotypes are implicit; women must overcome this hurdle to find a leadership style that meets the agentic expectations of leadership while simultaneously managing and balancing the expectations of society to demonstrate the softer communal traits of being a woman. This is a difficult and stressful balancing act because women want to have a fulfilling career while balancing a fulfilling family life.

Barriers to Women's Advancement

Women face obstacles balancing work, career advancement, and family responsibilities. Women also encounter stereotypes, which they face on a daily basis in the workplace. Women struggle to advance in their careers, despite working hard or being competent in a position. (Hewlett, 2019). The classic female mistake, as stated by Hewlett (2019), is that women believe they will be promoted simply because of their knowledge and experience. This belief fails to take into account the deep-seated gender bias and stereotypes that exist in the world.

Gender Bias and Stereotypes

There is a deep-seated cultural and gender bias that is problematic for women looking to advance their careers. Cultural and gender bias are problematic because they impede women from flourishing and advancing in the workplace. Bias also derails the hopes and aspirations of women succeeding in their career; many women face challenges trying to advance from middle to senior management. A shortage of women leaders is compounded by bias. This shortage contributes to a pipeline problem in that not enough women are going through the career pipeline to make it to executive management, also called the C-suite (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The barriers and obstacles along the way for women or those who identify as female/she/her can be overwhelming and may constitute a disincentive, thereby leading to a vacuous pipeline of female leaders. Gender bias and inequality create further obstacles for women on their journey to leadership at organizational, political, and social levels (Roberts & Brown, 2019).

Gender stereotyping also leads to negative evaluations and unfair expectations for female leaders, which creates more bias because fewer women will incur the challenges to become leaders. Alkadry and Tower (2011) claimed that women historically faced gender discrimination on three levels: position segregation, occupational segregation, and agency segregation. Gender bias continues to deny women senior and/or executive leadership; it also permeates gender wage disparities because women earn considerably less than their male counterparts. On average women will earn \$418,000 less than men over their 40-year career (Spencer et al., 2019).

Gender bias is similarly seen in investor relations in which women leaders are judged unfavorably about their ability and competence based on their gender (Gupta et al., 2020). Women are scrutinized and criticized more than their male counterparts. Gender also plays a role in evaluations because female leaders are more likely to be evaluated severely than their male counterparts (Moscatelli et al., 2020). Harsh judgment plays a role in dampening women's career aspirations and chances of promotion. The stress of burdensome disapproval diminishes women's leadership ambitions because of fear of anticipated leadership failure (Fisk & Overton, 2019). Fisk and Overton (2019) revealed that women are judged more severely than men and, when they fail, are more heavily criticized and penalized. This judgment further suppresses women's advancement and ambitions to executive leadership relative to men (Fisk & Overton, 2019).

The gender gap is also seen in board representation; although much has been done to encourage women to sit on boards, there is more work needed to make board representation diverse (Fisk & Overton, 2019). Many boards meet early in the morning or

at the end of the workday, which can pose a challenge for women's participation because of their domestic duties. Likewise, when board meetings are held during the workday, some women's employers do not support the time needed to participate, so women opt out of board involvement (Fisk & Overton, 2019). Fisk and Overton (2019) recommended organizational responses to support female executives in their leadership strategies for taking more risk and being more ambitious.

There is a visible lack of female leaders on boards because agentic behaviors are preferred by boards while women take on more caretaking roles (Chizema et al., 2015) leading to an imbalance on boards. Hoyt and Murphy (2016) examined the ways invisible gender and cultural barriers manifest in the workplace. Identity threat was identified as a barrier, operating as both a cause and consequence of image work (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Furthermore, the model of the impossible self for professional women affects them (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2016). Junior female professionals also experience stereotype threat, while their male counterparts display behaviors that are similar in nature to the firm's identity; such behaviors are rewarded and increase men's credibility. Junior female professionals also struggle with authenticity and identity threat and how it impacts their career. A combination of these factors makes it difficult for women to navigate the labyrinth of leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Gender bias for women is rooted in cultural and societal values; despite decades of efforts to dismantle these deeply rooted biases, they still exist. Soklaridis et al. (2017) examined how gender bias affects female CEOs. Executive female leaders discussed the biases and barriers they are faced with in their career. Results showed a gender imbalance

that affects the career path. Findings also indicated that the gender imbalance is improving. Workplace culture still has gender stereotypes, but organizational structure and policies can improve upon these cultural assumptions (Soklaridis et al., 2017). Unconscious bias impacts hiring decisions and promotion decisions, which also contributes to fewer women in key positions (Zenger & Folkman, 2019).

Pingleton et al. (2016) showed there is still an imbalance between male and female full professors, which confirms gender inequity exists in academic medicine. Pingleton et al. looked at the representation of women in academic medicine with an emphasis on the negative impact of silent bias and being ignored in the workplace, which affects women's promotion prospects. Future research may focus on women's coping strategies, self-reflection, and institutional support for family responsibilities to understand the effect such practices have on empowering women to pursue executive leadership. Pingleton et al.'s findings demonstrated how leadership development for women in medical academia is an important and significant indicator of success. These findings could also be transferred to other sectors, including business. There are numerous obstacles that need to be addressed in addition to gender inequity, but with coaching women can overcome these barriers (Pingleton et al., 2016).

Hideg and Shen (2019) drew attention to the role that benevolent sexism plays in society, which can limit women's career advancement. Sexism continues to perpetuate the underrepresentation of women in leadership. Hideg and Shen explored perceptions of sexism by men and women and the impact sexism has on women's career trajectory through an examination of current literature, from which they derived a new theoretical

model on the interpersonal and intrapersonal consequences of benevolent sexism on women's attainment of leadership positions. Hideg and Shen recommended further research using an intersectional study on informal and formal support for gender equity in the workplace.

Gender bias is implicit and affects women looking to advance their career. Gender bias, which is learned at a young age, leads to the notion that leadership is aligned with men and stereotypical male traits (Elsaid & Ursel, 2018; Schein, 1973). Elsaid and Ursel (2018) argued that society is conditioned to see leaders as men—even women see leaders as men—and, therefore, women who seek leadership positions are criticized and scrutinized more. Because of this conditioning, women believe they do not belong in executive positions; likewise, organizations believe women do not belong in top positions (Elsaid & Ursel, 2018). Learning how to change people's attitudes is yet another study that can be considered. By working toward more gender equality in organizations, progress will begin to unfold and take direction. Leadership advancement is not easy as women struggle with the role incongruity and double bind, but there is evolvment in the right direction.

Gender Equality

Women bring unique empathetic skills into organizations that are needed in the workplace (Spalluto et al., 2018). Male-oriented leadership framework is hierarchical, while female-led organizational structures tend to be more network-structured. Organizations could potentially address sexual discrimination in the workplace by building awareness and providing gender-based awareness training. Managing the

unconscious and conscious biases in the workplace also means evolving the organization to include the needs of new women executives. Spalluto et al. (2018) discussed the importance for change in traditional leadership structures that are male-oriented, as well as the problem of double bind that exists for women. Limitations of the research is that it is premised on secondary research. The benefit of this article is that it draws on the taboo subjects of sex, sexism, and sexual dynamics in the workplace. One very interesting point was the connection with the think male, think manager theory (Braun et al., 2017; Schein, 1973). This theory continues to plague women as it is still a barrier to career advancement. The think-male, think-manager theory also ties in with role congruity theory.

Another area that can be seen as a possible barrier to equality in the workplace is the fact that women run a double shift, working all day, and tending to family and housework at night (Thomas et al., 2020). This double shift runs continuously for women 7 days a week, 365 days of the year, even on vacation. The double shift surpasses domestic duties to include caregiving for senior parents and, in some cases, looking after both sides of the extended family. It is hard to achieve gender equality when at the domestic level, women are predominantly still doing most of the work in the home. A growing trend to sharing domestic and family duties more equitably among partners who each work is beginning to change the work-home balance.

Glass Ceiling

Women have faced negative limitations and barriers in the workplace, including sexism, motherhood penalty, weak negotiators, and biased performance evaluations. This

discrimination hinders women from accelerating in their career because their male counterparts are treated more favorably, while women are penalized with their salary, performance evaluations, and for being a mother (Beard, 2013). Metaphors like glass ceiling, glass cliff, glass escalator, sticky floor, maternal wall, and labyrinth all limit women from advancing in their careers (Carli & Eagly, 2016). The glass ceiling is the metaphor most often used. Despite progress to bridge the gap there are still glaring inequities that make women's ascension to leadership difficult.

Society underestimates and does not sufficiently understand the difficulty women have acting as their own advocate to advance in their career, nor does society grasp the gender-based leadership gaps in many professions (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). The glass ceiling impedes women's ability to advance to senior and executive management. Dowling (2017) recognized the metaphor of the glass ceiling but insisted that women should still be able to prove themselves. By looking at how women are underrepresented, Dowling maintained there is a bias that hinders women from being promoted. As such, Dowling discussed how the policies that are put in place to advance women are still lacking and do not help them accordingly. Organizations are autonomous and there is no one policy that can be applied across all organizations; therefore, it is important to also see the limitations of the glass ceiling that reduce the contribution of women in any organization (Dowling, 2017).

The glass ceiling is also problematic in situations of sexual harassment. For example, in a study by Yousaf and Schmiede (2016), an alarming 87.6% of the women in the workforce surveyed reported experiences of sexual harassment, and this does not

account for the number of women who did not report sexual harassment in the workplace, including those who identified as a sexual minority (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual minority people). These individuals are even less likely to report sexual harassment. Women also reported that sexual harassment is yet another obstacle to navigate during their career. Unfortunately, sexual harassment is engrained and prevalent throughout all levels of organizations and across all industries. There is hope that improved, transparent, and zero tolerance policies will protect women and sexual minority people as the goal is to create a safer work environment without fear of sexual harassment. The review of this research literature shows the drastic differences in experiences of women based on geographic sample and why it is important to further the discussions and training in supporting women in the workplace (Yousaf & Schmiede, 2016).

Barnes (2017) looked at the career experiences of African American women and how salary differences in leadership styles and acceptance affected their career. There were notable obstacles and biases, which confirmed that the glass ceiling is better referred to as the concrete ceiling for women of color. Expectations were fierce and greater for these women compared to their male and White female counterparts. Barnes recommended mentorship, inclusivity and staying true to oneself to overcome barriers. Increased awareness and resources are needed to support diverse ethnic and equity-deserving communities (Barnes, 2017).

Glass Cliff

Another problematic reality for women is when they are finally promoted, sometimes it is likely a high-risk appointment in a company that is in distress (Glass & Cook, 2016). The glass cliff phenomenon introduced by Ryan and Haslam (2005) argues that women are appointed to executive or C-Suite positions only during times of company distress or peril, but not when the company is doing well (Elsaid & Ursel, 2018). The glass cliff concept is worrisome, especially since women take on risky appointments at the time when the organization is struggling. Baker and Cangemi (2016) looked to help organizations overcome this shortfall and focused on helping organizations find solutions to the problems of glass ceiling and glass cliff.

Queen Bee Syndrome

Another barrier to female career advancement is the queen bee syndrome. Successful female executives become a queen bee when they lack the enthusiasm and reciprocity to help junior females advance since they personally did not receive any help along the way. This means that queen bees can be uncollaborative and unsupportive (Faniko et al., 2017). The problem with the queen bee syndrome is that it prevents young rising women leaders from learning leadership skills from the queen bee, thus perpetuating the glass or concrete ceiling further. The responsibility for balancing gender quotas in executive management is not only on men in organizations; as female leaders, women also have a role in ensuring gender equity in top leadership positions.

Barriers still exist for women in leadership. Some barriers include lack of strong mentorship, gender stereotypes that depict women as unfit leaders, burden of childcare

and family, domestic responsibilities, lack of networks, pay inequity, and promotion discrimination. Since unconscious bias exists, at times women can be perceived as incompetent leaders. However, despite the barriers, women are working hard to surmount the obstacles and attain leadership positions. To do so, women need to learn how to navigate the labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women need to find mentors, ask to be sponsored, and participate in development programs that will give them the experience to practice leadership (Carli & Eagly, 2016).

Career Mentorship

Lack of informal mentoring prevents women from advancing beyond their current positions because there is no professional network or support system for women to develop professionally (Bynum, 2015). Although several Fortune 500 companies use mentoring, it is still not widespread beyond the top companies. Formal mentoring is effective, but informal mentoring can be more effective as it is less structured and more accessible. The problem is there is a shortage of mentoring for women. Collaborative mentoring includes mentoring circles, peer mentoring and family support. Each type of mentoring plays a role in supporting women to achieve leadership goals through relational learning (Bynum, 2015). Ibarra et al. (2013) interviewed 40 men and women at peak senior levels in their career to discuss the differences in their mentoring experiences. Results demonstrated that women sometimes are over-mentored but under-sponsored, so women need sponsorship to succeed and advance in their careers. Men normally receive adequate mentorship and sponsorship, but Ibarra et al. found a lack of sponsorship opportunities for women.

Barnes (2017) looked at the differences in women's leadership experiences based on their various cultural backgrounds to understand how women can advance in leadership and achieve excellence. Barnes argued the importance for women to actively seek good mentors and to be forthcoming with their career plans. Networking is also fundamental for women (Lin et al., 2019). Since some of the experiences of women include systemic gender inequalities, lack of strategies to navigate bias, inequitable pay, and a lack of a family-friendly organizational structure, these factors should be considered by organizations as they hinder women's career advancement possibilities.

A lack of mentoring opportunities for women was noted as the reason for a disproportionate number of female executive university administrators in relation to their male counterparts (Searby et al., 2015). Although this research is focused on women in business, there are also inequities with women in academia. Out of 120 responses gathered by Searby et al. (2015), none of the women were being formally mentored, but many were being informally mentored. Findings indicated women were asking for multiple and diverse mentoring opportunities to benefit more fully, an experience referred to as a mentoring constellation or mentoring mosaic. Searby et al.'s results could mean that women are seeking and wanting mentorship opportunities.

The lack of proper mentoring for women affects their confidence and accessibility to advancement. Men are mentored more, and women are mentored less because they are perceived as less capable (Allen et al., 2016). The work of Allen et al. (2016) is a practical call to action on developing gender equity in the workplace. Allen also put emphasis on organizations to play a greater role in advancing the careers of women

through training and gender-free evaluations, and by developing opportunities for both men and women to take on family responsibilities as well as succeed in the workplace.

Mentorship benefits academics in medicine and is fundamental for career development (Ayyala et al., 2019). Brock and Rowlands (2019) looked at 50 shared journeys of executive women in the C-Suite and collated similar themes on developing leadership models, including mentorship. Brock and Rowlands noted how female CEOs came together to share their stories and experiences and how they built their confidence early on because of mentors in their life. Mentorship has a positive impact on advancing women in their careers (Helms et al., 2016). CEOs and organizations should continue to work together to help future female professionals.

Career Sponsorship

Sponsorship is defined as a powerful executive leader who advocates critically on behalf of a more junior executive and who can advance the careers of young professionals (E. W. Patton et al., 2017). Levine et al. (2020) defined a sponsor as someone with authority and influence who also proactively supports and helps guide the career advancement of a less senior person for promotion and advancement. Hewlett (2019) defined sponsorship as “a professional relationship in which an established or rising leader identifies and chooses an outstanding junior talent, develops that person’s career, and reaps significant rewards for these efforts” (p. 4). A sponsor is generally defined as someone “with clout who can advocate for the career advancement of protégés by introducing them to others in positions of influence and recommending them for positions or promotions” (Hilsabeck, 2018, p. 286). Mentors do not have this clout and do

not advocate like sponsors; rather, a mentor tends to guide and support their mentees (Hilsabeck, 2018). Career sponsorship is when powerful senior people use their personal influence and authority to advocate career advancement for their sponsoree (Ibarra, 2019).

Although sponsorship is experienced differently by women, it is known as a critical component to achieve high-level advancement (Levine et al., 2020). Sponsorship propels, protects, and advances women to executive management (Helms et al., 2016). In contrast to women, men generally have greater access to sponsors with power and influence to advocate for them (Ang, 2018). One reason that women still hesitate to seek out sponsorship is because there are fewer female leaders; women are also less likely to be identified as protégés for career sponsorship compared to their male counterparts (Levine et al., 2020). Carbajal (2018) discussed how women face biases and microaggressions in their career that are known to disempower them at a time when it is important to be empowered with the confidence and skills to succeed. Networking, mentorship, and sponsorship are critical to climb the corporate ladder for upward career mobility and women are at a disadvantage without sponsorship. It is vital that women have greater access to sponsorship because sponsorship is essential to career advancement in today's corporate climate (Hilsabeck, 2018).

There is an unfair bias against women that propagates gender stereotypes; female leaders must learn to deal with the reality that emotional double binds are always present in the workplace (Brescoll, 2016). Historically, leadership and executive management have been seen as male roles, so sponsorship for women is essential to help women

overcome the structural and psychological barriers of achieving and maintaining executive positions. Ayyala et al. (2019) argued sponsorship is critical for career development with their research on academics in medicine, but sponsorship's advantages can be applied across other industries as women compete for or achieve competitive positions normally attained by male colleagues. There are ways that men can play a positive role in helping achieve gender balance in executive management by being sponsors and male champions (Valerio & Sawyer, 2016) who help advance women in leadership. Male sponsors can support and help women develop and advance their careers with gender-inclusive leadership.

Career Development and Leadership

In general, women and men lead differently, so understanding how they are different is important to distinguishing their leadership styles and devising solutions to accentuate their leadership capabilities (Adler & Osland, 2016). Differing leadership styles between men and women also limit women from becoming CEOs (Carbajal, 2018). Girls are generally raised to look after others first before dedicating themselves to their own strategic trajectory to leadership (Ben-Noam, 2018). Family responsibilities, organizational culture, and limited organizational networking and organizational practices hinder women from advancing in their career. Furthermore, women are less narcissistic as leaders and take less calculated risks than men (Ingersoll et al., 2017), which is critical for organizational sustainability. Still, with social support, including coaching and mentoring, women can gain confidence and the balance needed to help them advance in their career (Jauhar & Lau, 2018). Fitzsimmons and Callan (2016)

argued the benefits of individualized strategies for female employees that include flexibility around family responsibilities, networking, training, self-promotion, and self-confidence for career development. Strategically specified leadership training based on gender could lead to increased human and social capital and help to address gender inequality.

O'Neil et al. (2015) designed a framework to help develop women leaders. O'Neil et al.'s work was informed by the literature on women in leadership and an acknowledged gap in women's leadership preparation. Three factors, "challenging organizational contexts, work-life integration, and career- and life-stage issues" (p. 254) were cited as contributing to the challenges women face when seeking to aspire to leadership roles. Executive coaching may be one way to mitigate these factors and development key leadership strategies for women who wish to advance. O'Neil et al.'s (2015) research illustrated some practical executive coaching practices, which can be helpful for advancing women's careers in light of underlying gender bias and double bind.

Transformational learning is helpful for understanding the tools women need to advance and succeed in leadership (Debebe et al., 2016). When organizations are open-minded and have the capacity and resources to implement such positive leadership training, transformational learning can support women who are seeking to advance their career. Debebe et al. (2016) suggested organizations develop an improved mentorship program because the mentee and mentor relationship is a delicate balance. Focusing on

the mentoring program is a way organizations can develop leadership training for female employees looking to advance their career.

Another area of leadership development that is valuable is inclusive leadership. Sugiyama et al. (2016) conducted a comparison of general leadership development programs (GLDPs) and women's leadership development programs (WLDPs) to understand how various programming approaches inclusive leadership. Sugiyama et al. examined the differences, similarities, strengths, and weaknesses of each leadership development program. The significance of Sugiyama et al.'s study is that it further promoted the importance of leadership programs to foster an understanding of oneself and others as one develops into a leader. Similarly, Madsen and Andrade (2018) looked at the dearth of female leaders in postsecondary education due to a lack of role models and effective leadership development. Madsen and Andrade recommended that society and organizations improve opportunities for women by helping them develop their competencies, supporting their aspirations, and providing mentorship and coaching. It is fundamental to have continuous succession leadership training and development to support female professionals to create greater diversity and gender equality. In addition, to leadership development and training, productive feedback is also needed and missing for women (Madsen & Andrade, 2018).

Another contentious area that stalls female career advancement is performance evaluations (Correll & Simard, 2016). Correll and Simard (2016) reviewed 200 performance evaluations revealing that women generally received vague feedback without direct indicators on how to improve outcomes. In contrast, men's evaluations

normally focused on specific business outcomes, so men benefitted from a more direct goal-based evaluation that was structured and thus enhanced their careers. Correll and Simard argued that vague feedback holds women back and adds to the low number of women advancing in leadership despite efforts to increase female representation. Women receive less feedback and structured development training to be leaders with a leadership style that is effective. Furthermore, there are already considerable gender stereotypes and unconscious biases that plague women, which make productive feedback appreciated and needed. The benefits of leadership development and effective feedback at Microsoft helped seven women get promoted to senior leadership positions. Therefore, in this case, feedback and development helped advance women. Correll and Simard recommended that future research could focus on improving feedback styles and strategies needed by females in order to progress.

Learning from the personal experiences of female executives helps improve organizational processes (Correll & Simard, 2016). Smith and Suby-Long (2019) invited 10 women to share their lived experiences related to their career and the continued underrepresentation of women in senior leadership. Women were allowed to tell their story through a narrative lens of reflection, reflection on purpose, and narrative sharing.

Women still carry the larger burden of domestic responsibilities, making work-life balance sometimes difficult to achieve and making advancement for women even more difficult. Hurley and Choudhary (2016) found that social and educational factors affect women achieving the C-Suite. Hurley and Choudhary's quantitative study on American publicly traded firms examined the differences in how men versus women

achieved CEO status in a firm by looking at how individual characteristics played a role in leadership selection. The research method included correlation analyses; results showed how the number of years of education, number of children, and number of employees in the business can determine to a great extent the probability of a female CEO. With more children, the likelihood of a woman CEO dropped, while women with more education, fewer children, and who worked in a firm with many employees had an increased likelihood of being a CEO. This research showed rigor and relevance, and this study could be replicated using other sample sets (Hurley & Choudhary, 2016).

Leadership development for women is critical for improved gender balance in executive management. Mentors and sponsors are also an essential part of leadership development. Bickel (2014) looked at 25 years of career development experiences and the positive effects of male mentors for female academic mentees in medicine. Bickel also examined the gap in mentors for females in comparison to the number of mentors for men. Male mentorship is also equally important and valuable. Female mentorship is also critical, but female professionals need exposure and experience with many different mentors and sponsorship to practice learned behaviors of leadership that give them the confidence and credibility to overcome role incongruity theory and gender discrimination (Bickel, 2014).

The literature review contained an evaluation of RCT on women in leadership as a conceptual framework through a thematic review of the literature. The evidence suggests little is known about the positive and necessary implementation of sponsorship for women's advancement into executive level leadership positions. Career sponsorship

produces career benefits and professional advancement for female executives. The literature review also covered the impact of career sponsorship in academia, healthcare, and organizations primarily located outside of Canada. Therefore, there is a gap in the literature on the lived experience of career sponsorship for Canadian women in business, providing an opportunity for this study to inform the body of knowledge on career sponsorship as a tool for advancing women's leadership into the executive level.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological hermeneutic study was to describe the lived experiences of career sponsorship from the perspectives of Canadian female executives who were sponsored. The population was Canadian female executives in the corporate sector who held executive management positions and had a formal or informal career sponsorship experience. I endeavored to understand whether career sponsorship has an impact on a woman's career advancement and how Canadian female executives described this experience. The data collection strategy included semistructured interviews. Interview transcripts were analyzed using manual coding and NVivo data analysis software. The qualitative phenomenological research design was best suited to the study purpose. Chapter 3 presents the research design and rationale for the study, role of the researcher, methodology, data collection and instrumentation, recruitment of participants, data analysis plan, trustworthiness and ethical considerations, and a summary. This study was conducted to contribute to the knowledge base of the advancement of Canadian female executives and the impact of career sponsorship on leadership training and development. The goal of the research was to create a understanding of achieving gender balance and to explore whether career sponsorship can play a role in increasing gender balance and diversity in executive management, also known as the C-suite, in Canadian companies.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question for this qualitative phenomenological study addressed how career sponsorship impacted Canadian female executives' career advancement. In

conducting a study on understanding the problem of gender disparity in the C-suite in Canada, I first had to decide on the type of study. I had to decide on which philosophical worldview the research would be based. The five prevailing paradigms are positivism, postpositivism, critical theory, constructivism, and participatory (Babbie, 2017). The positivist paradigm is based on the work of Comte and is seen as a naïve realism, while postpositivism is seen as a critical realism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The critical theory worldview is more of a historical realism based on social, political, cultural, and economic values and experiences, while the constructivist worldview is based on local and coconstructed realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The participatory view is centered on participative reality, both subjective and objective, and includes the postmodern and transformative viewpoints. The positivist and postpositivist approaches are scientific in nature and better suited for quantitative research, while critical theory tends to be qualitative or mixed-methods research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The constructivist worldview was premised on Berger and Luckmann's (1967) work; later, constructivism included Lincoln and Guba's (1985) writings. The constructivist view is associated with qualitative research. Participatory research lends to a qualitative research design based on participation and participative realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

I had to choose a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approach when seeking to understand the impact of sponsorship on career development and advancement. Qualitative researchers take more of a holistic view of the world and understand that there is no single reality, while quantitative researchers require numerical data (Goes & Simon, 2017). When considering a deeper look at the experiences of female

executives, I determined a qualitative study with a transformative worldview would best suit the objectives of the study.

Quantitative research is objective and focused on theory testing, experiments, longitudinal designs, surveys, and statistics. Qualitative research is subjective and concentrates on theory development, phenomenology, narrative research, case study, and ethnography (Babbie, 2017). Social researchers argue that standardized surveys are less effective, while mixed-methods research is a combination of the two research methods. After a preliminary review of the literature, I wanted to be able to describe the phenomenon of gender disparity in Canadian companies at the C-suite level and to understand the experiences of previous and current female Canadian executives. The participants' views in the context of their specific setting were important to gain an understanding of the female executive experience, to explain gender disparity in the C-suite, and to determine whether career sponsorship has an impact on the advancement of Canadian female executives.

The most appropriate approach for this study was qualitative phenomenology. Qualitative phenomenology allowed me to look at the research problem, which was the scarcity of knowledge about female Canadian executives' lived experiences of career sponsorship. I gained a deeper understanding of the real-life experiences of the participants through the phenomenological approach. To better comprehend the problem of gender disparity at the executive level, I explored the lived career sponsorship experiences of Canadian female executives. The approach was considered most suitable to not only document the participants' personal experiences but also to discover new

knowledge, patterns, or themes that could add to the body of knowledge in business management, specifically on women in executive leadership. Qualitative methodology was selected because it was unknown how many Canadian female executives would be willing and able to participate in detailed interviews. Qualitative research is about depth of insight rather than amassing numerical data; therefore, a small sample size would not have impeded the purpose of the study, which was to gain insight into Canadian female executives' experiences with career sponsorship for attaining C-suite positions.

The philosophical position for the study was a transformative worldview because the research was focused on social change and reform. The topic of career sponsorship for female executives is still a new phenomenon compared to the career sponsorship among male executives. Women's leadership development is not as common as it is for men; this fact contributes to why so few women achieve the C-suite status in an organization and remain, to some extent, marginalized from top leadership positions. The problem is exacerbated for women of color, Indigenous women, and people in the LGBTQ2+ community.

I wanted to explore the central phenomenon of the impact of career sponsorship on the advancement of female executives in Canada. According to RCT (Eagly & Karau, 2002), gender expectations affect women who strive to advance to executive leadership because this form of leadership is perceived as a masculine role and therefore not congruent with the expectations for women. Accordingly, women often encounter prejudice and obstacles as they seek to advance their careers. The goal of the research

was to discover to what extent sponsorship may have assisted in helping sponsorees succeed in achieving an executive position.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the qualitative researcher is to remain impartial while recognizing their personal biases so they may confront them and disallow them from influencing the research. The qualitative researcher is an observer in the research process. The goal of qualitative research is to uncover new information while simultaneously paying attention to researcher reflexivity, including researcher biases, personal backgrounds, and factors that may impede objectivity (M. Q. Patton, 2015). Suggestions for removing bias during the interview include writing personal notes that contain observations, thoughts, and patterns, while remaining careful not to affect the respondent's answers. The qualitative researcher seeks to gather rich data from multiple voices, perspectives, and themes.

The two philosophical approaches to phenomenology are Husserl's transcendental approach and Heidegger's hermeneutic approach (Heotis, 2020). Each approach is used to explore and better understand the human experience (Heotis, 2020). Husserl originally wanted richer descriptions based on lived experience, which natural science did not provide; the transcendental approach allowed Husserl to bracket any preconceived ideas and separate them from the research. Essentially, bracketing means putting aside any bias the researcher might have with the research to look at the raw data with an unbiased perspective. In contrast, Heidegger, who was Husserl's former student, developed the hermeneutic approach out of Husserl's transcendental approach. Heidegger conceived a slightly different method in that the opinions and experiences of the researcher are

considered as important as the participants' views because such experiences help the researcher better interpret the data and construct meaning behind the results. Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology claims that interpretation is critical and inseparable from the world (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). Van Manen (2017) stated that phenomenology in its original sense demands phenomenological researchers to have knowledge and appreciation for the past and present phenomenologists. A hermeneutic approach is used to study the meaning of the participants' responses (Goes & Simon, 2017). Hermeneutics is a continuous process of expanding the research for greater understanding, leading to overlapping related experiences among the participants (Goes & Simon, 2017).

Methodology

In qualitative research, there are strategies required for conducting the research and collecting the data. Semistructured interviews were the most appropriate form of data collection to understand the lived experiences of Canadian female executives. Semistructured interviews allowed me to obtain a better understanding of the participants' experiences and offered a measure of research quality, validity, and reliability.

Eleven Canadian female executives participated in this study. Interviews were conducted by way of Microsoft Teams and recorded using Otter.ai transcription software. The intention was to encourage participants to feel comfortable in telling their story about the experience of being sponsored and the effect of sponsorship on their careers. To accomplish this goal, I used an interview protocol (see Appendix A). Although the intent was to interview participants who had both formal and informal sponsorship experiences,

all 11 participants had participated in only informal sponsorship relationships. Questions were asked about the positive and the negative aspects of the experience. Participants were asked to describe what the experience gave them for their careers and what may have been missing in the experience to prepare them for executive positions.

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai transcription software. I used manual coding assisted by NVivo qualitative analysis software to code, organize, and report the data. By analyzing data on the experience of career sponsorship among the participants, I revealed common patterns and themes that could add to the body of knowledge in advancing female representation at the C-suite. Qualitative methodology was beneficial in this study because it allowed for personal recounts of lived experiences rather than structured exact responses that would be found in a quantitative study. A phenomenological design was best suited for this research to better understand the lived experiences of the participants.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

The research question addressed how career sponsorship impacted Canadian female executives' career advancement. The phenomenon of interest was the impact of career sponsorship on the underrepresentation of women in the C-suite. The lived experiences of sponsorship were explored through interviews. The data were reported by means of thick description, with detail from the statements by participants. The goal of this study was to create social change by encouraging a career process for executive women that enables them to overcome gender discrimination and gender bias. The

intention was to add to the body of knowledge regarding the experience of career sponsorship among female executives.

The interview process was the primary method of data collection and the principal instrument to conduct the research. The interview was an exploration of the reality of the career sponsorship phenomenon on the advancement of Canadian female executives. The lived experiences by each Canadian female executive were unique and added value to the data in understanding participants' experiences of career sponsorship.

Each qualitative interview was geared toward depth rather than breadth because the rich data were found in the in-depth conversation between me and the participant. Babbie (2017) stated that in a qualitative interview the participant speaks the most and the researcher speaks only about 5% of the time to garner as much valuable information as possible. The researcher is the interviewer and asks the questions to allow participants to tell the story of their experiences (Babbie, 2017). The wording of the questions was consistent to ensure clarity and fairness, because sometimes the questions may have come across as subtly predisposed to lean toward a certain biased response. The first question led into the following questions in logical order to help the interview run smoothly. The interview process had several stages, which were followed precisely because consistency is critical to collecting credible data.

According to Babbie (2017), the seven stages of the interview process include ensuring that the purpose of the interview and the concepts are made clear (thematizing), planning out the process and ethical considerations (designing), conducting the interviews (interviewing), transliterating the recorded interview (transcribing), studying

the collected data (analyzing), reviewing the reliability and validity of the data (verifying), and following up on knowledge dissemination (reporting). Each interview in the current study started with a debrief about the purpose of the research. Participants were asked to provide full, descriptive responses but also to focus on their experiences and not their viewpoints (see Peoples, 2020).

Instrumentation in phenomenological research includes an assortment of techniques such as interviews, focus groups, field notes, journaling, and audio/video recording (Peoples, 2020). The interviews in the current study were conducted using my personal computer and Teams video software. I served as the primary conductor of the interviews and as primary data collector. My personal computer was password protected, and the data were stored in a password-protected and encrypted cloud storage based in Canada. Data results were not shared with other parties; data results and analysis were only presented for the purposes of this research at this time. With permission of the participants, I will be able to disseminate the findings from the study at conferences or for further academic research. At all times, participants' confidentiality was maintained.

Recruitment of Participants

Potential participants were notified of the purpose of the research and given the opportunity to participate. The protocol for the recruitment of participants was to reach out on LinkedIn to potential participants, including Canadian female CEOs, C-Suite executives, Presidents, Vice Presidents, Directors, National Directors, or women in executive leadership positions. Potential participants who accepted the connection were later sent an email by the researcher asking if they would be able to participate in a

confidential interview about their career sponsorship experience and the impact of that experience on their career advancement journey (see Appendix B). The email also included a recruitment flyer (see Appendix C) and consent form (see Appendix D), which also included the research ethics approval number for the research study. Interviews followed an interview protocol and were recorded for transcription purposes with the acknowledgment and consent of the participant. The sampling criteria for this research study focused strictly on Canadian female executives in organizations with at least 20–25 employees and who held positions in the C Suite or executive management. Former female CEOs or executives from the past 5 years were also considered in the research as their lived experiences were also meaningful and had relevance to the research. Since qualitative researchers are also intent on understanding meaning, the hope was that the participants would provide the rich, detailed data needed to analyze the findings. This also meant that the participants felt comfortable with the researcher to share their personal and lived experiences of career sponsorship and career advancement.

The recruitment process included internet searches to locate Canadian female executives in organizations throughout the country. The following Canadian industry organizations were also searched for potential participants: Women in Leadership Association, Women’s Executive Network, Canadian Women’s Foundation, Women’s CEO Roundtable, Company of Women, 30% Club, and the Canadian Chamber of Commerce. The goal was to find enough interested individuals who met the inclusion criteria and would partake in the research interview. The researcher was cognizant that participation recruitment is a long process and would take time to complete.

The second step of the recruitment strategy involved utilizing LinkedIn as a source to connect with the female executives identified in the recruitment search. The researcher reached out to 250 Canadian female executives across the country on LinkedIn to ask if they had been on the receiving end of a formal or informal sponsorship. Once the researcher received a reply from the individuals confirming they were recipients of a formal or informal sponsorship experience, the researcher invited interested individuals to participate in an interview of their lived experience of career sponsorship via email. Interested individuals received an email containing the recruitment flyer. All interested participants were also given an informed consent form, which outlined the study's topic, purpose, eligibility requirements, and information about the privacy of participants' data. Participants were also allowed to skip any question in the interview process or withdraw from the study without penalty at any time. The goal was to ask a wide variety of women to participate to ensure a sufficient sample of participants, approximately 10–15 participants. If the number of participants needed could not be located through purposive sampling, snowball sampling was considered as a second strategy. Recruitment commenced upon approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The interview protocol outlined the structure of the interview, confidentiality, anonymity, research ethics, password protected data storage, and value of female executives' participation. The researcher communicated that participants' responses would be collated, codified, and reported, which will contribute to the current knowledge on advancing women in leadership and the impact of career sponsorship. Data collection

began with the first scheduled interview and continued until data saturation was reached, which occurred after 11 participants.

Data Analysis Plan

The purpose of a data analysis plan was to outline the method for understanding the meaning of the data through a logical analysis process. Findings from this research study came from data obtained in semistructured interviews with female Canadian CEOs, women in the C-Suite, and executive and senior directors. The data analysis plan employed a modified van Kaam process (Moustakas, 1994), looking at common themes to foster a greater understanding and potentially newer discoveries. The researcher used interpretative phenomenological analysis to make sense of the experiences and perceptions of Canadian female executives in business related to career sponsorship. The modified van Kaam process of data analysis looks at bracketing oneself from the data to remain impartial as best as possible (Moustakas, 1994). The findings of this study may contribute to positive social change by providing necessary information regarding how Canadian women can be better supported in the organizations they lead.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is evaluated differently than it is in quantitative research. This research was a hermeneutic qualitative research study and trustworthiness was achieved through interviews with participants about their lived experiences. The researcher aimed to achieve trustworthiness and overcome criticisms made by positivists (Shenton, 2004), ensuring the criteria for achieving trustworthiness was present in the research. Some methodologists give suggestions on how to improve

trustworthiness in hermeneutic qualitative research. For example, Peoples (2020) discussed using member checks by asking participants to “verify the accuracy of the transcripts but not the accuracy of the transcriptions” (Peoples, 2020, p. 70). Member checks allow participants to examine their personal viewpoints to develop a wider perspective (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and are critical to building trustworthiness. Participants were allowed to read through their transcripts to verify the information they provided accurately conveyed their perspectives and lived experiences related to sponsorship.

In this qualitative research process, the researcher endeavored to follow a rigorous set of criteria that would lead to a research study that would be considered valid, reliable, trustworthy, and credible. Validity in qualitative research is about accuracy, providing faithfulness to the participant’s experience, which builds trustworthiness (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Validity can also be achieved through Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) four paradigms of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility occurs in research when the study’s data are confirmed as truthful and correct. Credibility is established through member checks and triangulation. In this study, triangulation occurred through the interview transcripts, researcher’s field notes, and participant member checks. Transferability is the extent to which a research study can be transferred to a wider framework while keeping its rich data. Dependability means that the findings are consistent and stable, while confirmability essentially admits that the researcher could be subjective based on their own prior experiences; therefore, every effort is taken to make the data support itself (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). These four

paradigms help position the researcher in achieving quality research. Trustworthiness can be accomplished with triangulation (e.g., observation, field notes, focus groups, individual interviews) to diminish any potential bias from the researcher. Lastly, qualitative research differs from quantitative research in that it is accountable to the experiences of the participants and less so the methods (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). The researcher utilized individual interviews and field notes as a form of triangulation. Field notes allowed the researcher to observe participants' facial expressions to ensure consistency in what the participants were recounting and the facial gestures they displayed. Participants were all high-level executives but displayed professionalism, patience, and enthusiasm recounting their experiences of career sponsorship.

In addition to validity and trustworthiness, the researcher completed research ethics training in June 2022 accredited by the Canadian Federal Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, 2nd Edition (TCPS2), which is a Canadian federal accreditation in research ethics. The researcher ensured the informed consent, privacy, and protection of confidentiality of the participants' identity and their recorded data. During this entire process, the researcher used discretion and ethical judgment when collecting the data, interacting with the participants, and evaluating the benefits and risks of the research. Research ethics is paramount in research and all measures were taken to ensure trustworthiness.

Summary

The goal of this study was to create social change by encouraging a sponsorship process for executive women that enables them to gain access, build requisite leadership

skills, develop confidence, and be better leaders. The intention is to disseminate the information and knowledge gained from the research to share with women's professional networks, organizations, government-related women's committees, academic institutions, and other organizations that could benefit from the results of the research. Overcoming gender discrimination in hiring executives will improve the ability of organizations to retain top female talent and to recruit and train female professionals. Furthermore, providing a work environment that allows for flexible scheduling will permit employees, including women, to balance work and family, which will lead to improved job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Spellman et al., 2018; Verma et al., 2013). Many working mothers are constantly juggling work, family, domestic, and caregiving duties, which can lead to burnout and stress. The hermeneutic approach enabled an interpretation of the data considering known issues associated with gender bias. The interpretations were verified according to the standards of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

This chapter contained a discussion of the methodological design of the hermeneutic phenomenological research, including the interview protocol and process as well as the data collection methods and analysis. The goal of the study was to illustrate Canadian female executives' lived experiences of career sponsorship and how career sponsorship has affected their career. This research aspired to effect change and advance the practice of leadership training and development for all women, including women of color, Indigenous women, and the LGTBQ2+ community. The significance of RCT explains the gender stereotype and implicit bias women face in business and how gender

bias affects their career advancement. A possible contribution this study makes is increased knowledge on the impact of career sponsorship for female executives as well as an increased awareness of leadership and development. Even though the demographic group was limited to Canadian female executives, the results from this study will benefit women and organizations in other countries by advancing the discussion on understanding women's career barriers, which may potentially help organizations improve their own policies. Supporting gender equality, diversity, career leadership, and development for female professionals makes financial sense and is a positive social change. When more women can participate in a career sponsorship opportunity to advance their career, their organization, and sponsor other employees in the future, they continue this positive social change into future generations of women leaders.

Chapter 4: Results

The goal of this research was to describe the lived experiences of career sponsorship from the perspective of Canadian female executives and the impact of career sponsorship on Canadian female executives' career advancement. The exploration revealed how career sponsorship propelled 11 Canadian female executives to the C-suite and how they were able to maintain those executive positions because of their personal determination, technical skill, and sponsorship training. The results demonstrated how these 11 Canadian female executives experienced informal career sponsorship and their perceptions of the benefits they received from career sponsorship. The data insights can be used to inform four groups:

- younger female (and other rising) professionals on the impact of career sponsorship for their career advancement,
- organizations on the importance on strengthening their retention and succession plans through increased career sponsorship,
- potential sponsors to take the risk and invest in protégé/sponsee, and
- previously sponsored professionals to pay it forward and sponsor future working professionals.

Research Setting

The research setting was a virtual interview with me and the participant using a Teams platform. All interviews were conducted in private and closed offices with Otter.ai transcription software to record the interview. Each of the participants was welcomed; I explained that the interview would be recorded, and the transcription would be retained

with any repetitive language removed. I sent the transcription to each participant for their review and approval following the interview. After the interviews, every participant reflected and shared their positive experience participating in the study. Each participant expressed that they were grateful for the opportunity to discuss their career sponsorship journey. Additionally, the study allowed the participants to share their experience for the first time in an informal manner, and this opportunity positively impacted the way they viewed sponsorship in their current career paths. The participants acknowledged the significance of how this research could assist them in leading other female professionals.

Demographics

The demographics of the sample group included Canadian female executives who (a) were Canadian citizens or foreign nationals working in Canada, (b) were currently in an executive position, (c) participated in a career sponsorship experience, and (d) worked in the business sector excluding health care and academia. The focus of the research was to interview Canadian women in business because there was a gap in the literature related to Canadian women in the C-suite. I made a concentrated effort to include participants from diverse ethnic communities across Canada. The intent was to procure a deeper and wider representation of lived experiences and voices from a varied group of Canadian female executives.

The recruitment process was difficult because although there was interest from one female executive from one western province and another female executive from an eastern province, only female executives from Ontario and Quebec participated in the interviews. The lack of geographic diversity could be attributed to the fact that both

Ontario and Quebec have the highest gross domestic product compared to the other provinces in Canada; therefore, there could be a direct correlation between recruitment, economic output, and likelihood of women being in executive positions. The high number of female executives in businesses in Ontario and Quebec resulted in greater participation from this sector of the country. I made a strategic effort for cultural diversity and sent emails to many female executives from other provinces. The sample was homogenous due to participant self-selection. I attempted to recruit newcomers to Canada; however, none of the participants were newcomers to Canada. Although I anticipated the recruitment process would occur quickly, the process of finding participants who met the criteria and were available to participate consumed more time than initially planned. The entire data collection process took over 4 months to complete. Table 1 provides the organizational positions of the 11 participants.

Table 1

Participants' Organizational Position

Position	Number
CEO/president	1
C-suite	4
Senior/executive vice president, vice president	5
Director	1

An overview of the executive positions of the participants revealed that five were in the C-suite role, five were vice presidents (including senior and/or executive vice presidents), and one was a director who is considered an executive with approximately 750 people reporting to her directly or indirectly. All participants were in various sectors,

but an overview of the breakdown is shown in Table 2. Six of the 11 women were working in the financial sector, while the other five spanned other sectors.

Table 2

Participants' Industry Sector

Industry sector	Number
Financial services	6
Professional services	1
Consulting services	1
Energy	1
Insurance	1
Transportation	1

The process used to recruit participants included developing a list of Canada's top female executives across all provinces and territories. This list comprised executive women (C-suite or equivalent) from industry and professional associations, as well as Canada's Top CEOs, Canada's largest companies, Top 100 companies, industry associations, women's leadership associations, and searches on LinkedIn. Once the list was created, a short note about the purpose of the study was sent to 260 female executives on LinkedIn to connect for more information about the study. Upon the acceptance of the LinkedIn connection, I followed up with an email that included the recruitment flyer and consent form. When the Canadian female executive expressed interest in participating, I arranged an interview. Of the 260 connections, 97 approved the connections. I sent an invitation to 67 women who provided their email addresses. Of those 67 women, 19 women responded to the invitation indicating interest in participating in the study. A total of 11 qualified participants completed a semistructured interview

with me. Eight of the 19 potential participants expressed interest, but their work commitments did not allow them to schedule an interview during the data collection period. A summary of the recruitment outcomes is provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Recruitment Summary

Recruitment process	Number
Connections requested on LinkedIn	260
Accepted connections on LinkedIn	97
Emails sent	67
Positive responses from email for interview	19
Interviews held	11

The interview consisted of eight questions that resulted in a dialogue about sponsorship, which allowed me to understand the participants' experiences. The semistructured format was preferred to create a natural interviewing environment and to generate more dialogue and discussion. The audio-recorded interviews were conducted virtually using the Teams platform and were transcribed using Otter.ai transcription software. I conducted data analysis using NVivo, manual coding, and thematic analysis. Data collection was accomplished following a rigorous interview protocol to ensure the consistency of data collection across all 11 participants.

Data Collection

This study encompassed the voices of Canadian female executives employed in the business sector. The steps taken to collect the data included developing a list of over 400 Canadian female executives. I compiled this list from searching on the internet for industry and professional associations, Canada's Top CEOs, Canada's largest companies,

Top 100 companies, industry associations, women's leadership associations, and LinkedIn, from which 260 women were contacted through purposive sampling. After a deeper look at the LinkedIn profiles, 140 of the 400 women were not contacted because either they did not have a profile on LinkedIn, were working in not-for-profit organizations, were founders of their own business or family business, or did not meet other criteria for the study. In addition, I ensured people on the list were not affiliated with me professionally or personally.

The next step in the recruitment process included reaching out on LinkedIn to connect with the remaining 260 Canadian female executives from the original list of potential participants that was fully developed by me. Ultimately, 97 female executives accepted the connection on LinkedIn, demonstrating their interest in the research. The accepted connections received a follow-up email from me, which contained the research flyer and consent form. Connections expressed interest in participating in the study after reviewing the flyer and consent form via email. I replied to interest emails to schedule the interviews and obtain the signed consent form. This stage of recruitment proved challenging to find high-powered executives with available time for an interview during the data collection period. Many women executives' calendars were fully booked for 3 to 4 months out, and although 67 executives were emailed, only 11 participants ended up following through to participate in the interview, which was enough participants to achieve data saturation. The 11 participants who participated in the study provided rich descriptions of their personal lived experiences of career sponsorship.

A phenomenological design was identified as the most appropriate design for this qualitative study because phenomenology focuses on a small group of research subjects who share a common experience, in this case career sponsorship. The lived experience is at the core of phenomenological research; therefore, interviews were deemed most suitable means of describing participants' personal experience with career sponsorship. The semistructured interview also allowed me to "elicit in-depth, context-rich personal accounts, perceptions and perspectives" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018, p. 388). The primary data collection tool consisted of a semistructured interview containing eight open-ended questions.

The original research plan was to complete the data collection process within a 2-month time frame; however, the recruitment process was more complex than anticipated. For example, I was under the impression that more female Canadian executives would be willing to participate in such a dynamic study that would explore their lived experiences with sponsorship and how it impacted their career aspirations. I discovered data saturation was not necessarily associated with the number of participants interviewed who shares similar experiences, but rather the robust lived experiences of each participant and how their unique encounters with sponsorship differed in some manner.

There was a direct interaction with the participants through online virtual meetings facilitated by Microsoft Teams and audio transcription by Otter.ai, an artificially intelligent software that transcribes in real time. This method of recording the interviews allowed me to focus on the participants' lived experience rather than capturing every spoken word. The virtual Teams call ensured a personal and intimate setting, and

the participants were able to recount their lived experiences. I used live audio recording throughout the interview to capture the conversation accurately. Data collection integrity was a priority; therefore, the downloaded interview transcript was reviewed three times to ensure the accuracy of the data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis of the interview transcripts began immediately after the interviews using the modified van Kaam analysis method outlined by Moustakas (1994). The modified van Kaam analysis method contains seven main steps: (a) listing and grouping, (b) reduction and elimination, (c) clustering and thematizing, (d) validation, (e) individual textual description, (f) individual structural description, and (g) textural-structural description (Moustakas, 1994). According to Saldaña (2021), coding is commonly used in qualitative data analysis. A code “is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 4). Each question was coded in the cycle from multiple words and phrases to keywords and then synthesized. Saldaña referred to the first cycle of coding as analysis and the second coding cycle as synthesis in which the data are put back together in new groupings. The coding was completed after the first two cycles; I compared the codes from the question sets to look for common patterns and differences to allow themes to emerge from the data. Five themes emerged from the data to answer the research question.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

I followed qualitative research standards to ensure quality, honesty, and authenticity were achieved in the data collection and analysis. Trustworthiness is important in research because it refers to the degree of trust or confidence that the research was accomplished following rigorous research standards and is reliable. In each study, researchers should establish the protocols and procedures necessary for the study to be considered worthy of consideration by readers (Amankwaa, 2016). Although most experts agree trustworthiness is necessary, debates have been waged in the literature as to what constitutes trustworthiness (Leung, 2015). Four criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are accepted by many qualitative researchers and include credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Guba and Lincoln (1994) later added authenticity to highlight how trustworthy reporting includes the researcher's commitment to present the data fairly and in a way that is representative of all participants' perceived reality.

Credibility

I aimed for credibility by ensuring the participants were not known to me personally or professionally. Purposive sampling was used to reach out to over 250 Canadian female executives by connecting with them on LinkedIn. The connections that were accepted received a follow-up email from me informing the potential participant about the research study and consent form. I treated each of the participants equally. Data gathered from the participants were also treated fairly through use of the modified van Kaam analysis approach (see Moustakas, 1994). Transcript review was completed with

all 11 participants. The data collection process followed strict and uniform guidelines to ensure all participants were correctly identified and accurately portrayed.

Transferability

Transferability is important in qualitative research to show how the descriptions of the participants and the results provide a thorough understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of the study sample (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The current findings may be relatable to other settings and groups (i.e., women in health care, women in academia). I aimed to provide rich, detailed descriptions and explanations of the phenomenon (see Kostova, 2017) so the reader could transfer the findings to another situation.

Dependability

The research methods, including recruitment of participants, were created and executed to ensure the research could be replicated using the same methods to produce similar results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher followed rigorous research protocols so future research along the same methods would lead to similar findings. The goal of the researcher is to repeat the research again in other settings, so dependability was important to achieve.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the steps taken by the researcher to confirm the data amongst the research subjects; in other words, to use the data itself to confirm the validity of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, the researcher used an audit trail consisting of field notes taken during the interviews, the interview transcripts, and notes

made during analysis to support the veracity of the data. Additionally, each participant performed a member check of their own transcript to confirm the essence of their experiences was clearly communicated in the interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

This study allowed the researcher to understand how career sponsorship impacted Canadian females' career advancement to executive leadership. Of the 11 participants interviewed, five women held various roles in the C-Suite (chief executive officer, chief operating officer, chief procurement officer, chief client officer, chief human resources officer), five women were vice presidents (including senior and senior executive vice president), and one was a director, equivalent to a vice president. It is important to note that not all organizations use the C-Suite titles; some use president and vice president while others also use director to denote an executive position of power. Each of the 11 participants were assigned a pseudonym to ensure their identity was always kept confidential. For example, WL1 is the pseudonym for the first participant and stands for Women in Leadership Participant #1. Each of the participants will be referred to as WL1–WL11. Organizational and other identifiers were also removed from the study results to further protect participants' confidentiality. All the participants had multiple career sponsors; however, some participants did not realize in the beginning they were engaging in career sponsorship with their sponsor as the purpose of the relationship was not so obvious at first. Once these women understood the role of the sponsor and their role in the sponsorship, they started to develop professionally and advance their careers. Four themes emerged to answer the research question about the experiences of Canadian

female executives in career sponsorship: organic career sponsorship relationship, sponsors, sponsees, and sponsor-sponsee relationship. Each theme is discussed separately along with its corresponding subthemes. All themes and subthemes are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
Organic career sponsorship relationships	Natural, informal
Sponsors	Sponsor characteristics Sponsors as champions Sponsor limitations
Sponsees	Sponsee characteristics Career advancement
Sponsor–sponsee relationship	Reciprocity Risk Maintaining Sponsorship an advantage or disadvantage Sponsorship is succession planning Paying it forward No sponsor, no advancement

The participants in the study were asked questions about their experiences in obtaining career sponsorship and whether they initiated sponsorship themselves or the career sponsors discovered them. Participants explained the relationship was formed for the purpose of guiding the participant in their journey and assisting them in seeking growth opportunities within the organization. Based on this foundation, the four themes emerged from the conversations with the participants and how they shared their unique experiences on these positive relationships. The first section will begin with

understanding how these relationships had an impact on participants' professional aspirations. All the participants acknowledged that the career sponsorship was informal.

Organic Career Sponsorship Relationship

All participants confirmed they were sought out by their sponsor, except for one participant who sought out her sponsor after multiple sponsorships. All participants had multiple sponsors. WL1 stated,

It takes time to establish a sponsorship relationship because it sort of has to establish organically. My personal take is you can't ask someone that you don't know to be a sponsor, they need to get to know you first and truly believe it.

Then, generally, those relationships have continued while we are both in the organization and depending on where our positions are, and if they can influence.

WL2 indicated she approached her third sponsor and stated she wanted to be a leader in his organization and asked if he would sponsor her. Her sponsor started to identify roles for her and said he was going to create a role for her. WL2 demonstrated courage by asking to be sponsored, which led to further opportunities, work, and new roles. WL3 shared, "It was a natural consequence. I didn't know this is what I was actually looking for, but he turned out to be a very good sponsor."

WL5 and WL6 both mentioned how their sponsors came forward and identified themselves as their sponsors. WL6 highlighted that she felt she had an advantage since both her career sponsorship experiences were informal. WL6 did not feel obligated to either seek out certain roles or act on certain roles her sponsor suggested because the

sponsorship was informal enough that she had the ability to choose projects for which she felt ready.

The participants explained they were represented by multiple sponsors throughout their career journey. All participants shared the sponsors made the initial contact and being selected for sponsorship helped participants understand the value of the relationship as they later began to realize the impact of sponsorship on their career advancement and leadership development. WL9 shared how the first sponsor reached out to her; however, she initiated the second sponsor as she understood the value of career sponsorship. WL11's experience differed from WL9's experience in that three out of her four sponsors reached out to her to provide sponsorship.

Although most of the participants were selected by their sponsors, or made the initiation of sponsorship, it was imperative that the sponsorship experience be a natural and organic experience. One participant (WL5) stated,

I don't believe you ask someone to be your sponsor. I think sponsors come from people who see you as capable, and they think you would be great in that next role, and they do what it takes to try to help to get you there. I think it's from sponsor to the person they sponsor is how it happens. You can't make it work the other way—I don't believe you can.

WL9 shared that her sponsor saw something in her, while WL10 explained, "I'm not sure that I was ever intentional about being sponsored. It wasn't like I naturally sought him out; it took time to build." WL10 stated it was "less about seeking him out because he had the ability to influence; it was because he had insight, but it had to start

with trust.” WL8 suggested she “wouldn’t want women to become hung up on [needing] to get a career sponsor and lock that person in, and that person is going to sponsor them all the way through.”

The participants expressed how all their experiences were informal, organic, and natural. This also meant that it was not forced by the sponsoree or organization onto the sponsor, it was the sponsor taking the lead and investing in the sponsoree. The sponsors sought the sponsoree out and the career sponsorship relationship was formed informally and slowly. For example, WL6 explained how her sponsor did not identify herself for an extended period of time. Therefore, it was not always obvious to the participants that they had a career sponsor in the beginning. Each participant shared how their sponsor-initiated sponsorship grew as sponsors observed the sponsees’ talent and were confident about their sponsees’ ability to grow in the profession. WL8 reflected on the sponsorship relationship by sharing, “People will select and choose to sponsor you based on your work, performance, ability to build relationships, ability to put yourself out there and take risks and try different things.” WL8 acknowledged that “sponsors will seek you out if they feel you are dedicated to your profession.” Likewise, WL10 shared the perspective that her sponsor sought her out because of the value WL10 brought to the organization. WL10 stated, “My sponsor knew that he needed what I brought to the table to rally our partners around our merger and the future success of our business, and he knew he didn’t have that skill.” WL10 felt this relationship was natural as her sponsor “was able to assist me to navigate from the position of Partner to the C-Suite.”

Sponsors

Sponsors are instrumental in helping junior professionals achieve the ranks of executive management, but sponsors are also needed by organizations for retention, succession planning, and organizational success. All the participants had two to five sponsors each. As participants described their sponsors, some notable characteristics emerged that most of the sponsors exhibited.

Sponsor Characteristics

WL1 spoke about how a sponsor needs, to be influential in their role, has to have clout and the ability to make things happen, knows how to navigate the system internally, kind of trusted partner to go to and having that open dialogue. ... It can be lonely because you do not have as many people to talk to you. ... A sponsor is just another person that you can bounce things off of and have conversations with. ... A sponsor is curious about you, your interests and hobbies and what you can bring to the table, beyond your current job. Somebody who challenges you.

WL1 continued,

[My sponsor said,] “I think you could be in this manager role.” They really challenged me to say like, “Why not you and why not now?” Sort of being that reflection back to yourself and playing that challenge function when sometimes we aren’t good, or we’re too tough on ourselves, particularly as women sometimes. And [we] sort of, say, “Oh, I don’t check these 15 boxes.” They’re

able to sort of hold that mirror up back to you and say, “Well, like let’s work through that and let’s have a conversation about why you think that’s true.”

WL2 revealed,

It is good for sponsors to listen and to understand the situation that you are up against or what you are trying to achieve, so they need to be good at listening.

They would be good at identifying and deducing the problem or challenge and coming up with ways to remove those challenges.

Furthermore, WL2 stated the sponsor “would have influence, accountability, and authority in order to enact some specific action and they would be good at judging talent and in reading for characteristics that they want or are looking for.”

Some other characteristics shared by WL3 included “advocating for you in a way that you are informed, that it is not just about behind the scenes but it’s about educating, advocating and saying your name when you are not in the room.” WL4 shared insight on gender imbalance because the sponsor is “someone who can see beyond the surface, someone who has empathy or putting yourself in those shoes. ... Business is a man’s world; I was the only female at the table during both promotions.”

Another valuable characteristic WL6 communicated was that it was “more of developing a strong relationship and you know, my proving myself and then that person [sponsor] taking an interest. I developed strong relationships that I knew I could lean on when I needed them.” Lastly, WL11 relived how her sponsor told her, “This is how the game is played, this is the politics you will see in a company, this will help you understand what to do and when not to do it.” Her first sponsor also told her, “Don’t be

too feminine, but don't be too masculine," and because it was a union, the sponsor said, "Don't be over-eager but don't fail either." All these suggestions are effective in understanding the characteristics of a sponsor and how they helped the 11 participants prosper. Sponsors are essentially heroes and champions who help advance sponsorees they have invested in and believe will benefit the organization.

Sponsors as Champions

Sponsors are seen as champions. Sponsors take the risk; they look for those promising sponsorees who could take the organization to the next level. They give sponsorees special assignments and difficult tasks to test their capabilities and decide if it is worth the effort to invest in them. The Canadian female executives in this study stated that as champions, their sponsors advocated and pushed for them; provided guidance, direction, cover, and support; and helped sponsorees secure promotions.

Sponsor Advocated and Pushed for the Sponsoree. WL6 affirmed her sponsor "advocated for some roles for me," while WL11 shared, "It is really critical that you have someone around that table, a sponsor who is going to be pushing on your behalf and speaking up for you and sort of representing your best interests in those conversations."

WL9 affirmed how her sponsor,

Really helped me navigate, helped me come across, helped me get those visibility opportunities at a more senior level. My sponsor was also bringing me into really big, meaty projects so that I could be able to own them, so that was really helpful.

WL10 remembered how her sponsor was "pushing me forward as an expert and championing me, even recently at a global event." WL11 recapped how her "sponsor was

giving me more and more stretch assignments because he believed in me. ... He just kept piling the work on, and said, 'Keep going, keep going.'" WL11 also spoke about how her third sponsor spent 6 months helping his peers understand what WL11 was capable of doing. He said, "Don't leave her in this little, small division of this acquisition; be smart and take her and run." WL11 continued to recount how her sponsor then "got me introduced to the new leaders; he pushed me to present to them and had me in the right room." The sponsors advocated and pushed through to help their sponsorees be seen, accepted, and promoted. Sponsors spoke about the sponsoree when they were not in the room and gave them stretch assignments. Sponsors also provided direction, guidance, and support for the sponsorees as they learned and prepared for more senior levels of leadership.

Sponsor Provides Direction, Guidance, and Support. Carbajal (2018) stated, "Women are at a disadvantage without sponsorship, which is critical to career advancement" (p. 14). The participants conveyed how their sponsors provided direction, guidance, and support. Additionally, they provided cover, advice, and encouragement. For example, WL8 recounted how her sponsor,

Was a lot more savvy and helped me in gaining expertise, become more senior and helped me in navigating sticky situations around relationships, and gave fantastic advice. My sponsor showed me how to not sweat the small stuff and suggested I go do other things outside of my area of expertise and go take a course in other areas.

WL8 discussed other useful advice given to her as developed her business. WL8 stated,

My sponsor helped with business and finding clients. [My sponsor] has helped with reinventions of myself, helped me expand my career, someone who's kind of seeing you through multiple jobs, who actually helps you expand and thinks about the next thing, especially with the board roles. My sponsor was someone who kind of helped me in my current job, through changing jobs, through extending my capabilities, and then thinking about what is next for me. My sponsor was able to help me from all angles.

Similarly, WL9 spoke about how her sponsor, knows what I am looking to improve about myself because we have had more conversations. I do realize as a director I was at a high operating level, but as a vice president, I do recognize I have room to grow. This is where she [sponsor] is helping bring things to me and we have those discussions after things happen. We talk about what would you do differently here as a vice president versus when you were a director.

These critical conversations show the sponsor provides guidance and leadership throughout the relationship.

It was interesting to hear about WL11, whose sponsor guided her when their organization merged. The sponsor said, "Okay, we used to do it this way, but now you need to modify your approach and language until you are comfortable with the new folks." This sponsor helped WL11 "understand the cultural differences in the new

organization and how we had to adjust a little bit how we approached our problems.”

This same sponsor pushed WL11 to,

take on more roles; take on more women and leadership roles, diversity roles, etc.

He pushed me to go get some university courses to help me with my presentation skills. It was super, super helpful for my career. We would have conversations about what he thought my strengths and weaknesses were.

WL7 also mentioned how her sponsor made sure she was getting the right feedback, “making sure that you are becoming better leaders, and helping you get there.” The sponsors all played instrumental roles in the development and career advancement of the 11 participants. Finally, as champions, sponsors helped sponsorees secure promotions.

Sponsor Helped Sponsorees Secure Promotions. Having a sponsor and being engaged in a sponsorship helped the participants secure promotions; the participants indicated they worked to ensure they delivered what was expected of them. WL1 explained,

Two early sponsors advocated for promotions and my promotions came from that. Both of those jobs were not jobs that were posted or applied for. They [sponsor] said they [thought] I [could] do this job and they put my name forward and they [hiring manager] should have a conversation with me.

Similarly, WL9’s sponsor “really championed me at the senior management team level to support and show all the valuable things I was doing and the level of impact I was able to make. She [sponsor] did ultimately convince them all to support me.” WL11

had a similar experience, sharing that her sponsor was “very supportive and helping me become the VP through his influence.” However, sponsorship also has limitations. Participants spoke about the ways in which they outgrew the sponsor relationships and were encouraged to branch out.

Sponsor Limitations

Overall, sponsors proved to be highly beneficial for the 11 participants, but participants did recognize some limitations to the sponsor relationship. For example, WL9 stated, a “sponsor can guide you functionally, but you can outgrow your sponsor.” Another sponsor had no problem saying to WL11, “Okay, it is time for you to go, you are beyond this now. Thank you so much, we would love to keep you, but you are beyond this; go find something that that’s more exciting.” WL11 expressed how honest and upfront her sponsor was and told her she had outgrown the role and should find something more challenging. This was a limitation in that the sponsor realized the sponsoree had outgrown their role. Participant WL11 stated her sponsor’s candid advice was greatly appreciated. It takes a confident and self-assured leader to admit their sponsoree has surpassed their position. Some other sponsor limitations are when they have a limited network and can help grow the sponsoree functionally but not beyond that, as well as receiving unsolicited or negative feedback (WL8). Another example was when the sponsor has a “larger than life kind of personality ... and me creating my own path [beyond his larger-than-life personality] (WL10). Similarly, WL4 noted she had to carve out her own niche apart from her “strong-willed, no nonsense, and a bit of a bully-like sponsor”. The sponsorees all had to navigate around the limitations of their sponsor while

maintaining the relationship and their own credibility in the organization, while looking beyond for new pathways.

Sponsees

The 11 participants were sponsees who were sought out for sponsorship because they already showed promise, capability and leadership. The sponsees were committed to being efficacious in their new role and being an integral part of the executive leadership team. Participants' sponsors invested in them because sponsors believed the sponsees had value and leadership capacity. Participants reflected on and discussed how they exhibited or practiced some of their own personal characteristics while being in a career sponsorship experience.

Sponsee Characteristics

One of the personal characteristics the participants shared was the idea of improvement. For example, WL9 stated, "It is important for the sponsee to enhance their game every year." WL9 made sure to improve her skills and gain more experience and qualifications. WL10 also recognized how her skills were needed in the workplace. She shared,

I think from a business perspective he [my sponsor] knew that he needed what I brought to the table to rally our partners around our merger and the future success of our business. He knew he didn't have that skill and we were both in leadership roles, so it was just natural that it was the two of us.

WL10 also described that one of her best strengths is her ability to build relationships. The importance she places on relationships in work situations has helped

her attract career sponsors. WL11 spoke about being able “to pick up and move countries if your sponsor recommends you for a position overseas.” WL11 did move to another country and the result was positive; she not only advanced her career but developed her leadership skills in the process. WL2 recounted how,

I was learning so I sucked up all the information I could and then I left. I needed to move and find something else. I was hungry for knowledge, hungry for compensation, hungry for growing in a business to have more influence in a company, but I didn't know how to influence.

Lastly, WL8 learned, “to be less flattered by the people who are seeking me out and be, frankly, a little bit more opportunistic, about who I allowed to career sponsor me.” The participants were intentional about career sponsorship, which served them well and helped advance their careers.

Career Advancement

The participants gave detailed accounts of how their career sponsors helped advance their career. Participants also proved themselves to their sponsors and executive management and were able to retain positions they earned because they had the personal, technical and leadership skills necessary to succeed. WL1 discussed how the sponsorship experience,

Accelerated my path. I am one of the youngest vice presidents at my organization, and I would say all of that goes back to the first sponsor. ... These sponsors have kind of stepped in at points in my career that have really kicked me when I

wouldn't necessarily have naturally, organically been considered because of my age.

WL2 described how “[sponsorship] helped with identifying roles that I might not have otherwise considered. It helped with progressing more quickly and it helped with credibility.” WL3 profoundly recounted, “[Sponsorship] changed the trajectory of my career path completely. ... It really just opened up an entire world of potential.” WL4 shared, “I had a lot of the core skills and she [sponsor] recognized it; she pushed me to do it.”

Sponsorship helped with promotions. WL5 mentioned she was “positively impacted” and that the sponsor “would be a person in the room who is sort of defending, explaining, and creating opportunity for me in a room that I would not be in.” WL5 continued by sharing that her sponsorship gave

me the opportunity to allow others to say, “Okay, we'll promote her. You think she can do the job because of what we hear?” And that's someone [the sponsor] who's in a meeting to offer perspective to allow people to get the right view of me to be able to move up, so, all positive.

WL5 stated that on her own, a promotion like the one she received because of her sponsor's advocacy likely would not have been possible. WL6 shared,

The role that I am in right now, without those sponsors, probably that would not have happened or wouldn't have happened as seamlessly as it did. ... So, definitely, it affected my career advancement no question, salary no question, and

level in the company. They have been involved in pushing for me to reach our top level.

WL9 recalled how her sponsor helped her “get the promotion and get to that next level, which was a milestone for me.” WL10 spoke about how her sponsor asked her to take on a C-Suite role because,

He said, “We need somebody who is focused on the business, not servicing clients,” and that I need to take my skills and apply those skills to our business.

He stood in front of our group of owners and said, “this is why we need this role,” and this is why I was the best person for it. ... Today, I am the second highest paid partner in this firm and making sure it was fair and equitable ... because women in leadership are still grossly underpaid compared to their male counterparts.

WL11 shared a beautiful analogy on the importance of a career sponsor when she stated,

Your sponsor could very well be the person who is paving the highway that you end up driving down. Your sponsor will be the one that will recommend you for jobs that you may never think you could do and might terrify you, and that is the job you have to take.

These words of advice are helpful in leading new recruits who wonder if sponsorship is the right path for them. Undoubtedly, the 11 participants advanced their careers because of the investment and leadership of their sponsors. The mutual relationship between sponsors and sponsorees was a primary factor in the success of the sponsorship experience.

Sponsor–Sponsee Relationship

There was reciprocal relationship between sponsors and sponsees during and after the career sponsorship experience. The relationship varied on different levels, but many participants spoke about how they too helped their sponsor, and, in some cases, this help occurred later in the sponsees' careers. Reciprocal relationships add value and longevity to the relationship even after the initial career sponsorship experience has ended. Participants discussed factors in the relationship, such as reciprocity, risk, maintaining, advantages and disadvantages of sponsorship, succession planning, paying forward, and the need for sponsorship to gain advancement.

Reciprocity

One of the common comments made by participants in this study related to the reciprocity of the sponsor relationship. For example, WL4 made sure she,

Delivered and that I did not embarrass her [sponsor] was number one and number two that I was my own person. I had to tell my sponsor she was being overly critical about a team project and later she thanked me for being upfront and honest.

In this case, the sponsee gave advice and developed a reciprocal relationship with the sponsor. The sponsor is always looking for their sponsee to step into their role;

WL8 spoke about when one of her sponsors was badly fired. She shared,

I helped him negotiate some stuff ... and we have helped each other through a lot and career changes. ... We often were support networks for each other through transitions ... because career sponsorships eventually just become relationships,

with people that you respect, whether you label them this way or not. I think if [sponsorships are] done well, ... they eventually just become people that you have in your life as good business relationships.

The value of the reciprocal relationship between sponsors and sponsorees is important to the discussion on career sponsorship. WL8 mentioned “The cynical side of me would say that sponsors seek you out because if you are good at what you do, there’s a certain halo effect that a career sponsor can get from you.” In contrast, WL11’s sponsor sought her out because, “he had certain goals he wanted to achieve, so it was kind of I was helping him, and he was helping me. He sought me because it was win-win.” WL10 provided another example of a strategic reciprocal relationship when she explained, “From a business perspective he [sponsor] knew that he needed what I brought to the table to rally our partners around our merger and the future success of our business. He knew he did not have that skill and we were both in leadership roles, so it was just natural that it was the two of us.” Furthermore, WL10 added, “His sharp edges have been softened because of what I brought to the table, and he acknowledges and appreciates that.” The reciprocity in the relationship was evident and so was the degree of risk the sponsors were taking.

Risk

An important facet of the sponsorship relationship is risk. The sponsor takes a risk by sponsoring another individual. WL1 stated,

They are risking something and putting their reputation on the line by being an advocate for me behind the scenes. They want to be trusted to the people they are

advocating. I think it takes a period of time to establish that relationship, because it sorts of has to establish organically; if they're going to risk it, they need to see you in action and believe that you can.

A sponsor needs to have some certainty that their sponsoree is going to deliver because the sponsor's reputation is on the line. WL7 stated that sponsors, "are willing to sort of provide cover if you do try something out and it does not work out well. ... They provide that cover so you can recover from whatever happened ... and provide needed sage advice." The sponsor takes the risk and provides the protection so the sponsoree can develop their professional and technical skills needed to succeed in their role. Even though the sponsor takes a risk, the expectation is that the sponsoree will deliver, even if a few hurdles are overcome along the way. The relationship is intense and delicate because it is reciprocal and maintaining that balance is important.

Maintaining

The participants continue to maintain relationships with their former sponsors, but on a less frequent basis than with their current sponsor. Some sponsors are retired now and have aged over the decades, so the communication has either waned, ended, or is an annual call to catch up. On the whole, all the participants understood the importance of maintaining their relationships with their current and most recent sponsors. For example, WL6 indicated, "Because it was an informal sponsorship, our relationship has lasted across restructures." Another sponsor told WL11, "All right, you have to follow me; you have to come with me to this start-up," so she was able to keep her sponsor. Maintaining relationships with former sponsors is also important because "you tend to run into them

because the corporate community can be small ... because you tend to move in the same circles, or you attend similar types of events” (WL7).

Keeping in Touch With Your Sponsor. Almost all of the participants keep in touch with their past sponsors. As their sponsors got older it was common for the communication to be yearly or every few years. Only one participant noted she does not follow up with her sponsor because of the sponsor’s reputation and it was not beneficial to be associated with them. The frequency of keeping in touch is always more frequent with recent sponsors and diminishes over time (WL5). Participants’ general attitude is they keep in touch with their sponsors years after ending the sponsorship. WL8 summed it up perfectly by saying,

I still keep in touch with my sponsors because there are highs and lows in your career, people come and they go, there could be regime changes, you can be sold, you can be bought, there is so much that can happen in your career. I think career sponsors that you want to keep are there in the good times and the bad.

Sponsorship’s Impact on Career Advancement. The career sponsorship experience impacted female career advancement to executive leadership. All 11 participants who all had multiple sponsors concur that it advanced their career and they benefited from the experience. However, although there were mainly advantages, some of the participants did highlight some of the disadvantages that add value to the discussion on career sponsorship.

Sponsorship an Advantage or Disadvantage

All the participants described the many advantages of having a career sponsor. Seven of the 11 participants (WL1, WL2, WL3, WL6, WL7, WL8, and WL9) specifically stated they experienced only advantages in having a career sponsor and no disadvantages. Participants discussed advantages in terms of obtaining promotions, enhancing career advancement, gaining credibility and visibility among senior and executive management, and learning critical leadership skills for moving into executive management. Participants were quick to verify the positive role that career sponsorship played in their careers. WL8 stated, “There [are] really only advantages because there is reciprocity, reputation management, sponsors seeking out opportunities for you that you could not possibly see, and who bring different perspectives to you.” WL9 also shared this sentiment as she discussed the ways her sponsor “helped her manage the unstable environment and she kept things real; she was always level-headed and helped me keep a level head throughout the experience.” For WL9, the advantage of having a sponsor meant she was getting “seen and doing more higher-level projects, getting the visibility that I was desiring.” WL2 stated that having a career sponsor meant, somebody is “helping you and [will] help [you] navigate, clear the barriers, or suggest an outcome.” For WL3, a sponsor “changed the trajectory of her career.”

According to WL4, her sponsor was “highly regarded and people respected her opinion,” giving WL4 an advantage when her sponsor advocated for her. WL10 stated, I sat in a room with 500 people where he [my sponsor] was on stage speaking and giving me credit for something he was talking about. That is the kind of

individual he is. ... I trust he is always going to make the right decision as it comes to identifying me if there is an opportunity. Without question, I trust that if he thinks I am the right person for it and I have the right skills, he will advocate and push for me.

Another area that proved to be advantageous was the informality of the career sponsorship experience. For example, WL6 reported that both sponsorship experiences were informal, which was an advantage. She “didn’t feel obligated to either seek out certain roles or act on certain roles that they [sponsors] suggested because it was informal.” WL11 shared another advantage: “You ended up speaking the same language, understanding everybody’s motivators in the company and you were on the same level of understanding.” WL11 was also able to understand what motivates the people above her and how she could leverage her career just like she did a contract and learn to negotiate and understand what motivates everybody that is in that path.

Participants also spoke of the disadvantages associated with sponsorship. One disadvantage was how the sponsor is perceived in the organization. Another participant recounted how sometimes sponsorship posed a disadvantage because her career sponsor had a reputation of being no nonsense and a bit of a bully, and since WL4 was associated with her sponsor, she had to ensure she carved out her own niche apart from her strong-willed sponsor. WL9 did mention there were “no disadvantages, but sometimes you get unsolicited feedback; but you know, that is part of the sponsorship experience, even if sometimes you are not ready for it.” An important piece of advice offered by WL5 was that the sponsorship can become a disadvantage when the sponsor is in conflict within the

organization. One of WL5's sponsors pulled her up into a role because there was an expectation that the sponsor would become the next CEO, but they ended up leaving the organization, and she was left behind. Because of her relationship with the sponsor, she was perceived as being part of the other team. WL8 remarked there were only advantages but in one case there was a limitation with her first sponsor because the sponsor "was not well known with a broad network." WL8 also mentioned, "If your career sponsor does not have a big network, you are not going to benefit as broadly from it." Another drawback or disadvantage discussed by WL10 was, "when the sponsor casts a very large shadow and it is important to get out from under that shadow." WL10 realized that she "cannot be so closely intertwined, and I needed objectives and initiatives that I am going to put my fingerprints on and carve out my own place." Another participant shared that once there was disadvantage because her sponsor was not getting along well with a peer and she had to support that peer but also had to be respectful of her sponsor and of the other person, and not get in the way (WL11). On the whole, some of the disadvantages of sponsorship are problematic. For example, when a sponsor leaves an organization and the sponsoree is left alone, when the sponsor casts a large shadow, inter-organizational tensions, and when the sponsor does not have a large network of influence. What did arise from the interviews was that these participants had to work around each disadvantageous situation. Ultimately, a comment shared by WL5 captures the sentiment of the 11 participants. WL5 stated, "You cannot move up in an organization unless you have someone higher up pulling you up; you cannot get there." All participants agreed to the immense advantages of having had multiple career sponsors who aided in their

personal and professional development. Sponsors also helped include sponsorees in succession planning.

Sponsorship is Succession Planning

Succession planning came up in the interviews as an important part of the sponsorship experience. WL1 spoke about the importance of having a sponsor who is saying your name in the room and telling other executives why you are really strong and why the sponsor believes you should be part of the succession planning discussion. WL1's sponsor was "instrumental in making that move." Her subsequent sponsor was also "instrumental in setting me up in succession planning and pushing me out of my core area of expertise." WL1 also commented how her sponsor said, "I am really strong and [told me] why they believe[d] I should be part of the succession planning discussion." In another example, WL3 recounted how her sponsor included her in succession planning when "the company created a new U.S. division, and he supported me in applying for a position. I did get the job and it set me off on a new path." An interesting example of succession was offered by WL11. WL11's first sponsor sat her down and said, "Here is your landscape for the rest of your life, I am going to help you figure it out." When she expressed interest to her third career sponsor about one day doing their job, the sponsor said, "If you want my job, then you are going to have to do this job, then this job, and then this job;" the promotion followed her with every upward move in position. WL11 stated another reason why succession planning is considered important:

Sponsors are in tune with what is coming down the pipe in the company and are aware of the 2- to 5-year plan, potential strategic projects that are coming up.

Meeting with them so frequently, you are also top of mind for them for opportunities.

Having a sponsor is beneficial for access to leadership development, personal and skills development, promotions, career advancement, and learn to become a sponsor.

Paying It Forward

Paying it forward emerged as a theme. Participants shared the concept of paying it forward includes being a career sponsor as well and giving back. These executive women recognized the massive impact of sponsorship and are taking steps to bring those opportunities to rising talent. WL4 voiced, “I am a career sponsor to a number of people because I have a voice. When I hear about people looking for sponsor, I will point out who I think they should consider.” WL4 also shared that sponsorship is all about, “how you advocate and how you do it in a different way for everybody.” She stated how she keeps potential sponsorees top of mind and,

tries to understand what it is they are looking for and where they want to go. This way it is not just her imposing what she thinks is best, but it is really having that effective communication to understand how together, they can help define the path and opportunities.

WL6 noted, “It is a challenge for younger people now and they do not know how to get a sponsor and if someone doesn’t take the time, it is very difficult for them to find someone.” Therefore, WL6 is working informally on sponsoring some new hires. Paying it forward is valuable, because not having a sponsor can stall your career. WL2 described an interesting experience. When she was considering younger rising female sponsorees

she realized, “Women do not think to put their hand up and ask for these opportunities, because they do not think it is even an option.” This is something to consider as these participants are now sponsors or becoming sponsors and look to pay it forward as sponsors looking for rising female talent.

No Sponsor, No Advancement

The detailed conversations of the participants led to an obvious conclusion that not having a sponsor makes advancement extremely difficult, if not impossible. WL1 claimed how “critical sponsorship was for my career path and that I would not be where I am today if I hadn’t had sponsors.” WL2 stated how having a sponsor “accelerated my path. I am one of the youngest vice presidents in my organization, and I would say all of that goes back to the first sponsor when I started on that accelerated path.” WL5 also mentioned, “I think anyone who is truly honest would say they have not made it to where they are at without having a sponsor; whether they know it or not, they have had a sponsor.” She continued to share, “You cannot move up in an organization unless you have someone higher up pulling you up, you cannot get there alone.” WL5 concurred,

I think when you are not on the team, you can still stay and you can be a benchwarmer for the team, but you will never get to that next level, because you don’t have a sponsor who is going to get you there. ... Today I am without a sponsor, and if you do not have a sponsor, you do not move any further in an organization.

WL7 mentioned,

I think if you talk to any senior person, they will tell you they have had sponsors. No one or very few people would say, “Oh, I made it to the top or I made it to a senior leadership position and there was no one there who was the wind at my back or helped me along.

The imbalance of gender is real as WL4 recounted she had 24 managers reporting to her that were all men; she is still the only woman at the table with the executive team. These examples exemplify the importance of career sponsorship that prior to doing the research, the researcher did not know how critical it was in leading to career advancement. All 11 women discussed how significant it was for advancing their career.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Significance of the Study

The study is significant because it advances the knowledge on women in leadership in Canadian business, namely the significance and impact of career sponsorship. Through an exploration of the lived experiences of 11 Canadian female executives, the results revealed a deeper understanding of the intersection of career sponsorship and career advancement. The research problem was explored through the participant interviews; the findings showed that multiple career sponsorship experiences had a positive effect on the women executives' careers both in advancement and in leadership skills. These participants remain in their powerful positions, continuing to advance in their career beyond their sponsorships, growing in their confidence and capacity, and helping to improve gender balance in executive management one sponsorship experience at a time.

Interpretation of the Findings

The research question addressed how career sponsorship impacts female career advancement to executive leadership. A career sponsor is someone who is a powerful executive leader who advocates for a younger professional to advance their career (E. W. Patton et al., 2017). All 11 participants confirmed their sponsors advocated on their behalf.

Career sponsorship is designed to increase the self-confidence and enhance the risk-taking ability of individuals who wish to advance in their careers (Hewlett et al., 2011; Singh & Vanka, 2020). From their personal lived experiences, the 11 participants

benefitted from career sponsorship experiences and improved their leadership expertise. The participants became empowered by developing their leadership and professional skills through their unique experiences, which contributed to their career success. The participants were able to recraft their identity in congruence with the new leadership role and were able to make the transition over a period of time despite the hurdles faced along the way. This might have been more difficult, or in some cases impossible, without the support of a sponsor. The role incongruity (see Eagly & Karau, 2002) might have been less harsh and more accepting due to the backing and reassurance of the sponsors.

I used Heidegger's (2010) perspective to interpret that the 11 participants also benefitted from their transformational sponsors who were also transformational leaders. Transformational leaders exhibit four behaviors: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985). Women's transformational sponsors showed their support and provided needed stimulation, but it was the individualized consideration that each sponsor brought to the sponsor-sponsee relationship that allowed these 11 Canadian female executives to grow and thrive in their role and continue advancing in their career. It was the transformational mindset of the sponsor that provided the needed individualized consideration that helped these participants learn and bridge the executive gap to succeed in their career.

The queen bee phenomenon is something that is witnessed in organizations when "[women] at the managerial level may offer fewer opportunities to junior women" (Derks et al., 2016, p. 457). All 11 participants are involved in varying degrees of sponsorship

with up-and-coming professionals, including female professionals, thereby demonstrating that the sponsors were not queen bees; rather, they were transformational sponsors who saw the value in promoting diverse leadership.

Limitations of the Study

There were a few limitations in the study. The recruitment strategy made it difficult to recruit participants. Because the participants were not known to me, it was difficult for me to obtain a connection request acceptance from the women executives on LinkedIn. I was informed that many executives receive dozens of requests to connect on LinkedIn every day, and they do not go through them often. This may explain why 163 of the 260 female executives did not accept the connection on LinkedIn because they do not have the time in their busy day to browse requests for connections. The second limitation was related: Canadian female executives' busy schedules made it challenging to find a time when they could participate in a 1-hour interview. Some executives responded with calendars full 3 to 4 months in the future, which did not work for data collection. The interview and data collection process started in October 2022 and continued through February 2023, yet only 11 Canadian female executives were able to participate. A third limitation was in finding participants who had a career sponsorship experience because 13 respondents stated they did not have a sponsor. The data collection could have gone more quickly if I had opened up the study to include Canadian female managers instead of only those in executive management. Data collection could have also occurred more quickly if I had posted on my LinkedIn profile page and also through some of the local

women's organizations, including Women's Executive Network, Women in Leadership, and Canadian Women's Foundation.

This study was limited in scope because it was focused on Canadian female executives working in business. No other sectors were included, such as academia, healthcare, and not-for-profit organizations. Efforts were made to attract a set of participants across wide-ranging communities, but the female executives who responded and participated were from Ontario and Quebec. The limitations were also focused on participants' career sponsorship experience. In consideration of the participants' time, there were only eight questions in the interview.

Recommendations

This study focused on Canadian female executives and their lived experiences with career sponsorship in the corporate Canadian sector. Several themes that emerged from this research study could be addressed in future research. The themes included sponsors are champions, sponsorees lived up to expectations, sponsorship reciprocity, succession planning, paying it forward, and no-sponsor-no-advancement. These themes could become future research projects focused on the strengths of a good sponsor, characteristics of competent and determined sponsorees, the criticality of reciprocity, the importance of legacy planning, sponsorees becoming sponsors, and the reality that a person needs a sponsor to advance their position professionally.

Other recommendations would be to conduct studies on specific sectors (e.g., academia, health care, finance, energy, not-for-profit, governmental agencies) from the perspectives of both the sponsoree and the sponsor. A number of women expressed

interest in this study on career sponsorship, but they were outside of the scope of the study because they worked in academia, health care, and not-for-profit. I would also consider designing the recruitment strategy differently and recruit directly with select women's and industry associations. I would also include women who are known to me personally, professionally, and through LinkedIn. If I were to conduct a related study in the future, the design would include a mixed-methods approach using surveys and semistructured interviews to gain new knowledge about sponsorship.

Diversity and Inclusion

A recommendation that emerged is the need to strengthen sponsorship in organizations across all ethnic- and equity-deserving communities. Continued sponsorship research could include the perspectives of other valuable and important communities including racial minorities, Indigenous People, LGBTQ2+ individuals, and newcomers to Canada. Increased diversity at the leadership level has been demonstrated to improve financial performance (Hunt et al., 2015). One of the current participants who accepted the connection on LinkedIn explained she did not have a career sponsorship experience and suggested that future research might explore who gets sponsored. The respondent stated that as an openly lesbian Black woman, she never had a sponsor. She brought up a valuable point, which WL5 also touched upon:

It is incumbent upon executives to find someone not like them that they could consider to try and change the dynamic because we are never going to get more women into executive roles for visible minorities until there is real sponsorship.

People tend to hire, promote, and sponsor people who are somewhat like them. This is problematic because it limits how many people can advance in their career. If individuals do not see themselves represented in executive leadership, they might not be able to attain an executive position. The comments made by the participants highlighted the importance of diversity.

Building a Community of Practice

Another recommendation that emerged from the study is to strengthen sponsorship organically and naturally, but also in a way that allows for greater access and opportunities for women. I recommend a community of practice that allows organizations and industry associations to delve deeper into the benefits and opportunities within sponsorship. Additionally, I recommend extending the conversation about career sponsorship and increasing access and diversity, while improving performance and reducing attrition.

Women's Leadership Associations

An area of recommended future research would be to disseminate the research to Toronto-based or Canadian-based women's leadership groups, including Women's Executive Work, Women in Leadership, Canadian Women's Foundation, and LeanIn Toronto. My goal is to become involved in creating more awareness and understanding through knowledge dissemination and public scholarship. In addition, I am enrolling in an Executive Women in Leadership program with University of Toronto to learn more and extend the knowledge on women in leadership.

Implications for Social Change

The findings from this qualitative study could effect positive social change in balancing gender in the C-suite to bring awareness and understanding to Canadian female professionals who are aspiring to rise to the executive level. Findings could also mean that “more men must be willing to sponsor women, drop their cognitive bias, and view women in terms of their career potential” (Carbajal, 2018, p. 14). An emphasis on career sponsorship might influence organizations to increase awareness and attention by enlarging their sponsorship focus to include more women and equity-deserving communities. Such emphasis could help organizations leverage a career sponsorship focus as an opportunity to retain talented staff and reduce attrition from staff who might feel they are being overlooked for promotions. This qualitative phenomenological study may inform future female leaders on the importance of career sponsorship for career advancement but also for their personal leadership development. Career advancement is futile if it is not complemented with the requisite emotional and technical skills required to thrive and survive in leadership. The findings from this study may also advance the discussion and understanding of the importance of career sponsorship for all other junior employees looking to understand the impact of career sponsorship. Awareness and understanding may also lead to increased diversity in the workforce if current and future sponsors take a more proactive approach to diversity, equality, and inclusion in the workforce.

The lived experiences of the 11 participants may help organizations understand the value of career sponsorship in balancing gender in the C-suite and the value that

positive leadership development sponsorship provides women who seek to advance their careers. Career sponsorship could reduce the gender gap in executive leadership and abate the number of women leaving senior leadership since the COVID-19 pandemic. These implications for positive social change do not exceed the study boundaries but could lead to a wider ranging study focused on other sectors (e.g., health care, academia, not-for-profit, multinational organizations) and other demographic communities.

Conclusion

Sponsorship is critical for career advancement (Levine et al., 2020), a claim with which the participants of the current study agreed. The results of the research revealed that all career sponsorship experiences were informal and organic, and in all cases except one the sponsors sought out the participants. The career sponsorship experiences relayed by the participants bolstered the careers of the female leaders. Sponsors helped advance the female executives' careers, helped them navigate the pathways of executive management, and provided guidance on the sponsorees' personal leadership development. This is important because "aspiring leaders learn by observing role models who allow them to learn what behaviors are effective in various settings" (Kubu, 2018, p. 240). The results contribute to the body of knowledge on Canadian women in leadership by advancing the discussion on the benefits and significant impact of finding a sponsor to help women advance their careers while simultaneously proving their technical and professional competency in the organization. It was evident from the interviews with the participants that they would not have achieved their C-suite/executive status without the support and guidance of their career sponsors. All 11 participants are in executive

leadership roles in large part due to their sponsors, but also due to their grit, determination to succeed, self-awareness, and continuous upgrading of their skills.

The lessons learned from these participants may inform future female (and other rising) professionals about the importance of career sponsorship, and may encourage them to own the responsibility of their personal career advancement because it also depends on their fortitude, stamina, and determination for success and achievement. The sponsors helped immensely, but the participants all worked hard to improve their leadership and technical skill sets. These 11 participants exemplify transformational models of leadership and are affecting positive social and economic change in their organizations by becoming sponsors in their organizations to spot talent and bolster sponsorship pathways for rising talent. I look forward to continuing the discussion on women in leadership and career sponsorship in Canada. Career sponsorship promotion is important for positive social change because as more and more brave women learn to navigate the labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007) toward leadership, it will be easier for others to follow and for society to move toward greater gender equality (Kubu, 2018).

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

How do Canadian female executives who have been sponsored describe the lived experiences of career sponsorship? To answer this question, the following research question was presented.

RQ1. How do Canadian female executives perceive the impact of career sponsorship on their career advancement?

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your current position and describe your leadership role. (i.e., responsibility, sector, direct reports)?
2. When did you become engaged with a sponsor in your leadership career path?
 - a. Did the sponsor seek you out or did you seek out a sponsor?
 - b. Was your sponsorship formal or informal?
3. How long did this sponsorship experience last? (i.e., frequency of meetings, meeting format).
4. In what way or ways was the sponsorship structure an advantage or disadvantage to your career advancement?
 - a. How was your career advancement affected by your sponsorship (i.e., promotions, managing leadership, work-life balance)?
5. What are the qualities of a good career sponsor, and what elements enhanced your sponsorship experience?

6. Describe any specific hurdles/deterrents/barriers/struggles or challenges you experienced during the career sponsorship process.
 - a. How did you handle those challenges?
 - b. What would you have done differently?
7. Are you still in contact with your career sponsor? If yes, why? And what is the frequency? If not, why not?
8. Is there is anything else you would like to share about your experience with career sponsorship? (Debrief Questions: What advice would you give to future women looking for career sponsorship or to be a career sponsor? What would you like them to know?)

Appendix B: Recruitment Email



Dear [name of Canadian female executive],

Hello, I am a Canadian Ph.D. student, and I am writing to you today to ask you if could participate in my research study. Did you know that Canadian women make up half of the workforce but represent less than 10% of the executive workforce. My research study will look at the impact of a career sponsorship experience and if it can help address balance gender in executive management in Canada.

As a Canadian female executive, I hope you can participate if you have had a career sponsorship experience that lasted at least 1 year during your career journey, and you have since advanced in your career to an executive position (including C-Suite, President, Vice President, Chair, Executive Director, National Director, Director, or Senior Director). If so, you could participate in a confidential 1hr. virtual interview recorded and transcribed with me interviewing you about your career sponsorship experience. Your participation is voluntary, and your identity will be kept confidential at all times.

Please connect with me if you want to learn more about this research and if it is a study you want to participate in to advance the body of knowledge of career sponsorship for Canadian female executives. I can be reached at dianna.dinevski@waldenu.edu or by phone at (905) 599-7453. If you have any questions, please let me know and I appreciate your consideration.

Sincerely,

Dianna Dinevski

Ph.D. student

Walden University

dianna.dinevski@waldenu.edu

(905) 599-7453

Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer

WALDEN UNIVERSITY
EDUCATION FOR GOOD™

Female leadership study

Are you a Canadian female executive?

Volunteers are needed to participate in a research study that explores the impact of career sponsorship and how it affects career advancement for women.



Eligibility to participate:

- ▣ Canadian citizen (or Foreign national working in Canada)
- ▣ Female or identify as female
- ▣ Currently in an executive position
- ▣ Experienced a career sponsorship experience that lasted at least 1 year (informal or formal)
- ▣ Works in private sector

What to expect:

- ▣ 30-60min. interview via zoom
- ▣ Approx. 8 questions - focus on career sponsorship experience
- ▣ Identity always kept confidential
- ▣ Participation is voluntary
- ▣ Possible to exit the interview at any time
- ▣ There is no cost to participate



To participate in this study, please contact:

Dianna Dinevski
dianna.dinevski@waldenu.edu
 cell: (905) 599-7453

This research study has received research ethics approval from approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval #09-12-22-0547537.

Appendix D: Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study about the experience of career sponsorship. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study seeks 5–15 volunteers who are:

- Canadian female executives
- Experienced a career sponsorship experience that lasted approximately 1 year during your career journey while working in Canada
- Work or worked in industry (excluding healthcare and academia/education)

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Dianna Dinevski, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

Study Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experiences of career sponsorship from the perspective of Canadian female executives who have been sponsored. Understanding the impact of career sponsorship on the career journey of Canadian female executives will bring further insight on leadership development. The aim is to bring awareness about career sponsorship to possibly affect organizational change through improved development training opportunities for women.

Procedures:

This study will involve you completing the following steps:

- Interviewee takes part in a confidential, audio recorded Zoom/Teams interview (phone option available) (1 hour)
- review a typed transcript of the interview to make corrections if needed (10 minutes)
- speak with the researcher one more time after the interview to hear the researcher’s interpretations and share feedback, also called member-checking and it takes 20-30 minutes, phone option available).

Here are some sample questions:

1. Was your sponsorship formal or informal? Was this structure an advantage or disadvantage? In what ways?
2. How has being involved in the sponsorship experience affected your career advancement?
3. Have you had any needs in your career advancement that were not met by sponsorship?
4. Did your sponsorship experience help you in terms of overcoming barriers to leadership?
5. Do you feel you were better prepared as a leader as a result of the sponsorship experience? Yes, or no? In what ways yes or no?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Research should only be done with those who freely volunteer. So, everyone involved will respect your decision to join or not.

If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time. The researcher will follow up with all volunteers to let them know whether they were selected for the study.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this study could involve some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life such as sharing sensitive information. With the protections in place, this study would pose minimal risk to your wellbeing and does not go beyond normal daily experiences.

This study offers no direct benefits to individual volunteers. The aim of this study is to benefit society by raising awareness about the impact of career sponsorship for Canadian female executives. Once the analysis is complete, the researcher will share the overall results by emailing you a summary report.

Payment:

In lieu of offering participants a thank you gift or stipend for participating, a donation equaling the sum of \$10 per participant up to and including 15 participants (not to exceed \$150) will be made to the Canadian Women's Foundation (a registered Canadian charitable organization for gender equality).

Privacy:

The researcher is required to protect your privacy. Your identity will be kept confidential, and a pseudonym will be used so your information is protected. The researcher is only allowed to share your identity or contact info as needed with Walden University supervisors (who are also required to protect your privacy) or with authorities if court-ordered (very rare). The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. If the researcher were to share this dataset with another researcher in the future, the dataset would contain no identifiers so this would not involve another round of obtaining informed consent. Data will be kept secure by keeping digital data stored on a computer with encryption software, password protected, stored in a locked office of the researcher. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Obtaining Your Consent

If you feel you understand the study and wish to volunteer, please indicate your consent by replying to this email by checking the box “I consent.”

Date of consent _____

Contacts and Questions:

You can ask questions of the researcher by email: dianna.dinevski@waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant or any negative parts of the study, you can call


Walden University's Research Participant Advocate at (612)312-1210. **Walden University's approval number for this study is 09-12-22-0547537.** It expires on September 11, 2023.

You might wish to retain this consent form for your records. You may ask the researcher or Walden University for a copy at any time using the contact info above.

Appendix E: LinkedIn Message

Hi, I am a PhD student doing my dissertation on Women in Leadership and the impact of career sponsorship on leadership development for Canadian women. If you had a career sponsor along your career journey and want to participate in a confidential (8 question/30-60min) interview, please connect. Thank you.

Appendix F: Donation to Women's Canadian Foundation



CANADIAN WOMEN'S FOUNDATION | **FONDATION CANADIENNE DES FEMMES**

1920 Yonge St., Suite 302
Toronto, ON M4S 3E2
Telephone (416) 365-1444
Fax (416) 365-1745

1920 rue Yonge, bureau 302
Toronto, ON M4S 3E2
Téléphone (416) 365-1444
Télécopieur (416) 365-1745

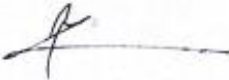
REÇU OFFICIEL POUR FIN D'IMPÔT

Canada Revenue Agency <https://canada.ca/charities-giving>


Dianna Dinevski

Receipt Number/N° de reçu: 3005979
 Date Received/Date reçu: April 10, 2023
 Date Receipt Issued/Date d'émission du reçu: April 10, 2023
 Amount Received / Montant reçu: \$110.00

Location receipt issued: Toronto, Canada



Paulette Senior
 President & CEO / Présidente-directrice générale
 Registration Number/N° d'enregistrement : 129855607 RR0001



CANADIAN WOMEN'S FOUNDATION | **FONDATION CANADIENNE DES FEMMES**

1920 Yonge St., Suite 302
Toronto, ON M4S 3E2
Telephone (416) 365-1444
Fax (416) 365-1745

1920 rue Yonge, bureau 302
Toronto, ON M4S 3E2
Téléphone (416) 365-1444
Télécopieur (416) 365-1745


OFFICIAL RECEIPT FOR INCOME TAX PURPOSES
REÇU OFFICIEL POUR FIN D'IMPÔT

Canada Revenue Agency <https://canada.ca/charities-giving>

Dianna Dinevski

Receipt Number/N° de reçu: 3005979
 Date Received/Date reçu: April 10, 2023
 Date Receipt Issued/Date d'émission du reçu: April 10, 2023
 Amount Received / Montant reçu: \$110.00

Location receipt issued: Toronto, Canada



Paulette Senior
 President & CEO / Présidente-directrice générale
 Registration Number/N° d'enregistrement : 129855607 RR0001