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Exploring the Impact of Grit and Sponsorship on Female Leadership and Aspirations

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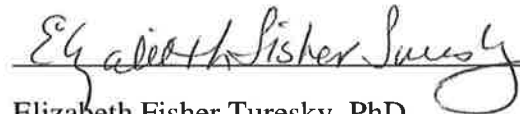
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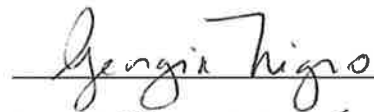
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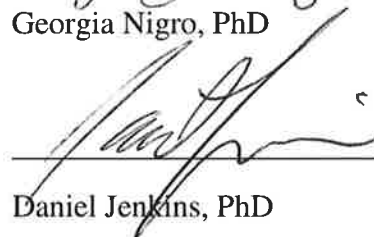
FINAL APPROVAL FORM

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

MASTER OF ARTS DEGREE OF LEADERSHIP STUDIES

April 19, 2018

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Melissa A. S. Landry entitled *Exploring the Impact of Grit and Sponsorship on Female Leadership and Aspirations* be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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Accepted

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Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

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Abstract

This mixed methods case study explored the impact of grit and sponsorship experiences of millennial females on their leadership aspirations and attainment of leadership positions. Six females in the same field of occupation in New England served as the participants. The case study focused on the experiences of two participants (one with the highest grit score and one with the lowest grit score). The participant with the highest grit score demonstrated both the attainment of a leadership position and aspirations for greater leadership positions in the future, as compared to the less gritty individual who had attained a leadership position but did not aspire to any future leadership positions beyond the current one. Both participants cited that their confidence increased when they had a sponsor and decreased when they did not have a supportive superior in the workplace. The combination of high grit and sponsorship led to the attainment of a leadership position and future leadership aspirations. The participant with low grit and a sponsorship experience attained a leadership position, but had no aspirations for future leadership positions beyond the present one. This study provides empirical data about grit and sponsorship for millennial females and identifies that sponsorship is a driver of success for leadership attainment and grit is a driver of success for increased leadership aspirations.

Keywords: confidence, grit, labyrinth, mentoring, millennials, sponsorship

Acknowledgments

Attending graduate school has been a personal goal for many years. I learned about the Leadership Studies program at the University of Southern Maine through Professor Brian Davenport. He was a member of my local trivia team. After hearing his "pitch" a couple times, I reflected and realized that this was a field that interested me and had practical implications for my life and career. This degree could provide transferable career skills and a new challenge, while allowing me to continue to work a full-time job. The journey began in May of 2015. It has been more time intensive and stressful than I imagined, but I am happy to receive my master's degree and finalize this chapter in my life.

As is often said, I did not do it alone. I am thankful for the professors and classmates who provided useful feedback on my work. Dr. Elizabeth Fisher Turesky has been a steady and exceedingly helpful advisor during the Capstone process. I am thankful for her guidance and delicious cappuccinos! My undergraduate thesis advisor, Dr. Georgia Nigro, reprised her role over a decade later and reviewed my thesis. Dr. Daniel Jenkins has been an exceptional professor during my time at USM. Erica Leighton and Dori Lynn Leadbetter were supportive classmates who provided great insights during the peer review process. I am also thankful for my family who acknowledged and respected my time commitment needs for studying. My husband, Aaron Landry, cleaned the house, did laundry, cooked wonderful meals, and took care of any errand that I requested. Aaron went above and beyond to make my life comfortable when I was overwhelmed and supported me when I was in doubt. I am also pleased that I could prove to myself that I am a good student, capable of stretching and growing,

despite the external demands of life. At the end of the day, this work was self-imposed,

but I take great pride in where this experience has brought me.

Exploring the Impact of Grit and Sponsorship on Female Leadership and Aspirations

As of March 2018, women account for nearly 47% of the workforce in the United States of America (U.S. Department of Labor, 2018). This rate of participation by women in the workforce has increased by nearly 57% from 1948 to 2016 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2018) and by 44% since the mid-1980s (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015). In addition, women currently attain more high-level degrees than men accounting for 57% of degree holders (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Yet, Fortune 500 companies have a mere 16% of leadership positions occupied by females (Cook & Glass, 2014). Previous research around this gender imbalance has focused mainly on the barriers that mitigate the number of female employees who attain workplace leadership positions, such as the glass ceiling (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009; Hogue, 2010; Martin, 2007), or more recently the labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2009). These discussions of barriers, however, fail to provide details on the positive growth factors that have propelled women into leadership roles. Women account for nearly half of the workforce population in America (U.S. Department of Labor, 2018), but little is understood about what pushes certain women over the top into positions of power.

This paper explores two key factors that have been identified as drivers of success: grit (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009) and sponsorship (Hewlett, 2013; Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010). This mixed methods case study utilized a quantitative questionnaire and a qualitative interview to gather empirical data on grit and sponsorship. By specifically exploring how these drivers came into play for millennial females in the same occupational field in New England, this research delved into previously under-researched factors that have allowed

women to obtain positions of power and navigate the labyrinth of workplace advancement, instead of the barriers that potentially stand in their way. The following research questions were addressed by the study.

Research Questions

1. Does a millennial female with high levels of grit seek and attain leadership positions in the workplace?

2. What are the sponsorship experiences for millennial females and what are their thoughts about sponsorship (for both those who have had the experience and those who have not had the experience of being sponsored)?

3. What is the interaction between grit and sponsorship, and what impact does that interaction have on leadership aspirations or attainment in the workplace?

This study provides information about the impact of sponsoring and grit on female career advancement and offers vital insight beyond the glass ceiling. Information regarding these two factors can serve as a stepping stone towards the promotion of sponsorship in the workplace. If females actively look for a sponsor because they know of the potential advancement benefits, then they may have an easier time finding their way through the labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2009). In regard to grit, teachers, parents, and colleagues could help individuals develop their commitment to long-term goals by assisting them in recognizing goals that are personally important to them and their future. Encouraging individuals with high levels of grit to pursue personally impactful goals could render positive results for females starting at a young age. A systematic approach could be taken at the state level with a new education initiative that could promote the development of grit in students.

Literature Review

A wide variety of factors have been used to explain the gender disparity in top leadership positions over the years. Whether it was a lack of education or other barriers (Barreto et al., 2009; Hogue, 2010; Martin, 2007), explanations often focused on women lacking some key component that would allow them to successfully take on a leadership role. Yet, the realities of the millennial workforce lay to rest many of these false explanations. Millennials are referred to as the generation born between 1977 and 1995 (The Center for Generational Kinetics, 2016). Issues regarding female inequality in the workplace are no longer attributable to discrepancies in college education attainment for millennials because females are attending college at a higher rate than males (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009). Female college graduates now outnumber male graduates in attainment of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Millennial females are better situated than ever before to reach equality in the attainment of leadership positions, yet females are underrepresented in business leadership positions, accounting for only 5.4% of Fortune 500 chief executive positions (Pew Research Center, 2017). Hurley and Choudhary (2016) found a negative correlation between female CEOs and the number of children they have. Females with less children are more likely to be a Standard and Poor CEO than a female with a higher number of children. Furthermore, attaining CEO leadership positions is not substantially increasing for highly-educated females (Hurley & Choudhary, 2016). The research outlined above, while providing a wealth of information about the lack of women in leadership positions, does not adequately identify any factors

that would dramatically improve the situation and close the disproportionate leadership gender gap.

In addition to the theories that rely on an idea of female inferiority to explain the underrepresentation of females in leadership positions, a number of theories have also been promulgated over the decades, blaming this underrepresentation on external obstacles (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009). A popular term used to describe these barriers is the concept of the glass ceiling, which originated in 1986 in the *Wall Street Journal* ("The Glass Ceiling," 2009). The glass ceiling refers to the often invisible barriers that make it difficult for women to advance in the workplace (Barreto et al., 2009; Hogue, 2010; Martin, 2007). According to Martin (2007), instead of the glass ceiling, "A more accurate metaphor for the obstacles women encounter is a labyrinth...a series of complexities, detours, dead ends and unusual paths" (p. 90). This definition is a more suitable description of the complexity of a female's journey to career advancement. Eagly and Carli (2009) emphasize the importance of navigating the labyrinth for females to achieve success in the workplace. Pointing out external barriers alone, however, will not provide the necessary tools to implement the changes needed to shift the tides of gender disparity in leadership roles. This study used the labyrinth analogy as a starting point and explored the drivers of grit and sponsorship on millennial females as navigational tools.

In past research, mentoring has been promoted as a key navigational tool for the attainment of leadership positions (Abalkhail, & Allan, 2015; Buzzanell, Long, Anderson, Kokini, & Batra, 2015); Hewlett (2013) contends that a sponsor will have a more significant impact on a person's career advancement than a mentor. Other studies

have also noted the importance of grit, detailing how females with high levels of grit have

experienced greater success and more positive outcomes on tasks (Duckworth et al.,

2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). This literature review synthesizes research about

females in leadership and the impact of sponsorship and grit on the attainment of these

leadership roles. This review also demonstrates that new research is needed to

understand and promote the advancement of millennial females into leadership positions.

Grit

Grit is defined as perseverance of effort and consistency of interest as

demonstrated through a commitment to accomplish long-term goals (Duckworth et al.,

2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Von Culin, Tsukayama, & Duckworth, 2014). As an

example, an individual who demonstrates persistence and perseverance in the pursuit of

goals would be considered highly "gritty." Credé, Tynan, and Harms (2017) conducted a

meta-analysis of grit literature and found that perseverance is a good predictor of

performance. Muenks, Wigfield, Yang, and O'Neal (2017) found that perseverance of

effort is a predictor of higher grades among high school and college students. Research

has also found that success outcomes are prevalent in individuals with high levels of grit

and these individuals have significant "incremental variance in success outcomes over

and beyond that explained by IQ" (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1098). Duckworth et al.

(2007) conducted six studies regarding the significance and relationship of the amount of

grit an individual had and their resulting goal achievement. The studies evaluated IQ,

educational attainment, hours of study time, and West Point summer training completion

rates. Studies one and two by Duckworth et al. (2007) utilized a public website and

analyzed people 25 years of age and older. The results for study one and two indicated

that "grittier individuals had attained higher levels of education than less gritty

individuals of the same age" (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1098). Study three included 139

undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania. Study three found that despite SAT

success, grittier students had higher grade point averages than their peers. Studies four

and five utilized 2,441 freshman cadets at West Point (a smaller group was used in the

second study). According to Duckworth et al. (2007), study four and five found that

grittiness was a better predictor of summer training completion by cadets than admission

evaluations and self-control measures. Study six was a longitudinal study that analyzed

273 finalists from the 2005 Scripps National Spelling Bee. In study six, gritty

competitors did better at the spelling bee than their peers (Duckworth et al., 2007).

The significant findings on grit and success outcomes from the 2007 research was

built upon by Duckworth and Quinn (2009) with the creation of the Grit-S scale.

Through the creation of an equally effective, shorter instrument, the studies conducted by

Duckworth and Quinn (2009) pared-down the 12 item self-report measure (known as the

Grit-O scale) to an eight-item scale that still offers predictive validity, known as the Grit-

S scale. Von Culin et al. (2014) also utilized the Grit-S scale in their studies. The

researchers conducted two cross-sectional studies through online surveys to further

explore the impact of grit on adults. Findings suggested that grittier individuals showed

motivation to pursue meaning and engagement in life, but not pleasure (Von Culin et al.,

2014). Less gritty individuals pursue pleasure as opposed to meaning and engagement.

Ultimately, the research by Von Culin et al. (2014) indicate that gritty individuals are not

motivated by seeking pleasure in life, but by accomplishing goals.

Self-Esteem and Confidence

Cech, Rubineau, Silbey, and Seron (2011) found that male college students had more confidence in their professional abilities and they demonstrated more behavioral persistence, an aspect of grit's perseverance dimension, than their female counterparts in the same field of study. The males were also more likely to stay in their field of work. The chief operating officer of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg, echoed this sentiment and has received publicity for her call to females to have the confidence to reach for their goals (Glass & Cook, 2014). In addition, a study of female CEOs found that they expressed the importance and positive impact that having an ally (e.g., a sponsor) had on the development of confidence (Chisholm-Burns, Spivey, Hagemann, & Josephson, 2017). The CEOs advised females to find sponsors in order to help them on their path to greater confidence and attainment of leadership roles. Liang, Lund, Mousseau, and Spencer (2016), studied the impact of self-esteem and mentoring on young females through conducting a cross-sectional, longitudinal study of 207 Midwest and Northeast girls from selective secondary schools. The findings indicated that self-esteem was predicted by growth-fostering mentoring relationships (Liang et al., 2016). In another study, college age students noted their confidence level increased when the "mentors helped to instill confidence through a combination of practical advice, skill development, and having faith in them" (Liang, Spencer, Brogan, & Corral, 2008, p. 176). The mentoring relationships outlined in Liang et al.'s (2008) study resembled the hallmarks of a sponsor and protégé (e.g., providing feedback and taking a personal interest in their goal achievements), more than those of a mentor.

Relationship Connections: Mentors and Sponsors

A mentor is an individual with work and/or life experience and provides guidance

to an inexperienced mentee (Liang et al., 2016) and establishes a relationship built on

trust with a typically younger mentee (McGill, Adler-Baeder, Sollie, & Kerpelman, 2015;

Washington, 2010). A study by Carter and Silva (as cited in Roebuck & Smith, 2011, p.

45) indicated that the odds of a woman becoming a mid-manager greatly increased when

a woman had a mentor. The benefits of a mentorship program alone, however, are not a

solution to the gender gap. There are notable deficits that can hinder growth in the

workplace. Research from Buzzanell et al. (2015) found that mentoring relationships

occasionally added to feelings of disassociation from colleagues. Furthermore, females

find inconsistent mentors unhelpful because they struggle to develop skills and receive

the appropriate feedback essential for advancement (Washington, 2010). Other

mentorship issues raised include feelings of appropriateness (or inappropriateness),

boundary ambiguity, and unwanted sexual advances from a mentor (Buzzanell et al.,

2015; Washington, 2010). Recent studies find that a relationship with a sponsor is a

more effective relationship to cultivate than a relationship with a mentor. A sponsor is an

advocate who provides career traction to a protégé in a lower (entry or mid-level) career

position. It is a step above the mentor-mentee relationship. According to Hewlett

(2013), "men and women with sponsors are much more likely to rise up through the ranks

and hang on to their ambition" (p. 12). Sponsors hold positions of great influence (e.g.,

chair of boards) and serve as champions for the person they sponsor.

There are similarities between sponsors and mentors. For example, both sponsors

and mentors provide advice to their protégés. The sponsor, however, also provides

critical feedback to the protégé on how to improve performance (e.g., how to be a better public speaker or how an action or statement was perceived by the group and suggestions for the future). In addition to that, according to Ibarra et al. (2010), "Sponsors go beyond giving feedback and advice; they advocate for their mentees and help them gain visibility in the company. They fight to get their protégés to the next level" (p. 83). Beninger (2015) framed the relationship in a similar manner where "A mentor will talk *with* you, but a sponsor will talk *about* you" (Ask a Catalyst Expert: How to Get a Sponsor, para. 2). Females are more likely to have mentors than men, and the mentors that women have are more likely to be junior-level managers (if they are managers at all) as compared to the mentors that men have who tend to be senior-level managers and staff (Ibarra et al., 2010). A Catalyst survey was conducted over two years, ending in 2010, found that men received 15% more promotions than females and detailed that this discrepancy may be attributable to men having more powerful mentors than the lower level mentors that females have (Ibarra et al., 2010). These mentoring relationships are not bringing females to the next level.

Ibarra et al. (2010) are not the only researchers to discuss how women are less likely to be able to secure upper level mentors or sponsors in the workplace. Eagly and Carli (2009) found that females had weak networks and few connections to the leaders in the workplace. According to a McKinsey and Company report in Forbes (Huang, 2016), this trend has continued, and females have predominantly female networks and few interactions or relationships with any members of senior leadership. The key to career advancement, according to Hewlett (2013), is to have relationships with those with clout and those in senior leadership positions. Despite the common misconception of hard

work alone as being the key to a promotion, Hewlett (2013) provides examples of

females who have the work ethic and educational background (as noted earlier, females

attain more advanced degrees than males), but who do not receive promotions. Females

with a sponsor are 19% more likely to feel that they are advancing at a good pace in their

career as compared to females without a sponsor (Hewlett, 2013). The article from

Chisholm-Burns at al. (2017) outlined advice for young females in the workplace from

female CEOs, and the CEOs also stated the importance of finding sponsors and

champions to help market and support them in their leadership development. In addition,

females with sponsors are 8% more likely than females without the support of a sponsor

to ask for stretch assignments (assignments that are ambitious and beyond the normal

scope of their duties) at work (Hewlett, 2011). Not only do females with sponsors

proactively ask for raises at a higher rate than females who are not sponsored, but the

sponsors bestow 22-30% of the requests for pay raises and/or assignments to these

females (Hewlett, 2011). A protégé will have career doors open to them if they have a

sponsor (Chisholm-Burns at al., 2017, p. 321). These studies demonstrate how the

support of a person in a position of influence can bring an employee up to the next level.

Conclusion

As demonstrated through this literature review, there is a disproportionate

representation of female leaders in the workplace. A study of this problem area is timely

because there is inadequacy in past literature (e.g., antiquated glass ceiling concerns), and

additional research is needed to identify ways to effectively navigate the labyrinth to

leadership positions for millennial females. This study provides empirical data on the

impact grit and sponsorship have on millennial females' leadership attainment and

aspirations in the workplace. Sponsoring, self-confidence, grit, and leadership have each

been shown to have positive correlations with individual development, such as the

increased confidence described by Chisholm-Burns et al. (2017) and Liang et al. (2008).

(e.g., sponsoring relationships led to increased confidence among protégés). In

combination, these three elements can inform those concerned about leadership and

career development, particularly for women.

Methodology

Six female participants engaged in this mixed methods study. The study utilized a

self-report measure created by Duckworth and Quinn (2009), which assesses a person's

level of perseverance and commitment to long-term goals, otherwise known as grit (see

Appendix A for Grit-S scale). Following the completion of the grit questionnaire via

email, in-person interviews were scheduled and conducted by the investigator in order to

glean information about the personal work experiences of the participants and their views

on sponsorship (see Appendix B for guiding interview questions). Answers to the

quantitative questionnaire and qualitative interview questions were used to further

understand the impact of grit and sponsorship on female career advancement and

aspirations for leadership. The findings are demonstrated through a case study. The

study compared and contrasted the sponsorship experiences and leadership attainment

and aspirations of two participants (one with a high grit score and one with a low grit

score).

Participants

A mixed methods approach was used to study college-educated females in the

millennial age range (ages 22 through 40) who work in the same occupational field in

New England. This study intentionally focused on a particular group within the same

field, thereby limiting the differences that would be found if it was across different

industries (e.g., different fields have different leadership structures). As suggested by

Patten (2014), it is important to select participants based on relevant criteria for the study.

Based on the investigator's knowledge of the occupational field, the investigator selected

and sent individual recruitment emails (see Appendix C for recruitment email) to eleven

millennial females fitting this criterion. Six females participated. The participants filled

out a short demographic information questionnaire asking for their gender, race, town of

residences, marital status, number of children, and level of education (see Appendix D for

demographic questions).

      Demographic characteristics of participants. The study utilized data from six

female participants ages 27-33 years old (ages 27, 29, 31, 31, 32, and 33). All of the

participants were white/Caucasian. Three participants were single, two were married,

and one was divorced. One participant had one child. The highest education level

completed was bachelor's degree for three of the participants, juris doctorate for two, and

master's degree for one.

Study Procedure

      An initial email was sent to the prospective participants along with a consent

form. If participation was agreed to and the consent form was signed, a questionnaire

was emailed to the participant for completion. The questionnaire was the Grit-S self-

report measure and it was approximately five minutes in length to complete. Participants

returned the measure via email back to the investigator. Following receipt of the

completed questionnaire, the investigator scheduled an in-person interview about the

work experiences of the participant. The interviews were conducted in a private office.

The investigator gave participants a copy of their signed consent form for their records.

Then, the participants filled out a short, demographic information questionnaire.

Participants were told before the interview that the audio would be recorded, and that

they could choose to decline any questions or stop the recording at any time. No

participant expressed any concern about the questions. Most of the interviews took

between 20 and 50 minutes. The initial contact emails and subsequent interviews took

place in December of 2017 and January of 2018. Following the interviews, recordings

were fully transcribed by the investigator and reviewed by the faculty advisor. Upon

evaluation of the material during analysis, it was decided that a case study approach most

appropriately captured and illuminated the impact of grit and sponsorship on leadership

aspirations in the workplace.

Grit Measure

The grit measure is a tool used to capture the perseverance and confidence of an

individual. Duckworth and Quinn (2009) created the Grit-S self-report measure to

evaluate the combination of perseverance and commitment to long-term goals. The eight

statements on the questionnaire measure an individual's level of grit. The participants

were given a statement, and they had to choose a response from five options. For

example, one statement is "I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short

time but later lost interest." The five options are: very much like me, mostly like me,

somewhat like me, not much like me, and not like me at all. Each answer has a different

point value and the point values were calculated in order to find the grit score. The

resulting grit scores were provided to the participants following the interview portion of the study.

Interviews

Structured, open-ended questions were the guide for the interviews on sponsorship and leadership. The working professional females were asked to share their work sponsorship experiences and/or thoughts about sponsorship. It was not anticipated that all the participants would have had a sponsorship experience. The concept of sponsorship was explained to each participant to ensure that the investigator and participant were speaking about the same thing, not mentorship. The participants who had sponsorships were asked to elaborate on experiences where the sponsors advocated for them and helped promote them. If the participant did not have a sponsor, then she was asked about her thoughts about potential benefits or weaknesses of having a sponsor.

The females were asked if they had a leadership position at work and what their leadership aspirations were. They were asked how their feelings have evolved since having a sponsor. They were asked about the amount of confidence they feel in the workplace. The interviews were recorded and field notes were written as a backup.

Validity and Reliability

There were gaps in past research on perseverance and confidence that precipitated the creation of a new measure for grit. Duckworth et al. (2007) identified past self-report measures as lacking in four areas. For example, one measure is meant for children, not adults, and another does not adequately assess perseverance of effort (Duckworth et al., 2007). The researchers created and tested a self-report questionnaire that appropriately captures the measures for grit. The concept of grit was operationalized through the

creation of the grit scale. Participants completed an online survey that asked 27 questions

on a Likert scale about perseverance of effort and consistency of interests. Using a larger

sample would help to further the external validity of their research, therefore Duckworth

and Quinn (2009) conducted six additional studies and created a pared-down, eight-item

scale that still offers predictive validity (grit was originally measured by a 12 item self-

report measure, known as the Grit-O scale). The investigator utilized the Grit-S scale to

measure the grit level of participants. The eight Grit-S scale answers were reviewed and

the scores were calculated for the level of grit. Each answer was assigned a different

point value and the total points were divided by the number of questions to indicate the

level of grit. The lowest level of grit (not at all "gritty") is one and the highest level of

grit (extremely "gritty") is five. Past studies have found acceptable and good internal

consistency for the reliability coefficient for the Grit-S scale (Duckworth et al., 2007).

The investigator calculated the grit score for all of the participants and double-checked

the scoring key and math to ensure the accuracy and validity of the scores. A score

below three indicates lower levels of grit (one is the lowest possible score) and a score

above three indicates higher levels of grit.

   To ensure qualitative validity across the interviews, all of the answers were

transcribed by the investigator. The faculty advisor reviewed the transcripts. In the

transcription, gestures (e.g., hand clap) were included in parentheses to ensure the

appropriate understanding of the interviewees' answers, such as during a funny situation.

Words were italicized to denote the emphasis by the interviewee regarding strong

feelings. For example, a participant was asked if a sponsor would be helpful to them and

her answer was "Yes, yes, *yes*!" The data were analyzed for themes. Themes were

identified as common answers and words that were used at a high frequency during the interviews.

The results from the Grit-S scale were analyzed in relation to the data from the interviews. A relationship was evaluated between the: level of grit and leadership status; sponsorship experiences and leadership positions and leadership aspirations; and grit and sponsorship. The results were used to identify the factors that support the advancement of females into workplace leadership positions. The sample size was small, but the females fit the correct criteria (e.g., millennials, etc.) for the questions. The findings provided the necessary information to evaluate the research questions, and the results were demonstrated through a case study. The case study explored the experience of the participants with the highest and lowest grit levels. Participant number one, who will be referred to as "Mary," had the highest grit score of 4.4 (which was also the score of another participant) and participant two, who will be referred to as "Trish," had the lowest grit score of 2.7. Comparing and contrasting this subset by using qualitative interview data provided further insight about the impact of grit on leadership.

Findings

Grit Scores

The lowest grit score was 2.7 out of five and the highest grit score was 4.4 out of five. Two participants had the high score of 4.4. The average grit score was 3.7 out of five. Results from the grit measure are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Grit Scores of Participants

Participants	Grit Scores
Participant 1 (P1)	4.4
P2	2.7
P3	2.8
P4	4.3
P5	4.4
P6	3.4

Case Study

A case study was deemed to be the most appropriate mixed methods approach to illustrate the findings from the data. From the quantitative grit measure, the investigator interviewed the participants to understand the impact of high grit and low grit on individuals' leadership aspirations and attainment of leadership positions. Both of the participants have advanced degrees (Mary has a master's degree and is contemplating another master's degree and Trish has a juris doctorate). Mary is 32 and Trish is 33. Both participants are married. Trish has a child. Gritty Mary and less gritty Trish both have leadership positions and serve as directors within their respective organizations. Mary "would be interested in leading an organization, probably a non-profit..." in the future and for years has wanted to run for the legislature. Trish is happy to remain in her current position and is more interested in maintaining a healthy life balance over seeking an advanced position. She said, "I have a nice balance...I would never want to be the Executive Director of an organization." When she was younger she felt more ambitious, but through self-realization, she found other priorities that tempered that drive. Now, she

would not take that Executive Director role "not because I don't think I could do it, but because I don't think that I would like it." Trish said she "learned about myself" stating "that it's hard to turn off the ambition for long enough [to realize] that the highest level I could attain isn't necessarily where I would be the happiest." In contrast, Mary had applied for a position at an out-of-state organization that would have a larger membership, thereby increasing her amount of responsibilities, further demonstrating her desire to expand her career. She applied for a CEO position while in her late 20s. Regarding the future, Mary said that she is "…interested in leading an organization, probably a non-profit" and possibly starting her own non-profit. Despite the attainment of leadership positions by both participants, the grittier participant has higher, future leadership position aspirations than the less gritty participant.

Both participants noted the ebb and flow of confidence during their careers, particularly and more dramatically so for Trish. Mary indicated at the beginning of her current position, "I felt like it was a huge reach. I started feeling...umm...not confident. That has kind of ebbed and flowed, to be honest." She has had other times in her career when she noted an increase in confidence when, "My heart, my head, and my work and everything were totally in line...I think that that alignment resulted in confidence." Trish noted the struggle with her confidence and "There were a lot of times when I was working it out on my own, and muddling through on my own, where I felt like maybe I didn't belong and I shouldn't be working in this field. Like I wasn't good enough..." She second-guessed her qualifications to be in her original position, citing that she might have not had enough experience in the first place. It was a very cold environment where you would "walk in and get beat up, and you are surrounded by people who tell you that you

are doing everything wrong. And so without someone standing next to you being like

'No, you're not,' it's hard to..." have the confidence to continue. She looked for jobs for

a long period of time before finding her current position. "My confidence took a huge

hit, and by the time I left there my confidence and self-esteem were totally in the gutter."

In the new position, however, her confidence is growing by the day, and she is receiving

support from those within her organization, which she did not have before. This theme of

low confidence showed up repeatedly during Trish's interview (e.g., "You have to be

incredibly self-assured, and I am not like that"). Trish was tempted to leave the field

entirely because of the consistent, negative evaluations from her boss that she

internalized and the lack of clear, productive guidance for her work. In comparison,

Mary's feelings of wavering confidence (e.g., she mentioned the need for guidance when

unsure) were coupled with numerous examples of growth and the building of her

confidence (e.g., attending events about females in leadership and exploring the

opportunities of having a life coach). Although Mary has many leadership aspirations,

she is unsure that she would want to have the top leadership position at her current

organization. The one area where both participants noticed a significant decrease in self-

doubt and an increase in self-confidence were the situations when they received support

from sponsors.

Both of the participants highlighted the difficulties they faced when they were in

negative work environments. Trish recently changed jobs and said, "I can never go back

into a situation like that where I am crippled with stress. I don't care if you called me

queen tomorrow because I don't want to be in a position like that because of the toll it

took on my life and family." The appeal of a leadership position was not worth the

exchange of stress and lack of work/life balance. Trish's move into her new role was a

lateral one; she is still a director, but for a larger organization. Despite the increase in

responsibilities, Trish notes the positive feedback that she is receiving instead of the

negative evaluations in her previous position, whereas Mary had a strong sponsor in her

first job out of college, but not now. Mary notes her current struggle stating, "I think it

[sponsorship] is very critical and has been a critical to my professional development so

far and I am seriously lacking a mentor here." She initially looked to her boss as a

mentor, but her boss does not fill that role. A woman in a similar role out-of-state

provided support for her when she started the new position and this sponsor "was

fantastic." Mary stated that "if she was my boss, I would be the happiest employee."

Again, Mary felt the least confident when her boss was involved. In contrast, Trish has

found a drastic change in her new job, explaining that "Everybody feels really positive

about my work so far. It's such a good feeling. It's such a huge relief." She reflects on

that times it makes her "sad about how much I allowed the previous negativity and bad

situation, how much I brought that on myself- not brought that on myself- but turned that

on myself." Trish was disappointed about the impact her work situation had on her self-

esteem and "how much I let that control my feelings about me and if I was good enough."

Both participants internalized the negativity in the work environment, and they noted the

decrease in confidence due to negative evaluations and lack of (positive) guidance from

their bosses.

Trish and Mary have had sponsors at points during their careers. Mary had a

sponsor at her previous job. She commented on the type of assistance her sponsor

offered to her, where "she was really helpful in going back to school and creating the job

that I came back to." Mary was able to leave her job, attend graduate school, and return to the organization in a new position that they jointly created. Furthermore, she said the sponsor "had my back. She made sure that I knew what to do in the future, but she never made me feel embarrassed or ashamed." Three different times during the interview she said that her sponsor "had her back," and it was a great source of comfort as she grew and evolved in her position. For example, Mary sent a curt email to a person of power within the organization. In hindsight, Mary fully recognizes that it was inappropriate to address that person in that manner. The sponsor gave her honest feedback and said she should not have done it, however, "It was a learning opportunity and I think that she even found humor in it." Mary noted that this support was incredibly helpful at the first organization she worked at, but correspondingly, Mary has noticed the void of a sponsor and mentor at her current job.

Mary has been searching unsuccessfully "to find people" to fill the role of mentor and sponsor. At her previous job, her sponsor was her supervisor, but the opposite is true at the present job. Mary indicated that "the times that I have felt the most unhappy or…[felt a] lack of confidence in this job was when my boss was involved." In her search for guidance, she has found mentors to help in specific areas of her job (policy experts), attended educational and networking events, researched additional graduate school opportunities, applied for different jobs, and explored other options, such as finding a life coach, to help her move her career forward and receive advice on her next steps. Mary found a marked difference in confidence and comfort between the previous job with a boss as a sponsor and the current job with the boss being critical and unsupportive. Similarly, Trish has seen the benefits of a supportive sponsor.

Trish found that a boss is not necessarily a sponsor and detailed how important her sponsor was "especially at a time when I felt like there wasn't anyone around me who like cared about how I was doing and whether I was getting any support from my own office." This sponsor was outside of her organization but provided advice and guidance "in helping me succeed at my job, but also like giving me advice about looking for new job." Trish's confidence grew because of the sponsor; she described how "having the validation of somebody highly credible and experienced to say 'No, you totally belong here and I think you could do all of these other things if you wanted'" gave her the resolve to continue. "It was really validating for me and helped me consider staying the course when I was having a hard time finding a job." The sponsor advocated on her behalf and helped her move from the negative work environment where she suffered a significant loss of self-esteem into a new position. Trish refers to her glowingly as "my career fairy godmother because she like appears magically when I need help with something and gives me all this advice and is super helpful and strategic." Trish acknowledges that her field of work is based on who you know. The sponsor would "bring in her organization's... clout to bear on issues that I was working on." Not only was the sponsor offering resources, but she took a personal interest in her protégé by "enhancing the quality of my work by bringing all of the resources and credibility of her own organization on issues that…she didn't have to, but because I was working on them and she cared and took an interest."

Another benefit from Trish's sponsor was greater awareness of work strategies and opportunities. When Trish met her sponsor, "she opened my eyes to the fact that there were a million ways we could have been more strategic and there were things...I

became aware of, all of these dynamics that I didn't know anything about before because nobody had shown me." She reflects back to her time before the sponsor and realized that she was "doing the best I could do all of the time and was operating at a very low level." It was with a sponsor that Trish had an epiphany. "It wasn't until I was introduced to someone who was highly resourced and strategic and was like, 'Oh shit, there's like this whole universe that I didn't know about and could be doing things completely differently.'" The sponsorship relationships where people took her "under their wing and been helpful to me" were significant to her development. She said that having a credible person reassure her of her worth, even when her boss was being a negative influence, helped give her the resolve to stay in the field and find a new job.

Discussion

The first research question asked if females with high levels of grit seek and attain leadership positions in the workplace. In the case study, gritty Mary and less gritty Trish had both attained leadership positions as directors of their respective organizations. The answer to the attainment question is that there is no difference between individuals with a high and low grit score. However, Trish indicated that she had no desire to "be queen" or let ambition guide her to a larger leadership or Executive Director position. Having work/life balance was more important to her, whereas Mary was applying for larger leadership positions out-of-state, was contemplating getting another master's degree, and indicated a desire to run for political office in the future. Grit did not impact leadership attainment in this scenario, but grit was a factor when it came to future leadership aspirations.

The second research question asked about the sponsorship experiences of the participants. Mary had a sponsor in a past job and Trish had a sponsor that led her to her current job. Mary noted that in her past job she was able to advance, in large part due to her sponsor who helped enable her to get her first master's degree and created an advanced position for her once she completed her studies. This was a time when she indicated feeling very confident in herself and her work. Without a sponsor in her current job, she has noted that her level of confidence rises and falls, and she feels a void when it comes to guidance and making the next step. Trish notes that her confidence has increased through having a sponsor. Experiences in her past job were negative, but the sponsor provided resources from her organization and included Trish in projects that made Trish feel valued and increase her confidence. It is with the active assistance of sponsor that Trish learned about her current position. Trish acknowledges that she might have left the field if it had not been for the support and encouragement of her sponsor.

The third research question asked about the interaction between grit and sponsorship on leadership aspirations and attainment. The combination of the high-level of grit and sponsorship resulted in positive leadership advancement in Mary's past job. Although her aspirations for future leadership positions are still high, she does not have a sponsor at this time. Mary has noted a desire for a sponsor again as she makes decisions about future leadership positions and the educational direction to follow (e.g., the type of master's degree to pursue). Trish's low-level of grit and sponsorship experience resulted in a leadership position at work. She does not desire a higher leadership position at this time, noting the importance of a work/life balance and less stress. Her ambitious

leadership aspirations from youth have been tempered by the desire for a more stable and balanced home life. The sponsorship experience has increased her confidence.

Although the focus of the findings come from two of the six participants in the form of a case study, a number of interesting experiences regarding confidence and sponsorship experiences also warrant mention. Many of the participants indicated that they had personal struggles with leadership advancement and support in the workplace. During the interviews, many participants had experiences with sponsors or a desire for a sponsor. A gritty participant (4.4 score out of 5), who will be called Kylea, found that a sponsor has been helpful as she evaluates the future, "Before I make a decision it's nice to have someone to bounce it off and make sure that I am going in the right direction and that someone else sees the benefit and I am not talking myself into or out of something." She said that she never would have known about opportunities in her current career field if it had not been for her sponsor informing her. Kylea's undergraduate degree was in an unrelated field that had few opportunities when she graduated nearly a decade ago. She had been at her job for only a few months, but she feels "pretty confident" and does not feel overwhelmed about the learning curve or her abilities to get answers to questions.

Similar to Mary's positive experiences of someone "having your back," a gritty participant (4.3 score out of 5, second highest grit score), who will be called Laura, said when she was only an intern, her sponsor "really helped me to understand the job application process…send a thank you card after you apply, things that they really didn't teach you in college. She really went to bat for me." Not only that, but "When a position opened up, she was vocal in recommending me in the job I ended up getting." Beyond the position itself, "She [her sponsor] really sparked my interest in the administrative

track." The sponsor opened her eyes to new possibilities. Laura would eventually like to be a Chief of Staff. On the other hand, a less gritty participant (2.8 out of 5, second lowest grit score), who will be called Cynthia, said that during "the most challenging work experience of my life, I had no one to go to bat for me. It was a very challenging group of people, personalities." Although her confidence has grown since that time nearly a decade ago, it had been "completely eroded by this horrible toxic work situation that made me feel personally awful." Even at the present, "sometimes the stress gets to me and I think about quitting, just like walking away." When asked if she needed a sponsor during the interview, it was an emphatic and repeated "Yes, yes, *yes*!" In her current role, Cynthia said, "It's like I have reached the top of my ladder and I'm trying to get the next rung, but I can't reach it, and I don't feel like I am getting a lot of help to get there." Another participant indicated the gap in where she is and her uncertainty and lack of confidence about what the future may hold. This slightly gritty participant (3.4 score out of 5) with a sponsor indicated that, "I would not feel anywhere near prepared for that now" in regards to reaching for a higher position. She is debating the possibility of going to law school, but is not ready to take a step forward at the present. She prefers to stay behind the scenes; she was also the youngest participant.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical support for the importance of grit and sponsoring on female career advancement. The case study demonstrates the increased leadership aspirations of a gritty individual (e.g., desire for a bigger position and running for legislative office) in comparison to a less gritty individual. Both Mary and Trish had leadership positions, they were state directors for their organizations, so high and low grit

individuals can have leadership positions. Having a sponsor is deemed as highly

important to both participants and could explain part of the reason for their position on

advancing their leadership. The sponsorship experiences of Mary and Trish were

positive. They found that their confidence and support from their sponsors paved their

path forward in the workplace. The study could be helpful to others who want to provide

successful resources to millennial females.

Although this study can offer insight, this convenience sample cannot offer

generalizable findings. The sample size is small and focused on an isolated group of

females in New England who have related professions. There may be additional factors

that promote leadership attainment or a correlation between grit and different career

interests and professional positions. Furthermore, new themes could emerge during the

interviews of millennial females relating to their work environment. Many participants

encountered toxic work environments and relationships. Supportive work environments

and helpful superiors added to the confidence of the participants. It would be helpful to

see if the themes of self-doubt and struggle would emerge among males as well.

Yet, despite these limitations, the study did identify that sponsorship is a driver of

success for leadership attainment and grit is a driver of success for increased leadership

aspirations, as demonstrated through Mary in the case study. Attainment of leadership

positions is possible for those with high or low levels of grit. Sponsorship experiences

are positive and led to the increased level of confidence. The combination of high grit

and sponsorship led to the attainment of a leadership position and aspirations for future

leadership positions for Mary, whereas the low grit and sponsorship experience of Trish

led to the attainment of a leadership position, but no aspirations for future leadership positions beyond the present one.

There are many opportunities for the advancement of female millennials and these success drivers can help increase these opportunities. New models of workplace sponsoring programs could develop from these research findings. Grit has the potential to increase an individual's likelihood to reach their goals and aspire to positions in the future, as shown through Mary's narrative. Qualitative data from "gritty" individuals may offer further insight into their perspectives on career goals and leadership. Since grit improves the achievement of long-term goals, teachers are in a prime position to help students develop meaningful goals and promote the development of grit in young students. Developing a statewide or national program that incentivizes others to succeed could be adopted and promoted. Furthermore, workforce programs could incorporate support and resources for grit development.

There are many other scenarios that should be explored to further understand the impact of the self-report measure of grit and the sponsorship experience. Factors that enhance leadership outcomes of females should continue to be a focus of future research, especially during this time of female empowerment and gender role re-evaluation. Although additional insight regarding leadership attainment is offered by this study, continued research is necessary for the development of resources and identification of factors that will positively influence present and future female leaders.

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Appendix A

Grit-S Scale

Directions for taking the Grit Scale (Duckworth, 2017): Here are a number of statements that may or may not apply to you. For the most accurate score, when responding, think of how you compare to most people - not just the people you know well, but most people in the world. There are no right or wrong answers, so just answer honestly!

1. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.

Very much like me

Mostly like me

Somewhat like me

Not much like me

Not like me at all

2. Setbacks don't discourage me.

Very much like me

Mostly like me

Somewhat like me

Not much like me

Not like me at all

3. I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.

Very much like me

Mostly like me

Somewhat like me

Not much like me

Not like me at all

4. I am a hard worker.

Very much like me

Mostly like me

Somewhat like me

Not much like me

Not like me at all

5. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.

Very much like me

Mostly like me

Somewhat like me

Not much like me

Not like me at all

6. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to

complete.

Very much like me

Mostly like me

Somewhat like me

Not much like me

Not like me at all

7. I finish whatever I begin.

Very much like me

Mostly like me

Somewhat like me

Not much like me

Not like me at all

8. I am diligent.

Very much like me

Mostly like me

Somewhat like me

Not much like me

Not like me at all

Scoring:

For questions 2, 4, 7 and 8 assign the following points:

5 = Very much like me

4 = Mostly like me

3 = Somewhat like me

2 = Not much like me

1 = Not like me at all

For questions 1, 3, 5 and 6 assign the following points:

1 = Very much like me

2 = Mostly like me

3 = Somewhat like me

4 = Not much like me

5 = Not like me at all

Add up all the points and divide by 8. The maximum score on this scale is 5 (extremely gritty), and the lowest score on this scale is 1 (not at all gritty).

Appendix B

Guiding Interview Questions

Guiding Interview Questions

1.   Describe any professional changes in position or responsibility from the

beginning of your work to the present.

2.   Do you have a mentor (a superior at work who provides guidance and information

about the workplace) or sponsor (an active advocate helping to promote your

advancement) and if so, what is their position related to yours? Is it a formal

arrangement (one assigned) or an informal sponsor? Describe the relationship.

3.   If you do not have a sponsor, what are your thoughts about the potential benefits

or risks of having a sponsor advocating for your professional advancement?

4.   How did you meet your sponsor?

5.   How did you form your relationship?

6.   What has your sponsor helped you with, to develop or promoted you to do?

7.   How has your sponsor helped you?

8.   How have your aspirations changed since you have had a sponsor?

9.   How confident are you in your career currently?

10.   Has this feeling evolved (either more or less confident) since you began your

tenure in the office? Has it changed since you have had a mentor or sponsor? How so?

11.   What are your feelings and thoughts about future leadership positions? Would

you like a higher position or are you content in your current role? Why?

Appendix C

Recruitment Email

Dear _____,

I am conducting a research study for my Master's Capstone at the University of Southern Maine. The purpose of this research study is to study the factors that impact the leadership attainment and leadership aspirations of millennial females.

Instead of focusing on the potential barriers that exist, this study seeks to understand the factors that incentivize and promote the development of female workplace leaders. If you choose to participate in the study and sign a consent form, you will be emailed a questionnaire (no more than five minutes) that you will complete and email back to the investigator. Then, I will follow up to schedule an in-person interview about your work experiences. The in-person meeting will begin with a short demographic information survey (no more than three minutes) followed by the interview. The meeting will be held in a private office in ███████████ and last for approximately 45 minutes to one hour.

All participants must identify as female and be a millennial (between 22-40 years of age). There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project, nor are there any direct benefits to you. The results, however, could provide empirical data that could benefit future female leaders. There is no monetary compensation for participation.

This is an anonymous questionnaire, so your responses will not be identifiable to you in any way. Since email is never fully secure, there is a risk that your survey could potentially be seen by a hacker. Email answers will be kept on the principal investigator's password protected USB drive and deleted from the email server. Audio

recordings will also be password protected. All paper documents will be kept under lock

and key in the investigator's home. Your participation in the study is strictly voluntary.

You may stop completing the study at any time. This study is being conducted by me,

Melissa Simones Landry, and I can be reached at (or

melissa.simones@maine.edu, if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Melissa A. S. Landry

Appendix D

Demographic Questions

Gender:

Age:

Ethnicity/race:

City/town of resident:

Marital Status:

Number of children:

Education level completed: