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Ethic Of Care Leadership Orientation Among Executive Women In The Home Furnishings Industry

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Ethic of Care Leadership Orientation Among
Executive Women in the Home Furnishings Industry

Karen Knoch

North Carolina A&T State University

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Major Professor: Dr. Daniel M. Miller

Greensboro, North Carolina

2014

The Graduate School
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University
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Greensboro, North Carolina
2014

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Biographical Sketch

Karen Knoch is a professional businesswoman and scholar. She was born and raised in Florida. Through career opportunities, she lived in several different U. S. states including, for the last ten years, North Carolina. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Finance from Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama and her Master of Business Administration degree from Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Florida. She is a candidate for a Ph.D. in Leadership Studies at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University where her academic accomplishments include Wadawan L. Kennedy Scholars Award, university Graduate Teaching Assistantship, and induction into Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society.

Before pursuing her doctoral degree, Karen spent more than twenty years working in the home furnishings industry. She started her career in retail merchandising and buying. She later began working in wholesale sourcing and product development, much of which took place overseas. Karen has been to China over twenty times and visited Vietnam and the Philippines numerous times as well. These experiences not only broadened her personal horizons but also taught her practical applications of international business and intercultural communication.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to draw on ethic of care leadership orientation to document the perspectives of executive women in the home furnishings industry and the degree to which they are affected by gender difference or otherness from their predominantly male counterparts in the workplace. Three research questions were generated relating to the study's purpose. 1) If women are shaped by society to develop an ethic of care orientation but spend years in organizations that value and reward justice orientation, how does this affect my informants' views of themselves? 2) Do my informants perceive that adapting within a masculine work environment implies a separation from care orientation and adoption of justice orientation? 3) What are my informants' perspectives on whether changing business conditions in a global, fast-paced economy are more conducive to a feminist ethic of care leadership approach?

Utilizing narrative inquiry as the methodological strategy, informants were asked open-ended questions regarding their experiences as a woman executive in the home furnishings industry. Autoethnography was included as an additional strategy of inquiry. The researcher has a "shared cultural membership" (Pelias, 2011) with the informants, having spent over twenty years working in the home furnishings industry and having attained an executive level.

Five distinct themes emerged as relating to the informants' experiences: 1) advantages and disadvantages of being a woman, 2) fortune versus self-confidence, 3) striving for authenticity in the workplace, 4) a network of women versus the "good old boys," and 5) an uncertain future for women in the industry. Each theme was represented by at least four of the five informants.

CHAPTER 1

The Unexplored Potential of Ethic of Care Leadership in Women Executives

Since I began my business career in the late 1980s, I have known both implicitly and explicitly that my gender set me apart from the men who were my bosses, counterparts, and coworkers. I could never clearly identify how to describe that difference and frankly, nobody I worked with wished to discuss it anyway. In the 1980s and 1990s, I understood it to be incumbent upon me to adapt my work and management style to the organizations in which I worked. As the 2000s emerged, however, I noticed a subtle shift. Companies in my industry—home furnishings—were now seeking a woman to join their executive ranks because it began to occur to them that our end-consumers are women. However, this awareness of the need for women leaders did not shift the internal culture and practices within these organizations. As the token woman executive, I was still required to adapt my work and leadership style to a male orientation—even though I had been hired or promoted in part because the executives said they wanted a woman’s perspective.

I have since learned that the feelings of difference, lack of fit, and alienation that I was experiencing in my career can be understood using the theoretical framework of feminist ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan, 1995). Carol Gilligan (1982) identified *ethic of care* as a difference in voice and “different modes of thinking about relationships” (p. 1) that distinguish the ways men and women think. Gilligan (1982) further noted that this difference is “characterized not by gender but theme” (p. 2), suggesting that viewing difference through the lens of care typically—but not necessarily—translates by gender.

1.1 Definition of Terms

Gilligan's (1982) ethic of care concept has been debated as it relates to feminist ethics (Borgerson, 2007; Gilligan, 1995; Thompson, 2008). This debate is relevant due to its application to business and business ethics. Janet Borgerson (2007) asserted that "care ethics and feminist ethics are different" (p. 478) and that ethic of care often pertains to feminine traits of caring and nurturing but does not theorize or attempt "to understand modes of exclusion, subordination, and oppression" that can be better addressed through feminism (p. 482). Thus, a clarification of terms is necessary for this research. My use of *feminist ethic of care* encompasses the feminist understanding of oppression, bias and exclusion relative to women in organizations (Borgerson, 2007; Thompson, 2008). This definition also understands that those disadvantages that women face are grounded in difference in voice and the ways women relate to people and the world (Gilligan, 1982). Accordingly, feminist ethic of care, for the purposes of this study, purports that in a patriarchal society, women may relate to others in a different, more relationship-oriented way than men, which affects their participation and acceptance in male-dominated, traditionally-oriented organizations and environments (Gilligan, 1982).

The concept of leadership should also be clarified as it relates to this research. Peter Northouse (2010) defines leadership as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 3). However, feminist scholars such as Alice Eagly (2007) suggest that the term *leadership* has been defined "primarily in masculine terms, and many theories of leadership have focused mainly on stereotypically masculine qualities" (p. 2). Additionally, a meta-analysis by Eagly, Karau, and Makhijani (1995) revealed that perceptions of effective leadership were found to be greater when the leader's role is more congruent to her/his gender. That is, the more masculine the job description, the more effective male leaders

were perceived and the less effective female leaders were perceived. As executive leadership positions within the home furnishings industry are held overwhelmingly by men, one can interpret these positions to be perceived as masculine in nature. Based upon this reality, a more common, albeit masculine-oriented, definition of leadership such as Northouse's (2010), would apply to this study even as it relates to women executives in leadership roles.

1.2 Purpose and Objectives

Relative to my own history in the home furnishings industry for over twenty years, the purpose of this research is to draw on ethic of care leadership orientation to document the perspectives of executive women in the home furnishings industry on ethic of care and the degree to which they are affected by gender difference or otherness from their predominantly male counterparts in the workplace. As noted by Gilligan (1982), difference is created through identity formation and is impacted by our culture and society. Individuals may not necessarily be born with this difference; however, as women begin to develop their identity, it becomes clear that relationships and the "failure to separate" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 9) oneself from others is viewed as subordinate when compared to men's identity development. As a result, in business and for corporate success, "if a girl does not want to be left dependent on men, she will have to learn to play like a boy" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 10).

Additionally, my research documents informant perspectives on how they have coped and adapted across time and tenure in typically masculine, hierarchal organizations. In particular, I am interested in possible impacts on identity over time for executive women who have achieved, at minimum, at vice president or equivalent title.

The masculine opposite of ethic of care is often referred to as *ethic of justice* (Gilligan, 1982; Machold, Ahmed, & Farquhar, 2008; Simola, Barling, & Turner, 2010). Ethic of justice is

“characterized by a focus on adjudicating between individual interests or rights in solving moral dilemmas” (Simola, et al., 2010, p. 180). While ethic of care reflects a relational orientation, ethic of justice reflects an impartiality orientation. If women are shaped by society to develop an ethic of care orientation but spend years in organizations that value and reward a justice orientation, how does this situation impact women’s views of themselves? Furthermore, for women who become executives and are successful in this environment, does adapting within this environment imply a separation from a care orientation and adoption of justice orientation? Or are these women able to maintain and integrate their care orientation despite their environment?

A final objective relating to this research is to explore my informants’ perspectives on whether changing business conditions in a global, fast-paced economy are becoming more conducive to a feminist ethic of care leadership approach. In the early 1990s, Bernard Bass and Bruce Avolio began to study transformational and transactional leadership (Bass, Avolio, & Atwater, 1996). Through different uses and iterations of their Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, Bass et al. (1996) determined a relationship between female leaders and transformational leadership style. A more recent study by Sheldene Simola, Julian Barling, and Nick Turner (2010) confirmed this relationship.

The relevance of transformational leadership is that it is viewed as more conducive to “flatter” organizational hierarchies that “emphasize more frequent contact” and “sharing of information” (Bass et al., 1996, p. 7). As our economy shifts from an industrial, manufacturing era to a knowledge era, these characteristics will become more and more relevant as organizations are forced to adapt to survive (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). While conjecture only at this point in my research, if ethic of care orientation inclines women to a transformational leadership style, and transformational leadership style is becoming more and

more relevant to successful knowledge-era organizations, can one infer that women are better suited to become the major organizational leaders of tomorrow? Complexity Leadership Theory, as described by Mary Uhl-Bien, Russ Marion, and Bill McKelvey (2007), includes three distinct types of leadership within modern, knowledge-era organizations. These types are administrative leadership, enabling leadership, and adaptive leadership. Administrative leadership is a more traditional role which includes, “bureaucratic notions of hierarchy, alignment and control” (p. 299) and is necessary for support functions within an organization. The other two, enabling and adaptive leadership, share characteristics with Bass and Avolio’s (1993) transformational leadership which include charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. Both enabling and adaptive leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) and transformational leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1993) depend on context and adaptability within the leadership function. Thus, leadership in modern organizations becomes less about theoretical or justice ethic and more about situational or care ethic (Gilligan, 1982).

1.3 Research Questions

The objectives outlined above translate to three key research questions being addressed by this study. They are:

1. If women are shaped by society to develop an ethic of care orientation but spend years in organizations that value and reward justice orientation, how does this affect my informants’ views of themselves?
2. Do my informants perceive that adapting within a masculine work environment implies a separation from care orientation and adoption of justice orientation?

3. What are my informants' perspectives on whether changing business conditions in a global, fast-paced economy are more conducive to a feminist ethic of care leadership approach?

1.4 Limitations/Delimitations of the Study

This study is delimited to one particular industry, home furnishings. Within that industry, only women executives who have attained at minimum a vice president title are included. As with any given industry, the home furnishings industry has some unique characteristics which limit the transferability of this study to a broader population

Any single methodology has its limitations. This research solely employs qualitative methodology which limits generalizability of the findings. Other limitations include my industry experience and presence which may bias responses (Creswell, 2009) and observational limitations due to the geographical disparity of informants requiring some interviews to be conducted via phone, or email.

1.5 Home Furnishings Industry

Home furnishings is a broad term that can encompass a large number of consumer products. For the purpose of this study, *home furnishings* refers specifically to residential furniture and bedding (mattresses and boxsprings). Consumer spending in this category for 2012 was approximately \$84 billion (Engel, 2012). Consumer demand for home furnishings is tied closely to economic indicators such as home mortgage rates, existing home sales, and new home construction levels (Nickell, 2013).

The home furnishings industry is characterized by two key functions: retail and wholesale/product development. The retail function refers to sales transactions made directly "to the ultimate consumer" through brick and mortar stores or through electronic sales (Bennington,

2004). The wholesale/product development function starts from “the idea stage to scheduling the completed product into full production” (Bennington, 2004). It also includes warehousing, shipping, and wholesale selling to retailers. The informants in this study have professional backgrounds in either or both of the two functions.

In the retail function of home furnishings, the top twenty five retailers—those selling the largest volume of furniture and bedding—accounted for \$29 billion in sales in 2012 (Engel, 2013). This 2012 sales number is a 10.8% increase over 2011. Increasing sales percentages through these top twenty five retailers is an indicator that the retail channel for home furnishings is consolidating to some degree with the closures of many independent “mom and pop” retail locations. While 59% of furniture and bedding sales were conducted through traditional furniture and bedding stores, the other 41% of sales were through channels such as discount department stores, warehouse clubs, rental stores, and office supply stores (Engel, 2013). Sales through these non-traditional channels have grown at a greater percentage than traditional furniture stores.

The wholesale/product development function of the home furnishings industry is characterized by a constantly changing number of players. Asian factories facing diminished demand from American buyers will develop products and sell their production capacity to numerous different wholesalers. Wholesale furniture shipments (excluding bedding) grew 5.4% from 2011 to 2012 (McIntosh, 2013). Among the twenty largest wholesalers, shipments grew at the same 5.4% rate suggesting that this side of the industry is not consolidating to the same degree as the retail side (McIntosh, 2013).

Wholesalers and retailers come together as sellers and buyers at furniture markets “for the purpose of making decisions that determine furniture distribution within the United States

and, in some cases, to other countries” (Bennington, 2004, p. 329). The primary furniture market is held twice per year in High Point, North Carolina; however numerous regional and specialized markets also exist (Bennington, 2004). Retailers and wholesalers both refer to this International Home Furnishings Market simply as “market” or “High Point” since its over 10 million square feet of showroom space constitutes “the largest furniture market in the world” (Bennington, 2004, p.331).

1.6 Paradigm

The worldview that grounds this study is constructivism/interpretivism informed by feminist critical theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Using feminist theory as my theoretical foundation, a critical theory paradigm does inform my constructivist viewpoint. My ethical position is guided by concern for my respondents and an understanding that their realities may be neither better nor worse than my own.

The constructivist viewpoint is characterized by relativist ontology (Guba, 1990). My beliefs are consistent with this view that multiple realities exist at any given point in time. In my dissertation research, I am seeking to explore and understand how other women in corporate settings view their feminine “otherness” as they navigate the patriarchal business world. I realize that their experiences and views may be similar to mine; however, they may also be quite different. In any case, each respondent’s narrative arises from her individual reality.

The relationship between me, as the researcher, and my informants holds potential to create new knowledge and understanding. This is characteristic of a subjectivist epistemology (Guba, 1990). In the course of researching a subject which has so profoundly affected me, I cannot and do not wish to be objective. I realize that in interviewing my informants, my questions must be open and not leading to a particular response. However, my constructed

understanding of reality will inherently influence what I perceive to be known (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Standpoint epistemology (Smith, 1990) argues that someone like me, as a female executive within this industry, is well-positioned to conduct such a study.

Constructivist axiology is “propositional, transactional” and “reflective versus critical” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 108). Critical theory axiology, on the other hand, seeks to change and improve oppressive practices or policies (Bernal, 2002). While my research will value the knowledge that is created between my informants and me, I hope that our findings do, in some small way, affect social change and reduce power inequities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) by illuminating women’s issues of otherness in a new way, and illustrating these within a specific industry.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This research consists of a qualitative study which focuses on women executive decision makers in the home furnishings industry. While this research represents a small slice of the business world by focusing on a particular industry, the results may have implications for women across numerous disciplines and fields of endeavor. Prior studies have included exploration of leadership styles and ethical judgments which are linked with gender (Bass et al., 1996; Simola et al., 2010; Vermeir and Van Kenhove, 2008), and numerous theoretical analyses and literature reviews. I have found little research that focuses on differing female viewpoints within the small microcosm of a specific industry (Kondo, 1990; Noddings, 1988). Also, little research has been conducted in which we hear actual voices of women in a narrative discourse (Fine, 2009). My research constitutes an attempt to explore, through the use of narrative stories, how women view their experiences, and how they have reconciled their authentic and inauthentic orientations to become successful in an industry that is traditionally white, male, and very conservative. I

ultimately hope to gain a better understanding of feminist ethic of care orientation for myself that will also enrich the existing literature and the understanding of others.

1.8 Organization of Proposal

Chapter One has introduced the research focus, identified the purpose and research questions being addressed by this study, indicated limitations and delimitations related to the study, described some unique characteristics of the home furnishings industry, shared my world view relative to this research, and advocated the significance of the study. Chapter Two provides a theoretical and conceptual framework for my study through a review of relevant literature. A gap in the literature is identified which supports a need for a narrative, industry-focused study relating to ethic of care orientation. Chapter Three describes the methodology employed for this critical narrative exploration. Chapter Four identifies and analyzes emergent themes in the interview data. The final chapter summarizes implications of my findings for practice and further research.

CHAPTER 2

A Theoretical/Conceptual Framework for Narrating Women Executives' Experiences in the Home Furnishings Industry

This study employs, as its foundation, feminist theoretical perspectives. French writer Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, published in 1949, is commonly thought to be the inaugural written work on modern feminism. In it, de Beauvoir described women as having a second-class citizen status "that rested not only on men's false understandings of women's 'true nature' but also on women's resignation to their lot" (Rosenbluth, 2011, p. 50). Feminism acknowledges a problematic view of women as framed against the male ideal—a concept which has been accepted by both men and women. Frances Rosenbluth (2011) referred to an "unconscious bias" (p. 53) related to negative gender stereotypes that pervades all aspects of society, particularly in the workplace.

Feminist perspectives have had many definitions and interpretations. While de Beauvoir viewed feminism as breaking out of a prison of oppression (Rosenbluth, 2011), other researchers have extended the concept of feminism to feminist morality, feminist ethics, and ethic of care identity development. This study specifically uses an advocacy lens which views identity development as the foundation for male and female differences. It then seeks to understand the degree to which women are aware of and incorporate this difference in the workplace.

Gilligan coined the term *ethic of care* in her 1982 work, *In a Different Voice*. Ethic of care refers to how women relate to others and their environment. Where de Beauvoir and early feminists framed the struggle for gender equality as being freed from shackles, Gilligan framed her ethic of care approach as stemming from psychological and societal norms which shape men's and women's identities very differently. Male identities are viewed as normal, whereas

female identities are viewed as different or less-than. Gilligan proposed that in adolescent development, boys are encouraged to separate from their mothers and to view themselves as independent beings. Girls in adolescence, however, are encouraged to remain attached to their families and to view themselves as part of the familial unit. Thus, when women enter the workplace with this connectedness orientation, it can be viewed by the dominant male group as being substandard or inferior.

Feminist perspectives undergird the approach to this research. Specific aspects of feminism including ethic of care shape the following literature review. Feminist perspectives impact women in the workplace and affect the lack of advancement for women in senior business positions. Current research shows the degree to which women continue to underachieve in attaining executive opportunities (Carlson, Kacmar, and Whitten, 2009; Northouse, 2010). Various interpretations as to how those underachievements continue to manifest themselves are explored. Implications as to how workplace bias and gender stereotypes continue to impact women are also reviewed. Finally, new opportunities for women in business to embrace their difference are examined. This literature review illustrates the multitude of perspectives in viewing feminist ethic of care, specifically relating to the workplace. I intend to establish where the literature is plentiful and comprehensive and where it appears to be lacking and why.

2.1 Identity Development and Feminist Perspective

As discussed above, Gilligan's (1982) original work focused on identity development and societal norms which resulted in her development of the concept of ethic of care. She contended that the difference between men and women in their perspectives and relationships is not inherent but is developed, particularly through adolescence. She chronicled women's

development as being based on nurturing and self-sacrifice and illustrated that many women feel conflicted—or even guilty—when they assert and place value upon themselves.

In later work, Gilligan (1995) distinguished the difference between feminist ethic of care and feminine ethic of care. She suggested that feminine ethic of care exists “within a patriarchal social order” (p. 122) and separates a person from her inner freedom because she is surrounded by an ethic of justice. Feminist ethic of care is described by the author as being based in connection. In the feminist approach, relationships are viewed as primary and they affect the feminine ethic of care by viewing the connection to self as necessary to form relationships with others.

In 1984, Nel Noddings elaborated on Gilligan’s concept of ethic of care, specifically exploring the feminine concept of caring. She argued that the traditional view of church and home as the training agents for “morality and emotional well-being” and educational institutions as training agents for intellect as not allowing one to be “fully human” (p. 172). The separation of care and intellect minimizes the value of caring. She further differentiated natural caring versus ethical caring, noting that neither is superior and that the former is dependent upon the latter. Ethical caring, then, is built upon a commitment to engage—not out of obligation, but out of the need to connect.

Mary Belencky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger and Jill Tarule (1986) conducted in depth interviews with 135 women using questions meant to elicit personal viewpoints on “self-image, relationships of importance, education and learning, real-life decision making and moral dilemmas, accounts of personal change and growth, and visions of the future” (p. 11). While Noddings’ area in inquiry was on caring, Belencky et al. (1986) focused on different ways women attain knowledge. The authors asserted that “conceptions and knowledge of truth” (p. 5)

have been created by and for men. While Belenky et al. (1986) related women's knowledge attainment to masculine-oriented educational institutions, a similar comparison may be made regarding workplace organizations. The women respondents in this study were frustrated by a teaching process by which "knowledge flows in only one direction, from teacher to student" (p. 217). Traditional organizational hierarchies mirror this one-directional, downward flow of information which contrasts with a relational approach more suited to women's knowledge attainment and understanding.

While not discussing gender or feminism specifically, Margaret Wheatley (2007) suggested the need for "a new story" (p. 16) in terms of how we view relationships, the environment, and organizations. She proposed that "life needs to link with other life, to form systems of relationships where all individuals are better supported by the system they have created" (p. 25). This supportive relational viewpoint is similar to Gilligan's (1982) ethic of care—especially in opposition to ethic of justice. Wheatley's (2007) description of the old or traditional story of "dominion and control" (p. 17) requires a mechanical, objective point of view which she contends as being obsolete in modern, uncertain times.

Riane Eisler (2005) illustrated gender identity differences in her domination model versus partnership model. She described the masculine dominance model as being characterized by "strong-man rule, rigid male dominance, institutionalized violence, and the devaluation of women and the 'feminine'" (p. 23). Conversely, Eisler (2005) described her partnership model as being characterized by valuing difference, equitable economics, conflict resolution by nonviolent means, and high esteem for collaboration. In order for this partnership model to be adopted, a "transformation of gender roles and relations" and a "redefinition of power and leadership in more stereotypically feminine ways" (p. 24) must take place.

2.2 Feminist Ethics

Fourteen years after Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, Jeanne Liedtka (1996) built upon the concept of ethic of care and linked it to "the effectiveness and the moral quality of the institutions in which we lead our work lives" (p. 181). Liedtka compared and contrasted ethic of care with organizational stakeholder theory noting that, at their essence, both recognize interdependence. The difference is that stakeholder theory relates to the interdependence of groups, whereas ethic of care focuses on interdependence among individuals.

Using Nodding's (1988) concept of caring, which is significantly different from the concept of problem-solving, Liedtka suggested that organizations can adapt a care orientation, but it takes conscious effort. Caring about customers versus viewing their needs as problems to be solved is essential. Further, the front-line employees who are in direct contact with those customers must be allowed to make changes and adapt to their needs. Thus, Liedtka (1996) asserted that organizations which are "flatter, quicker, and more intelligent at every level" will be more successful in the long run (p. 191).

Liedtka's attempt to bridge feminist ethic of care and organizational leadership is one of the first of its kind, and is why it is included in this review. She advocated for the possibility of an organization to adopt an ethic of care, both for its customers and its employees, but cautioned that changing an existing organization's culture is much more difficult than starting a company that adopts ethic of care values and practices at the beginning.

Silke Machold, Pervaiz Ahmed, and Stuart Farquhar (2008) referred to Liedtka's (1996) work on feminist approach and organizational caring relative to customers and employees and extended further into corporate governance. The authors offered an argument similar to Liedtka's that a feminist ethics perspective can equate to business effectiveness and success.

Their comparisons of ethic of care and feminist ethics are most applicable to my research. Machold et al. (2008) referred to Gilligan's (1982) web of individual connections analogy and created a feminist governance model which is also web-like. In it, care for concrete stakeholders, universal obligation of care to stakeholders, organizationally embedded care values, care-giving and receiving, fairness, and lack of harm are all aspects of the organization's web of relationships. As it would be impossible to genuinely care for all stakeholders (every customer, every employee, every vendor), the authors noted that maintaining an opportunity to be heard and represented, should one of these stakeholders desire it, allows for care on this level.

Machold et al. (2008) used the term *masculinist* to describe the opposite of feminist. They noted that their governance model is not suggested as being superior to a masculinist model but "rather it is meant to provide a different lens through which governance might be viewed" (p. 674).

In her 2007 article, Borgerson asserted that "feminist ethics has yet to live up to its potential in business ethics and corporate social responsibility" due to four factors (p. 478). These factors include recognizing the difference between feminist and feminine ethics, acknowledgement that care ethics are not related to feminine traits, understanding the differences between care and feminist ethics, and the distinction between feminist and postmodern ethics.

Borgerson (2007) advocated for inclusion of feminist (versus care or feminine) ethics in business ethics research and qualified this with the caveat that feminist does not necessarily apply to only women or to all women. She argued that ethic of care often pertains to feminine traits of caring and nurturing but does not theorize and attempt "to understand modes of exclusion, subordination, and oppression" related to feminism (p. 482).

Borgerson's distinction of terms is important in informing future research. The use of the term "feminist ethic of care" is, for the purpose of this research, not merely gender or feminine based but is inclusive of the feminist "reframing of responsibilities, relationships, and experience" (Borgerson, 2007, p. 494). As Borgerson cautions, "certain articulations of care ethics may express feminist concerns," though she suggests they can also be inherently different.

A quantitative study of gender differences in ethical judgments was executed by Iris Vermeir and Patrick Van Kenhove in 2008. Their Hypothesis 1 related to the double standard in which consumers are more likely to perceive an action as unethical if it is instigated by a salesperson versus a consumer. Hypothesis 2 (a and b) suggested that women are less likely to use double standards but that gender perception differences decrease as the unethicity of the action increases.

Vermeir and Van Kenhove's (2008) Study 1 was based on vignettes in which the respondents rated unethicity of situations (instigated by corporate employees or consumers) on a Likert scale. Hypothesis 1 was supported. Study 2 involved respondents rating scenarios with varying degrees of unethicity. In both cases, the authors ran an ANOVA to analyze their data. The results showed that "women are more inclined to rate a situation as less ethical compared to men" (p. 288). Further, women were found to be less likely to use double standards than men. However, in severe unethical scenarios, women and men's rating were no different. Thus, all hypotheses were supported.

This study by Vermeir and Van Kenhove (2008) was relevant in its exposure of differences in gender perceptions related to unethical behavior but did not seek to understand the underlying reasons for this difference. Further, study 2 was conducted using undergraduate

students as the respondents. These respondents and their perceptions are not necessarily indicative to how working adults may view similar situations.

An important aspect of decision making in an organizational setting is that of ethical perception. Through meta-analysis, Sean Valentine and Terri Rittenburg (2007) concluded that the substantial body of research shows no conclusive evidence that would support differences in ethical decision making between men and women. Prior literature does suggest, however, that there are differences in the manner in which men and women negotiate ethical dilemmas. Women also tend to react more overtly to questionable business practices. Some studies support that there are differences in the approach between men and women when addressing ethical concerns. Men and women view these issues through different lenses which are characterized by empathy and compassion in women and justice and fairness in men.

Rather than attempt to repeat studies purely on outcomes of decision making, Valentine and Rittenburg (2007) reframed the issue and proposed a hypothesis that “women’s generalized ethical reasoning is higher than men’s ethical reasoning” (p.127). The authors based their research on a study of 222 American and Spanish business executives. The study attempted to investigate ethical judgments and ethical intentions in decision making. The results indicated that women did have significantly higher ethical intentions than men but only marginally higher ethical judgments.

The relevance of Valentine and Rittenburg’s study within this literature review is the existence of different ethical lenses between men and women, and the general knowledge for organizations that women have a greater intention to act ethically as they approach the decision making process. This intention does not necessarily result, however, in different decision outcomes. Therefore, to this point, we see difference in approach and orientation regarding

decision making between men and women; but little if any difference in decision outcomes chosen.

2.3 Gender and Leadership

Some of the earliest and most cited authors on transformational leadership are Bass, Avolio, and Atwater. In 1996, they related transformational leadership style and gender in an important study. Bass et al. (1996) first reviewed prior literature which suggested mixed results regarding whether men and women lead differently. The authors, however, concluded that prior research had indicated that, depending on the organizational landscape and leadership style, women were perceived to behave in ways relating to transformational leadership more so than men.

Each of the five hypotheses posed by Bass, Avolio, and Atwater (1996) related to a particular leadership style and whether women are more or less likely than men to utilize that style. The authors suggested, and their research supported, that women are more likely to display transformational leadership style and would be rated as more effective, satisfying, and exert more extra effort than men. Their findings also provided evidence that women are less likely to use passive management-by-exception and laissez-faire leadership styles than men. They achieved mixed results, however, in women's use of active management-by-exception and contingent reward leadership styles.

In 2012, Gary Powell reviewed "the intersection of sex, gender, and leadership" from six different perspectives. He combined a literature review and meta-analysis of the studies conducted previously regarding gender and leadership. Powell (2012) concluded that women continue to hold fewer positions of power in leadership, particularly top positions.

Powell's meta-analysis on leader preferences showed that male bosses are preferred over female bosses, particularly by men. Masculine stereotypes are believed to be better suited to management; thus, men are thought to be better managers. Attitudes toward women still show hostility and prejudice relative to women in leadership roles. Leader effectiveness, however, has not been proven to be the domain of either masculine or feminine behaviors. Further, women are positively associated with transformational and contingent reward leadership style and men are more positively associated with management by exception and laissez-faire leadership style. Finally, according to Powell, organizational studies have shown that women leaders "rate higher than men in behaviour that contributes to their effectiveness as leaders and lower than men in behaviour that would detract from their effectiveness" (p. 133).

Powell (2012) further observed that organizations—especially in specific industries—are shifting away from more authoritarian, hierarchal structures to more democratic and participative structures. These evolving structures will help to reduce the advantage that men have in attaining top leadership positions. Wheatley's (2007) *new story* organizations, and Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey's (2007) knowledge era organizational structures drawing from complexity science both support Powell's observation.

In 2010, Simola, Barling, and Turner published an empirical study with the intent to determine whether the independent variable of moral orientation—ethic of care or ethic of justice—would predict leadership style. Simola et al. (2010) reported that prior research on leadership style, namely transformational and transactional, showed little relationship to moral orientation. The authors determined that those previous studies used different characteristics of ethic of justice, however; and no options existed for an ethic of care approach.

Using a multilevel regression analysis, Simola et al. (2010) supported both of their hypotheses which correlated ethic of care orientation to a transformational leadership style and ethic of justice orientation to a transactional leadership style. Further, the study showed a significant relationship between women and transformational leadership. The part of the study on leadership style was conducted using Bass and Avolio's Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) which has been used in numerous studies on transformational leadership.

Kate Grosser and Jeremy Moon (2005) explored leadership from a different viewpoint. They examined the "possibilities of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in advancing gender mainstreaming" (p. 532). Their primary research question asked how best to create an environment in which private businesses are likely to advance gender equality. The authors suggested that CSR is a means through which to accomplish this. Corporate social responsibility is becoming an important issue for organizations today. It serves as a marketing tool, a means of complying with government and environmental regulations, and a motivational tool for employees and vendors. Grosser and Moon (2005) argued that the corporate transparency created by CSR can be helpful in advancing gender equity and even gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming, as defined by the Grosser and Moon, is "a process of systemic transformation moving beyond equal treatment" to new organizational standards and practices for both women and men (p. 533). Focus on CSR and gender mainstreaming is affecting organizations in different ways. Certain investor groups such as the Calvert Group and UNIFEM are rating corporations on their CSR engagement and gender equality initiatives. The authors suggested that additional voluntary reporting on corporate gender initiatives should be requested by investors and stakeholders.

Grosser and Moon's (2005) article presents a positive business case for private companies to engage in gender equity and reduction in male gender bias. Most organizations are unlikely to change their masculine, hierarchal structure which continues to support the status quo—and those who have the power will work to keep their power. However, CSR—and the public's demand for visibility in the companies with whom they engage—is forcing organizations out of the status quo and into greater internal review of their norms and practices.

In the only narrative study I have found in my research, Marlene Fine (2009) executed a survey with fifteen respondents in senior leadership positions in a variety of private business, non-profit, and government positions. Her purpose for the study was to discover how women discursively construct their leadership, what their motives are, whether the respondents' input could help to “imagine new ways of talking and theorizing about leadership,” and how leadership can be redefined to be attractive to women (p. 183).

Fine (2009) recorded and then transcribed interviews in which the respondents were asked three questions relating to the purpose above. Several themes emerged through analysis of the transcripts. Leadership motive was attributed to having the right set of characteristics and skills and a desire to make a positive contribution. Leadership behaviors were attributed to teamwork and open communication. Expectations of others' behavior were most consistently expressed in being blindsided and/or disappointed by people who let them down or betrayed their trust. Implications for new ways of theorizing about leadership suggested a “moral discourse of leadership” in which ethical principles shape the leaders' behavior (Fine, 2009, p. 194).

The results of Fine's (2009) study are consistent with Gilligan's (1982) feminist ethic of care principles. Open communication, teamwork, valuing self, and giving back to communities are all attributes of relational care. This is an interesting study relative to my research given the

narrative approach. Interviewing women, within a given industry to determine the similarity (or lack thereof) to this study, is something that has not been explored and which my research will address.

One final aspect relating to women and leadership was explored by Ruth Mandel in 2003. In her chapter, Mandel posed the question of whether women today “might be opting not to move in traditional leadership directions” (p. 66). She suggested that one reason why women are so scarce in executive or top leadership positions is that, with the deck stacked against them, women are choosing not to force themselves to fit into traditional masculine molds. With other options now available, such as “part-time work, telecommuting, or small business ownership” (p. 71), women are making different, more appealing choices in terms of their priorities. Mandel described this issue as a “conundrum” (p. 72). The only way that the traditional leadership roles and practices will change is if women continue to infiltrate the ranks and change leadership from the inside. However, unfortunately few women are willing to make the sacrifices that it takes to get into the current masculine leadership “club”.

Mandel’s (2003) article continues to illustrate, even in the past decade, the concept of women as “other” in the realm of organizations and leadership. Having to fit oneself into a masculine mold to achieve a leadership position continues to deny an ethic of care orientation. Mandel has illustrated that, though women now have greater opportunities to achieve leadership roles—as achieved by women who have fought for three decades to help clear the pathway—many women today are instead choosing to opt out. For many women, the traditional, masculine domain has not changed and the requirement to distance oneself from her authentic ethic of care orientation is too costly.

In her empirical study of 497 women with graduate degrees, Elizabeth Cabrera (2006) found that 47% of women leave their career either permanently or temporarily at some point. While 35% reported childrearing as a primary reason, an overwhelming 62% cited a change of career focus. Cabrera found that key factors for women leaving corporate positions “is the masculinity of these organizational cultures” and the “clash between their ethical standards and those used in the business world” (p. 220-221). Additionally, Cabrera (2006) found that 46% of respondents indicated that work/life balance was an important consideration in career options.

Cabrera (2006) notes that while media focus on women’s departure from corporate careers tends to be on childrearing issues, her study suggests that this is not the case. She asserts that women’s choices in career paths are complex and influenced by three key issues: authenticity, balance, and challenge.

2.4 Synthesis

The literature on feminist ethic of care leadership orientation is discouraging from the perspective of the continued pervasiveness of traditional stereotypes and gender bias. The preponderance of current literature suggests that while women have made inroads, the costs and sacrifices required to achieve organizational leadership positions is still prohibitively high. However, some change may be on the horizon. With the advent of the knowledge era, organizations are realizing that new perspectives on leadership, hierarchy, teamwork, and relationship-building can be necessary for innovation and success.

Identity development, feminist ethics, and gender differences in leadership provide conceptual constructs for women’s feelings of difference and otherness, particularly in the workplace. My research will operationalize these constructs to determine whether the respondents understand ethic of care in their identity development, and to what degree they are

aware of, and are affected by, relational difference from their male counterparts in the workplace.

Fine's (2009) narrative study revealed common threads among fifteen highly successful women in a variety of industries. My study will focus on successful executive women in the same, relatively small, industry. These women, unlike Fine's respondents, are not necessarily exceptional overachievers but are more representative of middle-class women pursuing careers and achieving an attainable level of success.

CHAPTER 3

Narrative Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Women Executives

Feminism acknowledges a problematic view of women as framed against the male ideal—a concept which has been accepted by both men and women (Rosenbluth, 2011). This bias, related to negative gender stereotypes, pervades all aspects of society, particularly in the workplace. Having struggled with this problematic view in a male-dominated field, I as the researcher sought perspectives on how other women have integrated an ethic of care orientation (Gilligan, 1982) with a more masculine, justice orientation in order to achieve executive leadership positions in the home furnishings industry.

3.1 Strategy of Inquiry

This narrative study specifically focused on accounts of executive women in the home furnishings industry. The respondents included four women executives in a decision-making capacity at a vice president, equivalent, or higher level. Within the home furnishings industry, my informants were chosen from two different sectors: retail and wholesale/product development. In the retail sector, respondents were merchandise managers, marketing or advertising managers, or other executive level positions. In the wholesale/product development sector, respondents were product development, design, or marketing executives. Both sectors are male-dominated, involve a great deal of interaction with others, require management of a division or team, and include at least minimal amounts of travel.

Some of my informants are former work associates or industry friends. Others were recommended by those initial informants. Had I needed it, WithIt, a women's networking organization in the home furnishings industry, could have been contacted for recommendations.

3.1.1 Storytelling. Susan Chase (2011) identified four approaches to narrative inquiry: The Story and the Life, Storytelling as Lived Experience, Narrative Practices and Narrative Environments, and The Researcher and the Story (pp. 421-423). I have used two of these approaches in this study.

Chase (2011) describes Storytelling as Lived Experience as focusing on *how* informants tell their stories. Using in-depth interviews, the researcher is “interested in how narrators make sense of personal experience in relation to cultural discourses” (p. 422). The objective of my study was to understand my informants’ perspectives regarding *how* ethic of care orientation or otherness has affected their identity and authenticity in the workplace. My informants’ stories are their constructed realities and each informant’s representation of how she perceived and adapted to her work environment is meaningful and relevant.

Donald Polkinghorne (1996) emphasized another distinction relative to storytelling. He separated *life stories* from *identity stories*. Life stories are “publicly presented” (p. 366) to the interviewer and meant to inform. Identity stories, on the other hand, serve “in people’s lives as the source of their personal unity and purpose” and are “shaped by the questions and responses of the person to whom they are told” (p. 366). While Polkinghorne made this distinction in a discussion of narrative psychology, it has relevance to my study. Since my purpose and objectives related to documenting my informants’ perspectives on coping and adapting in a predominantly male work environment and impacts on their identity, their narratives fell into Polkinghorne’s identity stories category.

3.1.2 Role of the researcher. Epistemological questions, according to John Creswell (2013), include, “What is the relationship between the researcher and that being researched?” and “What counts as knowledge?” (p. 21). For the purposes of my research, the relationship

between me and my informants is that we “share cultural membership” (Pelias, 2011, p. 662) having worked and achieved an executive level in the home furnishings industry. This shared membership required reflexivity in order to be aware of my insider status but not to be a contaminating or negative influence (Pelias, 2011).

Knowledge is created as a result of the interaction between me and my informants (Guba, 1990). Through their stories, I hoped to create a greater understanding of our shared experiences. However, I acknowledge that my reality is a social construction based on my understanding and that I can never truly know or understand my respondents’ reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Maggie Savin-Baden and Lana Van Niekerk (2007) described the researcher’s role as being “an effective listener and to see the interviewee as a storyteller rather than as a respondent” (p. 464). Similarly, Polkinghorne (in Clandinin & Murphy, 2007) describes the narrative researcher as critical to encouraging informants to reach into areas that may not have been brought to light or explored previously.

3.1.3 Autoethnography. I indicated previously that I was using two of Chase’s (2011) approaches to narrative inquiry. In addition to Storytelling as a Lived Experience, I also used *The Researcher and the Story* (Chase, 2011). Chase describes use of this approach to “explore a topic or research question more fully by including the researcher’s experience of it” (p. 423). She includes autoethnography as a version of this narrative approach. Due to my insider status and similar career path as those of my storytellers, my experiences and perspectives have been relevant to my research purpose and objectives.

My role in the autoethnographic portion of the study is as one of five informants. I used the Interview Guide and the stories of the other informants to elicit and craft my responses.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection consisted primarily of narratives elicited using open-ended questions in one or a series of interviews. Interviews were conducted through a variety of methods due to the geographical disparity of the informants. While some informants are located in North Carolina and were interviewed face-to-face, others live in areas such as St. Louis and New York. These geographically distant informants were interviewed via internet audio channels, email, and telephone. In all cases, data were recorded through interview notes and audio transcriptions (Creswell, 2009).

The development of interview questions prior to ethnographic fieldwork can be problematic. Ethnography is inductive, and often the original questions are abandoned during the research process because they may have been selected on what gets proven in the field to be incorrect assumptions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). It is, however, important to focus an inquiry prior to engaging in the research process, even though that focus may shift as evidence is accumulated. My original research questions focused on developing an understanding of the informants' perceptions of: relational gender differences in the workplace, the degree to which women are aware of those differences, the degree to which they are made to feel difference by their male counterparts, and how they reconcile authentic self and difference in order to be successful in the home furnishings industry.

Narrative studies encompass a small number of interviews (relative to a quantitative study) which allow the use of individual stories—not to generalize—but to “highlight characteristics across a number of cases in order to link them to larger theoretical constructs” (Fine, 2009, p. 186). The purpose of interviewing respondents from a variety of executive positions within a particular industry is to determine whether their stories have suggested a new

or different theoretical approach to organizational leadership incorporating ethic of care orientation which may be applied beyond the industry (Fine, 2009).

The Interview Protocol included in the Appendix includes a series of questions that served as prompts for conversation (Creswell, 2013). This was by no means a required question checklist that was systematically employed. It merely served as a means of opening dialogue with my informants. Informants' full names and employers have not been revealed in the study. They have chosen a self-selected pseudonym.

Prior to executing the study, IRB approval was obtained through North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University's website. Informants' consent was obtained through verbal agreement to the university's standard Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Interview form.

The instrument for this study was an interview guide consisting of open-ended questions. Data analysis consisted of reviewing, organizing, and preparing the raw data, indexing the data, looking for emerging themes or issues, and interpreting meaning of themes or issues (Creswell, 2009). Specifically, interviews, conversations, oral and life histories, and narratives were transcribed. Member-checking was employed in which informants examined transcripts of recorded documentation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

Informant accounts were taken as analyses in their own right (Rosaldo, 1992). Additionally, grounded theorizing was used as an "iterative process" in which the narrative accounts offered by the respondents interplayed with the researcher's ideas and attempts at sense-making (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Integrative memos were used to recognize themes and categories, which, according to grounded theory, were not preconceived but emerged from

both inductive and deductive analysis throughout the entire research process (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

Data reliability was reviewed using reliability protocols as suggested by Creswell (2009). All transcripts were checked by the original interview informants to ensure that “they do not contain obvious mistakes during transcription” (Creswell, 2009, p. 190). While integrative memos were used instead of coding, strict attention was required to avoid “a drift in the definition” of emerging themes (Creswell, 2009, p. 190).

Validity was ensured through member checking of interview transcripts, researcher’s acknowledgement and review of bias (Creswell, 2009). Additionally, the use of “rich thick description” (Creswell, 2009, p. 191) was employed in my findings to represent details and nuances within the different settings.

CHAPTER 4

Storied Experiences and Created Findings of Women Executives

As stated in chapter one, the purpose of this study was to draw on ethic of care leadership orientation to document the perspectives of executive women in the home furnishings industry and the degree to which they are affected by gender difference or otherness from their predominantly male counterparts in the workplace. A second purpose was to document informant perspectives on how they have coped and adapted their communication style in typically masculine, hierarchal organizations. The third purpose was to explore my informants' perspectives on whether changing business conditions are increasing executive opportunities for women in the home furnishings industry.

The informants in this study were five women who are currently working or have worked the home furnishings industry and achieved, at minimum, the title of vice president or its equivalent. Two of my informants are currently in their qualifying position. Two others are retired or semi-retired. As the fifth informant, I have left the industry, at least temporarily, to work on my doctoral degree.

Informants were given a university approved copy of the Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Interview form either via email or in person prior to their initial interview. Each informant's consent was obtained verbally and is part of their transcript. Informants were interviewed at least one time each. Initial interviews ranged from 55 to 80 minutes. In two cases, email exchanges occurred after the initial interviews—one initiated by me and the other initiated by the informant. In one case, I initiated a third interview which was conducted using email. All interviews were member checked and approved via email communication.

4.1 Informant Profiles

Informant profiles highlight the qualifying position held relative to this study, and give some career background for the informants. In addition, an aspect of each informant's experience which makes her unique is also recognized. Identifying profile characteristics such as retail versus wholesale/product development experience and furniture category specialization are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Informant Profile Matrix

Informant	Qualifying Title-Status	Industry Function Experience	Specialty/Background	Specialty Furniture Category
Mia	Senior Vice President of Merchandising- Current	Retail	Retail Buying	Case Goods
Ruth	Vice President of Design- Retired	Wholesale/Product Development	Product Design and Development	Upholstery
Melanie	Vice President of Merchandising and Sourcing- Current	Retail and Wholesale/Product Development	Retail Buying and Product Development	Upholstery
Jean	Executive Vice President- Semi-retired	Wholesale/Product Development	Product Design and Development	Case Goods and Upholstery
Karen	Vice President of Merchandising- No longer in industry	Retail and Wholesale/Product Development	Retail Buying and Product Development	Case Goods and Upholstery

4.1.1 Mia. Mia is currently in her qualifying position of Vice President of Merchandising for a Midwest-based retail chain of home furnishings stores. She is in her mid-forties, has been with her current employer for ten years and in her current position for seven years.

Mia was born and raised in another country and moved to the United States as an adult in her early twenties. English is her second language, and she speaks with an accent. Because of her immigrant status, she says, “I felt more that I was discriminated as a minority more so than being a woman.” She argues that by choosing to live in large cosmopolitan cities, she has been better able to overcome, “who I am, how I look, how I speak, and my sex” than if she lived in smaller, more rural areas of the country.

Despite her immigrant status, Mia asserts that her experiences in home furnishings “have been very positive” considering that she achieved her vice president title in her late thirties. Regarding this achievement, she notes, “I think this is a very short time-frame considering that I never finished school here, considering that I do have an accent, considering that I do look different.”

Mia has spent her career predominantly on the retail side of the home furnishings industry. She was a buyer prior to attaining her current vice president position. Her buying expertise was in case goods—furniture made of wood (bedroom and dining room furniture versus upholstered furniture). Case goods, as Mia put it, “is on the top of the food chain,” in that it is typically the highest sales volume category in home furnishings retail businesses. She further elaborates, “This buyer carries a huge pen and with it a lot of power and prestige. It is a very coveted position, chased by many males and typically given to [the] alpha male.”

Mia leads a team of approximately twenty people including buyers, assistant buyers, inventory managers, and clerical staff. Her company employs over seven hundred people including corporate, warehouse, and retail sales staff. She is part of her company’s executive team, and notes that she is anticipating a title change to “senior V.P. level, which is only four of us and I’m the only woman.”

4.1.2 Ruth. Ruth is a retired home furnishings executive. Her qualifying title was Vice President of Design for an upholstery manufacturer/wholesaler. She began her career in the 1960s when “there were women in the field, but not specifically in management or design direction.”

Ruth went to a respected design school and began her career in the interior design trade in the northeast. Her interests extended beyond traditional interior design into furniture construction. She recalls, “I just became fascinated watching the things being built” at the design shop where she started her career.

Through a connection in the upholstery fabric business, Ruth was hired by an upholstery furniture manufacturer/wholesaler in High Point, North Carolina. At the time, the majority of furniture sold in the United States was being manufactured in North Carolina—in High Point, Hickory, or surrounding areas. Ruth moved to High Point to begin her career in upholstery design which eventually led to her achieving her vice president title.

After Ruth retired from her vice president position, she explains, “I started my own business and worked for five years as a design coordinator for a licensing firm.” She has also done freelance design work in her retirement but, “finally ended my last client . . . as of the end of the year.” Ruth remains active in home furnishings industry organizations and is featured in a permanent exhibit in a museum dedicated to the furniture industry.

4.1.3 Melanie. Melanie is currently Vice President of Merchandising and Sourcing for a chain of retail stores based in the Midwest. She is in her mid-fifties, and has been in the home furnishings industry for twenty three years. She has been with her current company for only a few months but had also achieved a vice president level with her previous employer.

Melanie began her career on the retail side of the home furnishings industry and was a retail buyer for over a decade. Melanie's experiences extend to the wholesale/product development function as well. She worked for two hybrid companies—companies that engage in both wholesale/product development and also own or franchise company-branded retail stores.

Melanie's retail buying and product development expertise has been in the upholstery category of home furnishings. Regarding the furniture categories, Melanie says,

I would say that most women that I knew were in the fabric side which is the more fashion side and most of the men that I knew were on the case goods side. And that most men felt more comfortable with case goods and most women felt more comfortable with upholstery and the fabrics. . . . I mean, I did know some women in case goods but not very many.

At her current company, Melanie is adjusting to a company culture that is unique in the home furnishings industry. At this “more enlightened, progressive company,” where “leadership and management of people is much more of the focus,” Melanie has been “reading countless books and approaches to management so that I can develop this skill set further.” She elaborates, “even though I've had this job title before, I was still a ‘doer’; whereas here, every single thing I do, I have to get done through somebody else.” While working for this “high-performance oriented” company has been a challenge, Melanie acknowledges that she “definitely had insecurity issues in starting the job,” but thinks that their cooperative, open culture is ultimately “pretty amazing”.

4.1.4 Jean. Jean is the home furnishings industry's female rock star. As a woman in the industry, if you do not personally know her, you know of her. Throughout her career, Jean has had many roles in product design, product development, design education, and even as a

syndicated columnist “in four hundred newspapers”. Her qualifying role for this study was Executive Vice President for a wholesale/product development company. She worked in this position for eight years and helped to grow the company’s annual volume “from about \$30 [million] to about \$150 million”.

When asked about her role in the home furnishings industry, Jean replies, “I used to say, ‘I’m a designer’. Then I used to say, ‘Well, I’m a product designer’.” Now, she answers:

I went through all these different phases of my career reinventing what I was, because people love tag lines and nomenclature, to put you in a cubby hole, but you couldn’t put me in a cubbyhole because I had all these experiences. And the two that have been the most consistent for me reflect how I’ve been able to adjust and that is, I consider myself a cultural anthropologist, because in order to do a good job in architecture and design, you have to study the common culture around you of the times to be able to interpret the needs of the consumer. That’s what you do.

And so that’s one role. The second thing is that I’m a creative strategist. The strategist, or creative business strategist, the word *business* became very important to incorporate that to be taken seriously. And I’ve learned that from the men because it’s well, “Who do you respect? Who do you look for?” “Well this guy, he’s a great leader, he’s this, he’s that.” “Oh, I read Jack Welsh’s book, you got to read it.” And whatever they read, or whomever they respected I listened very hard to that because I could then communicate with the same language to these guys. If I told them that I read Martha Stewart’s book on baking a cake, it wouldn’t have meant that much to them.

Jean began her career in the late 1960’s as an architect. She began working with a group of land developers creating luxury and resort condominiums. In the process of developing and

then selling the condominiums, “we would ‘merchandise’ the properties, enhancing the space that would capture the imagination of the consumer.” Jean notes that while visual enhancement is common practice in real estate now, it was “in its infancy when I got started”. She further suggests that, “All those type of visual enhancements which later became known as visual merchandising of the real estate is similar to visual merchandising in the retail stores.”

Jean’s career eventually led her to searching European furniture markets to furnish hotels and condos that we she was helping to develop. She began working with some furniture factories in Europe to develop specific furniture designs for these properties. At one point, an American furniture wholesaler saw her products and “asked if he could show my goods” at the High Point furniture market “and told me he’d pay me a royalty.” She agreed to do so and began a lucrative endeavor in which she was paid a percentage on every piece of her furniture that was sold. She began to gradually get more involved in furniture design and eventually left her architectural career behind.

Jean is in her late sixties and is still working, at least part time, in the industry. She attributes her long-lived success to, “My credibility—I take very good care of it. I really have a very high standard of ethics. And I think that’s a very, very, very critical part of someone’s professional reputation.”

4.1.5 Karen. I began my career in home furnishings directly after finishing my undergraduate degree in the late 1980s. My work experience was initially in the retail buying side of the home furnishing industry. I specialized in both case goods and upholstery during the buying phase of my career, and agree with Mia and Melanie that case goods buying tended to be more male-dominated while upholstery buying tended to be more populated with women.

After fifteen years of retail buying involving relocations to four different states, I moved to North Carolina to begin working in wholesale/product development. It was in this arena that I achieved my qualifying position of Vice President of Merchandising. In this position and the one I held prior to it, I developed case good products in Asian factories. What had been true of retail case goods buying was even more so in wholesale/product development—that my counterparts were almost exclusively male.

I traveled to Asia, most commonly China, on average of five times per year. The trips lasted from ten to fourteen days. They were grueling. The first night may have been spent in a major city—Shanghai, Beijing, Saigon—but then I was typically taken to an industrial area that was littered with huge shoe, leather goods, and, of course, furniture factories. Local hotels and meal options were challenging at best. In the summer months, I lived in fear of malaria carried by mosquitoes that were everywhere including my hotel room, factories, and especially bathroom stalls—where the standing water in the open drains that served as toilets were a mosquito breeding ground.

One of the more challenging aspects of Asian travel was the difference in cultures. China's culture is especially patriarchal; and I was typically greeted last and treated as insignificant by factory owners and managers despite the fact that I was often the most senior person in our group. I began to build relationships over time which helped me to earn at least some of the Chinese managers' respect.

In 2009, I was laid off from my job as Vice President of Merchandising. The Great Recession had impacted the home furnishings industry dramatically; and I was the least tenured executive in my company. Though I continued to work in the industry for another two years, I began to explore the idea of returning to school to work on my doctoral degree. I always wanted

to teach at some point in my career—it was the reason I had gone back to school for my master’s degree—so I decided that this might be right time. I have not looked back.

4.2 Themes

Through fieldnotes analysis and indexing of the interview transcripts, five distinct themes emerged relating to the objectives of this research. Each of the five themes will be discussed using the words and ideas of my informants through their interviews. Laura Ellingson (2011) asserts that this method of data analysis “will be understood as the process of separating aggregated texts (oral, written, or visual) into smaller segments of meaning for close consideration, reflection, and interpretation. . . .such as through construction of themes or patterns” (p. 595).

Ellingson (2011) further advocates for “a postmodern influenced approach to triangulation” (p. 605) called *crystallization*. Crystallization, as described by Ellingson (2011), involves the use of multiple genres to explore a given topic. Use of more than one genre allows for richer exploration and understanding of that topic. In this research, the informants’ stories are crystallized through autoethnographic stories. Utilizing both perspectives, “eschews positivist claims to objectivity and a singular, discoverable truth and embraces, reveals, and even celebrates knowledge as inevitably situated, partial, constructed, multiple, and embodied” (Ellingson, 2011, p.605).

4.2.1 Advantages and disadvantages of being a woman. All of the informants except for Mia indicated that being a woman in the home furnishings industry was, for at least a period of time, an advantage. *Ruth* says, “Surprisingly enough it probably was a plus in my career when I started in the 60s because I was somewhat unique in the industry.” She further asserts, “The fact that I was a woman, entering the field or appearing in the field with an excellent company

was a drawing card for the home furnishings media.” At the home furnishings markets, Ruth says of the editors and writers for the home furnishings industry publications:

They came to see me . . . because they were always looking for material to write about that would be a little different. I was the different person. So I did, early on, have the bonus of having quite a bit of press coverage and became known in the industry because of that.

Melanie corroborates Ruth’s assertion of gender advantage. She acknowledges that in the mid-1990s,

Being a woman was to my advantage because there had always been so many men in the industry that all of a sudden somebody, somewhere along the way discovered that women were the ultimate customers and that they need more women on their staff because who else can relate to women but other women?

Melanie also recalls a recent conversation with her current boss that shows a negative side to female advantage:

I was talking to my new boss and we were just sort of reminiscing about my interviewing days which were fairly recently since I’m new to the company, and he told me—we were talking about who else I was up against towards the end of the hiring decision and it was a gentleman that I was up against. And he came out and just told me, “Honestly, I really wanted a woman or a gay man.” He goes, “That was my preference in this position because I want to be sure that they have a more sophisticated or more sensitive taste palate, you know, taste level.” And of course I didn’t say anything because I was perfectly happy that he selected me. However, seriously? [Laughter] So gay men and women are just instantly born with this talent?

When asked her opinion on the matter, *Jean* says, “I think being a woman in home furnishings has definitely been an advantage.” Her viewpoint is a bit different from the others in that she sees advantage from the consumer’s viewpoint versus from an organizational viewpoint. She explains:

The largest percentage of the purchasing power of home furnishing products are women. The insight to women’s likes, tastes, functional needs, and the way she goes about making those selections—that knowledge makes it really important. Yet, the industry has been dominated by the decision makers, predominantly men, over the years. So, being a woman and one of the few women when I first entered the product development process and the merchandising process was really a distinct advantage. But it also was met with a lot of skepticism because the male dominated decision makers really felt that women didn’t know enough about the manufacturing process, didn’t know enough about supply chains, didn’t know enough about anything that they saw as their domain, meaning the male domain.

Mia did not relate any experiences in which being a woman was an advantage in her career. To the contrary, *Mia* recalls several instances in which being a woman put her at a disadvantage:

So in [my] first five years I felt very welcome in the industry and I felt like I belonged and then I got pregnant with my second child, which was a desired event. And after I had the baby and I stayed home for, I don’t know six months, and I worked part time. What took place was that a guy that I worked with who came from the stores and basically knew less than I did—granted I was young and he was older—but my experiences were already stronger in the wholesale part of the business that we both shared. So basically,

he came before I went on maternity leave and by the time I came back as a full time employee he was my boss.

So before I went we were equal and then I came back and he was my boss. So that didn't really sit well with me quite honestly, because I felt that I was penalized for being a woman and having a child and I felt that I was being passed over. So that was the first negative experience that I had.

Mia further elaborates on her experiences of disadvantage as a woman:

[On] my road to success, to get any attention from my superiors I felt that I had to over perform and be not just ok but extraordinary. I have always had high expectations from myself but the desire to be seen and recognized elevated my own expectations to another tier. My peers (mainly male) with few exceptions were not extraordinary but mediocre. Their success was contributed to [by] other factors. Right or wrong, my perception was that their journey was a lot easier than mine and I resented that, hence I resented them too.

Melanie also recounts how the same advantage she enjoyed in the 1990 came around to ultimately hurt women in the home furnishings industry:

I can remember seeing people promoted—I worked for a large company—because people wanted to promote women; and some women might have been promoted before they were ready, and they were only promoted so quickly because they were women. So that can hurt the women in the industry because you don't want to promote a woman and then have her do a bad job or break down crying in a meeting or because of the stress ... So promoting some women too early back in the day, I can remember just shaking my head and thinking these people are not giving women a good name. They were promoted

because they were women and now people are like, “See what happens when you promote women? They can’t take it.”

Melanie highlighted an additional aspect of disadvantage relative to being a woman in an executive position in the home furnishings industry. She notes of her executive male counterparts, “They didn’t really want to take the opinions of a woman. They just wanted to have their token woman.” She elaborates:

Just because on paper somebody wants their token woman, doesn’t mean that they actually want to listen to them; it just means that they actually want one on the team. And I think that there is an overriding stereotype that the men were more of the numbers people and that the women can pick the pretty product.

So, fairly recently in my career, in my last position, of which I was Vice President of Merchandising for a different company than I’m at now, I was in a meeting where the corporate office was discussing somewhat of a restructuring done of the merchandising area and how the different companies that roll up to this company were going to interrelate, and I recall asking a question in the meeting and being told in an extremely condescending voice that I really don’t need to worry myself about the numbers because I’m just there to develop pretty product. Somebody actually said that. And that person was a senior level executive of this parent company.

Ruth recalls her early days in North Carolina in her vice president role and some of the disadvantages that she experienced:

Of course, in the internal workings of the companies, I was spending not only design time in the design studio, but a great deal of time in the factory. I became very involved in the manufacturing, the creation of samples and determining exactly how I wanted things to

appear and sit on its upholstered furniture. So part of being an executive was a great deal more difficult at the factory level because these men who were well established and excellent craftsmen, many had worked from the time they got out of high school in the field, and having a woman dictate what they were to do was very difficult for them at first.

I will say that there was the overall factory manager who really hated me and never, in the seven or eight years that we worked together until he retired, never once called me by name ... never spoke my name, even to the other workers. You know, "She wants you to do this" or, "She says this," but they really thought it was funny. They didn't mind, you know they're really great, and so it almost was a joke behind his back. But he never got over it, never got over that I had the right to say, "No I don't want this done," or, "There should be more springs in the back of this sofa," or whatever.

Jean recalls a decided gender disadvantage in the early days of her career. When she started in the 1960s, she observes:

I went into my field that was male dominated from the very beginning. And they'd see a woman walking on the jobsite, they would put boards in front of me to trip on. I mean, you wouldn't believe what these contractors ... they hated women on the jobsite in the beginning. I mean it was terrible.

Jean noted further:

You had to prove your worthiness. And you did have to work twice as hard, and you did have to keep your emotions in check, and you couldn't let them see you cry. All those things are really true, because you had to play with[in] their terms. You weren't going to change them overnight.

Karen: My experiences were similar to Melanie's, relative to gender advantage in getting a job and disadvantage in actually doing the job. In the early 2000s, I left the retail buying side of home furnishings and moved into the wholesale/product development arena. Retail buying executives realized earlier on that having women as buyers made good business sense. I think it also helped that on the retail side, you are much closer to the consumer (who is likely to be female) than on the wholesale side. So by the time I moved to wholesale/product development, they were just realizing that having a woman on the team might just be a desirable thing.

Once I got the position, however, all advantage ceased. As Melanie emphasized, I was the token woman. At the home furnishings markets, my male boss and sales counterparts would trot me out to talk with the female buyers (our customers) that came into our showroom. It was as if to say, "See how enlightened we are? We have a woman too!"

However, in the day-to-day work, it was clear that I was supposed to tailor my work and communication styles to those of my male counterparts and boss. When I would try to interject a more feminine approach to product development, it was usually dismissed or ignored. So I did what I had always done in previous jobs, I adapted to their way of working and thinking—at least while I was in their presence and interacting with them.

4.2.2 Fortune versus self-confidence. The concept of being lucky or being more fortunate than other women who did not achieve the same level of success is common among the four informants—particularly in the early parts of their careers. However, they all also acknowledged that confidence and knowing themselves and their strengths was essential to their long term success.

Mia discusses her early career experience commenting that she was “very privileged to have quite a bit of good mentors in the industry that helped shape my career, that also shaped my style and how I do what I do.” She elaborates:

My [educational] background is in economics, which came in handy, but I’m not a designer. I don’t have, as I said, a day of school here [in the United States]. So I think I had a lot of things that were going against my success, but I think I was oblivious up to a point and I was fortunate to not have any bad experiences until about five years into it. So I’m still in it clearly. It suits me.

Ruth also affirms that at least some her early success was due to outside help. She argues that without this fortunate set of circumstances she would not have had the opportunity to achieve her future success. She says,

I think actually I was very fortunate in starting off, as I said, with this firm in New Jersey. Very nice people and nice product, and [I] learned the fabric. People who were selling really excellent fabrics, they are the ones ... the president of one of those companies had his sales manager who traveled down here [North Carolina] personally call and set up interviews for me and therefore he knew the kind of company that would be using his fabrics.

So I suppose that introduction was crucial. When I think of trying, let’s say, to come down here on my own and breaking into the business, I don’t think that ever would have happened. I never ... the companies that I might have approached probably would have had no interest. So it was a very auspicious start for me that I totally appreciate.

In discussing her entry into the home furnishings industry as a woman, *Melanie* also attributes good fortune as playing a role. She asserts,

So I think I was lucky enough to fall into probably somewhat of a reverse discrimination or just a little bit discriminatory because everybody needed their token woman and they all wanted them as buyers and as somewhat middle level leaders in the home furnishings industry. So I think I fell into some luck there because everybody wanted the token woman.

Regarding her prior discussion about women being promoted before they were ready and being set up for failure, Melanie insists about herself,

Yeah, I think I was just promoted at the right time and maybe was able to take the pressure of bigger jobs. So I think in that regard I was lucky. I think having good bosses also plays a role in that.

Despite her many accomplishments in the home furnishings industry, *Jean* made a point of acknowledging at least one aspect of her life in which fortune played a role. She explains,

I think I was extremely fortunate that I had a life partner, that I, you know, not everybody's been that lucky, women with careers, and I had a husband who was gold. He really, I'm not sure I would've evolved the way I did had I not been married to him. I'm pretty sure about that. He was strong and confident, and didn't feel threatened. He was my best cheerleader. "Go for it, do it, don't worry, I'll pick up the kids," you know? That type of thing. And in an age when it wasn't common at all, so, you know, I consider myself very, very fortunate.

In contrast to the concept of external luck or fortune, each informant discussed self-knowledge and confidence as being integral to maintaining her success. *Mia* described a time in her career when one of her key buyers left the company and she was doing both her job as vice president and the absent buyer's job. She says that she was "unhappy and frustrated" and not

spending enough time with her family. Fortunately, during this time period, Mia was scheduled to attend a week-long leadership conference on the west coast. Between what she learned at the conference and time for self-reflection, Mia realized she needed to meet with her boss:

So I had to sit down and say, "Hey, I can't do this anymore." That was the first time that I was brave enough I guess, to step in and say, "No, I need this and I need this and I need this. In order for me to function, in order for me to give back and be effective I need all of this. I can't do this for you anymore. I will gladly help you in some other shape or form, but I can't. It's not good for me; it's not good for my relationship with my peers."

About her relationship with her peers, Mia is aware of both her high standards and her shortcomings. She asserts:

For some reason, I choose to treat people at my level differently and that maybe comes from wanting to be understood, wanting to be—maybe not respected, but viewed as equal. I expect a lot more [from] people on my level because I do expect the same level of commitment . . . I expect a full alignment for the future, for the company.

Caring about people is probably the biggest thing on my list and then commitment to professionalism and commitment to a good quality work, not mediocre, but good quality work. And those are the two things that I'm looking for, and when I don't see them I'm not very forgiving. So that piece of my personality has created friction and probably will. I don't know that I'll ever really find a solution—I mean, find a whatever, but I think at this point, it is who I am.

When asked about her the source of her confidence, Mia acknowledges that coming to the United States as an adult motivated her. She maintains that her confidence "is part of who I

am and once I landed into . . . furniture, I felt that this was the right place to me. I think I was oblivious to obstacles because that's just how I chose to live my life.”

Mia also acknowledges that time and experience have increased her confidence. She says of this point in her career:

It makes it a lot easier and not just that you have innate confidence, this fearlessness in you, now you have experiences and now you have all this knowledge and now you're an expert in your field. So it's not even something you'd have to talk about, it just shows when you walk into the room and when you start saying things and people stop talking because they want to hear what you have to say. That feels good, right?

She continues,

Every time you step into a new role it takes you about a year to understand what the position is about and it takes several years to mold it to what you think it should be. So every time you climb the mountain and you view below it's like, "Okay, this was hard but I made it," and then there's another mountain to climb and it just keeps—you keep building and building and building. But I don't think it was that hard looking back. I really don't think, because I was looking forward to it. I wanted it. I wanted the challenge. I didn't want to be a housewife back in [home country] and just work seven to three. That wasn't good enough. I wanted the challenge; I wanted the struggle and got it. I want it all, man, I want it all! [Laughter]

Ruth presents a pragmatic view of her confidence when she observes, “you know, I just do what I do and I have always had the experience that [if] you do it well and it makes [the owners] a lot of money, it warms a lot of hearts.” She laughingly recalls an experience when she

went to work for a new company and presented her designs to the company owner and several of his sales representatives:

Of course they hated everything I was doing—and I left, I would say, by mutual agreement at the end of the meeting. That just taught me a lesson that I'd better stay where I knew what I was doing and where they knew what I was going to do.

Ruth underscores that, other than this one bad experience, she worked for only two other companies as a design executive, for fifteen years each, “and always on a level of where I was able to discriminate and show progress in design direction or whatever without a lot of adversity.” She further reflects,

I think that's very important—to know who you are. So that you know, as I say of this disastrous situation, you know you just don't belong here and you walk away. I mean I didn't try to amend my decisions or compromise. Not that I never compromise, because of course there were always questions, should you do this or that; but that was within the context of the goal. Not going in a completely different direction that you know is not representative of what you're able to accomplish.

Melanie acknowledges that building her confidence has come, in many cases, through making mistakes. She admits that,

I think I just tried to compensate for being a woman in a man's world by being tougher. I tried to be tougher and sort of the epitome of professional. Or what I viewed to be the epitome—which, in retrospect, was nothing of the sort.

In the short time that *Melanie* has been with her new company, she has already learned to adopt a communication style that is tailored to each of her employees and peers using “words that the person is going to be familiar with” based on their personality type. She marvels at her

new boss who, “plays on what people’s strengths and personalities are and makes sure that his team is interrelating and supporting each other. It’s almost like too good to be true. It seriously is.” Melanie further discusses how different this experience has been relative to her other positions in home furnishings:

So, starting a new job at another company has never been difficult because they’re all sort of the same. This is the only one that I’m like shocked of how different it is, and the fact that it’s in this industry, which is fairly non-progressive in any kind of management of people and things.

That said, when asked whether she would have stayed in the industry had she not taken her current job, Melanie emphatically states, “Yes, I would. Yes, there was another company that I was entertaining working for. It was a much smaller company and more than likely that’s what I would have done.” She concedes about home furnishings,

It’s the industry that I can make the most money in. I don’t want to start in a new industry because the only reason I can get the paycheck that I get is because somebody is paying for my experience. So I would not have really wanted to leave the industry, except if I was willing to accept a much lower pay. So that’s why I would stay in the industry; and also, you establish a reputation in the industry and you hate to lose that and have to start from scratch somewhere [else].

While *Jean* gives credit to her late husband for supporting her in her career, she is also very emphatic in pointing out her accomplishments. She asserts, “I think that played very well in a male dominated industry—that I could back up creativity with hard, cold facts, reality of dimension—and that earned a lot of respect.” She is not afraid to take chances and to speak her mind. She describes an exchange that occurred a couple of years after she began creating

designs for an American furniture wholesaler. She asked the company owner, “You know, I’ve got all this market research I’m working with, I’ve got all these ad agencies and these land developments, and frankly, what do you know?” She describes the rest of the exchange:

He said, “I know what my customers want.”

I said, “Who are your customers?”

He said, “My customers are-” and he names off all these retailers and showrooms.

I said, “Those aren’t your customers. I’m dealing with your customers. I’m designing the homes and condos for the consumer. And I’m designing it from their perspective.”

I said, “I would really like to do the next collection from my perspective instead of your retailer.”

He said, “Well, I don’t know if they’ll buy it,”

And I said, “I don’t know if they will either, but let’s try it,”

You know? It sounds so elementary, and so, so basic, but it wasn’t. It was radical at that time because the majority of the—none of the manufacturers at that point were using women in their process at all. . . . So they were widget-driven engineers at best, good furniture engineers, or marketing people, sales oriented, or they were 3rd generation with sawdust in their veins.

They weren’t consumer driven. . . . today we say that, it rolls off our tongues like it’s breathing, but that was a totally radical idea, to think about making things that the consumer wanted, especially women. The furniture was being designed by men for men because the [retail store] buyers were predominantly men.

Many years later, when Jean met with the general manager of the company with whom she would attain her executive vice president position:

I'd never even heard of them. But they were ready to grow their business beyond home office, and they'd heard of me, and really wanted to bring me in. But they weren't even sure what they needed because it wasn't really corporate structured.

And I met the general manager, who, you know, I said, "You don't even have a marketing department. You're just thinking home office. I don't think this is a good fit at all."

And he said, "No, that's why we need you."

And I said, "I do collections."

And he said, "What's a collection?" [Laughter]

Yeah, and then I said, "You don't really have any marketing. I mean, no one knows who you are. You're not a national player, and I don't mean to sound egotistical, but I need a bigger playground, and you're a small company."

And he said, "I can be in any playground you want. I can be your playground."

He knew he needed help, and they were ready to grow the business. So they had saturated home office. And I walked around their showroom and there was no signage, their product was lined up like washing machines, one after the other, *but* they had fabulous functionality built into their home office.

They had it wired for plugging in your computer. It was pre-wired, and I looked at that and I started thinking back to all my custom interiors, and all the kind of things we had to do for consumers and their homes when we were building these luxury developments. And I said, "There's technology."

I asked him, “Does everybody in home office industry do that?”

And he said, “No, that’s why we’ve grown so fast. We developed these wires in China, because we make everything in China, and we don’t have a patent on it, but nobody else has bothered with it.”

The whole thing took twenty minutes, honest to God. It’s really the truth. And I said, “But the main thing is, I want to take your wiring system, and see what I can do with it in other furniture.”

He said, “What do you mean?”

And I said, “I don’t know what I mean. I just know I want to do it and I want to go over to China, and I want to see all the component pieces they have in that factory. All the pieces.”

You know, I went right back into my own, my old functional architectural mode. . . . Functional logic and my woman’s perspective—now there’s a combination.

Karen: I would not attribute my success in the home furnishings industry to luck or fortune—even if I were asked directly if that was the case. I admit, I had some lucky breaks. But I ascribe to the doctrine of, “the harder you work, the luckier you are.” I worked my tail off—much to the detriment of my personal life. Opportunities came as a result of my maintaining a strong industry network and keeping my eyes and ears open.

I am not suggesting that I didn’t have help or mentors along the way. But even the help I received and the relationships I developed were a result of careful cultivation. Where I was able to succeed in growing in my career—as opposed to others who may not have gone as far—I do not perceive this as being influenced by random outside forces in the name of luck or fortune.

That said, I had a lot to learn over the years; and I made numerous mistakes. As Mia noted, confidence comes with time and experience. I was no exception to that.

After working in retail buying for fifteen years, I moved over to wholesale/product development. In many ways, this was like starting my career over. I had developed my confidence as a buyer. I had been promoted over the years from buying small-volume categories to the buying the highest volume category in the company. I was good at retail merchandising and I knew it. But numerous relocations, stagnant growth opportunities, and company bankruptcies and dissolutions took their toll. I was presented with an opportunity to move to the High Point area—wholesale furniture central—and I took it, thinking that it would be more secure than the ever-changing retail landscape. This was not necessarily the case, as my layoff in 2009 confirmed. But at the time, the decision seemed to be the right one.

I'm not sure that I ever had the same confidence level in product development that I had in retail buying. The positions I held in wholesale/product development were much more precarious, though not necessarily due to things that I could control. For example, in my first product development job, I was hired by the company's Senior Vice President of Sales and Merchandising. I'd known this man for about ten years. He came to Atlanta, where I was living at the time, and we spent a day together going to various furniture stores and discussing product trends and the position that he wanted me to fill.

About a week later, I was flown to High Point to meet with the president of the company and other employees at the company's office. I met several people in the organization including a young man that was in the department I would be joining. Finally, I accepted the job and began the relocation process to High Point.

My first day with the company was during the spring High Point home furnishings market. I had flown in the night before, and the gentleman who had hired me picked me up early in the morning. As we drove to the market, he began referring to “the person you’ll be reporting to”. This was the first I’d heard of this, as this man had been talking as though I would work directly for him up to this point. Inside, I was panicking.

We got to the market, went to the company’s showroom, and I was brought over to the young man I’d met briefly several weeks prior who was now to be my boss. I could tell from his reactions that he had not had much more notice of me than I’d had of him. We stumbled through getting to know one another. Our relationship never quite became comfortable in the nearly four years that I worked for him. I was not his choice and had been thrust upon him. I was older and more experienced than him (he’d only been in the industry for two years), and he had never managed anyone other than clerical staff. Oh, did I mention that he was the company owner’s son-in-law?

4.2.3 Striving for authenticity in the workplace. A theme that recurred repeatedly in each of the interviews centered around authenticity in the workplace. All four informants indicated, at some point in their interviews, that their role models or mentors were typically men—largely because there were no other women around to fulfill those roles. As a result, they learned much of their professional skills from a man’s point of view. Each informant had to reconcile that masculine perspective with her own identity as a woman in the workplace. *Mia* candidly describes the process as being quite painful once she reached an executive level. She reveals,

Since I always had male mentors in this male-dominated industry, my communication skills were shaped by how men behaved. So I was mimicking what I was seeing. So

while I did not—until I developed my own style, I was mimicking the guys' behavior and it wasn't natural to me and it was viewed by my peers as a negative because I was maybe too—what's the word—direct and too maybe in-your-face just like what I saw guys do, right? But when you—as a woman [do] that, that's not a good thing.

So part of it is that, but the other part of it is that since there aren't that many women on that level, men don't always know how to behave, period. They don't know how to behave around women. They're behaving like they're around guys and if they have things to talk about which is sports or whatever, golfing or name it you know--things, they don't really know how to communicate and how to handle women. I mean, I came across some men that really were afraid to look at you in the eye, how to say hello and whatnot.

So part of it is that there are very few women on their level so it is—well, I entered that world not quite having my own style and I'm mimicking the guys and then because there are so few of us, there's a lot of guys that don't know how to behave the right way and create the wrong perception of you, label you, don't really give you a chance. As I said, part of it you bring in because that's how it goes and part of it is just that their perception is that you're not feminine enough and I think that piece I had to mold because I realized that I'm not getting—I'm actually creating enemies that way versus softening my approach.

So two things happened—I felt that I didn't belong and they felt that I didn't belong. So I had to either accept it or—I felt the need that something has to change and I had to change. So I wasn't happy. I wasn't happy with my own style. So I had to soften it up because I had to bring it closer to who I am. As a woman, I realized that I can really

accomplish a lot more with a softer approach and it suits me better. So I'm not going to be run over because I'm softer or I actually realize that I can get further by being closer to who I am and what I am than mimicking other people.

As a boss, however, Mia's behavior was quite different. She explains,

I think I was in my early thirties when I had my first direct report and I think that was the best experience I could have had. It was somebody that was not valued by the company, super hard worker, who maybe also felt slighted and had a chip on her shoulder. . . . So I kind of got this person that was troubled and not valued.

So we're having these frictions and she's not happy that I'm her boss and maybe I'm probably not happy that she's my direct report because of all the attitudes and all the past and history there. But she was the best thing that could have happened to me because I worked with her—it forced me to think about how to win her over and how to create this little team of two and then later three, in a way that suits me.

So I realized back then that I really truly wanted to help her and that I really have to communicate that to her in order to win her over. But I do see—I thought about her, thought about what she's good at, what she's not good at, to then see what the opportunities are, what are the things that I can help her with to make her better and make her feel connected?

And I think one thing that goes well for me and that as an immigrant, I really don't have family here. I have very limited family and so at the workplace I'm seeking for the family feel. So when I'm at the workplace I like to connect. I like to feel connected, and I spent a lot of time with her to understand who she is, how she thinks,

her family life and truly interested and over time she understood me and I understood her and we worked in unison to where—we worked well together for several years.

Of the team of people that report to her currently, Mia says,

I realized how I can influence people; that I can influence in a bad way, but I can also influence them in a good way and that kind of became my mantra. So that's the kind of boss that I chose to be, which is create a little family inside a big family as a business. I look at our company as a family of 700 families that work in unison. Inside there I have my team of 15-20 people that is another little family as well, to where we choose to laugh together and work together and have parties at home and I really go out of my way to get to know them and to connect with them and I'm happy when they move on to bigger and better things. I feel that I have influenced in a good way.

Previously, *Ruth* described a factory manager that was not able to accept having a woman telling him what to do. Many of her interactions and direct management experiences were with male factory employees. She discusses how she worked with these men and the lessons she learned:

I learned early on, the first factory, when I made my first sample—it was a tufted sofa and the sample maker tufted it the way he'd always tufted it. I had told him I wanted it to be soft and puffy and he made it stuffed like a sausage, hard as a brick, but beautiful. You know, every tuft and every button was precise; and he, of course, was waiting with pride to show me. And of course I was horrified but trying not to show it. But I said, “No that's not really what I want,” and he did walk off the job. In fact he quit as of that moment—that I would tell him his perfect tufts weren't perfect! So you learn ... you don't say, “I don't like those tufts,” you say, “Let's try ...” [laughter].

Ruth offered another example:

I wanted to make an ottoman that was square on the bottom, very tightly upholstered and then very puffy tufts on top. So I went to my sample maker, of course I had a sketch, but I was trying to describe the contrast again and he looked at me and he said, “You mean just like a loaf of bread?” “Exactly, when it comes out of the pan and the top is like ...” you know. That’s the kind of thing that I remember because it taught me to respect that aesthetic sense that he had without the formal design education or any of his background, wonderful craftsman, but he could see in his mind how I wanted the piece to look and he was able to do it.

I really, genuinely admired what they were doing. I was knowledgeable enough about crafts and skill so that I was able to understand what they were doing and work with them to change some of the things that they were doing. So after a reasonable amount of time, I think the gender question really became negligible.

Ruth points out, “I never had a big staff or anything,” but she did have assistants and fabric buyers who reported to her. She describes a particular male fabric buyer and her management style with him:

We agreed about 90% of the time on the selections and trends and everything. We hatched everything and went to New York together to look at the lines to get an idea. I would have my sketches ready at that point. So he would have an idea of the type of proportion and style that we needed. But it was his responsibility to make the final selection. And as I said, we agreed about 90% of the time and fought bitterly the other 10%, but it was his decision.

I think you have to totally accept that you're not going to rule the world. I mean, if he felt that strongly it was right, even though I knew it was wrong, you know ... I was only correct 50% of the time. But he had that decision and that was important and he was very good at his job.

When asked about her role models, *Melanie* says, "I really have not had that many great role models, at least not in recent years." She elaborates, "The industry as a whole feels very political, and I don't know, they just don't seem to have updated with the times as far as a more progressive style of management." When asked how she developed her leadership style, in the absence of good examples, she replies,

I probably did it poorly at the beginning and at the beginning I think I behaved more like a man would behave with people in terms of my staff. I slowly evolved into maybe my own style of management as opposed to emulating the styles of management that I saw as examples which were more of a male style of management.

So there is a difference, I think, between how men and women manage and that's definitely a stereotype that I'm saying, but as an overall, I mean I'm sure it's not true of everybody but there is different styles and eventually I felt confident enough in my own style to go with that as opposed to just trying to emulate what's been done before. I happen to have direct reports that have very responsible management positions so I don't want to dictate what they should do. I try to help by asking them questions but really hoping that they're going to resolve their own problems and answer their own questions as opposed to me telling them what to do. I believe that giving my folks the most information, as much information as I know is preferable whereas sometimes ... and this

might be more a different company as opposed to male versus female, but in many companies, information is power and it's not shared that often.

Melanie elaborates on her management style:

I don't know if it's because I'm female or if it's because I'm in this more enlightened company, but I would say that my management style is more collaborative. I also am fairly relaxed as a manager and I want work to be fun, and so something that's important to me is to try to make work fun for the people that work on my staff and to do fun little unexpected things. I mean, we all spend a lot of time with each other at work, and a little levity, I think, is needed. So, yes, I'm sort of in the fun mode at work and I don't usually see many guys that really care about fun at work.

When asked how she came to adopt this sense of fun at work, Melanie replied, "I think that's just my thing."

As *Jean* transitioned from her architectural career to furniture development and design, her authenticity manifested itself in the functions and uses of furniture. She maintains,

It was very intuitive for me, and I had gone back and studied marketing, and business along the way, along with my architectural and interior design background, and I just really loved integrating the merchandising with the marketing. It was just a natural evolution for me. And thinking about product from a woman's perspective was natural for me. In case [goods] design, where there were no women, I used my architectural and my own women's intuition about functionality of things. . . . It was coming from a perspective of, "How would this woman use the furniture? What does she want? What kind of storage does she need?"

In describing her role as a leader and mentor, Jean posits,

Well, first of all, I did learn a lot of appreciation—you meet the same people on your way up on the way down, that kind of thing. And so there's a big lesson there and that is that you never, ever want to look at anything as "What's in it for myself?" Ever. Because if it's a one way street that only you benefit, it will come back to haunt you, and you'll be left in the dust when the going gets tough later on. That, I believe to my very core. You have to conduct yourself, in your relationship with your peers and your employees or the people who report up to you with respect and you have to take care of them and nurture them as if they're your family.

You have an obligation, especially to the women coming up through the ranks, to teach them, and to mentor them, because there was no one there to mentor me. And there are many, many women who have worked for me, who I have now brought along, and then brought into other positions with companies and helped them have a leg up. Not because I feel obligated for the sake that they're all female, but because I think they're really capable.

There are a lot of stories about women, especially who've moved up in the ranks, who forget where they came from and who are—who pushed so hard to get where they're going that they've got a field littered with people behind them because they've stepped on them. It's kind of like the Devil Wears Prada, that kind of thing. And I hear things like that and I just get sick because I, especially in our industry, we still have a long way to go. So if there's any way we can help teach those coming up through the ranks what's important to help them get to the next level it's for the betterment of the industry.

Karen: It is interesting to me that Melanie's authentic leadership style which incorporates fun and levity was self-taught. She acknowledges that she did not learn it from a boss or

coworker and that it is just her “thing”. I am interested in her perspective because Melanie and I worked for the same company fifteen years ago. She was a senior buyer and I was an associate, or junior, buyer. I reported to another senior buyer and Melanie had an associate buyer and several other employees that reported to her.

We had, as Melanie describes him, “a jerk of a boss” that treated her and the other female buyers with far less respect and regard than the two male buyers. On several occasions, when trying to stop me from speaking, he literally patted me on the head—like one does with a puppy. He would scream and yell and bang his fists on desks when he was angry. Melanie, along with the rest of us buyers, had to tread carefully around him. It was a difficult environment in which to work.

But I noticed Melanie when she was away from our boss and with her associate buyer, her assistant, or her supply chain team. Despite the oppressive environment, they were actually having fun. I could hear them down in Melanie’s office laughing and having a good time. I thought that this was wonderful and went into “sponge phase,” soaking up everything I could about her leadership style. She was a leader, not a manager. She inspired her team and created a sense of cohesion that I had never seen before. I aspired to be like her when it was my turn to lead a team.

A couple of years later, I changed companies and became a successful buyer. I had come into my new company buying a small category of goods (sales volume-wise) and was promoted twice, ultimately to the company’s largest category of products. While it is not my nature to be quite as gregarious and outgoing as Melanie, I did incorporate her sense of fun and cohesion in my team. It was very successful; and I’m proud to say that two of my assistants were promoted to buyers during my tenure there.

It took me a while to realize that Melanie was being her authentic self when and where she could. Merely emulating her style would not work for me—I had to incorporate what I admired about her and make it authentic to my leadership style. In jobs that I’ve held since then, I have adapted to the masculine culture with my peers and bosses, but was able to bring my authentic self to the parts that I could control—my role as team leader.

4.2.4 A network of women versus the “good old boys”. The term *good old boys* was used at some point by all of my informants except Ruth. Ruth did not use the term, but she certainly alluded to exclusivity among men in the industry. *Melanie* recalls that when she was a buyer going to the semi-annual High Point market,

I was very conscious that I wanted to be very businesslike and not a pushover because I’m a female. So I was very conscious of that. The other thing that sort of drove me crazy . . . is that the person trying to sell me in greeting me at market would always hug me as opposed to a handshake, which I really dislike. Because why are they hugging me? I don’t even know these people. . . . But it’s only a male/female thing. I don’t see the men hugging the other men.

I did not feel comfortable because it would take me off guard because I wanted to be the tough person. And I’m sure that especially when I was early in my buying years, I am sure the word “bitch” probably came up [laughter]. If two guys selling me were trying to discuss something with me, I’m thinking “bitch” probably came into the conversation. . . . Because our industry is just very antiquated and it’s very good old boy.

Ruth and Jean, as part of the pioneering generation of women executives in the home furnishings industry, both brought up the last bastion of the good old boys called The String and Splinter Club. The String and Splinter is a members-only club located in High Point adjacent to

one of the main home furnishings showroom buildings. Until about twenty years ago, it was an all-male club. Jean, not surprisingly, was its first female member. *Ruth* recalls that, not long after she moved to North Carolina, a woman's professional organization, of which she was a member, was forming its chapter in High Point. It was considered something of a threat because "it actually came out that they were really afraid that we were going to break into the String and Splinter Club membership. What a joke right, now, but at the time they took it very seriously. They did not want women in the furniture club."

Jean had a group of women that she'd gotten to know over the years and they began meeting informally at the High Point Market. In looking for a meeting place, Jean recalled that the String and Splinter Club (where she had been previously as a guest) had several private dining rooms. Jean remembers,

I said, "How do I join this club?"

And they said, "Well there aren't any women members."

And I said, "Well, can I join?"

So they introduced me to the club manager and she said, "Well, there's nothing in the bylaws that says there's no women," she said, "But you've got to get two sponsors and I don't know if you can get two sponsors who will sponsor you because it is all men."

I said, "Well, I've got friends."

I went to two male friends, and I said, "Would you sponsor me as members?"

And they said, "Sure!"

And they did, and I was the first woman member of the String, just so I could have a place to have dinner with my women friends.

And the first time I called the manager up and said, “Ms. [G] I need a room. You know, there’s a group of women and we want to get together.”

And she said, “My pleasure.”

She gave us the presidential room [laughter]. And we walked in in that door in the lobby and some of the “founding father good ol’ boys” really, you know, we walked in, and these guys, their jaws dropped. “What’s going on here?” And we walked right in the president’s room and closed the door.

While the String and Splinter was representative of the “boys club,” my informants established some version of their own “girls club.” *Mia* acknowledges that she “could do a better job of connecting with females. They are out there. I just don’t have like a good way of—I don’t have regular touching base.” However, she does assert,

Because there’s a few of us, I think there is a special kind of a connection amongst the ones that have had these experiences. I mean, even you were born and bred American . . . and you’ve had your own struggles and you’ve had your own paths and journeys in this industry, but I think there is a—it’s like this sisterhood of, “We know it, we get it, we’ve been there.” And I think if there’s anything that you ever need or anything that I need or that the other lady or the other lady—there are probably a dozen of us that have gone through this—that we’re there for each other. So I think that in spite of us being few and far in between. . . . we have this exclusive club.

Jean’s informal network of women that shocked the good old boys by meeting at the String and Splinter Club ultimately became an organization called WithIt, a non-profit leadership development and networking organization for women in the home furnishings industry. The

organization got started when Jean met with a female industry reporter who was writing a story on her. She recalls,

And so we kind of became friendly, and she started coming to High Point, and I invited her to the dinner.

After a couple of years of that she said, “You know I’ve got a group of women that I’ve met and interviewed. I think we should put our two groups together. I bet you don’t know half of them.”

I said, “There’s more?”

Cigars had become the “in” thing, and she did the good ol’ girl cigar party, kind of as a tongue in cheek, you know, I walked in [the] room and there was about 150 or 200 women. I couldn’t believe it.

By the end of that evening in 1997, Jean, her reporter friend, and another industry leader made plans to meet after the market. At that breakfast meeting,

We wrote a mission statement. . . . We decided we needed a formalized way that women could meet, that could network, who we could mentor, so that became part of the mission . . . where we could offer scholarships to bring more women to the industry with scholarships. So it was for networking, mentoring, education, continuing education. And that became the mission statement. And I ran it out of my house the first two-and-a-half years, because we didn’t know what else to do.

So, that’s how we got WithIt started. And of course, you know, it’s evolved, the agenda has changed a little bit, the leadership’s changed, but that’s a living organization, you’ve got to do that. . . . But it means a lot to a lot of people, and it’s been very instrumental, I think, in educating the manufacturers and retailers—that there is a role for

women in the industry far beyond maybe what they originally allowed them to do, which was pick the color of the fabric.

Karen: The gold old boys were a definite part of my home furnishings industry experiences. As Melanie observed, we female buyers were greeted much differently than our male counterparts. I, too, was uncomfortable with the obligatory hug and/or kiss by every sales representative I saw. This may be cultural—Melanie and I are not southerners, whereas the majority of sales managers were. As a buyer, I was going to the High Point Market or to a regional upholstery market in Mississippi. Most of the wholesalers, whose showrooms I was visiting, were based in North Carolina or Mississippi accordingly. That said, as the buyer, I was the customer, and one would think that they would not want to treat me in a way that made me uncomfortable. Yet, each showroom I would enter, I'd typically be greeted with a "Hey, darlin'" and a big ole hug or kiss. Yuck.

The first time I became aware of the existence of the String and Splinter Club, I was already living in North Carolina and working in my position as vice president of merchandising. My boss, the president, was a company-sponsored member of the club. If we happened to be working at our showroom which is near the club, we would often, as a group, have lunch there. I was the only woman in our group and often the only woman in the club—with the exception of the serving staff, of course. It is as you would imagine it: dark paneled walls, white linen tablecloths, brass fixtures, and mahogany leather chairs.

Interestingly, during one of the High Point furniture markets, I made last-minute dinner plans with a female friend who also happened to be a buyer and important customer for the company. I was trying to figure out where to go for dinner (restaurants in the area are packed during the furniture markets due to all the visitors in attendance). My boss suggested I call the

String and Splinter and make a reservation under our company name. The experience was fairly unremarkable; however, we were the only table with no men at it, we were seated in a rather inconspicuous section of the main dining room, and yet and we received a lot of very curious looks. And this was just a few years ago. I have no desire to return there.

When WithIt was established in 1997, I was working as an assistant buyer in south Florida. The retail chain of stores that I worked for was rather well-known in the industry at the time because it was experiencing huge success and growing at a rapid rate. The owner and president was, and still is, a very visible and admired member of the home furnishings community. So when WithIt had its first official networking cocktail party at the High Point Market, I attended along with the owner and two other women from our company. While there, the owner informed us that the company would sponsor our annual membership fees.

I remained a member of WithIt for most of the years that I worked in the industry. The companies that I worked for typically paid my yearly dues (around \$250). Not surprisingly, when I began to work for the company that was a member of the String and Splinter, the president asked me early on, “You don’t expect us to pay for that crap, do you?” So I think that was when I let my membership lapse.

Many executive women in home furnishings industry have chosen not to be a part of WithIt. Mia and Melanie are not members. To some, despite the lofty intentions of Jean and her co-founders, it has become “the good old girls” club. I attended several WithIt functions over the years including two of their annual 3-day conferences. I found that most of the members knew each other or had a group of women that they talked and sat with at the events. It was difficult to break into those groups and I didn’t feel as though there was any effort being made by the organization to involve “outsider” members. That said, I still believe that WithIt is important

and necessary to remind the traditionalists, veterans, and good old boys that women are an important part of the future of the industry and that we're here to stay.

4.2.5 An uncertain future for women in the industry. The home furnishings industry has changed substantially since the early 1990s. A major factor in that change was the move to overseas production of a large portion of the home furnishings sold in the United States. North Carolina once produced 60% of the country's furniture—post World War II (Furniture History, 2012).

This shift in production has dramatically affected the wholesale/product development function in home furnishings. Even upholstery, most of which is still produced domestically, has been impacted by the overseas production and importation of fabric and leather coverings. The retail function of home furnishings has also changed in the last twenty years. Family-owned, independent stores are being replaced by regional or national chains. The retail arena is further complicated by companies such as Ashley Furniture Home Stores, Ethan Allen, and Thomasville Furniture Stores which are exclusive, branded retail stores owned or franchised by wholesale/product development organizations.

Because the industry is changing and its future is uncertain, my informants were not exactly optimistic about future opportunities in general and for women specifically. *Mia* concludes,

I can't say that there a lot more women on the executive level. . . . I mean there's others but very few and part of it is also the industry shrank. As the whole pie shrank there are less players in the industry and therefore there's really not as much opportunity for new people, younger people, to come aboard and women as well.

I think there's a lot less opportunity and it's almost like—it's a really tough thing to be in. It's almost like a professional baseball player. There aren't that many positions, executive positions, period, because there aren't that many [teams]. Should I have to change my place of work, I'll probably have to leave the state and go to another state because it's a very specialized job.

So the field that I'm in is super specialized. Maybe being a V.P. of [human resources] or V.P. of finance or anything like that is not as difficult. You can step in other industries, but being in the merchandising ... So it's a very rewarding thing but it's also very scary because should something happen—you need to make some radical moves again.

So I think that once the economy gets better and things open, consumer confidence is up . . . I think that the industry is geared more to a female buyer or shopper. So I do think that we will see more women, but that's probably 10- 20 years from now.

Ruth also expresses her concern for future opportunities in the industry. When asked her perspective on whether achieving her level of success is easier for women entering the home furnishings industry today, *Ruth* replies,

Oh yes, I think so. Of course, the other sad-but-true fact is that the industry is not here anymore. At the time that I came into it, there were probably half a dozen major high end manufacturers involved and now there's nothing left with the exception—[Company X] does have their upholstered furniture factory here. But in the more high-end but not just totally designer custom market, there's really a dearth. Most of the manufacturers have moved into commercial as opposed to residential, more business-oriented. Leather, of course, has become a commodity which you well know, all made overseas. And so I'm

sad to say I don't think the opportunities [exist] in the same way I had opportunities, there are of course opportunities, but not the same path.

Jean acknowledges the changes in the industry as being unique to home furnishings, but she still maintains a positive outlook for women:

Our industry did start bringing in women from the outside who came from other industries, and what they brought with them was more corporate sensibility, since our furniture industry especially is kind of a family, home-grown business that has been tried to be taken over by Fortune 500-type companies over the last decade. The corporate environment has changed so much, as you and I know. And we have women who have entered our industry from a more corporate experience. Many of them—some of them get very frustrated and leave our industry. It is more entrepreneurial even when there's a corporate structure, because it's kind of a "dinosauric" industry. But what makes the home furnishings industry so different from the apparel industry is that very fact. It's a very, very different industry, and so it functions differently.

Some of it is not so good; some of it's very good. But, I do think women, finally, there are enough of us in the industry, that what we used to call "the good ol' boys", we've got "the good ol' girls" now, we definitely can network and refer each other into certain opportunities, not because it's just simple alliance but because they can do a good job. I wouldn't refer anybody, male or female, unless I thought they could do a good job.

Melanie and Mia also recognize that while the industry is in flux, attitudes toward women are changing somewhat. *Melanie* refers to her experiences of traveling to China and other foreign locations:

Different countries and different cultures treat and respect men differently than women, more overtly than we might do so in the States. In the States it's probably more hidden, whereas in another country it's a little more blatant. But I think that that's changing now, that you really ... it wasn't so much the case in my earlier years that women just weren't treated with the same respect as men when they travelled.

Mia concludes on a positive note:

I do see that there is more effort because there's more female buyers or female, maybe not executives, but there are more female buyers, so [industry men] are making more effort. But I felt that that wasn't initially the case. That they just were confused about the whole thing [laughter].

I think that there are younger people coming into the industry and with the influx of younger people, there is just less prejudice, less biases, less of everything. So I think it's just—it's a healthier environment in a lot of companies; where in the companies where the management didn't change for years. There are people that are still struggling and there are people that have modified their ways. It doesn't mean that they have modified their thinking; they have just modified their approach, which is nice, that's a beginning. I'm happy about that.

Karen: I am, unfortunately, rather pessimistic about opportunities in general in the home furnishings industry. This viewpoint is clearly shaped by my own experiences; and I am happy to see that some of my co-informants have a more positive outlook.

I do see the retail arena as being conducive to female buyers. Mia, Melanie, and I all started our careers that way. However, as Mia asserted, moving up from that position into an executive position is difficult simply because the number of retail chains has decreased and the

actual opportunities are fewer—regardless of gender. Other executive positions in retail exist in areas such as sales, finance, operations, and human resources; and I suspect the opportunities for women in those positions is increasing to some degree.

The wholesale/product development side of the home furnishings industry is changing as well. Before much of the production moved overseas, furniture factories designed and developed furniture and then performed the wholesale function of warehousing furniture and selling it to retailers around the country. This was the industry in which Ruth worked.

Today, furniture is produced in factories overseas. Wholesale/product development companies vie for production capacity at the better, faster, less expensive factories depending on their needs. Many large retail organizations are bypassing wholesalers and working directly with overseas factories themselves. The whole process is no longer clearly defined.

Given the uncertainty of the future, I've seen many male industry executives hanging on to life-as-they've-known-it with all of their might. I think it explains, to some degree, Melanie's use of "antiquated" and Jean's use of "dinosauric" to describe our industry. It is dominated by white, middle-aged men who see change on the horizon; and it scares them. Women are succeeding in the industry; but they are doing so in new and unique ways. They are not joining the traditional companies and trying to bide their time and work their way up as most of my co-informants and I have. They are starting their own companies, finding niches within the industry, and changing the landscape.

For someone entering the industry, a defined career path is no longer an option. However, just as Jean transformed a small home-office company into an industry leader, creative, forward-thinking people can help define the future of home furnishings. And I firmly

believe that those creative people can be either male or female—gender will no longer be a factor.

Melanie referred to improving treatment of women overseas, particularly in China. This brings to mind my very first trip to China in early 2001. I was still working as a retail buyer. Our group included me, another buyer, and our boss—the Vice President of Merchandising for our company. Both the other buyer and our boss had been to China together before. We were going to meet with executives from some of the wholesale/product development companies that were our current suppliers. We also were going to meet with our own Chinese agent who worked with factory owners and negotiated our buying directly from some of the factories there.

Toward the end of the trip, we had dinner with a Chinese factory owner, his factory manager, the owner of a wholesale company, and our Chinese agent. After dinner at a restaurant in the hotel where we were staying, the factory manager suggested that we go to “KTV”. I had no idea what he was talking about; but given the somewhat awkward responses by the other members of my group, I said that I was tired and was going to go up to my room. Some more discussion ensued. My boss then told me, “If I’m going, you’re going.”

So we went down into an area below the lobby, and were met by a woman who showed us to a private room. The room had a long, L-shaped seating area and a large television. “Oh,” I thought, “it’s karaoke.” As much as I love to sing along with the radio in my car, I do not exactly have a great voice. So I went to sit on the seat closest to the door so that I could easily escape. “Oh no,” my boss bellowed from the middle of the room, “you’re sitting right here next to me. I’m not getting into trouble.” I had no idea what he was talking about. We all began looking through the albums of songs to sing and someone came in took drink orders.

Then things changed. An older women walked in with a string of lovely, young (very young), glamorously dressed Chinese women. My stomach dropped. Each man was to choose a girl of his liking. Actually, the factory owner picked two, so I guess it wasn't limited to just one. When they got to my boss, he put his arm around me and said, "I'm okay. I've got my wife right here. No thank you." Aha. That's why he insisted I sit next to him.

Once chosen, the young women inserted themselves onto the sectional where we sat, onto the floor to serve fruit and drinks, or onto the laps of the men who had chosen them. I wasn't sure at the time, but later came to understand that these women were trained not just to be companions in KTV but to go up to the men's hotel rooms with them as well.

The karaoke commenced. I sat there rather stunned for a while and managed to avoid a turn at karaoke. Finally after what I thought was a polite amount of time, I made my excuses to leave.

The Chinese gentleman who was our agent, followed me out of the room. He'd just completed a painfully intense karaoke version of the 1970s ballad "Feelings," and I was having a hard time looking him in the eyes. However, he was concerned that I was upset over all that had transpired. He was—very kindly—trying to explain that this is their culture and that I was the first Western woman that had come over in my capacity. He said he hoped that I would try to understand. I remember reassuring him that I was perfectly okay and was not making any judgments.

In fact, as I walked away from KTV, I was smiling and feeling surprisingly good. I was there. I was the first Western woman—or one of the first—to be there and to do what I was doing. Maybe the next woman would be better prepared for that particular adventure—or maybe she could avoid it entirely. But for at least that moment, just being there felt like progress.

4.3 Created Findings

Theme 1 centered on the advantages and disadvantages of being a woman in the home furnishings industry. The disadvantages far exceeded the advantages. Melanie and I both experienced preferential hiring practices as an advantage; however, this turned to disadvantage when it came to having our female perspectives acknowledged or valued. Ruth and Jean found an advantage in being unique as women in the industry when they started in the 1960s. However, while uniqueness may have brought notice and even prominence, it also had corresponding negative effects. They each relayed experiences of resentment and skepticism by some of the men that surrounded them.

Having to work harder and smarter than men in order to succeed was also considered a disadvantage of being a woman in the home furnishings industry. Both Mia and Jean spoke of having to excel at their accomplishments in order to be given the same level of respect that men earned by being mediocre.

Theme 2 juxtaposes the concepts of luck and confidence. All four informants brought up that they were “lucky” or “fortunate” to have had an outside event help to propel their careers. Mine was the only story in which I did not acknowledge that fortune was a factor.

While luck may have been perceived to play a role in their early careers, self-knowledge and confidence were identified as being crucial to the informant’s long-term success. Mia gained confidence in learning to verbalize her needs and limitations. Melanie gained confidence in the positive feedback she received from her employees when she adapted to their individual needs. Ruth and Jean both acknowledged the need to discover your own strengths and abilities and to focus on the opportunities that best utilize them. Mia and I both agreed that experience,

accomplishments, and learning from mistakes are all necessary tools to build confidence over time.

In her 2006 empirical study, Cabrera used the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) to examine how women's career patterns change through time and why some women are "opting out" of the workforce. The KCM, as originated by Mainiero and Sullivan in 2005, found three factors influencing career decisions of both men and women: authenticity, balance, and challenge. For women, *challenge* is the primary factor early in their careers; *balance* becomes relevant during mid-career; and *authenticity* is most important late in their careers.

While the concept of balance was not a theme in this study, it could be applied to Theme 2 in terms of self-confidence. Mia spoke of finding the confidence to let her boss know that she was unable to take on additional responsibilities due to a lack of balance in her life. Jean recalled that her husband, contrary to typical gender roles in the 1960s, would help with childrearing duties so that she could focus on her career. Melanie spoke of acting too tough early in her career in order to be taken seriously—and then coming to realize that a more balanced approach achieves better results.

Theme 3 focused on the struggle for authenticity in the workplace. The informants all spoke about issues relating to *authenticity* even though the word itself was not used. Cabrera (2006) defines authenticity as "being true to oneself" and pushing people to "look for work that is compatible with their values". Mia spoke of a sense of not belonging with her peers and the need to be more herself. She realized that the one area where she was able to be more herself was in leading her team of employees. She used words such as "caring," "connected," and "family" to describe her feelings about this role.

Ruth and Melanie exhibited their authenticity as leaders when they spoke of giving respect to their employees and allowing them to be heard. Rather than mimicking the men who surrounded and preceded them, each found her own way to facilitate her employees' knowledge and growth.

Like Mia, Jean also used the word "family" in describing her role as boss and mentor. She brought up examples of women who lacked authenticity and turned their back on other women once they achieved a level of success. Jean highlighted her sense of obligation to mentor other women in the industry.

Melanie spoke of her "thing" in the workplace, which is incorporating a sense of fun. I have seen firsthand where her humor and levity helped to create sense of cohesiveness or family among her employees. I learned from Melanie's example and strove to bring a sense of authenticity when I led my own team of employees.

Theme 4 refers to my informants' perspectives on the "good old boys" and combatting it with their own network of women. We all felt a sense of being outside the boys' club. For Melanie and me, it came from unwanted physical contact in greetings—contact that only occurred from men to women, since our male counterparts were greeted with a simple handshake. Ruth and Jean experienced discrimination by an actual boys' club called the String and Splinter Club. Jean literally tore down that barrier by being its first woman member.

The final theme addresses the informants' perceptions of the future of the home furnishings industry and opportunities for women. Mia and Ruth agreed that the industry is changing and that both men and women entering it face new challenges. I elaborated on the concept of the industry in flux to suggest that even bigger changes may be on the horizon.

Melanie lamented on the continued pervasiveness of old gender stereotypes. Jean confirmed that pervasiveness referring to the “dinosauric” nature of the industry as a whole. A positive change, however, was noted by Mia. She observed that young people entering the industry or who have recently entered the industry have fewer biases and prejudices in general. Jean noted that the industry does have more women involved than ever and that networking and mentoring is necessary to help them grow.

4.4 Conclusion

Five themes were identified using the informants’ own words to describe them. Integrative memos, “whereby progress is assessed” and “emergent ideas are identified” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), were used to identify the themes. Table 2 serves as a relational matrix of the themes which explicates and encapsulates each informant’s perspective on each of the themes.

In the next chapter, I will discuss these themes as they relate to my research questions and theoretical foundation. Additionally, the implications of my study will be evaluated. Finally recommendations for future research will be suggested.

Table 2

Relational Matrix of Themes and Informants

	1. Advantages and disadvantages of being a woman		2. Fortune versus self-confidence		3. Striving for authenticity in the workplace	4. A network of women versus the "good old boys"	5. An uncertain future for women in the industry	
	Advantages	Disadvantages	Fortunate	Self-Confident			Industry Changes	Women's Roles
Mia		Punished for maternity leave	"Privileged" to have good mentors	Learned to say "no" and express her needs	Mimicked male mentors and bosses since there were no women	"Sisterhood" of women who have similar experiences	Shrinking retail industry leads to reduced opportunities	Limited opportunities to increase the number of women executives
		Had to be extraordinary while male counterparts could be mediocre	"Fortunate" that first 5 years in industry were positive- set up future aspirations	Experience and accomplishments build confidence	Learned that "softer" was not a negative Adopted a "family" approach to leadership	Being there for one another	Retail merchandising as a very specialized and limited field	Younger generations have fewer biases and prejudices
Ruth	Attracted notice of industry media	Resented by male coworkers/employees	"Fortunate" that a colleague set up interview with potential employers	Profits inspire confidence in owners Knowing your own skills and strengths is crucial	True appreciation for skills and craftsmanship helped to overcome gender bias Allowing employees to make their own decisions and mistakes	The good old boys' club in actuality- male members only	Move to overseas production means fewer jobs and opportunities	Greater opportunities for women entering the industry but through a different path than hers
Melanie	Preferential hiring opportunities in the 1990s	Women promoted too soon led to negative stereotype	"Lucky" timing in entering the industry- preferential hiring	Learned to tailor communication style to individuals	Sharing information and allowing employees to grow	Hugging as a form of greeting-for women only		Treatment of women overseas (especially China) is finally improving
	Stereotypical expectations that women have better taste level	Hiring token woman did not translate to valuing her perspective	"Lucky" that unlike other women, she was promoted when ready	Understanding the value of experience and reputation	Collaborative management style and incorporating fun	Combating the good old boys with toughness and label of "bitch"		Industry still antiquated with old stereotypes regarding women
Jean	Greater insight into female consumers	Skepticism by male counterparts regarding skills and abilities Women had to work twice as hard and keep emotions in check	"Fortunate" to have a husband that was supportive of her career	Ability to view product development from the perspective of female consumers Knowing strengths and being able to verbalize those to a prospective employer	Treat employees and peers with respect- nurture them like family Obligation to teach and mentor young women to aid in their future success	Crashing the good old boys club and becoming its first female member A network of women growing into Withlt, an organization with over 400 members	Unique nature of home furnishings business makes it difficult for those outside the industry to enter	More women in the industry than ever Necessary to network and help one another
Karen	Preferential hiring opportunities	Status as token woman		Being aware of opportunities and cultivating relationships	Exposed to the concept of authenticity by Melanie but had to incorporate to own style	Discomfort in the boys club- literally and figuratively	Industry in the midst of great change- uncertainty abounds	Industry in need of innovators regardless of gender
		Requirement to adapt to male culture		Value of experience and learning from mistakes	Bring authenticity where possible and adapt to masculine culture as necessary	Personal experience with Withlt		Early experiences as a woman in China

CHAPTER 5

Reconstruction of Narrative Themes Relating to Ethic of Care

I became aware that women, when describing their roles in their organizations, usually referred to themselves as being in the middle of things. Not at the top, but in the center; not reaching down but reaching out.

–The Female Advantage: Women’s Ways of Leadership

Sally Helgesen

This narrative inquiry study was originally purposed to draw on ethic of care leadership orientation to document the perspectives of executive women in the home furnishings industry on ethic of care and the degree to which they are affected by gender difference or otherness from their predominantly male counterparts in the workplace. The three research questions posed in this study were:

1. If women are shaped by society to develop an ethic of care orientation but spend years in organizations that value and reward justice orientation, how does this affect my informants’ views of themselves?
2. Do my informants perceive that adapting within a masculine work environment implies a separation from care orientation and adoption of justice orientation?
3. What are my informants’ perspectives on whether changing business conditions in a global, fast-paced economy are more conducive to a feminist ethic of care leadership approach?

Before discussing whether the purpose was achieved and the questions were answered, an elemental aspect of qualitative narrative inquiry must be readdressed. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) cautioned that “it is frequently well into the process of inquiry that one

discovers what the research is really about; and not uncommonly it turns out to be something rather different from the initial foreshadowed problems.” In this study, the research “is really about” the informants’ perspectives on the degree to which they experience their gender difference in their male-dominated workplaces. Thus, the original purpose of the study was achieved.

5.1 Theme Relation to Research Question One

The five themes that emerged from this study did relate to the three questions; however, no one theme necessarily pertained to one specific question. Question 1 relates to how my informants’ views of themselves may have changed as a result of working in companies that value masculine orientation.

Theme 1, Advantages and Disadvantages of Being a Woman related to companies in the home furnishings industry valuing the masculine, ethic of justice orientation over ethic of care. As token women may have had an advantage in being hired, their feminine perspective was often belittled or ignored once they were hired. Interestingly, despite the disadvantages of being a woman, at least in the context of this theme, the informants’ views of themselves did not seem to be impacted. Both the advantages and disadvantages of being a woman seemed to be generally viewed as external—outside of them. In other words, the advantages and disadvantages were suggested by the informants as being others’ perceptions, not theirs about themselves.

Theme 5, An Uncertain Future for Women in the Industry, appeared to share this characteristic of outside influence. Several informants spoke of the degree to which the industry had changed. Jean and Melanie referred to the industry as being antiquated or behind the times. Mia spoke of limited opportunities for women, while Ruth suggested greater opportunities but through a different path than the one she took. Again, in all cases, this did not suggest that the

informants themselves felt that they or future women entering the industry had to change or adopt a justice ethic. Instead, their perspective suggested that the industry had to begin to change to value care orientation.

5.2 Theme Relation to Research Question Two

Question 2 relates to whether my informants adopted an ethic of justice orientation, and, in doing so, became separated from ethic of care. Theme 3, Striving for Authenticity in the Workplace, addresses this question. Mia spoke of not being perceived as “feminine enough” by some of her peers and feeling unhappy with a sense that she did not belong in her executive role. Only when she looked internally and became more authentically herself did these bad feelings begin to abate. Melanie spoke of evolving from an overly tough, masculine-oriented boss to her “own style of management” which felt more authentic—her “thing”. Ruth noted that when she showed genuine appreciation of people’s work, she had much greater success in connecting with them. Jean spoke of nurturing and treating employees like family.

It seems that we all work with our male counterparts and bosses using communication and work styles that mimic theirs to a certain degree; but we bring authenticity to areas of our work where we are able to exercise control. For the women in this study, including myself, that area seems to be our staff or team of employees. The informants consistently spoke of learning their management and leadership behaviors from male bosses and mentors. We mimicked them in the absence of female role models in the workplace. As Jean observed of her male colleagues, “whatever they read, or whomever they respected, I listened very hard to that because I could then communicate in the same language as these guys.” However, each informant in her own way adapted her own style of leading which involved looking inward and being true to herself.

In Theme 2, *Fortune Versus Self-Confidence*, all of the informants—excluding me—referred to another external influence in the name of luck or fortune. This leads one to wonder if a group of male executives in this industry or any other would have similarly attributed at least some of their success to luck or fortune—outside of their sphere of control. In this study, four of five female respondents did attribute some positive career influence to luck or fortune. In each informant’s story, fortune intervened early—typically before self-confidence had been allowed to develop. Outside influences which consisted of bosses, husbands, mentors—typically male—were the producers of those fortunate circumstances.

Once they gained experience, however, the informants relayed stories about gaining self-confidence. Ruth spoke of knowing her skills and strengths. Mia spoke of finding her voice and learning to say “no”. Melanie and I both spoke of making mistakes and then learning from them. Jean spoke of viewing her design and product development skills from the viewpoint of the female consumer. The consensus here seems to be that, again, we looked inward; and in doing so, we found authentic, care-oriented solutions to resolve our dilemmas.

5.3 Theme Relation to Research Question Three

Research question 3 related to informants’ perspectives on whether changing business conditions are more conducive to a feminist leadership approach. Theme 5, *An Uncertain Future for Women in the Industry*, touched on future opportunities for women in home furnishings industry. However, the speculation did not extend beyond women in home furnishings and the industry itself.

The informants discussed the many changes to both the retail and wholesale/product development functions in home furnishings. Several spoke of positive changes for women within the industry. Jean noted that “finally there are enough of us in the industry” and that it is

incumbent upon women to “refer each other into certain opportunities.” Melanie claimed that for women entering the industry, “there is still an ever so slight advantage to being a female if they wanted to go into buying or product development.” I suggested that the industry is badly in need of innovators, regardless of gender. Mia brought up a key point about women and other minorities coming into the industry when she observed that younger generations simply do not have the same prejudices and biases of their predecessors. She insists that this modern mentality leads to a “healthier environment in a lot of companies”.

Theme 4, A Network of Women Versus the “Good Old Boys,” also addresses some aspect of the third research question. The prevalence of the boys’ club, and the informants’ acknowledgement of it, indicates that masculine, justice ethic is still the overriding leadership orientation in the home furnishings industry. My informants and I have, however, found ways to cope with the good old boys. As Jean suggested, “we’ve got the good ol’ girls now” in organizations such as WithIt and in our personal networks of women. Melanie said of her experiences at companies where she worked, “any woman that was in a high level, I would relate to in a more friendly way, whereas the other men that were at that same high level it was more strictly business.” Mia spoke of a “sisterhood” of women in the industry with similar experiences. As more women have entered the industry, those networks—formal or informal—have increased their memberships. Surely, one would hope, these increased numbers would allow for more care orientation as these women ascend to leadership roles.

Table 3 summarizes the relationship between research questions and emergent themes.

Table 3

Theme Relation to Research Questions

Research Question	Supporting Themes
1. If women are shaped by society to develop an ethic of care orientation but spend years in organizations that value and reward justice orientation, how does this affect my informants' views of themselves?	<p>Theme 1, Advantages and Disadvantages of Being a Woman: Despite status as token women and/or perspectives not valued, informants' views of themselves were not impacted. Advantages and disadvantages of being a woman are viewed as others' perceptions, not theirs.</p> <p>Theme 5, An Uncertain Future for Women in the Industry: Antiquated industry viewed by informants as limiting women's opportunities. Informants suggested the need for the industry to change—as opposed to them changing.</p>
2. Do my informants perceive that adapting within a masculine work environment implies a separation from care orientation and adoption of justice orientation?	<p>Theme 3, Striving for Authenticity in the Workplace: Positive results achieved both in connecting to employees and personal happiness associated with becoming more authentic. Being true to self led to authentic leadership.</p> <p>Theme 2, Fortune Versus Self-Confidence: Four of five respondents attributed some positive career influence to luck or fortune—initiated by male bosses, husbands, or mentors. As confidence increased, informants looked inward to authentic, care-oriented solutions to resolve dilemmas.</p>
3. What are my informants' perspectives on whether changing business conditions in a global, fast-paced economy are more conducive to a feminist ethic of care leadership approach?	<p>Theme 5, An Uncertain Future for Women in the Industry: Discussions centered around opportunities for women in home furnishings industry versus leadership in general. Positive changes were noted in the industry, particularly with younger, less prejudiced generations.</p> <p>Theme 4, A Network of Women Versus the "Good Old Boys": The prevalence of the boys' club indicates that masculine, justice ethic is the overriding leadership orientation. Organizations such as WithIt and personal networks of women have been a source of support for the growing numbers of women in the industry and may facilitate more women in leadership roles.</p>

5.4 Implications

Implications of this study can be categorized into three areas: home furnishings industry, women's or feminist studies, and leadership studies.

5.4.1 Home furnishings industry. The home furnishings industry, as described previously, is in a state of flux. Overseas furniture production and the consolidation of both wholesalers and retailers has changed career paths and opportunities for younger generations currently working in the industry and those who are entering the industry. As both retailers and wholesalers seek to attract creative and innovative young people, their recruitment and hiring practices must begin to reflect opportunities for women and men of multiple ethnicities. The good old (white) boy mentality cannot continue or this industry will continue to languish and lose its share of consumer discretionary dollars.

5.4.2 Women's or feminist studies. As noted in the literature review, Carol Gilligan's concept of ethic of care has inspired numerous interpretations and applications. However, this is the only study, of which I am aware, that focuses on women executives within a particular industry. In 2009 Marlene Fine published a study similar to this in that it utilized narrative inquiry with "women who have achieved significant positions of leadership" in "business, government, or nonprofit organizations" (p. 187). She cited some interesting and telling common themes among her respondents. Similarly, Sally Helgesen (1990) used "diary studies" to explore leadership characteristics of four very successful and visible corporate women leaders.

This study, to the contrary, explores perspectives of five women in the same industry—most of whom would know one another if identities were revealed. Illustrating how Ruth and Jean's pioneering successes in the 1960s helped to impact Mia, Melanie, and my success in the 1990s and beyond offers a perspective of connectedness and continuity that a group of disparate

respondents cannot offer. In my autoethnographic reflection on authenticity, I acknowledged Melanie's influence on me many years ago as a more senior female leader. My story is a continuation and iteration of some of the lessons that she learned as a woman in the home furnishings industry.

5.4.3 Leadership studies. In chapter one, I cited Northouse's (2010) definition of leadership as, "A process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 3). I acknowledged, however, Eagly's (2007) assertion that standard definitions of leadership are expressed in "primarily in masculine terms" that tend to place value on "stereotypically masculine qualities" (p. 2). The definition of leadership must evolve to include diverse orientations and perspectives. This study illustrates, on an admittedly small and specific scale, that ethic of care leadership orientation continues to grow in importance to the study of leadership and will continue to impact the meaning of constructs such as organizational effectiveness and corporate governance.

5.5 Recommendations for Future Research

This study has addressed a gap in the literature and added to the body of knowledge relative to the implications above. It also highlights a need for future studies in several areas. First, future narrative or case studies of executive women in different industries could be beneficial to the body of knowledge and would enhance the findings of this study. Comparing emergent themes of several of these studies in a meta-analysis may shed light on a bigger picture perspective which industry-specific studies may not reveal.

Additionally, quantitative studies exploring women executives in specific industries may yield a greater understanding and clarification of women's ethic of care leadership orientation.

However, some industries, such as the home furnishings industry simply do not have enough women in executive level positions to allow for such a quantitative study.

Theme2, Fortune Versus Self-Confidence, revealed the concept of luck or fortune as being relevant to this study's informants in their early careers. A study comparing this perspective from women's versus men's viewpoints could elicit insightful results. Is seeing oneself as fortunate for succeeding in an industry where other have not been so successful consistent to both genders—or would men attribute their early success to something internally generated?

Finally, authenticity was a central theme in this study. For my informants and me, finding opportunities to be authentic in the workplace had a positive effect on self-confidence. Future research exploring the relationship between authenticity and self-confidence could also add to the body of knowledge—both in academia as women's studies and in business industry research.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

Project: Ethic of Care Leadership among Women in the Home Furnishings Industry

Date:

Time of Interview:

Place:

Interviewee (first name or pseudonym):

Relevant Position of Interviewee:

Potential Questions:

- How has being a woman impacted your career in the home furnishings industry?
 - In what specific ways?-
 - Can you give me an example of that?
 - Tell me about a time when being a woman made you feel different or isolated.
- Is your leadership and/or communication style different from that of your male counterparts (or previous male bosses)?
 - In what ways?
 - How did you deal with that?
- Is the home furnishings industry changing relative to executive opportunities for women?
 - Why or why not?
 - What needs to happen to encourage change?

Thank the informant for her participation. Assure her that care will be taken to ensure her confidentiality. Remind her that she will be given the opportunity to member check her transcript.