A DOUBLE STANDARD:

WOMEN LEADERS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS AND CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

by

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ABSTRACT

Over the last 20 years, the feminization of public relations has affected the public relations field concerning the status of the profession, gender inequities, salary discrepancy, and organizational roles. This has re-directed public relations scholarship to include feminist theory, diversity, the glass ceiling phenomenon, and leadership. This qualitative study uses 11 in-depth interviews to explore women leaders’ views on the glass ceiling and other barriers for the advancement of women in public relations and corporate communications. Gender roles and stereotypes still clearly affect women’s role in the workforce. Because of the feminization of public relations, this field has a softer image and is not seen as a valuable or credible part within an organization. This causes a double glass ceiling to exist for women in public relations and corporate communications: their gender and career choice.

INDEX WORDS: Feminization of public relations, Women leaders, Glass ceiling phenomenon, Feminist theory, Corporate communications
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I. Justification of Study

The feminization of public relations over the last 20 years has caused the dynamics of the field to change. Because women compose over 70 percent of public relations practitioners, public relations is now regarded as a female-dominated profession. As women continue to enter this profession, researchers have uncovered an unfortunate truth. Despite the influx of women, men still benefit more in terms of achieving more jobs, higher salaries, and promotions at the management level (Aldoory and Toth, 2002). The feminization of public relations has affected the field concerning the status of the profession, gender inequities, salary discrepancy, and organizational roles. This has re-directed public relations scholarship to include feminist theory, diversity, the glass ceiling phenomenon, and leadership.

The principal issue in studying women in public relations centers on the fact that they are seldom found in executive or leadership roles. However, this fact is not solely tied to the public relations and communication realms of business; this trend is evident across all of corporate America. When studying women’s lack of advancement in the communications field, it is clearly relevant to explore women’s role in corporate America as well. Women are becoming more established in the public relations and corporate communications industries as well as in the business world. Though women compose over half of the labor force in the United States, this equality in numbers is not reflected in women’s salary and prestige. This is referred to as the glass ceiling phenomenon, which is an invisible barrier that prevents women and other minorities from moving into the higher ranks of an organization.

While past studies have investigated why women are not rising within public relations and corporate communications, the public relations glass ceiling has only been briefly explored. Wrigley’s (2002) study has been the only one to focus directly on the glass ceiling phenomenon in public relations.
Wrigley’s study uncovered barriers such as sex discrimination, denial of equal pay, denial of promotion, different treatment in the workplace for men and women, and men feeling threatened by women.

Past public relations studies have also investigated the gender inequities through feminist analysis and theories (Aldoory, 2003, Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Hon, 1995; Russell-Loretz, 2007; Toth, 2001). Liberal and radical feminist perspectives are commonly used in public relations feminist scholarship. Many studies use a liberal feminist perspective which empowers women to seek career autonomy and prestige through personal strategies. On the other hand, the radical feminist perspective targets the organization or system as a whole. Radical feminists believe that gender inequalities are structural and can only be eradicated through addressing the source of the problem, the societal culture and/or the organizational culture.

This thesis will further the body of knowledge in public relations and corporate communications by examining the glass ceiling phenomenon and other barriers that women may encounter. Through 11 in-depth interviews with women in leadership positions in public relations and corporate communications, this study will seek to identify factors that contribute to, and perpetuate, the problem of the glass ceiling for women. Though this study is concentrated on the communications industry, it extends to the corporate world since the glass ceiling and gender inequalities are societal issues, not just public relations’. To understand the extent of this barrier and its potential causes, the role of gender in American society will be first examined.

II. Gender Roles and Stereotypes in American Culture and Society

Gender roles and stereotypes work in conjunction with each other as well as perpetuate each other in society and the workplace. Unlike a person’s sex which is biological and genetic, gender is acquired through social interaction and changes over time. Gender is a social construction as defined by many. It is considerably more complex than sex. We are born male or female but we learn gender through our interactions with society and thus we learn the traits of masculinity and femininity (Wood, 2003). “Gender is a social construction that varies across cultures, over time within a given culture, and in
relation to the other gender” (Wood, 2003, p. 21). Therefore each gender takes on meaning by the influence of a “society’s values, beliefs, and preferred ways of organizing collective life” (p. 21).

For example, in American society, masculinity is attributed to being strong, determined, successful, balanced, powerful, and emotionally guarded (House, Dallinger, & Kilgallen, 1998). In contrast, femininity is associated with being physically attractive, courteous, passive, emotional, nurturing, and caring in terms of fellow humans and relationships. However, the characteristics of masculinity have become less rigid and more modernized when compared to earlier time periods, but the traits of femininity remain traditional and intact (Wood, 2003).

From the day we are born, we learn gender and what it means to be a boy or a girl. Throughout our lives, we are encouraged to conform to the social expectations of masculinity and femininity. “Because social definitions of gender permeate public and private life, we see them as normal, natural, and right” (Wood, 2003, p. 23). However, it is important to note that though we are taught gender throughout our lives, we do not just passively accept these roles. We are constantly analyzing and evaluating gender meanings and this results in us influencing them in various ways. One common vein of research in terms of gender is the role that gender plays in the workplace. More specifically, the influences of gender roles and stereotypes in corporate management and hierarchy are consistently analyzed, researched, and studied.

Stereotypes are often based on sex, age, race, ethnicity, or cultural background (Thomas, 2005). “Stereotypes are widely held beliefs that people have certain characteristics because of their membership in a particular group” (Weiten, 2001, p. 658). When someone stereotypes, they judge and evaluate others based on common perceptions of their particular group to which they belong not based on their individual characteristics (Cox, 1994, Weiten, 2001). Societal gender stereotypes are transferred into the workplace which limits women from filling positions for which they are qualified. According to Kanter (1977), people generally classify women and men into a few basic stereotypes that reflect the expected performance in the business environment. Women are classified as one of four stereotypes: sex object, mother, child, or iron maiden. The sex object stereotype defines women in terms of their sex or sexuality.
Therefore a woman’s appearance and behavior should conform to the social expectations of femininity (Wood, 2003). The mother stereotype has two different versions: the figurative and literal. The figurative version is displayed in the workplace when other employees expect mother-like support from a woman coworker. “Women must “take care of the ‘emotional labor’ for everyone—smile, exchange pleasantries, be accessible, and listen to, support and help others” (Basinger, 2001, and Bellas, 2001 as cited in Wood, 2003, p. 228). When workers regard women as motherly figures, they are more apt to communicate with women workers over men when they are seeking support and sympathy. On the other hand, the literal meaning of the mother stereotype is a true label of women who have children. This role overshadows the professional competency of women because they have children; and they are often viewed as less than serious and competent professionals (Wood, 2003).

The third stereotype of women is referred to as the child stereotype in which women are seen as a child or a pet, “both of which are cute but not to be taken seriously” (Wood, 2003, p. 229). In this stereotype, women are portrayed as “less mature, competent, or capable of making decisions than men” (Wood, 2003, p. 229). This stereotype is developed from the thought/misconception that women need to be protected. Consequently it prevents women from growing professionally as well as proving their abilities (Wood, 2003). The first three stereotypes negatively contribute to the image of women in the workplace and as a result affect the disparity in pay and power between women and men (Wood, 2003).

The final stereotype is the iron maiden and it defines women as being unwomanly, unfeminine, or manly. Characteristics such as independent, ambitious, directive, competitive, and tough are considered unfeminine. When a woman’s actions reflect one of these characteristics she is considered an iron maiden or a bitch in the workplace (Garlick, Dixon, & Allen, 1992). Many women who have been successful in corporate positions believe there is a conflict between being professional and being feminine. Women in leadership roles often feel that they must shed their femininity, and not act “too much like women” (Wood, 2003, p. 231).

A commonality found in the aforementioned stereotypes is they portray women as being incompetent or unbearable in the workplace. Women are therefore viewed as undesirable employees.
These stereotypes damage the professional potential of women because they define women’s professional success in terms of their sex and gender rather than their education, skill and performance. Each of these stereotypes discredits women and their abilities, and in some way prevents women from reaching career success. Another influence of the societal perception of gender roles in the workplace is displayed by the number of women in certain professions, such as education, nursing, and communications. Though there is evidence that women are now more able to have careers in most fields and professions, an important part of the professional spectrum is still gendered.

In contrast to the women stereotypes are the male stereotypes that influence the status of both genders in society as well as in the workplace. Wood develops three stereotypes of men: sturdy oaks, fighters, and breadwinners (2003). In the sturdy oak stereotype, men are “self-contained, self-sufficient pillars of strength who should not appear weak or reliant on others” (Wood, 2003, p. 233). This stereotype carries into the professional life of men. Under this stereotype, men take unwise risks both personal and professional in order to conceal their doubts and fears and to appear competent and manly. They also refuse to seek advice or consultation from others. (Wood, 2003)

Wood’s second male stereotype is the fighter. Under this stereotype, men are “brave warriors who go to battle, whether literally in war or metaphorically in fighting the competition in business” (Wood, 2003, p. 233). Men are raised with a competitive edge whether it be on the playing field or in the office. Characteristics of this stereotype include being aggressive, eager, ruthless, and competitive. “The stereotype of men as fighters echoes other themes of masculinity: dominance, force, and violence” (Wood, 2003, p. 233). Because this stereotype portrays men as macho and manly, it prevents men from being able to take family leave without coworkers and superiors looking down at them. Even firms and organizations that allow men to take paternal leave do not necessarily approve when men take it (Rapoport, Bailyn, Kolb, & Fletcher, 1998).

Wood’s final male stereotype is the breadwinner. “Men are expected to be the primary or exclusive wage earners for their families, and achieving this is central to how our society views men’s success” (Wood, 2003, p. 234). This stereotype so strongly defines men in our society that if a man is
unable to make a good salary, he may suffer emotionally because of it. Being the breadwinner is greatly tied to a man’s success in our society. Depression, suicide, and emotional problems are all side effects induced by this stereotype and society when men can fall short of being able to financially provide for the family (Wood, 2003).

The perception of women as mothers combined with the perception of men as breadwinners perpetuates the idea that men are not responsible for sharing family duties as well as the idea that women are not committed or qualified enough for upper management roles in an organization (Wood, 2003). However, it is not a single stereotype that inhibits women’s growth and reputation in the workforce. Rather, it is the combination of all gender stereotypes and perceived roles of both genders that work against the professional credibility and advancement of women.

III. Women in the Workplace in Corporate America

A. General Overview of Women

Women account for approximately half of the workforce in the United States. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, women have increased their labor force participation from 43 to 59 percent between 1970 and 2004 (2006). Furthermore, the 2005 annual averages show that women, 16 years and older, comprised 43.6 percent of the workforce and men comprised 56.3 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). The increase of labor force participation of women has coincided with women’s pursuit of higher education. In 2005, 3 in 10 women ages 25-64 had college degrees whereas only 1 in 10 had college degrees in 1970.

Unfortunately this equality in their presence in the labor force is not reflected in career and salary prestige. In 2005, women held 50.3 percent of management, professional, and related occupations whereas 49.6 percent were held by men according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006). Although more women are achieving managerial roles, there is still a gender gap in terms of women in executive positions (Ragins, Townsend, and Mattis, 1998). Twenty-five percent of chief executives are female whereas 75 percent are male (Bureau Labor of Statistics, 2006). Furthermore, Catalyst, the leading nonprofit research and advisory organization focused on expanding opportunities for women and
businesses, revealed conflicting results in a recent census survey. According to this survey, women represented only 9.4 percent of the highest ranks of corporate leadership, which is up from 7.9 percent in 2002 (Catalyst, 2006).

This study also reveals the average Fortune 500 company had 21.8 corporate officers in 2005, on average, women held only 3.6 of these positions; women occupied only 9.4 percent of titles higher than vice president; and more than one half of the Fortune 500 companies had fewer than three women corporate officers (Catalyst, 2006). Catalyst predicts that at the rate of women’s progression in the corporate world, it will take about 40 years for women to achieve parity with men in corporate officer positions; however, this does not take salary into account (2007).

The inequality between men and women is further evidenced when we examine salary disparity. Women in full-time positions still earn only 77 cents for every dollar men earn (Murphy, 2005). This has been the case since 1993. In the 1960s, women earned 59 cents for every dollar earned by men. However, at that time, it was deemed acceptable because as women were just starting to pursue advanced education and enter the workforce, the gender wage gap existed because of a “merit gap.” This theory explained how women were not as well-educated as men, had not been in the workforce for as long as men, and were working in lower-skilled jobs than men. However, in 1994, the gender wage gap widened despite the growing economy. This should have been the time that women closed the wage gap since they had successfully closed the “merit gap” (Murphy, 2005).

Even though women can be found now in almost every occupation, they are significantly underrepresented in higher paying positions and fields. Many academic and media analysts believe that the wage gap exists because something is wrong with women. Their arguments include the following claims: women are less educated, women are less experienced, women do not work as hard or as long as men, and women are not committed to working. All of these contentions support the claim that women are deficient and consequently cannot handle any type of management role in an organization (Murphy, 2005).
B. The Glass Ceiling

Despite the growing numbers of women in the labor force, many barriers still remain that prevent minorities from achieving roles of power in the workforce (Thomas, 2005). Women have overcome one of the biggest challenges in our society by their omnipresence in the workforce. Still challenges remain concerning their progression in the organizational hierarchy. Women’s lack of presence in prestigious, white-collar occupations as well as their lack of mobility in this occupational tier results in the glass ceiling phenomenon. Murphy (2005) describes the glass ceiling phenomenon as a hidden barrier, one that represents “unspoken assumptions, unexamined attitudes, [and] habitual ways of behaving” (p. 7). According to Wood (2003), the glass ceiling phenomenon is an “invisible barrier that limits advancement of women and minorities” (p. 248). The Department of Labor (1991) defined the glass ceiling as, “those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into management-level positions” (p. 1). The phrase, the glass ceiling effect or phenomenon, was developed to help people visualize this barrier to advancement for women and other minorities. The bottom line is the glass ceiling describes the lack of progression and promotion of individuals not based on their merit, but based on a discriminating characteristic, such as race or gender. Therefore the glass ceiling is the consequence of different organizational barriers and covert acts of discrimination (Bose & Whaley, 2001).

The glass ceiling’s presence is attributed to sex segregation in the workforce, which is influenced by gendered social expectations for men and women. Men were always seen as the breadwinners therefore women were not required to work (Bose & Whaley, 2001). As women sought equality and autonomy in society, they began to enter the workforce. However, because of the preeminence of their biological capabilities in the mainly gendered essentialist perception that society has of women and men, women were gravitated toward feminine occupations that allow them to withdraw from the workforce and raise their children (Maume, 2001). Therefore sex segregation has affected the workforce in gendering industries, occupations, and jobs. A business entity is usually labeled female- or male-dominated if it is at least 75 percent female or male respectively. Traditionally female-dominated occupations such as
teaching and nursing are located in the middle of the white-collar occupational hierarchy with executives, physicians, lawyers, and college professors at the top and clerical and sales workers at the bottom (Bose & Whaley, 2001). To accurately describe and differentiate the cluster of female-dominated occupations at the white-collar level, people began to refer to them as pink-collar occupations. The pink-collar occupations are often thought of as semi-professions because they lack prestige and autonomy and generally have lower salaries (Bose & Whaley, 2001). More than 90% of employed women work in the “pink collar ghetto.” “Pink collar workers have, on average, more years of education than their male counterparts in blue collar jobs but make considerable less money” (Hoffman, 1998, p. 450). The pink collar ghetto relates to the velvet ghetto, which will be expanded upon later, in terms of women being limited to certain jobs and duties because of their expected roles.

The glass ceiling also impacts women’s professional growth outside of female-dominated lines of work. Most professions are based on the traditional working pattern of a man, education—fulltime career—retirement. Society does not allow women to have their own type of working pattern therefore they are forced to conform to the traditional male pattern. If women do not conform or resist conforming, employers are less attracted to them because they do not appear to be the best possible candidate. Because of societal expectations related to women as mothers, spouses, and caregivers, women require more flexibility from a job than do men. Career breaks are inevitable for the majority of women because of familial responsibilities: to have/care for children as well as to care for elderly relatives. Even though employers today are more understanding of this and come to expect it, they continue to view women primarily as wives and mothers rather than committed workers. The assumption that women are less committed and less able is just one supposition of many held by men and society in general that reinforces the glass ceiling (Flanders, 1994).

However, some men believe that women create the glass ceiling for themselves. According to Thomas (2005), “Male CEOs fault women’s supposed lack of interest, family responsibilities, and lack of numeric representation (women’s absence within the leadership pipeline) as keeping women outside of the core of corporate leadership” (p. 152). Many believe that women simply choose not to seek leadership
roles because of the inherent time commitment. However, executive women believe that their lack of advancement is caused by the difficulties of accessing male-dominated networks and by the lack of mentoring (Ragins et al., 1998).

According to Flanders (1994), other widely-held assumptions include: women lack the leadership qualities to head a team or an organization; women dislike power and decision-making; women are less assertive than men; women lack the ruthlessness needed to succeed in a competitive environment; women are better suited in the “nurturing” careers such as teaching and nursing; the male managerial style is more accepted and effective; the culture trap meaning that women’s own attitudes and lack of belief in themselves; and built-in attitudes, prejudices, and misconceptions of women. These assumptions exist in our society and perpetuate the glass ceiling but as women are becoming more prevalent in the workforce and in power positions, these assumptions are slowly eroding. Unfortunately, these assumptions are not the only factors contributing to the glass ceiling, there are actual physical contributors that include: women’s isolation and lack of role models while attempting to advance within an organization; women’s exclusion from the “old boy” network, particularly socializing after hours with the organization’s men; women generally receive less training while employed than do men; and women are seen as a threat to men especially now that more women are found in management (Flanders, 1994).

C. Diversity and Leadership in the Workforce

As American society becomes more diverse, diversity issues are more prevalent and organizations are no exception to this trend. Thomas (2005) argues, “Organizations that want to remain competitive in today’s environment must be knowledgeable about the diversity that is present in their workforce, in the overall labor force, and in the marketplace if they hope to have a viable business” (p. 2). Since organizations now must address a more heterogeneous public, diversity should be the core of every organization and should be the focus of every leader (Cox, 1994). Leaders have the responsibility to communicate, guide, inspire, and provide vision for the rest of the organization (French & Bell, 1999). Effective leadership in today’s world is rooted in implementing a multicultural workplace environment.
However, this presents a complex challenge because of the diversity in terms of gender, race, and even sexuality of our workforce. Leaders must overcome what Thomas (2005) refers to as a “similar to me bias” (p. 155). Unbeknownst to them, leaders select and evaluate people like themselves more favorably. Consequently, women and other underrepresented groups struggle to break into the white male network. By ignoring (or being unaware of) this bias, leaders and organizations secure a homogeneous culture which contradicts that of the American society. Leaders must “use diversity as a competitive advantage” (Thomas, 2005, p. 148). Therefore it is to the organization’s advantage to work at eliminating the glass ceiling for underrepresented populations so that they themselves can become leaders (Thomas, 2005).

IV. Objective

Gender roles and stereotypes directly impact a woman’s place in the organization hierarchy. Therefore this qualitative study will further explore the implications of the feminization of public relations through 11 in-depth interviews with women leaders of public relations and corporate communications. Though there is a strong foundation of research in public relations concerning the feminization, gender inequities, feminist theory, and organizational roles, this study will further the body of knowledge by concentrating specifically on the glass ceiling in public relations. By focusing on factors that contribute to the glass ceiling, this study will also explore other barriers women face and effective leadership strategies in order to more fully develop this critical area of public relations research.

The following study will be divided into four subsequent chapters. In chapter two, the literature review, I explore previous research focusing on the feminization of public relations, women and the glass ceiling phenomenon in public relations, and leadership roles in public relations. This chapter concludes with my research questions. Chapter three focuses on the theoretical framework and methodology used in this thesis. Chapter four provides the analysis of the eleven interviews. This section is divided into three areas: the glass ceiling, barriers, and leadership. Chapter five concludes the study with three sections: agency versus structure, the limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research. The interview guide can be found in Appendix A, followed by the participants’ profiles in Appendix B.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

I. The Feminization of Public Relations

The number of women entering the field of public relations in the last 20 years has increased greatly. As women continue to pursue careers in professions other than those considered traditionally “female” such as nursing and teaching, many factors affect the workforce, such as salary, status, and influence within the field (Grunig, L. A., Toth, & Hon, 2001, pp. 5-6). The feminization of public relations has made an impact in the profession considering the status of the industry, gender inequities, salary discrepancy, and organizational roles. The communication roles of both women and men in the field of public relations must be considered in order to fully understand the effects of the feminization of public relations (Grunig, L. A. et al., 2001). According to the PRSA/IABC Salary Survey of 2000, women represent about 70% of the public relations field compared to 1979 when less than 44% of the public relations employees were women. However, men still benefit more in terms of achieving more jobs, higher salaries, and promotions at the management level (Aldoory and Toth, 2002, p. 103).

A primary issue related to the feminization of public relations is the declining status of the industry (Grunig L. A. et al., 2001). Lesly (1988) believes that because of the amount of women in public relations, there is a “soft” perception of this field. Therefore public relations is not always considered a vital part of the management function, but rather as a “soft” and many times disposable element of it (Lesly, 1988). When women enter public relations, they are encountering a double discrimination, by gender and by career choice. Women in public relations face proving themselves as women in the corporate world as well as proving that effective communicators are key to the dominant coalition.

A. Organizational Roles in Public Relations

In order to better comprehend the function and nature of public relations, its professional success within a business, and the feminization of it, public relations scholars have developed roles theory
Practitioner roles are key to understanding the function of public relations and communication” (Dozier, 1992, p. 327). The two dichotomous roles that have been developed and agreed upon throughout roles research are the technician role and the manager role. The managerial role requires strategic decision-making and is associated with broader, more long-term goals of the organization. This role also includes conducting research, setting objectives, monitoring the organization’s impacts, boundary spanning, and creating organizational philosophies (Berkowitz & Hristodoulakis, 1999). On the other hand, the technician role is defined through short-term decisions, participating in a “peripheral department within an organization,” carrying out decisions made by others, and other daily short-term activities such as writing, editing, media contacts, and production of publications (Berkowitz & Hristodoulakis, 1999). However, every public relations practitioner participates in activities associated with both of these roles. Though the roles are different and independent of each other, they are not mutually exclusive (Dozier & Broom, 1995).

In discerning how organizational roles are affected by gender, L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Dozier (2002) found that “gender discrimination plays an important role in this process of role segregation” (p. 203). Women work predominantly at the technician level mainly because they have fewer years of professional experience (Hon, 1995). The technician level therefore serves as a ghetto for women in public relations. It serves the same function in public relations that occupational segregation embodies in the larger labor force (Hon, Grunig, L. A., & Dozier, 1992). Furthermore, the dynamics of role segregation are quite complex and are influenced by biological issues, social issues, labor force issues, and public relations professional issues. The biological and socialization attributes that men generally possess enable them to assume the manager role with greater ease as compared to women. Additionally, women are generally more attracted to the less risky technician role because of its low level of involvement and commitment (Hon et al., 1992).

In looking at the traditional progression of advancement within the communications field, a practitioner enters the field at the technician level and can anticipate gradually achieving the managerial role. “With more professional experience, practitioners move from the technical role to management
responsibilities” (Grunig, L. A. et al., 2002, p. 203). However, according to Broom and Dozier (1986), this opportunity is more likely to be offered to men than women. Women face more difficulty advancing from the technician role than do men with the same amount of years experience (Broom & Dozier, 1986). Professional experience does not mean advancement for women as much as it does for men (Grunig, L.A. et al., 2002). To men, the technician role is merely a stepping stone, a transitory place; however, for women, it is a relatively permanent placement (Hon et al., 1992). While Dozier and Broom (1995) concluded that attaining management roles was based more on experience than gender, other studies have countered this argument with evidence that gender discrimination does exist and keeps women in technician roles longer than men (Choi & Hon, 2002; Creedon, 1991; Grunig, L. A. et al., 2001). 

There is also research that provides insight into the general characteristics that female practitioners possess whether at that managerial or technical level. Toth and L. Grunig (1993) concluded that the failure to promote women comes from on-the-job experience not just from gender and years of professional experience. Even though women perform managerial duties, they continue to perform technical tasks also. Women are described as “doing it all” (Grunig, L. A. et al., 2001, p. 224). Women are more willing to do a combination of technical and managerial work and women enact this dual role more than men. Therefore this dual role brings down the status of women by associating them more with the technician role. Nevertheless, it is important to note that men and women participate in managerial and technical work despite their actual job titles (Grunig, L. A. et al., 2001, p. 205). What is unique about how women fill the managerial role is “when women do managerial work, they tend to do it as middle managers rather than top managers, which is more the province of men” (p. 205). Suggesting that their research stands on essentialists conceptualizations of gender, L. A. Grunig et al. (2001) believe because of a woman’s innate sense of nurturing others and “doing it all,” women have fewer personality characteristics and professional experiences that prepare them for top management (pp. 205-206). Again, this sense of performing all types of duties brings the status of women down and they are more likely to be viewed at the technician level regardless of their actual position.
B. Gender Pay Gap

Generally speaking, women in full-time positions earn only 77 cents for every dollar men earn (Murphy, 2005, p. 3). The salaries of women in public relations are much lower than those of men regardless of age, experience, or type of organization (Grunig, L. A. et al., 2001). According to the 2005 PR Week-Korn/Ferry Salary Survey, the average male reported an annual income of $107,960 whereas the average woman reported that she made only $75,498. Women are still paid approximately 30 percent less than men (Chabria, 2005). Women’s lower wages correlates with Donato’s (1990) seven reasons why women have been well-received into the field of public relations: the sex-specific demand for women, women as a “better buy,” new publics, female-intensive industries, affirmative action, gender ideology, and women’s attraction to public relations. The sex-specific demand refers to how the field of public relations attracts more women now and employers acknowledge this attraction by looking to women to fill more job openings. This directly relates to Donato’s second reason of women as a “better buy.” As women enter the field today, they are naturally obtaining jobs at the technical level whereas the men are advancing and achieving jobs at the managerial level. Because of the abundance of women at the technical level, these women provided a cheaper labor supply than did men (Donato, 1990). According to L. A. Grunig et al. (2001), three reasons as to why women generally are paid less than men are: (1) women have less experience and tend to be younger than the men already in the field because of the recent influx of women in public relations; (2) women typically seek jobs in lower paying organizations; and (3) women seek jobs in lower paying positions (p.197).

However, there are some arguments against the pay gap in public relations. For example, Hutton (2005) argues that past studies that claim salary discrimination exists in public relations are not comprehensive or grounded in statistical evidence. Hutton’s study found that the most important factor contributing to salary variation was years of public relations experience not gender, which correlates with Broom and Dozier’s (1995) conclusion that men’s prevalence in the managerial role is based on experience more than their gender. Hutton argues that experience and hard work are much more
important to career success and salary than gender is. Though Hutton (2005) agrees that gender might have a slight effect on salary, this influence is related more to women’s newer presence in the field.

C. The Velvet Ghetto Study

The first comprehensive gender study in public relations was published in 1986, *The Velvet Ghetto* (Cline, Masel-Walters, Toth, Turk, Smith, & Johnson). Since then, many other scholars have investigated the issue of gender in public relations in order to describe the status of women in the industry, apply feminist perspectives to existing public relations theories, and explore new feminist theories (Toth, 2001). The velvet ghetto studies did not only lead public relations scholarship in gender, but also conceptualized the role of women in public relations. “The velvet ghetto studies were named after a *Business Week* article speculating that communication at least was a safe place, a ‘velvet ghetto,’ where women managers could be counted as such but would not threaten men for competition for top management jobs” (Toth, 2001, p. 245). These studies were aimed at examining the public relations and business communications profession as women became the dominant gender.

The velvet ghetto studies revealed a number of reasons and factors that explain why women are not advancing in communication professions. Some of these reasons include: gender bias, women do not fit in with the male-dominated atmosphere, women are not effective managers, and women do not possess characteristics that are valued in the business world (Cline et al., 1986). As the velvet ghetto studies are revisited in more recent studies, it is found that overall salaries have not declined due to the influx of women in public relations profession. However even though women have dominated the field in the last 15 years, their salaries are still significantly lower than men’s (Taff, 2003).

The velvet ghetto studies approached the gender issue in public relations with a liberal feminist perspective, which is a commonly used theoretical framework in earlier public relations scholarship. In short, liberal feminism advocates change within the individual woman which will eventually influence change within the organization (Grunig, L. et al., 2001). However, this perspective is often criticized by some scholars because it provides an “incomplete framework for understanding gender issues” (Hon, 1995, p. 31). A radical feminist perspective challenges this concentration on the individual public
relations practitioner and instead focuses on the change within the system of male-centered values that define worth in organizations (Rakow, 1989). Both of these theories will be elaborated on more in the theoretical framework of this study.

From a liberal feminist perspective, the velvet ghetto studies advised women to be informed and aware of gender inequalities in public relations. Women should strive toward equality and improve their salary negotiating abilities. Furthermore, mentoring programs should be developed to aid women in gaining management experience. Women should proactively seek out role models to help in their advancement (Toth, 1989a).

Another theory used to explore the gender inequities in public relations scholarship is the human capital theory. “Human capital theory came from studies by economists who assumed that the investment in education and work experience was equally available to men and women” (Toth, 2001, p. 237). Capital includes education, years of experience, and professional development opportunities and “capital” is available for everyone (Aldoory & Toth, 2002, p. 107). Furthermore, human capital theorists believe that women earn less than men because they invest less (Grunig, L. A. et al., 2001) and women have not had enough managerial experience because they are new to the field (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). However, since women are entering the workforce, specifically in public relations and other communications fields at a greater rate, women’s experiences are starting to approach that of men’s, and the wage gap should decrease (Grunig, L. A. et al., 2001).

II. Women in Public Relations/Glass Ceiling Phenomenon in Public Relations and Communications

Though the majority of public relations practitioners are women, their lack of presence in management limits the opportunities for women and the benefits an organization can endure due their contributions (Wrigley, 2002). The lack of power of women in organizations is attributed to the lack of women in decision-making roles and positions. Because of the lack of presence of women in management roles, the organizational culture is created and dominated by men. Therefore the atmosphere of such organization “may be unreceptive to other women’s applying (Hon et al., 1992). On the other hand,
organizations that employ more women and allow them to ascend into management roles are viewed as having more progressive climates and are more attractive to women (Moore, 1986). Because of this, many researchers and scholars advise women to network and tap into informal coalitions in order to build a support system within an organization.

In Tam, Dozier, Lauzen, and Real’s (1995) study, they posit that mentoring relationships can positively affect a woman’s ascent into management. This opportunity can also impact role enactment and professional growth of practitioners. Mentoring is defined as a relationship between a superior and a subordinate employee. The mentor can provide the mentee with basic knowledge and skills about the profession as well as insight and a broader perspective of the corporate culture and the business environment (Tam et al., 1995). Regardless of gender, any practitioner can benefit from an effective mentor. However, because of the shortage of women managers, women practitioners may be less likely than men to experience the benefits of same-sex mentoring (Tam et al., 1995).

In Tam, Dozier, Lauzen, and Real’s quantitative study (1995), they researched the impact of gender on mentoring relationships. Their conclusions showed that men and women benefit the most from same-sex relationships in terms of intensity and support. However, since men are predominantly found in management roles, they are more advantageous for subordinates in terms of role enactment and career advancement. Therefore male subordinates benefit the most from mentoring relationships because male mentors provide a more active and intense mentoring experience as well as contribute to their ascent into management (Tam et al., 1995). Regardless of these findings, Tam et al. (1995) advise all practitioners to actively seek out an influential and powerful mentor.

Despite seeking the support of other women professionals, there are inevitable barriers women may and will encounter in pursuing management and leadership roles in public relations and communications as well as in other disciplines of business (Hon et al., 1992). These barriers may include: men in top management wanting to promote those similar to them (Hon et al., 1992); women may find difficulty in establishing a public identity that aligns with a high power position (Conrad, 1985); a lack of support and confidence in women from home and society (Hon et al, 1992); and the conception of power alone,
meaning power is mainly associated with men (Helgesen, 1990). However, a general feminine trait is that women are effective communicators. Therefore they are often associated with two-way symmetrical communication, which is often seen as one of the most effective ways to practice public relations (Grunig, J. E. & Hunt, 1984). “Two-way symmetrical communication invokes cooperation, collaboration, and relationship building,” which are often associated with women (Grunig, J. E. & Hunt, 1984, p. 429). “Given this feminine propensity for fostering interdependence and mutuality, perhaps women’s styles of communicating and managing should be heralded rather than forsaken” (p. 430). As women in public relations is studied more, researchers are linking the nature of public relations to the nature of women. Furthermore, progressive styles of leadership are also associated with feminine characteristics.

Despite the research in support of women in public relations and leadership roles, there are still gender discrepancies in hiring, salary, and promotions (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). In a quantitative study, Aldoory and Toth (2002) found that there are eight factors that explain why gender differences exist in terms of promotions. These factors include: (a) socialization, (b) sex discrimination and sexism, (c) unrealistic expectations of women who balance family and work, (d) biological determinism, (e) skills differentials, (f) favoritism towards men due to their low numbers, (g) type of organization influences access to promotions, and (h) gender discrepancies in promotions do not exist (p. 123). The majority of these factors secure the existence of a male-dominated organization into place despite the influx of women in the industry and the workforce. Thus emerged the glass ceiling phenomenon in public relations.

Though many public relations scholars have focused on the role of women in public relations and the gender discrepancies in the field, Wrigley (2002) explicitly targeted the role of the glass ceiling phenomenon in public relations. According to Wrigley, the glass ceiling phenomenon is an important area of study in the public relations and communications discipline because of the nature of the field of public relations, the nature of today’s business climate, the contributions to the bottom line, and the responsibility to students (2002). In her qualitative study, Wrigley proposed the theoretical concept, negotiated resignation, to explain the psychological process of how women handle the glass ceiling phenomenon. Negotiated resignation is used to describe the way in which women described the glass
ceiling as well as the strategies that they used to overcome it. Wrigley argues that the conciliatory strategies mentioned by women do not address the larger question of whether the structure is at fault. Instead women focus mainly on personal strategies to handle discrimination in the workplace.

Wrigley’s (2002) study uncovered five factors that possibly contribute to the glass ceiling for women in public relations and communications management. These factors include: denial, gender role socialization, historical precedence, women turning against other women, and corporate culture. In addition, the women in Wrigley’s study identified strategies to overcome the glass ceiling. These include: mentoring, working hard(er), changing jobs, going out on your own, demonstrating competence and efficiency, taking control of your own future and creating new work cultures, being a problem solver, and having patience (Wrigley, 2002). Empowerment and autonomy is a commonality found in these strategies for women.

III. Leadership Roles for Public Relations Professionals

Though the body of knowledge in public relations can be considered broad because it explores the areas of the feminization of the field, management skills, sexual discrimination, salary discrepancies, roles research, and many more, little has been studied in terms of leadership in public relations (Aldoory, 1998). This is true despite the fact that J. Grunig and his colleagues, in an innovative study of public relations, included leadership as one of the 12 characteristics of excellent organizations (Grunig, J. E., Dozier, Ehling, Grunig, L. A., Repper, & White, 1992). Leadership is at the center of many different excellent theories and models (Hickman & Silva, 1987; Peters, 1987; Waterman, 1987). Furthermore, direction and empowerment are themes that run through much leadership and management literature (Grunig, J. E. et al., 1992). Power in the public relations department depends greatly on the view of the chief executive officer and the dominant coalition in terms of the value of public relations. Because of the lack of representation in upper management, public relations often appears to lack professionalism and value. Therefore by public relations having power in the organizational culture and being part of the decision making process, the value of public relations can effectively compliment the organization
(Grunig, J. E. et al., 1992). Consequently leadership roles research is important to expand the body of knowledge in public relations.

Leadership roles concerning women in public relations are important to this study in order to validate and explore women’s experiences in management. In general, studies of leadership roles are rather limited in public relations research and discourse, mainly because there is a scarcity of leaders. Many public relations scholars have studied management strategy and relationship building which are related to leadership but research directed at leadership within public relations is rather sparse. Because of the feminization of public relations, it is important to explore the intersection of gender and leadership in this field (Aldoory & Toth, 2004). Since studies suggest the existence of the glass ceiling, a primary focus of expanding the literature on leadership roles is whether women’s styles of leadership assist them or limit them in breaking through the glass ceiling (Aldoory & Toth, 2004). Analyzing varying styles of leadership provides the basis for leadership theory, which is much needed in public relations.

In researching leadership roles in public relations, Aldoory (1998) and Aldoory and Toth (2004) address the following areas: leadership styles, gender and sex differences in leadership, and leadership in public relations. Two leadership roles, transactional and transformational, have been commonly explored by researchers in past management research (Aldoory, 1998). Transactional leadership is typically associated with men and includes a reward/punishment system: employees are rewarded for their effective services and punished for insufficient performance (Bass, 1990). This is closely associated with an autocratic style of leadership. On the other hand, the transformational style is usually associated with women. It includes encouraging employees to achieve and perform in terms of a broader goal and to work as a team (Rosener, 1994). “Transformational-type leaders use tactics that seek to create connections, establish rapport, and reinforce intimacy” (Pincus & DeBonis, 1994, p. 191). Transformational leadership is closely associated with a more democratic style of leadership. It should be noted, however, that many researchers do not believe that one particular style of leadership enables managers and leaders to succeed in every situation or circumstance. Therefore some argue for a situational theory of leadership. Scholars have asserted that effective leaders modify their style to best compliment the situation, the circumstances,
or the environment (Casimir, 2001). An apparent benefit of the situational style of leadership is that it is not typically associated with a specific gender as transactional and transformational are.

In general studies conducted about gender and sex differences in leadership, there are mixed findings as to whether sex and gender matter in terms of effective leaders. Concerning public relations, Aldoory and Toth (2004) found “the practical contributions of this study include the understanding of leadership styles as contingent on gender and on environment” (p. 179). Though women are typically associated with transformational leadership and men with transactional leadership, stereotypical gender roles affect the opinions of subordinates concerning which style and/or gender is more effective. “Women who adhere to feminine leadership traits are perceived as better leaders, and men who display masculine behaviors are viewed as better leaders” (Aldoory & Toth, 2004, p. 161). This contradicts the common belief that women can only be successful in leadership if they shed their feminine characteristics. However, this finding does display how gender socialization directly influences the way effective leadership is perceived (Aldoory & Toth, 2004).

The fact remains that the public relations field is over 70 percent women and public relations possesses feminine characteristics. Some feminine characteristics include that excellent public relations is based on relationship building, two-way symmetrical communication, and collaboration (Rakow, 1989, Aldoory & Toth, 2004). In Aldoory and Toth’s (2004) study, “many comments by focus group participants connected the unique nature of public relations, its work environment, structure, and goals to the need for transformational leadership” (p. 178). Previous researchers asserted that transactional leadership is beneficial in stable, predictable environments. Since public relations lends itself to a “constantly changing, turbulent environment,” a transformational style of leadership may best compliment the nature of this field (p. 178). Therefore it could be argued that women may, in fact, fill the role of an effective leader better than men in public relations (Aldoory & Toth, 2004). However, the participants in Aldoory and Toth’s study acknowledged that different leadership styles work in different situations therefore disregarding gender and focusing more on the circumstance that presents itself, which is a situational style of leadership. “Women who are moving up into management positions may need to
seriously consider the complexities of enacting a feminine, a masculine, or a mixed style of leadership, depending on circumstances” (Aldoory & Toth, 2004, pp. 179-180). Regardless of gender’s role in leadership styles, leadership in public relations is a crucial area of study as organizations are beginning to understand the value of communications in furthering their overall success.

There is a solid foundation of research on gender roles and stereotypes in our society, the feminization of public relations, the glass ceiling phenomenon in corporate America, organizational roles in public relations, and leadership roles in organizations. Therefore this study’s purpose is to extend the body of knowledge pertaining specifically to women leaders in public relations. Though women make up approximately half of the labor force and 70 percent of public relations, their presence does not extend in to upper management. The previous literature on these areas of study reveal that numerous factors work against women and women in public relations. These factors may include: gender roles and stereotypes, the feminization of public relations, the lack of credibility and value of the public relations function, women choose to stay at the lower levels of an organization, women’s acceptance of discrimination, women’s societal role of bearing children, and women’s specific style of leadership.

IV. Research Questions

In studying the roles of women in the workforce, one of the main issues is their lack of presence in upper management. As many researchers have concluded from past studies the glass ceiling is a major barrier for women and other minorities in seeking advancement. Previous studies suggest the glass ceiling’s existence and point to certain factors that keep it in place: perception of gender roles, the prevalence of gender stereotypes and how they affect the workforce; women have less experience and tend to be younger than the men already in the field (Grunig, L. A. et al., 2001); women seek jobs in lower paying positions and fields (Grunig, L. A. et al., 2001); gender bias; women are not perceived as effective managers because they do not possess characteristics that are valued in the business world; women do not fit into the male-dominated atmosphere (Cline, et al., 1986); women have not had enough managerial experience because they are newer to the workforce (Aldoory & Toth, 2002); and women may
perform managerial duties at a lower level position meaning they possess a dual role and continue to be regarded as lower-level employees (Grunig, L. A. et al., 2001).

Men and women believe that conditions in the workplace are improving for women and minorities since there are success stories of women who have made it to upper management. L. A. Grunig (2006) referred to this feminist phase in literature as “compensatory feminism,” which occurs when women are comforted by the fact that some women have made into the upper ranks of business. “Literature in this phase seeks to overcome the previously unquestioned absence of women by searching for and profiling impressive women. In essence, it provides an alternative history of the field” (p. 118). However, Catalyst found that “at the current rate of change, it could take women 47 years to reach parity with men as corporate officers of Fortune 500 companies” (2007). It is important to note that Catalyst studies women in general in the workforce; its research is not confined to a specific discipline. But the fact remains; women have a long way to go in terms of status and salary in order to reach parity with men.

In Aldoory and Toth’s (2002) quantitative study, they found that public relations practitioners perceive discrepancies in hiring, promotions, and salary. Their surveys reveal that female respondents in their surveys perceived greater discrepancies than male respondents. Another fairly recent study that investigates women’s interpretation of the glass ceiling is Wrigley’s (2002) study. In this qualitative study, she suggests a new theoretical concept, “negotiated resignation,” to address the how women described the glass ceiling as well as strategies to overcome it. Negotiated resignation includes “strategies of getting along and fitting in, attempting to please by working harder and building consensus, or being a peacemaker in resolving conflicts between co-workers” (Wrigley, 2002, p. 49). According to Wrigley, the glass ceiling is an important area of study for the following reasons: the feminization of the field, nature of the field of public relations, nature of today’s business climate, contributions to the bottom line, and the responsibilities to students (pp. 32-33).

This study will extend Wrigley’s in some respect. It will examine the impact of the glass ceiling on the advancement of women in public relations and communication leadership roles. However, it will also interpret other barriers that women encounter that may or may not be a reflection of the glass ceiling.
Therefore developing a deeper understanding of this issue today. Finally, it will analyze strategies used by successful women in leadership roles in order to conceptualize the effect gender has on advancement. These three components will be explored through the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the experiences of women in leadership roles in public relations and corporate communications reflect the presence and impact of the glass ceiling?

RQ2: How do other barriers encountered by women in public relations and corporate communications relate to the glass ceiling?

RQ3: What are the strategies used by women in leadership roles in public relations and corporate communication to assume leadership roles?
CHAPTER 3
THEORY AND METHODS

I. Theoretical Framework

In order to develop a theoretical framework for this study, a brief overview of theoretical developments in the public relations discipline must be outlined. By definition, a theory is “a set of related propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relationships among concepts” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p. 13). Researchers attempt to explain phenomena by looking for order and consistency in their findings and as a result develop theories (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Until relatively recently it was generally considered that one of public relations’ major disadvantages was its lack of theoretical development. Currently, however, the field benefits from paradigmatic diversity and displays a strong push towards theory building (Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, & Jones, 2003, 2008).

Much research in public relations focuses on the gender inequities present in the field. Once a traditionally male-dominated profession, like many others, the influx of women has caused much disorientation in the field regarding its progression, image, equality, and overall external perception. Public relations is considered a female-dominated field because more than 70 percent of its practitioners are female. Despite this dominance in numbers, there is still a lack of representation of women in senior management especially in the corporate sector. Many public relations scholars believe that the feminization of the field has negatively affected the profession in terms of its decline in salary, status, reputation, and professionalism (Aldoory, 2003; Lesly, 1988; Rakow, 1989; Toth, 1988, 1989b). This feminization has increased the likelihood of encroachment from other disciplines (Lauzen, 1992), the exclusion of public relations from the decision-making team (Lesly, 1988), and the rejection of valuable feminine characteristics of the field (Scrimger, 1989; Toth, 1989b; Toth & Cline, 1991).

Because of this, academics and theorists such as Aldoory (2003), Hon (1995), L. A. Grunig (2006), L. A. Grunig, Toth, and Hon (2001), Russell-Loretz (2008), Sallot et al. (2003, 2008), Toth
(2001), Toth and L. A. Grunig, (1993) have explored and analyzed the development of a feminist theory for public relations. Their research has increased the field’s body of knowledge in the understanding of the gendered views and biases present in public relations practice. However, the field still lacks one prominent feminist theory. Three theories that are frequently explored in public relations in terms of gender include: the human capital theory, liberal feminist theory, and radical feminist theory.

A. Human Capital Theory

The human capital theory is one of the initial theories used to explore the gender inequities in public relations scholarship. This theory was proposed by economists “who assumed that the investment in education and work experience was equally available to men and women” (Toth, 2001, p. 237). Capital includes education, years of experience, and professional development opportunities and “capital” is available for everyone (Aldoory & Toth, 2002, p. 107). Human capital theorists believe that women earn less than men because they invest less (Grunig, L. A. et al., 2001). Regarding public relations, women have not had enough managerial experience because they are new to the field and since men have more experience than women, they are more apt to ascend into management roles (Aldoory & Toth, 2002).

B. Feminist Theories

To further introduce the theoretical framework for this study, a brief overview of feminism also will be given. As we are now in the early decades of third wave feminism, a common misconception about feminism remains: it focuses on the woman only. An important part of any gender study is taking both genders into account. Furthermore, “to this day, there is no agreement as to what defines feminism” (Aldoory, 2003, p. 222). Because of the negative connotations of feminism in our society and its various definitions and schools of thought about it, there is ambiguity among the general public. In its simplest form, feminism “touches on beliefs about identity, social roles, and cultural mores” (Russell-Loretz, 2008, p. 318) in terms of gender. Feminism is about oppression through dominating beliefs which are typically held by white men, referred to as the “white male model” (Rakow, 1989, p. 291). Related to the concept of feminism, are other modes of oppression such as classism, heterosexism, racism, ageism, to name a few. Feminist studies often include a look at these
other oppressions. Feminism underscores gender inequality as a critical area of study because it is one symptom of the existence of a patriarchal society in our country.

Feminism is both a social movement and a paradigm. As the latter it has its own set of theories that focus on gender as a critical component in any societal analysis. Tetreault (1985) defined these as “scholarly inquiry [of] new questions, new categories, and new notions of significance which illuminate women’s traditions, history, culture, values, visions, and perspectives” (p. 370). Regarding feminist public relations research, there have been several studies under the subcategory of “women and minorities” and some that were grouped under “theory development” in a new subcategory of women’s studies/feminist school/gender/ diversity/minority theories (Sallot et al., 2003, 2008). Though public relations scholarship has included examination of the feminization of the field and gender inequalities, a single or unifying feminist public relations theory has not emerged or been established. Most of the feminist public relations studies have been descriptive studies that focus on the gender inequalities. There are no studies on practice and/or application of public relations using a feminist perspective (Sallot et al, 2003, 2008). However, the most recent study on feminist theory is Russell-Loretz’s (2008) overview and analysis in which she tracks the evolution of feminist perspectives in public relations scholarship.

According to Russell-Loretz (2008), a principal challenge of developing a feminist theory in public relations centers on the multiplicity of feminism itself. Consequently, there is no monolithic feminist perspective in feminist scholarship in all disciplines. There are various feminist perspectives which may include Marxist, liberal, radical, socialist, multicultural, ecological, global, existentialist, psychoanalytic, cultural, and postmodern (Russell-Loretz, 2008). While the schools of feminist thought offer many different perspectives and definitions of feminism, Grunig, L., Toth, and Hon (2001) use the simplified dichotomy of liberal and radical feminist thought in their public relations research though they acknowledge its limitations.

Liberal feminists believe that inequality is present in the workforce and must be acknowledged. This inequality is caused by “irrational prejudice” of women and can be solved through “rational arguments” (Steeves, 1987, p. 100). According to Aldoory, liberal feminists strive for equality among
men and women (2003). Liberal feminist scholars “assert that equality of women will come through equal numbers of women and men in management positions, equal pay, and equitable treatment of women throughout the position” (Aldoory, 2003, p. 223). An example of this perspective is revealed in the velvet ghetto research (Toth & Cline, 1989). By encouraging women to look to themselves for solutions, the velvet ghetto research revealed rational answers to the barriers women encounter:

1. Accept that the velvet ghetto is real.
2. Learn to play the game.
3. Develop a career plan.
5. Accept your limitations.

Furthermore, the underlying emotion surrounding this perspective is one of optimism. Liberal feminists believe that optimism influences working for change within an organization as well as within the industry itself especially since public relations is based on “accommodation, negotiation, and the resolution of conflict between organizations and the groups on which their employers depend” (Grunig, L., Toth, & Hon, 2001, p. 54). Furthermore this approach suggests that women should focus on change within themselves in order to overcome the gender bias (Grunig, L. et al., 2001). This may include proving their capabilities and competencies in the workplace in a way that men do not necessarily have to.

In their extensive 2001 study, L. A. Grunig, et al. analyze several liberal feminist strategies for women’s advancement in the workplace which emphasize the necessary changes women must undertake in their personality traits (Henning & Jardim, 1977), communication behavior (Fitzpatrick, 1983), and management style (Ezell, Odewahn, & Sherman, 1986). By stripping themselves of any perceived feminine traits, women can blend more effectively with men. “The strength of liberal feminist strategies lies in the empowering effect these tactics can have since liberalism assumes women as individuals can and do overcome discrimination” (Grunig, L. et al., 2001, p. 321). These strategies can also help women
secure advancement, which liberal feminists argue, can contribute to institutional transformation, a radical feminist goal that will be discussed next.

Liberal feminist strategies mainly focus on how women can “work” the system rather than fight it. Under this argument, the following strategies were discussed in L. Grunig, Toth, and Hon’s (2001) study: finding the right institution to work for, denying the existence of discrimination, recruiting male practitioners, facing important work-life balance choices, insisting on inclusion in management decision making, and networking with men (pp. 324-328). Another focus of liberal feminists targets women’s competency in public relations, women should refine the skills and knowledge required to advance in public relations. Women should also demonstrate professionalism and empower themselves by networking and connecting with other women. Therefore the liberal feminist perspective is shrouded in women being proactive in their endeavors and deciding their fate through their own efforts (Grunig, L. et al., 2001). This perspective, of course, minimizes the structural factors that impede women’s agency.

On the other hand, radical feminism is more extreme than liberal feminism in its approach. According to Steeves (1987), radical feminists “agree that women’s oppression is widespread and that the problem is rooted too deeply to be removed by either individual or social change” (p. 97). The radical approach is not as common as the liberal approach in public relations research in terms of proposing solutions to the issues of gender bias. Radical feminists strategies are “geared toward the institutional transformations that must take place before discrimination against female practitioners stops” (Grunig, L. et al., 2001, p. 334). The radical approach places focuses on change within the “system” rather than suggest that women need to change themselves to overcome inequality, bias, and oppression.

In terms of the radical feminist approach, L. Grunig, Toth, and Hon (2001) examine the institutional bases of discrimination at three levels: societal, organizational, and public relations. At the societal level, they analyze the levels of awareness of women’s progress; federal initiatives to further assist family leave, ban sexual harassment, and further support affirmative action; and the issue of gender stereotypes and breaking them down in the workplace as well as at home. The second level examined is organizational reforms. At this level, establishing progressive work-life policies in the workforce is a
major goal as well as focusing on the feminine values in organizational cultures. The final level, reforms in public relations, concentrates on “combating marginalization” and “reassessing undergraduate education.” “Combating marginalization” translates into educating leadership and the general public about the value of this field. Participants in L. Grunig Toth, & Hon’s (2001) research revealed that “the most fundamental problem within public relations is overcoming the others’ misconceptions about the field” (p. 344). In other words, PR needs PR. The final initiative at this level involves reexamining the undergraduate education of public relations. Research shows that more business-oriented classes should be included in undergraduate public relations programs. The participants of Grunig, Toth, & Hon’s (2001) study believe that future public relations practitioners should be educated on how to be “communicators and managers.” (p. 346)

The study of gender-related issues in public relations benefits from all feminist perspectives. In particular, liberal and radical feminist theories shed light into the characteristics and paradoxes that women and men face in corporate America, in general, and public relations, in particular. Though this specific study is framed more with a liberal feminist perspective, radical feminism will also be used in analyzing the discourse of the 11 in-depth interviews that constitute this study.

II. Methodology

This study used the qualitative method of in-depth interviews in order to provide for a deeper analysis of the lack of presence of women in leadership roles in public relations and corporate communications. Eleven in-depth interviews were conducted with women public relations and communications professionals. These women hold management and leadership roles with public relations or corporate communications-related titles. Of the women interviewed, four hold the title of senior vice president, four are vice presidents, one assistant vice president, and two directors. Most of the women work for Fortune 1000 companies. These women ranged in age from 42 to 57. The years of experience in public relations and corporate communications of the participants ranged from 2 to 29 years. Only four of them received college degrees in communications. Only one participant has a master’s degree and one is
completing a master’s in business administration. The rest earned bachelor degrees in journalism, English, environmental studies, and anthropology.

The sampling method consisted of finding women who hold leadership roles in public relations and corporate communications. I found each potential participant through her respective Fortune 1000 company’s Web site. In order to do this, I visited each company’s Web site to determine if there was a female in an upper management public relations role. Therefore, the criteria for this study required participants to be female and possess a leadership role in public relations and/or corporate communications. Once I had the appropriate contact information, I called the potential participant. After introducing myself and the purpose of my call, the participants generally requested more information regarding the study. This was sent through e-mail and from there interviews were set up. I identified two participants through snowballing rather than their companies’ Web sites. Of the 70 women contacted, 11 were able and willing to participate.

The 11 interviews represented geographical diversity by representing the following states: California (2), Georgia (3), Michigan (1), Minnesota (1), Nevada (1), Texas (1), and Virginia (2). All of the women interviewed were Caucasian, which presents a limitation in analyzing the glass ceiling’s effect on women of other races and exploring the intersectionality of oppressions. Only two interviews were conducted in person; the remaining nine were conducted over the phone. Despite the nature of the interviews, in person or over the phone, all of the interviews were comparable in terms of timing and responses. The interviews took from 30 to 60 minutes. All phone interviews were conducted in a secure location at the Grady College of the University of Georgia. The in-person interviews were conducted at the participants’ respective offices.

I received Institutional Review Board approval for this study in order to protect the rights of the participants. When conducting the interviews, I used an interview guide (see Appendix A) and all interviews were audio-taped. These interviews were semi-structured; I remained flexible and open to the participants’ introduction of new topics in the conversations. After conducting the interviews, I personally transcribed them. Analysis of the interviews occurred in four stages and pseudonyms were assigned to
each participant in order to adhere to a confidentiality agreement. To analyze the interviews, I first read each transcript in order to identify emerging themes, repetition, and patterns. Stage one also consisted of writing these themes, along with commentary, in the margins of the transcripts. In stage two, I composed “excerpt files” (Weiss, 1994, p. 155), which included extracting relevant quotes from the transcripts for each theme identified and organizing them into appropriate files. In the third stage, I summarized each excerpt file. The final stage consisted of relating the themes to the theoretical framework of the study (Kasper, 1994).
CHAPTER 4
ANALYSIS

The following analysis is grounded in feminist theory and organized in three sections: the glass ceiling, barriers, and effective leadership.

I. The Glass Ceiling

The first part of this section will analyze the participants’ answers pertaining to the first research question, “How do the experiences of women in leadership roles in public relations and corporate communications reflect the presence and impact of the glass ceiling?” The participants’ conceptualization of, and experiences with, the glass ceiling will be presented and analyzed in order to highlight the reasons behind this phenomenon and the extent of its prevalence in public relations and corporate communications. While some of the women had similar beliefs concerning the glass ceiling, there was a wide range of responses as to why it still exists in the workforce when more than half of the labor force is composed of women. When analyzing the different beliefs and feelings about the glass ceiling, it is important to consider each woman’s title, age, geographical location, and time with the company they work for. While there are multiple influences on a person’s feelings and beliefs about a phenomenon such as this, the aforementioned characteristics can greatly affect women’s responses to this issue. It should be noted, however, that the women interviewed for this study are all Caucasian. Therefore the analysis is limited to the perspective of only one ethnicity.

A. Conceptualization of the Glass Ceiling

Responses about the meaning of the glass ceiling included the general and commonly held view that the glass ceiling prevents women from advancing and reaching upper management. Many of the participants included the familiar phrase, “an invisible barrier” to define the glass ceiling. Though many of the women in this study did not feel they have personally experienced it, most of them were confident that the glass ceiling is intact. Sandra Bailey, 57, a senior vice president who has worked for her Nevada-
based company for 8 years commented, “The glass ceiling is an invisible barrier to the advancement of women and because you can’t see it, many people assume it’s not there when in fact it is.” Jenny Sheridan, 51, a vice president who has worked for her Georgia-based company for 8 years, had a similar comment, “It’s an invisible barrier that is definitely there.” Most of the women focused their explanations of this barrier being specifically about women, but some included other characteristics that the glass ceiling may pertain to, such as race and class. Kristin Watson, 57, a vice president who has worked for her Virginia-based company for approximately 30 years, explained the glass ceiling phenomenon with the following statement:

I would define it as a level beyond that which people can see into but can’t attain for whatever reason and not a legitimate reason. I mean there are reasons why people don’t attain positions of leadership and they have to do with qualifications but I think the glass ceiling only applies to the wrong reasons – sex, race, whatever.

Though not all of the women involved in the study believe they have been affected by the glass ceiling or encountered it throughout their careers, all of them were knowledgeable about the glass ceiling phenomenon in terms of its meaning and its potential presence. Nine of the 11 women interviewed shared their experiences with the glass ceiling. Six of these women believe that the glass ceiling did not exist for them personally while advancing in their careers. Three of the women believe the glass ceiling was a barrier to their advancement; and it inhibited them in a variety of ways. The remaining two women did not make clear references as to whether they personally experienced the glass ceiling; their responses included focusing on certain barriers that may or may not be a reflection of the glass ceiling and this will be further explored in the analysis.

Concerning the conceptualization of the glass ceiling, two themes emerged throughout the women’s responses: the inconsistency of the glass ceiling and the emphasis on diversity throughout the workforce. Some participants believe that the glass ceiling exists, but it is not a tangible, consistent presence. The glass ceiling is different in every industry and every company. It is constantly transforming. Therefore, it is a phenomenon that is difficult to characterize in a general manner, and displays a “fuzzy”
nature. Kristin Watson, 57, a vice president who has worked for her Virginia-based company for approximately 30 years, said:

I believe there are places where it exists. I mean I don’t think it’s an ‘it’ in the sense that there’s one level everywhere in the country or the world beyond which women cannot go. I don’t think that exists. I think there are barriers to women’s advancement that have to do with them being women and no other reason, it’s more a part of some organizations than others, but I think it’s definitely changing.

Michelle Turner, 44, a communications director, who has been with her Texas-based company for 6 years, recalled one particular experience when she was talking to a reporter about women in the workplace and the reporter made the comment, “oh yeah, you’re in one of the ‘R’s,’ they always let the women do the ‘R’s,’ the IR, the PR, and the HR.” Though Michelle believes that many companies are becoming more and more progressive and acknowledge that there is a glass ceiling barrier for women, the reporter’s comment adds much credibility to the velvet ghetto studies. However, the question must then be raised, is it gender that precludes women in reaching upper management or is it the public relations profession that cannot reach that level? This question will be further explored in the barriers section of the analysis.

According to Rose McNeely, 42, an assistant vice president who has been with her current Virginia-based company for about 5 years, the glass ceiling is an unintentional barrier. Rose believes that there are two major factors holding the glass ceiling in place, the people under it and the people above it:

I believe it exists and let me just say this, a lot of the times, most of the times, it’s unintentional. I just think that it exists for two reasons and this may surprise you, but it might not. It exists because the people who are under the glass ceiling put it there and the people who are above the glass ceiling put it there. The people who are above the glass ceiling unintentionally have it because gosh, I want to have people around me who look like me, act like me, think like me, who I’m comfortable with because some men were raised that getting too familiar with girls is not a good thing. I know that sounds strange but there are men who are very confident about
themselves and who are willing to work with women and work with people of different backgrounds, but then there are men who really always grew up playing sports with guys like themselves and they really just don’t know how to relate to women or people who are different from them so that’s why the glass ceiling is there. This is my opinion. Then there are the people who are below the glass ceiling who are willing to let it stay there and who feel like well I guess I have to live it, who might not recognize it and might say I’m comfortable with it there.

This reference to an unintentional bias aligns with Thomas’ “similar-to-me-bias” (2005). People unconsciously favor people like themselves and thus eliminate the other. Since white men predominantly make up senior management teams, this “similar-to-me-bias” reinforces the glass ceiling. Rose also made the observation that people below the glass ceiling are as much at fault as the people above it. This is echoed by some public relations scholars’ findings that women attach themselves to technical roles and want to stay there due to life and family demands (Hon et al, 1992, Grunig, L. et al, 2001). Does this mean a glass ceiling exists for those women who choose to stay at the lower level? Not necessarily, but by many women remaining at the lower levels out of personal decisions, it paints a bleak picture as well as many misconceptions about women in the workforce as a whole.

Rose’s reflection on the glass ceiling is quite poignant because it takes both sides of the glass ceiling into consideration. It is rather easy and common to blame those in upper management for this barrier. However, some women are reinforcing this barrier by choosing to accept it and not challenging this discrimination. The problem perpetuates when women do not have a desire to ascend into management roles- are they inadvertently securing the glass ceiling then? This points to a fundamental difficulty in our quest to understand the glass ceiling’s impact on the workforce. How do researchers accurately analyze the impact of the glass ceiling if some women are choosing to remain in the lower levels of the organization? This can also lead one to question women’s motivation for choosing to remain at the lower level. Women may feel trapped at this level because an organization is not willing to allow them to achieve work-life balance at more prestigious levels in an organization.
Because of the awareness and research in successful business strategies and practices, the corporate world has educated itself on the benefits and values of good leadership. Research on successful, progressive companies has elucidated the benefits of diversity in senior management teams for organizations. Allison Petty, 52, a senior vice president, who has been with her Georgia-based organization for over 30 years, made it apparent that her company prides itself on diversity and forming prejudices and stereotypes of different genders, races, and classes is not an accepted practice. She stated,

All of the work that has been done and the awareness of that [the glass ceiling], you’d think that with any real leadership team would cause that to just break down. You wouldn’t think that anyone who is a true leader at the top would intentionally let that be the case; it doesn’t make sense. Here, I am part of the top now and that is a clearly part of what we think all of the time.

We look at opportunities to include people and to look for different backgrounds. It’s part of what we recognize as a way to strengthen the team and the organization.

Like many scholars, Allison believes diversity is the key to a successful, progressive business (Cox, 1994, French & Bell, 1999, Thomas, 2005). A prosperous company cannot have a homogeneous team and expect to cater to and address heterogeneous publics. By a leader acknowledging the value of diversity within the organization as well as within management, nontraditional workers will have more opportunities to ascend within an organization, which will help break down the glass ceiling (Thomas, 2005). The leadership team, which drives the organization, must realize the benefits of diversity and act on them. Allison’s beliefs about the glass ceiling suggest the importance of a leadership team that acknowledges the value of diversity.

Though there were no explicit references to diversity by the other participants, some participants made references that align with this theory. Paula Clarke, 56, a senior vice president who has been with her California-based company for about 30 years, believes that when management is making personnel decisions, they are making subjective decisions and judgments about the potential candidates. Management’s goal is to bring someone to the table who is a good fit and will complement the rest of the
team. Gender is not an explicit factor in the management decision; however, biases can and will form against people who are unlike the current team. Paula stated:

That’s a subjective judgment as people assess you and if you don’t fit maybe their image of what that would look like then there could indirectly be a bias that’s there and sometimes it’s hard to identify because it’s that subjective part of the decision maker that’s kicking in and saying you know I just don’t feel comfortable with this person. They look good on paper and they have a good track record but there’s something about them that I am not in sync with and so if you are of a different gender or of a different ethnic origin or any number… maybe you just have a very different style. That could then trigger that let’s call it the rejection phenomenon that takes place, where they say you know what I just don’t feel comfortable. It may be that and more so in some industries than others where it’s very, very male dominated that a woman coming in just looks so different that there isn’t that sense that this person is going to fit well on the team and it may be something that they are not aware of, very subjective. I guess what I’m saying, at least in my experience, that’s how sometimes this glass ceiling kicks in it’s very hard to put your finger on and of courses now there is a lot of emphasis on diversity in the workforce and gender balance and ethnic balance and so forth. People try to make an effort to look beyond those things because it’s not only required by law but it’s good business practice.

Paula also echoes Thomas’ (2005) “similar-to-me-bias.” Though Paula’s reference to human nature is an innocent observance, it is detrimental for women and underrepresented groups because it is a tendency and habit that more often than not goes unacknowledged. If this continues to occur in an organization, the glass ceiling remains intact (Thomas, 2005). It is an issue that must be addressed by the organization and its leaders.

Kristin Watson, 57, a vice president who has been with her company for over 30 years, which is headquartered in Virginia, believes that the glass ceiling is not a factor in her company because of the corporate culture. Though every person has their own prejudices and we can not erase prejudices from human nature, she states, “I don’t think you can eliminate prejudice from the universe. But I think as a
corporate entity, prejudices that create barriers to advancement based on nothing more than race, sex, or any other superficial barrier, they are very much frowned on here.” Rose McNeely, 42, an assistant vice president who has been with her current Virginia-based company for about 5 years made a reference to stereotypes, “When there are stereotypes about people, a glass ceiling is put there.” Both of these women mention the severity of bringing stereotypes and prejudices into the workplace and especially management. While stereotypes and prejudices should not be ignored because they can have an adverse effect, leaders must be aware of the impact that they can have when making personnel decisions.

Gwen Spicer, 45, a vice president who has worked for her Georgia-based company for about 20 years, provided a spin on the idea that diversity will and is phasing out the glass ceiling. Gwen believes that the standards of society and of women themselves are not high enough for women’s placement in the corporate hierarchy. She believes that leaders may have the misconception that if their organization has at least one underrepresented person on their leadership team, they can refer to themselves as diverse. She stated, “We have two women out of 10 on our senior leadership team. And I think men think that’s good enough. I think they think 20 percent is good enough. I think our standards aren’t as high as they should be.” She continued this argument explaining how her company won an award for the last four years because of its supposed diversity, which further supports her contention that societal and organizational expectations for women and other minorities are too low. These low expectations can be an influence on women’s decision to remain at the lower levels because that is where they neatly fit according to the perception of society.

This discourse illustrates how important it is for professionals to be conscious of the human tendency to gravitate towards people like them. Additionally, awareness of stereotypes and prejudices is crucial since stereotypes are deeply ingrained in us because of our culture and society and stereotypes lead to prejudices. However, due to the amount of diversity in the American population as well as the amount of research on diversity in our country and in our workforce, individuals should be able to look past these stereotypes and overcome prejudices in order to become successful leaders and professionals as well as contribute to organizational success. Diversity should be sought after in every essence.
B. Experiences with the Glass Ceiling

Half of the women interviewed believe they have not experienced or encountered the glass ceiling in their personal careers despite other barriers they cited, which will be further discussed in the next section. Many of these women noted that their familiarity with the glass ceiling is due to the prevalence of research about it. The following responses reflect optimism concerning the deterioration of the glass ceiling in today’s corporate world. The following participants believe that the glass ceiling may exist though they have not personally experienced it or have been able to overcome it. Many of these women are well established in public relations as well as the business world. Each of them has at least 20 years experience, some with the same company. These factors may directly contribute to the glass ceiling’s impact on their careers.

Vicki Burns, 53, a director, who has been with her Michigan-based company for over 30 years, stated, “I guess because I have read a lot about it, it must exist. My personal experience, I have to tell you I don’t think I have been discriminated against or limited job opportunities because I was female.” Based on this response, Vicki believes that the glass ceiling exists only because she has read about it and not through personal experience. Additionally, Michelle Turner, 44, another communications director, who has been with her Texas-based company for 6 years, believes that it exists though she not felt its impact. She stated:

I don’t think it’s had a huge effect on me; I was never headed for the CEO suite and I am well aware of that. I believe that I’ve been able to excel in my own career regardless of what sex I am. I think it’s this field is dominated by women. I work on a lot of committees and work with a lot of my colleagues at other companies and it’s 70 percent women, maybe I’m guessing. I feel like I’ve done well and I am happy with the progress that I’ve made personally; I don’t think I’ve been held back other than not being a part of “the club,” not being part of the hang out.

These responses spark intrigue because both were made by women who are not at the vice president level. Though an individual title does not necessarily need to scream leader in order to be a leader, these two women are obviously not a part of the senior management team and they still believe that the glass ceiling
does not exist for them. Michelle’s comment is particularly intriguing because of her statement on being satisfied with her level of success. However, at the end of the interview, she revealed that she will be moving to a new company and assuming a vice president role. This advancement could directly influence her response to this question. Furthermore, Michelle’s initial satisfaction with the level of her success points to a possible cause of the lack of women in upper management. Because fewer numbers of women hold leadership roles, women at the middle and lower levels may not be motivated to pursue higher levels themselves. On the other hand, women managers at the middle level may not have a communications leadership role to pursue, meaning there may not be a position in upper management for public relations and/or corporate communications. This possibility should encourage public relations professionals, regardless of their gender, to prove the worth of this business function in order to have a role in upper management.

Allison Petty, 52, a senior vice president, who has been with her organization for over 30 years in Georgia stated:

I really don’t think it [the glass ceiling] affected me – I have never felt frustrated to the point that I didn’t see a way to continue moving forward. I just never felt that that was a problem. Now did I feel that there were things that needed to be worked through and trust that had to be gained? Yes, but I didn’t see it as anything that I couldn’t get past. Even if it affected me, I saw solutions and was able to break through it.

Allison’s beliefs on the glass ceiling are a product of the longevity of her career at the same organization. However, she has experienced much change within the organization and though she comments on the barriers laid before her, she always felt that she could advance.

Jamie Price, 45, a vice president, who has been at her California-based company for approximately six years, stated:

I believe it exists some places, not everywhere. I have to say I have not experienced it myself. I am sure it exists especially in old traditional organizations. I think that people who have the
characteristics of leaders are very much in demand and it really doesn’t matter what they look like if they have those characteristics they will rise.

This response reflects the perceived direction of today’s companies. Because of the competition in the corporate world, organizations focus their attention on building successful leadership teams. This requires organizations to enable professionals who display effective leadership traits to rise within an organization regardless of their gender or race. This practice can minimize the impact of the glass ceiling.

Finally, Frances Anderson, 47, a senior vice president, who has been with her Minnesota-based company for two years, stated:

I certainly believe it did. I don’t know how much it exists anymore. Where I work, I work for a Fortune 500 company, there’s a 12-person senior management team, half of it is women. Half of us are women. So I have not and am not personally experiencing that.

Frances’ response echoes feelings of optimism and hope. Judging by her age and short time at her current organization, Frances has been successful in breaking through the glass ceiling.

The last three women all hold vice president positions or above, but have a range of years experience within their present companies. This displays that the number of years experience of women does not directly correlate with the presence of the glass ceiling, meaning women who have been with a particular company for decades have put in their dues and should be able to advance, but even women with just a few years at a certain company have not experienced this phenomenon and have been able to advance in their careers. One possible explanation of this is in the organization itself. As stated earlier, the glass ceiling is not one consistent barrier throughout every organization. Rather the glass ceiling’s existence is dynamic and its presence may depend greatly on the individual organization.

One the other hand, three of the remaining participants approached this inquiry in a pragmatic way stating that though the glass ceiling is present, it is penetrable. Paula Clarke, 56, a senior vice president, who has been with her California-based company for 30 years has assumed her current role for only one year and has two years of experience in public relations and communications. Paula’s experiences contribute to this study because of the way in which she advanced in her organization:
I think probably the way that I would describe that is each time I was offered a promotion I was usually offered that promotion at a title that was slightly below my predecessor. For example, if I was promoted into a vacancy that was left by someone who had a manager title, I was promoted into it with a director title which was just below the manager and then after I had been at the job a year I finally got the title that my predecessor had. I never was put off by that or angry by it because I just felt that well I’ll get the job and prove that I can do it and then I’ll get the title and that’s usually what happened, in fact, that’s always what happened.

Since this happened to Paula before she entered the communications department of the business, it is evident that the glass ceiling is not just present in the communications industry, but it exists in other sectors of the business as well. Paula’s reaction to this discrimination is interesting and it probably reflects many responses by women in the corporate world. If women just wait patiently and prove their worth, they will be noticed and eventually get the promotion they deserve. However, how long must women wait? In Paula’s experiences, the glass ceiling was penetrable; it just required patience. However, this strategy may not benefit every situation and every woman.

Furthermore, Kristin Watson, 57, a vice president, who has been with her Virginia-based organization for about 30 years, does not believe that the glass ceiling could have existed when she first started her career because the idea of women in the workplace was still so foreign. She stated:

I think they [barriers] were cultural, social, and systemic early on – I don’t think they were a product of the glass ceiling. I don’t think there was a glass ceiling back then. I don’t think there was any…there was not a great deal of opportunity to get to the level where the glass ceiling was an applicable phrase. The ceiling such as it was became higher and higher and higher and you can look at the glass ceiling as a step in the right direction, it’s not a concrete ceiling, you can see through it, you can see what’s going on, it’s still a ceiling but there’s more opportunity to smash it.

Her comment that the glass ceiling is “a step in the right direction” suggests how pervasive the ideological underpinnings of our society are. Though Kristin’s comment displays a positive development
about women in the workforce today, it is devastating at the same time. The fact that a glass ceiling even exists is regarded as improvement for women, which illustrates how men and women reinforce the inferiority of women. Kristin’s comment is a hopeful message to women that there is now opportunity to break through the glass ceiling; however, this implies that women are still regarded as the substandard and less competent gender and thus barriers, such as the glass ceiling, still exist.

Finally, Rose McNeely, 42, an assistant vice president, who has been with her Virginia-based company for 5 years believes that there are different levels of the glass ceiling. The glass ceiling lowers as a woman climbs higher. She believes that she faces the glass ceiling now in removing the “assistant” from her title. Though she has been able to penetrate the glass ceiling when moving from director to assistant vice president:

…the when you start moving up to the lower echelons, it gets tougher and tougher and tougher and the number of women get fewer and fewer and fewer. I think that it’s taken me longer to advance and I am a very talented, well-respected person in my industry…. I think that you stay at director level longer. I think you stay at lower upper management longer. I am an assistant vice president now, at least I’ve broken the vice president ceiling, but now to wipe that assistant name off the front of my title is probably going to take a lot of work and a lot of time because that is having a seat at the senior management table and that is the toughest thing to get.

This statement further supports the conceptualization of the glass ceiling as inconsistent. Though the glass ceiling is pervasive throughout the corporate world, it varies from organization to organization as well as at different levels within an organization. Since the corporate hierarchy is a pyramid, there are fewer roles as one gets higher in the organization, Rose’s statement reflects the difficulty a woman can face as she ascends within an organization. As women compete against men for top management jobs, a woman’s gender may serve as the deciding factor that prevents her from receiving the job. Thus the glass ceiling surfaces in the workforce though it is at a high level, it is still a barrier.

Vicki Burns, 53, a director who has been with her Michigan-based company for 30 years, does not believe that gender affects advancement, at least in her company. She stated that the glass ceiling
must exist throughout corporate America merely because of all the literature about it. However, she personally does not believe it exists:

But in general, it’s a meritocracy, if you have the skills, if you have the ability, if you have the desire and the drive to do the job, if you have the ambition to get ahead; I think you are in the competition with everyone else in whatever that race may be. I don’t see it as being a gender specific or race specific barrier at this point.

This optimistic outlook is certainly believable considering that women have closed the “merit gap” in terms of education. Vicki believes that the playing field is level for both men and women and therefore advancement depends on the individual. However, factors such as the years of professional experience of women and the gender wage gap support the glass ceiling phenomenon and contradict Vicki’s belief.

The universal themes in these interviews regarding the glass ceiling are ones of optimism, hope, determination, and practicality concerning women’s advancement in public relations and corporate communications. While all of these women have been successful, many of them have been at the same organization for decades which surely influences their clout. Furthermore, the participants’ awareness and knowledge of the glass ceiling phenomenon shows that it is still an important issue in the corporate world and among women themselves. In addition, it is interesting that no single participant denied that it existed, but instead expressed that they never personally experienced it or it is not present at their current organization. However, it is important to note that one of the potential participants declined to interview for this study because she does not believe the glass ceiling exists. This is a finding in and of itself because it indicates that there are women leaders in public relations who deny the glass ceiling exists. On the other hand, the women in this study who did detect a glass ceiling to be in place appeared confident that it could be penetrated with time and energy. This can be interpreted as a negative contribution to women and their overall advancement, but at least women are still advancing.

II. Barriers

This section will address the second research question, “How do other barriers encountered by women in public relations and corporate communications relate to the glass ceiling?” This section will
focus on the barriers encountered by women in public relations and corporate communications that may or may not be a reflection or direct cause of the glass ceiling. As women shared their testimonials about the barriers they encountered, they also included their personal reactions to the barriers. By discussing their personal reactions to these barriers, these women revealed whether or not they felt there was a connection to the glass ceiling. The barriers these women encountered were not self-induced but rather imparted by the system and/or specific organization itself. Therefore, the exploration of these barriers will further contribute to why and how individual organizations and society may influence the glass ceiling.

A. Barriers Encountered by Women

Ten of the eleven participants in this study have faced at least one barrier to share and reflect about its impact. The one participant who did not feel that she experienced any barriers, firmly stated:

I have to say that I really don’t feel that I encountered any really significant barriers. I was fortunate in that a number of opportunities came along in the course of my career and I think that the thing that worked well was that once I had demonstrated a certain level of competency and was considered for those opportunities or my name came up for those opportunities (Paula Clarke).

Though Paula did not feel that she encountered any barriers or the glass ceiling, she later commented that she did have to become comfortable in many situations where she was the only woman present, which arguably can be a barrier itself. In a situation such as this, a woman may feel too intimidated and uncomfortable to effectively contribute to the leadership team. This situation may also prevent a woman from considering pursuing a leadership role at an organization such as this because there is no one to relate to or to network within the upper ranks.

The barriers encountered by the rest of the women are not new ones, but ones that have been discussed and analyzed throughout literature on business as well as public relations. These barriers include: other women, the double standards of gender in our society, and the communications discipline itself. The majority of the barriers relate to a woman’s gender, which one can argue connects them to the glass ceiling.
Other Women – Women’s behavior towards other women was one focus of the interview. Previous research shows evidence that women are often times more concerned with promoting themselves at other women’s expense. However, research also shows that women create a support system for other women and serve as very effective mentors (Grunig, L. A. et al., 2001). Therefore it was relevant to this study to inquire if women in the workplace are creating barriers or levels of support for other women. When asked the question, “How do the women in your organization support each other or compete against each other?” Many respondents laughed and commented that it was a great question. However, a few acknowledged that this question required them to make a blanket statement about all women and that was difficult for them to do.

For instance, Rose McNeely affirmed that women can serve as a barrier based on unfortunate experiences she had with her first two bosses who were female:

The first barrier that I encountered was I think sometimes when you have a woman boss they can be threatened by you. If you do a really good job, if you have an insecure female boss, I hate to say it, I hate to throw that on women, but that’s where I’ve had issues. When I worked at a PR firm in New York, it was my second job; there was a woman who was my manager who was incompetent. I did not pay attention to that until she did a couple of unethical things and ended up getting fired, but I’ve had this happen twice where they become a barrier and eventually either they get fired or you leave the company.

This situation could clearly happen with a male boss, but it appears to be especially sensitive that a woman can hamper another women’s advancement in this way. Having an unsupportive female boss has a negative effect, much in the same way as having no women in leadership roles. Both reinforce the impact of the glass ceiling by preventing women from attaining leadership roles. Allison Petty said that other women were a barrier only in the beginning of her career:

Going back to the beginning, this is really not true today as it was many, many years ago, women can be women’s worst enemy as women start to advance. I had to learn that that could be a real challenge and women don’t perceive women taking the authority in a positive way necessarily.
That was the case early on, but is not the case today. We were able to work through that in a lot of
different ways and strategies. There are still some situations when that’s a problem, but it’s not
for me and hasn’t been for many, many years. We have a number of women who have moved up
to management levels at ___________. We treat each other more as individuals not as women
who are to be threatened by. But women in the lower ranks in the earlier years were a challenge.

While this was an initial barrier that Allison encountered, she makes it clear that in upper management
women support each other as well as men do. It is unclear from Allison’s response if women at the lower
levels still have the tendency to compete against each other rather than support each other. However,
other participants did address the varying degrees of support for other women at different levels of an
organization.

Five of the interviewed women believe that women serve as both barrier and support for other
women. Many commented that at the lower levels of an organization, women are more competitive, but
once a part of management and leadership, women form a support system for each other:

I would say at the VP level we are very supportive. I have seen women in this organization who
were pretty evil. I have seen that. I know that it exists. I would say once you get to the highest
levels of the organization it’s a pretty supportive group. On your way there, it may be a little more
competitive. I am sorry to say that in my experience I have seen more dirty pool, political
competition from women than I have seen from men. I have seen more women hurt each other
when trying to get to the top, women versus women than I have seen men do that. I am very
disappointed to continue to see that (Jamie Price).

In addition, Rose McNeely said, “It depends on the woman. There’s a lot of support but there are vipers
as I call them and you know who they are and you know how to work with them.” Sandra Bailey also
made the comment that the first person to undermine a woman is another woman. She explained this
belief by stating, “I have a theory that that is because they have always believed that there is only a
limited number of jobs available so they are competing against each other rather than looking at the
broader field.” This competitiveness among women, some may argue, is characteristic of the female
gender. However, in this specific situation, women’s aggression against other women generates from women’s need to prove their competence and worth in the workforce even if it means lowering the status of another. This does, however, display a contradiction: if women are so competitive, why are some of them willing to stay at the lower echelons of an organization?

The rest of the participants believe that overall women are supportive of each other. However, most of the women prefaced this statement by clarifying that their opinion was based on their experiences in the present organization. Many of them also explained that the corporate culture in which they work instills a very supportive network among all employees so that both genders are supportive of everyone. Paula Clarke stated, “I think they are generally supportive of each other but I think that that’s based more on overall corporate culture which is one of general collaboration as it is related to gender per say.” Since men and women are more comfortable with women’s presence in the workplace in today’s society, it is safe to conclude that women are acknowledging that more time and energy is wasted by preventing women from excelling in their careers.

**Double Standards of Gender in our Society** – Many participants mentioned barriers that directly connect to the traditional roles and double standards of men and women in American society. Three women sighted a barrier that they encountered as traditional male companies/industries. These comments about traditional male companies were stated matter-of-factly by the participants, which suggests acceptance of this barrier. The participants appeared to attribute this barrier to our society, something unintentional in the workforce. This type of barrier was a direct reflection of what was traditionally accepted and practiced in society at a particular time. Though it was traditionally acceptable to have an all white male leadership team, it is not acceptable in present day. Allison Petty stated:

I entered the workforce a little over 30 years ago in the South in a traditionally male company. Management had always been white males until now. And it actually still probably is certainly at the industry as a whole; it certainly is at plant management level. That was probably the most significant change just to be able to recognize that and learned to work with that and continue to have opportunity… I really never considered it was an intentional barrier set up by my management
but it was just tradition and what they think of as manager and leader and we [women] didn’t necessarily fit the profile.

The two other women who acknowledged this barrier made it clear that it was something encountered early on in their careers and is not present in their company now. All three women have been with their present companies for 25+ years and can reflect on the changes within their personal companies/industries. Vicki Burns stated:

First let me tell you that I have been with ______ 30 years so in the course of 30 years, if you look at the changes in cultural norms in the country, I think the barriers that I encountered along the way really paralleled the social barriers at any given point of time. When I first hired in, I was the only professional female in a staff of 635 people.

Though many companies may still fit the traditional profile of having predominantly white men in management, these women’s testimonials suggest that many large corporations are progressing in terms of diversity in management and acknowledging that traditional practices are not synonymous with a successful, progressive company. The solution to this barrier is for leadership to not only emphasize diversity within their company but also within management and leadership. As Thomas (2005) argued, diversity especially in leadership and management is a competitive advantage from which companies benefit in numerous ways.

Furthermore, Frances Anderson believes the barriers she encountered were caused by the deeply-rooted support men have for each other in an organization. This is often referred to as the “good old boy network.” She stated:

You know I don’t think it’s as much the glass ceiling as it is the old boys’ club and I see those two things as being different. The relationship orientation that men have that I have experienced in the workplace where they will make bad decisions, they will go to the end of the earth to protect their relationship with someone else. I think has been more of a barrier for me than the glass ceiling.
In her career, Frances has experienced many tenacious relationships between males in the workplace. She describes what she observes as an impenetrable bond between male co-workers. This reference to the boys’ club extends the usual indication of this barrier. Frances referred to this network as being with all of the men in the workplace not just management or leadership. Though her point of view is that the glass ceiling is different from the boys’ club, they appear to still have the same negative effect on women in the workplace, they exclude women from relationships and opportunities.

Regarding women’s traditionally accepted role in society, “the mommy track,” women have more to prove, and the lifestyles and personal choices of women can all negatively influence women’s success in public relations as well as the business world. These barriers are a symptom of societal assumptions about women. In our patriarchal society, women are not expected to be career ambitious, reach upper levels in the business world, or choose work over family. These assumptions turn into lowered expectations for women and consequently women lower their ambitions to fit these societal stereotypes in order to fulfill their “appropriate” role in society.

According to Gwen Spicer, a barrier that still exists in the corporate world is the “mommy-track.” The “mommy-track” refers to women who disqualify themselves for top positions by choosing to have children. Women either take themselves out of the running and settle for lower-level positions with less responsibility and less time commitment or male superiors assume that these women are not fully committed to the organization because they have children to raise (Selvin, 2006). Gwen stated, “I think there is some skepticism about how committed they [women] are to their careers. I think that can damage their career path.” When a woman puts her career on hold in order to have children and/or care for her children, her commitment level is questioned by upper management. This is an issue in most industries. In addition, Frances Anderson mentioned this barrier was potentially limiting for her in her career; however, her husband enabled her to pursue the career she wanted despite having a family. “I also think a family has limited me a little bit, far less because I have a husband who has been far less career ambitious than I have been. He’s been able to pick up the slack there.” Unfortunately in today’s world, single parenting is quite prevalent and especially limiting for career-ambitious women.
Because of this, like Maume (2001) mentioned, women tend to gravitate to the “female-dominated careers,” also known as the pink collar ghetto, such as teaching or nursing because these careers are more conducive to the balance of work and family for mothers. These careers enable women to combine work with child-rearing whereas male-dominated professions do not always offer extended leave or withdrawal without payment penalty as well as lost skills. Many women select female-dominated careers because they allow women to take time away from them and upon returning, they will have the same pay and the same skills needed to resume (Maume, 2001). These career choices, of course, have the added characteristic of being the lowest paid in our society. Public relations is considered a female-dominated career since the influx of women in the last twenty years. Unfortunately it is closely linked to the business world which is dominated by men, at least in management and leadership. Though the public relations profession is dominated by women, its role in an organization is typically overseen by men and therefore the “mommy-track” can hinder a woman’s advancement in public relations and corporate communications.

Two participants of this study reflected on the double standard for men and women by the fact that no matter how talented and skilled a woman is, she still has more to prove opposed to a man. Jenny Sheridan mentioned that just tapping into the business world took quite a bit of effort as a woman. In addition, Sandra Bailey said:

Well, there’s both gender barriers and then just business barriers. I think that particularly when I went into business, women had far more to prove to be considered of the same quality. They had to overcome everything from marriage to children to were they really up to the task and even some of that continues today. You are always fighting to prove equal levels of anticipated competency. I think I have experienced all of them. Even in business, they have a tendency, what do they say…men are considered of competence until they prove otherwise when women are considered of lesser competence until they prove otherwise. It’s just a different standard.
Sandra’s comment reinforces Jenny’s statement. Being a woman in the business world, no matter the specific discipline, poses a greater challenge for survival and advancement than for men. Women simply have more to prove because of the societal stigma of their gender.

Not only do women have more to prove, but in today’s business world, they have an ultimate decision to make. The balance of work and family life is difficult to achieve for career-ambitious women therefore they essentially have to choose one over the other in which to dedicate more of their time. According to Vicki Burns, many women in today’s society do not choose to continually seek advancement in their career:

For a lot of women and a lot of men, there is a self-selection effect, where I had this in my career at some point in time, I don’t want the next level badly enough to do the things I know I need to do to get there. That’s a self-selection bias, that’s not a glass ceiling to me. I think there’s a lot of people that get to a point where they say, I have exceeded my expectations already, this is a great job and you look at the time commitment you have to make, you may be sacrificing a marriage, you may be saying that you’re not going to watch your kids grow or be at important events, not be able to participate in your parents as their aging care for them. You make those trade-offs in life and I think that’s a very real decision-making process. The idea here that as a woman, I can’t go any further, I know to not be the case in the company in which I work. I think a lot of people use this as a really convenient excuse for avoiding the conversation where I just didn’t want it badly enough to go any further. I think it’s a convenience that says well I couldn’t have gotten there anyway because I’m … fill in the blank, whatever protected class you are talking about.

Vicki explained that women often hide behind the excuse of the glass ceiling when they are choosing themselves not to exceed further. This “self-selection bias” pertains to men also. However, it is more spotlighted with women because of their biological capabilities as well as societal child-rearing expectations. Consequently, the decision to not further advance for a woman is met with skepticism and even criticism.
Furthermore, Sandra Bailey focused on the traveling and time commitment required of her specific industry, which is comparable to most Fortune 500 corporations:

You have very demanding hours and travel, that is going to be a contributor that really isn’t in any way misogynistic it’s just that a lot of women really are not willing and capable to make that kind of commitment. If my children had not been in school, I could not have done the job required of me because of the worldwide travel. I am often gone for 2-3 weeks at a time. So there are barriers that are from perception or belief and then there are barriers that are just reflective of the job requirements.

Like the argument Vicki made, leadership as a professional goal for women requires much commitment that women may or may not be willing to give. Though it is considered a personal choice by some, it is still a reflection on the corporate culture because of how male-oriented it is. The bottom line is due to the double standards of gender in our society, women have far more to prove because of their gender. By choosing to have a family, women may disqualify themselves from the “leadership race,” a race they are barely in to begin with.

*Barriers Associated with the Professional Fields of Communication and Public Relations* – As mentioned throughout much literature focusing on the image of public relations, this profession has a “soft” image mainly as a consequence of it being dominated by women. Three women in this study acknowledge that a barrier in their advancement was not gender, but the field itself. However, because of the history and nature of this discipline, one can see that it is clearly both factors that have created barriers against women public relations practitioners: the first barrier being a woman, the second barrier being in a field that does not receive the credit or value it deserves because there are so many women.

Michelle Turner believes that there is no glass ceiling for women within the communications department, but extending oneself beyond this department and into the executive team, there is a barrier based on your communications background regardless of your gender. She stated:

I think that very few people, when I think of the glass ceiling I think of the executive management of the company and I don’t think that people who want to be in the public affairs
and communications industry don’t have a glass ceiling to getting into that industry. I guess I should separate the two. I think that if you are a woman or a man and you want to work in this field, I think it’s wide open no matter who you are. Now if you want to rise up out of this discipline, I think there’s a very big glass ceiling. If you want to make it to an executive level of a CEO level, you’re going to have to get a lot of experience and change jobs a lot.

This statement suggests there is a lack of credibility regarding public relations in the corporate world. Though this lack of credibility is regarded by the participants as a separate barrier from the glass ceiling, the lack of credibility is clearly connected to the feminization of the field. Women in communications face a double glass ceiling: one based on gender and one based on career choice. Jamie Price supported this argument further by stating:

You know most of the barriers have nothing to do with being a woman. I think that someone who’s smart and assertive and really does get along well with others can be successful in most companies. The barriers that I found mostly have to do with being in communications and public relations, which tend to be seen as kind of a soft job in some companies. Communication was basically seen as an offshoot of marketing and it wasn’t really seen as one of the core pieces of the business. I did a lot of work since I have been here trying to lift the respect of the function and try to learn more segments of the business so I could broaden my scope a little bit and that’s why I am in charge of strategy as well. I am the chief strategy officer and reporting to be is public relations, marketing communications, strategic planning, corporate development, and investor relations. I think the biggest challenge had to do with the career I chose rather than my gender.

This barrier underlines the assumption that a public relations professional is not capable of being a strategic planner rather he or she is only skilled at writing press releases and press-related materials. Though Jamie explicitly states that this barrier has nothing to do with a woman’s gender, the fact is this “soft” reputation is a direct cause of the feminization of the field. This leads to another barrier of women being stereotyped as the unprofessional woman publicity person. The stereotype of the woman publicity
person also relates to the glass ceiling of the communications department. Rose McNeely referred to the damaging stereotype of the woman publicity person multiple times throughout her interview:

The assumption that you are not strategic; you’re not a strategic thinker because you are a PR person that you can’t add value to a business discussion overall because you’re a one-track person who’s not strategic and again, it goes back to that stereotype. I think it’s more the role than the person in most of my jobs…

This stereotype of the party-planner, publicity-hungry, spin doctor public relations woman is pervasive in our society. It is one of the most common misconceptions and understatements of this discipline. One cause of this misconception again relates back to the feminization of the field. This stereotype also secures the glass ceiling into place. Since this unflattering stereotype ties together women and public relations, women in public relations are not taken seriously therefore advancement and credibility is a far-fetched ideal for them in the business world. Often times, because of public relations’ soft reputation, the organization does not feel that it is a critical element of the management team. However, it is difficult to determine which factor influences a more tenacious glass ceiling: being a women or being in public relations.

This barrier was further developed when some participants acknowledged how they had to learn and grasp the business functionality to advance in their careers. Frances Anderson stated, “I think the barriers have primarily been for me that I did not get a business degree so that limited my cross-functional mobility.” Upon entering the field of corporate communications and public relations, a couple of the participants mentioned they felt the need to expand their business knowledge. Jamie Price is currently earning her master’s degree in business administration, but she found herself scraping by in terms of financial knowledge of the business when she got promoted to a new position that included investor relations. When receiving this promotion, she recalled spending hours and much money on financial books and even referred to these books as her best mentor. However, she believes this promotion was a wise career move. She stated, “It was the best thing that ever happened to me because it really forced me to understand what was driving the business environment…and it also made me much more marketable.”
The other reference to the disadvantage of not having a business degree or background was made by Gwen Spicer. She believes women’s tendency to gravitate toward softer roles such as public relations or human resources is reflective of their lack of interest in math and science around the high school age. She feels that young women’s lack of advancement and interest in these subjects may hinder a future career in business. As a consequence, she explained that many times public relations roles do not easily lead in to the main operating roles:

Women tend not to get degrees in college that are going to lead them into those operating roles. I think it’s tough for them to make the transition and those are the roles that lead to the CEO suite to the C-level jobs typically.

Not having a degree/background in business is a barrier for any public relations person despite their gender. However because of the influx of women in public relations, there are more women in communications and public relations college programs. To overcome this barrier, future public relations practitioners should enroll in some business classes during their college education. Public relations programs should also require this of their students.

It is impossible to determine if all of these barriers are a reflection of the glass ceiling. However, it can be concluded that women face certain barriers while advancing in their career that men do not necessarily. Although people encounter multiple barriers while advancing in their careers regardless of gender, women in public relations face more because of their gender and their industry.

B. Reactions to Barriers

When facing barriers in the workplace, it is important to consider what a person’s reactions to these may be. As with any situation, there are constructive and destructive reactions to every issue. The women in this study, who are all well-established in the business world, responded with constructive reactions. These included being positive, having patience, building relationships/trust, understanding the business, looking for ways around the barriers, facing/dealing with the barriers, working hard, communicating with leadership about your goals, and having an odd sense of humor.
The reaction mentioned by the most respondents was to face/deal with the barriers. Rose McNeely said, “I put up my dukes and fight.” Vicki Burns stated:

I think you have to deal with each one of those one by one as you encounter them and either logically work your way through that or understand that you are going to disagree and find a way to get the work done going around people with whom you disagree.

Furthermore, Kristin Watson commented that she became “very strident and probably a little louder than I should have been protesting those barriers.”

All of these reactions required women to be proactive in facing the barriers. These reactions illustrate a constructive reaction in that women looked within themselves to find the best way to handle and overcome these barriers. They did not try to challenge the system or the institution, but tackled the barriers in the best way they knew how in order to resolve the issue for themselves personally not necessarily for women as a whole. Though these women acknowledged that many barriers still exist for them in the business world, all of them are conquerable. Some of the barriers mentioned were considered to be a reflection of the glass ceiling, but the participants were positive about ways to overcome even these. Women as well as men have the responsibility to educate themselves on the American corporate culture as well as their specific company’s corporate culture. By acknowledging barriers and evidence of the glass ceiling, women can make strides to remove both of these drawbacks. Many reactions to these barriers focus on a woman’s personal situation as well as the environment in which she finds herself. Women must constantly assess the entire situation and not lose sight of their potential advancement especially if this is what they desire.

III. Characteristics and Strategies of Effective Leadership

The final portion of this section analyzes responses related to the third research question, “What are the strategies used by women in leadership roles in public relations and corporate communications to ascend to upper management?” Astin and Leland (1991) defined leadership as “activity aimed at bringing about change in an organization or social system to improve people’s lives” (p. 7). Effective leadership is essential in the progression of a company as is effective public relations and communications. The nature
of this question takes a feminist approach in that it focuses on women proactively seeking and attaining leadership roles through personal strategies despite the glass ceiling and other barriers. This part of the study does not look at the system itself or the specific institution of the participants, but rather it investigates how these particular women advanced into their current positions.

A common area of research in the business world centers on the characteristics and strategies of effective leadership. This concentration is the result of a rather competitive and cutthroat American business culture. The success of an organization is based primarily on financial accomplishments and effective leadership directly contributes to this sort of success. There are many characteristics that describe and define effective leadership; this particular portion of the analysis will focus on various attributes and tactics that describe effective leadership based on the opinions of 11 corporate communications leaders. These women described personality traits, behaviors, and strategies that they possess and have enacted personally as well as ones seen in past and present superiors and colleagues. It is important to note that leaders in public relations and communications are the focus of this particular study; however, the participants’ responses are all encompassing of effective leadership in general.

**Communicator, Negotiator, Team-Builder** – In sharing their opinions on what constitutes effective leadership, all of the participants referred to communication skills as being an essential characteristic. This skill is imperative for the public relations practitioner as well as the business leader. A few of the participants elaborated in their explanations by referring to team building and negotiation.

According to Allison Petty:

> You have to be able to communicate and articulate strategies in your message and just be able to have people hear you when you share those things. You have to be able to recognize and respect others’ contributions and really build that team and recognize the importance of it and build the entire team, don’t just be a dictator.

Vicki Burns stated:

> Communication skills is probably the first and foremost. My personal favorite is the whole idea of listening. Negotiation can’t occur if it’s a one-way discussion. I think a listening component is
one of things that is really essential in a leadership position and I don’t know that a lot of people in non-leadership positions really appreciates the extent to which that either makes or breaks your career. The idea of being able to negotiate, to actually understand someone who is very different from you, what their needs are, but also what their skills are, what they bring to the table and how to use that asset most effectively are critical skills for any executive.

Furthermore, Jamie Price mentioned the abilities to articulate ideas, to motivate, and to cultivate respect, which are arguably dependent on communication from the leader. Michelle Turner furthered this argument when she stated, “You have to be able to communicate with all different types of people. You have to care about them if you don’t care about them and all you care about is your own career, it’s really not a good leader.” With this emphasis on communication, the participants described a democratic and collaborative style of leadership.

Though these women described communication skills as a generally effective practice of leaders, some women in this study suggested effective communication as a distinctive way in which women lead. According to Kristin Watson, women tend to be “consensus builders rather than lone operators” and women tend to be more inclusive and more team building. A major obstacle for women can arguably be the nature in which they lead because the business world is accustomed to the traditional way in which men lead because they have dominated the leadership ranks for so long now. However, these participants believe that the collaborative style of leadership associated with women is becoming more acceptable in the corporate world. Kristin Watson stated:

I think there’s a type of leadership that men are more comfortable with is considered an acceptable form of leadership and that it’s only in the last few years that people have begun to understand that a leadership that is more traditionally practiced by women is equally as effective.

Gwen Spicer believes that women have a distinctive style of leadership that is beginning to influence the style that men practice as well as become more acceptable in the workplace. She mentioned that men are becoming more comfortable with the democratic style of leadership and it is becoming more acceptable and pervasive in business. She stated:
I believe there are differences in the way men and women lead. I don’t know that that necessarily makes one better than the other. I think some of the differences are starting to dissipate a little bit. I think men actually are starting to take on more of the characteristics of women, which is more cooperative leadership, more teamwork, more collaboration, more participation. They typically have better listening skills. It’s more democratic, not as autocratic as a man’s leadership is, but I think those characteristics are being adopted more by men. If they don’t come naturally to them, they are learning them I think because I think they’re being recognized in the workplace, at least in this workplace, as valuable. They’re being rewarded more.

Though none of the women believe that one gender is a more effective leader over the other gender, many of the women were in agreement that unconventional styles of leadership are more acceptable today. It is also important that all of the women mentioned communications skills as being an effective leadership strategy and this was linked to how women typically lead.

Be a Progressive Leader – One woman in particular mentioned that an effective leader is a progressive leader. Many other women named characteristics that complement this descriptor of an effective leader. One who is progressive is motivating, smart, talented, honest, passionate, and enthusiastic. Furthermore, a progressive leader is one who is tuned in to the changes and discoveries of the field as well as the general business sector. As communicators, we must be informed about our specific company, its values, goals, and successes. A progressive leader includes pushing forward the business by not only focusing on his or her departmental goal, but the goal of the entire corporation.

Kristin Watson stated:

Good leadership is moving forward, encouraging the people around you to move forward with you, getting the people around you to move forward with you…It is taking responsibility, I believe its realizing what you are asking of people and asking it of them fairly and evenly. It’s different from managing in a sense because I believe managing can be a nurturing experience, and a scheduling experience and all that. Leadership is, I think, really stepping out ahead of the
group or away from the group and bringing the group along with you and moving them forward and making successes out of what you have to do.

Kristin makes a significant distinction between what constitutes a manager versus a leader. A successful leader does just that, leads the company in its endeavors whereas a manager focuses his or her attention more on the team, its function, and its performance. A common saying in our society is to lead by example. A progressive leader becomes the example by developing the direction of the company.

Vision and Voice – Public relations is based on building relationships with various publics. These relationships can have numerous positive effects on the success of the business, such as increasing stakeholders and shareholders, avoiding crises, enhancing public knowledge, and refining the business from within it. Therefore public relations involves vision and so does effective leadership. A public relations leader must seek out relationships with various publics and envision how these should be developed in order to benefit the business. This vision requires the systematic process of strategic thinking, communicating, and executing. Sandra Bailey stated, “Good leadership is vision, the ability to communicate to a variety of stakeholders that vision, execution, the ability to build teams and commonality of purpose among your colleagues.” Whether having vision in public relations is a learned or innate human behavior for a person, it is critical to this field and to being a successful leader.

Sandra furthered her argument with the following statement:

You have to have clear vision of where you want to go and the compromises you are willing to make to get there and by compromises, I mean time and travel and family and you need to be very well thought out in what your goals are and then develop a strategy to get there and then align yourself with both mentors and colleagues to help you reach that goal and to be very clear with your managers and those you report to about where you want to go and asking for their advice on how to get there. Women have sometimes the tendency to be way too silent. Don’t be afraid to stand out.
Having foresight is a quality that probably most women possess. However, women are still breaking out of the submissive, dependent, complacent stereotype. Being proactive in a career means declaring your endeavors to yourself as well as to your superiors, which links to effective communication skills.

**Be a Servant Leader who Removes Barriers** – Another belief about being an effective leader is having the vision and the ability to remove barriers for subordinates in order to advance the company. Rose McNeely believes that an effective leader puts the well-being of the business before anything else including him or herself. She stated:

> A lot of bad leaders, in my opinion, are people who say it’s all about me and if you’re a good leader, you say it’s rarely if ever about me; it’s about the company and about my people. That’s very simplistic but that’s how I lead.

Under further investigation, this opinion connects with many of the other aforementioned characteristics of effective leadership. By keeping the business’ endeavors on the forefront, a leader provides opportunity for advancement in and of the business. This requires communication skills, progressive thinking, and envisioning success.

Furthermore, two participants reflected on the importance of “servant leadership.” Frances Anderson believes, “Good leadership is about servant leadership and about removing barriers for the people who work for you so that they could be successful.” Frances extends this belief by stating that passion and enthusiasm are the behaviors that make servant leadership thrive. Passion and enthusiasm, when exuded by a leader, inspire people and reinforce a culture in which success is the primary goal. These emotions are infectious in the corporate environment. In addition, Rose McNeely stated, “I think you need to be a servant leader meaning you exist to motivate and develop your team. You must exist to make sure your team is fully engaged in the work that they are tasked to do.” Motivating, inspiring, and developing your team is the essence of effective leadership. These strategies contribute to the removal of barriers for future managers and leaders of a company. They also assist the leader in recognizing the potential of future leaders.
Performance – Allison Petty revolves her entire response to this inquiry on personal performance. She feels that it is dependent on the person to prove his or her leadership skills and public relations skills. She states,

Performance is the simple way to say it. Simply just doing your job better and better and reaching as much you can up into the top level management and that may be harder to do in some companies. By doing that, you are actually helping the top manager move the company forward. You really really are affecting what is happening and his/her ability to make things happen whether it’s with an investment audience or an opportunity to talk to employees. It really can make the person successful. You’re really performing and helping the company. Opportunities to be seen as a professional, someone who is articulate and can help make things happen for the company on your own is certainly an important thing as well.

The function of a public relations practitioner as well as a public relations leader greatly affects the success of the business. By continually pushing the company forward through the public relations practitioner’s skill and performance, a person proves the worth of the department as well as him or herself. Performance is about proving oneself no matter the title or organizational role he or she technically fulfills. The bottom line is that one individual can make a difference and progress a company one extra step.

Furthermore, two participants stated that proving your expertise was an effective strategy for advancement. This can be done by actual performance as well as getting certified, such as APR. Involvement in a professional public relations organization is another way to develop and show your credibility.

Business Strategy – Being a strategic advisor means understanding the nature of the business. As mentioned earlier, a barrier that women in public relations may face is not having a background or degree in business. Having fundamental knowledge of the business industry contributes to the strategic thinking a public relations professional must do. Therefore business knowledge and strategic planning are interrelated in the practice of public relations. Most public relations schools and colleges do not require a
student to take any business courses, but many professors advise it. This is further proof that a lack of business knowledge can hinder a woman’s advancement into leadership. As a strategy to overcome this barrier, Frances Anderson advises that a future communications or public relations practitioner earn a degree in business:

I think there was a time when people who were in public relations and communications could get by if they didn’t like numbers, they could go into PR, no longer the case. I think some of the core skills, you still need to be good in PR and communications are the same, writing and fluency and skills, but a fundamental business understanding is critical to being successful because our profession is being called upon more and more to help achieve business results.

Since many communicators are not prepared for this aspect of public relations based on their education, it becomes dependent on the practitioner to educate oneself. Many professionals advise college graduates to return to school and pursue a master’s degree in business administration in order to increase their status and marketability.

Jamie Price has now been in the public relations/communications industry for 25 years and she is also in the process of earning a master’s degree in business administration. While recalling the stages of her career, she shared a story of how she educated herself in business as she advanced throughout her career. Referred to in the previous section of the analysis, this particular story is about her experience when senior management decided to link investor relations with corporate relations and promote her to oversee it in a vice president capacity. She stated:

I remember going to a bookstore and sitting down in the business section of the bookstore and just going through book after book after book. I spent a few hundred dollars on books and just brought them home and studied and for probably six months every time the phone rang, I was shaking in my shoes. I just thought I was going to be fired the next day because I did something stupid, but it was probably the best thing that ever happened to me because it really forced me to understand what was driving that business environment. These were questions that were going to
be thrown at a CEO or thrown at a CFO and I was learning what made them tick. So it was the best thing that could have happened to my career and it also made me much more marketable. This story illustrates the versatility that a public relations professional must have. It is important to acknowledge at this point that it is rare for a corporation to have a vice president of public relations because this niche is rather specific for a large corporation. Instead, leadership roles in communications typically have a broader range of titles as well as departments answering to them, such as corporate relations, investor relations, human resources, public affairs, and even government relations. Women who want to advance into communications leadership must be equipped with skills in multiple business disciplines. Their marketability is dependent on their knowledge and diversity of skills. Because a woman can influence her own marketability, this strategy rests on her personally.

A few of the women interviewed mentioned this as a strategy for advancing to leadership that benefits both genders. However, Kristin Watson addressed how this strategy is different for each gender:

I don’t think in the workforce itself there is a sense that because you’re a woman, you can’t succeed. But there’s a sense that you better have the tools to succeed and nobody will have the patience to teach you those tools once you are in the business. It’s much more natural for men to have been taught that as part of just their life training, to have knowledge of money and business and hard-edged competition for money.

This issue is a result of gender roles and expectations in our society. Men are supposed to be the breadwinners and take care of the finances; therefore they are raised and educated understanding the importance of this knowledge and focusing on it in their studies. This business knowledge is neither required in college communications programs nor stressed among females throughout their education. Therefore it is important for women to take the initiative to become better equipped in knowledge of the business industry.

Find a Mentor – Many of the participants described their experiences with mentoring as facilitating their advancement in their careers. A mentor is often viewed as role model; someone who aids in a subordinate’s success. In public relations, a female mentor may help a female subordinate envision future
advancement. Conversely not having a female mentor may prevent a woman from envisioning the idea and opportunity to ascend into leadership (Savenye, 1990). Out of eleven interviews only a couple women felt that mentoring did not help them advance in their careers in public relations. The other women spoke fondly about their experiences with mentoring. Most of the women had several mentors throughout the course of their careers. These mentors ranged from colleagues to supervisors to CEOs. These women cited positive mentor experiences with both genders and most of the women referred to having at least one female mentor. A couple participants recalled valuable mentors during the beginning of their career and some mentioned the emphasis they personally place on their role as a mentor now.

Nearly all 11 of the women interviewed had some sort of experience with informal mentoring. Very few worked or work for companies that practice a formal mentoring program. The value of mentoring is dependent on both roles of this type of relationship, the mentor as well as the mentee. A mentor is responsible for observing and acknowledging future and potential leaders and must guide these future leaders in their growth. On the other hand, a subordinate is responsible for seeking out mentors especially if his or her organization does not a formal mentoring program. Some of these women agreed that informal mentoring is more beneficial than formal mentoring because informal mentoring allows people to form natural relationships and gravitate toward people in whom they see commonality.

Kristin Watson described her informal mentors as:

people who paid attention and took notice and that you can talk to sort of off the record about issues. One was a boss who took it upon himself to play a mentoring role, someone I actually reported to and to some extent his boss as well. In other words, they determined that they wanted me to succeed so they kind of worked to help me along on that. Both of them were men. I would say that I have a woman mentor now who is in the company and they really began as sort of a symbiotic relationship because of the work we were doing and developed into what I would like to think of as a very strong work relationship.

Kristin’s testimonial suggests that a woman can benefit from mentors of both genders as well as how mentors can emerge in many different aspects of a person’s career. It also displays that managers and
leaders play a tremendous role in the mentoring process. By being experienced in the workforce, superiors typically know firsthand the benefits of mentoring especially in the early stages of a career. Therefore it is crucial for them to prepare those who have the skills to become leaders.

Furthermore, a professional can benefit from having more than one mentor at a time and can benefit from multiple mentors in a variety of ways. Michelle Turner worked for six different CEOs and all of them served in the mentor capacity in different ways:

All of them had very different styles; all of them took the time to talk to me about their passions, and my ability to meet their needs, and were very supportive and have offered me a lot. And I’ve also had individuals, former bosses that have been great and taught me a lot about corporate America. I’ve had a lot of different mentors. I think mentors can come in all different shapes and sizes and you can learn from a lot of different people. I’ve also learned from people who worked for me. You can learn from all different people.

Through Michelle’s experiences it is evident that in order to reach optimal success, a person should seek relationships with people who will positively affect his or her growth. Furthermore, this strategy is dependent on the individual; one must seek out people who will positively affect one’s growth.

Another woman spoke of an experience with a specific mentor whom she worked for in the beginning of her career. Rose McNeely recalled:

I had a mentor at ________ and he was the COO and he was a very wise and wonderful African-American man. What he did was help me learn how to handle really sticky situations where, I can be fiery and very outspoken sometimes reacting too quickly to things and he saw me do that a couple of times and pulled me aside and would talk me through what would have been more constructive responses…He tempered me in how to deal with leadership and leadership issues and challenges to my leadership that really, really made me mad.

In this case, Rose was lucky to have a mentor seek her out and teach her how to handle herself in leadership situations, which can be difficult for a person to learn on his or her own.
Some of the women elaborated more than others on their opinions about the benefits of mentoring. Through all of their responses, it was evident that they all placed value on the act of mentoring. Frances Anderson believes that mentoring helped her with the struggle of work/life balance, which is a struggle that many women endure in the workforce. Sandra Bailey spoke about the general benefits of mentoring for anyone:

It helps you stretch. It helps you grow. It teaches you to think differently and approach goals differently than you may have if you were just looking from your own perspective or bank of knowledge. Mentoring really allows you to see the company of the world from a different perspective.

This response shows how the strategy of having diversity in a leadership team can benefit mentoring which can further benefit future leadership. The outcome is beneficial when you have someone with a different perspective, a different background, and a different outlook sharing his or her input and experiences with you. It serves as a growing experience no matter how new or old you are to the business.

Gwen Spicer provided a twist to the benefits of mentoring when she recalled her experiences with her first female boss. This lady was nicknamed the “Dragon Lady” and did not believe in giving other women special treatment to help them ascend into management. This former boss believed that everyone should have to “fight their own fights” like she did. While Gwen learned a tremendous amount about the nature of public relations and the tactile skills that are involved in this field, she also learned about what type of leader she did not want to be from this mentor. She recalled, “Honestly I would say that I didn’t learn a lot of my leadership skills from her. I didn’t like the way she led. I had great respect for her as a PR professional not really as a good leader.” This experience further supports the argument that a person should seek out multiple mentors because each mentor is valuable in a unique way.

Managing Emotions – A final leadership strategy is managing emotions in the workplace. Some women acknowledged that managing emotions is a worthwhile strategy in pursuing leadership. However, this strategy can be interpreted as a reflection of the patriarchal corporate culture rather than an effective
strategy. Since women have the reputation of being more emotional beings, this widespread perception can lower a woman’s status in the competitive business world:

Women’s downfall is, I hate to say it, but there is that emotional stereotype and it was earned for a reason because women have the tendency to make it personal and take it personal. And I’ve had to work really hard on that over the years (Rose McNeely).

This strategy, as well as many of the previous ones mentioned by the participants, displays how business continues to be male-defined in our society. The strategy of women managing their emotions at work is not the real issue here. The real issue is that emotions are not acceptable in the workplace because of the masculine influence on corporate culture. By suggesting a strategy such as managing emotions, these women are recommending that we buy into the male-defined standards in order to have a chance at professional advancement. These aforementioned strategies may have contributed to their growth in their career, but the bottom line is women must cater their skills, traits, and strategies to the male-defined standards. Thus women who believe they have successfully ascended into leadership roles display that strategies of effective leaders are still dependent on the male protocol.

Throughout these interviews, the participants expressed how the glass ceiling as well as other barriers can hinder a woman’s advancement in the corporate world as well as in public relations and corporate communications. Because of the invisibility of the glass ceiling, it is a difficult phenomenon to study. Women’s personal experiences with it provide us with details as to how and why it exists. However, most of the women in this study did not believe they had personally experienced this invisible barrier. They denied its existence in their careers and their organizations. The participants were knowledgeable about this invisible barrier mainly because of prevalent research about it. They attributed their lack of direct experience with the glass ceiling to the emphasis on diversity in the workforce as well as the corporate culture of their individual organizations. The participants also described it to be an inconsistent, intangible, unintentional barrier, which adds to the difficulty in studying and conceptualizing it.
While the participants, for the most part, denied the existence of the glass ceiling in their personal careers, they did cite other barriers they encountered. These barriers included: other women, the double standards of gender in our society, and barriers associated with the professional fields of communications and public relations. The participants believed that these barriers were not related or connected to the glass ceiling. However, these barriers more negatively affect women than men. Because of societal expectations of women, women have more to prove than men and these barriers verify this. However, the participants believed, for the most part, they were able to overcome any barriers they faced with time and energy. The participants shared successful strategies and practices that contribute to a woman’s ascent into management and leadership within an organization. These women are not condoning ignorance or acceptance of these barriers, but rather they illustrate a pragmatic approach of overcoming them one by one in order to slowly diminish the traditional gender role of women in society and in the workplace.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS

I. Agency vs. Structure

The 11 participants of this qualitative study provided much insight into critical issues of public relations and corporate communications that have developed since the feminization of the industry. This study explores three critical areas that pertain to women in leadership roles in public relations and corporate communications: the glass ceiling phenomenon, barriers women may encounter when advancing in the workforce, and effective leadership. Women in the general workforce may all be susceptible to the glass ceiling phenomenon and other barriers. However, women in public relations and corporate communications face a double glass ceiling due to their gender as well as their professional area. Throughout these interviews, a couple of themes emerged under the different topics of inquiry. The participants’ continually referred to diversity in the workplace and the credibility of public relations. Because of the emphasized diversity in organizations, women believe that they are now more capable of attaining higher roles in an organization. However, at the same time, because of the soft, feminine-influenced image of public relations, women believe that they still are kept out of upper management roles. This confluence of beliefs illustrates the difficulty in determining the degree to which various factors affect women in public relations.

The glass ceiling phenomenon is commonly referred to as “an invisible barrier.” Though not all of the participants feel like they have experienced the glass ceiling, their discourse and conceptualization of it verifies that it still affects the labor force. Though academics and scholars struggle with how to clearly define the glass ceiling and its existence, we know what it is not. The glass ceiling is not tangible. It is not blatant. It is not omnipresent. It is not universal. It is not consistent. It is not impenetrable. It is not intentional. It is not level. The glass ceiling’s existence is not secured in place by a specific group or an individual. It cannot be measured on its own. Rather its saliency is accounted in the evident lack of
women in the upper echelons of the managerial hierarchy and through women’s experiences and testimonials of it. Its placement is due to multiple factors that start with gender roles in our society and extend to leadership teams and corporate cultures of individual companies. Interestingly enough, hardly any of the women interviewed referred to gender roles or stereotypes as contributing to the glass ceiling phenomenon. It appears that women are more comfortable focusing on strategies to overcome this barrier rather than address it as a pervasive obstacle in our society. Though there is evidence that women have broken through the glass ceiling and ascended into upper management, women, individually cannot destroy this barrier because it is systemically rooted in our society and culture.

However, 11 accomplished women did not put any blame on the organization or the society itself. The only reference to the glass ceiling as a systemic cause happened when the participants referred to the barriers they encountered at the beginning of their careers which took place over 20 years ago. Coincidentally most of these women began their careers in public relations at the onset of the feminization of this field. The timeline of these participants’ careers could be a factor in the absence of discussion about gender roles, stereotypes, and our society in these interviews. Since women’s role in the labor force has increased greatly since these women first started their careers, the effect of the strongly-held perceptions of gender roles and stereotypes are not as blatant as they once were. Therefore the participants may not feel that these roles and stereotypes are the major cause of the glass ceiling’s existence. Additionally, women’s equality in numbers in the workforce could very well deceive a woman’s perception of the true disparity in status and prestige.

Many scholars who focus on gender inequalities in public relations approach this topic from a liberal feminist perspective mainly because their participants, be it consciously or unconsciously, take a liberal feminist perspective in their experiences and general approach to their careers. This was also the case with the 11 participants of this study. Though the participants were not knowingly coming from a liberal feminist perspective, their strategies suggest that solutions to the glass ceiling lie within the individual, which is the basic tenet of liberal feminism. To begin with, they denied the glass ceiling’s existence within their personal careers and organizations. Besides the glass ceiling, they also described
other barriers to their advancement as being: other women, the double standard of gender, and the communications discipline itself. These barriers directly connect to a woman’s gender and therefore it can be concluded that they are in some way connected to the glass ceiling. However, these women serve as proof that these barriers can be overcome and that women can make it to the top of an organization. The participants also shared accommodative strategies to overcome these barriers and become effective leaders themselves. The 11 women interviewed display the common practice of most women who are determined to reach upper management in their careers: they accept the barriers and look for ways around them. Rather than question the existence of these barriers and the glass ceiling, career-ambitious women invest time and energy into adapting to the male standard and proving their worth as leaders. They regard this inequality as a barrier that simply needs to be worked around and can be worked around.

On the other hand, radical feminists have challenged the idea that it is only women who need to change. Rather than focus on change within the individual, radical feminists target how the male-defined structure of an organization and society must change. According to Hon (1995), the most practical plan may very well be to use liberal feminist strategies with a radical intent to undermine and remove the male-centered system and change society because many reasons as to why women face barriers directly related to their gender connect to the ideological and structural characteristics of our social formation. Though women responded to all of these barriers with personal strategies that they used to overcome them, the barriers themselves were not destroyed they were just merely overcome by that specific individual. Factors supporting or perpetuating the glass ceiling relate back to society’s structures and limitations for women. Women’s expected roles as mother, caretaker, and nurturer can prevent them from advancing in the workforce because men, the dominant force, and society have a set of expectations for their professional leaders that are at odds with women’s perceived characteristics and societal roles.

Interestingly, most of the women interviewed did not explicitly attribute the glass ceiling or barriers to society. However, their responses could be linked back to stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination, and assumptions about women that were developed by a patriarchal society. Furthermore, the soft reputation of public relations is also caused by the influx of women in this field. Public relations is misunderstood in
the business world and commonly is not viewed as being a critical part of the executive team. Hence, women in public relations face the glass ceiling and the weakened reputation, credibility, and perception of their profession, precisely because it has more women than men. This weakened reputation impedes public relations practitioners of both genders to sit at the table with decision makers. However, the women in this study did not address the connection between the feminization of the field to its image and credibility problems. This illustrates how women do not acknowledge institutional barriers or corporate constraints for the barriers they encounter. Women’s lack of awareness of these structural limitations illustrates the deeply embedded societal norms that dictate our respective roles in society and the workforce. When societal structures remain unexamined, they reinforce patriarchal power.

Our patriarchal society is the major cause of the glass ceiling. Both men and women secure it in place. We are accustomed to women’s inferior role to men. It is our gender roles and expectations that cast the view of women as effective mothers in the home and ineffective managers in the workforce. Therefore men and women both reinforce the glass ceiling by not challenging these traditional roles. This gender socialization has greatly affected public relations because of the feminization of the field. Because public relations is considered a female-dominated profession, its status in the corporate world has lowered. Therefore women face a double glass ceiling. However, many women are not consciously aware of this. They perceive the field to be the major barrier, but do not link this barrier to their gender as well. Because of our socialization, it is very difficult for women to look beyond the perceived expectations of their gender. Instead, women find it easier to accept societal expectations of them to become mothers and fulfill semi-professional careers in female-dominated fields. Because men and women do not fully understand our patriarchal society’s influence on the workforce, women handle this discrimination by focusing on personal strategies to remove barriers rather than challenge the system. Being that many contributors to the glass ceiling and other barriers are the product of society’s ideological underpinnings regarding gender, it is an extremely difficult feat to remove these obstacles. However, thanks to studies on the glass ceiling and gender disparities, our citizens are now questioning the characteristics of the playing field in corporate America for men and women.
Gender roles and norms have also influenced the way our society perceives an effective leader. Men are more associated with a transactional style of leadership whereas women are more associated with a transformational style of leadership. Male leaders are typically described as leading with an autocratic and authoritative style. Women, on the other hand, are associated with leading in a more democratic and collaborative style. Despite the gendered research on leadership, the participants in this study believe that both men and women can make effective leaders. In fact, they believe that women’s traditional style of leadership is becoming more acceptable and more valued in the workplace and even influencing men.

Throughout our conversations, the women offered various definitions and strategies that are key ingredients of effective leadership. These include: communication skills, being a progressive leader, having vision and voice, being a servant leader, excelling in one’s performance, understanding the nature of the business, and managing emotions. All of these strategies are self-reliant and require a woman to take the initiative to be perceived as qualified and skilled in leadership. While some of these strategies and characteristics are interpreted as being associated with women’s nature, such as communication skills, being a servant leader, and having vision, many of them are more closely associated with men.

Men are raised as being business-savvy and emotionless. Though women have cited personal strategies to help them excel in the corporate world, many of these tactics require them to carry themselves in a more androgynous way. This displays how our culture continues to affect the workplace and how each gender is perceived in the workplace due to the influence of gender roles and stereotypes.

The presence of women in the workforce suggests how some women have broken through gendered expectations of domesticity. However, the expectations and perceptions still follows them and impairs their ascendance in the workforce. Because of this, women must continue to prove themselves more than men. Women will continue to be attracted to the profession of public relations because of the dominance of women in numbers. However, due to the implications of the feminization of public relations, women are further disadvantaged because of the lowered status of this profession. Therefore it is important for women to be aware of this implicit gender discrimination whether it be perceived as the glass ceiling for their gender or for their industry. The universal message from the participants advises
women in public relations to take their fate into their own hands despite the glass ceiling and other barriers. Women must be proactive, critical, well-rounded in business knowledge and experience, communicators, risk takers, emotionally managed, determined, progressive, and have vision to further erase the traditional stereotypes, which reveals that women must buy into the patriarchal society. Though the women interviewed are success stories of women public relations leaders, the numbers of women in upper management roles are still very low. When faced with discrimination, women cannot just simply look for ways around it. They must address and fight the discrimination. At the same time, women must work towards changing deep-seated and unquestioned assumptions and expectations about gender roles in society and the workplace. If they do not, they are allowing the hegemonic structure to continue to exist.

II. Limitations

This qualitative study focused on exploring factors that affect women’s growth in the corporate world. Through 11 in-depth interviews, the participants’ conversations enabled further analysis of the critical issues surrounding the glass ceiling in public relations, but they are not statistically representative to the entire population of public relations practitioners. Another limitation is the size of the sample. Though the sample consists of 11 women leaders in public relations and corporate communications, with a sample size of 15-20, the validity of this study could be increased. The participants all considered themselves to be leaders in public relations and corporate communications and occupy positions that support their assertion. While this factor contributed to the validity of their insight on leadership, it does not take into account the views of women at the lower levels of corporations. In addition, the study lacks an ethnically diverse sample. All participants interviewed were of the Caucasian race. While this is regarded as a limitation, it also sparks the inquiry of whether public relations is an ethnically diverse profession or if it is a white woman’s profession.

III. Suggestions for Future Research

The women in this study identified many factors that may inhibit their growth throughout their careers in public relations and corporate communications. Most of these factors directly connect to a woman’s gender. To provide further direction and investigation of women’s evolving role in the
American culture, future researchers may conduct another qualitative study that explores the presence of gender roles and stereotypes in the business. This may be done by interviewing women in upper management roles who may have been witness to women’s changing role in our workforce. Researchers may also invest in a quantitative study to see if the findings from this study are generalizable and representative to the population of public relations practitioners. Furthermore, by studying women at the lower levels of an organization, scholars are able to assess how the glass ceiling and other barriers are affecting women newer to the field.
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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What barriers have you encountered while advancing in your career?

2. How did you react to these barriers?

3. Are you familiar with the term “glass ceiling?” (If person is not familiar with the term, define it for her and skip the next question.)

4. What is your definition of the glass ceiling?

5. Do you believe the barriers that you mentioned before are a reflection of the glass ceiling?

6. Do you believe the glass ceiling exists? Why?

7. How has it affected or not affected you/your career?

8. What factors perpetuate/contribute to the glass ceiling in your organization?

9. What are the characteristics of good leadership?

10. Is good leadership genderized? Do you believe men or women make more effective leaders over the other gender?

11. Do the women in your organization support each other or compete against each other? Explain.

12. What strategies are available to women in public relations and communications who want to work to eliminate the glass ceiling?

13. Describe your ascent into management.

14. Were you ever mentored by someone during your career? If so, how did mentoring play a role in your ascent into management?

15. How did your experiences with mentoring help or not help you achieve your current position?
APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANTS’ PROFILES

All participants in this study are women of the Caucasian race.

Frances Anderson, 47, is the senior vice president of communications for a financial company. She has 25 years experience in public relations and corporate communications and she received her bachelor of science degree in communications.

Sandra Bailey, 57, is the senior vice president of communications and government relations for an organization in the gaming industry. She received her bachelor of arts degree in English and she also attended the University of Southern California’s School of Food Marketing Management. She has 8 years of experience in public relations and corporate communications.

Vicki Burns, 53, is the director of communications research for a leading corporation in the automaker industry. She received her bachelor of science degree in English and Anthropology. She has also completed master of arts coursework in English Language and Literature and master of science and doctorate of philosophy coursework in industrial and organizational psychology. She has approximately 20 years of experience in public relations.

Paula Clarke, 56, is the senior vice president of communications and public affairs for a successful company in the gas and electric industry. She only has 2 years experience in public relations. She received her bachelor of arts degree in environmental studies and is also a graduate of the Stanford Executive Program at Stanford University.

Rose McNeely, 42, is the assistant vice president of public affairs and store marketing for an automotive financing company. She received her bachelor of arts in English/Literature and has been in the public relations industry for 20 years.

Allison Petty, 52, is the senior vice president of corporate relations for a Fortune 1000 company in the food and bakery business. She received her bachelor of arts degree in communications. She has worked in the public relations and corporate communications industry for 29 years.

Jamie Price, 45, is the corporate vice president, chief strategy and communications officer for a leading company in the technology industry. She has 25 years experience in public relations and corporate communications. She is currently working toward a master’s degree in business administration. She also has a bachelor of arts degree in political science and journalism.

Jenny Sheridan, 51, is the vice president of corporate relations for an up and coming organization in the financial electronic commerce services industry. She has 25 years experience in public relations. She received her bachelor of arts degree in English and a master’s degree in journalism and communications.

Gwen Spicer, 45, is the vice president of communications and public affairs for a communications and entertainment company. She has 16 years experience in public relations and received a bachelor of arts in journalism.

Michelle Turner, 44, is the director of public affairs and communications for a corporate forerunner of the oil and gas industry. She has approximately 20 years experience in the journalism and public relations industries. She received her bachelor of arts degree in communications.
Kristin Watson, 57, is the vice president of corporate communications for a top organization in the news and information industry. She received her bachelor of arts degree in English Literature and has worked in journalism and public relations for 25 years.