

# Class Matters: The Role of Social Class and Organizational Sector in High-achieving Women's Legitimacy Narratives

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in High-achieving Women's Legitimacy Narratives**

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**ABSTRACT**

While prior research recognizes that women struggle to maintain legitimacy for their successes and that self-narratives play a key role in building such legitimacy, theory provides limited insight into how women build legitimacy through their self-narratives. Our findings from an inductive, qualitative study of 40 women who rose to elite levels in corporations or entrepreneurial ventures during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, despite considerable underrepresentation by women in similar roles, shed new light on how women narrate their own legitimacy. We build a theoretical framework showing how women legitimate their successes in the face of gender-based challenges, identifying six discursive legitimation strategies women use to explain and justify success against the odds. We also explore why women differ in the constellations of strategies they present in their self-narratives. While women universally pull upon multiple discursive legitimation strategies to explain their successes, we find that women's social class origins and the organizational sector in which women ascended, either corporate or entrepreneurial, relate to the discursive strategies women employ in their legitimacy narratives.

Women who ascend to elite organizational roles where females are highly underrepresented are pioneers in their workplaces and industries. They achieve exceptional levels of workplace success in spite of facing well-documented barriers to advancement (e.g., Bagilhole, 2002; Buse, Bilimoria & Perelli, 2013; David & Woodward, 2005; Eagley & Carli, 2007; Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008; Janssens, Cappellen & Zanoni, 2006; Polnick, Reed, Funk & Edmonson, 2004). However, even women in elite organizational roles are often viewed as less legitimate than men who occupy similar roles (Burke, Stets & Cerven, 2007; Correll & Ridgeway, 2003; Fiske & Lindzey, 2010; LaPointe, 2013). Because cultural and prescriptive messages assign women less status, worthiness, and competence than men (Blader & Yu, 2017; Ridgeway, 2001) women must continue to legitimate their achievements and status to others (Bornstein, 2009; Meister, Sinclair & Jehn, 2017) in spite of objective achievements and high status positions (Burke et al., 2007; Sherman, 2010). Women's ability to convince others of their legitimacy is critical to maintaining credibility, privileged power positions, and continued career ascendance (Tylor, 2006).

Self-narratives, "stories that make a point about the narrator" (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010: 135), can be critical to building and maintaining legitimacy (Brown, 1998; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Through self-narratives, one provides accountability for one's actions (Czarniawska, 1998; Pentland, 1999), gives sense to and normalizes one's decisions and experiences (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012), and increases others' acceptance of one's claims to organizational positions (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbelescu, 2010). Prior work highlights tensions in women's self-narratives and differences across women in their discursive approaches (e.g., Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Chase, 1995; LaPointe, 2013), but offers little insight into how women build legitimacy for their successes through self-narratives.

We address two questions through a qualitative, inductive study of the self-narratives of 40 women who ascended to elite organizational roles during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a time during which women were highly underrepresented or, in some settings, totally absent from such roles. First, we ask how women use their self-narratives to build legitimacy for their successes. We consider two features of “success”: the attainment of elite roles and steps forward in the pursuit of those roles. Second, we explore why different women present different constellations of legitimation strategies within their self-narratives. In response to the first question, we build a theoretical framework that shows how women position their self-narratives around pivotal events that highlight how they faced – and overcame – difficult gender-based barriers in order to achieve. Our framework displays how women build legitimacy by presenting a constellation of six “discursive legitimation strategies,” which we define as distinct narrative approaches used to explain and justify success. In response to our second question, we theorize the role that personalized social and historical context, specifically social class origins and corporate or entrepreneurial sector, plays in shaping women’s choices among discursive legitimation strategies. Building beyond prior research, we assert that social class background and organizational sector shape narrative choices because objective experiences early in life and on the path to elite organizational roles influence the lens through which women understand themselves and their successes (Côté, 2011; Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016; Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2014).

Our contribution at the intersection of two lines of research, one focused on legitimacy of women in the workplace and the other focused on self-narrative as a tool for building legitimacy, addresses how women legitimize their achievements by “telling a good story” of how their successes were realized in the face of gender inequalities. While a common refrain is that self-

narrative is a key tool for building legitimacy (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Maclean, Harvey, & Chia, 2012; Pentland, 1999; Sparrowe, 2005), many opportunities remain to shed light on how women who succeed in male-dominated environments do so in spite of gendered challenges to establishing and maintaining legitimacy. A primary contribution we make is to identify how women situate their stories in pivotal events characterized by gender-based barriers and use discursive legitimation strategies to make their successes in these environments sensible and understandable. Specifically, we build a theoretical framework showing that women rely upon a constellation of primary and secondary discursive legitimation strategies to explain and justify their ascent against the odds. We also show that social class origins and organizational sector relate to different constellations of legitimation strategies. Our focus on social class and organizational sector responds to recent calls for research to pay greater attention to the role of social and historical context in organizational behavior processes (Johns, 2006).

### **INFORMING LITERATURE**

We bring together and draw upon two literatures: research relevant to successful women's legitimacy at work, and research addressing self-narrative as a tool for building legitimacy. This approach enables us to contribute to research on gender, which shows countless instances of women's legitimacy being questioned more readily than men's (Burke et al., 2007; Correll & Ridgeway, 2003; Ellemers, 2018; Fiske & Lindzey, 2010; Heilman, 2012; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; LaPointe, 2013). This work also suggests that a woman's legitimacy is not called into question simply because she has achieved success but, rather, the inferences that others make about how a woman gained her success play a critical role in determining others' evaluations and support (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). Our work seeks to fill an important gap in understanding how women leverage self-narrative as way of shaping

inferences about their successes and therefore their perceived competence and legitimacy in highly elite roles.

### **Successful Women's Legitimacy at Work**

Research focusing on challenges successful women face in building and maintaining legitimacy at work informs our theorizing. To be legitimized in terms of one's organizational role or successes refers to the idea that one's position, power, authority, or actions are viewed as right or proper, just, reasonable and appropriate, and normatively acceptable (e.g., Jost & Major, 2001; Suchman, 1995; Tyler, 2006). A relatively large body of literature on legitimacy in the management field focuses on the organizational and institutional level of analysis (e.g., Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Bitektine & Haack, 2014; Deephouse, Bundy, Tost & Suchman, 2017; Suchman, 1995; Suddaby, Bitektine & Haack, 2017). Studies exploring legitimacy at the individual and group level of analysis are rarer and tend to focus on the social psychological components of legitimation of others, and how legitimacy perceptions are tied to status characteristics associated with particular social group memberships (e.g., gender, race), which perpetuates social inequality (e.g., Acker, 2006; Kelman, 2001; Ridgeway, 2001; Tyler, 2006).

Varied lines of research in sociology, psychology, and organizational studies on women and work speak to legitimacy in the context of women's success. Highlighted in this work is that women, compared to men, face greater barriers to maintaining their legitimacy at work *even after* they have achieved positions characterized by considerable power and authority (Ellemers, 2018; Heilman, 2012). Women are viewed as less trustworthy, unfit for their roles, and less competent in work groups or as members of their profession, as compared to men, even when they hold high status roles (e.g., Carli 1999; Dryburgh, 1999; Ridgeway, 2001; Smith, Liss, Erchull, Kelly, Adragna & Baines, 2018).



Shedding light on this phenomenon, research on the “double-bind” shows that when women occupy high status roles in organizations, especially in settings where women are highly underrepresented, they are evaluated less favorably than men in similar roles (Jamieson, 1995). This occurs because the roles they occupy, and the behaviors considered normative and valued for those who occupy those roles, are typically masculine. That is, by occupying high status roles and asserting the behaviors associated with their positions, women violate gender norms (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman et al., 2004). Women face trade-offs between acting in gender-inconsistent ways to fit into male-oriented organizational cultures, resulting in being perceived as competent but unlikeable, or acting in gender-consistent ways (e.g., being warm, friendly) and being perceived as likeable but less competent (e.g., Cuddy, Glick & Beninger, 2011; Phelan, Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2008).

Women also are negatively stereotyped, further detracting from their legitimacy. While the majority of past research focuses on descriptive (who women are) and prescriptive (who women should be) stereotypes that hold women back from success or influence their credibility in powerful roles (e.g., Heilman, 2012; Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie & Reichard, 2008; Rudman & Phelan, 2008), stereotypes also attribute credit for *how* women achieve success. For instance, a woman’s promotions may be attributed to factors outside of her own abilities, such as that she benefited from affirmative action or she has “slept her way to the top” (Ely, 1994) rather than to her own skills, hard work, and talents. Further, women’s own attributions about how they achieved successes have been found to gravitate to explanations that undermine their own legitimacy. Research suggests women may underestimate the role their own abilities play in their success (e.g., Beyer, 1990; Eagly & Carli, 2007), attributing their achievements to external factors such as luck rather than internal factors such as hard work or competence (e.g., Leonard

& Harvey, 2008). Together, this work illuminates how "... gender stereotypes can prompt bias in evaluative judgments of women even when these women have proved themselves to be successful and demonstrated their competence" (Heilman et al., 2004: 416).

Status characteristics theory (Ridgeway, 2001; 2015) demonstrates that women's struggles with legitimacy arise because of cultural, historical, and social norms dictating status differential between demographic characteristics such as gender (Berger, Ridgeway, Fisek, & Norman, 1998). Other identities, such as race and social class, intersect with gender to create additional challenges (e.g. Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). A high achieving woman's gender-based lower status means she has a deficit of perceived legitimacy out of keeping with the objective reality of her elite organizational role (Ridgeway, 2014). These dynamics are exacerbated when gender-based status beliefs are unexamined, where women are tokens, or in occupations that have a strong association with a particular gender (Brescoll, Dawson & Uhlmann, 2010; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). For instance, Brescoll et al. (2010: 1) find that "when an individual has achieved a high-status position in a gender-incongruent occupation, making a mistake can prove especially damaging to his or her status. A gender-congruent leader's competence is assumed, but for a gender-incongruent leader, salient mistakes create ambiguity and call the leader's competence into question, which, in turn, leads to a loss of status."

As a whole, these lines of research highlight that women are likely to be in an ongoing struggle to build and maintain their legitimacy even after achieving considerable success. A key question concerns how women overcome this. Some research demonstrates that in environments where women are highly underrepresented, women appear to engage in various behaviors to build power, status and acceptance, such as putting forth extra effort and overachieving (Kanter,

1977), balancing their presentation of masculine and feminine characteristics (Halbert, 1997), managing their appearance (Mavin & Grandy, 2016), or more broadly, managing others' impressions of them (Hatmaker, 2012) such as by presenting themselves in a positive light (Roberts, 2005). While this work is suggestive in terms of the behaviors women employ at work, many questions remain about how successful women can combat the problems they face with legitimacy. In particular, scholars consistently suggest that self-narratives are a tool to build legitimacy, but limited research explores these connections deeply.

### **Self-Narratives and Legitimacy**

Self-narratives are organized around plotlines, or what Ricoeur refers to as “emplotment” (Ricoeur, 1984), which involves tales of people, places, and events and sets of common themes located in particular time, place, and historical context (Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 2001). Individuals employ “discourse,” or patterned ways of telling stories of the self. “Good stories,” as discussed in Ibarra & Barbulescu (2010: 135), help the narrator create meaning (Gergen, 1994; McAdams and colleagues, 1996, 1999) and legitimize identity claims (Ashforth, 2001; Van Maanen, 1998). Discursive patterns involve which stories are told, how stories are told, and how the self is positioned in the stories told (LaPointe, 2013).

A central premise in the scholarly research that guides our work is that self-narratives are a method through which individuals can build, maintain, and repair legitimacy for their successes and justify their elite positions (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Maclean, Harvey & Chia, 2012; Pentland, 1999; Sparrowe, 2005). As discussed in Pentland (1999: 716): “People do not just tell stories, they enact stories, and these stories provide legitimacy and accountability for their actions.” Within stories, legitimacy is built by creating “a sense of positive, beneficial, ethical, understandable, necessary, or otherwise acceptable action in a specific setting” (Vaara & Tienari,

2008: 986). For instance, Maclean, Harvey and Chia (2012) examine life-history narratives of elite male business executives and demonstrate that business executives relied on four storylines to legitimize how they were able to rise to elite status: defying-the-odds, staying-the-course, succeeding through talent, and giving back to society. While illuminating how different storylines can build legitimacy for elite status, Maclean et al.'s (2012) work cannot speak to women's legitimation strategies when encountering gender inequalities on the road to success.

While acknowledging that people may not always be explicitly aware of, or actively narrating to build legitimacy (Vaara & Monin, 2010; Vaara, Tienari & Laurila, 2006), we assert that the stories elite women tell and how they tell them form a legitimating account (Orbuch, 1997) for what they have accomplished and how they accomplished it. In other words, we take the position that women's self-narratives go beyond autobiographical accounts; self-narratives are performances through which women legitimate actions and outcomes in a specific time in historical and social context (Orbuch, 1997). We focus our theorizing on the discursive legitimation strategies within their self-narratives women use to build legitimacy for their unusual successes. Our findings shed light on the constellation of discursive strategies women draw upon to build legitimacy for why they, and not other women, have succeeded against the odds.

Factors beyond women's awareness may relate to how they imagine their own legitimacy and we seek to understand whether the different social and historical contexts from which women emerge relate to their discursive legitimation strategies. In particular, themes in our data point to the roles of social class origins and the organizational sector in which women rise to success in shaping women's legitimation strategies. We define social class using Côté's (2011: 5) psychological view of class 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-à-vis others.” Organizational sector refers to the type of organization – entrepreneurial, corporate, or mixed – in which women rise to success.

## METHODS

We used exploratory and inductive qualitative methods, specifically narrative methods, to achieve our goals of building new theoretical insights and understanding women’s legitimization strategies within their self-narratives. One of the authors and two other interviewers conducted semi-structured interviews with highly successful women who entered the workforce between 1950 and 1990. These interviews were part of a larger project originally conceived as a study of how corporate and entrepreneurial women deal with barriers and conflict.<sup>2</sup> The analyses and findings presented here include 40 interviews with women who were raised in the U.S. and spent all or the majority of their careers in the U.S.<sup>3</sup>

### Data Collection and Sample

Participants were recruited 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 a faculty affiliate to members of a high-status, women-only networking and fundraising board (N=16). Finally, women from a publicly available list of female founders of successful entrepreneurial ventures were recruited using “cold calls” (N=14).

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<sup>2</sup> Information about larger study to be added after blind reviews conclude.

<sup>3</sup> Because social class varies in critical ways across countries, we restricted our sample to 40 (of the full set of 54) interviews with women who were raised in the U.S. and spent all or the majority of their careers in the U.S.

----- Insert Figure 1 about here -----

Eighteen of the participants worked entirely or almost entirely as entrepreneurs; twenty worked exclusively or almost exclusively for corporations; and two had work experiences spanning both sectors (see Figure 1). 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. All of the women entered the workforce between 1950 and 1990. We ascertained race and ethnicity through visual assessment and information gathered from publicly available information on each of the women (described below). Thirty-two of the women were classified as White, three as Asian, three as Black, and two as Hispanic. By happenstance rather than design, White women were divided evenly into corporate and entrepreneurial sectors (15 corporate; 15 entrepreneurial; 2 mixed); all Asian women were entrepreneurs; all Black and Hispanic women were corporate executives. Because of the overlap between race/ethnicity and sector, as well as the small sample size of women who are Asian, Black, or Hispanic, we do not explore distinctions along race or ethnicity around how women build legitimacy through self-narratives.

----- Insert Figure 2 about here -----

A notable minority of participants referred to the socioeconomic environment in which they were raised, which led us to investigate family-of-origin social class, though this was not an intended focus at the outset of this study. Triangulating across multiple external data sources (described below), we determined that twelve women were raised in lower-class environments, fifteen in middle-class environments, and thirteen in upper-class environments (see Figure 2). Social class background and organizational sector were unrelated: five, nine, and six corporate executives were identified as coming from lower-, middle-, and upper-class backgrounds,

respectively; exactly six entrepreneurs hailed from each social class category. Race and ethnicity were also unrelated to social class: eight, thirteen, and eleven of the White women were from lower-, middle-, and upper-class backgrounds, respectively; among Asian women, two were from lower- and one was from upper-class backgrounds; among Black women, one was from each social class background; among Hispanic women, one was from lower- and one was from middle-class backgrounds. The dispersion in participants' social class origins, roughly equally distributed across lower-, middle-, and upper-class backgrounds and across sectors and race/ethnicity, allowed us to explore the relationship between social class origins and women's self-narratives.

The same semi-structured interview approach was used for all participants (see Appendix for interview protocol). The interview was structured to learn about women's work history and self-perceptions regarding their workplace successes and ability to deal with barriers. Each interview, lasting 45 to 180 minutes, was carried out by one or two interviewers either over the phone or in person. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Analytic Approaches**

We used an iterative, inductive analytic process to uncover and illuminate women's self-narratives. Our initial review of the transcripts revealed that many women organized their narratives around stories of pivotal events along their rise to success, offering explanations for why they succeeded against the odds in those moments. This led to our analytical focus involving legitimation within self-narratives. The analytic process was informed by the narrative methods of Feldman, Sköldbberg, Brown, & Horner (2004) and McAdams (e.g., McAdams, 2001, 2007, 2012; McAdams & McLean, 2013), and relied on four analytic approaches that built on one another: 1) identifying narrative elements within women's stories; 2) identifying conceptual

elements across interviews; 3) establishing patterns in women's approaches to building legitimacy through their self-narratives; and 4) linking those patterns with social class origins and work sector. At least two of the authors analyzed the 40 transcripts at each stage.

*Identifying narrative elements within women's stories of how success was achieved.* We took two steps to identify narrative elements within each participant's interview. First, all of the authors read through the transcripts and discussed themes revealed in the transcripts. This framed the study's overall research questions in the data and helped clarify emergent patterns that could be important in coding the self-narratives. Then, we summarized each transcript into a grand memo identifying one or two overarching themes that characterized the woman's self-narrative, linking each identified theme to specific stories offered by the participant. Such an approach to analytic memos is common in the iterative qualitative process and serves as an important corollary process to data coding (Saldaña, 2009). We discussed, compared, and contrasted grand memos to create a list of themes that cut across interviews, such as gender barriers, need for legitimacy, and how much agency women claimed for their own successes.

Recognizing the theoretical importance of pivotal events in women's overall self-narratives, we applied fine-grained narrative methods to assess how each woman made sense of these occurrences. A pivotal event was defined as "an account...of how [a] change from beginning to end took place" (Danto, 1985: 234) that the narrator presented as a factor in her own success or advancement. One of the authors and a research associate extracted pivotal event stories out of the transcripts. Examples include movements in or out of education, work roles, positions, tasks, or organizations, as well as major organizational changes (e.g. a merger), and personal events (e.g., the death of a family member). Some of the pivotal events referred to objectively negative events which were experienced as such when they occurred, such as being



fired or losing a child; in these cases, we included the event as pivotal if the woman understood it to have led, ultimately, to learning, growth, or ascendance. For example, if a participant described turning down a novel opportunity because of a spouse's constraints and then spoke of the same event as leading to her being tapped for another leadership role, this was coded as a pivotal event that contributed to her ascendance even though it was originally viewed as a sacrifice.

Our interpretive approach to the stories of pivotal events 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." These meanings can be found by analyzing the words, expressions, and references evident in different stories within a narrative. We applied two interpretive methods to illuminate the unstated logic and tensions within pivotal event stories: identifying oppositions and contrasts, and incomplete syllogisms (see Feldman et al., 2004 for full description of these methods). For example, one woman sets up oppositions and contrasts by positioning herself against other women when she says: "I never had to pound on anybody's desk and say you've got to give me an opportunity" [like other women had to do...] (011).<sup>4</sup> Syllogisms can be defined as a form of reasoning leading to causal inference, whether or not that inference is accurate. Incomplete syllogisms suggest incomplete, or "careless" logical inference that is "plausible, likely, or probabilistic ... rather than logically binding ..." (Feldman et al., 2004: 152). An illustration of an incomplete syllogism comes from a participant who emphasizes that "I produced, therefore they didn't care that I was a woman" (013). The syllogism implicitly suggests the importance of performance to overcoming problems

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<sup>4</sup> Numbers in parentheses at the end of quotes refer to participant ID numbers.

presented by her gender, while explicitly linking her ability to “produce” to her success. These interpretive methods deepened our understanding of the women’s presentation of pivotal events and their discursive attempts to legitimize their successes while acknowledging substantial barriers.

Coding of pivotal events included what women identified as “the event” itself in terms of what was going on, who was there, and what the outcomes were. Gender-based components of her narrative were specifically coded in terms of attributions women made about the role gender played in what was happening and the outcomes achieved. In addition to pivotal moments, we coded any sections of the narratives that included attributions women made about their own gender, stories of others’ actions related to gender, and what women did in response to events that were talked about in terms of gender.

*Identifying discursive legitimation strategies and establishing patterns within self-narratives.* Building on the understandings gleaned from interpretive methods and memos, two of the authors iterated back across the interviews with an aim to identify how women used discourse to legitimize their success in the face of gender barriers. While not part of the initial focus in our analysis, prior research at the organizational level of analysis shows that discursive strategies are used by organizations to build legitimacy (e.g., Erkama & Vaara, 2010; Vaara, 2014; Vaara, Tienari & Laurila, 2006; Vaara & Monin, 2010). We worked from Vaara et al.’s description of discursive legitimation strategies as “specific, not always intentional or conscious, ways of employing different discourses or discursive resources to establish legitimacy” (2006: 794). The initial analyses of pivotal event stories revealed five distinct discursive legitimation strategies participants used to justify their attainment of elite roles and their successes in the intermediate steps along the way. The authors then trained two research associates to code the

transcripts for discursive legitimation strategies. Iterating between coding and discussion in the initial training sessions, the two authors and two research associates identified and added a sixth distinct discursive legitimation strategy. The final set of strategies are: *social ties, competence, maneuvers, warrior-like action, serendipity, and endurance*.

The research associates, blind to our growing attention to gender, class, and sector, used a qualitative analysis software program (Dedoose) for all of their coding. After iteratively training on a subset of interviews, the research associates coded all of the transcripts independently, checking for agreement with one another after coding. Disagreements were resolved through discussion between the research associates; instances of continued disagreement were resolved in discussion with two authors. The research associates analyzed each entire transcript, with special attention to pivotal events, coding for discursive legitimation strategies and applying multiple codes when appropriate. The final result identified the full constellation of legitimation strategies within each woman's self-narrative.

*Linking narratives to social and historical context: organizational sector and social class.* The original study design focused on two sectors: entrepreneurial and corporate. In light of this, one author systematically reviewed the coded transcripts to detect differences between entrepreneurs' and corporate executives' use of legitimation strategies, in either the tone used within a strategy or reliance on a specific array of strategies.

The participant sample was not selected based on social class. Elite status and professional success was a condition for inclusion, so all of the women were of high socioeconomic status at the time of the interviews. In spite of this, and though the interview protocol did not include any specific questioning about upbringing or social class background, roughly twenty percent of the women interviewed directly referenced their early socioeconomic

environment. Seven of the women explicitly positioned the socioeconomic environment in which they grew up as an important factor in their self-narratives; five of these women integrated family-of-origin social class into multiple stories of pivotal events. Social class appeared to shape these women's narratives, suggesting avenues for access, ways of viewing challenges, sources of inspiration, and cause for additional barriers. The suggestive evidence of a connection between social class of origin and self-narratives was intriguing and led to further investigation.

To examine this relationship, we needed information on the social class origins of all of the participants, not just those who mentioned it in their interviews. To gather social class data, a contract research associate, unfamiliar with the study, was hired to "scrape the web" for any information on the social class conditions each woman experienced during her childhood and teen years. Across the 40 participants, information was gathered from 174 web pages, including LinkedIn profiles, parents' obituaries, college records, newspaper articles, Wikipedia entries, census documents, and company websites.<sup>5</sup> The information gathered included parents' education and occupations, city of birth and town of residence during childhood (cross referenced for median household income), high school and college attended, and mention of family details (e.g., supported siblings; father funded a campus center for a university). Using this information, the research associate and one author categorized each woman into one of three social classes – lower-, middle-, or upper-class – based on descriptions of social classes in the U.S. (Beeghley, 2015; Gilbert, 2017). We reviewed the seven interviews in which women mentioned their socioeconomic background to check whether categorizations based on the Internet search matched women's own characterizations of social class; they did so in all cases (3

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<sup>5</sup> This information was also used to complete demographic records for each woman, reported above.

lower class; 1 middle class; 3 upper class). After establishing participants' social class origins via archival information, two authors systematically reviewed the coded transcripts to detect class-related differences in women's discursive use of legitimation strategies, in either the tone used within a strategy or reliance on a specific array of strategies.

## **FINDINGS**

Our study focuses on two questions: How do women use their self-narratives to build legitimacy for their successes? Why do different women present different constellations of legitimation strategies within their self-narratives? To answer these questions, we break our findings into three parts. First, we show how women's self-narratives set the initiating conditions for their success by discursively positioning the settings, pivotal events, and gender-based challenges to success. Initiating conditions drive the self-narrative forward by setting the stage for the events that stimulate the narrator's progress as she ascends to greater power and authority. Second, we illuminate the constellation of discursive strategies women draw upon in their self-narratives to legitimate their successes. Third, we offer evidence of a relationship between the social and historical contexts through which women passed on their path to success, specifically social class origins and work sector, and their constellations of legitimacy narratives.

### **Initiating Conditions**

To set the stage for how women build legitimacy, we needed to understand how women themselves set the scenes for their successes within their self-narratives. We find that women discursively locate themselves in pivotal events that involve distinct times, places, and inciting incidents that are critical to their successes. Women emphasize several themes as they describe these initiating conditions. First, we find that women's self-narratives emphasize that they are "the first," or among the first, female leaders in their organizations or industries, whether in large

firms or in smaller entrepreneurial ventures. Many of the women pursued advanced degrees, such as an MBA, and their narratives hone in on their experiences as being among very few other women in their programs. The emphasis is on the woman's position as an outsider and a pathbreaker – someone who was able to gain access to highly coveted roles typically occupied by, or actively reserved for, men. The woman quoted below was the only female Vice President in a very large manufacturing firm, but she attained elite status only after moving out of another male-dominated firm:

“One of the senior executives from [firm where she worked previously] was there ... and we were chatting about [why she left the firm] for a while. And I just basically said, ‘Hey, I didn’t really think I’d ever get a shot at a line job at this level in [old firm].’ And he said, ‘You’re right’ ... I’m the first woman VP in [new firm] ... There still is no woman with that kind of responsibility at [old firm]” (003).

Here, as in stories conveyed by other successful women, the narrator frames her unusual achievements as a rarity, or even an oddity, at the particular place and time in history.

Women's descriptions of pivotal events along the road to success also often include stories of how they find themselves under attack by others (typically powerful men) who see women as a problem or threat:

“I learned much later that my hiring was somewhat controversial because there was one partner who was convinced that I would break down in tears the first time someone yelled at me ... They had one or two women out of college who were doing what now would be called analyst work. But never had they hired a [woman] MBA” (006).

Stories of attacks suggest that others resent the narrator's presence because of their gender, that they perceived that others expected her to fail or even actively undermined her success. This story illustrates:

“I can still remember ... I was in a merger discussion with my boss and two other people. And we all went into a side room to sort of discuss the situation. And I remember, I piped up and I made some comments. And my boss turned and said, ‘Oh, the little woman has some ideas.’ Now, is this discrimination? Is this putting me down? Or is it just a natural reaction of sort of pushing you back to see how you react? I remember at the time, it really annoyed me, because why would he say that to me?” (006).

As the quotes above illustrate, many of the women voice acute awareness of “being a woman.” The awareness of gender and standing as an exemplar for all women plays into some of the women's storylines. As one participant emphasizes: “Trust me, there were people that wanted me to fail ... I felt that not only could I not fail, I didn't want to fail for women” (062).

Being a gender minority is further complicated for some of the participants by their race or ethnicity. While none of the White women refer to race, women of color often root their discourse in the challenges of being a double-outsider. These women emphasize their awareness of the racial inequalities they face in addition to gender inequalities: “Working in political institutions, you certainly run into gender and racial bias, especially as an African-American woman. That can undermine your ability to get your ideas adopted” (070). This same woman also emphasizes how she succeeds despite these challenges: “But I've never experienced any major setbacks in my career, at least not enough to get discouraged” (070).

Unlike gender and race, women's family-of-origin social class could remain an invisible identity (Clair, Beatty & MacLean, 2005) and childhood circumstances could be expected to play

little, if any, role in self-narratives. We find, however, that nearly twenty percent of the women (7 of 40) mention their family-of-origin socioeconomic status. In contrast to discursive presentations of gender and race or ethnicity, social class is offered not as a source of additional discrimination, but as a personal factor shaping women's professional experiences and their perspectives on their own success. One woman, for example, views her notably high-ranking job through the lens of having to fend for herself during her early years:

“My father died when I was a kid and we had no money, so I was always doing after-school jobs and all. I think all those jobs were meaningful. It's not just executive jobs” (063).

On the other side of the socioeconomic spectrum, women raised in wealthy homes, with well-connected family and friends, refer to the opportunities granted by their upbringing. Reflecting on her initial foray into business, a woman from an upper-class family presents her success as linked to her father's:

“My dad went into retirement for three months before he was bored out of his mind. So he said, ‘OK, well ... I'll go and try and do this [new entrepreneurial venture].’ So I started – I was my father's sort of TA, meaning I did everything. We started building [high end properties]” (076).

In summary, we find that women from across sectors and socioeconomic backgrounds focus their self-narratives on the initiating conditions in which they built success in the face of gendered pressures, barriers, and challenges. While universally acknowledging that gender is in play, women vary in the extent to which they feel factors related to gender held them back. For example, two women describe the impact of being a woman in the workplace: one claims, “It never sort of fazed me” (011), while another reports, “It's smacked me in the face every day of



my life” (052). Whether the barriers negatively affect them or not, women agree that they had to deal with gender barriers on the road to success: “And at that point you’ve got to decide, what am I going to do about it? And I think the smart thing to do is just say ‘it is what it is, it’s there and I’m just going to deal with it’” (051).

### **Six Types of Discursive Legitimation Strategies for Explaining Success Against the Odds**

We find that women’s self-narratives draw upon six distinctive explanations to legitimate success in the face of gendered challenges along the road to success: social ties, competence, maneuvers, warrior-like action, serendipity, and endurance. We summarize the similarities and differences between these discursive strategies in Table 1. In the Table, we distinguish each of the discursive strategies in terms of: 1) how the narrator positions herself in her own story of success; 2) the degree of agency versus passivity indicated in the story; 3) embedded logics – “underlying assumptions ... often unexamined, which form the framework within which reasoning takes place” (Horn: 1983: 1) – in the narrator’s stance on her own success; and 4) distinct vocabularies used (e.g., common phrases and words). We provide illustrative quotes for each strategy in Table 2.

----- Insert Table 1 about Here -----

----- Insert Table 2 about Here -----

While the discursive strategies are distinct from one another, women draw upon multiple, interwoven discursive strategies to legitimize their successes. All or nearly all of the women present three of the discursive approaches – social ties, competence, and maneuvers – in one or more of their stories of pivotal events. We refer to these three as primary discursive legitimation strategies. Our analyses reveal that these strategies alone, however, offer an incomplete picture of the women’s narration of their own abilities to succeed. Three secondary legitimation

strategies – warrior-like action, serendipity, and endurance – complete the picture. Only subsets of the women turn to explanations that include these strategies. Each woman narrates a constellation of primary and secondary strategies as she builds legitimacy for her successes. Figure 3 presents a bar chart of the six strategies, illustrating the relative frequency of use across all the strategies. Below, we discuss and present illustrative examples for each of the six discursive legitimation strategies individually, starting with the primary strategies and following with the secondary strategies.

----- Insert Figure 3 about here -----

***Success through Social Ties.*** In legitimation strategies highlighting *success through social ties*, women speak of access, support, and sometimes protection attained through ties to others. *Success through social ties* is a primary discursive legitimation strategy; all but three of the women relate one or more stories in which social ties are presented as a key to ascension. In these commonly told stories, the narrator positions her connections to a cadre of powerful others as the “wind beneath her wings” that makes her successes seem understandable and reasonable. In particular, when presenting how she succeeds through social ties, women often highlight the critical role their relationships with powerful senior men play in opening gateways to higher levels of authority and influence. 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” (060).

Some *success through social ties* stories profile the narrator as responsible for actively pursuing and cultivating relational connections and opportunities as she strives to achieve. In the example below, an entrepreneur reaches out to a highly influential man as she takes a new product forward:

“I though, this is crazy. I need help. So I picked up the phone and called the president of a company who I had met about eight years ago ... I called him and I basically [said] I’ve got this huge idea with unlimited potential and I don’t have any money ... He said, ‘well then what do you want from me?’ And I said, ‘well, I want you to take a piece of my company and help me build this thing.’ And he did” (061).

In other storylines, women position themselves in a less agentic role vis-à-vis their social ties. In these narrations, relationships are available through the social circle traveled in or through other means not actively created by the woman herself. In this example, the narrator is the recipient of attention from a social tie she neither sought out nor earned:

“I would go to New York every so often, go out to parties with him [fiancé]. And at one I met a partner from [bank] ... 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.’ I had not said a word” (006).

Notably in this example, the legitimacy narrative includes both *success through social ties* and *success through serendipity* in that the narrator benefits from a seemingly random benevolent act by someone in her social circle.

### **Success through Competence**

Women's self-narratives often include a legitimation strategy emphasizing their own *competence* as the rationale for success. This primary discursive strategy emphasizes the role that a woman's unique abilities and extraordinary talent play in her success. In competency strategies, the narrator positions herself in her story as "doing great work" (62), or having special gifts such as being "extremely astute" (055). The narrator discursively positions her excellent performance as an antidote to problems arising because of her gender. For instance, one woman notes that she was so competent "that they didn't even care if I was female" (015). All but one of the women convey one or more stories of *success through competence*.

In presenting competence as a legitimation strategy, the narrator identifies her own skills and talents and locates them in her success stories:

"From the very day that I hired into [company], my performance at work was always in the top five percent, ten percent ... Even my first job I had to laugh because the day I was leaving the job, the head of the whole group, the Vice President, called me in and said, 'you know what your rating is?' I said no. He said, 'You are the first employee ever in my experience to have achieved the top rating in the first job'" (030).

In most stories discursively employing competence, the narrator positions herself as fundamentally agentic, responsible for her own skills and related accomplishments. In *success through competence*, the narrator explains that her talent, skills and abilities are so outstanding that they are self-evident to others, and this overcomes any doubts others might have concerning her gender. For instance, one participant describes a number of years during which she worked for a powerful male who was "tough, impossible to work for" but:

"... he recognized my talent and I was allowed to work within his company. I was like a bumblebee pollinating ideas and gaining knowledge. And, of course,

once I got this knowledge, I became pretty well-known for my expertise. I think that's why I ended up, after a few years, being the first woman winning [Job] of the Year... I had become adept at developing resources, about going out into the marketplace and finding product and working with people in very unusual, sophisticated ways" (055).

Gender as a barrier is downplayed here; the emphasis is on meritocratic processes, and the speaker establishes her legitimacy by demonstrating narratively that, even in light of significant gender discrimination, her ample and unusual ability and qualifications are so great that her gender rarely (or perhaps never) stands in her way.

### **Success through Maneuvers**

Discursive legitimation strategies referring to *success through maneuvers* build legitimacy for a woman's achievements and accomplishments by demonstrating her capacity to strategically maneuver in and through opportunities and barriers. *Success through maneuvers* relies on a political logic: in order to advance and succeed, the woman must engage in a series of strategic and/or political moves and tactics to build opportunities and overcome gender-based barriers. The maneuvers discourse positions the narrator as a bushwhacker – analyzing possible paths and adapting her approach to the twists, turns, and blockages encountered on the road to success. Through maneuvers, women work around challenges to their authority, take advantage of hidden opportunities, and strategically plan and capitalize on what is needed in order to succeed. Those who are excellent at maneuvering find their way along circuitous and often narrow paths in their rise to elite roles. Almost all women in our study narrate *success through maneuvers* as part of how they explain their ability to succeed against the odds.

When presenting *success through maneuvers*, the narrator speaks as if she intentionally molds herself and her situation over time in a conscious, intentional way, as in this story of transitioning from a corporate role to an entrepreneurial venture:

“I was looking for an opportunity in the [retail] industry. So I searched for a high-quality company with a high-quality brand that presented a clear opportunity ... I like to have the deck stacked in my favor ... I negotiated to purchase the license for [brand] ... It was a corporate challenge in the sense of the constraints that were placed on us ... but it was also entrepreneurial in the sense that we didn’t have any corporate funding, so we had to come up with our own resources” (102).

Maneuvers are presented as fundamentally agentic. By referring to her maneuvering, the narrator credits her own resourcefulness and political shrewdness for proactively advancing her career.

Maneuvers often involve choosing when to say yes and when to say no, as 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” (060).

### **Success through Warrior-Like Action**

*Warrior-like action* is a secondary discursive legitimation strategy rooted in the logic that the road to success is a battleground with winners and losers. In presenting warrior-like action, the narrator discursively legitimates her success by positioning herself as having obliterated obstacles (often related to her gender) during pivotal events through her own direct and powerful

actions. In these stories, women survive within the battleground by fighting, kicking down doors, standing up for themselves, and confronting barriers directly. Achievement and success involve compelling claims that naturalize the narrator's ability to continually break into roles and positions usually reserved for men. Warrior-like action strategies are a secondary discursive approach presented by slightly over half the women as they explain breaking through extraordinary barriers.

*Success through warrior-like action* is the most consistently agentic discursive legitimation strategy. Unlike the circuitous approach women tell of in their stories of maneuvering, warrior-like action involves direct hits, often on competitors within the same organization. While acknowledging others' presence in her story, the narrator is assigning credit squarely and fully to herself. This discursive approach is highly focused on the narrator's individual power and exceptional self-agency and downplays weakness and fear. This example of fearless pursuit is illustrative of warrior-like action strategies:

“There were four of us working for him and I remember, when it came to bonus time, we all got the same bonus. And I had done more deals than the other people, and I really – I stood up and complained. And I said, ‘Look, I don’t understand this. Why would I be paid the same amount of money as the other three? I did more successful transactions.’ He said, ‘Well, your husband works so you really don’t need the money’ ... Can you imagine? I mean, I was just speechless. So I went to the head of the department” (006).

Warrior-like action as a discursive strategy is resonant with highly active imagery illuminating individual strength of will. 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” (070). Gender discrimination in the stories of warrior-like action tends to be framed as inevitable, but conquerable through heroic action.

### **Success through Serendipity**

Narratives that rely upon *success through serendipity* as a secondary discursive legitimation strategy position career success as a matter of luck or happenstance. By highlighting serendipity within stories of pivotal events, the narrator places herself in a passive role in comparison to outside forces working in her favor. Women conveying success through serendipity discursively position themselves in the narrative as lucky, as having had extraordinary good fortune and, therefore, success. Slightly over half of the women (22 of 40) offer serendipity as a legitimation strategy and most of those women do so only once.

The factors involved in lucky circumstances vary across women. Some women explain that the serendipitous circumstances relate directly to their gender, such as when a career opportunity arose because a company was seeking to recruit underrepresented women. Other women emphasize that lucky circumstances relate to good timing, as in this example: “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” (076).

Our focus is not on whether luck or fortunate timing objectively play any role in a given woman’s career; rather, our interest is with how women tell their stories and the weight assigned to luck in their narrated constructions of their careers. Stories relying on the *success through serendipity* strategy emphasize external factors and downplay the narrator’s own agency in her own ascendance. The minimization of agency is particularly striking given the obstacles women describe within their self-narratives.



## Success through Endurance

Women use *success through endurance* as a secondary discursive legitimation strategy to underscore the hard work, persistence, and willpower that paves the way for their success. This discourse highlights periods of hardship overcome by steadfast industriousness and oftentimes sacrifice. In some stories, endurance reflects innate characteristics; in others, endurance reflects a diligent act of survival. Because women endure and outlast those around them, they are rewarded for their grit and tolerance of intense labor. About half of the women in our study speak of endurance in their self-narratives.

Women's descriptions of endurance vary in the degree of agency expressed in the narratives. In less agentic presentations of endurance, the narrator paints herself as succeeding by lasting through drudgery or chaos. In this example, a woman describes her early chaotic years as a professional, going to school, with a young baby:

“I don't even know how I got that done, but to be honest with you, I just didn't think about it – because when I talk about it now, I'm like, oh my God, I don't even know how I did that” (075).

In more agentic forms of endurance, the narrator assigns herself credit for being a workhorse, which leads to opportunities and successes:

“You have to be willing to work your ass off. I can't tell you how many hours I work. I think I have to take the 12-steps. I have to admit I'm a workaholic. But by the same token, I'm not as bad as some people I know. I actually can find some balance. But I work really hard, and I can throw an awful lot of balls in the air and can compartmentalize them ... But a thick skin, a tenacity, a very strong work ethic, a very high energy level, and a willingness to let a lot of crap just roll off my back” (030).

In summary, women in our study convey their self-narratives through stories of pivotal moments; in many of these stories, the women describe facing considerable gender-based barriers. Women present a constellation of six discursive strategies to legitimate their successes even in the face of barriers. Three of the discursive legitimation strategies are primary: success through social ties, competence, and maneuvers. Nearly all of the women in our sample discursively used these three legitimation strategies within their self-narratives. Three of the discursive legitimation strategies are secondary: success through warrior-like action, serendipity, and endurance. Half or fewer of the women in our sample presented these supplementary strategies in their legitimacy narratives. In the next section, we describe our findings relating women's constellations of discursive legitimation strategies to the personal social and historical contexts through which they passed on the way to elite professional roles.

### **Women's Social and Historical Context and Discursive Legitimation Strategies**

Women's discursive presentation of primary and secondary strategies reflects the narrators' lived-in social and historical contexts. We find sector-based differences in terms of frequency across strategies and the narrative presentation within strategies. The social class in which women spent their early years also leaves its mark on women's self-narratives. As with organizational sector, we find that the relative frequency of use of the different strategies and the narrative emphasis within strategies differ for women raised in lower-, middle- and upper-class environments. Below, we consider how sector and social class as forms of social and historical context shape the degree to which and how women narrate each discursive legitimation strategy.

***Social/historical context and social ties.*** Nearly all corporate and entrepreneurial women refer to social ties as an important factor in their success. Entrepreneurs' narratives are especially laden with mentions of social ties, and entrepreneurs present this discursive strategy repeatedly

across multiple stories. In particular, entrepreneurs speak of social ties as critical to their development of new ideas, funding, and start-ups, as narrated here:

“So I said this is crazy. There’s a ton of venture capitalist money and this seems like ... the right time to it. So I convinced [my colleagues] to move ... And so the three of us worked over a weekend to put together a presentation – not a business plan, but a presentation. We went off and talked to [VC] and six weeks later we had \$25 million in the bank” (054).

Corporate women speak of relying on others for more gendered reasons, primarily for internal opportunities and promotions, explicitly naming their ties to others as a source of legitimacy. Corporate women appear to rely on the reflected legitimacy of those to whom they are tied, consistent with Burt’s (1998) network analysis showing women benefit from ties to senior executives within their firms. This observation by a corporate woman illustrates: “There is no question that having the strong sponsorship of a very senior executive at the company is an important element of legitimacy” (057).

Unlike sector, social class background does not play into the frequency with which women narrate stories of *success through social ties*, but the degree of agency conveyed within these stories reflects the socioeconomic environment in which women spent their early years. Women from lower-class backgrounds speak of actively seeking out and fostering relationships with people who control critical resources, intentionally building networks of influential ties, as illustrated here:

“The best way I can answer this question for me is spending equal time to forming relationships up, down, over and out. And what I mean by that is forming the relationships with people you work for, like [COO], like [CEO], like other

senior leaders, down to people that work for me ... when I visit the different countries I'll have dinner not just with my direct reports, but with people that report several layers down, to get to know them. I'll participate in social things, like I've gone to races, I've gone to concerts, and I've gone twice to Carnival" (003).

In contrast, women from upper-class backgrounds seldom provide details about the source of their social ties, suggesting they take the relationships for granted without their active intervention. In this example, a woman from the upper class describes others' roles in a pivotal moment along her ascension:

"Some very senior people that I knew in the world of [industry] knew I wasn't happy, so they mentioned my name to the Chairman ... and I think he heard of me from about three or four different people ... And he just called one day and said, why don't we have breakfast? So I did ... and then, finally, I came to [company]" (060).

In contrast to the active, seeking role women from lower-class backgrounds paint for themselves within their stories of social tie legitimation strategies, women from upper-class origins position themselves as deserving recipients of the generosity of others who are always in the wings, ready to share their access to a wealth of resources and opportunities.

*Social/historical context and competence strategies.* Within our sample, women's references to their own competence as a narrative legitimation strategy do not vary with social or historical context. Corporate women and entrepreneurs alike tell comparable tales, at comparable rates, relating their successes to their own skills, knowledge and abilities. Similarly, social class of origin does not appear to distinguish women's narrative use of competency strategies. Women universally point to their own competence as a critical factor underlying their exceptional

success. In our discussion section, we explore why this may be the case; however, our observation is that competence is positioned as a central legitimating strategy regardless of women's social/historical context. In other words, whether women are entrepreneurs or in corporations, and whether women harken from lower, middle, or upper-class backgrounds, they position themselves discursively to build legitimacy by emphasizing their unusual competencies and abilities as pathways to extraordinary success in context characterized by considerable gender-based barriers.

***Social/historical context and maneuvers strategies.*** Like competence strategies, corporate and entrepreneurial women present maneuver strategies with almost exactly the same regularity and in remarkably similar ways. The awareness of barriers stacked against women and descriptions of the need to respond strategically to these barriers appear regularly across self-narratives in both sectors. In contrast, women from different social class backgrounds vary in their use and presentation of maneuvers as a discursive legitimation strategy. Women from lower social class origins rely more heavily on *success through maneuvers* in their self-narratives than do women from middle- or upper-class origins. Women raised without financial and social resources to help open doors repeatedly describe assessing other people's needs and interests and designing their own approaches to address others' perspectives in order to move themselves forward and succeed. The intensely interpersonal maneuvers marking the narratives of women arising from lower social class origins reveals an attention to motivations of powerful others, as illustrated in the quote from (102) above and this example:

“At that point, you've got to get creative and you've got to say okay, 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, that is where your psychology comes in a lot. In order to be a leader, you've got to know what you are — you've got to deal with it. And you also have to sort of mold yourself to the situation to resolve it" (051).

When women from middle- and upper-class backgrounds do present a maneuvers strategy, they speak less of others in their stories of strategizing their way to success. While equally agentic, attention to others is less evident in these women's discursive use of maneuvers. Instead, women who have grown up in relatively privileged environments present maneuvers in more starkly analytical, impersonal terms, as in this example:

"At the time, only two Ivy League schools took women ... I actually thought this through in a very logical way, which was, I'm going to be a superstar. I want the best possible faculty I can get ... I'm going to go where the men are ... It's got to be Cornell, Stanford or Duke. Stanford would be good. Cornell would be even better. It turned out at the time there were a lot of other women there who thought like I did ... The women were much better than the men" (058).

***Social/historical context and warrior-like action strategies.*** In direct contrast to entrepreneurs' heavier reliance on serendipity strategies (discussed below), corporate women rely more heavily on warrior-like action to discursively legitimate their own success. A large majority of corporate women (16 of 20) present one or more stories of *success through warrior-like action*, while only a minority of the entrepreneurs (7 of 18) weave this discursive strategy into their self-narratives. We reviewed the details of the pivotal events narrated in this way to investigate why corporate women rely more heavily on this legitimation strategy. The excerpts reveal tales of warrior-like action often arising in corporate women's narration of dramatic pivotal events involving within-firm competitors, when more passive strategies would have led

to failure, and when the primary strategies of social ties, maneuvers and competence were unhelpful because doors had already been opened but someone was blocking passage. This story is typical of corporate women's discursive use of warrior-like action to legitimize winning in the face of strong resistance:

“So I went and confronted the comptroller [about someone else taking credit for her work]. ‘Was this true?’ And he said yes. And I said ‘well ... I did do this work. Why don't you get this other guy down here ... because clearly he couldn't have come up with this.’ ... And I said [to the person who had claimed her work] ‘you know as well as I do that you didn't do this work because you don't have the expertise’” (075).

Social class also reveals itself in women's discursive use of warrior-like action as a legitimation strategy. Women from upper-class backgrounds very seldom narrate their success as owing to this highly agentic strategy. Women from middle-class backgrounds do refer to warrior-like actions, but this discursive legitimation strategy is most common among women from lower-class backgrounds. As one participant who arose from limited means 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 ... 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” (055).

This discursive approach adopts a stereotypically masculine willingness to claim aggressive agency, an approach that may be more heavily discouraged for girls raised in upper-class settings. We make no arguments about the relative efficacy of this masculine claiming strategy across women from different social class backgrounds; instead, we focus on the ways in

which women from lower-class background display a fearless willingness to claim legitimacy through warrior-like tactics that other women appear less willing to adopt. In this example, the woman, raised in a lower-class environment, tells an increasingly warrior-like story of confronting men who interrupt her:

“Some of the time you just have to speak up, or just, ‘I’d like to say something, please.’ Or, ‘You interrupted me; can I finish my point?’ There are times where you do have to get aggressive and step in. And if there is someone that interrupts you, I’ll sit them down, eyeball to eyeball, and just basically say, ‘I’m sure you don’t know you’re doing this, but when we’re sitting in a room together, I sense you’re not always hearing what I’m saying.’ And just confront it” (003).

***Social/historical context and serendipity strategies.*** Sector is evident in women’s presentation of serendipity strategies. Entrepreneurs’ self-narratives often rely on *success through serendipity*, the least agentic of the legitimation strategies. The following narration of an early venture is typical of entrepreneurs’ discursive approach to serendipity, conveying a story of luck in stark contrast to more agentic legitimacy strategies:

“I wasn’t even close to that [successful, profitable] when I first started out. I was lucky that people saw something in me, saw that I had something, and they were patient with me. Think of those venture capitalists who gave me millions that I wasted ... and I feel honored by my venture capitalists that they did what they did” (055).

In contrast, only two of the corporate women’s self-narratives include more than a single reference to serendipity.

Stories of success through serendipity are present in narratives from women across the social class spectrum, but the degree of agency women convey within attributions of serendipity



differs. Serendipity in its most extreme form, reserving no modicum of agency on the part of the narrator, is most notable in how women from upper-class backgrounds narrate benefiting from luck and good fortune. We find that their narratives have a particularly passive tone, as exemplified in this woman's story about getting her first job:

“And one day I was standing on the street corner. It was a beautiful April afternoon and this guy says ‘it’s a beautiful day.’ I said, ‘yes, it is.’ ... And the guy said ‘Before you cross the street, can I ask you a question? ... Are you looking for a job?’ (laughter) ... And I said, ‘I am. How did you know that?’ ‘Well, it’s 2:30 in the afternoon and you’re in a navy suit, a white blouse ... and you have your briefcase. If you had a job, you’d be back at it by now.’ ... And he pulls out his business card ... that was my first job on Wall Street” (065).

While we cannot confirm the facts of this encounter, it is the approach to narration that is of interest to us in terms of how she presents the circumstances, what happened, and the different characters' roles in the story. In this narrative, the woman casts herself as the lucky recipient who has no role other than being in the right place at the right time. She does not provide any details or insights that relate to her own agency in the situation – even in terms of her own reaction to this strange turn of events. Rather, with almost fairy-tale like characteristics, she narrates this tale of opportunity falling at her feet during a beautiful spring day on a street corner. Other narratives offered by women from upper-class backgrounds have a similar tone. While the circumstances vary, their serendipity narratives share in common that the narrator positions herself as holding no responsibility for an opportunity that helps pave the way to success.

In contrast, women raised in middle- and lower-class environments claim at least a little credit for themselves in their serendipity stories. For example, a woman from a middle-class

background presents an event as “happenstance” while simultaneously claiming credit for her own skills:

“I really just thought I had a window of opportunity to learn a lot and to make some good money and then go get a real job again. And I was fortunate in that some of my first customers were pretty large corporations. I built a really strong reputation for understanding their business challenges” (069).

This quote highlights our finding that, while women who arose from middle- and lower-social class origins recognize the role that good luck plays in their successes, their narratives place the women as protagonists in their own stories.

*Social/historical context and endurance strategies.* Corporate women and entrepreneurs rely upon the *success through endurance* legitimation strategy at the same rate, but their stories reveal the different types of perseverance called for in the two sectors. Corporate women narrate hanging on in spite of the people around them, most often unsupportive bosses who may have created problems and barriers to success: “I lasted two and a half years, which apparently was the longest that anyone lasted while he was there ... he didn’t really allow me to function and he made me quite miserable” (018). Women in the corporate sector are located within historical structures of power and authority, and thus their endurance relates more directly to persevering in the face of gendered bias and men’s power and authority over their ability to succeed. In contrast, entrepreneurial women in our study persevere in the face of other, less hierarchical and less gendered challenges; for instance, women in our study often discuss the long work hours required, especially in early phases: “I worked 18 or 20 hours every day. I lived the company and that’s what it takes when you start a business” (061).

Women from different social class origins also engage with the *success through endurance* discursive strategy in observably different ways. We find that women raised in middle-class environments rely more heavily on stories of endurance than their peers from upper- and lower-class origins. The narratives vary widely, but women from the middle class consistently include discursive strategies locating the narrator's legitimacy within her capacity for hard work and perseverance. In this story, for example, an entrepreneur raised in a middle-class environment legitimizes her success by referring to holding steady through bad periods:

“We believed if we could survive, if we could just get through this bad time that as all of these other companies fell off, that there was going to be this gigantic opportunity for us to really capitalize on that and really grow” (069).

Similar in tone to these stories, several of the women from lower-social class backgrounds who speak of endurance present tales of hanging on through tough times: “I had A+ investors and they hung out there with me, and it took a lot of staying power, tenacity, and perseverance on their part and mine to keep [company] alive and flourishing” (055). In contrast to the tone of pure perseverance in the stories from women coming from less privileged backgrounds, the few endurance stories presented by women from upper-class backgrounds adopt a tone of service to others:

“You know what, this is going to sound so dumb and so simplistic, but I put so much energy into my job. I've had bosses where you give them something to approve, and you beg them three weeks later to get back to you. I just really work hard not to do that ... and I fail obviously sometimes, probably a lot of times, but I really try to be respectful ... I never go home without returning all of my staff's phone calls.” (072)

Endurance stories are so rare for women from upper-class backgrounds that this emphasis on generosity toward others within the story may be idiosyncratic, but we note that it fits with the presentation of social ties as “gifts” also found uniquely in the self-narratives of women from upper-class backgrounds.

In summary, we find that the social and historical circumstances from which women arise shape their approaches to building legitimacy through self-narratives. The starkest sector difference in women’s self-narratives appears in presentations of the most and least agentic of the discursive legitimation strategies. Corporate women relate tales of warrior-like action used to achieve success, a strategy largely absent from entrepreneurs’ narratives. On the other end of the spectrum, entrepreneurs turned to serendipity as their featured secondary legitimation strategy. Women’s presentations of social ties and endurance also differed by sector, reflecting sector-based differences in the types of pivotal moments where relationships and perseverance mattered most: generating start-up ideas, funding and partnerships for entrepreneurs, and dealing with gendered internal opportunities for corporate women.

Turning to social class origins, women from lower-class backgrounds discursively legitimize their successes through strategies involving high degrees of individual agency, whether touting their own competencies, strategically maneuvering through political quagmires, actively building a strong set of relationships, or even making personal claims around lucky breaks. Women raised in upper-class environments, in contrast, present more passive forms of each of the discursive legitimacy strategies. The constellations of strategies presented by women from the upper class at times emphasize generosity – toward others and from others – an emphasis seldom seen in the self-narratives of those from less advantaged backgrounds. Finally, women from the middle class are uniquely likely to form a constellation of legitimation strategies

including endurance, playing out the middle-class narrative of pulling oneself “up by the bootstraps.” In our discussion section, we discuss why social and historical context might play into women’s self-narratives in these ways, our contributions to research on women’s legitimacy at work and self-narrative as a tool for building legitimacy, and opportunities for future research based on findings in and limitations of our work.

## DISCUSSION

To shed light on how women build legitimacy through self-narratives, we share findings from an inductive, qualitative study of 40 women who have risen to elite levels in corporations or become founders of organizations despite considerable gender underrepresentation in their industries during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While scholarly work recognizes that women face ongoing barriers to legitimacy in workplaces even after substantial success, we know little about *how* women build legitimacy through self-narratives, and factors that may shape their approaches to building legitimacy. We build a theoretical framework showing how women build legitimacy; we do so by a) revealing the initiating conditions laying out gender-based challenges within pivotal moments, and b) identifying six discursive legitimation strategies women use to explain and justify success against the odds. Three of the legitimation strategies – success through social ties, competence, and maneuvers – are primary, playing into nearly all of the women’s self-narratives. Three of the strategies – success through serendipity, endurance, and warrior-like action – are secondary, coming into play when the primary strategies are insufficient to legitimize success in the face of unusual or extreme challenges. We also explore *why* women present their self-narratives as they do. While all women pull upon multiple discursive legitimation strategies to explain their successes, we find that the organizational sector women

work in, either corporate or entrepreneurial, and their social class origins relate to the constellation of discursive strategies women employ in their legitimacy narratives.

### **Women Build Legitimacy for Success through Traditionally Masculine and Feminine Forms of Self-Narratives**

We shed light on how women build legitimacy for their success through self-narratives. Our work reveals how women position their stories within settings where they faced gendered barriers to success. We show that women convey stories of pivotal events to set the stage for how they succeed in these settings, against great odds. They do so by drawing upon a set of six discursive legitimation strategies, which we define as “specific, not always intentional or conscious, ways of employing different discourses or discursive resources to establish legitimacy” (Vaara et al., 2006: 794). Across the six discursive legitimation strategies, women’s narratives reflect both traditionally feminine as well as masculine forms of self-presentation.

Women’s self-narratives vary a great deal in the level of agency or passivity they assign themselves in their narratives of success. We find instances of more passive legitimacy strategies, such as *success through serendipity*, 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 seems 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 legitimacy strategies, especially in the case of *success through warrior-like action*, which is rooted in highly masculine images of war and fierceness, is also remarkable. Not only do these highly agentic and individualistic tales defy the common narrative trope found in research, emphasizing that even senior level women do not aggressively advocate on their own behalf (Bowles, Babcock & Lai, 2007); they are inconsistent with prior research suggesting that women are held back from advancement when they are highly

assertive in the workplace (Ridgeway, 2001). Our findings add a deeper understanding of women's narratives to these prior findings by demonstrating that highly successful women *do* present themselves in ways that defy common generalizations about women's agency or passivity.

We also advance beyond prior work by demonstrating how women justify their own successes. Prior work has built insight into how male executives legitimate their place at the top of organizational hierarchies. Specifically, Maclean et al. (2012) studied male executives and found four types of legitimation strategies that they rely upon to justify their rise to the top. There are some similarities to our findings. In particular, both men in Maclean et al. (2012) and women in our study emphasize competence and endurance to justify their ascension to the top of organizations. Being seen as unusually competent and not giving up until success is achieved both resonate with the American achievement narrative, which is associated with a meritocratic ideal that the most talented and capable individuals rise to the top (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Our framework, however, also includes discursive legitimation strategies that men in Maclean et al.'s did not rely upon, notably *success through serendipity* and *success through relationships*, both of which are more commonly associated with females in the workplace. Yet, our findings suggest that the biggest factor setting women's legitimation strategies apart from men's is that women's self-narratives are rooted in disadvantages and barriers related to their gender, and their successes are only understandable in light of these barriers. This gendered nature of discursive legitimation is missing from the self-narratives of male executives. In our findings, we learn about women's "vocabularies of acceptable motives" (Mills, 1940: 908) for why they present their behaviors in a particular form. By highlighting the gender barriers women face, as well as how they overcome them, narrators recruit the listener to see and understand why certain kinds

of actions, especially those not normally associated with female gender-norms, such as *success through warrior-like action*, are necessary and appropriate to succeed against the odds. Thus, our findings suggest that women may draw upon a wider array of traditionally masculine and feminine narrative discourses than men do to build legitimacy for their successes.

One method by which narratives build legitimacy is by mirroring common cultural storylines in particular contexts (e.g., Giddens, 1986; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; LaPointe, 2010; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Vough & Caza, 2017). As discussed in Adler and McAdams (2007), particular themes reoccur in cultures and act as cues that resonate with audiences. The most common success storyline in the United States is the individual achievement narrative, which is often told in concert with the American Dream narrative of movement from “rags to riches” (McAdams & McLean, 2013). This cultural story-form is based in the idea that people achieve success through independence and individual efforts. Yet, Chase (1995: 11) makes the case that the individual achievement narrative has limits for successful women and others who face inequalities: “When successful professional women narrate their work stories, they bring together two kinds of talk that generally do not belong together in American culture: talk about professional achievement and talk about subjection to gender [and other kinds of] inequalities.” Further, scholars recognize that, while “life stories tend to echo the social categories such as gender and class that are common in cultural discourse...women have been deprived of dominant narratives of power (Heilbrun, 1988).” Our insights build beyond this prior work by demonstrating how women build legitimacy in their self-narratives by positioning themselves relative to gendered inequalities, and by narrating legitimation strategies that make sense of how they have been able to overcome the gendered barriers they have faced.



## **Social and Historical Context Shapes Women's Approaches to Building Legitimacy through Self-Narratives**

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 relationship within the stories we gathered, we develop insights that make an additional contribution by revealing the roles that sector and social class origins play in shaping women's approaches to building legitimacy through their self-narratives. Research on self-narratives observes that autobiographic memories emerge and are given meaning in a social context (McAdams, 2001). Women from different backgrounds are likely to travel different paths to success (Bell & Nkomo, 2001) and their self-narratives and plotlines are likely to be shaped by the experiences they encounter along those paths (Berntsen & Bohn, 2009; Chase, 1995; Fivush, 2011; McAdams, 2001). We argue that social class background and the sector (corporate or entrepreneurial) in which women rise to elite status shape self-narrative choices in ways that reflect objective experiences and related subjective understandings of the self (Côté, 2011; Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016; Stephens et al., 2014).

*Corporate and entrepreneurial sectors.* Research indicates that women experience divergent sets of opportunities and constraints in corporate and entrepreneurial sectors and, thus, strategies for success are likely to be objectively distinct across the two sectors (Mattis, 2004; Thébaud, 2016). Subjectively, corporate women and entrepreneurs may have different understandings of their own challenges in building and managing legitimacy (Thébaud, 2015). Consistent with both objective and subjective distinctions across sectors, the pivotal events conveyed by entrepreneurs and corporate executives reflect attention to different types of constraints. Corporate women present challenges involving political quagmires, back-stabbing

peers, and unsupportive or even actively problematic bosses, while entrepreneurs describe the demands of searching for capital, customer and market whims, and endless work hours. In turn, sector-linked differences in discursive legitimation strategies reflect the divergence in constraints. The most marked differences in legitimation approaches are evident in women's presentations of the least agentic – *success through serendipity* – and the most agentic – *success through warrior-like action* – among the discursive strategies. Notably, these are both secondary strategies, called into play in addition to primary strategies used by women across the board to help legitimize success. For entrepreneurs, the three primary strategies offer little explanation for unique “lucky breaks,” such as when a funder waits through multiple years with no returns or a product “hits” when similar others fail. Claiming credit for the perceived happenstance conveyed in these stories could undermine the narrator's legitimacy; serendipity offers a plausible explanation that downplays individual agency while highlighting the narrator's ultimate success. For corporate executives, primary strategies seem insufficient to explain success in the face of gendered barriers placed before them by their own peers and bosses. Social ties, competence, and strategic maneuvering can explain rising above ordinary organizational politics, but severe cases call for warrior-like action to obliterate the efforts of those blocking the path to ascension.

***Family-of-origin social class.*** As with organizational sector, we argue that the socioeconomic environment women experience during childhood results in both objective and subjective differences that affect women's self-narratives. To theorize about possible mechanisms linking social class origin and women's narratives, we reconsider the definition of social class: “... a dimension of the self that is rooted in objective material resources (income, education, and occupational prestige) and corresponding subjective perceptions of rank vis-à-vis others” (Côté, 2011: 5). Building from this definition, we propose that women from diverse

social classes face objectively different experiences along the path to achievement and these experiences shape women's own understandings of themselves and their experiences. Social class background objectively shapes the education underpinning individual achievement, for women as well as men (Sacks, 2007; Stephens et al., 2014; Suh, Suh & Houston, 2007). The close, positive connection between quality of education and employment outcomes (Psacharopoulos, 1994), including earnings via self-employment (Robinson & Sexton, 1994), nearly guarantees that class will influence the paths women take to elite roles (Bell & Nkomo, 2001), and that women from lower socioeconomic groups will be disadvantaged along those paths (Rivera, 2015; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016). Individuals also tend to inherit social class capital, such as involvement in leisure activities and knowledge of self-presentational norms, which affects life opportunities and reproduces social class across generations (Bourdieu, 1979; Rivera, 2012; Weber, 1958). Given this cycle of social class reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), women from different socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to present distinct constellations of legitimacy narratives in part because they have different levels of access to resources and opportunities, and in part because they carry different sets of social and cultural understandings and norms as they make choices and respond to events along their life paths.

Recent research that explores connections between self-concepts and social class origins also shed light on our findings (Kraus & Stephens, 2012; McGinn & Oh, 2017; Stephens et al., 2014). Scholars surmise that, though an individual's social class status may change later in life, foundational home and school environments earlier in life create psychologically formative experiences that filter how the person understands the self in the present (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Ridgeway & Fisk, 2012; Stephens et al., 2014). Further, in their youth women raised in more advantaged environments learn the mannerisms, preferences,

values, language, orientations, and so on of those in positions of power and authority in society and in workplaces (Domhoff, 1970), creating greater perceived comfort and affinity to the gatekeepers of professional opportunities.

Building on this past research, our findings suggest specific ways in which family-of-origin social class plays into women's self-narratives. Women from upper-class backgrounds present themselves within their narratives in less agentic terms than do women hailing from lower social class environments. When material and cultural resources are more available, it may be relatively easier to construct one's career opportunities as fortuitous. In contrast, women from lower social class backgrounds may rely on more agentic legitimation approaches to justify spanning the distance, both objective and subjective, between their starting points and their realized end point.

Only one of the primary discursive legitimation strategies – *success through competence* – is used with roughly equal frequency and presented similarly by women across the social class spectrum. It appears that women universally perceive that their competence must be explicitly established. The other approaches to legitimation, however, fall in different constellations identifiable by social class. Within the primary discursive legitimation strategies of success by social ties and maneuvers, we find differences by social class that are likely related to the amount of individual effort required to secure social and financial resources. Resources – for instance, in the form of monetary resources to fund entrepreneurial efforts or in the form of high status connections linking women to professional opportunities – are more readily available to women who spent their childhoods in wealthier households and communities (Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2015; Rivera, 2015). Within their self-narratives, the stories women from upper-class backgrounds convey about success through social ties appear to take the presence of influential

relationships, if not the benefits accruing from them, for granted. Women from lower-class backgrounds, in contrast, describe their active efforts to seek out and foster relationships, intentionally building networks of influential ties. While all women may benefit from network ties to high prestige actors (Burt, 1998), the amount of personal agency involved in building and maintaining those ties appears to vary with the woman's family-of-origin social class. The greater need to direct effort and attention toward influencing others may also play into women from lower-class backgrounds' higher reliance on discursively legitimizing their success through maneuvers. Without social support as a given, women from lower-class backgrounds present a more strategic, planned approach to assessing others' needs and interests and integrating those needs and interests into their own moves forward.

Distinctions by social class are most notable in the secondary discursive legitimation strategies, when primary strategies may be perceived as insufficient to legitimize success in the face of unusual challenges. Consistent with their presentation of the primary strategies, women from upper social class backgrounds present explanations of *success through serendipity* when telling of highly improbably successes, relying on an extreme form of serendipity making essentially no claim of credit on the part of the narrator. Whether due to objectively beneficent life circumstances, subjective interpretation of those circumstances, or an upbringing emphasizing that girls should not brag about their own achievements, serendipity strategies presented by women raised in upper-class families have a particularly passive tone. The most notable secondary strategy discursively presented by women from middle-class backgrounds is success through endurance, taking a page out the classic story of "pulling oneself up by the bootstraps." Women raised in middle-class environments stress their perseverance in enduring boring jobs, gruesome bosses, weak markets, periods of continued financial losses, extreme

hours, and just plain hard work. These middle-class tales are akin to the Horatio Alger narrative of success and achievement discussed in McAdams' (2007) work on self-identity and narratives. Turning to women from lower-class backgrounds, we find a markedly more agentic approach to legitimacy narratives. In contrast to the humility conveyed in the stories of serendipity and the patient perseverance conveyed in the tales of endurance offered by their more privileged counterparts, the pivotal events narrated by women raised in lower-class backgrounds assign primary credit to the narrator. When confronted with seemingly insurmountable barriers and challenges, women from lower-class backgrounds turn to agency on steroids, offering accounts of take-no-prisoners, warrior-like action. In addition to reflecting the distance women from lower-class backgrounds have to travel on their way to success, discursive use of warrior-like action may reflect differences in "nice girl" socialization by social class background. This narrative form is mirrored in research on other marginalized populations, who gain power and authority through extreme forms of self-agency (Edley & Wetherell, 1997).

A growing body of research in social psychology research suggests that people raised in lower social class environments are more likely than their relatively advantaged peers to see the self as choice-constrained and interdependent (Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Kelter, 2012; Stephens et al., 2014; Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2010). Our study provides critical nuances that build beyond a binary view of the effects of social class on self-understanding. We find that women from lower social class backgrounds emphasize the strategic value of reading others' needs and meeting others' interests, but we also show that these same women are more willing than others rising from more advantaged environments to aggressively pursue their own success and actively counter others' resistance. Our findings run counter to social psychology research but are consistent with recent work suggesting an interaction between

gender and social class in women's employment (McGinn & Oh, 2017). Our findings contribute to this growing literature by suggesting that women's class-based experiences as they ascend professionally may heighten identification with gender for women from upper-class backgrounds and heighten identification with social class for women from lower-class backgrounds, potentially reversing class-based differences documented in past social psychology research.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

As with all research, our work has limitations that offer opportunities for future research. The primary limitation is the uniqueness of our sample, which consists of women who ascended to elite roles during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is evident that the women in our study overcame harsh odds to rise to the pinnacle of their organizations and industries, and they did so in a specific historical time and context where few women had done so before them. These women's unusual achievements during a certain point in history may set them apart from women who seek to rise to the top in environments that are no doubt challenging, but less starkly male-dominated. Yet, qualitative research seeks to build generalizable theories, and we believe that the ideas we offer provide a strong platform for future researchers to study women's legitimacy narratives. Future research could also use the framework of discursive legitimation strategies to explore gender differences among men and women's approaches to building legitimacy. While we compare our findings to Maclean et al. (2012), who collect data from male executives, it would be insightful for future research to gather a gender-mixed sample within a single study to explore distinctions between men and women's discursive legitimation strategies. Doing so will shed light on the role of gender in linkages between individuals' self-understandings, self-narratives, and their rise to power and authority.

We also see opportunities for productive research exploring factors that influence the effectiveness of discursive legitimation strategies. For instance, one possibility is that women may benefit from balance between gender-consistent ways of explaining her success (e.g., social ties, serendipity, endurance) and less gender-consistent explanations (e.g., warrior-like action, maneuvers). Given that women must balance double-binds, they may benefit from not over-relying on certain types of legitimation strategies; rather, creating a balance among several strategies maybe most effective in building legitimacy. However, it is evident from our findings that narratively-speaking competence is perceived to be important to building legitimacy by different kinds of women; thus, future research could explore whether competence is a general strategy that can be effective for many types of individuals. We also see opportunities to vary women's personal backgrounds in research on legitimacy building strategies to explore whether differences such as race, age, or even industry influence which strategies are more effectively employed. To explore some of these questions, scholars might design a study that involves self-narratives told by a protagonist to a study participant, and then measure the extent to which the narratives are viewed as an effective basis for building legitimacy for success. Experimental design research could provide an optimal starting place for exploring the efficacy of different forms of discursive legitimation strategies when justifying one's successes to an interaction partner.

There are also additional opportunities for future research related to a second limitation of our study, which is that we only explore how two aspects of an individual's background – social class and organizational sector – shape how women build legitimacy. Multiple other social identities are likely to shape women's legitimacy narratives, such as a woman's racial or ethnic background. Our sample had several women of color, but confounds with sector and insufficient



numbers precluded a focus on these identities. Rich future opportunities are available to build theoretical insight into how a fuller range of diversity affects the ways in which women build legitimacy for their successes.

### **Implications for Practice**

The self-narratives of high-achieving women provide practical insight for advancing women's legitimacy in the workplace. First, by highlighting six discursive legitimization strategies as the building blocks of women's self-narratives, our research offers aspiring women a lens through which to understand their own challenges and opportunities in the context of gender, social class, and sector. Our work demonstrates that while women face disadvantages at work, overcoming barriers provides opportunities for powerful narratives that establish legitimacy and credibility. Furthermore, our findings underscore that many high-achieving women deviate from gender expectations and stereotypes in their self-presentations. Our work challenges notions of a single prototype for successful women's stories and may empower women to explore a wide range of approaches for seeking legitimacy and overcoming gendered barriers.

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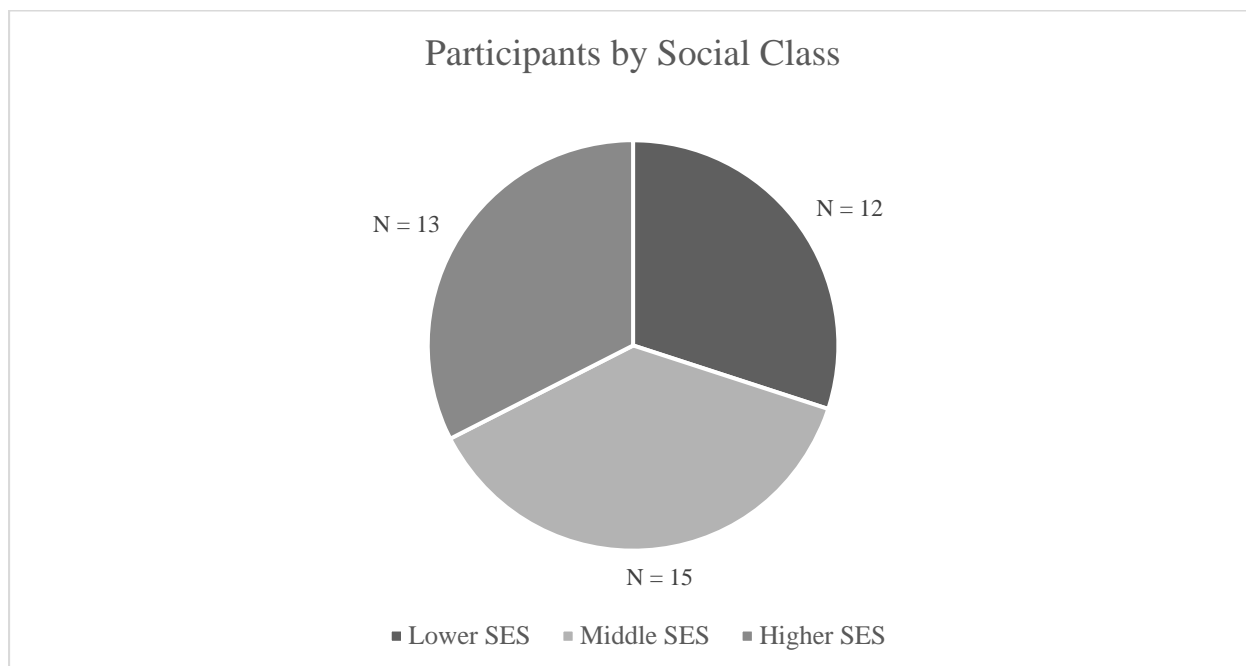
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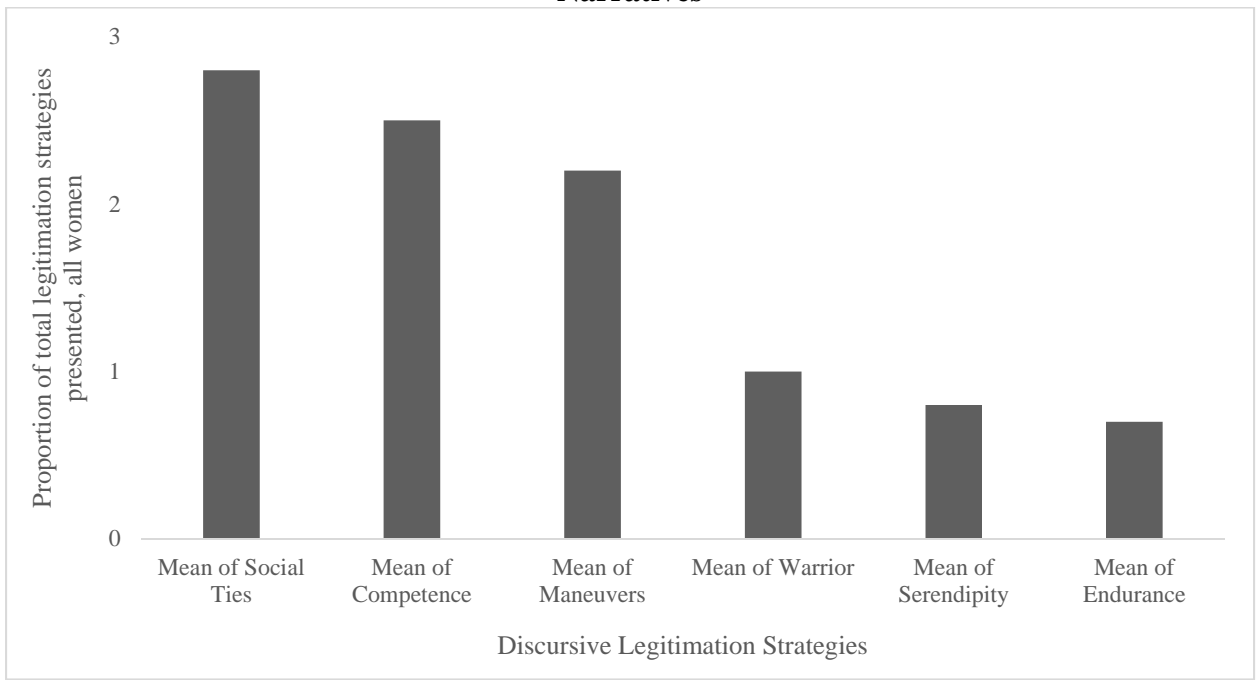
**FIGURE 1**  
**Counts of Participants by Corporate or Entrepreneurial Sector**



**FIGURE 2**  
**Counts of Participants by Social Class Background**



**FIGURE 3**  
**Discursive Legitimation Strategies as Percent of Total Strategies Presented Within Self-Narratives**



*Notes:* Bars represent average proportion for the given discursive strategy, across all women.

**TABLE 1**  
**Typology of Discursive Legitimation Strategies Women Use to Justify How They Achieved Elite Roles against the Odds**

| Type of Narrative           | How She Positions Herself   | Degree of Agency versus Passivity Evident in Her Discourse  | Embedded Logic Explaining Her Success Against the Odds   | Distinct Vocabularies Used (e.g., Phrases and Words)  |
|-----------------------------|---|---|--|---|
| Success through Serendipity | The narrator is a lucky person.   | Passive. She describes how she benefits from fortunate circumstances that have more to do with happenstance than her own qualities and behaviors.   | People can benefit from chance circumstances to succeed. I was lucky.  | “It began of course, in truth, completely accidentally.” (054)<br>“I was fortunate to be at the right place at the right time.” (069)                         |
| Success through Endurance   | The narrator sticks with it no matter what. She outlasts and out-works others.                    | Low agency. She describes how she perseveres in difficult circumstances in order to succeed. Endurance involves persistence and will power, but also accepting circumstances as they are. She does not seek to create opportunities or change conditions. | Success arises from hard work, sticking to it, and outworking others. I out-worked, out-last-ed and out-performed others.  | “Guts, and persistence, and stick-to-it-iveness.” (064)<br>“I am the only one who survived the transition” (012)  |
| Success through Social Ties | The narrator is a well-connected person who benefits from strong relational ties.                 | Mixed-agency. More agentic forms of social ties involve seeking out and exploiting connections. Less agentic forms involve benefitting 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. | “The network aspect of it was very important to me.” (018)<br>“That relationship had been built up over many years. That’s what ultimately moved me up” (054) |
| Success through Competence  | The narrator is excellent in skills, abilities, talents, and performance above and beyond others. | Mixed-agency. More agentic forms involve outperforming and outshining others to overcome barriers. Less agentic forms involve benefitting from excellent skills and talents that others recognize without her actively seeking that recognition.          | Excellent abilities and skills leads to opportunities and advancement. People will overlook your gender when you are incredibly competent. I was incredibly competent.   | “I think I had some innate ability” (056)<br>“I’ve produced results and that gave me a tremendous amount of credibility over time.” (102)                     |



|                                     |   |   |   |  |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| Success through Maneuvers           | The narrator is an analytic thinker who strategically seeks out opportunities and circumvents barriers. | Agentic. She describes how she actively works around barriers and identifies and capitalizes on opportunities to pave her path forward. | Advancement requires a series of often political moves and tactics to build opportunities and overcome barriers. I am strategic and adaptive. | <p>“Then you come back, and then you say, I’ll try it to the left. No, I’ll try it to the right.” (015)</p> <p>“You have to set up a win-win ... show them [that what] you are trying to accomplish could make them look good as well as you.” (030)</p> |
| Success through Warrior-Like Action | She is a fighter who has great vigor, courage, and aggressiveness.                                      | High agency. 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.  | <p>“Even if the door is closed, you’ve got a couple of kicks at it” (057)</p> <p>“I ended up rolling my boss.” (070)</p>   |

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**TABLE 2**  
**Illustrative Quotes for Discursive Legitimation Strategies**

| Narrative Type              | Illustrative Quotes   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| 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. (054)</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. (013)</p>   |
| Success Through Endurance   | <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 ... and often the last one there ... 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. (064)</p> <p>That took four months, and it probably added ten years to my life. It was completely all encompassing and exhausting. And I really didn't get that much support from the company in terms of resources and the help that I would need. I look back and I'm like, what idiots they were. If I had been a normal person and just done my job it would never have worked. But I had to work literally, frantically for months, and months, and months. And that was, I think, in hindsight kind of stupid of them not to provide a better guarantee of success. (072).</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]. (069)</p> <p>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. (003)</p> |
| Success Through Competence  | <p>You have to prove yourself ... I had those skills as part of my repertoire, and they helped me to take a leadership role ... and each position that I had along the way after that, I tried out different skills and that helped me get to where I was. (018)</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. (062)</p>  |

Success Through  
Maneuvers

So, every time I narrowed my constituency, I enhanced my value. I think I narrowed it in ways that played to my strengths. Now, I don't know if that is instinct or what you would say. I do think that, I mean you started out by saying negotiation. I would say conflict avoidance led me down a path where I had the least conflict. (002)

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. (065)

Success Through  
Warrior-like Action

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 [my] bank account ... 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 ... 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 it – and he loved them. (055)

If there were 24 credit hours that I could take instead of 17, I would take 24. It was that kind of thing. I had to graduate in two-and-a-half years instead of three because it was available to me. . . I always followed my instincts which has also been the most, I think, important factor in my career, that I've always gone where I felt I had to go. Sometimes, again, contrary to the advice of others who I respected a great deal. (051)

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**APPENDIX**  
**Interview Protocol**

1. Briefly describe your job.
2. Please tell us the story of how you got this job.
3. How have you 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?