2017

Securing Government Contracts for Women-Owned Small Businesses

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Abstract

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MBA, University of Phoenix, 2004

BS, Shorter University, 1998

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

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Abstract

Research indicates a variety of factors may inhibit the award of federal contracts to women-owned small businesses; however, a dearth of research exists on the topic from the perspectives of women who own small businesses. The purpose of this case study was to identify the capabilities needed by female small business owners in Atlanta, Georgia to win federal contracts. The framework was based on the theory of representative bureaucracy and the effects of gender differences on individuals' entrepreneurial perceptions. Data were collected via semistructured interviews with 6 women who owned small businesses and competed for federal contracts. Results of the thematic data analysis revealed 3 overarching themes: intrinsic factors, extrinsic factors, and contract procurement experiences. Each of these themes reflected qualities fundamental to participants' successful procurement of federal contracts. Significant intrinsic characteristics included adaptability, work ethic, and networking skills. Stakeholders may use study results to foster positive social change by providing women with resources they need to compete for federal contracts. Female entrepreneurs could improve communities by using strategies from this research to reduce unemployment and increase income for themselves and their employees. Social implications include the development of additional training programs to teach women how to complete contract applications, which may increase their participation in federal contract procurement and positively contribute to the economy.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my three children for seeing me through this journey. Sissy, you inspired me to move forward with my education, as you seemed to breeze through post-graduate studies yourself. Jared and Savannah, you were just 10 and 11 years old when I began; now you are adults starting college. I hope you will enjoy your college years, continue with a plan of success, and achieve your own positions in life.

So, thank you Sissy, Jared, and Savannah for allowing me the freedom to finally bring this college experience to an end. I have often told you that if I could change anything about my life, I would take the first 2 years of college far more seriously. My prayer for each of you is that you will find the path that is yours, and move in that direction without taking too many side trails. While side trails may provide excitement, they often lead to a circle and take you right back to your starting point. Always remember to have fun and make good memories on whatever path you choose.

Acknowledgment

I would like to acknowledge my research participants for their hard work and willingness to share their information. It is through the experiences of these participants that other women can learn how to expand their businesses. It is said that we grow by learning from others—by standing on the shoulders of giants. Thank you all so much for providing that base to support other women entrepreneurs as they strive to fulfill their dreams.

I must send a very special acknowledgement to Jessica Bell. For years, you have provided me with ideas and support, laughter and comfort—every time I wanted to stop, you pulled me through. There was absolutely no better support system than you, and for that I am truly thankful.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Women-owned firms represent the fastest-growing small business sector within the United States (National Women's Business Council, 2012). As of 2013, 8.6 million women-owned small businesses (WOSBs) employed nearly 7.8 million people across the country (Wright, 2015). Between 2002 and 2007, the growth of WOSBs rose by 20% (National Women's Business Council, 2007). Estimates related to growth among the number of businesses, number of employees, and revenues generated by these businesses have exceeded the estimates of all other small business sectors for these same statistics (Wright, 2015). According to the Joint Economic Committee (2010), WOSBs created 500,000 jobs between 1997 and 2007, while all other privately held firms lost jobs.

The potential of female entrepreneurs has been limited by unequal access to federal contracts (Cantwell, 2014). Passage of the Small Business Reauthorization Act of 2010 has done little to mitigate the gender gap in the procurement of federal contracts (Mee, 2012). Women who own small businesses have access to annual federal contracts in excess of $500 billion; yet, this population of entrepreneurs has never been awarded more than 4% of available contract dollars in any fiscal year (Cantwell, 2014). Many educational resources are available to female business owners, and a portion of available contract dollars are set aside for WOSBs through the WOSB Procurement Program; however, the procurement of federal contracts by WOSBs remains paltry. Because women entrepreneurs are an increasingly influential force in the national economy (Doh & Quigley, 2014), an understanding of elements that may affect the rate at which WOSBs win federal contracts is essential. The objective of this qualitative case study is to explore factors that may influence federal contract procurement by WOSBs.

Background of the Problem

In 1994, Congress established a government-wide goal to award at least 5% of available federal contracts to WOSBs. These federal contracting opportunities represented annual revenues of more than $500 billion (Cantwell, 2014); however, the number of federal contract dollars awarded to WOSBs since that time occurred in 2012, and included just 4% of available awards instead of the established 5% goal. That 1% shortfall represented more than $4 billion in lost potential revenue for WOSBs. Despite the economic growth of these firms, female business owners may not be taking full advantage of opportunities to apply for and obtain federal contracts.

Research indicated that a variety of factors may inhibit the award of federal contracts to WOSBs, including gender bias (Fernandez, Malatesta, & Smith, 2013), the lack of sole source authority, poor understanding of the WOSB Procurement Program (Cantwell, 2014), and the lack of qualifications needed by women entrepreneurs to win contracts (Mee, 2012). Although each of these factors may have contributed to the problem, insufficient literature exists on the issue from the perspectives of WOSBs, which might advance other likely explanations for the problem. Resources are available to support WOSBs as they compete within the realm of federal contracts, but an extensive review of existing research indicated that little is known about the related perceptions of female entrepreneurs and their use of available resources (Frey, 2013).

Problem Statement

Federal contracts are a source that can enhance the success of WOSBs (Sloka, Kantane, Avotins, & Jermolajeva, 2014). In 1994, Congress established the WOSB Procurement Program with the goal of awarding at least 5% of federal contracts to these

businesses (Frey, 2013). Female small business owners have not taken advantage of this opportunity (Cantwell, 2014). The general business problem is that a variety of factors have prevented WOSBs from obtaining federal contracts. The specific business problem is that some female small business owners lack the capabilities needed to win federal contracts.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to identify the capabilities needed by female small business owners to win federal contracts. The participants included six women entrepreneurs located in Atlanta, Georgia, who have applied for a minimum of one federal contract. The ratio of participants between those who have successfully procured federal contracts, and those who have been unsuccessful at securing contracts was approximately equal. The results from this research may help communities of female small businesses understand how to participate in the federal contract procurement process, thereby growing their businesses. Findings from this study may also help clarify barriers that inhibit the application and award of federal contracts to this group of business owners. Results from the study may equip female small business owners with the information needed to improve their abilities to procure federal contracts.

Nature of the Study

The nature of the study was qualitative. A qualitative method allowed me to use open-ended data-gathering procedures to gain an understanding of the research problem (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012). A quantitative research design was not chosen because this method relies primarily on statistical analysis (Miller, 2014), and does not

provide the rich data that is collected through a qualitative study. Similarly, a mixed method approach was not selected because such methods involve the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Using a solely qualitative approach, data on the experiences of women with federal contract procurement, both successful and unsuccessful, can be gathered in addition to factual archive data, including company revenue, company metrics, and information from contract applications, as available.

A case study design was selected for this study because it allows researchers to ask participants how and why questions (Yin, 2014). An ethnographic design was inappropriate for the study because the focus was not on the behavior of a specific cultural population group (Lapan et al., 2012). Narrative research was not applicable because the resulting data was not in the form of a story (Merriam, 2014). The case study design employed the Yin (2014) doctrine, which emphasized multiple data sources that describe the original qualities of common experiences and was the most fitting method for the research.

Research Question

The following research question guided this study: What capabilities do female small business owners need to win federal contracts?

Interview Questions

Interview discussions involve the use of open-ended questions intended to prompt discussion of the topic of interest (Morgan, Ataie, Carder, & Hoffman, 2013). I acted as the data collection instrument, or interviewer, by asking questions and initiating dialog with participants. I audio-recorded all participant responses, and took field notes to record

facial expressions, emotions, and body language. I posed the following initial questions to each participant:

1. What caused you to apply for contracting opportunities with the federal government?
2. What are your experiences with the federal contracting process?
3. What contracts have you applied for with an unsuccessful result?
4. What contracts have you applied for with a successful result?

I asked participants additional questions based on whether or not they have applied for a contract, and whether or not they were successful in their applications. A list of these additional questions is in Appendix A.

Conceptual Framework

Mosher's (1968) theory of representative bureaucracy, as well as the Koellinger, Minniti, and Schade's (2013) conceptual framework about the effects of gender differences on the entrepreneurial perceptions of men and women, served as the collective conceptual framework for the research. In 1968, Mosher introduced the theory of bureaucratic representation, which describes bureaucratic representation as either passive or active. Fernandez et al. (2013) defined passive representation as a demographically diverse workforce. Active representation describes the assumption that governing members will support their own membership. If government agents applied the theory of representative bureaucracy during federal contract procurement, demographic groups, such as minorities and women, may successfully procure more contracts.

Koellinger et al. (2013) outlined another important conceptualization of potential issues related to entrepreneurialism among women. These researchers explored the

differences in perceptions of business ownership across cultures and genders, and discovered that within the United States, gender significantly affected individuals' entrepreneurial propensity. Men and women have different perceptions of business aspects, including skillsets, fears of business failure, and opportunity costs. These differences in perception may inhibit female entrepreneurs from applying for federal contracts or skew their perceptions of available resources. This research by Koellinger et al. provided a valuable lens through which to analyze participant responses to interview questions.

Operational Definitions

The following terms are used throughout the research and are defined for purposes of the study:

Contract procurement: Contract procurement describes the awards granted to a civilian business by the federal government to provide goods or services to the government for a negotiated price and duration (McManus, 2012).

Disadvantaged businesses: Disadvantaged businesses are those that do not typically receive a large portion of federal contracts, such as those owned by women, minorities, veterans, or the economically disadvantaged (Cantwell, 2014).

Federal contract: A federal contract is an agreement between a civilian business and a federal organization by which the government agrees to pay the business a contracted rate for goods or services (Snider, Kidalov, & Rendon, 2013).

North American Industry Classification Systems (NAICS) codes: NAICS codes are those assigned to a solicitation or invitation to bid or provide a quote within an

industry designated by The Small Business Administration (SBA) as substantially underrepresented by WOSBs (Small Business Administration, 2011).

Set-asides: Set-asides are a fraction of government contracts "earmarked" for disadvantaged or underrepresented businesses such as WOSBs. For example, the U.S. federal government aims to award a minimum of 23% of the $500 billion spent on annual contracts to small businesses owned by women, disabled veterans, and economically disadvantaged individuals (Athey, Coey, & Levin, 2013).

Sole source authority: Sole source authority is a tool that allows government agencies to award contracts to a single contractor, allowing the contractor to circumvent the traditional competitive requirements (Cantwell, 2014).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions are those conditions expected to be met for the underlying research method to be justified (Simon & Goes, 2013). Three assumptions were important in the study. I assumed that participants would understand the purpose of the study and the procedural directions. I assumed that participants would be cooperative and truthful about their experiences in competing for government contracts. The final assumption was that the audio recordings and transcriptions of participant interviews would be clear and accurate.

During case study research, limitations are potential weaknesses not under the control of the researcher. Researchers must consider these factors when interpreting and discussing study results (Simon & Goes, 2013). A limitation of this research was the varying levels of experience the participants had with securing government contracts. To overcome this limitation, I designed interview questions to emphasize the experience of

each participant. Another limitation was the small number of participants, which would not represent a cross section of all types of WOSBs. This sample restricted generalization of the findings. Generalization is not a typical goal of case study research (Yin, 2014).

Delimitations of the study involved the participants, data, and geographical location within which the study was conducted (Simon & Goes, 2013). Participants included female small business owners located within the Metro-Atlanta area who had applied for government contracts either successfully or unsuccessfully. The choice of geographic location was one delimiting factor. The interview protocol was also a delimiting factor because many possible questions could be included. Many theories address gender, discrimination, economics, and business; consequently, there were also many possibilities for the conceptual framework of the study. The selected framework from which to review collected data represented another delimitation.

Significance of the Study

The study held significance for the field of business administration in several ways. The research could be used by female small business owners to perceive and experience the procurement of federal contracts. The results from this investigation could bring other factors to light that may contribute to the paucity of federal contract awards to WOSBs, and thereby provide direction for future research. Information gleaned from the research could also help stakeholders, including federal agencies and female entrepreneurs, understand additional barriers encountered by females who own small businesses as they seek to procure federal contracts, and provide insight for overcoming those obstacles.

Implications for Social Change

The research also had potential implications for positive social change. As the growth of WOSBs outpaces that of all other small business sectors, it will become increasingly important for these firms to win more government contracts than in the past to prevent expansion of the business gender gap (Koellinger et al., 2013). Nurturing growth among WOSBs may also have positive economic effects because of the proven strength of this sector (Joint Economic Committee, 2010; Matsa & Miller, 2014).

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

This literature review was designed to provide a comprehensive background and conceptualization of the research problem. The review included discussion of the following topics: the gender gap in business, the entrepreneurial propensity of women, the history and growth of WOSBs, an analysis of the federal contracting process related to WOSBs, a review of the WOSB Procurement Program, and sources of support for female entrepreneurs.

Search Strategy

I used several databases through Walden University's online library to locate literature for this review. Walden University recommends that 85% of the sources be peer-reviewed, as well as having been published within the 5 years preceding the respective study. Eighty-eight percent of the articles reviewed in this section were from peer-reviewed journals, and were published after 2013. I obtained most sources by searching the business and management databases within the online library. Other search tools included Google Scholar and the following databases: ScienceDirect, Business Source Complete, Sage Premier, government databases, and ProQuest. Sources reviewed

included peer-reviewed journals, textbooks, articles and web searches, and other secondary sources. I employed several search terms, including *women-owned small businesses, WOSB, federal contracts, contract procurement, government contracting, minority businesses, female entrepreneurs, gender and business, theory of representative bureaucracy, business competition, profitability, growth of WOSBs, sole source authority, disadvantaged businesses, access to credit, WOSB Procurement Program, Small Business Administration, women's equity in contracting, WOSB certification, economically disadvantaged businesses,* and *business equality.*

Related Theory

The purpose of the qualitative exploratory case study was to identify the capabilities needed by female small business owners to win federal contracts. The framework for the research was grounded in Mosher's (1968) theory of representative bureaucracy, as well as Koellinger's et al. (2013) conceptual framework on the effects of gender differences from the perceptions of entrepreneurial men and women. According to Mosher, bureaucratic representation can be either passive or active. Passive representation refers to a demographically diverse workforce, while active representation refers to the expectation that governing members will support the groups to which they belong (Fernandez et al., 2013). Most researchers who have reviewed the normative theory of representative bureaucracy support passive representation for its abilities to promote equal opportunities within a democracy. Passive representation is what fuels programs such as the WOSB Procurement Program, with the intent of promoting equality through the award of federal contracts to disadvantaged groups. These goals are not always achieved; consequently, an understanding of the roles women play in facilitating

such equality toward improved program implementation and equality is important (Fernandez et al., 2013).

To investigate gender differences within the context of government contracts, Fernandez et al. (2013) explored whether the representation of minorities and women helped federal agencies increase the rates at which contracts were awarded to women- and minority-owned businesses. While increasing the number of minorities working within a government agency improved the number of contract dollars awarded to minority-owned businesses, the same effect was not evident for women-owned businesses. The researchers reviewed representation of women at different levels and found no evidence of passive gender representation benefits, which might have been the result of the multiple factors. First, according to the self-categorization theory, group members tend to internalize the social norms of a group. Women responsible for awarding federal contracts may align their behaviors with the male majority, supporting an existing bias against women-owned businesses to protect their own positions within an agency. Women in executive positions, as members of male-dominated groups that frequently harbor negative stereotypes toward female leaders, often support male-owned businesses (Fernandez et al., 2013). Fernandez et al. (2013) concluded that achieving equality and gender advocacy for women would continue to be a challenge in policy settings that historically control and favor men.

Koellinger et al. (2013) outlined another important conceptualization of potential issues related to entrepreneurialism among women. The researchers explored differences in business ownership perceptions across cultures and genders. Within the United States, Koellinger et al. found that gender significantly influenced individual entrepreneurial

propensity and that men and women perceive business situations differently, including skillsets, fears of business failure, and opportunity costs. These differences in perception may inhibit female entrepreneurs from applying for federal contracts or skew their perceptions of available resources. Koellinger's et al. conceptual framework will provide a valuable lens through which to discuss study results.

History of the U.S. Gender Gap

Gender disparities within the United States have a longstanding history; however, women have made significant gains since the 1960s. Women emerged as a new sub-group of entrepreneurs when the first article detailing business successes was written in 1976 by Eleanor Schwartz (Jennings & Brush, 2013). Not until the late 1990s to early 2000s were women recognized as business owners when revenues exceeded $9 million (Jennings & Brush, 2013). In the middle of the 20th century, the gap in labor force participation between men and women was more than 50% (Robb, Coleman, & Stangler, 2014). In August 2014, the gap was only 13% (Robb et al., 2014). Much of the increased participation in the labor relates to educational gains made by women (del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes, Bojica, & Ruiz-Arroyo, 2015). In 2015, research revealed that the completion rate of a bachelor's degree or higher between men and women was the same at 33% (U.S. Census Bureau [USCB], 2015). From 1976 to 2010 the completion rate of a bachelor's degree for women grew from 20% to 36% (USCB, 2015). These educational gains have led to increased participation in the workforce and entrepreneurial activities among women. Although women are increasingly involved in business, their entrepreneurial activities continue to lag well behind those of men. An exploration of the causes of the

entrepreneurial gender gap is essential to addressing such gender inequalities (Haigh, Kennedy, & Walker, 2015).

Gender gap in business. While gender gaps exist across all facets of business, a significant example of gender disparity exists within the boardroom. Although most corporate board leaders express a desire to increase female representation, women held just 16.6% of all company board seats in 2012 (Groysberg & Bell, 2013). To explore this phenomenon of gender inequality, Groysberg and Bell (2013) conducted an investigation of the types of women that fill board seats and the obstacles they encounter. The female participants of their study were board members who confronted four primary obstacles: (a) not being heard; (b) not being accepted as part of the "in" group; (c) difficulty with establishing credibility; and (d) negative stereotypes. The presence of these obstacles indicates that the challenges for women in business span across organizations and up hierarchal chains.

Within business, a significant gender gap exists among entrepreneurs (Bullough, de Luque, Abdelzaher, & Heim, 2015; Faveri, Wilson, & Shaikh, 2015). More men than women participate in entrepreneurialism across various economies (Klapper & Parker, 2011). Men are more likely than women are to start businesses and prefer self-employment (Verheul, Thurik, Grilo, & van der Zwan, 2012). Women-owned firms account for just one-third of all U.S. businesses, and within high-growth businesses, women typically account for less than 10% of founders (Robb et al., 2014). While research on female entrepreneurship is expanding, the causes of the gender gap among entrepreneurs remain unclear (Bonte & Piegeler, 2013); yet, they are important to understand. Researchers have suggested that entrepreneurship may not be as beneficial

for women as previously thought (Ahl & Nelson, 2012). As women comprise a growing percent of educated workers, entrepreneurship within the United States may be strongly influenced by female participation.

Possible reasons for the differences in the entrepreneurial propensity of men and women include opportunity costs, discrimination, access to credit and financing, and differences in competitiveness. The opportunity costs and discriminatory issues with which female entrepreneurs contend have been extensively studied (Cheng, 2015; Fairlie & Marion, 2012; Fielden & Davidson, 2012; Henderson, Herring, Horton, & Thomas, 2015; Koellinger et al., 2013). Additional reasons for women lagging behind men within the realm of business may relate to the expected roles of women within the home and gender ideologies (Loscocco & Bird, 2012; Peris-Ortiz, Rueda-Armengot, & Osorio, 2012). Gender discrimination, access to credit, and female competitiveness were the reasons of focus in the study.

Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination is a challenge with which many female entrepreneurs contend (Groysberg & Bell, 2013). Although the WOSB Procurement Program was developed to prevent gender discrimination in the awarding of federal contracts, non-federal purchasing decisions may be subject to covert discrimination. For example, in a study on gender discrimination by purchasing managers, Wu and Sirgy (2014) reported that although purchasing managers might not intentionally do harm to unknown female suppliers, they are more likely to subconsciously prefer to do business with unknown suppliers who are male. Female entrepreneurs may miss bids for federal contracts. The preference to do business with an unknown male over an unknown female may be from

gender discrimination based upon stereotypes suggesting that women are less competent in business than are men. Wu and Sirgy posited that when purchasing managers are unfamiliar with female suppliers, gender stereotypes might substitute for the data needed to make informed decisions. Such stereotypes and discrimination may be a significant factor in the competitive barriers encountered by female entrepreneurs (Bosse & Taylor, 2012).

Gender and biological differences. Differences in entrepreneurship between men and women can be analyzed from the perspective of gender or biology (Goktan & Gupta, 2013). Gender identity is likely to have more influence on the orientation toward business ownership than biological sex. Higher rates of entrepreneurship are often associated with assertiveness, toughness, and ambition, which are traditionally masculine traits (Brescoll, Uhlmann, Moss-Racusin, & Sarnell, 2012). Owning a business, or possessing top management and business leadership positions, is perceived as requiring stereotypical masculine traits such as risk-taking, boldness, and assertiveness, regardless of the biological sex of the leader (Goktan & Gupta, 2013). Indeed, research has indicated that masculinity is an implicit aspect of entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurship is socially constructed as a masculine endeavor (Goktan & Gupta, 2013). Because gender identity is socially constructed, rather than biologically fixed, women can also possess and demonstrate these masculine qualities.

Access to credit. A gender gap in credit access may help explain the lower rate of entrepreneurship among women, as well as the smaller sizes of women-owned firms when compared to those owned by men (Mijid, 2015a). Female entrepreneurs often have less access to financing and credit than their male counterparts (Henderson et al., 2015;

Piras, Presbitero, & Rabellotti, 2013; Stefani & Vacca, 2013). Other variables may also have an effect. Women-owned businesses are often less capital intensive, smaller, less productive, and composed of younger leaders than those businesses owned by men (Aterido, Beck, & Iacovone, 2013). These factors may cause lenders to perceive female borrowers as a higher risk (Piras et al., 2013). Additionally, men are more often financially motivated, which may render them more growth-oriented, and likely to seek lines of credit than women (Mijid, 2015b). Women-owned firms may be less likely to apply for credit because they anticipate rejection (Piras et al., 2013), and female entrepreneurs may lack access to the social capital needed to obtain information on sources of financing (Mijid, 2015b; Seghers, Manigart, & Vanacker, 2012).

Findings from studies on gender and business credit access also indicated mixed results across countries. Researchers have reported no significant evidence of gender discrimination in U.S. credit markets (Agier & Szafarz, 2013; Cheng, 2015); however, Stefani and Vacca (2013) reported that gender was largely responsible for differences in access to credit among European borrowers. Klapper and Parker (2011) posited that the discrepancy in types of business structures among male- and female-owned small businesses might relate women's tendencies to distance themselves from businesses requiring a high capital outlay to enter. Alesina, Lotti, and Mistrulli (2013) reported that women-owned businesses in Italy paid higher interest rates than Italian businesses led by men.

Two other possible reasons for differences in credit access between male- and female-owned small businesses are the strength of loan applications, and the business backgrounds of the prospective borrowers. Female borrowers tend to be less financially

literate (Bucher-Koenen, Lusardi, Alessie, & van Rooij, 2014; Fonseca, Mullen, Zamarro, & Zissimopoulos, 2012; Mahdavi & Horton, 2014) with weaker loan applications than men (Van Auken & Horton, 2015). A lack of relevant education or business experience, collateral, and social connections, as well as weaker credit histories, may also hamper credit access for female business owners (Saparito, Elam, & Brush, 2012).

Other factors that may significantly affect the access to credit by female entrepreneurs are their perceptions of themselves, as well as the perceptions others have of them. Both forms of perception may discourage women from pursuing lines of business credit. Mijid (2015a) conducted a study to explore why female business owners are less likely to apply for credit than their male counterparts. Mijid found that banks often held negative stereotypes surrounding female borrowers regarding their abilities to repay loans, which had a negative effect on the rates of approval and sizes of business loans that banks approved for female entrepreneurs. The researcher reported that women misperceived their credit worthiness. The underlying issue of gender discrimination relating to the access to business credit is that women view themselves as inferior borrowers. Lenders regard them as less desirable borrowers than men. Female entrepreneurs often fall into a negative cycle of circular reasoning (Mijid, 2015a). First, they typically begin smaller, less profitable, and less growth-oriented businesses than men, which render them less appealing to lenders. These factors increase their likelihood of rejection for a loan. Once they have been denied loans, women become discouraged from applying for future loans. Firms of female entrepreneurs remain small, generate less cash flow, and experience disproportionately smaller growth opportunities.

Competitiveness and risk preference. Another possible reason for the discrepancy in the entrepreneurial propensities of men and women are gender differences in competitiveness (Westhead & Solesvik, 2015). Croson and Gneezy (2009) identified significant differences in male and female preferences for competition, noting that women had much less desire to engage in competition than did men. Women are more likely to quit competitive games than men (Hogarth, Karelaia, & Trujillo, 2012) and are less likely to compete under pressure, such as time constraints (Ahl & Nelson, 2012; Shurchkov, 2012). Although gender differences in competitiveness begin at an early age, men are more likely than women to compete throughout their lives (Gupta, Poulsen, & Villeval, 2013; Mayr, Wozniak, Davidson, Kuhns, & Harbaugh, 2012). Bonte and Piegeler (2013) analyzed a 2009 dataset that contained information regarding the competitiveness among men and women in 36 countries. The analysis indicated that individuals who were more competitively inclined and willing to take risks were also more likely to become entrepreneurs. Differences in competitiveness and risk preferences related to gender may contribute to differences in entrepreneurial propensity between men and women.

Men and women also demonstrate differences in risk preferences (Charness & Gneezy, 2012; Croson & Gneezy, 2009; Dawson & Henley, 2015). Croson and Gneezy (2009) reported that women were more averse to risk than men were. The decreased likelihood of engaging in competition and risk-taking suggested that women may be less likely to participate in entrepreneurial activities than men may. Bonte and Piegeler (2013) tested this theory by exploring the relationship between gender differences in competitiveness, and the latent and nascent entrepreneurship of men and women. Latent

entrepreneurs are those who prefer self-employment, while nascent entrepreneurs are those who prefer to start businesses. Bonte and Piegeler argued that the willingness to take risks and preferences to enter competitive situations were relevant for entrepreneurship.

To investigate how competitiveness affects male and female entrepreneurship, Bonte and Piegeler (2013) analyzed data from the Flash Eurobarometer Entrepreneurship 2009, a survey conducted in 36 countries with approximately 26,000 participants. The instrument included questions about participants' self-employment preferences and business startup activities. The researchers assessed competitiveness and risk-taking through participants' responses to statements such as "I like situations in which I compete with others" and "In general, I am willing to take risks."

Analysis of the survey results indicated significant differences between the male and female participants (Bonte & Piegeler, 2013). Bonte and Piegeler (2013) found that both latent and nascent entrepreneurship were significantly associated with level of competitiveness. The results also indicated that the women had significantly lower competitiveness scores than men in 32 of the 36 countries, suggesting that women were less likely to enter competitive situations such as entrepreneurship. Bonte and Piegeler also reported that women were less likely to take risks, and that risk-taking was positively associated with latent entrepreneurship. The researchers concluded that the differences between male and female risk-taking significantly contributed to the gender gap observed in latent and nascent entrepreneurship.

Human and social capital. As noted earlier, lower levels of human and social capital among women may negatively affect their entrepreneurship (Cetindamar, Gupta,

Karadeniz, & Egrican, 2012; Goktan & Gupta, 2013). Female entrepreneurs often possess less business and management work experience than their male counterparts (Conroy & Weiler, 2015). Because females are more aware of their deficiencies and obstacles, they are less likely to attempt entrepreneurship (Huarng, Mas-Tur, & Yu, 2012). Lacking the experience helpful for starting a business, many women who attempt entrepreneurship fail to remain self-employed (Conroy & Weiler, 2015). Conroy and Weiler (2015) posited that the attainment of bachelor's and master's degrees were associated with higher levels of entrepreneurship, and women who possessed only high school diplomas were less likely to become entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurial orientation. Another factor that may contribute to the gender gap in business, as well as the participation of WOSBs in the procurement of federal contracts, is entrepreneurial orientation (EO). The three dimensions of innovation, risk-taking, and proactiveness (Lim & Envick, 2013) characterize EO. Entrepreneurial orientation describes strategic actions taken by business owners and entrepreneurs, which are driven by the identification, perception, and exploitation of opportunities (del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes et al., 2015). In business and entrepreneurship literature, EO is often cited in conjunction with decision-making processes, philosophy, and managerial roles (Anderson & Eshima, 2013). Entrepreneurial orientation has become foundational to entrepreneurship research (Wales, Gupta, & Mousa, 2013). While EO is often considered the "overall posture of an organization" (Goktan & Gupta, 2013, p. 99), *individual* EO describes "a holistic assessment of individual proclivity towards entrepreneurship" (p. 99). Because the study focused on the entrepreneurial activities of individual, female,

small business owners, EO was conceptualized as an individual orientation for purposes of the research.

Distinct differences between the EO of men and women are evident in the following three factors: (a) women are less likely to envision themselves as entrepreneurs (Goktan & Gupta, 2013), (b) women may possess less human capital, including skills and competencies, than do men (Cetindamar et al., 2012), and (c) women often possess less social capital than do men (Cetindamar et al., 2012; Goktan & Gupta, 2013). Both masculine and feminine orientations can uniquely contribute to EO (Hamilton, 2013). Qualities typically considered feminine, such as the maintenance of group harmony and the nurturing of others, are important to entrepreneurial success (Brescoll et al., 2012). These qualities are associated with larger, higher quality social networks, which can provide female entrepreneurs with increased confidence and support when taking business risks (Goktan & Gupta, 2013).

As more women enroll in business courses and create businesses, an increasing level of EO among women has become evident. Goktan and Gupta (2013) conducted a large empirical study on 1,575 undergraduate students within the United States, Hong Kong, Turkey, and India to explore the role of gender in EO across different cultures. The researchers found significant differences in EO among men and women. In general, men demonstrated a stronger orientation toward entrepreneurship than did women. Although both masculine and feminine values relate to entrepreneurship, the theme of masculinity dominates entrepreneurial research. Goktan and Gupta (2013) found that androgynous gender identity was strongly predictive of higher levels of EO. Individuals who demonstrated androgyny were less likely to subscribe to male or female gender roles. For

example, androgynous women would not be intimidated by entrepreneurship even though entrepreneurship is considered a masculine activity. Similarly, androgynous men would not avoid nurturing relationships or record keeping job roles because of the stereotypical feminine association.

Androgynous entrepreneurs can possess both masculine and feminine traits, providing them with a broader array of EOs associated with business success (Adams & Funk, 2012). Goktan and Gupta found that differences in the relationships between EO and gender were not significant across cultures, suggesting that gender constructs had more influence on EO than cultural variances. The researchers explained that the cross-cultural consistency of the relationships between EO and gender demonstrated the importance of gender identity in understanding the differences in entrepreneurial activity between men and women.

The gender gap in entrepreneurship occurs consistently across different cultures (Lim & Envick, 2013). Lim and Envick (2013) conducted an empirical investigation of gender differences in EO among a sample of university students from the United States, Korea, Fiji, and Malaysia. The dimensions of EO assessed included autonomy, innovativeness, risk taking, and competitive aggressiveness. The findings indicated that men across all countries scored higher on all four dimensions of EO than women. Lim and Envick noted that although gender may not affect the performance of new ventures, it did influence entrepreneurial activity in the following ways: (a) men were more likely to engage in risk-taking than women; (b) men were more likely to demonstrate innovation, and become involved with technological and growth-oriented ventures than women; (c) men were more competitively aggressive than women, especially with external factors

(e.g. business competitors); and (d) men tended to rely less upon spousal and other forms of social support than women, rendering them more autonomous than female populations within the business realm.

Knowledge acquisition. A critical factor that may contribute to the differences observed in the EO of males and females is knowledge acquisition. Women are more likely to experience constrained access to knowledge-based resources than men, including education, professional experience, and entrepreneurial experience (del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes et al., 2015). del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes et al. (2015) conducted a study to explore the role of knowledge acquisition in the EO of female business owners and the performance of WOSBs. The researchers reported that EO significantly influenced the financial and organizational performance of WOSBs. In small, non-technological sectors, EO is a key performance driver used to improve results, especially the financial success of WOSBs.

del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes et al. (2015) found that women entrepreneurs implemented knowledge acquired from customers and other business collaborators. Such knowledge acquisition can improve the performance of WOSBs regarding the products and services offered, as well as customer satisfaction; however, a significant relationship between knowledge acquisition and financial performance was not indicated. del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes et al. reported that "women entrepreneurs indeed incorporate the knowledge acquired from customers and collaborators in their operations to improve their organizational performance and increase customer satisfaction, but they may not devote significant effort to using this knowledge to improve financial performance" (p. 709). Female entrepreneurs are likely to apply acquired knowledge to improve their customer

service and service/product quality, but not to improve the financial performance of the firms. The researchers concluded that because knowledge acquisition had a direct, positive correlation with EO which, in turn, had a direct, positive correlation with financial performance, it could be inferred that knowledge acquisition directly and positively affected the financial performance of the respective business, through the mediation of EO.

Knowledge-based resources alone do not create competitive advantage for businesses; rather, the entrepreneurial combination of knowledge and resources creates advantage. Female entrepreneurs might improve their competitive advantage considerably if they employed such collective knowledge to generate financial growth and profitability *in conjunction* with an emphasis on customer service and product/service quality. It may not be a lack of knowledge that serves as a disadvantage to WOSBs, when compared with firms owned by men. It may simply be that men are more likely to be financially motivated and focused on profitability than are women.

Growth and Profitability of Women-Owned Small Businesses

Mee (2012) noted that even with the entrepreneurial differences between men and women and the clear gender gap within the realm of business, women-owned businesses have experienced significant growth since 1977 (Table 1). Between 1972 and 2007, the number of women-owned businesses within the United States grew from 4.6% of small businesses to 28.7% (National Women's Business Council, 2007). Between 2002 and 2007, the number of women-owned businesses increased by 20%. While other private firms lost jobs during the economic downturn between 1997 and 2007, women-owned businesses generated approximately 500,000 new jobs (Joint Economic Committee,

2010). Women-owned businesses are less likely to downsize their workforces during tough economic times than are firms owned by men (Matsa & Miller, 2014); consequently, women-owned firms represent an important factor in economic growth and stability.

Table 1

Growth Comparison Between Small Businesses Owned by Men and Women

Type of Business	Growth 1977-2007 %	Growth 2002-2007 %	Jobs 2002-2007	Addition or reduction in employees 2002-2007 %
Female-owned	44	20.1	+500,000	+6.2
Male-owned	22	5.5	-2,000,000	-2

Cantwell (2014) reported that 8.6 million women-owned businesses were operating within the United States in 2013. According to the Center for Women's Business Research (CWBR; 2009), women-owned businesses grew at twice the rate of all other firms between 1997 and 2002. During this same period, WOSBs also outpaced the growth of all other sectors of small business. To conceptualize the magnitude of this growth, the CWBR stated that if all the women-owned businesses within the United States were in a country of their own, they would collectively represent the world's fifth largest GDP. In 2009, women-owned businesses generated $3 trillion and 23 million jobs, which represented 16% of all U.S. jobs.

Table 2

Comparison of Female and Male-Owned Small Businesses

Type of business	Sales over $500,000/year %	Paid employees %	Average receipts for employer firms $	Average receipts for nonemployer firms $
Female-owned	3.7	11.7	1.1 million	26,486
Male-owned	11	22.3	2.5 million	53,329

Although the growth of WOSBs is undeniable, women remain far less likely to become entrepreneurs than men (Brixy, Sterberg, & Stuber, 2012; Verheul et al., 2012), and are typically less successful as entrepreneurs than men (Mee, 2012). WOSBs are more likely to fail than businesses owned by men. When they do succeed, they are typically smaller and less profitable (Mee, 2012; Sullivan & Meek, 2012) (see Table 2). Klapper and Parker (2011) reported that female entrepreneurs earned less income than their male counterparts, within both industrialized and developing countries. The reason for this income discrepancy is not necessarily inferior entrepreneurial performance. Because female business owners are more likely to operate smaller businesses in industries with lower capital intensities and returns to capital, the income disparity may be at least partially attributable to these factors (Center for Women in Business, 2014). Male entrepreneurs are often hyper-focused on financial success, while female entrepreneurs view financial success as just one of many benefits from business growth (Manolova, Brush, Edelman, & Shaver, 2012). Women also vary significantly from men regarding noneconomic outcomes, such as building trust, relationships, and a sense of

satisfaction, which are factors that may also affect business growth (Meek & Sullivan, 2013; Terjesen & Elam, 2012). According to the CWBR (2009), minority-owned businesses, a category that includes WOSBs, typically absorb the largest losses during tough economic times. Women are also subject to the notorious gap in compensation between genders (Kahn, 2015; Lips, 2013), and have less capital to sustain their businesses during difficult economies (Henderson et al., 2015; Piras et al., 2013; Stefani & Vacca, 2013).

Traditionally female businesses. Another significant difference in business participation between men and women is the type of industries within which women traditionally establish businesses. Women open businesses in a diminished number of industry categories. The most common examples are sales, retail, and services (Klapper & Parker, 2011). The beauty industry is included in these categories, and has attracted 46% of all self-employed women. The median hourly wage of jobs within the beauty industry is $11.38 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015). In 2006, 69% of women-owned businesses were within the service industry, and 14.4% were in retail (CWBR, 2009). Approximately 47% of all self-employed workers in the retail industry are women, while women-owned firms represent a small percent of businesses in technology and other high-growth sectors (Center for Women in Business, 2014; Dautzenberg, 2012). Female entrepreneurs are increasingly venturing into fields traditionally dominated by men, such as engineering, technology, manufacturing, construction, and transportation (BarNir, 2012; Mcdonald & Westphal, 2013). Many of these fields represent industries with federal contracts for which women-owned businesses are eligible under the WOSB Procurement Program.

Federal Contracts

To discuss issues related to federal contract procurement and WOSBs, a review of federal contracts in economy and industry was necessary. Federal contracts are important to public administration in several ways. Snider et al. (2013) described the following three major characteristics related to government contracts: (a) federal contracting offices are found in nearly all local, state, and federal agencies, and employ over 50,000 people; (b) federal contracts represent a sizeable contribution to the U.S. economy, accounting for nearly 15% of the total annual federal budget; and (c) federal contracts are responsible for the development of a variety of products and services, including weapons, aircraft, and other national defense products. These contracts are necessary in the provision of supplies and services the U.S. government requires to function.

Despite its importance, the government contracting process is not without flaws (Terjesen, 2015). According to Snider et al. (2013), one major problem is the lack of contracting competency. Pergelova and Angulo-Ruiz (2014) described contracting capacity as what governments require from others willing to provide a product or service. Skills expected of contracting officials include internal and external management tools, such as contractor performance management and contract management (Snider et al., 2013). Without confirmation of the necessary tools, federal agencies are vulnerable to corruption from incompetence (Kauppi & van Raaij, 2015). When federal contracting decisions are made without adequate skills, violations of duty, public trust, ethics, and power can occur (Cullen, 2012; Snider et al., 2013).

Snider et al. (2013) reported that another problem with federal contracts is that agencies often lack capable contracting processes. Three important related processes

involve (a) the ability to make decisions surrounding the appropriate time to contract work; (b) understanding how to solicit contractors, evaluate proposals, and award contracts; and (c) the ability to evaluate the performance of contractors (Pergelova & Angulo-Ruiz, 2014). A lack of contracting competency and knowledge surrounding appropriate procedures on the part of federal agents responsible for awarding contracts can have a significant influence on the procurement process, especially for disadvantaged and underrepresented businesses.

Small businesses often struggle during difficult economic times, especially with reduced revenues and "skyrocketing" tax burdens (McManus, 2012). Through federal contracts, however, the U.S. government can support small businesses as they work to remain profitable (Cunningham, Baines, & Charlesworth, 2014). More than $500 billion in contracting opportunities are available on the federal procurement market (Cantwell, 2014). Historically, female business owners have had limited access to these contracts, often solely through subcontracting.

Despite the remarkable growth of WOSBs, these businesses have remained unable to procure a reasonable share of federal contracts (McManus, 2012; Mee, 2012). In 1979, women-owned businesses obtained 0.2% of the available contracts with a value exceeding $25,000. By 2009, that figure had increased to just 3.68% of all contract dollars (Mee, 2012). In 1994, Congress established a goal of awarding 5% of federal contracts to WOSBs in an attempt to improve contract acquisition (Federal Acquisition Streamlining Act of 1994, 1994). That effort fell short, and the number of contracts awarded to women-owned businesses decreased by 38% between 1997 and 1999 (Cantwell, 2014). In response, Congress established the WOSB Federal Contract

Program in 2000. The program, which acknowledged the disparity that had existed for years with no legislative resolution, was designed to make federal contracting more accessible to women (McManus, 2012). It took more than 10 years for the program to be implemented. During that time, WOSBs received an average of just over 3% of federal contracting dollars (Cantwell, 2014). As Cantwell (2014) hypothesized, if the 5% contracting goal had been achieved over the course of the 11 years since enactment, it would have represented an additional $63 billion in contract opportunities for WOSBs.

In 2011, the WOSB Procurement Program was implemented, but with limitations. WOSBs were limited to maximum awards of $4 million, which meant that the most lucrative contracts were out of reach for female business owners. This, in turn, created barriers that other small business initiatives did not encounter (Cantwell, 2014). Following passage of the 2013 National Defense Authorization Act, these caps were eliminated. Eligibility for the program required adherence to the SBA size standards outlined in 13 C.F.R. Part 121 (Meagher, 2011). WOSBs were also required to obtain certification through any of the following approved third party organizations: the El Paso Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the National Women Business Owners Corporation, the U.S. Women's Chamber of Commerce, or the Women's Business Enterprise National Council (McManus, 2012).

WOSBs describe small businesses that are, at minimum, 51% owned by one or more women, with daily operations controlled by women. These restrictions related to control are designed to prevent firms from obtaining WOSB status when, for example, a single woman serves as a company "figurehead" with no other female proprietors (Meagher, 2011). Control rules under the WOSB Procurement Program are outlined in

the following manner: (a) management and daily operations must be controlled by one or more women; (b) the highest office position must be held by a woman with appropriate managerial experience, as well as operated by her on a full-time basis; and (c) the woman manager need not possess required licenses, but must demonstrate supervisory control over those who do because, if a man possesses the licenses and has equity interest, he may be viewed as possessing control over the business (Meagher, 2011).

To prevent ineligible businesses from taking advantage of WOSB set-asides, the SBA has implemented several eligibility and enforcement measures against those who violate the requirements by falsifying ownership status of a business as predominantly female. Such businesses may be disbarred or have administrative and civil remedies prescribed against them through the False Claims Act (SBA, 2011). The federal government may also prosecute businesses that misrepresent their status to gain WOSB eligibility for criminal penalties under 18 U.S.C. 1001 (SBA, 2011).

Despite efforts to increase federal contracts awarded to WOSBs, the 5% goal has not been met during any single fiscal year (Cantwell, 2014). This translates into an average annual loss of $5.7 billion that WOSBs would gain if the goal were met. Cantwell (2014) posited that the problem is partially because of inadequate knowledge of the WOSB Procurement Program by women business owners and federal acquisition officers. Between its enactment in 2011 and July 2014, approximately $237 million in federal contracts had passed through the WOSB Procurement Program. This represents less than 1% of the $1.74 trillion in federal contracts awarded during the same period.

Set-asides. The amended Small Business Act of 1958 is the primary authority for small business set-asides in federal contracting (Manuel & Lunder, 2015). The Act

permits the reservation of small purchases for goods and services (more than $3,000 but less than $150,000) to small businesses. This legislation applies solely to the purchase of goods and services with appropriated funds and excludes certain contracts. Contracts fulfilled overseas, “blanket” purchase agreements, and orders placed against Federal Supply Schedule contracts, are not subject to these regulations. Contracts that exceed $150,000 differ because agencies must employ sealed bidding procedures or contract negotiations prior to awarding contracts.

In addition to set-asides for small businesses, Congress mandated that federal agencies extend preferences to small businesses owned and operated by individuals who are socially and economically disadvantaged, such as racial and ethnic minority groups. These types of businesses are classified as 8(a) firms, and are typically required to have been in operation for a minimum of 2 years to qualify for federal contracts. The Small Business Reauthorization Act of 2000 amended section 8(m) to include economically disadvantaged WOSBs. Contracts could be set aside for these businesses if the contracting agency expected to receive bids from a minimum of two qualified WOSBs, and if the contract was based in an industry within which WOSBs were underrepresented. The total award was required to be below $4 million in all industries, with the exception of manufacturing in which the maximum award was $6.5 million (Manual & Lunder, 2015).

Miller (2014) posited the underrepresentation of WOSBs in federal contracting. The SBA has designated 83 4-digit NAICS codes as either underrepresented or substantially underrepresented (SBA, 2011). Under the WOSB Procurement Program, requirements can be set aside for WOSBs or businesses owned by economically

disadvantaged women, if the following criteria have been met: (a) the NAICS code assigned to the solicitation, invitation for bid, or quote represents an industry within which the SBA has designated WOSBs as substantially underrepresented; (b) the contracting officer expects two or more WOSBs to submit offers; (c) the anticipated award price does not exceed $4 million, or $6.5 million for manufacturing contracts; and (d) the contracting officer estimates that the contract can be awarded at a reasonable price.

Sole source authority. A possible reason for the failure of the WOSB Procurement Program to its goals is that until 2013, the program lacked sole source authority. Sole source authority is a tool that allows government agencies to award contracts to a single contractor, thereby freeing the contractor from traditional competition requirements (Cantwell, 2014). Sole source authority allows federal officers to award contracts to WOSBs through the program while removing the requirement to identify multiple WOSBs prior to awarding a contract. Sole source authority removes costly administrative burdens that can cause small businesses to become ineligible for contract awards. The ability of government agencies to award contracts to WOSBs puts the WOSB Procurement Program at a disadvantage (Cantwell, 2014).

In December 2014, the House Armed Services Committee and Senate Armed Services Committee came to an agreement on the National Defense Authorization Act for 2015 that created sole source authority under the WOSB Procurement Program (Connor, 2014). Although this was a positive step forward for program proponents, the effects may not be visible for quite some time. The SBA must first develop rules for implementing the law, and contracting officials will need to learn the program changes. Regardless,

passage of this law was an important first step toward improving the effects of the WOSB Procurement Program and increasing the abilities of WOSBs to compete for federal contracts.

Women-Owned Small Businesses

Drawbacks and values. Cantwell (2014) noted that poor implementation, and regulatory and statutory burdens, prevent the efficient use of the WOSB Procurement Program by WOSBs and those responsible for program implementation. Poor implementation is worsened by narrowly focused, outdated industry classifications, and a lack of sole source authority. These issues render program application more challenging for federal contracting officers.

Although the WOSB Procurement Program is not without critics, its value and importance is validated by the economic value of WOSBs within the United States. The $2.8 trillion in revenues, and 23 million people employed by these businesses, makes this segment of U.S. business a powerful economic contributor (Center for Women's Business Research, 2009). The WOSB Procurement Program has remaining issues to work out, and cuts in government spending could result in further reduction to the number of federal contracting dollars awarded to WOSBs, despite program efforts (McManus, 2012). The federal government aims to reduce unnecessary costs, put a stop to uncontrollable spending, and eliminate redundant contracts (Goltz, Buche, & Pathak, 2015). Although these are positive steps for the individual taxpayer, potential cuts in spending could threaten government spending in the same sectors that the WOSB Procurement Plan seeks to protect. McManus (2012) warned that the SBA provision for WOSBs will spur protests, fewer contracts, and less federal money to spend.

Recommendations for program improvement. To rescue the WOSB Procurement Program, improve contracting opportunities for WOSBs, and help the U.S. government reach its goal of 5%, Cantwell (2014) offered the following recommendations:

1. Legislate the award of contracts to WOSBs and businesses owned by economically disadvantaged women through the WOSB Procurement Program.
2. Accelerate the updated disparity study conducted within the SBA to determine industries in which WOSBs are underrepresented.

Criticism. Although programs such as the WOSB Procurement Program are designed to contribute to "evening the playing field" for smaller and disadvantaged businesses, critics of such legislation claim that they are less concerned with protecting such businesses, and more intent on reducing agency workload. The use of these programs is expected, especially when government agencies lack organizational contracting skills (Snider et al., 2013). According to Snider et al. (2013), the governance of diversity has become an exercise of expedience rather than a tool to redress discrimination and disadvantage. The researchers further argued that, until federal programs become more organized, they would rely upon minority preference programs, such as the WOSB Procurement Program, out of convenience rather than to protect the competitive interests of minority-owned businesses.

Critics of programs for socially disadvantaged businesses (SDBs), such as the WOSB Procurement Program, argued that the political nature of these programs creates prohibitive burdens for agents and contractors (Yukins, 2010). Such programs have the

potential to encourage non-SDB businesses to misrepresent their size or ownership status. Although criminal and civil penalties exist for such fraud, “loopholes” are present that could allow large firms to win contracts set aside for small businesses. Programs targeting SDBs can also create discrepancy between fair competition principles and preferences toward SBDs (Thai, 2008), Although the fundamental intent is to support small businesses, critics argued that large firms often receive awards through the programs from agency mistakes or reporting errors (Snider et al., 2013).

Support for female entrepreneurs. Although the WOSB Procurement Program may assist WOSBs with proprietors interested in competing for federal contracts, an understanding of the support mechanisms that may also affect their abilities to compete, is important. Although female entrepreneurs certainly do not lack ambition, they do tend to have a lower number of business opportunities and business skills than men have (Diaz-Garcia, Saez-Martinez & Jimenez-Moreno, 2015; Fielden & Hunt, 2011). Despite the significant increase in female entrepreneurship, there remains nearly twice as many male business owners as female business owners (Carter & Mwaura, 2015). According to Fielden, Davidson, Dawe, and Makin (2003), a missing element that results in barriers to business creation is access to beneficial business support. Although such supports are sometimes available, women may not have access to them for social reasons, including low confidence, childcare needs, ethnicity, and social background. Many scholars have evaluated female entrepreneurs as homogenous with men; however, women are more accurately viewed as a heterogeneous group with diverse characteristics (Fielden & Hunt, 2011; Nikina, Shelton, & LeLoarne, 2015).

Social networks can provide a valuable source of support for female entrepreneurs that enhances communication and the exchange of ideas and information which, in turn, can affect business success (Ameer & Othman, 2012; Boling, Burns, & Dick, 2014). The *perceptions* of support among women more significantly affect their entrepreneurial success than actual support, regardless of the measure of success (Fielden & Hunt, 2011). Additionally, the degree to which women perceive business advice as helpful may differ from the perceptions of men (Henry, Foss, Fayolle, Walker, & Duffy, 2015). Gender may significantly affect the support needs of male and female entrepreneurs.

Fielden and Hunt (2011) conducted interviews in a research study on the social support needs of current and potential female entrepreneurs. The aim of these researchers was to explore the types of social support available to female entrepreneurs through traditional forms, the types of support most effective in assisting women during their creation new ventures, and the ways in which social support requirements could be met by an online coaching program. The researchers recruited a purposive sample of 30 established female entrepreneurs and 30 potential female entrepreneurs, all between the ages of 22 and 55. Semistructured interviews were conducted and the transcription was examined via thematic analysis.

Informal sources of social support are often viewed as less threatening to women, rendering these support sources more likely to be implemented (Fielden & Hunt, 2011). Fielden and Hunt (2011) found that many interview respondents viewed such informal support to be damaging and lacking in benefit. These researchers noted that women entrepreneurs who relied upon this form of support might experience disadvantages because it limits their social support resources. Gender significantly influenced the ways

female entrepreneurs in Fielden and Hunt's study viewed the empathy and understanding of others. The needs of new female entrepreneurs were most likely met by individualized, one-on-one support. Because many female entrepreneurs struggle to balance work and family responsibilities, the benefits of virtual support were emphasized by the study respondents. The ability to access online support at a convenient time was viewed as an advantage over traditional forms of business support. Online coaching held the potential to increase female entrepreneurship and improve performance outcomes (Fielden & Hunt, 2011). The rationale was that such coaching might provide women the social support they need while incorporating elements of both tangible and intangible support, such as individual coaching, networking with other businesswomen, and access to information on issues related to venture creation.

Another potential cause of the discrepancy between male and female entrepreneurship may be related to culture. Shinnar, Giacomin, and Janssen (2012) conducted a study to investigate how culture may shape entrepreneurial intentions and contribute to explaining the gender gap in business. The study sample included 761 university students from China, the United States, and Belgium. Participants answered questionnaires that assessed perceived barriers related to a lack of support, fear of failure, and a lack of competency.

The findings provided cultural insight into the perceived entrepreneurial barriers of men and women. Shinnar et al. (2012) found that women from all three countries sampled perceived the lack of support barrier as far more significant than did men. These researchers also recorded no difference in the gender gap across the three nations, suggesting that perceptions of available support were shaped by gender, not culture. The

female participants from the United States and Belgium perceived fear of failure and incompetency to be more significant than did the male participants. A stronger negative relationship existed between incompetency and entrepreneurial intentions with female participants from the United States than with the men from the United States. No such differences were found in respondents from China or Belgium.

Shinnar et al. (2012) concluded that, although their findings indicated culture and gender matter regarding perceived barriers to entrepreneurship, gender roles are not consistent. A notable finding was the effect that gender seemed to have on the ways the participating women from all three countries perceived lack of support, suggesting that gender and institutional support, rather than culture, are responsible for the perception patterns. Whether or not support is lacking, if women perceive it as lacking, the barrier will exist. Shinnar et al. recommended that governments promote female entrepreneurship by creating support mechanisms, such as training, financial lenders, and consultants.

In an attempt to provide female entrepreneurs with the support necessary to navigate the federal contract procurement process, the SBA collaborated with Women Impacting Public Policy (WIPP) and the American Express Open in 2014. According to the SBA website, ChallengeHer hosts networking events for women entrepreneurs to receive information on how to promote their products and services (Shoraka, 2014). The events are designed to help women understand how they can become certified for the WOSB Procurement Program, and register with the federal government Systems for Award Management database. ChallengeHer events are hosted throughout the country. The events and workshops provide women with access to mentoring opportunities, online

curriculum, and government buyers to help women compete in the government marketplace. Other organizations offer resources to help female entrepreneurs navigate the federal contract procurement process, including the U.S. Women's Chamber of Commerce, the Women's Business Enterprise National Council, and the National Women Business Owners Corporation.

Transition and Summary

Although many resources appear to be available to help WOSBs successfully compete for federal contracts, little is known surrounding the way female entrepreneurs employ these resources, and how adequately they perceive these supports. I investigated this gap in the existing literature. The study was guided by the following research question: What capabilities do female small business owners need to secure federal contracts? Section 1 was an introduction to the study, including the background of the problem, the problem, purpose, nature, and research questions. The framework, definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and significance were also detailed. Section 2 includes a detailed explanation of the method, including the research design and rationale. The role of the researcher and issues of trustworthiness are also discussed. Section 3 includes the findings, followed by a discussion of the research implications.

Section 2: The Project

Section 2 included the details of the project, including the researcher's role, participant solicitation and data collection procedures, and analytical strategies. The ethical considerations and issues of validity were also presented to promote transparency, and describe the methods used to remedy any potential harm. This section concluded with a discussion of how reliability and validity were ensured in this study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to identify the capabilities needed by female small business owners to win federal contracts. The participants included approximately six women entrepreneurs located in Atlanta, Georgia, who have applied for a minimum of one federal contract. The ratio of participants between those who have successfully procured federal contracts, and those who have been unsuccessful in securing contracts, were approximately equal. The results from this research may help communities of female small business owners understand how to participate in the federal contract procurement process, thereby growing their businesses. The study may also have clarified barriers that inhibit the application and award of federal contracts to this group of business owners. Results from the study may equip female small business owners with the information needed to improve their abilities to procure federal contracts.

Role of the Researcher

Having applied a qualitative method, interviews were the main source of data in the study. Unlike the quantitative approach, qualitative data collection requires the researcher to become the instrument through which data flow (Tracy, 2013). Because the

researcher was deeply intertwined in the data collection and analysis processes, it was important to be aware of personal bias, desired outcomes, and personal thoughts and interests. The goal of recognizing such bias and preconceptions is to compartmentalize, or set aside, all personal viewpoints, allowing all data interpretation to occur in as natural a manner as possible.

As a female entrepreneur, I have a relationship to the topic of the study. I am aware of the special federal programs developed to promote women and other minorities in business. My personal goals were to learn more about these programs and processes to enable me to extend assistance to women needing the support that these programs offer. These goals were in direct response to research that shows a lack of capability to win federal contracts among female entrepreneurs (Bates & Robb, 2013; Fernandez et al., 2013). I am a resident of the Metro-Atlanta area and a small business owner. I maintain membership with local government and business organizations within my local community. The participants of the study were drawn from within the Metro Atlanta area. Because my goal aligned with the purpose of the study, personal interests were not expected to sway my interpretation of the data. Rather, my relationship to the topic and personal involvement as a female entrepreneur enabled me to empathize with participants, and build trust to capture details potentially crucial to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of interest.

As the researcher and instrument in the study, I served as the recorder for interviews, observed the participants, requested archival data, and monitored the audio recording of the sessions. Rubin and Rubin (2011) suggested that the researcher guide the interview process, as the researcher can draw out information pertinent to the goals of the

study based on knowledge of the topic and the study goals. In line with Rubin and Rubin's (2011) position on interviewing, I chronicled the facial expression, emotions, and body language of the participants to describe their responses. I followed the guidelines from The Belmont Report (1974), which outline strict criteria for conducting research involving human subjects, and incorporated any recommendations of the Institutional Review Board.

Doody and Noonan (2013) advised that face-to-face interviews could render a study vulnerable to researcher bias if the investigation leads the interview toward a specific direction or outcome. The use of panel reviewed interview protocols can limit this potentiality (Seidman, 2013). To mitigate the potential for bias during the interviewing process of the study, I created a protocol and had a panel of experts within the field of business review the instrument to ensure the questions were clear, concise, and not phrased in a manner that could influence responses or include leading prompts. I considered all feedback from the panel, and revised the protocol as necessary. All responses to the open-ended interview questions were audio recorded and transcribed with the assistance of a professional transcribing service. Microsoft Word supported the transcription process. Themes were uploaded to Microsoft Excel. Excel spreadsheets are widely used in the analysis of qualitative data because of the ability to easily sort and review themes and similarities (Flick, 2014; Given, 2008; Silverman, 2013).

Participants

Yin (2014) described the optimal case study participants as meeting the essential criteria of experience with the case, interest in the case, and a willingness to participate in the study. Strict selection criteria were applied to potential participants to ensure that each

was representative of the target population. Each participant was a minimum of 18 years of age, female, and owned a small business. Each female business owner must have applied for a government contract or have had an interest in such application. By meeting these criteria, the participants were representative of the target population of interest, and had experience relevant to the case, allowing them to provide applicable information important to the study (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

I am involved in several women's organizations, as well as business organizations, and used these networks to access the population of interest. Walden University's approval number for this study is 02-10-17-0148870; the approval expires on February 9, 2018. Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I contacted "gatekeepers" within these organizations via informational letters (see Appendix B). This communication included details of the study along with a request to forward the letter to female business owners who are members of the organization. This procedure was in addition to personal contact through emails gathered from the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. Letters of consent (see Appendix C) were delivered to all respondents expressing an interest in participating in the study. This letter described the full procedures of the study, and provided all information necessary for informed decision to participate. I subsequently conferred with the respondents, and scheduled a mutually agreed upon time and place with each participant to conduct the study interviews.

Yin (2014) asserted that with each participant a working relationship must be established between the researcher and the study participants. Toward this end, the interview process began with a brief introduction and light conversation to raise the comfort level of the participants. I strived to ensure that the immediate needs of the

interviewees were met during the sessions to avoid distraction. Brinkmann (2013) suggested these steps as a means of building rapport, and eliciting more comprehensive and open responses. My familiarity with the government contract process was expected to provide a connection with the participants, and garner more open and honest responses. I also followed Kisely and Kendall's (2011), Brinkmann's (2013) and Yin's (2014) suggestions to encourage all interviewees to provide full and complete responses, reminding them that their responses were strictly confidential. I requested archival data, including company revenue, metrics, and federal contract applications at the close of interviews.

Research Method and Design

The study adhered to a qualitative research method and case study model. Qualitative researchers apply open-ended data gathering techniques to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Lapan et al., 2012). Yin (2014) posited that qualitative research allows participants to provide rich detail regarding their perceptions and experiences. This model also permits the collection of multiple forms of data, including interview transcriptions and archival data, which can take numeric form.

Research Method

I chose the qualitative research method to enable the collection of perceptions and experiences from women who have been either successful or unsuccessful in securing government contracts. Qualitative methods are the most appropriate when specific variables are unknown, and rich detail is sought to explore a specific case (Bansal & Corley, 2012). This allows researchers to approach case studies with the freedom to draw conclusions and identify factors relevant to the case, as well as to eliminate limitations

sourced in the highly-targeted data collection techniques used in quantitative research (Yin, 2014).

Quantitative and mixed-method research do not produce rich, descriptive, and exploratory results (Miller, 2014). The quantitative researcher must gather data regarding a specific set of variables, and such targeted data are not useful for an exploration of potential variables. Within the scope of the study, quantitative data would have been incapable of providing detail concerning the specific experiences encountered by female small business owners applying for government contracts (Stentz, Plano Clark, & Matkin, 2012). Without former knowledge of those experiences, a quantitative analysis was inappropriate (Stentz et al., 2012). I did not assess significant effects among variables but, rather, assessed which concepts or experiences were perceived as important to the target population. Because of the described strengths of qualitative research, this methodology was deemed optimal for the study.

Research Design

I designed the research as a case study, with the intention of gathering information from a specific case of interest (Yin, 2014). Within the case study design, several approaches were available. The most common is the exploratory design, which was chosen for the research with the goal of exploring any experiences or factors relevant to the application for a government contract among female business owners. Using the exploratory case study design, researchers can gain insight into complex situations, as well as analyze the relationship between situations, by posing how and why questions to study participants (Yin, 2014).

Research applying a case study design often results in findings related to the exploration, effects, and meaning of events over time, using a secondary data source to triangulate the findings and thereby increase validity (Yin, 2014). The case study design provided a deeper understanding of the issues with data collected from the use of open-ended, semistructured questions coupled with archival data of both quantitative and qualitative nature regarding company metrics, revenue, policies, and federal contract applications, as available (Baskarada, 2014; Ploor, 2014). Within qualitative research, there are several research designs effective for guiding the analysis. Ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory were considered before determining that the case study design was best aligned to the goals of the study. The ethnographic approach was not suitable because the scope of the study did not involve Brown's (2014) position that ethnographic research seeks understanding a cultural group. Instead, the purpose of the research was to analyze a very specific case. Phenomenology was not appropriate for the study, because I did not seek to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of this target population, which Moustakas (1994) detailed as the main goal of phenomenological research.

Corbin and Strauss (2014) cited the creation of a theory as the goal of grounded theory research. A grounded theory approach was also unsuitable because I did not intend to create a theory regarding female business owners or government contracts. This study contained details surrounding the process of female business owners applying for government contracts. This focus represented a specific case, and by defining the boundaries, I could direct data collection and explore the full scope of the case (Yin, 2014).

For qualitative research, the foremost consideration is the saturation of data (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Saturation represents the moment at which the data drawn from participants ceases to contribute unique or substantive information (Morse, Lowery, & Steury, 2014). The qualitative researcher must assess each theme to determine whether full description has been achieved and confirmed among the participants. Meeting this goal indicates that saturation has been reached (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Corbin and Strauss (2014) suggested that data collection from interviewing may end when the themes identified reflect a complex, profound, and diverse explanation of an experience, as well as a developed understanding of the case under study.

Population and Sampling

The target population relevant to this study was composed of female small business owners who were more than 18 years of age, and had applied for government contracts (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Robinson, 2014; Suri, 2011). No incentives were offered, as there was a sufficiently large population to contact so that a minimum sample of six participants could be found without the need for an incentive. Piloting was considered, but rejected based on time constraints. Expert review was elected in place of formal pilot testing. To gather six participants from this population, female small business owners from the Metro-Atlanta, Georgia, area were contacted through email. Those email addresses were gathered from the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, which houses this information for public use. In that email, potential participants were asked to respond with confirmation that they met the inclusion criteria of (a) being female, (b) having attempted to obtain a contract with a federal agency, and (c) being 18 years old or older.

Those who had either unsuccessfully attempted to secure a government contract, or had successfully applied for such award, were informed of their eligibility to participate in the study. I have direct access to female small business owners through their common membership in business organizations, and gathered their contact information from a public source. Because I contacted participants based upon their availability, this represented a convenience sampling technique (Coyne, 1997; Robinson, 2014; Suri, 2011). Convenience sampling is appropriate when a researcher seeks to identify individuals with salient experience relevant to a study topic of interest, and when these individuals are invited based upon their availability or their proximity to the researcher (Robinson, 2014). Proximity to the researcher was assured because the sampled businesses were all identified as being from the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce.

Experts within qualitative fields of study have offered varied suggestions for a standard sample size when conducting case study. Yin (2014) suggested that the specificity of a case study is conducive to quickly attaining saturation because a well-bound case may be explored more efficiently than other, less directed methods. Emmel (2015) recommended a minimum of six participants for studies applying qualitative data collection methods. Following this recommendation, a sample size of six participants was used in the study, which was sufficient to elicit responses that encompassed and adequately represented the perceptions within the specific case of interest. The use of this sample size was based on a combination of the suggested sample sizes from Emmel (2015) and Morse (1994), and the indication from Yin (2014) that case study research tends to reach saturation with less participants than other methodological designs. I recruited an equal number of participants between those who did and those who did not

successfully apply for government contracts. If saturation was not achieved with these participants, data collection would have continued using snowball sampling until saturation was reached (Emmel, 2015; Morse, 1994; Yin, 2014). Snowball sampling refers to the use of existing participants to solicit participation from their friends and colleagues who also apply to the study. Participants may share contact information of women they believe meet the inclusion criteria. I then emailed the women to ask them to participate.

Ethical Research

Consent is obtained from participants prior to conducting a study, partially to build a trusting relationship (McDermid, Peters, Jackson, & Daly, 2014). Two weeks before commencement of the study, I emailed a consent form (see Appendix C) to each woman who was invited to participate in the research study. In line with the suggestions from McDermid et al. (2014), that form described the background of, and procedures for, the study and promised to maintain confidentiality with all information provided during the research. The potential participants were also informed that no compensation would be provided for their involvement in the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Robinson, 2014; Suri, 2011). My contact information was provided, and the participation of the recipients was requested. Each individual desiring to participate in the study signed the consent form prior to the interview. The informed consent procedure took place at the interview site to give participants a chance to ask questions in person. McDermid et al. (2014) indicated that this is the only way to be sure that participants understand their role in the research and agree to take part, which should be addressed before any data are gathered.

All participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, before or after signing the consent form, by contacting me through telephone or email.

Ethical protection for each participant in the research was maximized using de-identification numbers. It is important that researchers also serve as advocates for study participants, and maintain the highest level of confidentiality that is reasonably possible (Hair, Wolfinbarger, Money, Samouel, & Page, 2015). Assigning a deidentification number to each participant protected both their anonymity and that of their businesses. I did not falsify data or disclose confidential information. I did not publicize any personal matters that may have been discussed during the study (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Merriam, 2014; Seidman, 2013). I complied with all requirements for research, as outlined by the Walden University Institutional Review Board. Inmate populations were not recruited for the study. I have stored all collected data within a locked cabinet where they will remain for a period of 5 years from the completion of the research, and will subsequently destroy the data. DePoy and Gitlin (2015) suggested this retention period for auditing purposes, and it is also a requirement of Walden University.

Data Collection Instruments

I conducted semistructured interviews as the data collection source in the study; the interview guide can be found in Appendix A. This data source consisted of individual face-to-face interviews, and was audio recorded using a Sony voice recorder model ICD PX440. In the event of any technical difficulties, my backup method was the recording feature on my iPhone which I did not have to use. The voice recorder was tested prior to each interview. I developed an interview protocol, and worked with a panel of experts to ensure that the questions were clear, concise, free of bias, and directed to gather relevant

information toward answering the research question. Panel review is a common method for validating qualitative interview protocols (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Fan & Sun, 2014; Seidman, 2013). The interview sessions were open-ended, allowing participants to answer freely (Kahlke, 2014). This method of inquiry often leads to the exploration of new topics as they emerge, and allows researchers to guide the interview process (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Seidman, 2013).

The questions included in the interview protocol were designed to explore participant experiences related to applying for government contracts. Semistructured interview questions allow an opportunity to request detail via probes such as "Tell me more about that" or "How did it make you feel?" as new and relevant topics arise. This depth of probing aids in gaining a complete view of participant perceptions, and allows an examination of the many expected and unexpected facets of the case under study (Kisely & Kendall, 2011; Merriam, 2014; Seidman, 2013). Although a structured interview protocol guides researchers as they collect more uniform data, this method does not permit the analysis of irregularities or unforeseen concepts and perspectives (Marshall & Rossman, 2015).

Data Collection Technique

Following approval from Walden University, I began to search for qualified study participants using the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce's website. A letter of interest was distributed (see Appendix B) that described the intent of the research, and outlined the participation criteria. Before the study interviews, each participant was emailed a copy of the interview protocol (see Appendix A). Face-to-face interviews result in more detailed responses than online surveys or Skype meetings (Patton, 2015). Each interview was

conducted using semistructured questions in a neutral environment without any outside opinions for or against the participants' discussion (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Patton 2015; Tracy, 2013). Semistructured interviews are useful to researchers who wish to explore topics arising naturally, and the interview protocol of the study is built on this interview format (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Such a format renders it possible for some participants to provide data that others did not, increasing their contribution to saturation. Focus group interviews were considered but rejected. A disadvantage to using the focus group technique is that researchers may interject personal bias into the questions, leading participants to alter their discussion (Rowley, 2012). To contribute to the triangulation of case study data, each participant was asked for a copy of several pieces of documentation from their business. Documents can include one or more of the following, as available, and as provided by the participant: (a) business metrics, (b) federal contract applications, and (c) company metrics. By reviewing these documents, companies can be assessed for their applicability to the contracts to determine if that may be the reason for denial, or if any factors contributed to approval, based on the application's outcome. These documents may also add novel information regarding company details not gathered during interviews.

In qualitative research, sampling requirements are focused on the concept of saturation. As noted earlier, saturation is achieved when additional participants do not add data unique to that already collected (Francis et al., 2010; Morse et al., 2014; Patton, 2015;). To achieve saturation, each theme must be explained and rich in data. Corbin and Strauss (2014) advanced that sampling is sufficient when the primary themes exhibit depth and variation across the participants, and can be used to express the perspectives

and experiences of the participants. Because saturation is reached when no new information is received to add to the themes in any significant manner, I ceased interview data collection in the study when this point had been reached.

For more homogeneous samples, saturation is rapidly reached as the experiences of the sample overlap (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Fan & Sun, 2014; Morse et al., 2014). To study sampling in qualitative research, Francis et al. (2010) applied the concept of saturation to assess the sufficient sample size needed to reach this point in data collection. These researchers found that most the data codes were used by the sixth interview. In the study, six participants comprised the initial set of participants. During coding, I assessed the results for data saturation, which is considered achieved if new themes do not emerge during the analysis of new transcripts (Francis et al., 2010). If saturation was not achieved with the initial sample of participants, I would have resampled using the same sampling procedures until enough responses were garnered.

Transcript review allowed each participant in the study an opportunity to review the transcript of what she said in her respective interview. The use of transcript review can be extremely useful in validating pieces of data to ensure that they are accurate, as they may be used as supporting excerpts in the presentation of results (Kornbluh, 2015). Transcript review is the process of asking participants to review the transcription for accuracy of their report, and can be used to remedy any errors in recording or transcription (Harper & Cole, 2012). Each participant was assigned a de-identifying number such as J1, J2, or J3 (Fan & Sun, 2014; Kornbluh, 2015; Merriam, 2014). Following transcript review and initial analysis of data, participants were asked to verify what she had intended to say throughout her interview during the process of member

checking. Member checking is the process of requesting that participants review the findings of a qualitative study, and provide input toward how the findings align with their thoughts and beliefs, or what they intended to convey in the interview (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Kornbluh, 2015; Patton, 2015). This process was used as a final assurance of the study's trustworthiness. Female entrepreneurs often invest a portion of each workday asking customers whether the service or product received was satisfactory or for their recommended improvements. This is an example of informal research (Fan & Sun, 2014; Hair et al., 2015; Kisely & Kendall, 2011).

Data Organization Technique

During data collection, participants in the study were de-identified using random codes such as J1 and J2, which Reardon, Basin, and Capkun (2014) suggested as a valid method of confidentiality protection. Ummel and Achille (2016) also supported the use of pseudonyms as a means of protecting participant confidentiality. Following the suggestions of Reardon et al. (2014), I used an Excel spreadsheet to store participant contact information with the associated data code so that requests to be removed from the study could be accommodated. I used this same data sheet to organize any archive documents drawn from each company and match them to the appropriate participant (Camfield & Palmer-Jones, 2013). I subsequently transcribed all interview data from audio to text and stored them in a series of Microsoft Word documents, with one file per interviewee (DePoy & Gitlin, 2015; Merriam, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). These data were transferred to Excel for ease of analysis and data organization (Fan & Sun, 2014; Kornbluh, 2015; Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). Data storage consisted of a locked filing cabinet, where the data will be housed for 5 years from the completion date of the

research. DePoy and Gitlin (2015) suggest this retention period for auditing purposes, and it is also a requirement of Walden University. All data will then be destroyed by either permanently deleting electronic data or shredding paper copies, in line with Walden University guidelines (Kornbluh, 2014; Morse et al., 2014; Patton, 2015).

Data Analysis

Leedy and Ormrod (2015) opined that analysis is an iterative process. Data analysis in the study was performed using the Braun, Clarke, and Terry (2014) inductive thematic analysis with two primary phases. This analysis results in a list of the central themes and common responses among a sample of interviewees. The list of central themes and common responses all related to the capabilities of female small business owners regarding winning federal contracts, and were cross-examined with archival data drawn from company documents. Examination of these themes were contributed to Mosher's (1968) theory of representative bureaucracy by highlighting both passive and active representation. Fernandez et al. (2013) defined passive representation as a demographically diverse workforce. Active representation describes the assumption that governing members will support their own membership. If government agents applied the theory of representative bureaucracy during federal contract procurement, demographic groups, such as minorities and women, may successfully procure more contracts. This analysis method also applies to Koellinger et al.'s (2013) concept of potential issues related to entrepreneurialism among women by assessing the perceptions of women entrepreneurs, which are not well understood in comparison to the perceptions of their male counterparts. After uploading the textual interview data into Microsoft Word, all data was coded and analyzed. Archival documents were not uploaded, as they did not

require the same degree of analysis and organization as interview data. Microsoft Word was chosen, based on my familiarity with the software. The initial codes were generated and subsequently clustered into themes.

To generate the initial codes, the interview transcripts were repeatedly reviewed to gain a stronger understanding of the responses. During subsequent readings, units of meaning were outlined for each interview, and each of these excerpts was identified as an initial code or unit of meaning. This process required the creation of notes from the compiled material, which became the initial coding of the data with blocks of extracted text from the material. Braun et al. (2014) identified these initial codes as the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data that can be assessed in a meaningful manner to the phenomenon under study.

After the general units of meaning were defined, I compared sets of codes among the participants' responses. This process consisted of noting all units of meaning addressing the research questions and, hence, relevant to the study. Units of meaning with no relevance to the central research question were not reported (Braun et al., 2014; Morse et al., 2014; Patton, 2015). I subsequently organized relevant units, and removed or combined redundant themes. Because the repetition of meaning was very important to the study, I carried out this step of the analysis with consideration to the weight that the participants placed on themes, and the way excerpts were stated and noted these impressions during the post interview notes.

In this phase, analysis began with a list of each of the codes relevant to the case, and considered the various ways in which they could be combined to form overarching themes. The different sets of initial codes and themes were linked, and the relationships

among themes presented even more findings. Upon conclusion of this phase of the coding process, a final set of themes emerged that reflected a summative expression of the data. The findings reflected the themes using excerpts from the interview data (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Kornbluh, 2015; Merriam, 2014). During the final stage of analysis, triangulation took place between the resulting codes and documents. Though each company's archival documents did not correspond directly to each code, they contributed novel information to further expand codes, or verify participants' statements. In addition, the triangulation from these documents indicated added rationale for the approval or denial of federal contracts.

Reliability and Validity

Scotland (2012) argued that, when performed correctly, qualitative research is valid, reliable, credible, and rigorous. Kornbluh (2015) identified four major components of reliability and validity in qualitative research. These components included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Fan & Sun, 2014; Kornbluh, 2015; Loh, 2013). By addressing each of these components individually, the study can be verified to have a sufficiently rigorous reliability and validity, and can be considered valid, reliable, credible, and rigorous (Kornbluh, 2015; Loh, 2013; Scotland, 2012).

Credibility

Credibility, in qualitative research, refers to the degree to which the results reflect the true and accurate experiences of the participants. A study is considered to be credible when the findings are a sufficiently accurate description, in that an individual with similar experiences would readily recognize the presented case (Kisely & Kendall, 2011; Kornbluh, 2015; Loh, 2013). To improve credibility of the data collected in the study, I

elected to use semistructured interviews. Using this form of interviewing, participants were encouraged to elaborate on their responses when additional clarification was needed.

To enhance credibility of the study, audio-recorded and transcribed interviews were completed in a timely manner to retain the nuances of the data. Member checking verified the accuracy of the findings (Harper & Cole, 2012; Kornbluh, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). A copy of the interview transcripts and initial themes were provided to the participants to confirm that they were an accurate depiction of the experiences of the participants. Saturation also increased credibility of the findings by ensuring that the identified themes were sufficiently confirmed within the data (Kornbluh, 2015; Loh, 2013; Merriam, 2014).

Transferability

Transferability is the ability of readers to judge the applicability of the findings of a study to other contexts (Kennedy-Clark, 2012; Loh, 2013). Generalization is not a typical concern in case study research because such research is conducted to describe a unique situation within a specific setting, rather than generate broad generalizations (Yin, 2014). Readers of case studies determine the degree of transferability to different but analogous cases. Detailed descriptions were provided in the study to enable readers to judge the transferability of the findings to other settings, as this is the accepted method of interpreting transferability (Kennedy-Clark, 2012; Kornbluh, 2015; Yin, 2014).

Dependability

Dependability is the extent to which study findings are consistent to the case under investigation (Kornbluh, 2015). Several methods exist for enhancing the

dependability of qualitative research studies. In the study, dependability was enhanced through use of triangulation. Various sources of information created a more reliable, impartial, and accurate depiction of the case (Loh, 2013; Mok & Clarke, 2015; Yin, 2014). Mok and Clarke (2015) supported the use of triangulation in various modes of qualitative research, with an emphasis on its use in case study designs. Triangulation was sought with the use of archival documents, including company revenue, metrics, and federal contract applications.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the extent to which the findings of a study reflect the meaning and intent of the participants rather than that of the researcher (Kornbluh, 2015). Confirmability was enhanced through the use of reflexivity, which entailed a continual examination of my own impact upon the development and construction of the study findings (Kornbluh, 2015; Loh, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). I analyzed, and continued to research, the ways in which personal experiences and bias could affect the data collection and analysis process throughout the completion of the case study (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Merriam, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Transition and Summary

Section 2 included the methodological details and procedures of the study. In this chapter, the use of a qualitative case study was justified, and use of appropriate participants relative to the population was identified. In the study, six female small business owners were interviewed to collect data through semistructured face-to-face interviews. The analysis procedures adhered to the recommendations for thematic analysis advanced by Braun et al. (2014) method. The limitations to the study have been

addressed, as well as the potential harm to trustworthiness. The findings in Section 3 open with a description of the final participants used in the data collection. In Section 3, the themes derived from the data are presented and the findings are synthesized against the extant literature.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify the capabilities needed by female small business owners to win federal contracts. Results of participant interviews revealed three overarching themes: intrinsic factors, extrinsic factors, and contract procurement experiences. Each of these themes reflected the capabilities and qualities that were fundamental to participants' successful procurement of federal contracts. Intrinsic factors described personal qualities that fostered the capabilities needed to succeed in the federal contracting arena, including a strong work ethic and the abilities to (a) adapt, (b) recognize limitations, (c) reach out for help when needed, and (d) network. Extrinsic factors included self-learning (research) and the ability to identify a business niche. Under the theme of contract procurement experiences, the following five subthemes emerged: (a) tedious, meticulous, cumbersome, (b) trial and error, (c) broken system, (d) weed out, and (e) gender discrimination.

This section includes a presentation of study findings, organized thematically. Findings are examined through the study's conceptual framework to apply findings to professional practice, describe implications for social change, as offer recommendations for practice and future research. The section closes with reflections and concluding remarks.

Presentation of Findings

Participant Description

The overarching research question was: What capabilities do female small business owners need to win federal contracts? Participants included six women located

in the Metro area of Atlanta, Georgia. All participants were small business owners who had applied for at least one federal contract. Five of the six participants had successfully procured at least one contract. Table 3 provides a description of each study participant. The ages of participants ranged from 30 to 51, and the number of years in business ranged from 2 to 20. All of the women had college degrees; one had a 2-year degree; two had bachelor's degrees; and three had master's degrees. All six women worked in different industries, including facility and support services, construction, government outsourcing, pest control, information technology, and insurance and health care.

Table 3

Participant Descriptions

Participant Identifier	Age	Years in business	Number of contracts applied for but not won	Number of contracts won	Education level	Current industry	Previous professional background
J1	Mid 30s	4	5	20	MA	Facility support services	Real estate
J2	39	5	2	2	AAS	Construction	Banking
J3	41	19	20	2	MBA	Government outsourcing	Management consulting
J4	51	15	10	2	BA	Pest control	Homemaker
J5	30	8	20	10	MA	Information technology	Student
J6	45	10	3	0	BA	Insurance and healthcare	Insurance broker

Theme One: Intrinsic Factors

The first major theme that emerged from study interviews was that of intrinsic factors. This theme was organized into the following five subthemes (a) strong work

ethic, (b) ability to adapt, (c) ability to recognize limitations, (d) ability to reach out for help when it was needed, and (e) willingness to network. Details of each theme and supportive excerpts from participant interviews are included in the following discussion.

Strong Work Ethic

Data from each interview indicated that participants' work ethics were strong and determined. A strong work ethic was based built upon a positive outlook, self-starter mentality, and willingness to work on dreams for the long haul. Participants were not dissuaded by the effort that they knew their goals required, nor did they expect instant success. They sought long term success over instant gratification, and were aware that procuring federal contracts could be difficult. Participants were determined, focused, and not easily discouraged by obstacles. They each made decisions to enter the federal contracting arena, and taught themselves the steps necessary to succeed. Within this subtheme, participants described working on their own with limited support or resources. Participants were determined to win federal contracts, and were confident in their abilities to succeed. Many of the women started their companies on their own, and had to put in long hours with the meager support they managed to gather on their own. As J1 explained, "I had to do it by myself, basically."

Even when faced with obstacles or disappointments, the work ethic of these self-starters was colored by grit and determination, which helped them to persist when things did not work out as planned. For example, after being taken advantage of by a business partner, J1 explained: "I didn't let it discourage me. I just rolled up my sleeves, got through it, worked with the SBA to get things back on track, and it just took off from there." After that experience, J1 persisted and secured a contract worth $3.1 million. She

explained that from the start of her research into federal contracting, she had little experience in construction and no knowledge of contract procurement. J1 had a vision; she was a determined self-starter, and these qualities were fueled by her work ethic. The growth and profitability of the businesses owned by the participants in this study challenged previous research, which indicated that women-owned businesses are less likely to be successful or profitable than those owned by men (Klapper & Parker, 2011; Mee, 2012; Sullivan & Meek, 2012).

J2 also described herself as being a self-starter with a strong work ethic. Although she had worked alongside her husband to develop his business for many years, she decided one day that she wanted to take initiative and do something for herself, especially to foster her financial independence: "I've been supporting my husband for years. And I just felt like I needed something to make me more independent, have my own income even though we're a team—you know how women, we, I just needed some security." This statement also described J2's impetus for seeking out federal contracts. Although she was financially secure within the safety net of her husband's business, she wanted to develop something for herself that she could depend upon. With independence and security as her goal, J2 took the initiative to seek out opportunities that she could independently foster.

Because of the amount of work and research involved with procuring contracts, J2 highlighted the importance of an impeccable work ethic, and the strong desire to succeed–traits of positive, self-starters. J2 explained:

> You have to really want it, and you have to commit to it. I mean, it's a real commitment. And you have to set timelines because you could be setting

> up your company for years! I mean, I started in '09, and I had no clue, and I tried to figure it out—and I'm a pretty committed person, but—I didn't know half the stuff I was reading! So it's easy for you to give up and say, 'Meh, I'll get to that later. I'll get to that later,' and next thing you know, years have gone by and you haven't done anything.

J2 shared that not only was it important to be a self-starter with "real commitment" in order to not "give up," but it was also important to recognize that the startup phase could last a while. She had to be in it for the long haul, maintaining her drive and positive outlook while her business slowly blossomed.

When discussing their determination and work ethic, participants alluded to a general refusal to give up. Many participants shared stories about simply refusing to take "No" as an answer when they faced obstacles. Others discussed viewing challenges as opportunities. One way that participants maintained a strong work ethic without getting discouraged was by viewing large goals as a series of short term goals. For example, J1 examined her long term goals related to federal contracts, and then broke them down into smaller, manageable tasks, working at them until she acquired the contracts she sought. She also was able to use her strong work ethic to stay focused on her long term goals, working hard on small projects to produce results that would attract larger contracts in the future. J1 explained:

> I put in work. And I do it consistently. And being consistent with it is very important, too. Because I know people who work–they work here, then they take off. You gotta keep that fire going, you know? And just because you win one contract, there's [still] so much more out there.

She later explained how this attitude of endurance pushed her to keep working, even when she wanted to give up:

> I remember, when I was going for this 8(a), I wanted to give up like, every day. That's the real side. That's the real. But, it's something in you that keeps going. It's not that you're not gonna want to give up, it's—do you make the choice to give up?

J1 also credited her success to the consistency of her work ethic: "Consistent–like anything else, it's a numbers game." Along this same vein, J3 shared the importance of *wanting* more, of truly being hungry for success in the contract procurement process, which she used to fuel her work ethic: "You've gotta want these things more than you could ever want."

J3 contributed to this theme of strong work ethic by sharing how she would not view any opportunity as small or insignificant. Rather, as she began to build her business and reputation, she saw every job as the chance to prove herself and earn future business. She explained how her strong work ethic for delivering excellent products and services on a consistent basis helped her achieve contracting success. J3 recommended that women interested in procuring federal contracts take advantage of opportunities with smaller contracts: "They're willing to maybe give you a smaller project to give you a chance, or even a bigger one sometimes, if you prove your past delivery."

Past experiences also helped participants acquire the strong work ethic and sense of determination needed to compete in the federal contract arena. J1 described going to work for a local construction company that operated in the private and federal sectors, and learning how federal contracts were procured while working at the company. Not all

of the experiences that participants alluded to as being fundamental to their success with federal contracts were in the business arena; participants also described how their personal experiences provided them with the fortitude and moxie needed to be successful. For example, J1 described how being a Division 1 basketball player, and an "athlete by heart" helped her develop the work ethic needed to dedicate the steadfast energy and determination required to help her start her business.

In addition to her basketball experience, J1 described how an entrepreneurial mindset as a high school student may have helped nurture her into a successful business woman who had won multiple government contracts. As a teenager, J1 would sell candy bars out of her backpack while she was at school, because she realized that the school vending machines only operated during certain hours; however, students always wanted candy. So J1 would have her mom take her to Sam's Club, where she would buy candy bars in bulk. She was not able to work after school because of basketball practice, so she found a way to combine school with an opportunity to make money. J1's example here demonstrated how her strong work ethic was already developing at a young age, as she juggled her responsibilities as a student and athlete with her entrepreneurial mindset.

The grit, moxie, and work ethic demonstrated by women in this study challenged findings from previous scholars on gender-based differences in competitiveness and risk preference. For example, Croson and Gneezy (2009) reported that women had much less desire to engage in competition than did men. Hogarth et al. (2012) reported that women were more likely than men to quit competitive games. Other researchers found that women are less likely to compete under pressure than men (Ahl & Nelson, 2012; Shurchkov, 2012). In contrast to these findings, participants in the current study

described a preference for risk and competition, as well as the fortitude and work ethic to follow through and pursue their business goals, even when faced with setbacks and challenges.

Ability to Adapt

In addition to determination and strong work ethic, another common personal trait among participants who won contracts was the ability to adapt. Participants described a commitment to adapting to situations, or making a way when opportunities did not appear to exist. As J1 explained, “Find a way, or make one.” The subtheme of adaptability aligned with the subtheme of work ethic, because women who described a strong work ethic and self-starter mindset were also likely to demonstrate the grit and tenacity needed to adapt their businesses to survive, thrive, and win federal contracts. The very attributes that helped them start businesses from scratch, and commit to securing contracting opportunities in the long haul, also helped participants adapt when things did not go as planned, or when they recognized new opportunities. Women who successfully procured contracts had malleable mindsets when it came to business. Their attitudes about how their businesses should be run, or what opportunities they should pursue were not fixed. They were able to recognize when change was needed, but the common sentiment was the refusal to give up. Quitting was not an option–when faced with challenges that may have made other business owners throw in the towel, participants in this study had the wherewithal to step back, re-examine the situation, and figure out what they needed to adapt or change to move past a particular hurdle. As J1 shared, “Sometimes, I used to tell people, ‘I think I’m a little bit off.’ You know? Because some people understand the word, ‘No,’ or, ‘You can’t do this.’ And something in me doesn’t understand that.” Here,

J1 succinctly demonstrated her determination, which she used to adapt and overcome a series of obstacles she encountered during the procurement process.

In addition to demonstrating adaptability to overcome obstacles, participants were also able to adapt their businesses to maximize opportunities for success. For example, J1 and J4 both discussed adapting their businesses to offer services in other geographic locations when they struggled to win contracts in their home locations. For example, if other organizations were bidding lower on projects, preventing them from winning, the women realized they could expand their service locations to other nearby areas that were not as competitive. Similarly, J4 discussed applying for different sections of contracts, for which her company could be more competitive, instead of applying for the whole contract. Being adaptable also involved recognizing opportunities to shift business focuses to capitalize on the government's changing needs, or take advantage of new contract opportunities. For example, J3 described her desire to build partnerships and new areas of focus to capitalize on new opportunities that she had recognized as being more valuable with increased profitability.

Adaptability was also illustrated in the participants' impetus for entering the federal contract arena. Many participants explained that they began to seek out federal contracting opportunities after experiencing struggles in their previous professions or businesses, especially in the wake of the 2008 recession. For example, J1 sought out federal contracts after the real estate crash in 2008, during which time she was working in real estate. She explained:

> Well, I came about to getting a federal space because of the 2008 market crash. I was in real estate, and the lady who was my broker, because I was

licensed in the states of Georgia and Florida—my broker, she suggested that I look into the federal space.

J2 also entered the arena of federal contracts after the 2008 recession. She noted that a lot of other individuals in construction businesses also made the switch from home construction to restoration because the payees were insurance companies, rather than individual homeowners who had taken significant financial blows from the recession. In this way, J2 adapted to the changing market and economic climate of the recession. She could no longer thrive in construction, but restoration provided a reliable source of potential clients and income, in the form of insurance companies. She was able to take what she learned in real estate, and adapt it to become successful in restoration while tapping into a niche that had not been wiped out by the market crash.

Other participants entered the federal contract arena when they realized that opportunities existed to expand their existing businesses. For example, J4 began to research federal contract opportunities for her pest control business. She realized that through federal contracts, she could "add government contract to our repertoire." Similarly, J5 examined her current business ideas, and the best opportunities that existed for each. Once she learned about government contracting, she determined it was "the path of least resistance in order to get the business off the ground." She viewed the length and steady opportunities that could result from successful contracts as positive qualities that made her decide to seek contracts.

Adaptability is a quality of entrepreneurial orientation. Lim and Envick (2013) described entrepreneurial orientation as strategic actions taken by business owners and entrepreneurs, which are driven by the identification, perception, and exploitation of

opportunities (del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes et al., 2015). Previous researchers found that distinct differences existed in the EO of men and women, with women typically possessing less orientation toward entrepreneurship than men (Cetindamar et al., 2012; Goktan & Gupta, 2013; Hamilton, 2013). Because women in the current study described significant adaptability when it came to their businesses, which is a facet of EO (del Mar Fuentes-fuentes et al., 2015), these findings contrast with those of previous researchers, who described low levels of EO among women business owners.

The strong levels of EO evidenced by participants in this study challenged Koellinger et al's (2013) idea that entrepreneurial differences exist between men and women, which may create barriers to entrepreneurship among women. Koellinger et al. posited that men and women have different perceptions of business aspects, including skillsets, fears of business failure, and opportunity costs. These differences in perception may inhibit female entrepreneurs from applying for federal contract or skew their perceptions of available resources. Strong entrepreneurial orientation among participants, in the form of adaptability, networking skills, and self-learning, suggest that even if women are at a gender-based social disadvantage in business, they possess the ability to overcome those differences and disadvantages, which may be the key to entrepreneurial success and successful contract procurement among women business owners.

Awareness of Limitations

A recognition of limitations was another theme that emerged under the umbrella of intrinsic factors. Participants were able to recognize and hone in on their business weaknesses–which was essential to creating plans to address those weaknesses and move forward to procure government contracts. Understanding their limitations and weaknesses

reflected a sharp level of self-awareness, humility, and desire to succeed. Study participants understood that ignoring the limitations or weaknesses in their businesses would prevent them from obtaining the success they desired. J3 illustrated this, explaining:

> If you have a failing or struggling business, you need to really look at why you're failing or struggling, and why you were failing to get commercial clients, because you're gonna have that same issue as you go forward into the federal business as well."

This theme also emerged during a discussion of what happens when an organization wins a contract, but then fails to fulfill it. J4 explained that when that happens, "It's public record, and you are—and they don't, your name, you're blackballed." For example, because J4 owned a small business, she lacked the resources and manpower to provide service required by some of the larger contracts. In those instances, she explained that it was important to recognize her limitations and walk away: "You just have to walk away. Be prepared to walk away." J6 also discussed the importance of knowing her business limitations before she applied for a contract. She explained that failing to fulfill the obligations of a contract would "put you on the list" or, as J4 explained, get a business owner "blackballed."

Ability to Seek Organization Help or Guidance

The ability to seek out organizational help or guidance was also described as being fundamental to successful contract procurement. For example, J1 described reaching out to a man with a lot of experience in the 8(a) program: "he had a lot of experience in the federal space, so he coached and mentored me, and guided me in a lot

of the directions." J1 recognized the value in soliciting assistance from others who had knowledge and experience that she lacked in certain areas. The ability to seek outside help is an interesting parallel to the first subtheme discussed in this section, strong work ethic, where many participants described working independently, and going after their goals on their own or with very little support. The subtheme of seeking organizational help indicated that participants saw the value in seeking the help and advice from others who could help them procure contracts and grow their small businesses.

J2 described how help from one particular individual in another organization helped her learn the process of federal contract procurement, and helped her win contracts:

> He's the reason why I got my contracts. Because he set my company up to the T, he educated me about the process, about the different set-asides—or how to do set-asides, what set-aside I wanted to be—women-owned small business, small business, minority business, you know, there's different types. So, he basically narrowed my company down to the most, the three things that I could do right now that would set me apart.

This individual helped J2 learn which opportunities existed for her, and how she could cater her business and fine tune her applications to increase her chances of winning contracts.

Another opportunity to seek out organizational help and guidance was through paid memberships to various business organizations and networking groups. J3 mentioned different relationships that she had built through opportunities with

organizations such as the NCMA. Similarly, J6 described joining an association that helped her learn the ins and outs of government contracting.

While being on the receiving end of organizational help and guidance was discussed by many participants, it is also important to note that some were the ones providing the guidance. For example, J3 described mentoring other people interested in procuring federal contracts. She taught other small business owners how to move beyond 8(a) status, and develop businesses that offered services that would be consistently valuable to the government. In this way, J3 was able to pass on much of the valuable advice and guidance she had received during her own journey into business development and contract procurement.

The participants' ability to seek out organizational support may have been a key to their entrepreneurial success. Fielden, Davidson, Dawe, and Makin (2003) reported that a missing element that results in barriers to business creation among women is access to beneficial business support. Women in the current study sought out sources of organizational support to foster their success.

Ability to Network

In addition to seeking out organizational help, networking was described by many participants as being fundamental to their success with federal contracts. For example, J1 explained, " You know, I tell people, 'Your net-worth, is your net-work.'" She described getting involved with the GCA, which was where she learned about government contracting. After attending the GCA networking event, J1 explained she "was sold." As she became more successful with winning contracts, J1 never forgot the value of networking:

> I just kept on marketing, kept on—like now, this morning, I was just out door beating, meeting who I could meet with, talking with who I could talk with, getting in front of the right people—you never know who's gonna connect you with who.

Later in the interview, J1 reiterated the value of networking, as well as the pleasure she got from it: "I always felt like I had a gift to connect people, and talk to people, and I love doing it."

J3 described how networking with individuals within the federal government could help business owners procure federal contracts, but the process of developing those relationships was often time consuming:

> And so, to build those, to build up those relationships, can take like 18-24 months in the government, and it's harder, there's also a lot of turnover, so you've gotta be in front of multiple people to make sure that they know who you are and that you're being serious.

She continued, "Just like in the commercial business, you have to have the relationships, and you have to prove your worth to them." J5 also mentioned the idea of turnover, or "flux" in government, and how this could complicate the process of networking and securing contracts.

J3 also described integrating partnerships with other business owners as part of business development plans. For example, she advised that 8(a) organizations develop long term plans that include seeking out other 8(a)s to develop partnerships and joint ventures. In addition, J3 explained that providing regular follow up with individuals in other organizations, as well as the leaders of the federal organizations with which she

contracted, was essential to building and maintaining the positive networking relationships required for success. She stated, “I think following up with the relationships, understanding the needs of the agencies, I know I think I sound like a broken record, but how you can meet them, having due diligence for just ultimate follow up.”

J4 also provided details on the importance of networking to successfully procure government contracts:

> Being involved. Attending the meetings—because they have different meetings and different opportunities, different kinds of groups, different kinds of associations, different kinds of meetings, you know, teaching you about government and trying to introduce you.

When asked for the most important piece of advice she would offer to other women business owners aspiring to win government contracts, J4 discussed the value of networking. It is important to note that, although J4 discussed networking, especially with decision-makers and leaders in one’s industry, she also was suspicious of some of the organized networking efforts sponsored by the government and other organizations. She felt that oftentimes, these were “good faith efforts” aimed at the appearance of gender equality rather than truly welcoming women into the contracting arena, especially in fields typically dominated by men.

J5 also felt that networking was one of the most important keys to successful contract procurement. She explained the importance of “Somehow getting in front of the customer with enough lead time before the solicitation is released, so the customer knows you, or knows of you.” J6 shared that networking and partnering were essential to

success: “You can’t do it on your own, you need to partner with other people to help you to be successful.”

Networking did not just involve efforts to socialize with individuals who could help participants foster organizational success; it also involved ensuring that the individuals with whom participants regularly interacted were supportive of their success, as well. For example, J1 described the importance of surrounding herself with the right people to obtain success:

> Like my family, they always—ever since I was younger, they always seen something in me. They always, you know they would always say, ‘You’re gonna be that one.’ I think that inspired me, and it always kept me striving for more.

J1 reiterated the theme of networking, drawing a parallel to the importance of surrounding herself with positive people who would nurture her business growth: “Who you network with, it determines your net worth. And, that’s why I said for me it was key that I surrounded myself with people who believed in me.” Similarly, J2 shared how important it was for her to surround herself with people who would help her reach her business goals:

> Be it a mentor, a coach, a subcontractor, you know, somebody else that’s in the industry like you are, that you can kind of brainstorm and call and say, “Hey! You’ve done this. What do you think I can do different? Or, what do you think about this situation? How do you think I need to handle it?”

The participants' ability to network and leverage social relationships challenged findings from previous researchers who reported that women were less effective at building business relationships than men (Meek & Sullivan, 2013; Terjesen & Elam, 2012). Women in this study clearly understood the value of networking and social capital, and used both to their advantage. Previous researchers reported on the importance of networking to enhance communication and the exchange of ideas and information, which can, in turn, affect business success (Ameer & Otherman, 2012; Boling, Burns, & Dick, 2014).

Theme Two: Extrinsic Factors

In addition to intrinsic factors, participants also discussed two subthemes related to extrinsic factors that were integral to their contracting success. The first theme, self-learning, referred to the research and self-education sought by the participants to inform themselves of the various aspects of federal contracting. The second theme, identifying a business niche, described the importance of identifying the right business and the right contracting opportunities.

Self-Learning

The personal research that participants described was fundamental to their successful procurement of federal contracts. Participants described processes of seeking out information before deciding to pursue federal contracting opportunities. Some described becoming interested in federal contracts, and beginning to research the process after personal and professional associates mentioned the idea to them. An important part of the research process required to become successful with contract procurement was understanding programs and rules within the government, such as 8(a) programs and

sole-source authority, designed to help businesses owned by women, minorities, and economically disadvantaged people. For example, J1 described learning about sole source authority, and how she could use it to her advantage to win contracts, such as in competition for contracts worth less than $4 million. She used this knowledge to reach out to contracting specialists about opportunities that she would not have to compete to obtain. J1 explained:

> Because it's gonna be a waste of their time to go through that procurement, how much money it wastes to procure a small contract like this when you have a vehicle where the government is set up for you to sole-source. And I was able to do that, and accomplish that.

Later, J1 revisited this theme when discussing the benefits of working with the federal government:

> They have money, and they have budgets—that's why I love doing business with the federal government. And they have mandates, they have procurement goals. You know? They have things that they have to live up to, so being a women-owned business is a benefit, being a minority-owned company is a benefit in a federal space.

She explained that the key was to do research in order to understand that opportunities for contracts existed. J1 likened the procurement process to "digging for gold. You know? When you're digging for gold, you think you'll never find any!"

J2 also described the importance of doing her own research to learn about opportunities for federal contracts. After learning that her and her husband's business could qualify for more contracts if she was the owner (as a minority woman), she began

her own company. She described initial feelings of being overwhelmed as she began seeking out federal contract opportunities: “When I started doing my research on federal contracting, and government contracting, there are so many–it’s such a HUGE market.” She had to spend time learning acronyms used by the federal government, including NAIC codes. In fact, when asked about the factors she believed most contributed to her success, J2 first discussed the importance of education and research:

> Anything you wanna get into, you have to educate yourself. Understand what it is that they’re asking for. Understanding the process, like I mentioned, there’s a lot of paperwork, there’s a lot of codes, you know, there’s a lot of different aspects of government contracting. So make sure you understand what each of those things are.

Similarly, J3 described the importance of educating oneself before considering entering the federal contracting arena. She explained that other women looking to obtaining federal contracts should be sure their businesses have a strong track record of success, and that they truly understand what their products are. J3 explained:

> I think there are a lot of businesses out there that get into government contracting, state/local, and they are getting into it, but they don’t really have a clear vision of what their offering should be. So, you’d do better by, I think, viewing federal contracting as if it is a commercial business.

This perspective can help female business owners make sure they truly understand their products and services, and how those offerings can meet needs of the federal government.

J5 also described a process of self-education and research which was required to enter the government contracting arena. At the library, she checked out books to learn

everything she could about the process, and what was required to successfully win contracts. J5 noted that she had a difficult time locating updated resources at her local library; the resources she obtained at the library simply helped her learn the basics. J5 also discussed the bevy of misleading or inaccurate information available on the Internet about the procurement process. Although it may be easier for today's women to access resources to learn about the contracting process, J5 explained that the information available is not always helpful:

> It actually isn't telling you how to do business with the government. It's still very cryptic, it doesn't—it's scattered, it can lead you down paths that lead nowhere, it's still a lot of deciphering–even through that information that's available on the Web. It's almost as if it's marketing flow, but nothing of substance.

Because of this, J5 explained that, for her, the most critical resource for women interested in learning about government contracting is to reach out to other women who have successfully won contracts. In this way, J5 connected the theme of networking to the theme of research.

Similar to J2, J3 discussed understanding how set-asides could be used to the advantage of female and minority small business owners. That did not guarantee businesses would qualify for set-asides. It was still essential for businesses to be viable and meet a specific federal need. Further, business owners must truly understand the rules of programs, such as set-asides and sole source authority. As J3 explained, "you just really have to know what you're doing."

J3 explained that, in addition to informing herself of the programs and needs related to specific contracts, it was also important to integrate her networking skills so that she could personally reach out to people, develop relationships, and more closely identify the needs related to a contract. When she spoke of unsuccessful attempts to procure contracts, she indicated that poor networking and lack of an in-depth understanding of the needs related to a particular contract precluded her from winning: "I just feel that it was unsuccessful for us because we didn't have as much of the relationship with the agency that we should have had. But when we do, do and we really understand what their needs are? We write to those needs in a much better way." That is, J3 felt that networking gave her a competitive edge during her research preparation.

J4 mentioned using former organizational help her learn how to navigate the contract procurement process. She went to a local university and took classes on how to conduct business in other counties. The classes also taught her important information about women-owned businesses, and how she could use that to her advantage. In addition, J4 described a lot of self-guided inquiry when she began to consider seeking out government contracts. She said "You just keep asking questions—"How do you do this? Blah blah blah." And then, if you ask the question, the universe is going to respond."

Another important aspect of research during the procurement process was knowing how high to bid. Because bids from other organizations are sealed, individuals do not know what dollar amounts their competition proposes. J4 explained that two sources of information she used when bidding was expiring contracts and previous bids, so she could get an idea of what a project was worth and how to bid competitively for it.

J6 tied in the importance of research with trial and error. As mentioned earlier, J6 had the experience of having to withdraw a contract after making a pricing error. After that, she endeavored to slow down, pay closer attention to the details, and spend more time learning what she needed to know before she pursued a contract. She explained of the research process, "I don't want to move too fast because it's a lot to digest, but I am taking notes, and when I need to, I'll refer back to them."

Self-learning is a facet of EO (del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes et al., 2015). Del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes et al. (2015) reported that women were more likely to experience constrained access to knowledge-based resources than men, including education, professional experience, and entrepreneurial experience. Participants in this study did not appear to have poor knowledge acquisition related to any of these areas, and their proactive behaviors toward knowledge acquisition challenged findings from previous researchers, which reported that women had less access to intellectual resources than men (del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes et al.).

Identifying a Business Niche

A key to successful contract procurement was finding a niche or addressing a need–particularly those that participants were passionate about. For example, J5 stated, "I think that part of the success of winning the prime contracts has been that I offer a unique service that the government wants." She explained how broad the opportunities are for government contracts–that they are not limited to the industries one may typically consider, such as construction. J1 explained:

> The federal government a unique place because, I tell people, "Whatever we need in the private sector, the government needs in the government

> sector. It's no different from—They have buildings, they have events, you know, they have all these things that take place in the government space that a lot of people don't know about until they get familiar with the government. And the way they procure for it, it might be different than how they procure for a large construction project, but the opportunities are there. They actually have barbers–contracts for barbers! You know? You go on base and people get their hair cut?

Carving out a niche in an industry, while also providing solutions to problems within that industry, was also helpful for contract procurement. J1 explained, "One thing I've learned about being in business and being a true entrepreneur is, it's solution driven."

In addition to making sure their services and products were aligned with the needs of federal contracts, participants also described consistency and value as being fundamental to their success. J3 detailed the importance of always working hard to offer the best possible services and to perform well on a contract, to help build a solid track record that would attract future contracts. J3 described always going the extra mile to help build a professional reputation that would ensure future opportunities.

Theme Three: Contract Procurement Experiences

Under the theme of contract procurement experiences, the following five subthemes emerged (a) tedious, meticulous, cumbersome, (b) trial and error, (c) broken system, (d) weed out, and (e) gender discrimination.

Tedious, Meticulous, and Cumbersome

The process of procuring federal contracts was described by most participants as tedious, meticulous, or cumbersome. J1 described the significant length of applications for contracts, and explained how critical it was for individuals to make sure they accurately provided all of the required information. J2 described the process as "really meticulous," explaining, "There's a lot of paperwork. There's a lot of red tape." J2 further explained:

> So you really have to be, you have to read every—you have to dot all your i's and cross all of your t's, and make sure that what you're reading, you understand what is required of that contract. And just, you know, just the process of setting up your company, making sure you have, that you're set up correctly in SAM, because if there's ONE piece of information that is missing—you don't get anything, you know, you're rejected.

In addition to being tedious, J2 also described the application process as cumbersome and inefficient: "They [federal contracting agents] are in *such* a hurry to get a quote, but so slow to start the job. You know? They're in such a hurry to get nowhere." J2 later reiterated the importance of paying attention to details when applying for contracts: "I think just being, like I said, meticulous, and aggressive, and I'm a perfectionist. So just making sure that everything I do is on point."

J3 added to this theme when speaking of the proposal process: "You have to meet every terms and condition, every requirement, you know, dot your i, cross every t, 12-pt font, you know?" She added, "I've had one of my [proposals] kicked out last year because we had a diagram that did not have 12-pt font… Yeah. It's pedantic." Similarly,

J4 stated, “It’s very tedious. Because one thing is—most of the contracts last for several years.” J5 added to this theme, stating “The proposal—The way the proposal is written. That it’s clear, that it is compliant. I mean, it sounds like it’s something very simple, but some companies really struggle with writing a compliant proposal. It’s just very difficult for them, the concept is difficult.”

When responding to a request for proposal, J4 explained that, although the bid number is important, filling out information in the required forms can also make or break a business’s ability to win a contract: “With the proposal they ask you for all your—They ask you for your staff, and they get the background of your company, your capabilities and all of that, they go into more details. They want, not just the price, but what kind of services do you really offer.”

J5—who spoke at length about the brokenness of the contract procurement process (detailed later in this section)—blamed a lot of the dysfunction on the meticulousness and compliance-driven nature of contracting. She discussed this in-depth, as follows:

> The procurement process is bogged down with a lot of regulations and compliance requirements. And I’ll say this—Those compliance requirements and regulations, I believe, optimistically, that they came from a place where they were, where the intention was to make the process fair. But what I think has *actually* happened is that it’s become, number one, unwieldy because it’s too many regulations, it’s too much compliance.

J6 detailed some of the specific qualifications she had to apply for before she could even be eligible to apply for contracts:

> So I had to apply to get a D-U-N-S number. I then had to apply to SAMS, S-A-M-S, System Award Management System, that's the federal contracting vendor system that they have. I then had to get a CAGE number. You have to have—they require certain documentation. So that's the whole process that you have to go through before you can even apply for a contract.

J6 later added that she found the contracting process to be "very cumbersome" and "quite lengthy." She explained that it was necessary to have alternative sources of income arranged during the application process, as it could take a significant amount of time to apply for contracts, and even then, there was no guarantee she would win. Although working to grow their businesses and secure federal contracts, it was also necessary for participants to ensure that they had other forms of revenue to provide adequate financial support for themselves and their families. J1 described working to secure smaller government contracts for smaller construction projects, such as renovations, while she worked to win larger contracts. J6 later revealed that the lengthy and cumbersome application process made her question, to some degree, her decision to apply for federal contracts: What is my perception of government contracting? I think it's very cumbersome. And, because I haven't won one yet, I'm wondering—Is there money to be made in this field?"

Trial and Error

Most of the participants described going through periods of trial and error in which they learned how to acquire contracts. For example, J1 shared a negative experience with a joint-venture partner, in which someone she had depended upon and looked to as a mentor ended up taking advantage of her. J1 explained:

> I was looking to them as a mentor, and they kind of took advantage of that—Not kind of, they *did*. So, it was very disappointing, very discouraging. When you're first out the gates, you know? You think the [8(a)] program is really there for other people to reach back and help, but everybody's not like that. I learned very early on, that was the case.

Learning how to win contracts also required, in many instances, first failing to acquire them. J1 explained that she applied for many contracts without success. She stated, "You know, it's so funny—you see a person who wins, but you don't see how many losses it took to win." She described one experience where her company won an $8 million contract, but then had to turn it down because the quote contained errors.

Although J2 won both of the federal contracts she applied for, she approached them with an expectation that the process would involve trial and error. She did not expect to win her first contract, but approached it as an opportunity to learn the process: "I kind of just wanted to go through the process and see what it is, you know, go through the federal contracting process, what does it entail? What is it like to write a proposal? What is it like to talk to a contracting officer? What is it like to go through the Q&A process?" Similarly, although J5 had won approximately 10 contracts, she explained, "I've lost a lot more than that. I don't think I could even count!"

J3 described how the tedious nature of the contract procurement process often required her to enter and accept periods of trial and error. Similarly, J4 explained how debriefings helped her understand why she did not win certain contracts, and what she could do to improve her odds next time:

> A debriefing is very important. When you don't win an award, you can have an appointment with the agency to, you know, present yourself and find out what happened, and how you can do better, you know, just to create that relationship with them so they can know who you are next time around.

J6 described having to withdraw an application when she first began seeking out federal contracts because she forgot to calculate in her wholesale pricing. She explained, "So, that was a big error on my part. And, obviously, first time." J6 learned from this mistake, contributing to the theme of trial and error. The lesson taught her the importance of slowing down, thinking through the details, and making sure she had considered all the facets of a contract, and what she would do to fulfill the contract if she won it. J6 was the only participant who had yet to win a contract, and she described the experience of having to pull out an application as "a good learning experience for me. And it was a small order. So, I'm making sure that I have that all in place before I go out and bid again on another contract." When asked if she intended to continue to apply for contracts, J6 replied, "Yes I do. I do, I do, I do. I do intend to apply for more contracts, and it's definitely going to be a learning process. I want to continue this until I've at least won my first one, and see how that works."

Broken System

Almost all of the participants spoke disparagingly of the federal procurement process, not just regarding the tedious and cumbersome natures discussed earlier, but also as a broken or rigged process. J5 simply stated this idea: "My personal perceptions of the contracting process, the procurement process, is that—it is broken…it does not best serve the interests of the federal government, or taxpayers." As J4 simply explained, "My perception of the process is that—You remember the statement that we made earlier? 'They don't know what they're doing.'" When asked to clarify who "they" were, J4 stated, "The entities; the agencies. The ones that are procuring the services." J4 also felt that legislation in place to help women-owned business, such as sole-source authority, still had many kinks to work out:

> That's a new law that they've put in place to award women. So, they're learning, too! They're learning how to do it; they're learning what's the best way to do it, and things like that. So, it's all a learning curve.

For example, J4 explained how the "rule of two" could present a disadvantage to women-owned businesses in traditionally male industries:

> For example—In the pest control industry, when they have these sole-source set-asides for women, you still have to have two—two that are bidding on this project. You have to have two. And so, in the pest control—there are not many women-owned pest control businesses, so that becomes a disadvantage again—to even quality for the set-aside.

J4 continued to elucidate the brokenness of the federal contracting process, especially for women-owned companies trying to qualify for set-asides:

> It's bad. It's so tedious. The questions are worded in double negatives. So you have to sit there and figure out exactly what they're asking. And they give you this process, and make it rigorous to weed out all those that are weak, and all those that are not gonna persevere. So the idea is, like you just said, when you persevere through all these obstacles, and you keep showing up, and you participate in all these different seminars that they offer, and you, and you know, you keep learning, you keep applying yourself. You know?

J4 also believed that set-asides and sole source were more functions of "good faith" in the government, rather than true efforts to nurture WOSBs competing for contracts in male-dominated fields: "They're just going through the motions to say, 'We've done this.'"

J5 also discussed this concept of a broken and rigged system, and shared J4's suspicions of the procurement process, especially the perception of many of the processes as nothing more than "good faith." When discussing the reasons why a company may be denied a contract, J5 distinguished between the "official" reasons that could be given, versus the "real" reasons. For example, an official reason a contracting office may give for failure to win a contract could be failure to follow the meticulous rules of the proposal process. J5 continued:

> So that's the official reason. Unofficially? Reason why they—
>
> Unofficially, there's things that are going on in the background that can make the process unfair. I've heard of things like, someone knows one of the people on the evaluation board. They already really wanted a particular

> company, but for the sake of following procurement rules, they had to put it out to bid.

J5 was also critical of set-asides, especially for women in certain industries or those that were also categorized as economically disadvantaged. J5 described a situation in which she had responded to a solicitation for economically disadvantaged, women-owned businesses. Although J5 knew that another economically disadvantaged, women-owned business also responded, meeting the "rule of two" requirement, the solicitation was later taken back: "They cancelled the whole thing. So, that's why I'm saying—and then it was changed, slightly. The requirements slightly changed. And it was put out again, as a small business" (as opposed to a WOSB). When asked why she believed this happened, J5 shared:

> It could be that they had a firm in mind that they wanted to select, but they needed to again show that this is being put out in the marketplace fairly. It could be that they—there's a bias against economically disadvantaged women-owned small businesses, and they just don't wanna, you know, they don't wanna deal with economically disadvantaged women-owned small businesses.

J5 also spoke of the corruption that she felt existed to favor large corporations over small businesses:

> And then I also think that the process has been influenced by very large corporations in order to knock out the ability of small businesses to really participate in the procurement process. Because, ultimately, those small businesses are always potential threats to those large businesses. So I think

> some of the rules that have been put in place have actually been—potentially put in place by large businesses, because a small business can become a large business!

The theme of a broken system aligned with research that was discussed in the literature review. For example, Kauppi and van Raaij (2015) posited that federal agencies are vulnerable to corruption from incompetence. Other researchers (Cullen, 2012; Snider et al., 2013) explained that violations of duty, public trust, ethics, and power can occur when federal contracting decisions are made without adequate skills. Pergelova and Angulo-Ruiz (2014) reported that a lack of contracting competency and knowledge surrounding appropriate procedures on the part of federal agents responsible for awarding contracts can have a significant influence on the procurement process. In addition, the corruption that participants hinted at, which seemed to systematically disadvantage women, was also discussed by previous scholars. For example, Cantwell (2014) noted that poor implementation and regulatory and statutory burdens prevented the efficient use of the WOSB Procurement Program by WOSBs and those responsible for program implementation. According to Snider el al. (2013), the governance of diversity has become an exercise of expedience rather than a tool to redress discrimination and disadvantage.

Weed Out

Participants also shared that they believed the contract procurement process was systematically designed to weed out certain businesses and individuals from the process. J1 shared:

> I know that there are barriers, I know that there are mechanisms set up for certain people not to succeed, and certain people not to get to this place, or to keep you right here, but I don't buy into it. I know that's what—I see them! I see them all the time, I encounter them—But I just don't buy into them.

J2 also felt that the process "is in place to kind of weed out companies that—It's not made for everybody." She added, "I think they [the federal government] have created a process that is very, that kind of weeds out people who don't have good intentions with getting it. [It's for] People who really *want* the business."

J6 believed that the meticulousness of the process leading up to eligibility to even apply for contracts was systematically designed to weed out certain applicants:

> So, the federal government, before they'll even put you in the system they, in their own way, will do some vetting and check you out before they can approve you to become quote unquote a "vendor" in the federal contracting process, so I had to go through that.

Gender Discrimination

Some participants discussed general gender discrimination they experienced in the industries in which there are rich government contracting opportunities. For example, J1 explained:

> It can be a 'Good Ole Boy Club' sometimes. You know, when you think about this contracting, and you think about federal government, a lot of the times these employees start in the federal market and they'd hear, 'Twenty, thirty years.' And sometimes it's like, they have their picks and

> chooses—the people at the companies they know and work with—and being a WOMAN in construction, and saying, 'Hey, I do construction,' and being a MINORITY woman in construction, it's like, 'What? Who are you?' You know? So, you have your challenges.

Similarly, J2 shared:

> I would have to say, as a woman-owned small business—I actually had a ton of experience. I worked in the private sector for almost seven years. And it became very competitive. It's extremely male-dominated. Typically when you go in and pursue an opportunity, be it contractual or just a job, a lot of times, unfortunately, your customers are always looking for a male to come in—especially in the industry I'm in, I'm in construction. So, that is definitely more male-driven, male-dominated, extremely competitive, extremely cut-throat.

J4 shared how competing for contracts in a male-dominated industry was difficult, as a woman: "It's not EASY. Because you have to persevere, and you have to keep doing it, and you have to break through because, in our industry, the pest control industry, you know, it has always been the 'big boys'."

The discrimination issues mentioned by J1, J2, and J4 echoed the larger problem of gender inequities present in the business world, which was detailed at length in the literature review of this project (Bosse & Taylor, 2012; Groysberg & Bell, 2013; Wu & Sirgy, 2014). In addition, the presence of gender discrimination suggested that Mosher's (1968) theory of representative bureaucracy is not evenly applied in the business world. If government agents applied the theory of representative bureaucracy during federal

contract procurement, it is possible that more women would procure government contracts.

Application to Professional Practice

Federal contracts are one source to enhance the success of WOSBs (Sloka et al., 2014), yet some female small business owners lack capabilities needed to win federal contracts. Even after Congress established the WOSB Procurement Program, which aimed to reward a minimum of 5% of available federal contracts to WOSBs, small businesses owned by women have yet to win 5% of available contracts (Cantwell, 2014). Research indicates that a variety of factors may inhibit the award of federal contracts to WOSBs, including gender bias (Fernandez et al., 2013), the lack of sole source authority, poor understanding of the WOSB Procurement Program (Cantwell, 2014), and the lack of qualifications needed by women entrepreneurs to win contracts (Mee, 2012). Despite research on these topics, previous researchers failed to explore the experiences of federal contract procurement from the perspectives of female small business owners.

Results from this study provided insight into the factors that help participants procure federal contracts, and can, therefore, be applied to professional practice to help women interested in entering the federal contract arena. Women business owners could leverage the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that emerged as subthemes from this analysis to improve their own business acumen and tenacity. For example, because a strong work ethic and adaptability were major factors that participants discussed in their success, women who own small businesses may use these findings to improve their own work ethic and malleability. Women should also become aware of their personal and business limitations, and view them as opportunities for improvement rather than as barriers.

Women should also engage in networking, and work to surround themselves with other professionals who will foster their own business success. Regarding the extrinsic factors, women could use results from this study to understand the importance of doing their own research and identifying business niches.

Finally, WOSBs could use results from this investigation to ascertain some of the challenges associated with procurement to efficiently overcome obstacles. For example, it would be helpful for women business owners to understand how meticulous the contract procurement process is, and how important it is to pay close attention to every detail when filling out applications. It may also help them to understand that contract procurement is largely a process of trial and error, and that they should not become discouraged if their efforts are not met with immediate success but, rather, view rejections as opportunities to ask questions, and learn how they can improve future applications.

Implications for Social Change

Findings from this study have important implications for social change. Female small business owners may apply findings, as discussed above, to better understand the contract procurement process, how to be more successful with contract procurement and improve the rates of federal contracts awarded to WOSBs. As the growth of WOSBs outpaces that of all other small business sectors, it will become increasingly important for these firms to win more government contracts than in the past to prevent expansion of the business gender gap (Koellinger et al., 2013). Nurturing growth among WOSBs may also have positive economic effects because of the proven strength of this sector (Joint Economic Committee, 2010; Matsa & Miller, 2014). Between 1972 and 2007, the

number of women-owned businesses within the United States grew from 4.6% of small businesses to 28.7% (National Women's Business Council, 2007). Between 2002 and 2007, the number of women-owned businesses increased by 20%. While other private firms lost jobs during the economic downturn between 1997 and 2007, women-owned businesses generated approximately 500,000 new jobs (Joint Economic Committee, 2010). Women-owned businesses are less likely to downsize their workforces during tough economic times than firms owned by men (Matsa & Miller, 2014); consequently, women-owned firms represent an important factor in economic growth and stability.

The social change implications from this study are significant because women are increasingly important actors in the country's economic stability. If more women business owners are able to successfully procure federal contracts, the growth of WOSBs may increase even more, helping to create more jobs for Americans in general, and more opportunities for women business owners, specifically.

Recommendations for Action

A few important recommendations for action can be made based upon findings from this study. First, although all of the participants in this study took the initiative to conduct their own research on federal contract procurement, analysis indicated that this was an area where women business owners could use more help. Because much of the information available on contract procurement is scattered, convoluted, and difficult to locate, women interested in contract procurement could benefit from a database of resources, or training, or courses designed to teach them the details of contract procurement. It is very possible that a better understanding of the process could reduce the amount of trial and error that participants reported as being a necessary part of

learning to win contracts. Less trial and error, and higher success rates may also encourage more women to enter the federal contracting arena. Women need to understand that significant opportunities to grow their businesses exist through federal contracting, and they need to have access to streamlined, up-to-date information. In addition to better understanding how to learn about contracting opportunities and apply for them, women business owners may benefit from an understanding of programs designed to help them grow their businesses and win contracts. There are many organizations designed to help female small business owners, but for women to benefit from these organizations, they have to know they exist.

Although this study was a qualitative study with results that cannot be generalized for all female small business owners, they do suggest that women who become successful in business, and successful with contract procurement more specifically, seem to possess grit, tenacity, drive, and commitment. Study participants were hungry for success, and were autonomous and motivated. If results from this small sample of women business owners is any indication, women are not short on motivation, but they may lack the information needed to be successful in contract procurement. If campaigns are developed to raise awareness of contracting opportunities among women business owners, women may be directed to the very information they need to become successful. Such information could be accessed from some of the more common resources that women may initially turn to when seeking information on contract procurement, such as the SBA. For example, the SBA could develop a section of its website dedicated to providing simple, easy to understand information to women interested in federal contract

procurement. In addition, the SBA could provide contact information to link up women with experts who can answer their questions about contract procurement.

Another recommendation for action relates to the dissemination of results from the investigation. This study could serve as an inspiration to women considering entering the federal contracting arena, but have held back because of insecurity or lack of information. Results from this study provided real examples of women who obtained significant success with federal contracts, moving from simple ideas and dreams to businesses that procured millions of dollars in federal contracts. Women business owners may be inspired to become their own success stories in the contracting arena. Accordingly, study results could be disseminated to women's business organizations in the form of pamphlets with short narratives of participants' experiences, in addition to valuable resources.

Recommendations for Further Research

Many opportunities for future research emerged from this investigation. First, future researchers may considering repeating this study in other geographic locations, as the investigation was limited to women who owned small businesses in the metropolitan region of Atlanta, Georgia. It is possible that women in other regions of the country, or those areas less populated or more rural, may have different experiences than the women in the investigation. Similarly, women in more progressive areas where a larger percent of educated professionals live, and where fewer gender discrepancies are present, may have different experiences than women in the southeastern region of the United States. It would also be interesting to see if, or how, race factored into the experiences of women

business owners competing for federal contracts, and how race may have factored in differently based on location.

Because the main limitation of the investigation was the small sample size and lack of generalizability, future researchers may consider using the research questions from this study to guide a larger, empirical investigation with a nationally representative sample of female small business owners. For example, a national survey investigation could reflect differences in contract procurement experiences, based on the demographics mentioned above (race, education, geographic region, etc.).

Future researchers could also investigate how contract procurement experiences vary based on the industry in which women work. For example, most of the study participants owned businesses in industries traditionally dominated by men, such as pest control and construction. Women in more women-oriented or gender neutral industries, such as family support services, may have different contract procurement experiences. Future qualitative researchers may specifically examine how the traditional gender orientation of an industry affects contract procurement among women who own small businesses.

The most prominent subthemes to emerge from the study are related to personality, such as work ethic, and adaptability, and social-related skills, such as networking. Future researchers could explore these themes further to better understand the potential role of personality in women's contract procurement experiences. For example, researchers could examine how much of women's success with federal contract procurement is linked to personality traits—for example, those identified by Myers-Briggs—versus more cognitive or social skills, such as research and networking. Such

investigations could provide more insight into the themes and subthemes that emerged from this study.

Finally, future researchers could examine the role of gender. Although I expected gender to be a prominent theme in this investigation, it emerged only as a subtheme. This could simply be because I did not ask any pointed questions about gender in the interview protocol. The lack of gender questions was intentional—I wanted the idea to emerge naturally, rather than to provoke participants to consider gender as an issue in their experiences. Gender was mentioned by only two of the participants, indicating that participants were more inclined to discuss factors that they could control in the contract procurement process. Although sex or gender may be viewed as fixed, work ethic and adaptability were proactive traits that participants could leverage to improve their odds of winning contracts. Future researchers could ask women business owners specific gender-related questions about their contract procurement experiences. Further, they could examine if personality traits, such as grit and tenacity, counteracted any of the negative business effects associated with being a woman.

Reflections

As a woman, I had to be very careful during all stages of data collection and analysis to bracket my personal thoughts, biases, and experiences. I have worked in different business environments throughout my career, and have experienced firsthand the challenges that women can experience in a variety of business environments. Since I have not had much experience with entrepreneurship, and no experience with federal contract procurement. I found it very interesting—and encouraging—that the participants did not indicate beliefs that gender created significant limitations for them in the

contracting arena. As mentioned above, this may have simply been because I did not ask specific questions about gender. It may also be an indication that the playing field for women in the game of business is gradually being leveled. Or, the lack of focus on gender may indicate that the women chose to focus on things they could control to improve their success, such as putting in long work hours, paying close attention to all the details of their applications, or conducting close research.

Conclusion

Tenacity and grit, along with the autonomy and perseverance that my study participants described inspired me in a number of ways. None of them complained about not winning contracts, or the sometimes brutal world of business. They were positive, self-confident, aggressive, and successful. I think that if more women were able to talk to and network with women who have become successful entrepreneurs, more women would be willing to take risks, start businesses, and even compete for federal contracts. The playing field in business does appear to be improving for women, but there is still work to be done—and, as indicated by results from this investigation, providing women with the resources and information they need to become entrepreneurs and begin competing for federal contracts, may be a good place to start.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol and Interview Questions

A. The interview session will commence with salutations, introducing myself to the research participant, after which I will introduce the research topic.

B. I will thank the participant for taking the time to respond to the invitation to participate.

C. I will request the participant to read the consent form, ask any questions before proceeding to sign the consent form.

D. The recorder will be turned on, and I will note the date, time and location.

E. The coded sequential interpretation of the participant's name e.g., respondent will be indicated on the audio recorder (or electronic storage device), documented on my copy of the consent form and the interview will begin.

F. The interview will span approximately 2 hours for responses to eight interview questions, including any additional follow-up questions.

G. I will remind participants of the purpose of the study before asking questions. The purpose of the case study is to explore important capabilities for women who own small businesses to procure federal contracts.

H. Then, I will inform the participant regarding the review of the interview report that I will make available after my transcription.

I. At the end of the interview, I will thank the research participant for taking the time to participate in the study.

The following open-ended semistructured questions will be posed in each interview:

1. What caused you to apply for contracting opportunities with the federal government?

2. What are your experiences with the federal contracting process?
3. What contracts have you applied for with an unsuccessful result?
4. What contracts have you applied for with a successful result?

Applied for a federal contract but did not win:

1. What contracts have you unsuccessfully applied for?
2. What factors do you believe prevented your business from winning the contract(s) you applied for?
3. What are your perceptions of the federal contracting process?
4. Do you intend to apply for more federal contracts in the future? Why or why not?

Applied for and was awarded a federal contract:

1. What factors do you believe contributed to your success?
2. What are your perceptions of the federal contracting process?
3. Had you previously applied for contracts that you did not win? If so, what do you think you did differently that helped you win future federal contract(s)?
4. What tools, skills, or guidance do you believe would help you win additional future federal contracts?

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate in the Study

<Date>

<Address Block>

Dear Madam,

As part of my doctoral study at Walden University, I would like to invite you to participate in research I am conducting to explore factors important to women-owned small business owners securing government contracts. I contacted you to participate because you are a female business owner from the Metro-Atlanta area. Participation in the research study is voluntary, and all information provided will be held strictly confidential. Please read the enclosed consent form carefully, and ask any questions you may have before acting on the invitation to participate.

To achieve the objectives of the research study, your participation depends upon satisfying certain criteria. These criteria include: (a) female owner of a small business; (b) must have attempted to secure a federal contract with a governmental agency; and (c) must be a minimum of 18 years of age. If you satisfy these criteria please notify me via the contact information provided. I will arrange a personal interview with you as soon as I receive your response.

I anticipate the total time required for the study interview will consume no more than 2 hours. The interview will be audio recorded, and you will have the opportunity to review the transcribed interview for accuracy prior to inclusion in the study.

I sincerely appreciate your valuable time and thank you for your consideration. Your participation in this important research would add extreme value to the study.

Sincerely,

Janet Harrison
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix C: Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study focused on exploring the aspects important to securing government contracts. You are being asked for potential participation because you are a female business owner who has previously attempted to secure a contract with a federal agency. This form is part of a process known as *informed consent*. It allows you to understand the research before deciding whether to participate. Janet Harrison, a doctoral candidate at Walden University, is conducting the study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to identify the capabilities needed by female small business owners to win federal contracts.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to: (a) participate in a face-to-face interview that will be audio recorded and consume approximately 2 hours; (b) review the final transcription of your interview for accuracy; (c) confirm or correct the researcher's interpretation of your voice inflection, body language, and all other non-verbal cues you may give during the interview; and (d) return the transcribed interview if any changes are necessary. The total time to review your transcript and make changes will consume approximately 30 minutes of your time. A copy of your interview transcript will be provided once it is available. Please provide your email address:

_____

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary; therefore, your decision whether to participate or not participate will be respected. There are no adverse

ramifications if you decide not to participate in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you are at liberty to opt out at any time before or during the study. You may stop at any time. You may ignore any question(s) that you are uncomfortable answering or feel are too confidential.

To contribute to deeper understanding of case study data, you will be asked for a copy of several pieces of documentation from your business. Documents can include one or more of the following, as available and as voluntarily provided: (a) business metrics, (b) federal contract applications, and (c) company metrics.

Risks and Benefits of Participation:

Given the nature of this research, the potential for harm to any participant is minimal because the focus of the study is solely on examining the experiences and informed perceptions of female-owned small businesses. No confidential information or trade secrets will be sought. The potential benefit of participation is your contribution to determine what capabilities female small business owners need to win federal contracts.

Compensation:

To avoid bias there will be no financial or other form of compensation provided for participation in this study.

Confidentiality:

All information provided during this research will be held strictly confidential. The researcher will not use your information for any purposes external to the research project, and your name or any form of personal identification will not be used within any reports of the study.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions you have now, and feel free to contact the researcher via email or telephone, if you have questions at a later time. If you would like to privately discuss your rights as a research participant, you may call Dr. Leilani Endicott with Walden University at 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is **02-10-17-0148870** and approval expires on **February 9, 2018**. The researcher, Janet Harrison**,** will provide you with a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and sufficiently understand the information within this form, and the purpose of the study to make an informed decision regarding my participation. By signing below, I am agreeing to the terms described throughout this form.

Printed Name of participant:

_____

Date of approval:

_____

Participant's Written or Electronic* Signature:

_____

Researcher's Written or Electronic* Signature:

_____