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Judith A. Clair  
Beth K. Humberd

Kathleen L. McGinn  
Rachel D. Arnett

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Judith A. Clair  
Boston College

Kathleen L. McGinn  
Harvard Business School

Beth K. Humberd  
University of Massachusetts, Lowell

Rachel D. Arnett  
Harvard University

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## **Class Matters: The Role of Social Class in High-Achieving Women's Career Narratives**

Judith A. Clair<sup>1</sup>  
Associate Professor  
Boston College  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467  
[clairju@bc.edu](mailto:clairju@bc.edu)

Kathleen L. McGinn  
Cahners-Rabb Professor of Business Administration  
Harvard University  
Boston, MA 02163  
[kmcginn@hbs.edu](mailto:kmcginn@hbs.edu)

Beth K. Humberd  
Assistant Professor  
University of Massachusetts, Lowell  
One University Ave  
Lowell, MA 01854  
Tel: 978-934-2740  
[beth\\_humberd@uml.edu](mailto:beth_humberd@uml.edu)

Rachel D. Arnett  
Doctoral Candidate  
Harvard University  
Boston, MA 02163  
[rarnett@hbs.edu](mailto:rarnett@hbs.edu)

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<sup>1</sup> The contact author for this paper.

## **Class Matters: The Role of Social Class in High-achieving Women's Career Narratives**

### **ABSTRACT**

Our study explores the career narratives of women from diverse social class backgrounds as they describe how they ascended to elite organizational roles despite severe gender underrepresentation. We illuminate the varied ways that high-achieving women understand and retell their career stories, identifying five broad approaches to narrating their ascent against the odds: serendipity, competence, social ties, maneuvers, and aggressive action. We demonstrate the role that social class origins play in shaping the career narratives of these high achieving women. Women from lower social class backgrounds employ highly agentic narratives to fuel their success against the double obstacles of gender and class. In contrast, women from middle- and upper-class origins were constrained in their use of agentic narratives, and were more likely to describe their success in terms of serendipity. The present findings shed light on the variation in women's career narratives and demonstrate that some women deviate significantly from gender stereotypes by narrating their success using extreme levels of agency typically associated with men.

Women who lead and found organizations in contexts where females are highly under-represented are pioneers in their workplaces and industries. They achieve levels of career success in spite of facing well-documented barriers to advancement. How women overcome odds to ascend to top roles in organizations and industries, where few (if any) women have succeeded before them, has been an ongoing source of fascination for scholars across a wide variety of disciplines (e.g., Polnick, Reed, Funk & Edmonson, 2004; Metz, 2009; Bowles, 2012). Past studies shed light on how high-achieving women claim power and authority and overcome structural and cultural barriers in the process of doing so (e.g., Janssens, Cappellen & Zanoni, 2006; Eriksson-Zetterguist & Styhre, 2008; Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011; Buse, Billimoria & Perelli, 2013; Karelaia & Guillen, 2014). This prior research provides insights to scholars concerned with gender inequality and women's careers, to women who aim to follow in the paths of successful women preceding them, and to organizations that seek to create conditions under which talented women can achieve their full career potential.

Yet, much of the research exploring how women overcome organizational barriers to achieve career success emphasizes shared, rather than diverse, experiences underlying women's ascendance. This emphasis on shared experiences reflects a major focus of scholarly research to date: comparing conditions of women's success *to* conditions of men's success (e.g., Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt & Van Engen, 2003; Carley & Eagly, 1999; Goktepe & Schneier, 1989; Eagly & Karau, 1991; Wentworth & Anderson, 1984). While comparative research offers insight into differences between men and women, research emphasizing shared experiences among women runs the risk of sophisticated stereotyping (Osland, Bird, Delano & Jacob, 2000) – that is, of underspecifying the diversity of contexts from which successful women emerge and the variety of approaches through which their success is achieved.

Social class is a contextual feature that has a profound effect on individuals in organizations. Yet, scholars rarely study social class in organizational behavior research (Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2015, Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013; Stephens, Markus & Phillips, 2014). Individuals from different social class backgrounds encounter objectively distinct material and socio-cultural conditions that, in turn, shape the social construction of the self – mental representations of one’s own attributes, relationships, behaviors, and characteristics (Côté, 2011). As discussed in Kish-Gephart and Campbell (2013: 5): “...one’s social class origins are not easily shed on the rise to the corporate elite. Rather, social class origins and the experiences inherent in them have a lasting and differential impact...” Limited scholarly work demonstrates that social class origin influences executives’ preferences, decisions, and effectiveness later in life (e.g., Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2015; Martin, Côté, & Woodruff, 2016). The relationship between social class and women’s ascent into elite organizational levels, however, remains unexplored.

In this paper, we build insight into how differences in social class relate to variation in women’s career narratives. Using qualitative narrative methods to analyze interviews with 41 women executives and entrepreneurs who ascended to leadership in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, we find a diversity of career narratives concerning how women tell the story of their career success. Specifically, we build a typology of five distinct forms of career narratives evident across high-achieving women: 1) success through serendipity, 2) success through competence, 3) success through social ties, 4) success through maneuvers, and 5) success through aggressive action. While prior research demonstrates that high-achieving women draw upon some of these narrative forms, such as luck or relationships, when accounting for their workplace outcomes (e.g., Clance & Imes, 1978), other narrative forms, such as aggressive action (which is forceful and assertive)

or maneuvers (which is characterized by tactical and strategic behaviors), are more commonly associated with men's self-perceptions about their approaches to career success (Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Sonnet & Holton, 1996). Thus, our findings demonstrate how high-achieving women's narratives tend to draw from a wider array including traditionally male narrative forms.

We also find patterns demonstrating that the types of career narratives women rely upon differ systematically based on their social class origin. At the time of the interviews, the women in our study shared elite status at the top of the social class hierarchy, potentially obscuring the role of social class earlier in their lives. Though the women in our study were selected based on their role as pioneers with no thought to their social class origin, a diversity of social class backgrounds existed among them: some women came from the upper class with its attendant social status and powerful connections to help smooth their way despite their gender (Kendall, 2002; Ostrander, 2010), others hailed from middle class backgrounds with some measure of economic security, and still others arose from lower socioeconomic origins, lacking the silver spoon of their peers (Chase 1995). Taking a social construction perspective, we theorize that the distinctions among women's career narratives based on social class reveal not only her perceptions about the path she took to success, but more importantly, her experience of self (e.g., who she was) as a member of her social class along the path to significant power and influence.

Our findings offer several important contributions. First, rather than emphasizing commonalities among women or building insights about women's experiences in comparison to men's, our results bring variation among women to the fore. We contribute to a small, but growing, body of research that calls for recognizing greater variation among women in terms of their career experiences and perspectives (e.g., Humberd, 2014; O'Neil, Bilimoria & Saatcioglu, 2004). Doing so is important for recognizing the boundary conditions of prior research that

characterizes women's methods for career success as if they generalize to all types of women; in the case of our research, focusing on variation among women's career narratives is what allowed the central role of social class to emerge.

Second, our work also advances recent efforts to build theory and empirical insight into the role of social class in the workplace (e.g., Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014; Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013; Cote, 2011). We do so by showing how social class backgrounds relate to high-achieving women's career narratives. Consistent with the broader organizational studies literature that mostly ignores social class, existing research on high-achieving women either tends to assume that individuals share a middle or upper class background, or is silent on social class origins all together. Our work makes an additional key contribution by building insight into an overlooked segment of high-achieving women: women from the lower social classes who climb to top organizational roles despite extraordinary challenges of being a double-outsider in terms of their gender *and* social class backgrounds.

Third, our research sample offers a rare glimpse at the narratives of women who achieved significant power and influence in 20<sup>th</sup> century workplaces, where very few women had ascended to elite organizational roles before them. Women in our sample are pioneers of their time and organizational scholars can learn from their insights and perspectives to inform future research on how women build success in contexts where they are likely to face extraordinary barriers.

## **BACKGROUND**

Scholars across multiple disciplines show great interest in studying women's careers, and pay particular attention to conditions associated with women's career advancement—and lack thereof. Work demonstrates that a key reason why so few women ascend into elite positions is

that they face a labyrinth of gendered challenges; thus, women must navigate “indirect paths, sometimes through alien territory” (Eagly & Carli, 2007: 1) to achieve elite roles. For instance, prior work highlights how gendered contextual conditions, such as the presence of an “old boys network” (Davies-Netzley, 1998), shape women’s propensity to strive for, and to be granted, top organizational roles (Ragins, Townsend & Mattis, 1998). This work demonstrates that women must actively acknowledge and engage within gendered organizations and relationships to increase their chances of taking on greater power and authority (Meyerson & Kolb 2000). Yet, while these ideas provide insight into women’s experiences in general, it tends to emphasize what women share in common rather than explore the diversity of women’s understandings of their own career paths. Further, it does not consider the role that social class plays, which is the focus of our findings.

In light of these limitations, we position our work within two literatures, which offered key reference points from which we built our theoretical insights: the career narrative perspective and research on social class in organizations.

### **Career Narrative**

According to the narrative perspective (e.g., McAdams, 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013), many stories could be selected to describe life experiences, but only certain stories are sufficiently internalized and have enough self-importance to be presented as central to one’s own narrative. A narrative approach to the study of career offers key insights into individuals’ self-constructions of their career experiences (Bujold, 2004) through *what* stories are chosen in a speaker’s telling of her own career and *how* they are told (McAdams, 2012; Chase, 1995). We define career narratives as narratives that illuminate the narrator’s own perspective on her career,

that are “both expressive of and constitutive of” (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010: 135) the speaker’s self-views about her life, her career, and the context in which these take place.

We draw from prior work rooted in a social constructionist perspective, which emphasizes that individuals do not create their own career narratives in isolation; rather, they draw from social and cultural contexts in constructing the self (Giddens, 1988; LaPointe, 2010; Vough & Caza, 2016). Self-construction is rooted in, and constrained by, the stories society and history make available in a time and place (Watson, 2009, citing Goldthorpe, 1968; Baumeister & Muraven, 1996). Thus, “...in linking identity and narrative in an individual, we link an individual [career] story to a particular cultural and historical narrative of a group” (Hammack 2008: 230).

Prior research comparing men’s and women’s careers recognizes the underrepresentation of females in certain careers, organizations, and industries, and at top organizational levels is a feature of the shared historical context. Women’s career narratives are likely to be shaped by this shared context, and prior research demonstrates that career stories of high-achieving women often seek to reconcile organizational successes with the gender barriers faced (e.g., Chase, 1995). However, there is also a need for studies that focus on diversity, rather than similarity, among women’s career experiences (Humberd, 2014; Inman, 2000), in particular because the differences within groups may be greater than the differences between (Moran, 1992). A small but growing body of work considers the interplay between women’s employment and certain demographic characteristics, such as race and ethnicity, or age (e.g., England, Garcia-Beaulieu & Ross, 2004; Lambert, Lincoln & Rosemary, 2010; Enkelis, Olsen & Lewenstein, 1995), yet social class is seldom explored even though it is likely to be an important influence shaping a career. As the labor force participation rate of white, married, women in the U.S. labor force rose

from slightly above 20% in 1950 to over 70% by 2000 (Fernandez, 2013), intra-cohort variation in women's labor market participations and wage trajectories along social class lines has been increasing (Fernandez, 2013). Women are likely to construct their career narrative in light of distinct experiences earlier in their lives that differ along social class lines. Thus, a second key literature is research on social class.

### **Social Class**

We define social class using Côté's (2011: 5) psychological view as "...a dimension of the self that is rooted in objective material resources (income, education, and occupational prestige) and corresponding subjective perceptions of rank vis-a-vis others. Social class reflects individuals' mental representations ... of who they are, how they should relate to others, and what they should be doing ... [leading] in turn, to specific patterns of action and cognition." Social class is a robust predictor of how people think and act throughout their lives (Ogbu 1981). While social psychologists are increasingly attending to the role of class differences in social interactions (Stephens, Markus & Townsend 2007; Piff et al. 2010; Kraus et al. 2012), organizational scholars seldom consider social class in their empirical work or theory development (Côté 2011).

In limited recent research, scholars demonstrate that formative experiences with social class affect individuals' careers long after they have attained elite status (Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2015; Côté, 2011). For example, leaders' social class origins influence their propensity to take risks (Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2015) as well as their proclivity for narcissism (Martin, et al., 2016). Social class background also shapes the experiences and education underpinning a career. As discussed in Côté (2011: 47): "Access to material resources leads individuals to exhibit certain distinctions, including the neighborhoods where they live, the

educational institutions they attend, and their social club memberships, recreational and aesthetic preferences, manners and customs, clothes, language use and actions, and patterns of nonverbal behavior.” Thus, social class leads to fundamentally different career opportunities for individuals. Individuals from lower social class backgrounds are less likely to graduate from high school (Suh, Suh & Houston 2007) and less likely to excel in and graduate from college if they do attend (Stephens et al. 2014). College degrees that individuals from lower class origins attain are less likely to come from top tier institutions (Sacks 2007). The close, positive connection between quality of education and employment outcomes (Psacharopoulos 1994), including likelihood of and earnings via self-employment (Robinson & Sexton 1994), nearly guarantees that women from lower socioeconomic groups will be disadvantaged in competitions for jobs and promotions. Even after controlling for education, social class affects the likelihood of being hired into elite professional jobs (Rivera 2015; Rivera & Tilcsik 2016).

Because of the vastly different odds lower versus middle and upper class individuals face in the employment market, social class is likely to have had a strong influence on women’s career paths, and in turn, on their subjective self-perceptions. However, much of the existing research on women’s careers exclusively draws on the experiences of women from upper or middle class origins (c.f., Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008) or ignores social class all together. The work that does include some social class insights focuses on dynamics influencing retention of women in the workplace. For instance, contrary to the rhetoric of “choice” versus “need” (Damaske 2011) and “opting out” (Percheski 2008; Stone, 2007), recent empirical studies suggest that financial resources make it easier and more likely for more advantaged women to remain at work (Damake 2011; Clawson & Gerstel, 2014). Although lower class women in the U.S. are historically more likely to be in the paid workforce in comparison to middle- and upper-

class women (Garey 1999), this trend has changed in recent years (England, Ross, and Garcia-Beaulieu 2004). This may reflect childcare constraints in the U.S.; lower and middle-income families are much more likely than upper-income families to rely on relatives for child care—relatives who often have limited capacity for additional childcare hours (Williams & Boushey, 2010). Reflecting the relaxed constraints enjoyed by upper class women, professional women from the upper classes are more likely than their less advantaged peers to remain employed throughout key childbearing years (ages 25 to 45) (Damaske and Frech 2016). While studies that consider social class and women’s careers simultaneously are few and limited in scope, they do highlight that there are potentially powerful interactions between social class and women’s careers worthy of further research.

Bringing these literatures together, our study explores the career narratives of women from diverse social class backgrounds that ascended to elite organizational roles in contexts where women were highly underrepresented. Our results reveal that an emphasis on women’s shared experiences, based on their gender and historical context, is an incomplete story. We illuminate the varied ways that high-achieving women understand and retell the stories of their own ascent to elite roles against the odds, and we explore the role that class origins play in shaping the career narratives of these high achieving women.

## **METHODS**

We used exploratory and inductive qualitative methods, specifically narrative methods, because our goal was to build new theoretical insights and to understand women’s own stories of themselves moving through a career. One of the authors and two other interviewers conducted semi-structured interviews with women who had ascended to elite roles during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as a part of a larger project originally conceived as a study of how corporate and

entrepreneurial women deal with barriers and conflict in their careers.<sup>2</sup> The analyses and findings presented here include 41 interviews with women living in the U.S. during their college years.<sup>3</sup>

## **Participants**

Researchers recruited participants through three methods. First, a letter of invitation was sent from the Dean of an MBA program to female MBAs who graduated from top tier business schools in the U.S. before 1990 and had reached executive levels within corporations or had founded successful companies (N=10). Second, a letter of invitation was sent from the faculty director of a university-affiliated, women-only networking and fundraising board to similarly successful members of the board (N=16). Finally, women from a publicly available list of female founders of successful entrepreneurial ventures were recruited using “cold calls” (N=15).

Nineteen of the interviewees were entrepreneurs; 19 were corporate executives; and three had careers spanning both sectors. Titles at the time of the interviews included board chair, chief executive officer, chief financial officer, chief information officer, chief operating officer, director, president, principal, founder, and senior/executive vice president. Thirty-one of the women had children; of those with children, 27 were married and four were divorced. Ten did not have children; of those, seven were married, one was divorced and two were single. While we did not recruit based on social class, the participants varied across social class lines. In our sample, 10 women came from the upper social class origins, 19 women originated from the middle class, and 12 women came from lower social class origins. Dispersion in the

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<sup>2</sup> In the larger study, [name redacted] and [name redacted] were coauthors with one of the authors of the study presented here.

<sup>3</sup> Because we use undergraduate education as a proxy for social class origins (explained in our methods section), we restricted our sample to the 41 (of the full set of 54) interviews with women who were in the US during their undergraduate years.

interviewees' social class origins allowed us to explore the relationship between social class origins and professional women's career narratives.

### **Data Collection**

We analyzed transcripts from semi-structured interviews formulated to elicit women's career stories, particularly focusing on pivotal events (See Appendix for interview protocol). Our focus was on women's narratives about the career transitions that led to their attainment of elite organizational positions. Interviews were carried out over the phone or in person, and lasted 45 to 180 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

### **Analytic Approaches**

Our analyses focused on similarities and differences in the narratives women used to explain their ascendance and achievements, not on variance in career outcomes. We engaged in an iterative, inductive process for uncovering and illuminating the women's career narratives. All of the authors read and discussed a subset of the transcripts before we began our analyses. After discussing each of these transcripts individually, our analytic process was informed by the narrative methods of Feldman (2004) and McAdams (e.g., McAdams, 2001, 2007; 2012; McAdams & MacLean, 2013). Our process relied on four analytic approaches, which built on one another: 1) identifying narrative elements within women's career stories; 2) identifying conceptual elements across interviews; 3) coding each woman's interview using our emergent conceptual framework; and 4) linking distinct career narratives with outside data on each woman's social class origins. At least two authors analyzed the 41 transcripts at each stage.

*Identifying narrative elements within women's career stories.* We took two approaches to identifying narrative elements within each woman's career story. First, two of the authors summarized each interview into a grand memo to capture the study's overall research questions

in the context of the data, and to begin to understand what emergent patterns and themes may be important to the overall coding of the narratives. Such an approach to analytic memoing is common in the iterative qualitative process, and serves as an important corollary process to data coding (Saldana, 2009). Each grand memo identified an overarching theme that characterized the woman's entire career story, as well as sub-stories within the overall narrative that accompanied different professional stages in the women's overall career. The memos allowed us to create a list of themes that cut across interviews, such as the role of self versus others in key career transitions.

Recognizing the theoretical importance of career transitions in women's overall narratives, we employed fine-grained narrative methods to assess how each woman made sense of different transitions in her career; that is, points in her career that involved a change of some kind. Our interpretive approach to the transition stories adhered to Feldman et al.'s (2004: 150) notion that stories are "loaded with embedded, sometimes hidden information ... it is necessary to find a more in-depth means of grasping ... not only what is happening but also the understandings of the participants about why and how it is happening."

One of the authors and a research associate extracted transition stories out of the transcripts, defining a career transition story as "an account...of how the change from beginning to end took place." (Danto 1985: 234). Examples of what we coded as transitions include professional movements in or out of education, work roles, positions, tasks, or organizations, as well as major changes for the company (e.g. a merger), and personal events that resulted in professional shifts (e.g., the death of a family resulting in the promotion to CEO of a family business). We applied two interpretive methods for illuminating the unstated logic and tensions within stories: identifying oppositions and contrasts, and capturing stories in syllogisms (see

Feldman et al. 2004 for full description of these methods). For example, we captured a transition story about changing jobs after the birth of a severely disabled child with the following syllogism: *I needed flexibility due to my daughter's disabilities; sales offers flexibility; therefore I moved back into sales.* These interpretive methods informed our next step, in which we sought to develop a higher-level conceptual framework.

***Identifying conceptual elements across interviews.*** As discussed in Feldman (2004), the preceding “micro-interpretations” can serve as a basis for formulating a conceptual understanding of the data. Our initial focus on narrative elements and overall themes in the grand memos led us to an emergent set of two general categories, which we called *Who* and *How*. Some elements suggested the speaker’s account about which source(s) deserved credit for driving events and outcomes within and across transitions; we categorized these elements as *Who*. Other elements suggested the speaker’s accounts for the tactics or approaches used to resolve tensions, deal with barriers, find and capitalize on opportunities, and other mechanisms conveyed as critical to progress through the transitions; we categorized these elements as *How*.

We based our assessment of *Who* on two questions about the transition stories and the larger narrative: Who or what did the interviewee present as responsible for action, events, access to resources, success, failure? And, who is the prominent actor in the story or narrative? In coding *Who*, we considered the content of what was said, as well as the way language was used within the narrative. For the *Who*, we preliminarily identified “self”, “other”, and “luck” as distinguishing codes. We based our assessment of *How* on four questions about the transition stories presented in the narrative: How were resources accessed? How were barriers overcome? How were doors opened, opportunities found? And, how was success achieved? Our process revealed four kinds of tactics and methods most evident in the career narratives, which at this

point we tentatively called: relationships, technical competence, strategic maneuvers, and assertiveness/aggression.

***Coding each woman's interview using our emergent conceptual framework.*** In our final stage of qualitative analysis, we examined career narratives as a whole for each woman, aggregating across the *Who* and *How* elements the women drew upon when conveying stories embedded within their career narratives. As we undertook the analysis, we saw that the *Who* and the *How* categories identified previously were related; for instance, women whose career narratives emphasized assertiveness/aggression also presented the self at the center of the narrative, and tended to downplay or not mention others or luck at all. Through multiple meetings in which we iterated between the data and discussions among two of the authors, we decided that there were five most common types of career narratives across all women's interviews, which we label: 1) success through serendipity, 2) success through social ties, 3) success through competence, 4) success through maneuvers, and 5) success through aggressive action. The five types of career narratives each have unique combinations of *Who* women perceived as responsible for their success and *How* their success was achieved.

As a final step, at the level of each of the woman, we assigned one career narrative to each of the 41 interviews. While woman's stories may have contained more than one narrative form, our goal at this point was to isolate the career narrative most commonly drawn upon across the total interview. Two authors resolved disagreements about which narrative type predominated through discussion and reflection.

***Linking SES origins and types of career narratives.*** None of the interview questions inquired about social class and few of the women discussed the financial circumstances of their family of origin. But several women referred obliquely to the social context in which they grew

up. These comments hinting at a connection between class and type of career narrative led us back to the grand memos, where we saw additional evidence suggesting a link between the women's social class during upbringing and the way they discussed the progression of their careers. The limited evidence linking social class to career narratives intrigued us and led us to investigate further.

We undertook a final step in our data analysis to examine the role of social class origin in relation to professional women's career narratives, which involved gathering outside data on social class upbringing. As discussed in the introduction, past research in the U.S. is conclusive in demonstrating that the prestige of the undergraduate institution attended is closely related to socioeconomic class (Astin & Oseguera 2004; Sacks 2007). Individuals from lower social class backgrounds are less likely to enroll in, excel in, and graduate from college (Stephens et al. 2014), and college degrees that individuals from lower class origins attain are less likely to come from top tier institutions, and rather often come from lower status institutions, such as junior or technical colleges (Sacks 2007). Conversely, middle class individuals are more likely to enroll in public or state universities, given the greater affordability of the institutions, and lack of access to the most elite schools that tend to be populated by children coming from wealthy backgrounds. Upper class individuals are more likely than others to enroll in high-status private colleges and universities, given that affordability is not a problem, their paths to elite institutions have been paved long before they arrive (such as boarding, prep, or private school attendance), and status associated with the institution (such as the Ivy League) is often culturally valued among the upper classes (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977). Drawing on this long-established relationship between educational background and social class and consistent with extensive prior research (e.g., Astin & Oseguera 2004; Kraus et al., 2010; Sacks 2007; Snibbe & Markus, 2005;

Stephens et al, 2011; Winkleby, Jatulis, Frank, & Fortmann, 1992), we used U.S. undergraduate institution as a proxy for social class of origin.

We identified the college attended by each woman in our sample from publicly available sources.<sup>4</sup> We used Forbes “Top 50 US Colleges” list (2015; 2016) to differentiate class upbringing: women who graduated from a college on the list were considered from the upper socioeconomic class (N=10); women who graduated from other 4-year colleges were considered from the middle socioeconomic class (N=19); women who attended a community college or other 2-year school, did not attend college directly out of high school, or did not attend college at all were considered from the lower socioeconomic class (N=12). The list of top U.S. colleges is likely to vary somewhat over time; differences between school status in 2015-16 and school status at the time the women interviewed were in college could blur the line between our upper and middle class classifications. The distinction, however, between colleges in the upper stratum in comparison to community colleges or other 2-year schools is likely to remain consistent over time.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Five Types of Career Narratives**

Employing a narrative methodology, we discovered five types of career narratives concerning women’s rise to power and authority in industries where few if any women had done so previously: 1) success through serendipity, 2) success through competence, 3) success through social ties, 4) success through maneuvers, and 5) success through aggressive action. We summarize the similarities and differences between the narratives in Table 1, and we provide illustrative quotes for each type of narrative in Table 2. The narratives differ from one another in

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<sup>4</sup> We searched multiple web sites, as needed, until we found information on education for each woman.

systematic ways. Table 1 shows that the narratives vary in terms of women’s narrative identity – that is, how she perceives herself as a character in her narrative (e.g., a person who has excellent skills versus a person who is well-connected). Second, the narratives vary in the extent to which she presents the self as an active, agentic character in one’s own career story, ranging from hyper-agency to a lesser amount of agency, to greater passivity. They also differ in the specific rhetoric that women draw upon to explain their successes and to account for how they have overcome obstacles (including gender barriers). Finally, the narratives differ in terms of how and to what degree she identifies factors outside of the self, such as other people or general forces (e.g., cultural mores, features of the social context, organizational events), as a key influence on her career story. We found that most women in our study draw upon several types of career narratives discussed in this section; however, women tended to draw more heavily upon one type of narrative in comparison to the others as a driving rhetoric device underlying the overall career narrative.

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Insert Table 1 about Here

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***Success through serendipity.*** Seventeen percent of women emphasized *success through serendipity* as a basis for explaining their career achievements. The *success through serendipity* narrative positions career success as a matter of luck or happenstance, and places the self in a passive role in comparison to outside forces that worked in their favor (see Table 2 for illustrative quotes). In terms of her narrative identity, a women conveying success through serendipity presents herself as lucky or as someone who has had extraordinary luck influencing

her success. Conversely, in relaying this narrative, she also underplays her own talents and skills.

The factors that indicated lucky circumstances varied among women. Some women explained that the serendipitous circumstances leading to their successes related directly to their gender, such as when a career opportunity arose because a company was seeking to recruit women. Other women emphasized that lucky circumstances related to good timing were the main factor that provided a chance for success: “My own view of partly why I’ve been successful in a number of my career experiences is just timing. My timing has been uncanny and I think that’s just luck” (54<sup>5</sup>). Similarly, another woman explained that her promotion to a more senior role resulted from chance rather than her own skills or abilities:

“So here I was, and gradually, I became – I was the only one around, so I was the next – sooner or later you become the next in line, if you’re around long enough. So out of need, that was one of the reasons truly, it was really, it was being there at the right time at the right place. And sometimes, I think that it’s really karma if something like this happens.” (76)

To clarify, the issue is not whether or not luck or good fortune objectively played any role in the women’s career; rather, our interest is with how the woman tells the story of herself and the circumstances leading to her career advancement and success, and her own role in that success. For women who narrate their career story via a *success through serendipity* lens, the emphasis is placed on factors outside of the self, in particular the role of luck or good circumstances; conversely, she does not emphasize at all (or as much) her own role in creating her positive circumstances.

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<sup>5</sup> Indicates randomly assigned participant number.

***Success through competence.*** In contrast to the prior narrative, another subset of women (19.5%) relied the most upon a *success through competence* narrative. The *success through competence* narrative emphasizes the role that her own hard work, tenacity, and skill play in her achievement and success. As the features of Table 1 and the illustrative quotes in Table 2 demonstrate, this narrative explains that she succeeded at a time where few if any women had ascended to elite roles frames because she is especially talented and capable. As one participant explained:

“Every job I had, I had the best numbers in the company and then would get to the next job and have the best numbers in the company. Part of it was just head down, getting it done” (102).

She gleans her promotions and successes because she outworks others, demonstrates stellar performance, embodies unique knowledge or skill sets, and expresses an outcomes-focused orientation. Simply put, the participant narrates that she performed better than other women *and* men, so much so that others could not deny her abilities and talents. Her excellent performances are an antidote to problems arising because of the narrator’s gender. For instance, one woman noted that she was so competent “that they didn’t even care if I was female (15).”

As is evident in the quote appearing above, and in other quotes located in Table 2, the *success through competence* narrative positions the woman herself as the source of her own success. Some women describe how they actively and consciously built excellent skills and advanced competencies to generate attention and to form their reputation for being the best. For others, the narrative is somewhat less agentic; her talent, skills and abilities are so great that they are self-evident to others and overcome any doubts others might have concerning her gender, but the woman herself does actively strive to advance, as illustrated in the following quote:

“... if you did the job, and you could produce revenue, and you could do whatever they asked you to do, and you obviously were successful, they didn’t care who you were” (15).

Regardless of whether she actively seeks to build her own skills and abilities to outperform others, she always presents herself as the lead actor in her own story excelling beyond expectations and demonstrating outstanding skill and talent that others cannot deny. Others play a role, but a supporting role by recognizing, and then rewarding her competence.

*Success through social ties.* Just under 22% of the career narratives underscored that relationships with others played a most central role in removing barriers and opening doors to opportunities; thus, we called this kind of career narrative *success through social ties*. While at first blush this career narrative may seem focused on the role of others, we found that that this narrative often involved a blend of both personal agency and external assistance. The majority of *success through social ties* career narratives positioned the narrator as responsible for actively pursuing and cultivating relational connections and opportunities, as illustrated in the following quote:

“I ran all of the programs nationwide, developed them, learned a lot more about women and women entrepreneurs and what was going on in the women’s entrepreneurial arena, and made contacts, and generated enough respect and credibility that when I left there I could build on those contacts. So, the network aspect of it was very important to me.” (18)

Some of the narratives that emphasized *success through social ties* went so far as to present the woman as an actor who is intentionally exploiting relationships for her own benefit, as illustrated in this example:

“I’m walking in and there are people here who are not going to make it easy for me. They are nice people and they like me ... but they have this thing where they are not able to let go of the power or the control. At that point ... I’ve got to look at each person here, and I’ve got to find out how to deal with that person because I’ve got to do this. I’ve got a job to do. And I’ve got to do this, and I’m going to find out what works with Mr. A, Mrs. B, Mr. C.” (11).

In addition, *success through social ties* positions specific others as playing a central role in her career story by opening doors, mentoring and sponsoring the woman. Other people are also cast as protector, shielding the narrator from others’ ill-will (often aimed at her gender status). The *success through social ties* narratives often highlighted ties with powerful senior men and allocated these men credit for providing a gateway to higher levels of authority and influence at a time where few others were willing to provide women, even evidently talented women, with such opportunity. The following quote illustrates:

“Somewhere in my early career ... I met a man ... who thought the world of me. Today, he’d be called a mentor, but that didn’t exist 30 some years ago. But he ... subsequently moved into very important positions at [company], and time and time again, he was willing to take a risk on me ... he believed in me and I performed” (60).

There are also other narratives in this group where the woman positions herself in a somewhat less agentic role. In these narrations, relationships are available to her as part of her social circle or through other means, and she is the recipient of another person’s attention or good will even though she has not asked for the opportunity or attention:

“I would go to New York every so often, go out to parties with him [fiancé]. And at one I met a partner from Lehman Brothers ... And I asked him this question about investment banking...And so he proceeded in the next 20, 30 minutes to just give me a monologue about investment banking. And at the end of it he said, ‘you know, you’re really bright. I really think we ought to interview you at Lehman.’ I had not said a word.” (6)

While less common in our data set, several of the interviewees even went as far as to position themselves as unworthy recipients of the opportunities others provided:

“My uncle was a correspondent at [broadcast company] and he had a friend at [other broadcast company]. I went to interview ... It turned out it was a secretarial job. The guy made me take a typing test. I failed ... They let me come back and take the test again ... and I still couldn’t do it. And finally the guy who was hiring said, ‘you know what, you can’t type but you really want this job so I’m going to give it to you.’ So, I got the job” (72).

***Success through maneuvers.*** As illustrated in Tables 1 and 2, *success through maneuvers* narratives account for women’s achievement and accomplishments by discussing how they strategically maneuver in and through opportunities and barriers. The *success through maneuvers* narratives were the main storyline in almost 22% of the women’s narratives. In these narratives women narrate that they had a knack for analyzing and adapting in light of twists and turns within a career, working around challenges to their authority, taking advantage of the situation at hand, and proactively planning and capitalizing on what they needed, from a resume to mentors, in order to succeed. The narrator speaks as if she intentionally molds herself and her situation, and doing all this over time in a conscious, intentional way:

“Resumes are important. ... I knew I had to build my background, myself, and my resume, so to speak, if I wanted to become a CEO someday. That’s what I did ... I always thought about my career progression and the experience that I had gained. What would that get me ready for?” (52)

Women presenting *success through maneuvers* describe a strategic shaping of oneself and situations to minimize barriers and maximize opportunities. The woman credits her own resourcefulness and political shrewdness for proactively doing so to advance her career. This participant illustrates:

“I’d been running a business unit and they came to me and offered to make me a VP, basically of the kitchen – I forget what it was called. And I just looked them in the eye and I said ‘I haven’t invested my education and my career to go run the kitchen.’ And they said, ‘fine, that was fine.’ And six months later, I became Vice President of an operating unit.” (60)

It is important to note that several of the transcripts feature one specific type of *success through maneuvers*—reliance on personal branding based on credentials. In these narratives, women build stellar credentials in order open doors so that no one can question her competence or legitimacy:

“...something told me that if I was going to go on, and if I was really going to try and do whatever I wanted to do next, I had to have the credentials and the validation...It’s just the validation that if you are going to get in the rooms with the guys with the propeller heads and all of that kind of stuff, you need to be able to talk their language, and also be able to say, not wear your Stanford tee-shirt so

much but just be able to have the credibility that you know you went to one of the best schools and did very well.” (15)

***Success through aggressive action.*** The final type of career narrative that was predominant in 19.5% of the interviews, *success through aggressive action*, displays agency on steroids. In the *success through aggressive action* narrative, women explain that they succeeded by obliterating obstacles to success. The narratives often draw upon warrior imagery; women describe pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, building ladders rather than climbing ladders already there, and blowing up hurdles, regardless of the presence or absence of supportive structures or actors. As one participant states, drawing on stark metaphors:

“Even military guys still saw me as the colonel. I am the quarterback—guys understand that” (70).

Further, she often describes gender discrimination in *success through aggressive action* narratives as inevitable, but conquerable:

“I’m a woman. I don’t see barriers. If I hit a wall, I climb over it, go around or under it, or blow it up” (8).

Unlike virtually all of the other narratives, most of the *aggressive action* narratives do not include a focus on external factors as shaping her career. In fact, some of the women who tell their career story through an aggressive action lens do not even mention any other person or external situation in the entire career narrative, aside from herself, playing a role in her successes. More often, the narrator positions herself as an independent actor:

“I didn’t depend on mentors as much and I think that probably undermined some of the things that I wanted to accomplish. In retrospect, other people have done

very well, sort of riding up on the coattails of other people. I've never ridden on the coattails of other people." (63)

### **The Relationship between Social Class Origin and Career Narratives**

When women narrated their career stories, they often obliquely referred to their social class origin. For instance, the following quote indicated an upper class background:

"I don't want to say noblesse oblige because I don't want to think that I'm that – but I do profoundly perceive the lucky circumstances of my birth" (100).

In turn, this woman's upper social class origins presaged her propensity to explain how she achieved success by placing others as the central actors in this part of her career story, and narrates herself as a passive (but deserving) recipient of others' actions:

"I never ever had to push my qualifications and skills because they were always observed and appreciated and then I would be promoted and be the person that was the one that was entrusted with everything" (100).

We contrasted this type of narrative to other women who were at the other extreme, in that they described having arisen from childhood poverty or lacking financial means as young adults. As one participant narrated:

"And I was in love with Gloria Steinem, because she broke the – she made it possible for someone like me with a two-year finishing degree to go out and think that I could capture the world." (55)

In turn, we found that women from the lower social classes, similar to this participant, seemed more likely to tell her career story in a highly agentic voice consistent with a *success through aggressive action* narrative, as illustrated in the continued account by the woman quoted above:

“I did [capture the world]... I know I’m a great idea person. I know I’m a phenomenal sales person. It’s not about money. It’s about a dream and living it, and not being afraid.”

(55)

Our “truth table” (Becker, 1998) presented in Table 3 demonstrates how social class backgrounds intersect with the participants’ career narratives. Other factors likely play a role in women’s career narrative because there is not a perfect correlation between social class origins and the dominant career narrative. But the trends depicted in Table 3 indicate an association between women’s narratives and their social class origins.

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Insert Table 3 about Here

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Aggregating across the social class spectrum, women are about equally distributed across each of the five types of career narratives. Yet, once social class is taken into consideration, dominant approaches become visible. Over half of the women classified as rising from a lower class background rely upon the *success through aggressive action* career narrative, while only one of the women classified as rising from the middle class and none of those from the upper class told their stories primarily through this narrative. In contrast, the modal narratives for women classified as rising from the upper class were *success through competence* and *success through maneuvers*, each used by only one woman classified as lower class. The dominant narratives of women who arise from middle class backgrounds fall roughly equally across four of the five narratives; the only exception is *success through aggressive action*. Overall, the pattern suggests different career narratives associated with successful women rising from different socioeconomic classes. Most notably, women from a lower social class background tell the story of their careers through narratives that emphasize bold action, fierceness, and willful warfare,

while middle and upper class women are more likely to emphasize serendipity, competence, social ties and strategic maneuvering.

### **THEORIZING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CLASS ORIGIN IN HIGH ACHIEVING WOMEN'S CAREER NARRATIVES**

To theorize about possible mechanisms linking social class origin and women's career narratives, it is important to revisit the definition of social class, as the objective properties of available resources (e.g., material, cultural and social capital) and the social construction of oneself given class-based status in society (Cote, 2011). Building from this definition, we propose that women from diverse social classes have objectively different experiences along the path to achievement, and in turn, this shapes how they see themselves in terms of who they were on the road to success.

Specifically, women from upper- and middle-classes are more likely to narrate their stories as involving luck and good fortune because *their social class works on their behalf by providing them with resources, at times without having to ask*. When material and cultural resources are more available, it is relatively easier to construct one's career opportunities as fortuitous to oneself and to others. Resources – for instance, in the form of monetary resources to fund entrepreneurial efforts – are more readily available to provide greater opportunities as well as a safety net to catch her if she falls (Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2013) Further, social-class based social ties to powerful others via friends and family are more likely to lead to opportunities that happen seemingly “by chance.”

Conversely, in the case of a lower-class woman, the virtual absence of material and cultural resources, at least early in her career, makes it less likely that she narrates her successes to herself and to others as arising via serendipity. Rather, the lower class woman must

aggressively pursue opportunities on her own behalf and achieve *in spite of* her social class, making it more likely that she will account for her successes through the lens of aggressive and individual actions of a warrior who rises up from “rags to riches.” This is a narrative form mirrored in research on other marginalized populations, who gain power and authority through extreme forms of self-agency (Edley & Wetherell, 1997).

Several factors associated with her social class background support the idea that lower class women are likely to see themselves in distinct ways from middle and upper class women in terms of how they achieved elite organizational roles. For instance, women who come from upper class backgrounds are more likely to be in relationships with powerful (or at least influential) actors in society at a young age; often people of influence are friends of the family, or met in social contexts frequented by upper class individuals. These connections are part of the fabric of her life, meaning that she has opportunities for trusting relationships with people from her social circle who can help her gain entrance to organizational roles, and offer informal and formal support once she has done so (Rivera, 2015). Middle class women may lack ties to social elites, but they are still likely to have some relationships to those in influential organizational roles, and ties to persons that can help open doors or provide support for her when needed. The lower class woman is extremely unlikely to have such connections, at least earlier in her career, because her social circle does not include individuals who are in powerful or influential positions that can provide access and opportunity (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013).

Further, in their youth women of the upper and middle classes have advantages over lower class women because they have learned the mannerisms, preferences, values, language, orientations, and so on which reflect the social class backgrounds of those in positions of power and authority in society and in workplaces. In the case of upper class women, as illustrated in

*The Feminine Half of the Upper Class* (1971: 36), written during the childhood years of the women we interviewed, class shapes women's early experiences:

“The little girl of the upper class tends to lead a very different life from her middle-class and lower-class peers. First, there is the possibility that she will have a nurse or a governess in the early years. Then there is the exclusive kindergarten... accompanied or followed shortly by special dance classes, riding lessons, and introduction to a foreign language...[she attends a private day school or boarding school where] the young lady mingles with her “own kind”...”

While the daily lives of young women of the upper class may have changed somewhat since the writing of this book, individuals tend to inherit social class capital, such as involvement in leisure activities and knowledge of self-presentational norms, which then dictates life opportunities and reinforces social class across generations (Bourdieu, 1979; Rivera, 2012; Weber, 1958). Given this cycle of social class reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Weber 1958), the upper class woman is likely to access opportunities somewhat more easily compared to middle class women, and middle class women are more likely to access opportunities compared to lower class women because gatekeepers to jobs and promotions feel greater comfort and affinity in terms of her social class.

Research also demonstrates that social class influences judgments of individuals' competence, honor and esteem (Weber, 1968, as cited in Rivera, 2010). As discussed in Gray and Kish-Gephart (2013: 673):

“As a result, lower class individuals will be judged to be less competent than higher class ones (simply because of their social class). While social class and status remain conceptually distinct, in practice, social class based attributions of

status can add to or subtract from the status that accrues from one's position and/or performance.”

To summarize, regardless of class, all of the women attribute their career successes to their efforts to maneuver, build relationships, and demonstrate excellent work, as our results attest. However, the lower class woman is likely to see herself as a strong aggressor who makes it to success despite lacking access to class-based resources. Conversely, the material and cultural resources that are more often available to those in middle- and upper-classes means that these women are more likely to narrate their success as arising from “luck” than the women from lower social class backgrounds.

## **DISCUSSION**

We shared findings from an inductive, qualitative study of women who achieved high levels of career success despite considerable gender underrepresentation, demonstrating diversity in women's career narratives and highlighting the key role of social class origins in differentiating the career narratives of high-achieving women. While scholarly work has long recognized the challenging conditions that women face in ascending to top levels within organizations, theories of women's advancement pay little heed to the role of social class origins in women's careers.

We induced five distinct types of narratives employed by women to tell their career stories. We found that women tended to draw from one dominant type of career narrative the most overall, suggesting that high-achieving women rely on certain lines of reasoning to explain their career path. Our work is in contrast to a history of research that emphasizes commonalities among women (as compared to men) as we demonstrate the diversity of career narratives that women rely upon. In particular, we found that women's social class origins appeared to be an

important factor shaping women's career narratives. Social class is often invisible in prior research on high-achieving women's careers, and scholars usually assume that women originate from the middle or upper classes.

### **Contributions**

Our findings advance two literatures within organizational studies. First, our findings generate an understanding of the conditions that shape high-achieving women's career advancement in cultural and organizational contexts where women are severely underrepresented in roles of power and authority. In particular, our work offers rare insights concerning how women who ascended in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century into CEO, owner, and other executive and senior organizational roles understand their own, unusual lives.

Further, our results demonstrate diversity among women's experiences of career advancement by showing five distinct types of career narratives. Our findings make evident that women's self-understandings are not a "one size fit all" that conforms to a common theme or form. On the one hand, some women's narratives demonstrate less self-agency, which conforms to prior research pointing to similar themes (Heilman, 2001). We found instances of passive narratives striking given our sample of women, who surely must have overcome daunting obstacles on the way to the top of their organizations and industries; passivity seemed to be a highly unlikely narrative form for such women. On the other hand, the extreme form of agency put forth in some of the narratives, especially in the case of *the success through aggressive action* narrative, which is rooted in highly masculine images of war and fierceness, was also remarkable. Not only do these highly agentic and individualistic narratives defy the common narrative trope found in research emphasizing that women do not as aggressively advocate on their own behalf (Bowles, Babcock & Lai, 2007), it is inconsistent with prior research

demonstrating that women are held back from advancement when they are highly assertive in the workplace (Ridgeway, 2001). Our results attest that women indeed can and do make it to the top of their organizations and industries and nonetheless perceive and present themselves in agentic, hyper-masculine terms. It may be that some women are able to adopt a more masculine style as a method for advancement rather than as a source of penalty.

If we assume that career narratives are a reasonable representation of how women see themselves, one must ask (and we did): What influenced high-achieving women to see and experience themselves in ways that did not conform to what we might expect? As aptly stated in Cohen & Mallon (2001: 49): “The value of stories, then, lies in their potential for elucidating ... the relationship between individual action and wider social and cultural contexts.” By probing this question within the context of the stories we gathered, we developed insights that make an additional contribution by revealing the role that social class origins play in shaping women’s career narratives. Recent research that has begun to explore connections between self-concepts and social class origins (e.g., Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Stephens, Markus & Phillips, 2014) sheds light on our findings. Scholars surmise that, though individuals’ social class status may change later in life, so called “gateway contexts” – such as one’s home or school environments – earlier in one’s life can create psychologically formative experiences that filter how the person experiences the self in the present (Ridgeway & Fiske, 2012; Stephens, et al., 2014).

Our findings run counter to past research suggesting that those from the upper classes are more likely to internalize a perspective rooted in a notion of individual choice and independence, whereas those raised in more constrained environments are more likely to see the self as choice-constrained and interdependent (Stephens et al., 2014; Stephens et al., 2012; Kraus et al., 2012). Our data provides critical nuances that build beyond this binary view of the effects of social class

on self-understanding. We found that women from lower social-class origins were more likely to assert individuality rather than interdependence, and tell a story of self-responsibility for creating choices rather than a story of self-as-choice-constrained. Our data suggest that career narratives of women who excel despite their gender and humble origins are likely to be more closely aligned with the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps,” Horatio Alger narrative of success and achievement discussed in McAdams’ work on self-identity and narratives (2007).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

As with all research, our work has limitations that offer opportunities for future research. A first limitation is that we did not enter this research with the intention to study social class origins; rather, our focus on social class origins emerged from our data, consistent with qualitative research processes. Because our quotations provided limited opportunities to examine links between social class origins and career narratives, we sought a more rigorous approach based on women’s educational backgrounds. While scholars view educational background as a strong proxy for social-class origins (Sacks, 2007), it is no doubt an inexact approach to measuring social class. Researchers should ideally separate the effects of social class origin from more proximal status effects of prestige of higher education, as in recent years it has become more common for individuals from the lower and middle social classes to attend elite colleges and universities. Researchers have begun to untie the interactions between higher-education prestige and social class origin (Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2015); future research should ideally measure social class using methods that are more direct.

A second limitation is that our sample size is limited to 41; thus, in the future, scholars could offer greater nuances building upon our conclusions with a larger sample. For instance, it may be that a larger sample size used in future research could reveal differences in the degree

that women rely upon the *success through relationships*, *success through maneuvers*, and the *success through competence narratives*. A larger sample might also reveal greater nuances in how women employ each of the five kinds of career narratives. For instance, upper class women are more likely to have social ties to elites who open doors for them without asking, whereas middle class women may have social ties to professional class individuals that can work on their behalf but may not be able to assert the considerable power and influence of individuals in elite roles. Our data does not provide opportunities to explore these nuances.

A third limitation is the uniqueness of our sample, which consisted of women who ascended to elite roles during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is evident that women in our research overcame unbelievable odds to rise to the pinnacle of their organizations and industries, and did so in a specific historical time and context where few if any other women had done so. The nature of these special women and the uniqueness of the times may set them apart from women who seek to rise to the top today in environments that are no doubt challenging, but less starkly male-dominated in many organizations and industries. Yet, qualitative research seeks to build generalizable theories, and we believe that the ideas we have built here provide a strong platform for future researchers to study women in a modern context. Given scholars' longstanding interest in comparing women to men, future research could also use the framework of five types of narratives to explore gender differences among men and women's own understanding of their careers. Doing so will shed light on distinctions between women's and men's experiences and self-concepts, which can offer opportunities for scholars seeking to build new research on linkages between individuals' self-understandings and their rise to power and authority.

A final limitation is that our research isolates just two social identities that intersect, gender and social class. Realistically, other social identities are likely to shape women's career

narratives, such as a woman's racial or ethnic background. Our sample had several women of color, but not enough to include a focus on race or ethnic background. Rich future opportunities are available to build theoretical insight into a fuller range of within-gender diversity beyond what we achieved in this study.

### **Practice Implications**

We see practical implications from this research for individuals and organizations. For women aspiring to achieve power and authority in their careers, our findings shed light on the diversity of approaches possible in a successful career. Understanding the breadth of approaches successful women take in their career paths opens up opportunities for women who might choose not to pursue leadership opportunities because they do not identify with the singular prototype dominating the discourse about successful women.

Similarly, organizations benefit from recognizing that women do not all fit into a single type. Broad generalizations that compare women to men, and lump all women together do a disservice to individuals as well as the whole. Women are also diverse, and recognizing their diverse career pathways and self-understandings will provide organizations with insights that will help organizations and the women within them envision new pathways for success.

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**TABLE 1:  
A TYPOLOGY OF FIVE CAREER NARRATIVES OF HIGH-ACHIEVING  
WOMEN ACCOUNTING FOR HOW SUCCESS WAS ACHIEVED**

Type of Narrative	Narrative Identity	Degree of Agency versus Passivity	Rhetoric drawn upon to explain career progress	Role of Outside Forces in the Narrative
<b>Success through Serendipity</b>	The narrative positions her as a lucky person.	Greater passivity. She positions herself as benefitting from fortunate circumstances that have less to do with her own qualities and behaviors.	People can benefit from chance circumstances to succeed. I was lucky. Therefore, I succeeded.	<b>High.</b> Narrative positions her as influenced by uncontrollable forces.
<b>Success through Competence</b>	The narrative positions her as a person who is excellent in skills, abilities, talents, and performance above and beyond others	Typically more agentic in seeking to outperform and outshine others to overcome barriers. Can be less agentic, narrating benefits from her excellent competence that others recognize, but she doesn't seek.	Excellent competence leads to opportunities and advancement. People will overlook your gender when you are incredibly competent. I was incredibly competent. Therefore, I advanced.	<b>Moderate to little.</b> Narrative positions her as responsible for her own performances. For some women, others play a role when they notice and reward her, without her asking for it.
<b>Success through Social Ties</b>	She is narrated as a well-connected person who has strong relational ties from which she benefits	Typically more agentic in seeking out and exploiting connections. At times can be less agentic, narrating that she benefits from social ties already in place.	Social ties are critical to building a career and advancing to elite levels, offering opportunities and connection to influential (often senior male) people. I had or built key ties that protected or provided for me, therefore I advanced in my career.	<b>Moderate.</b> She is at the center of her own narrative, but helpful others are the key to her successes.
<b>Success through Maneuvers</b>	She narrates herself as a wily strategizer who maneuvers her way forward against the odds	Agentic narrative in which she actively maneuvers around barriers and takes advantage of opportunities to pave her path forward.	Career advancement requires a series of moves and tactics to build opportunities and overcome barriers. I maneuvered, therefore I advanced.	<b>Low to moderate.</b> She is positioned as driving her successes. Though others or external circumstances play a role, they are often the objects around which she maneuvers.
<b>Success through Aggressive Action</b>	She is a fighter who has great vigor, courage and aggressiveness	Agency on steroids. She narrates her experience as characterized by winning battles, overcoming foes, and winning against the odds.	To succeed requires that you go to battle and win. I battled and overcame; therefore I succeeded.	<b>Low.</b> She positions herself as the center of the narrative, at times not mentioning others in the stories.

**TABLE 2**  
**ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES FOR FIVE TYPES OF CAREER NARRATIVES**

Narrative Type	Illustrative Quotes from Participants
Success Through Serendipity	<p>My own view of partly why I've been successful in a number of my career experiences is just timing. My timing has been uncanny and I think that's just luck. (54)</p> <p>I did have something of a lucky break. Some women had just sued [company] for not being promoted [into sales roles]. Women at that time in the brokerage industry frequently got their sales license in order to be able to be of assistance to their male boss. The world hadn't yet shifted to women being expected to have any training for anything. So, two years later I would have had to have [training in sales]. But at this point I could still just cross the aisle. (13)</p> <p>And just by sheer serendipity, I stumbled across, in one of the trade magazines, a posting from [agency], who was recruiting like crazy at the time. I ended up there – ended up hiring on there as a programmer and stayed for 12 years. (4)</p>
Success Through Social Ties	<p>I really needed to tell everybody that I met, and worked to know every executive at [possible partner company], and at [another company], and at [another company] about what we were doing and really work to get them excited about what we were doing, and to simply ask for their help. We have a strategic alliance with [company]. We are doing a lot of cool things with them. I have worked an outrageous number of hours in building very strong relationships with senior executives at [company]. And those relationships are finally really in the past two months all coming together where we are being viewed as a very, very critical go-to market partner for [company], and we're the lead go-to market partner for small- to-medium-sized businesses. So, and now that has brought us to a relationship with [very big company]. (69)</p> <p>They gave me the responsibility. So I started this with nothing. And then from there, created a very small staff. And most of my resources I have allocated to the region.... I think that when [male sponsor] put me in charge of [large division], I controlled the – at that time, and really still, ... the profitability of [Company]. So in effect he gave me the position that if I fouled up, that was an instant hit on the bottom line, that week, that month, that year. And the only way that I got that was with the advocacy of [sponsor]. And I don't really think that there are enough [sponsor's name] around in these top, big companies that are willing to give women that much line responsibility and that much, in effect, risk for business. (3)</p> <p>And so I invited them over for dinner to ask truly advice about a startup, lawyers,, what about service providers, who should I network with, how do I raise money, what's the path. And I truly want to say that I was sitting there just looking at her exclusively as someone who had done it before; it was completely advice. And we're there around the table and we were drinking tea and it was getting late at night, and [guest] turns to her husband and says, what do you think we invest 50,000 in [narrator's] company? And that was in February and it was this brilliant seed that completely made the whole rest possible ... I just started to [seek funding through] all these networks. (100)</p>
Success Through Competence	<p>One of the things they asked me, when I came here, what makes you think you can do this? And I said, I went through that throughout my career. I've always been thrown into positions where I've been out of my comfort zone and it's how – and I've been able to grow through those experiences. And I do a lot with my own people based on that. So there's nothing I have not been thrown into that I wasn't able to be successful in. (5)</p> <p>Authority here is based on what you've done and what you've accomplished. So what happened to me over time is different VPs would start seeing my work and praising it with accolades ... I didn't go out proactively to do it, but as a result of your work, your work is viewed and recognized and you get on the short list, basically, of them watching you and – how do I – I don't – I feel uncomfortable saying anything that positive. But they know who really does great work and who doesn't, or who can deliver in this kind of situation. (62)</p>

	<p>But it was really a lot of learning and hard work ... my social life went to hell in a hand basket because I would work, I was the first one in the office at 7:00 a.m., and often the last one there at 10:00 at night. And I worked most weekends. So for me, I think the story of my career is working very, very hard. And being very prepared, and doing it in something where I thought I was adding great value to ... my clients. (64)</p>
<p>Success Through Maneuvers</p>	<p>So, what you have to do is go okay, I'll just—what I'm going to do is pull back, and I'm going to the right, and I'm going to go to the left, and then I'm going to come around, and I'm going to circle. It's like you are hitting the wall. Then you come back, and then you say, I'll try it to the left. No, I'll try it to the right. No, I'll keep going" (15)</p> <p><i>(Status Borrowing)</i> I decided that if I was ever going to talk to the finance guys, and ... be taken seriously, I needed to go to business school ... I went to [top tier B-school] ... and I did very, very well ... It's just the validation that if you are going to get in the rooms with the guys with the propeller heads and all of that kind of stuff, you need to be able to talk their language, and also be able to have the credibility that ... you went to one of the best schools and did very well. (15)</p> <p>I really think I became tired of just the practice, and I saw that there were other things that I liked to do in terms of putting deals together, representing clients on appeals before government. And I started thinking there was something else that I needed to do to be happy. To me, the most important thing was to be happy with my job, and I wasn't happy anymore. I was going through the motions like many people do, and doing a very fine job, but internally deep down inside I knew that I had to make a change. (51)</p> <p>So I had done a lot of work over the years really defining my vision, my philosophy, the team vision for what I see works best and I wanted to make sure that this firm fit that. So I offered to consult with them for a while. And they took me up on that and continued to ask me to join full time, but I waited because I wanted to make sure the fit was right. (65)</p>
<p>Success Through Aggressive Action</p>	<p>I am the war general that preserves, protects, and defends the company internally and externally. (67)</p> <p>So I did a big résumé ... I never went to school for it, but I was flamboyant, so I was doing that, and went for an interview. And he wouldn't hire me. He said it's a joke. You haven't worked a day in your life at this ... I should hire you? That's when I went out and borrowed some money from the bank account ... I think it was \$8,000. For me, at that time, we were just starting out, I was just at home with young kids. And I went and got one of those planes ... hired a plane, did this tagline, and I buzzed his office for a week. I think that he was so taken with – first of all, he sent the police to arrest me for disturbing the peace. And then he told the police to tell her that if she'd stop buzzing my office, she could come in for an interview. I brought him 70 ideas to improve his business. And he went crazy over it. He couldn't believe – and he loved them. (55)</p> <p>I had just come from working on Capitol Hill, and I knew a major issue for the corporate patent was going to be [government policy] ... So I made myself an expert on this issue. I used all my contact and connections to get key information, and I created a direct contact for myself with [international] office, all without involving my boss. Eventually, this key executive asked to meet with me and I ended up going to [capital city in Europe] every couple of months. I ended up rolling my boss. I was given more access and eventually got his job. (70)</p>

**TABLE 3**  
**PRIMARY CAREER NARRATIVE BY SOCIAL CLASS ORIGIN**  
*(Modal Narrative by Social Class in Bold)*

<b>Social Class</b>	<b>Serendipity</b>	<b>Competence</b>	<b>Social Ties</b>	<b>Maneuvers</b>	<b>Aggressive Action</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Lower</b>	1 9.09%	1 9.09%	2 18.18%	1 9.09%	<b>6</b> <b>54.55%</b>	11 100%
<b>Middle</b>	4 20.00%	4 20.00%	<b>5</b> <b>25.00%</b>	<b>5</b> <b>25.00%</b>	2 10.00%	20 100%
<b>Upper</b>	2 20.00%	<b>3</b> <b>30.00%</b>	2 20.00%	<b>3</b> <b>30.00%</b>	0 0.00%	10 100%
<b>Total</b>	7 17.07%	8 19.51%	9 21.95%	9 21.95%	8 19.51%	41 100%

**APPENDIX**  
**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

1. Briefly describe your job.
2. Please tell us the story of how you got this job.
3. How you have gained the authority to lead?
  - a. What factors tend to strengthen the legitimacy of your leadership?
  - b. What factors tend to undermine the legitimacy of your leadership?
4. What were your most pivotal work experiences, in terms of enabling you to obtain your current leadership position?
5. How have you managed to gain the resources and opportunities to become a leader in your field?
  - a. How do you know when to negotiate and what's negotiable?
  - b. Have there been times when you wanted access to resources or opportunities for leadership but you were unable to get them?
6. What are the greatest barriers you have faced in attempting to achieve leadership positions? Provide one or two examples, if any.
7. What are your responsibilities outside work?
8. What do you believe distinguishes you from others who have tried, but have ultimately been unable, to achieve similar positions of leadership?
9. What advice would you give to people who aspire to leadership positions? Would you give different advice to women than to men?
10. Do you think there is a different set of skills, abilities, or traits for getting into top leadership positions in your field, than for being effective as a leader once you get there? If so, what are the differences?