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EXIT, VOICE, AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP: THE IMPACT OF IDENTITY
CONCERNS ON UNDERREPRESENTED MINORITIES

A Dissertation Presented
by
GEORGIANNA D. MELÉNDEZ

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,
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Business Administration Program

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GEORGIANNA D. MELÉNDEZ

Approved as to style and content by:

Banu Özkazanç-Pan, Associate Professor
Chairperson of Committee

Maureen Scully, Associate Professor
Member

Marcy Crary, Professor Emerita
Bentley University
Member

Nardia Haigh, Graduate Program Director
Business Administration
College of Management

Alessia Contu, Chair
College of Management

ABSTRACT

EXIT, VOICE, AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP: THE IMPACT OF IDENTITY CONCERNS ON UNDERREPRESENTED MINORITIES

March 2019

Georgianna Meléndez, B.A. Bentley University
M.P.A., University of Massachusetts Boston
Ph.D., University of Massachusetts Boston

Directed by Professor Banu Özkazanç-Pan

Despite organizations' growing concerns over the recruitment and retention of underrepresented minorities in the United States, not enough is known about the conditions that lead underrepresented minority professionals to exit organizations and become entrepreneurs. Through an intersectionality lens and using a phenomenological methodology to form descriptive themes, this study seeks to further explore the experiences of minority professionals in organizations. Specifically, the focus of the study is to understand the conditions prompting underrepresented minorities to become entrepreneurs and either straddle or exit when launching their ventures. Although underrepresented minorities launching their own businesses is not a new phenomenon, the idea that there may be specific drivers within their organizational environment that move them in this direction that may be

different from the non-minority population could add to our understanding of what causes them to choose entrepreneurship over employment at another organization. Employing qualitative fieldwork, the study utilized in-depth interviews with 30 underrepresented minority entrepreneurs to understand their experiences. These interviews included individuals who have exited by leaving the organization and launching their own businesses and those who straddled (stayed) while launching their businesses. Examining the experiences of the participants through a lens of intersectionality sheds light on the ways that overlapping identities interact in the face of power and oppression. This study considers the intersecting identities of gender, race, class, and age as well as their relationships with power structures within organizations as reported by underrepresented minorities. It also sheds light on why some individuals choose exit over voice and provides insights about the interactions of identity, power, and organizational structures in management and organization studies. The study finds that underrepresented minorities continue to face negative identity-based experiences within organizations due to the power structures that reinforce and support oppression.

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This was not a journey I walked alone. Everything I did to get to this place impacted my family and friends as they rallied around me to make sure I would be successful, something they have always done for me throughout life. My very forgiving and helpful family stuck with me as I missed many special occasions and family time. I cannot thank all of my circle of supporters enough for all they have done, not limited to feeding me and the family, providing rides and other forms of back-up when needed, cleaning my house (sigh), reading and editing my drafts, transcribing help (Andrea, Breanna, Amanda and Candyce), providing me with spaces to work quietly, and sending me frequent messages of love and encouragement. It has been a seven-year journey for this degree which was preceded by my three-year trek with my Masters' degree. Working full-time, launching a business, being fully immersed as a Mom and partner, and being a full-time student was a significant undertaking. Thank you for pushing, pulling and encouraging me to be my best! Banu, Maureen and Marcy, you are the best Team Unicorn I could have asked for on this journey. I appreciated your ability to challenge me while lifting me up at the same time. Your patience with me as I learned to be a scholar and your sincere interest in my research agenda made it more of an engaged process and I look forward to our continued work together in the next stage. Deanna, Lisa, Tara, and Angelina...you are all amazing women. Thank you for the writing weekends and all that was part of being there with you! Mom and Papi, I cannot even begin to put into words what you have both done for me. I cannot remember a time when you were not making education a priority, and how much it meant for you to have us kids to go to

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This research represents a personal commitment to understanding power structures that oppress and the barriers preventing each and every one of us from living our full potential free from bias. Our intersectional identities should strengthen our bonds within and across communities, though the research says otherwise. My research aspirations are that the data will prove useful in providing information for those who truly want to understand and actively engage in changing the structures of oppression.

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TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Entrepreneurship – In this study, “entrepreneurship involves individuals who are owners and managers of their businesses” (Gartner, 1990).

Exit – an individuals’ option to leave an organization when there are lapses in performance, or when quality of experiences decrease and lead to dissatisfaction (Hirschman, 1970).

Exiters – individuals who leave the organization either through a decrease in productivity or commitment, or who leave the organizations’ employment altogether (Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, & Mainous III, 1988).

Identity – refers to the group membership status of participants in the study, for example, race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, immigrant status, etc.

Organizations – In the context of this study, an organization refers to the employers of the participants identified as the target population.

Silence – individuals who “do nothing” to express their dissatisfaction with an organization while they remain employed there (Kolarska & Aldrich, 1980).

Straddlers – as used in this study, an individual who maintains employment at an established organization while running their own business outside of the organization.

Underrepresented Minorities – for the purposes of this study, professionals of color are defined as underrepresented racial or ethnic minorities.

Voice – “refers to members...expressing their dissatisfaction to authorities, either directly or indirectly, from the inside or outside an organization” (Kolarska & Aldrich, 1980).

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Within underrepresented minority professional communities there has long been discussion of how workplace experiences link to identity and how this impacts satisfaction levels within the field and inside the organization. Simultaneously, within U.S. organizations, in recent decades there has been an investment in inclusive employment practices such as employee recruitment and retention. In communities where individuals have choices about where they want to work and where market competition is healthy, individuals may choose to pursue other options, which leads to employee attrition. This process of using exit to address disappointing organizational performance is a classic form of correction characterized by Hirschman (1970). Specifically, the focus of this study is to understand the conditions prompting underrepresented minorities to become entrepreneurs and either leave their employment (exit) or remain at their present organization or move to another (straddle) when launching their ventures. While others have investigated reasons why individuals leave organizations, the missing feedback specific to experiences of underrepresented minority professionals is lacking. This lack of information may mislead an organization to believe that their diversity/inclusion climate works well and the organization, therefore may not engage in corrections to organizational practices, policies or culture. As Hirschman (1970) theorized, voice that names the problems is the other mechanism whereby organizational under-

performance might be remedied, as an alternative to exit. My study begins to elucidate conditions that were motivators for leaving (*exiting* or *straddling*) the organization and launching a business (*entrepreneurship*), examining situations in which feedback was provided to the organization (*voice*) and where it was not (*silence*).

Study Background

Researchers and organizations both seek a deeper understanding of the meaning and practice of diversity management, attrition, and its impact on underrepresented minority employees. To gain this insight, it is necessary to understand the experiences of underrepresented minorities in the workplace through individual narratives as well as to consider the historical context of these experiences in the United States.

This country has an established history of racism and discrimination (Banks, Eberhardt, & Ross, 2006; Bell, Marquardt, & Berry, 2014). Within this historical framework, racial and ethnic minority professionals have been historically underrepresented both in professional career paths as well as in general employment rates (Bell et al., 2014; Buttner, Lowe, & Billings-Harris, 2010). Specific groups subjected to racism and discrimination have shifted over the centuries; however, discrimination against racial and ethnic minority individuals has persisted despite legal and social efforts to address such behavior (Alexander, 2012; Kendi, 2016). Scholars Nielsen, Nelson, and Lancaster (2010) studied employment discrimination litigation outcomes, finding overlapping connections of the “law, workplace discrimination and social inequality” (p.176). Yet the literature shows that despite the U.S. government’s established legal protections for historically oppressed groups, the ever-increasing discrimination case filings demonstrate a persistent pattern. “Everyday encounters with prejudice are not rare instances but are familiar and recurrent patterns of being devalued

in many varied ways and across different contexts” (Deitch et al., 2003, p. 1301).

Discrimination is an everyday reality for underrepresented minorities in the U.S.

Scholars endeavor to understand the behaviors connected to racism, bias, and discrimination. They developed an Implicit Association Test (IAT) (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995), finding that most people discriminate against traditionally disadvantaged groups, despite often being unaware they are doing so (Jolls & Sunstein, 2006). These conclusions provided employers insight on behaviors in work environments that may lead to employee exit. Organizations have also expressed concern about this issue. Many employers have sought help with diversity management strategies. However, organizations are complex entities in which relationships undergo constant negotiation and renegotiation. In an attempt to be more inclusive and to improve recruitment and retention, organizations have implemented diversity initiatives. For example, PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PwC), under the leadership of Tim Ryan and in the wake of multiple shooting deaths of black men by police officers in 2016, launched inclusive companywide conversations about race (McGirt, 2017). Employees engaged in diversity dialogues within the company that provided room to reflect on the levels of minority group representation and motivate the company to create pathways for change (McGirt, 2017).

Diversity-in-the-workplace initiatives work to address a variety of issues through Employee Resource Groups (ERG). These ERG’s are often not intersectional, but one dimensional (Scully, 2009) and have been particularly focused on members of the U.S. federally-defined protected classes such as race, ethnicity, gender, disability, age, sexual identity, and sexual orientation. “Now these issues are playing out again in the workplace, with a wide range of employee network groups emerging to support employees who share a

social identity (such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religion) or life experience (such as caregiver or military veteran) that might pose barriers to inclusion and opportunity at work” (Scully, 2009, p. 74).

“The notions of diversity and diversity management, as used in organization and management studies, can be seen as having clear connections with that of intersectionality” (Hearn & Louvrier, 2015). Edmondson Bell and Nkomo (2003) found that women of color managers felt that leadership both wanted to embrace diversity and inclusion practices and were simultaneously afraid of them. The women in their study expressed skepticism about the organizations’ commitment to promoting women and minorities (2003). Despite the efforts to understand, the problem of discrimination in the workplace persists.

The literature on employee satisfaction provides some insight as to why employees may leave an organization. Hirschman (1970) developed a theory to explain the conditions under which employees might choose to leave or *exit*, exercise *voice* to influence change in the organization, or remain “loyal” regardless of the organization’s willingness to change. Hirschman’s (1970) “Exit, Voice and Loyalty” theory posited that organizations would be prompted to correct lapses in performance as a direct result of feedback loops which included *exit* and *voice*. While Hirschman (1970), and later Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, and Mainous III (1988) provided explanations for the choices made by employees in the majority population, Hirschman noted the experiences of “minorities” (racial and ethnic minorities) were inevitably unlike those of their White counterparts linked to their social, educational, socio-economic, and work environments. Focusing on the family and community impact of the path of the individual exiting, Hirschman’s (1970) subsequent research did not explore the

specific differences in these work environment experiences. This study contributes to filling that missing piece.

Statement of the Problem

In regions where professionals have competitive market choices for employment and do not face monopolies, professionals may flow more freely from one organization to another (Hirschman, 1970; Rusbult et al., 1988). Individuals exit organizations for a multitude of reasons, including dissatisfaction. Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, and Mainous III (1988), whose research continued Hirschman's work, viewed studying employee dissatisfaction as "one of the most important themes in the history of research on organizational behavior" (p. 599). Hirschman's (1970) theory was predicated on the notion that dissatisfaction was the basis for taking any exit, voice, or loyalty action. This loss of talent has an impact on organizations. There are negative costs associated with employee turnover which include direct and indirect costs (Johns & Johnson, 2005).

Through the years, organizations have invested significant resources to understand the reasons that professionals of color exit (McKay et al., 2007). Organizations' desire to maintain a diverse workforce was undercut by the turnover rates for underrepresented minorities, which were higher than the turnover rates for their white colleagues (Buttner et al., 2010; McKay et al., 2007). McKay et al. (2007) found that an organization's diversity climate directly impacts turnover rates, regardless of whether the experiences were real or perceived.

While it is not uncommon for individuals to exit an organization due to negative experiences, Hirschman (1970) asserted that employees leave when it is more attractive to

exit than it is to stay and try to force change. This study will examine the phenomenon of individuals who chose an exit path that involves launching their own businesses, sometimes becoming a direct competitor to the organization they exited. Often, these entrepreneurs relied on ties to the organization they exited in order to grow and succeed. Aldrich (1986) found that entrepreneurs required strong linkages to existing resources and networks. His findings claimed that in fact, entrepreneurs' positionality within their networks determine their success or failure (Aldrich, 1986). Exercising voice, if not well received, could negatively impact the desired relationship with the organization employees are exiting, particularly if the organizational leadership has not created internal competence for a supportive work environment. If dominant group members within an organization engage in behaviors and practices that marginalize, discriminate, or harass minority group members, and the power structures support, endorse, or do nothing to prevent the continuance of these encounters, dissatisfaction is inevitable. Despite dissatisfaction, employees who need the ongoing support of networks might not exercise voice, while in the organization or upon exiting, to make their concerns known.

Purpose of the Study

This research aims to understand the conditions prompting underrepresented minorities to become entrepreneurs and either *straddle* or *exit* when launching their ventures. I investigate the conditions under which employees come to do what I characterize as straddling or exiting. Both staying in organizations (*straddling*) where they are dissatisfied and leaving (*exiting*) creates barriers linked to intersectional identities of gender, race, age, and class. Understanding how underrepresented minority professionals experience their

colleagues, management, and organizational structures can provide insight on the decisions that follow those encounters. Research on dissatisfaction provides insight on why underrepresented minorities may leave, but more research is needed to understand the linkages of these identity-based encounters with the decisions to launch businesses in lieu of joining another organization. The application of the intersectional lens has been historically criticized as having too narrow a focus and not taking into consideration that identities are more complicated and nuanced than the typical selected identity criteria would explain (Rodriguez, Holvino, Fletcher, & Nkomo, 2016). However, using this phenomenological methodology in presenting the stories of these experiences, the study has the potential to contribute to the literature on diversity by including many previously unremarked facets of the complicated and nuanced environments and experiences.

Research Questions

Despite widespread acknowledgment that retention of underrepresented minority professionals is a problem for organizations, there is a need to better understand the specific conditions that lead underrepresented minorities to exit organizations and launch their own businesses. Organizations invest resources to reduce attrition and specifically to engage in practices designed to recruit and retain talented underrepresented minority professionals, and yet these individuals continue to have experiences that prompt them to leave. The following questions help to establish the research agenda and pursue that line of inquiry:

RQ1: How do identity concerns impact the experiences of underrepresented minorities in organizations and their decision to stay or exit?

RQ2: Why do underrepresented minorities choose to become entrepreneurs rather than join a competing organization?

These research questions are approached through the perspective of underrepresented minority professionals across various industries and spanning hierarchical positionality within organizational structures.

Conceptual Framework

The study examines the intersecting identities of race, gender, age, and class, and their interactions with power structures of and within organizations as reported by participants. Phenomenological research (Bernard, 2012) seeks to understand how the underrepresented minority professionals make sense of their experiences and is central to characterizations of themes and the development of the dissertation.

Applying phenomenology through an intersectional lens sheds light on ways that overlapping identities interact in the face of power and politics using the words and descriptions shared by the participants. This study looks at the lived experiences of multiple inequalities of the participants, and the experiences they shared that are often overlooked (MacKinnon, 2013). The hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenological approach (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007) pointedly seeks to understand the experiences as understood by the underrepresented minority professionals who lived through them. Together, these approaches bring to light stories that need to be shared in order to uncover the nuances and complications in these identity-linked encounters mentioned earlier. Nash (2008) described intersectionality as “the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality,” and noted it “has emerged as the primary theoretical tool designed to combat feminist hierarchy, hegemony, and exclusivity.”

Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) found that the scrutiny that intersectionality placed on differences and similarities across multiple identities widely influenced the discourse on gender, race, and class throughout public discussions and academia. Matsuda (1987) believed in the value of the voices of marginalized individuals and groups as voices that deserve our attention. By building upon work of Crenshaw, Holvino, Nkomo, and others, the study will illuminate why underrepresented minority professionals may choose entrepreneurship over other employment options and will use an intersectional lens to uncover both subjectivity and structural issues related to experiences of marginalization in organizations. “Intersectionality was introduced in the late 1980s as a heuristic term to focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics” (Cho et al., 2013, p. 787). They found that this framework has prompted discussion in new fields where there is a realization that single-axis approaches or lenses limit our ability to understand a phenomenon (2013).

Rodriguez, Holvino, Fletcher and Nkomo (2016) stated that the impact of intersectionality on organizational studies has been uneven and “has not been fully utilized to explore structures of discrimination and systems of power and inequality” (p. 202). Holvino (2010) urged scholars to use an intersectional approach in exploring organizational experiences that highlighted the “hidden stories hidden stories at the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, class, nation and sexuality” (p.1) and claims that there is silence on this issue in mainstream literature on managing diversity. Carastathis (2016) encourages scholars to embrace the lens of intersectionality as a way of thinking or a habit. For example, Black women face distinct challenges from White women and from Black men, as seen through the lens of intersectionality.

Phenomenology allows the voices to be presented in the words of the individuals who lived them. MacKinnon (2013) urged consideration of the treatment of individuals through the lens of their identities as a hierarchical ranking. However, Bernstein, Crary, Bilimoria, and Blancero (2015) joined many other scholars in framing “the management of social identities in the workplace as a social construction process” (p.117) and focused attention on the individual’s internal hierarchy of identities, the identity from which they would draw their inferences of meaning. In this study, the participants themselves determined the identity linkages to their experiences and reference different identities depending on the encounter and what the participant felt motivated the bias.

Little has been done to understand the individual experiences of professional women of color who choose to leave organizations to become entrepreneurs. While this study does not exclusively focus on the experiences of women of color, a majority of the sample identified as women of color. Their experiences and life journeys can highlight hitherto under-explained reasons or mechanisms for departure and new aspirations. The social status and power differentials of men and women are mirrored in workspaces and provide another layer of information to consider. Research conducted by Edmondson Bell and Nkomo (2003) identified racism and discrimination connected to these differentials as a racialized form of sexism.

In approaching this topic through qualitative inquiry, as a researcher I seek to solicit and present descriptive representations that will establish a foundation of knowledge from which themes emerge to inform our understanding of the shared, lived experiences. Applying an intersectional lens and using a phenomenological methodology, the information will highlight where *voice and silence* are considered and applied in encounters of bias and

oppression. It will also highlight behaviors, power structures, and positionality, which influence the decision to enact either option as well as the consequences experienced by the participants.

Rationale and Significance

Although underrepresented minorities launching businesses is not a new phenomenon, the idea that specific drivers for this population may exist that are unique to their identity can supplement our understanding of what causes individuals to choose entrepreneurship over joining a different established organization. This notion can also clarify why some choose *silence* over utilizing *voice* in the decision to *straddle* or *exit* and launch. Public discourse around why underrepresented minorities exit often occurs within silos. Organizations view and interpret employee exit from one lens and underrepresented minorities view and interpret their experiences at the organization from another lens. The two views have not come together to improve our understanding of why this population of employees straddle or exit and launch their own businesses.

Organizations develop their operations strategy based on their understanding of employee satisfaction insofar as it impacts their viability. Hirschman (1970) asserted that the voices demanding change must be significant if they are to prompt the organization to take corrective action. Participant narratives resulting from this research will offer missing voices that will contribute an understanding of the lack of progress in areas of diversity and inclusion within organizations. This work will also contribute to the conversation concerning the experiences of underrepresented minorities in the workplace.

Making visible the reasons underrepresented minorities choose to become self-employed over staying with their organization, being fully invested in their organization, or leaving, can help organizations that genuinely want to engage in inclusive work spaces that provide competent supports. Their narratives can provide perspective that could inform future diversity management practices including channels of communication that do not lead to *silence* or *exit*.

As the population of underrepresented minority professionals in the workplace increases, organizations may benefit from reviewing the findings associated with this research. An exploration of the emergent themes extrapolated from the lived experiences of the participants may help provide context for previously misunderstood or where organizations were underinformed regarding the reasons for the exits. Employee voice is an important part of the feedback loop that assists organizations in gauging their own performance. When that feedback loop is compromised, as it is when individuals do not feel safe to exercise voice or when they experience retaliation or other consequences as a result of exercising voice, the organization takes on risks of worsening the performance gaps that are causing employees to be dissatisfied.

Organization of the Dissertation

This study is organized in a six-chapter design. Chapter One defines the problem and lays out the theoretical foundation for the study with an overview of the key methods that are applied. Chapter Two reviews existing literature and establishes context from which the findings can be connected and understood. Chapter Three describes methodologies used in conducting the research along with detailed characteristics about the 30 individuals in the

sample. Chapter Four presents information about three emergent themes related to Organizational Experiences framed around Research Question One. Chapter Five presents information about three more emergent themes related to Context and Industry Changes from participant interviews connected to Research Question Two. Chapter Six discusses contributions and implications for practice and opportunities for future research.

Summary

In Chapter One, I introduced the phenomenon being researched, the theoretical framework that guides the dissertation, and explained the key concepts. This chapter provides the foundation for how future chapters will frame the experiences of underrepresented minority professionals' experiences in the workplace that led them to entrepreneurship. The following literature review will provide a contextual background to understand the experiences of underrepresented minorities via an overview of prior research in the areas of why employees exit, experiences of minorities in the workplace, and minority entrepreneurship.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter Two illuminates the landscape of experiences of experiences that are motivators for leaving, *Why Employees Exit*; specific experiences of oppression of underrepresented minorities in the workplace, *Minority Employee Experiences in the Workplace*, and what the literature says about what underrepresented minority entrepreneurs encounter or must consider, *Experiences of Minority Entrepreneurs*. My study operates at the intersection of these literatures.

Why Employees Exit

Hirschman (1970) claimed the act of exiting forces learning and change in organizations if they are to survive. That feedback, provided by the exit behavior, can reveal itself through lower revenues, or loss of customers, or loss of employees. These losses force management to take action to address problems. However, not every revenue decrease or loss of customers leads to the necessary corrective action. As such, Hirschman (1970) suggests that a loss needs to have a significant enough impact to get the organization's attention but not so significant as to force them out of business. Branham (2012) conducted post-exit surveys for workers who left organizations. She found that organizations became interested

in taking action for reasons that included retention, achieving organizational goals with a talented workforce, and organizational reputation. Branham (2012) wrote that feedback loops were in fact important to some employers who prioritize understanding why employees leave.

One might consider how this type of feedback loop would translate for women and racial minority populations in an organization. If the experiences of these minority populations gave rise to only a small voice, given that their numbers were likely small, perhaps the concerns raised by these voices would not warrant the attention of the organization. It is also possible the organization sees the exit, but is unclear on the cause without an intact feedback loop.

Hirschman (1970) explained that sometimes customers moving from one organization to a competitor organization or the reverse occurring may play a role in disguising these losses. In these cases, the effect may mask the dissatisfaction that often prompts exiting. According to Hirschman, individuals prefer the “neatness of exit over the messiness and heartbreak of voice,” and the most dissatisfied of customers are ineffective in having their voices heard because they exit (Hirschman, 1970, p. 107). Organizations that tolerate a certain amount of slack in performance will miss these messages and benefit from this aversion to a visible public struggle. Because individuals have more employment options available to them and because there is a surplus beyond their basic needs, society fails to create processes guaranteeing continuity and leadership (Hirschman, 1970). This failure allows organizations to move on without taking corrective action (Hirschman, 1970). The fact that individuals leave an organization is a mere inconvenience as they can be replaced with new employees. Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, and Mainous III (1988) found that having

other options, such as not needing to work or access to other employment opportunities, provided incentive to be more active in exercising voice to force either change within the organization or exit from the organization.

Both Hirschman (1970) and Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, and Mainous III (1988) claimed that the higher the investment an employee had in the organization, the more likely the employees were to exercise voice or remain loyal. The lower the investment, the more likely the employees were to exit or be neglectful (absenteeism, tardiness, low productivity, etc.).

Job satisfaction has long been an area of focus for research on why employees leave. Scholars like Wasmuth and Davis (1983), Hellman (1997), and Branham (2012) have explored connections between employee satisfaction and employee turnover. Wasmuth and Davis (1983) looked at employee turnover rates in the hospitality industry, citing managerial practices which in some cases have a negative impact on individual morale. Hellman (1997), looked at the correlation between job satisfaction and intent to leave, noting special circumstances in which skills and occupational specialties could shift the outcomes where employees stay even when dissatisfied; for example, when their specialty limits their mobility. Branham (2012) dissected the experiences of exiting employees in her book *7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave*. When employees left, it cost the organization time and financial resources, a strong motivator for the organization to engage in transformation or corrective actions (Branham, 2012). Feedback loops have also caught the interest of scholars such as Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, and Mainous III (1988), who explored employees' desire to influence transformation or change within the organization as an alternative to exit. There existed a strong connection between investment in the organization and employees' willingness to exercise voice (Rusbult et al., 1988). Though they also found that the higher

the level of dissatisfaction, the higher the likelihood they would leave if nothing changes (Rusbult et al., 1988). They explored employees' use of feedback through supervisors, use of union representatives and outside agencies and found that those employees who were satisfied supplied more constructive feedback than those who were not (Rusbult et al., 1988). Zhou and George (2001) found that when commitment to the employee existed within the organization and employees were dissatisfied, they were more motivated to creatively express their voices to ensure a feedback loop. An absence of commitment to the individual employee resulted in higher connection to exit (Zhou & George, 2001). Overall, the literature shows an enduring interest in the question of why employees leave alongside difficulty in determining the reasons for exit and the ways to diminish exit. It also ties dissatisfaction to organization response as a contingent influence on their decision. If the organization seems invested and responds in a way that diminishes dissatisfaction then employees will stay, and if the organization either is not invested or responds poorly, they will leave when other options are available.

Experiences of Underrepresented Minorities in the Workplace

Roberts, Swanson and Murphy (2004) found that “Blacks, Hispanics and Multiracial/Multiethnics reported higher rates of exposure to racial and ethnic discrimination than Whites” in the workplace (p.139). Hirschman (1970) was one of many researchers to note the experiences of individuals of lower social class status who exit their groups in order to be accepted by the next level up. For example, they get a certification or a college degree to get access to a higher-level career opportunity. He singled out minority groups' experiences as being different, highlighting the Black power movement's resistance to the

exit pattern. The pattern of upward mobility for the community was seen as a threat to their collective communities calling them unworkable and undesirable and rejecting the individuals from the Black community who engaged in upward mobility efforts (Hirschman, 1970). Minorities were being rejected by some of their communities while trying to improve their individual circumstances, and at the same time were trying to be accepted by those in the “higher group”. Hirschman (1970) asserted that a “collective thrust” was necessary to have an effective impact (1970). It is interesting that Hirschman’s work has been widely taken up across the social sciences, but this particular observation about minority groups’ experiences has been given little subsequent attention.

Organizations make choices about whom to please and whom not to please which begs the question of how an organization makes this decision and based on what criteria (Hirschman, 1970). Because underrepresented minorities do not represent the majority of the workforce population in most organizations, and have minimal representation in positions of leadership and power, organizations seeking to maximize their profits will not likely respond to the concerns of a minority workforce population. Hirschman’s theory asserts that the belief that flight leads to opportunity (referring to the flight to the western frontier provided opportunity to settlers) is not reality for most (2007). Could this belief explain the reasons underrepresented minorities exit to launch organizations? Buttner, Lowe, and Billings-Harris (2010) described the connection between employee satisfaction and work outcomes as being influenced by diversity climate perceptions. McKay and Avery (2005) found that underrepresented minorities had an expectation that their employers had “obligations and commitments to provide a positive and supportive diversity climate.”

The issue of underrepresentation in high ranks is relevant across professional fields. For example, the legal profession, despite being charged with enforcing laws related to discrimination and racism, has significant underrepresentation of minority professionals in the field (Wald, 2011). Organizations will not likely respond to the concerns of a small or weak voice simply out of altruism (Hirschman, 1970). Yet underrepresented minorities are more likely to pay attention to the diversity climate of their organizations (Buttner et al., 2010). For these professionals, an inclusive climate translates into colleagues who look like them, who have a voice in decision-making, and who have their ideas embraced and do not experience discrimination (Buttner et al., 2010). Climate impacts employees' decisions about whether or not to stay. Staying employed is often a main priority for underrepresented minorities who also have to determine how to navigate discrimination experiences in both professional settings and in other daily activities (Zane, 2002).

Not all dissatisfied underrepresented minorities exit but exercising voice may interfere with the desired outcome of change. When voice is used too often, it may be received negatively and interfere with efforts to improve the situation (Hirschman, 1970). In a case study conducted at Eastern Bank of Massachusetts, the CEO included employee voice in redefining the climate, particularly as it related to diversity and inclusion (Zane, 2002). “[The report] highlighted themes of exclusion, denigration, glass ceilings, and glass walls. These discussions made visible the double binds that white women and people of color experienced in regards to recruitment, career development, and promotions” (Zane, 2002, p. 341). The inclusion of various voices allowed the employees to identify behaviors that had negatively impacted their experiences at Eastern Bank, such as the internal informal networking, the ongoing discrimination despite the increasing diversity on their teams, and

the obstacles that remained preventing their growth and development. They voiced that they felt that the price was too high to speak out and underrepresented minorities did not experience an inclusive work environment that made it feel safe to exercise their voice (Zane, 2002). Diversity programs that strive to make marginalized groups feel safe can have an unintended consequence. “A new survey from Ernst and Young and ORC International confirms and quantifies what many corporate diversity professionals already know or have always suspected: white men feel left out of workplace inclusion efforts and it has slowed down progress” (Donnelly, 2017). Race is not the only identity that these programs impact. Intersectional identities affect the complex ways in which underrepresented minorities experience discrimination in the workplace. “Thinking in this way is not thinking about race as a variable or even as an identity but as a dynamic position in a real-world hierarchical rank ordering that, when comprehended and upended, ignites and transforms the sex-based concept” (MacKinnon, 2013, p. 1026). Bell, Marquardt, and Berry (2014) considered racial hierarchy including intersectional identities. Not only did underrepresented minorities experience discrimination in the workplace, but researchers also found that the more overlapping identities an employee had, the more significant the discrimination would be. For example, African immigrants experienced more discrimination than African-Americans (Bell et al., 2014). More work can be done to explore structural bias concerns through utilizing the intersectional lens to explore structures of power (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Rodriguez et al. (2016) Rodriguez, Holvino, Fletcher, and Nkomo (2016) found two standard approaches to applying the intersectional lens to the study of organizations:

- 1) *The first “focuses on subjectivities and explores intersections to highlight the texture and consequences of inequalities experienced by individuals and groups given their social membership.”*

- 2) *The second “embeds subjectivities within systemic dynamics of power and explores intersections to highlight these dynamics and make them visible and available for analysis.”*

This research will focus on the first approach as the study is focused on the perceptions of the participants; whereas the second approach would require a look at organizational structures and would require additional knowledge of the systems at play. It will focus on the overlapping identities of gender, race, and class of entrepreneurs. Researchers on entrepreneurship frequently discuss the networks as being a key factor. Anderson and Miller (2003) found that from the initial creation of business through everything that follows, the entrepreneurs’ social world is directly connected. In addition, while entrepreneurs’ family and community play a role (Anderson & Miller, 2003) their workplaces also become part of their network.

Experiences of Minority Entrepreneurs

The idea of exiting an organization due to negative experiences and lack of growth opportunities for underrepresented minorities is more appealing when the option to launch their own business exists. Feldman, Koberg, and Dean (1991) and Ortiz-Walters, Gavino, and Williams (2015) found that minority entrepreneurs outpace the launching of businesses by their white counterparts. Yet the decision to *exit* presents significant challenges (including discrimination) in establishing businesses (Bates, 2011). They also face more barriers than their white counterparts (Bates, 2011). These minority entrepreneurs rely heavily on their networks, often likely to be friends and family (Ortiz-Walters, Gavino, & Williams, 2015). This difference can bring to the surface the variations in the way ethnic and racial communities engage one another (Ortiz-Walters et al., 2015). “Chaganti and Greene (2002)

posit that ethnic minorities face similar barriers to entry and challenges to those that other small business owners experience. However, they and others also acknowledge that both ethnic and female entrepreneurs suffer from some issues more intensely than other small business owners (DeCarlo & Lyons, 1979; Hisrich & Brush, 1986)” (Ortiz-Walters et al., 2015).

The constant struggle for resources and opportunities impacts who succeeds and who fails (Aldrich, 1986). Researchers have found that all entrepreneurs do not begin with a level playing field. Stereotypes about roles of minorities, fiscal challenges such as obtaining credit or capital, and access to education and training play a role in shaping minority entrepreneurship (Mora & Dávila, 2014). Feldman, Koberg, and Dean (1991) also highlighted a lack of business training as an obstacle. Entrepreneurs of color have historically faced more challenges to obtaining necessary credentials than their White counterparts (Bates, 2011). Though people of color launch businesses in record numbers, they also display a significant record of business failure rate (Ortiz-Walters et al., 2015), often attributed to a lack of preparation and resources typical of minority-owned businesses (Bates, 2011). Bates (2011) described the scholarship in this area as attributing experiences of racism in the workplace as a cause of increased entrepreneurship. This scholarship provides an indication that drivers connected to identity-based experiences may exist to move underrepresented minorities to exit organizations to launch businesses. My sample is an interesting subset of this broader approach to minority entrepreneurship, the study includes people who have extensive business experience, were on the brink of promotions that were earned but denied and have cultural and social capital that support the option of launching a business. Looking at the opportunities and challenges that this subgroup contemplates, from the perch of having

a more traditional organizational job, will add to the understanding of how entrepreneurs of color approach business launch.

In closing, I have reviewed three literatures that have typically been separate silos. I bring them together here to address my two research questions. Taken together, they may offer new insights about the broader experiences of why underrepresented minority employees exit, what kinds of inequitable conditions they are exiting from, and what kind of entrepreneurial landscape they are moving toward upon exit. In taking these three literatures together, puzzles from each literature can more fully be addressed.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Rationale for Qualitative Research

A descriptive phenomenological approach is appropriate when you consider that the research questions seek to understand how the individuals make sense of their experiences (Bernard, 2012). McNamara (2005) describes phenomenology as an approach that proceeds from theoretical deduction versus judgment imposed by the researchers own experiences. “Phenomenology is critical of objectivism because it holds that the notion of meaning independent of mind or being is inconceivable: meaning cannot inhere in an object independently of any subject” (McNamara, 2005). Likewise, Dowling’s (2007) summary of the descriptive phenomenological approach includes the notion that all meaning that is made of an experience is related to something specific, some object. The participants of this study told stories connected to the experiences that led them to choose entrepreneurship.

The descriptive phenomenological approach has frequently been applied to understand the meaning of the individual lived experience. The in-depth semi-structured interviewing of the participants provided a context through which meaning could be interpreted and allowed me to wear both immersed and analyst hats, both being present in the moment while hearing their experiences and assessing the way they are sharing their story

and the words they choose to describe their experiences (Bernard, 2012). This research did not attempt to explore the interdependence between the described experiences and the reality. In other words, I, as the researcher, did not look to verify the accuracy of the narratives, or to get a different perspective on the experiences described. Instead I focused on the meaning the subjects made of their experiences and the choices they connected to those experiences.

The narratives of underrepresented minorities who have had to consider the option to exit or exercise voice, have provided insight into the variables considered in their decision-making process. The descriptions of their experiences showcase the phenomena under study. “Phenomenological study involves trying to: 1) see reality through another person’s eyes; and 2) writing convincing descriptions of what those people experience rather than explanations and causes” (Bernard, 2012, p. 21).

Identifying and Accessing Entrepreneurs

I limited the research to underrepresented minority entrepreneurs actively doing business in Massachusetts. In determining the scope of the research, I understood that variables connected to community climate could impact the lens through which the participants might respond to the questions. So, an entrepreneur in Florida or Texas may have different community climates that could also be connected to their experiences in the workplace. Given that the participants were going to be answering questions about their identity-connected experiences, I wanted to have participants who operate in the same contextual community environment although their specific work environments would be different. A limitation of the study is that there may be subcultures within this environment that might impact participant experiences. It also made sense to do the research in the state where I am located, Massachusetts. I did not limit the field type and therefore the research

included a diverse array of industries: attorneys, real estate developers, consultants, personal trainers, professional services providers, software developers, merchants, professional development companies, and advisors. Within the sample, seven of the entrepreneurs maintained a paid position at another organization in addition to running their own business. I did not target any one specific identity group until after completing the first 17 interviews. At that point, I noticed there was an overrepresentation of women in the sample and I specifically added to my social media posts that I was seeking more male participants. In the end there were 22 females and eight males. All participants were asked, but not required, to self-identify their identity group membership. Demographic data on the participants is provided in Chapter Four.

The entrepreneurs in the metro-Boston region were identified initially through my professional network. I accessed the target group as a person immersed in a field who routinely engages this population. Through this network, others were identified through a snowball referral process. In addition to reaching out to existing contacts, I utilized social media to seek participants. My contacts on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn assisted by sharing my post on their own pages or by directly emailing individuals they thought might be interested. The final sample consisted of individuals that I either knew personally or who were directly connected to someone I knew personally. Since the target subjects had actively expressed an interest in participating in this research over the past year, the interviews were completed in three week's time. All data was collected in November and December of 2018.

Data Collection

All interviews were conducted by phone or video web services and were transcribed from an audio recording. Each participant was asked to sign an *Informed Consent Form* (Appendix B) prior to their interview. If they did not return it, they were asked for email consent or verbal consent while I reviewed the content of the form with them. Interviewees received information about the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and their participation rights.

Through in-depth semi-structured interviews, 30 participants shared their experiences and reflections. Interviews began with a set of standard questions (see Appendix A – Interview Questions) but allowed the participant to take the dialogue in various directions so long as the content connected in some way to the information I was seeking to understand. The interviews explored the experiences of the participants' career history as it related to their journey in the workplace, experiences as they related to their road toward entrepreneurship, and the participants' reflections on what it has meant to them (Rossman & Rallis, 2011). Storytelling and dialogue tools assist with understanding experiences and how meaning and identity are constructed from those experiences (Sfard & Prusak, 2005).

Participants were asked questions about their original goals in starting a career, how the actual organizational climate compared to what they had anticipated upon hire; the impact of those experiences on their career trajectory, their reflections on the choices they have made, and why entrepreneurship was an option (see Appendix A – Interview Questions). A few individuals were identified early in this process to assist with refining the questions. I drew from the readings on theory including *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*, and readings on intersectionality, as well as from my own experiences to create an initial question set. I

conducted a small pilot to help with identifying the appropriateness and flow of the questions given the topic under study. While the interviews had standard starting questions, the nature of the dialogic and phenomenological interview is that the questions were often open-ended and at times the participant would start talking before even being asked a question. Their desire to tell their story felt urgent.

Data Analysis

Working to understand the actions taken by underrepresented minorities who have considered exit and voice, required a theoretical approach that allowed the narratives to shape the meaning. These narratives shed light on whether underrepresented minorities recognized structural dysfunction or bad behavior as organizational slack, whether they interpreted it as an intentional form of discrimination, or as something else.

Even if an organization could continue to exist with a certain amount of dysfunction, it cannot deteriorate past the point of recovery (Hirschman, 1970). Accordingly, it was important to understand the impetus for the decisions made by the entrepreneurs in this study in order to deepen our understanding of structural inequalities that led to exit and voice. These decisions, mostly made in the wake of the experiences they had, impacted their career trajectories and had differential impact across intersectional identities. Their experience of interlocking systems of oppression viewed through the lens of intersectionality required exploration. I was listening to their stories and noting how they would identify experiences and how they connected those experiences to one or multiple identities. I would see some discuss their indecision about how they could tell whether or not it was connected, while others were clear on the connection. I wondered how they separated out which identity was targeted and how some primary identities (Harvey and Allard, 2014) such as race or gender

would be front of mind, and other times it would be a secondary identity (Harvey and Allard, 2014) like class issues.

Initially, the concept of interlocking systems of oppression was introduced to highlight the previously invisible experiences of Black lesbian feminists in the backdrop of the active socio-political movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Carastathis, 2016). “The intersectional approach challenges us to look at the different social positioning of women (and men) and to reflect on the different ways in which they participate in the reproduction of these relations. As we do this, intersectionality serves as an instrument that helps us grasp the complex interplay between disadvantage and privilege, a requirement to which some objections have sometimes been raised” Helma Lutz (2011). To be consistent with examining intersectionality in this manner, the study applied a phenomenological interview method.

The narratives were organized according to themes that described the essential qualities of the experiences (Creswell, 1998). I looked for relationships between the themes and the decisions that were made. Initial codes were created from the questions that were part of the interviews, from the readings, and my professional experiences. For example, I asked, “And how have the challenges that you've experienced affected your career trajectory?” and used the code: *impact on career trajectory*. Another example, “Did you have personal or professional supports to move in that direction?” and used the code: *supports*. As I developed the list of questions, I considered my own experiences as an entrepreneur, the choices that led me there, and how I have experienced being an entrepreneur. So there were key words and phrases included that could later be pulled as codes, such as emotional impact, early goals, anticipated challenges, or changed industry. Likewise there were key words or phrases from

theory that were used as codes, such as voice, identity-based experiences, why exit?, told truth about exit reason, and so on.

The narrative analysis approach has often been used in both understanding individual experiences and as a tool to compare and identify the essence of the collective experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Reflexivity fosters the potential for many interpretations. I looked for all possible meanings and other ways of viewing the results to ensure that I stayed true to the descriptive phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2011). Other perspectives always exist, and as a researcher I was constantly looking for them in order to create faithful descriptions of the experiences.

“Stories are primary sensemaking devices within life-history narratives, helping individuals make sense of change: locating the self in time, space, and context, making meaning from its interactions with a fluctuating reality, and incorporating change into a unified self in a continuous process of becoming” (Maclean, Harvey, & Chia, 2012, p. 20). Individual descriptions of experiences can tell you about how the teller makes meaning of it, and what object they are connecting it to. Many descriptions of experiences can bring together elements of disparate conditions in a way that the reader can identify patterns, allowing them to make sense of a phenomenon (Maclean et al., 2012). Maclean wrote that it allows the reader to engage with the story. When considering the complexity of multiple identities, the narrative approach provides a unique lens through which to gain an understanding of the experiences of the target sample population. It can clarify the links between intersectional identities to embedded relationships and arrangements of power within an organizations’ standard practices or execution of processes and systems.

Engaging with the narratives in a meaningful way was a deliberate exercise. I leaned on *Destination Dissertation: A Traveler's Guide to a Done Dissertation* (Foss, 2015), *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Saldaña, 2015), *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), and *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (Bernard, 2012) as tools to guide me through the coding and analysis process. Each helped me look at the data in different ways to understand the stories, the impact of the stories, and the connectedness of their experiences. This helped me to create clusters and threads, which led to identifying patterns, similarities, differences, and frequency. Saldaña (2015) stressed the importance of patterns as he said, “they become trustworthy evidence for our findings since patterns demonstrate habits, salience, and importance in people’s daily lives” (p. 6). I was also interested in anomalies in the narratives. The unique experiences, though not always apparently connected to the lived experiences of others, added to the understanding of the phenomena under examination. In fact, I had to spend time considering their role, the connectedness, or lack thereof, in order to determine its place in the research. For example, when considering the class, an initial variable I was seeking to study, I found it did not show up in the data in the way the other variables showed up. The participants treated class differently than they treated race, ethnicity, gender, and age.

Pre-Coding

The data was first collected via interviews that were audio recorded. During each interview I focused on the questions and answers, looking for clarification if the answers required more detail for me to understand the meaning the participant was trying to convey. After finishing the interview and before the transcription process, I wrote mini-memos at the

bottom of the blank question document to remind me of my impressions of the interview as opposed to the content. For example, a couple of times I was aware that the participant, who was known to me, did not share some details that I had knowledge of from prior conversations. In my memo, I would wonder if it was that they forgot I knew or if they were aware that in this process it could be reported out, even if it was anonymized. In another example, I noted that I had to work through my sense of how my own experiences connected with the stories shared by the participant. Or I would make notes about their emotional expressions including when they cried in an interview. And finally, I listened to the audio while using dictation software to transcribe. This provided me with yet another opportunity to listen to the manner in which the participants expressed themselves and the words they chose to share their experiences and convey their meaning. In preparation for the first cycle of coding, all interviews were printed twice. One copy was placed in a binder for easy page navigation. The second copy was to be used later, once the manual coding was complete and the text could be cut into strips for second cycle coding (Foss, 2015).

First Cycle Coding

In codifying the data, I looked at general patterns related to identity-based experiences, emotional impact, career-level impact, responses to experiences, and reasons for launching businesses. This level of analysis involved stepping back and looking at the narratives individually, then as a whole, taking in the stories and working to make sense of the language and descriptions. I looked for things that appeared and felt alike. Consistent with the ontological basis for the study, I used these four coding methods: Attribute coding, In Vivo coding, Emotion coding, and Process coding (Saldaña, 2015). Each coding method

allowed me to look at the data in a different way. Attribute coding allowed me to log the information about each participant's demographic characteristics, which I would refer to frequently throughout the analysis. In Vivo coding allowed me to use the actual words used by the participants, honoring their voices in their descriptions of their experiences. Emotion coding was used to identify responses to experiences and meaning-making connected to those responses. Process coding was used to look at the actions taken by participants as a result of the lived experiences and view their behavior over time as presented by them.

Second Cycle Coding

In the second cycle of coding I used two coding processes: Narrative coding and Pattern coding (Saldaña, 2015). Narrative coding allowed me to look at the stories in a holistic manner and to ensure that the cycle one coding process did not result in the stories losing their meaning. Pattern coding allowed me to work out the emergent themes pulled out of the threads that were flowing through the experiences shared by the participants.

Only three participants did not connect their experiences in any way to identity-specific motivators or stressors. Thus, the main focus of their stories was on the ways in which negative identity-based experiences played a role in their day-to-day work environments and on their decision-making process throughout their careers.

Data Coding

In pulling out the relevant statements, I had to review them separately and then again in the context of the full interview to ensure I was not changing their meaning. The Attribute coding helped me to understand the pool of participants' demographic characteristics. I

looked at their race/ethnicity, gender, age, disability status, immigration status, highest level of education, and sexual orientation. When creating the self-identification questions, I did not know what the data would show, so I opted for more categories over fewer, targeted categories for the purposes of answering the research questions. Structuring it this way allowed for a natural emergence of the characteristics the participants felt were salient for them. This level of coding assisted in situating the participant experiences using their words. It led to the identification of shared lived experience subthemes including microaggressions, tokenism, discrimination, sexual harassment, misogyny, power, growth limitations, structural bias, discrimination, independence, leadership concerns. As a result, some of the clusters were consolidated and eventually revised to make for a more succinct code. While it was important to look at the frequency of code clusters, the codes were broad enough in their meaning to allow for unique incidences that elucidated a sub-theme. The first three themes that emerged were *encounters with bias and oppression*, *power and powerlessness*, and *health impact*.

The first theme, *encounters with bias and oppression*, encompassed the specific behaviors participants identified as having been connected to their identities in a negative way in the workplace. Value was placed on participant word choices and representative examples of their experiences over time. Participants expressed frustration, anger, and resignation over the ongoing condition of the workplace for people who share their identity group membership.

The second theme, *power and powerlessness*, provided insight into the power exercised over the participants and the responses to those behaviors. It demonstrated the rationale for choosing independence and autonomy through entrepreneurship. Their efforts to

push back and the responses to those efforts conditioned the participants to become “numb” or to figure out how to cope in a way that did not draw retribution or retaliation. For some, the only answer was exiting.

The third theme, *health impact*, elucidated the toll the experiences took on the participants. They showed that their physical and mental health suffered under the conditions they experienced. It was not possible to decouple the examples in theme one with the impact in theme three.

For this theme, the first level of code clusters looked like this:

Table 1. First-level code clusters: Race

invisible	underutilized
blocked/limited growth	underrepresented
stereotyped	silenced
racist remarks	exploited
tokenized	marginalized
undervalued/underpaid	disparate treatment
put-downs	retaliated against
different requirements	work harder
bullied	jealousy/felt threatened

Ultimately, the final code clusters were narrowed down to experiences connected to race and ethnicity, gender, and age. This cluster was further refined and assessed for intersectional experiences within those codes.

The presence of these concerns was pervasive in the stories. However, it was only present in one man’s account. He identified as gay and was the only man in a woman-dominated manufacturing work environment. In the accounts of the women’s stories, one case was about lascivious harassment, in another it was about machista dominance, and in another it was about the culture of proper female etiquette and behavior in that work environment. The degree of expressed concern of the women varied. Eighteen of the women

(82 percent) had experiences that they specifically tied to their identity as women, though more than that anticipated that their gender would be an obstacle for them. The first level of code clusters looked like this:

Table 2. First level code clusters: Gender

sexual harassment	underrepresented
invisibility	intimidating
gender - nonconforming behavior	pigeon-holed into job types
limited growth	underpaid
undermined	dominance
undervalued	worked harder

The encounters linked to gender, including intersectional experiences, encompassed the significance of the attitudes members of the workplace held against these women because of their gender. In essence, these codes displayed how these women experienced their work environments and their work colleagues. Value was placed on their individual interactions with specific colleagues with and without legitimate power over them as well as on the outcomes of their professional growth efforts. Participants expressed a mix of apathy toward the interactions and experiences and emotional trauma connected to those interactions and experiences. Table 1 and Table 2 are representative samples that demonstrate how the coding clusters worked for all six themes.

The fact that the participants chose to share these experiences demonstrates the value or weight they place on them and the impact those experiences have had on their career trajectory. The quotes selected for this section represent only the sections in the stories that held the key points. The full narratives contain rich data on career histories and experiences.

With these considerations in mind, in the following chapters I will describe the six themes that have emerged as a result of this study and share the experiences and choices of the entrepreneurs.

CHAPTER 4

ORGANIZATIONAL EXPERIENCES

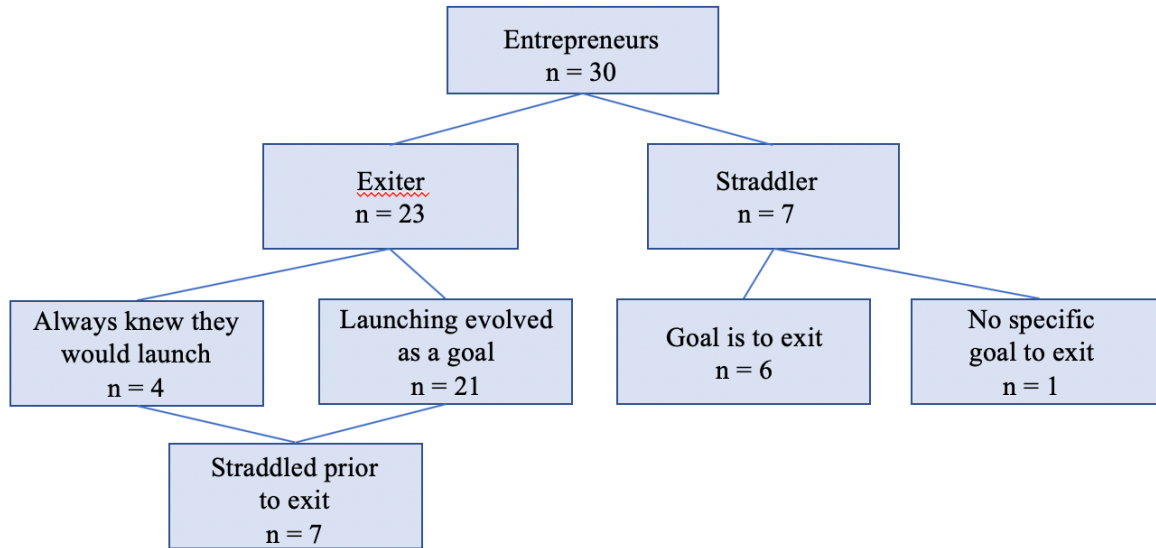
Chapter Four is organized around the first research question: *How do identity concerns impact the experiences of underrepresented minorities in organizations and their decision to stay or exit?* This chapter presents findings that emerged from a sample of 30 underrepresented minority entrepreneurs in the Metropolitan-Boston Massachusetts area. Consistent with previous scholarship on the experiences of minority entrepreneurs which suggests that underrepresented minorities have had negative experiences connected to their identity in the organizations where they have been employed, all but two the participants indicated negative identity-based experiences as contributing factors and sometimes as decisive drivers in their decision to exit their organizations and pursue entrepreneurship. Analysis of the audio recordings and the transcripts of interviews revealed three consistent themes: *Encounters with bias and oppression*; *Power and powerlessness*; and *Health impact*. After providing a description of the study participants in the sections that follow, each theme is discussed. I conclude by putting each theme in conversation with one another and delineating the overall findings of the study.

Summary of Participants

Thirty underrepresented minority professionals provided detailed reflections on the experiences during their careers that led them to entrepreneurship. I used purposive and snowball sampling to identify a sample of interest, thus increasing the probability of reaching underrepresented minority professionals who had left established organizations to launch their own businesses. The sample was limited to individuals who had worked for someone else at some point in their careers prior to becoming entrepreneurs. The sample consists of 22 women and eight men ranging in age from 27 to 71. It included underrepresented racial and ethnic minority groups identifying as Asian, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx and provided a rich variety in demographic characteristics and workplace experiences.

As it pertained to entrepreneurship status, 23 exited their place of employment to launch businesses full time, called *exiters*. Seven maintained a *straddler* status, meaning they launched an entrepreneurial venture while maintaining employment at the established organization. Several from the group who exited previously maintained a *straddler* status at some point prior to becoming an *exiter*, launching their entrepreneurial venture. In this study, these two groups are called *Exiters* and *Straddlers* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Exiters and straddlers



All participants operated entrepreneurial ventures in the metropolitan Boston area during the time of the study. Each was asked to provide demographic information about themselves after completing the interview so as to avoid unduly influencing the categories of group membership that each participant felt was salient for them in answering the questions. Participants were given the option to skip any questions they preferred not to answer. Each participant determined which identity(ies) was most noticeable for them in each encounter they discussed after reflecting on their experiences. Bernstein, Crary, Billamora, and Blancero (2015) describe this behavior as a component of their social construction process.

For this study, I chose to use the racial category of Black¹ for anyone who self-identified as either Black or African-American. Not everyone who was Black was African-

¹ I chose to use Black to both preserve anonymity and to observe the National Association of Black Journalists' Style Guide recommendation to "use black because it is an accurate description of race" (NABJ, 2019).

American and some expressed apprehension that naming their ethnicity alongside other particulars would allow a reader to deduce their identity. The use of Latinx versus, say Puerto Rican or Mexican, also allowed the ethnic identities of the participants to remain anonymous. Asian was chosen for similar reasons and also without the added label of “Asian-American” as not all Asians in the study identified as American. Table 3 provides a closer look at demographic data collected from the participant pool.

**Table 3. Demographic characteristics of underrepresented minorities
Sample (n=30)**

Variable	N	%	Variable	N	%
Age			Highest Level of Education		
Under 35	2	6.7	Bachelor's degree or less	9	30
35-49	11	36.6	Master's Degree or higher	21	70
50-64	12	40	Immigrant		
65+	5	16.7	Yes	12	40
Gender			No	18	60
Female	22	73.3	Disability		
Male	8	26.7	Yes	3	10
Race/Ethnicity			No	27	90
Asian	3	10	Sexual Orientation		
Black	12	40	Gay	2	6.7
Latinx	10	33.3	Straight	28	93.3
Multiracial	5	16.7			

Through a process of grouping similar circumstances, similar accounts, and similar descriptions, the three themes emerged. Before discussing each theme, it is important to note that despite the fact that a large majority of participants reported that their experiences with identity-based prejudices led them to consider entrepreneurship, it was a topic that was difficult to discuss. In other words, it appeared easier for participants to discuss the outcomes of their choices rather than the motivators behind those decisions. The process of prompting participants to share specific detailed examples versus sharing only the impact of those experiences was not effortless. Specifically, participants sometimes insisted they preferred

not to focus on “that stuff,” but instead preferred to focus on their forward progress. This represents a life strategy for coping with discrimination. Some participants emphasized a desire not to want to villainize the person in their example who caused them harm, while others did not mince words in depicting the transgressor. One participant said she could spend all day providing examples, asking how much time I had. More than one expressed reluctance to provide specifics about incidences saying it was in the past. I could sense the hurt in their tone and their words and did not immediately press, though I did come back around to asking for examples. Some displayed caution in providing specifics to protect the anonymity the individual being discussed, not solely because of my connection to the participant, but out of concern should the details someday be published. In these cases, I reminded them of the confidentiality agreement made in the Informed Consent document.

Encounters with Bias and Oppression

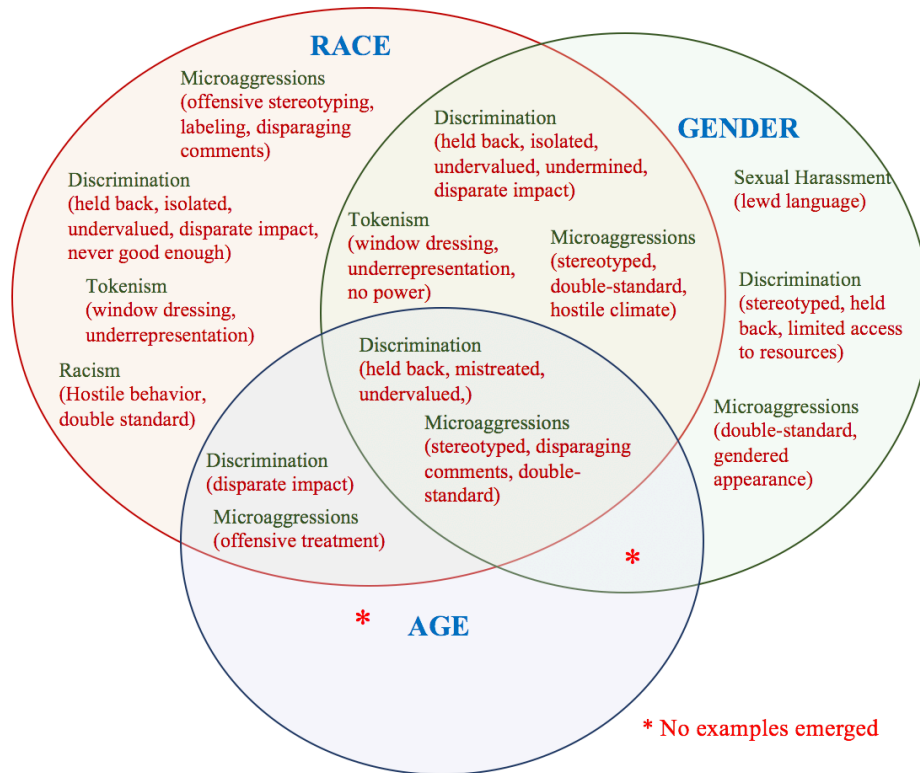
Participant Experiences

In unpacking individuals’ specific motivations, I found a range of emphases on how much each felt their experiences drove them to exit or straddle. The following are examples of experiences connected to specific encounters with bias and oppression in the workplace. This section describes the intersections of race, gender, and age. Class is discussed separately because of the way the participants connected it to their experiences. Consistent with the phenomenological approach to depicting the lived experiences of the participants in their words, the categorization of class for them, represented an expression of insecurity they imposed on themselves prior to even entering the workplace, rather than an expressed connection to specific experiences of bias and oppression in the workplace.

Qualitative inquiry allowed me to engage with the participants as I listened to their stories, seeking to understand their experiences and how they interpreted what they encountered and their subsequent choices. The following descriptions are meant to engage the reader in the individual stories while also following the thread of connectedness in shared lived experiences. In order to preserve confidentiality, given the sample size and uniqueness of some of the career journeys, it has been necessary to avoid specific information about the particular role of the participant to a specific industry. Alternatively, I have opted for specificity in their narratives. Details such as organization names, project names, or position titles are also excluded from the examples.

I asked a set of questions that included whether or not participants anticipated identity-connected challenges as they progressed through their careers and if so, whether those challenges occurred as anticipated. I also asked them to provide specific examples of the encounters along with details that would help me understand how and why they interpreted them as identity-linked. Figure 2 shows the interactions of the themes and subthemes that emerged.

Figure 2. Intersectional experiences in the workplace



In two of the three themes the encounters were experienced singularly and intersectionally. None of the participants provided an example that was connected to age alone, or age and gender simultaneously. The sub-theme categories were similarly named across the intersections, though the specific examples provide the nuanced details that differentiate them. Phenomenology involves writing convincing descriptions of the participants’ stories (Bernard, 2012). “Phenomenologists emphasize the experience of the phenomena to determine their essences, the things that make them what they are” (Bernard, 2012, p. 20). The placement of the experiences in each theme, subtheme, and intersectional spaces is an effort to accurately present the connections in the way the participants perceived and described them. For example, if a woman of color described the experiences as

connected to her identity specifically as a woman rather than as a woman of color, that is how it is placed both in the diagram and in the narrative.

Experiences Linked to Race and Ethnicity

The theme centered around race and ethnicity includes subthemes: *tokenism*, *microaggressions*, *discrimination*, and *racism*. While individual participants provided examples across several subthemes, this section features specific encounters that they linked to race or ethnicity alone. *Tokenism* refers to the status a person has when they are a numerical minority and are placed into positions where their growth opportunities are limited as is their access to power (Kanter, 1987). While tokenism was initially applied to women, it is now also commonplace to have it applied to race (Jackson, Thoits, & Taylor, 1995; Niemann, 1999; Stroshine & Brandl, 2011). M. Watkins, Simmons, A., Umphress, E. (In Press), in reviewing Kanter's work on tokenism wrote, "the extent to which a social identity group member is a token dramatically shapes the persons experiences within a workgroup or organization, and this tends to be negative" (p. 4). Niemann's (1999) research found that attitudes of tokenism in academe are subtly hidden in demeanors and actions. Participants shared encounters that included revealing examples of underrepresentation of people of color in their organizations and the negative impact the encounters had on how they viewed those experiences. For example, the following four participants described the underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities in their workplaces.

Barbara², Black woman in her fifties: I was the only person of color in that business center in a leadership position. I was the only person of color in the program, but there was a guy in

² All names used are pseudonyms.

IT, a Black gentleman, but in terms of my peer group and the folks that I work with, I was it in terms of diversity.

Nicole, Black woman in her sixties: Every now and again there was another Black guy, but there were no other Black people but me.

Valeria, Latina woman in her forties: When I did volunteer work at (target organization), they had a big staff meeting. I didn't see a lot of me in there, or African-Americans, or anybody of color. I could count like three. And then, when I went to the kitchen to get a snack, all of the cooks were Hispanics. I was like so this is where we are all at (laughter).

These participants reflected in the impact of not seeing others like them in leadership. For Valeria, the visual of seeing the people who looked like her relegated to service roles reinforced the message that perhaps she did not belong where she was trying to reach. In that particular organization, she volunteered as a way to get her foot in the door, but when she applied for a permanent role, she was not invited in for an interview. She connected this rebuff to the lack of representation. She launched her own business to create a space for herself and for people like her.

Many individuals in this study stated they either perceived or were directly told that they were not chosen because of their talents or potential contributions to the organization. Instead, they were seen or treated as a form of window dressing, where there was no expectation of actual performance or contribution. The organization could check off a diversity box and invite them in when they wanted others to see that there was diversity. Participants resented this lack of respect. For some, it motivated them to prove their worth. Some expressed that it did not so much matter by what means they got their position in the organization, what mattered was what they did with that opportunity. There was an expressed level of frustration in their reflections: They were determined to be valued as well as to

address the “stereotype threat.” Stereotype threat refers to the varied responses tokenized individuals have to being stereotyped (Niemann, 1999; M. Watkins, Simmons, A., Umphress, E., In Press). For example, they may work harder to prove themselves, trying to avoid living up to the others’ negative stereotypes.

Isabella, Latina woman in her seventies: I suffer from the same thing a lot of people do. I want you to hire me because I'm good at something. And so, I began to realize, okay, that's not a bad thing that they consider my being of Hispanic or whatever, maybe they're doing it for their own reasons. But the fact of the matter is, that I've said many, many times since then, they may have hired me because yes, I'm a Latina, they can check a box and then that's another tipping point for me career-wise.

Helen, Black woman in her twenties: So, it's almost like exploitation (the act of recruiting a diverse workforce), like we're a diverse workforce, and you know we speak all these different languages, and this a great thing, but when it comes to actually dealing with issues where culture actually affects how people are managed or affects something that's operationally happened within the organization, it's something that doesn't want to be addressed.

Faith, Black woman over sixty: I was very aware that I got this opportunity at the (organization) because I was Black. I was so much as told that. As I looked around me, I was the only one. This is true in a lot of meetings that I went to. And yes, there was discrimination, some of it subtle. And some of it more overt.

Isabella chose to deal with the stereotype threat by working hard to prove she belonged and to make good use of the opportunity. Helen discusses the window dressing aspect of being tokenized. The organization wanted representation but did not truly activate the value of diversity in operations or how employees were managed. Faith knew why she had been hired and said she felt lucky to have a job at a time when others around her in the community were being laid off. She worked hard to prove her worth to counteract others’ assumptions that she was not someone who brought value to the organization.

Some participants were reluctant to associate their experiences with identity, claiming it was difficult to say if it was one thing or another. It could be, as some mentioned, a reflection of their concern for being accused of using the “race card.” They did, however, note the lack of people of similar identity groups in the organization, even in the interview process.

Daniel, Black man in his fifties: The person that I talked to on the phone was like, we decided to go in another direction. And I was like, but the job was offered? I'm not understanding. And she just basically told me that that was the decision. Looking back on it, part of the unease that I had when I was going through the interview process, was that there were no other people of color in the organization.

Daniel shrugged it off at the time, but it strengthened his resolve to work for himself. His future career choices, including the direction of his entrepreneurial venture, involves addressing organizations' diversity cultures.

Stroshine & Brandl (2011) described representation of numerical minorities as “tokens” as those who “are expected to experience a variety of hardships in the workplace, such as feelings of heightened visibility, isolation, and limited opportunities for advancement” (p. 344). Tokenism was only part of the demeaning experience, which was compounded by continuous microaggressions. According to Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Holder, Nadal, and Esquilin (2007), “racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271).

The *microaggressions* described by the participants in this study included offensive and prejudicial behavior, offensive and disparaging remarks, stereotyping, invisibility,

double standards, and practices that resulted in disparate impact, in other words, practices that disproportionately impacted underrepresented minorities over the dominant group members. The nuanced descriptions lent themselves to multiple categories as displayed in Figure ?. Offensive and prejudiced behavior took many shapes in the participant descriptions, both apparently intentional and unintentional. As Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Holder, Nadal, and Esquilin (2007) noted, not all microaggressions are intentional. Their effects are nonetheless apparent in the descriptions below.

Camila, Latina woman in her fifties: I personally had challenges in the fact that I was light-skinned Latina and I showed up in a way that people assumed I was white. The initial reaction was fine, until they heard my name and it wasn't so fine.

Lorena, Indigenous Latina woman in her forties: I have the privilege of having white skin. I remember an experience I had with a supervisor. When I had children, I added my last name (Smith) at work. Prior to that I was always (Perez). She was having a hard time using anything but (Perez). We went to a town meeting where we were getting money and we had to do a presentation on our services. And she said I would like to introduce my colleague (Mrs. Smith). She dropped (Perez), because we were in a white town receiving money.

Kevin, Black man in his fifties: I had to fight images of people always comparing me to a former chair who also happened to be an African-American woman ... making comparisons with someone who everybody talked so ill about.

Amy, Asian woman in her fifties: And I remember having this discussion about immigrants with a white male colleague and he said, "Well I don't understand why any immigrant would complain because you guys all have it better off don't you?" I remember looking at him like, *no*. My father was college educated. He came here because he thought there was something to this country. He did not come here to get a job. I remember being very upset about that. Like I should be *damn grateful* for whatever I get.

Camila described the experience of arriving at an organization and getting a surprised reaction to her ethnic name and being limited from growth opportunities and recognizing that she would have to leave the organization to move up. Lorena said she was shocked by her encounter with bias. She had been frustrated that her supervisor wouldn't address her by her married name. In doing so on an occasion where the motivation was clearly connected to the supervisors' perceptions about what the audience would feel most comfortable with, presenting Lorena as a White woman versus an ethnic woman, painted a picture of her apparent bias. Kevin was angry about the constant negative comparisons and having to deal with dominant group members, who were also his subordinates, stereotyping of him. As a supervisor he found it difficult to call out the bad behavior and instead opted to provide training to help his team with their microaggressions. In the end, he said that strategy was ineffective as they were not seeing their behavior as biased or discriminatory.

The literature describes three types of microaggressions including microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Sue et al., 2007). "Microinsults are described as behavioral and verbal expressions that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean an individual's racial heritage or identity. Microinvalidations invalidate, negate, or diminish the psychological thoughts, feelings, and racial reality of Black Americans" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 329). These behaviors are not always recognized as such by the individuals engaged in the behavior though they still have the effect of making the recipient feel devalued or demeaned (Sue et al., 2008; M. Watkins, Simmons, A., Umphress, E., In Press). The literature points out that underrepresented minorities are pressured to refute the stigma that they occupy a role or are promoted because of their identity membership, not because they

earned the role through hard work. (Jackson et al., 1995; M. Watkins, Simmons, A., Umphress, E., In Press). Ana, like many other participants felt that she had no choice.

Ana, Multiracial woman in her forties: I think that I saw a lot of opportunities for people who didn't look like me and just assumed that it was because I was a person of color, so I continued to work harder and harder.

Experiences of discrimination in this study included accounts of how participants career progress was decelerated, how they were undervalued and underappreciated, mistreated, and how their voices were stifled. Their reports are consistent with what the literature claimed about the experiences of underrepresented minorities (Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2014; Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015).

Diego, Latino man in his forties: I realized that there were people that I was training that would be promoted above me. And I was like, how is this so? If I have been here the longest, and there were people who had only been there two years and they're being promoted over me?

Gabriel, Latino man in his thirties: She got a promotion as a senior quality person. And she started after me. And I'm like, how is she getting a promotion and I'm not, and the other three compliance people that were there? We were there for a year and a half, were living it and we were like, oh my God, we were working so hard and you come in and you bring this person and then they immediately get that senior role?

Samuel, Latino man in his sixties: It was different, there was a lot of discrimination, there was a lot of stuff. They used to give you the worst of the companies, but I didn't care. I wanted to work, and I wanted to help my family.

Kevin, Black man in his fifties: I really felt marginalized in a sense that no, I'm really going to put you in this corner and in this box and you're going to do this. Even when I knew there were opportunities, I would ask about an opportunity that they might be seeking for somebody to fill that role. It was like no, you are good where you are.

Even the legal system, through the courts, recognized that it was difficult to point to either intent to discriminate or specific behavior that was discriminatory. As a result, they allowed complaints to be brought forward under the umbrella of disparate impact. Disparate impact is a legal theory that allows an employee to make a claim of discrimination based on the impact of an employment practice, even if on the surface, the practice was not designed or intended to be discriminatory (Goldman, Gutek, Stein, & Lewis, 2006). Some participant accounts described outcomes that negatively impacted racial minorities even if the practice itself did not appear to be racist or discriminatory.

Sharon, Black woman in her sixties: I had heard similar stories from my colleagues, so that I knew that it wasn't just me, isolated with what I had experienced with all of the stuff that they had drummed up.

Camila, Latina woman in her fifties: With the jobs that were open, all the folks getting those positions were all not people color. The people of color, I was part of a small group, we often talked about this, the experience of, we applied but we're not going to get it.

Maria, Latina woman in her fifties: However, when it came down to projects or empowerment or I would say like support, like when decisions were made for one person than another, they tended to be towards more the White people in the role. Even though this was a very supportive environment for diversity in general overall, critical decisions were made to go in favor of the crowd majority the non-minority crowd. Even if these people were in lower level positions, which was kind of weird. So, people in lower level positions felt more empowered than minorities and higher-level positions. And this was a very diverse and very inclusive environment.

One participant shared an account of an early career experience that both solidified his resolve to be successful and also shaped his approach to his career. His experiences of undisguised racism were a core part of his early career encounters as a professional athlete.

Diego, Latino man in his forties: The minute I walked in, people would start spitting on the floor. because I was Hispanic, and it was their way of saying that I was not welcomed.

And while that was an early career experience for him, Diego expressed his awareness of what the young men coming up must deal with as they navigate their lives. His world view of work was shaped around this. At the time of the interview, he had begun working to help young people navigate what he described as inevitable negative encounters in their futures. He said he teaches them coping strategies and he encourages them to not allow others to dictate to them what they are worth. He said it is important to understand how others see you so that you are prepared to navigate what may come up. “Racial group membership continues to influence perception of workplace events ” (Offermann et al., 2014, p. 504). For the participants, group membership connected to their lived experiences reinforces this sentiment. Offermann et al. (2014) wrote that the “given the assumed commonness of these experiences in the lives of many minority group members, it is also important to consider how these effects occur over time and may accumulate to a larger effect ” (p.506). Following these examples of encounters the study explores their cumulative impact on health and later looks at the struggle of deciding between voice and silence.

Experiences Linked to Gender

This theme centered around gender includes subthemes: sexual harassment, microaggressions, and discrimination. These selected examples from the study included some participants who connected experiences to their identity as women rather than as women of color. Participants discussed a range of experiences from being fired from their jobs, feeling

compelled to speak out aggressively, to needing to leave the organization to escape harassment.

Sara, Multiracial woman in her forties: I had a situation where I was sexually harassed, and I came to the HR director. I was myself in HR and I said, we may want to have some training. And she said, “why would we want to have some training on harassment?” I said, because you know there's some things. I mean, I'm not upset about it or anything. I just think that maybe there should be some training on like, what are some things that you can say, and you cannot say. And then basically two hours later, I was fired.

Valentina, Indigenous Latina in her fifties: It was interesting thinking about #metoo, and everything. It wasn't as explicit as that. They wouldn't ask me out, quid pro quo or anything. But you were like, little jokes, some look at what you are wearing, it looks nice. Yes, you're in a really nice outfit. They were checking me out. So, you know one time, I just said this shit has to stop.

Amber, Black woman in her thirties: I think what was interesting was that at one point I was blatantly making sure that I was wearing clothes that were baggy in the office...And he made it a point to send (someone he trusted) to go shop for clothes that he felt were appropriate for me to wear. And I had cut my hair at one point and he hated it... And the other thing he did, and we had to do travel, he traveled a lot. Not overnight trips, day trips. But I would always request not to sit next to him. So, I would get to the airport real early to make sure that I could change my seat, right. And wherever I ended up sitting he would go and request that the person sitting next to me let him have the seat. So yes, it was bad... It was really uncomfortable...And he said, “if I was 30 years younger, the things I would do to you.”

Amber said that she could no longer tolerate the continued lascivious and harassing behavior. After the incident described above, she left without a word and never returned. She not only left the organization, but she left the entire industry. Barbara also mentioned that she had experiences with #metoo (sexual harassment) but declined to provide specifics. These women did not have support in the organization or outside of the organization to help them

deal with their experiences with sexual harassment. In one case (she asked not to be specifically identified), one participant discussed her experiences with her partner who did not understand why she let it bother her at all and was frustrated with her for her response to the harassment.

Delia, quoted in the example below, shared that she felt that the overall environment in her organization was male-oriented. She did not feel this orientation negatively impacted her until she became a mother. She learned of a specific incident through a woman colleague whom she identified as a White woman, who was also a mother, and who was present during a discussion about project assignments. The woman was able to intervene on her behalf.

Delia, Multiracial woman in her forties: The only time I felt slightly or very slowed was right after I had my baby. That's the one time I felt like they view you differently. They view you as not being as committed or that you may not put in the time. I did everything to try to break the stereotype, but you can say it has to do with being a woman. That factor can be very slowing for women, for me at least because it was viewed so negatively. Once they see you have a baby, we're not going to give you the same work, the projects you're going to get are not going to be as good, or you won't get the same access to the partners that generate the great clients or business because you may not commit. You could decide to leave at any time, so there's just a lot of stereotypes, they're very hidden, they're very unspoken, but they're there.

In addition to the negative consequences of becoming a mother while working, some women in the study shared stories connected to implied or imposed gendered norms for work attire. Howlett, Pine, Cahill, Orakçioğlu, and Fletcher (2015) found that “women who even subtly sexualise their work attire may be detrimentally affecting the way they are perceived by other females, especially if they are in a high-status role” (p. 29). The intersection of race and gender for women of color means that they face “double-jeopardy” in experiences of sexual harassment, facing a racialized form of sexual harassment (Berdahl & Moore, 2006;

Edmondson Bell & Nkomo, 2003). While Isabella and Nancy shared stories below which referred to early career experiences, the effects of those experiences carried through their careers, impacting their attire decisions even into their lives as entrepreneurs. In telling her story, Valentina did not expect to become emotional. But she broke into tears as she described how she had shifted her work attire to a strictly conservative look while working in the industry – and how that contrasted with the freedom she later felt as an entrepreneur when she was able to freely express herself through her clothing choices. On the surface the issue of dress may seem “small” but the emotional impact over time was very significant for these women.

Isabella, Latina woman in her sixties: They had issues with women back then. You couldn't wear, whenever the CEO was in the office, were on the same floor, you weren't supposed to wear pants. I mean, it was an unwritten rule that he didn't like to see women in slacks.

Nancy, Black woman in her sixties: And you have to remember the times because we were still dressing in men's suits with skirts. The whole look had to be manly. The traditional button-down white shirt, the blazer, and a skirt, clear pantyhose and closed toed shoes. That's it. No purse. Briefcase. Put the wallet in the briefcase and step.

Valentina, Indigenous Latina in her fifties: If you were to ask me, the trade-off is that I've always downplayed how I look. Now that I'm a business owner, I can wear *whatever I Goddamn please*. Oh, I thought, I kinda want these long earrings instead of wearing conservative pearls!

Expectations of women varied in different organizations. Along with that variation, the expectations connected to gendered behavior were necessarily different. Nonetheless, participants were clear that definite gender-based behavioral norms existed in their work environments – and they had to figure out how to navigate them.

Nancy, Black woman in her sixties: The pleasant expression that you would normally have on your face, as a woman, in a meeting listening actively, you're smiling, nodding your head. I remember talking specifically about that and needing to practice so that I could take the lead in the conversation in the meeting room and strategize. She would say don't smile so much, don't nod. Just listen or speak. Be succinct. Modulate your voice. The female thing for sure.

Valentina, Indigenous Latina in her fifties: I started to notice I was the only woman, and there were 12 men, and we were in a meeting, you know, and we're talking. And I'm like, it was just a little weird, but I felt like I was part of the group. It was just interesting I just I had to curse with them. I mean, I would curse people out. I had kind of assimilated. That's what I did. That was my way of handling it.

In addition to the above examples, the women in the study discussed experiencing a range of microaggressions, including being oversexualized, stereotyped, undervalued, and isolated. They provided examples of the gendered expectations they had to learn to navigate. Valentina's example below is representative of many others she provided. She attributed these behaviors as the cause for slowly, determinedly changing the way she interacted with men in her work environments. Toward the end of her interview she discussed her awakening process and acknowledged how much she had given up. This occurred only after she exited and became an entrepreneur. She knew she had changed, but she hadn't stopped to consider the impact the change had on her.

Valentina, Indigenous Latina in her fifties: I was completely unaware of this, but the way I looked was a bit too exotic and I started to notice that when I would talk to men, colleagues or bosses and they started to talk about their wives. And I'm like, Okay? And, you know, like, I'm not gonna attack you, or I'm not going to try to seduce you. I'm just here too, and if you think I remind you of a Go-Go Dancer or something, that's your problem. I'm not! But it was just, it just almost felt like, what am I supposed to do so that you feel comfortable with who I am?

Women's presence in the workplace did not always translate to an environment that was welcoming to women for our participants. The organizational structures, practices, and cultures did not automatically shift with the demographic shift. The organization's cultural norms, centered around men, persisted. "Women's experiences with discrimination tend to result to a great extent from workplace policies and their use" (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011, p. 781). Bobbitt-Zeher (2011) also discussed the different ways in which men and women experienced the workplace, taking into account wages, occupational segregation and power differentials along gender lines. Delia begins to highlight how this played out for her, focused on organizational culture.

Delia, Multiracial woman in her forties: There, the way relationships are built are very male-oriented. You do things that men do, you might go to, I don't know, clubs or Harvard clubs, you might go golfing, you might go eat a steak. Like it's very male things where I wouldn't do that. Those are not things I naturally do. Like you were asked to go network at a club by yourself. I don't. I think women would do things differently. They might do things more collaboratively or together. They're not necessarily going to go golfing.

While Delia discussed doing what she needed to do to get the job done, she was talking about a structural set-up that favored men's work culture and that did not account for women in the workplace and their different approaches or needs.

Below, Jimena's interaction with her manager was the beginning of her isolation – the beginning of her feeling that her role and even her value was being erased. Her attempt to avoid being sidelined was thwarted and she said she could not force her manager to acknowledge her talents and contributions.

Jimena, Indigenous Latina in her forties: Again, one of those situations where he had a very little amount of experience within my space. And my first indicator when he became my manager

was, I said, I'm going to prepare a PowerPoint presentation, so you are aware of the projects I'm currently working on, as well as giving you a copy of my resume so you understand my breath of experience. His reaction was, don't bother. I don't need it.

Amy described an encounter with a male colleague who engaged in undisguised misogynistic behavior against her for rebuffing his microaggressions. Her tone and emotion were heightened as she described this encounter.

Amy, Asian woman in her fifties: I do remember specifically this gentleman said something about if we had sent out a recap about the other meeting, things would be smoother now. I said clearly, you're not reading your emails, because that recap was sent out. And I had to stare him down because *how dare he* blame me or my team for something that he clearly wasn't keeping track of. I had to show some feistiness. I remember this one gentleman told me that I was pushy. And I said, *pushy*? And he said, yeah pushy. Would you call men pushy? I said I'd never heard a man be called pushy. And for the longest time every time he saw me, he would call me the pushy woman.

Encounters with real and disguised misogyny encompass the significance of the attitudes members of the workplace held against these women because of their gender. The essence of these encounters relates to how these women experienced their work environments and their work colleagues. Significance is placed on their individual interactions with specific colleagues with and without legitimate power over them as well as on the outcomes of their professional growth efforts. Participants expressed a mix of apathy and trauma toward the interactions and experiences and emotional trauma connected to those interactions and experiences.

Encounters with sexual harassment in the work environment encompassed hostility and persistent torment as described by the participants. These encounters were perpetrated by only men. The narrative elucidated accounts of pushing back or trying to become invisible to end the behavior. Whether voice or silence was enacted, neither had a positive outcome for

the participant. In every case in this sample where sexual harassment was present, the participant who experienced it said she had to leave the organization in. In one case, the woman was fired for reporting it. Similar to the gendered experiences described above, the underrepresentation of women of color in their work spaces may not have provided the participants with the lens to link the encounters with their multiple identities.

Experiences Linked to Race, Ethnicity, and Gender

The encounters linked to race, ethnicity, and gender include subthemes: tokenism, microaggressions, and discrimination. As with the previous examples, tokenism was identified as having a negative impact on participants, these intersectional experiences were linked to both race and gender. Similarly, they identified behavior that caused them to feel undervalued, stereotyped, as if they were window dressing, invisible, powerless, and it created expectations around their attire and conduct.

April, Black woman in her thirties: It felt like I was a pawn in that sense. You know, I was the only woman of color on that campus. You know, there were times that I would wear hair wraps to work with my blazer and things like that. So, I felt like you know the institution felt like they fulfilled their role with checking off the box of DE&I with having a person of color on staff.

Jimena, Indigenous Latina in her forties: Someone, a male, asked me, “don't you feel bad that most likely you're getting hired just because you're a woman and a woman of color?”

Her encounter shocked her, but then it had her questioning herself and the reasons why she was hired. What if it was true? She was not alone in her doubts. Others in the study wondered as well. She found that it drove her to work harder to prove she was capable. Jimena, in a separate incident, also described a hostile work environment which she attributed to undisguised misogyny. As she and her colleague were both identified as

members of the same ethnic group, from an ethnic lens Jimena was an insider, but from a gender lens she was an outsider.

Jimena, Indigenous Latina in her forties: He was Latino. What I experienced was very much that “machismo” that you experience when you go into that whole family type of situation. How he communicated with people, in a very narcissistic type of personality, and he was very seldom present. But when he was, it was more of a situation where he dictated. But at the same time, he expected everyone to stop when he decided to be present. I asked for an intervention and asked for another board member to be present because I also knew that it would become a he-said, she-said type of situation. Unfortunately, the only board member that was available was a woman who did not feel comfortable standing up or speaking up. And number two, she was only available via conference call.

The experience she described was rooted in the dissatisfaction created by a hostile intersectional gender and ethnic dynamic. She explained that the organization deeply depended upon the social capital of this male board member who engaged in “machista” behavior toward her and others. She said this machista way of orienting, defined as “arrogance and sexual aggression in male to female relationships” (Stevens, 1973) left her feeling angry and frustrated. Though she was aware of the Latino culture of authority-deference (Stevens, 1973), she worked to push beyond it. When navigating him was particularly difficult, she turned to other board members who then also said they felt disempowered and intimidated by him. As a result, they would not make themselves available for a requested intervention to push back on his behavior. This created an intense and conflict-filled relationship between her and the board of directors. They were relieved when she resigned, as it meant they did not have to confront him.

Other participants gave examples of places where they felt a double standard was applied. The double-standard also came up as a marker for the race, ethnicity, and gender sub-

theme in a variety of ways. The “stereotype threat” connected to tokenism is applied to the descriptions provided below. From feeling like they had to work harder to prove they belonged, to having to make physical gestures to take up more space, these women described the lengths they went through to be seen and heard.

Ana, Multiracial woman in her fifties: I think they make me work harder. And I think that you hear that, with women, with people of color, that they have to work extra hard. There’s the tax if you will, for being successful. I just don’t want anyone to ever think that I’m not giving it my 100 percent.

Maria, Latina woman in her fifties: There's a lot more pressure for me to justify why I am in this role. I had to actually convince people that I was in that role. I actually had people tell me, “you know that's a big role, right?” And it was kind of hard to tell if they were saying that to me because I'm a woman, or a minority, right? So it could be both, but I think of being a woman in that role competing with men.

Barbara, Black woman in her fifties: I was always very data-driven because I knew that as a woman of color, I needed to be better and I needed to measure. I knew that I needed to have data to corroborate what I was saying.

Amy, Asian woman in her fifties: I was the only woman, the only person of color, and definitely the only woman of color, and also the shortest. Again, I know I keep bringing the height up, but it's very daunting. I remember being in a room full of people and everyone was tall. I had to go to great pains to do that. A lot of males took up a lot of space on the conference room table. I started to create more space, I would jack up my chair to the highest level so that at least while sitting I’m at the same height as them. A lot of people talked over me, no doubt about that...It took quite a bit of effort on my part to be more knowledgeable than everyone else, making sure that everything I was saying what's concrete, and once I started to do that, they couldn't ignore me. Even then I had to literally jump into the conversation for a while.

Holder et al. (2015) found that the impact of race and gender extends to attributions of hostility and aggressiveness particularly for Black women. This study elucidates the

perceptions of the participants across these feelings and attributions. Part of the impact of microaggressions is the creation of a hostile work climate (Sue et al., 2008).

Underrepresented minority women in this study described their work environments as hostile, as places where they experienced being stereotyped, isolated, and exposed to offensive and disparaging remarks that were linked to their intersectional identities of race, ethnicity, and gender.

Camila, Latina woman in her fifties: I am happy (I challenged the behavior) for my own personal growth, but I know that it makes it a little more difficult for me because now I feel like I have been flagged as a potential problem case.

Amy, Asian woman in her fifties: I knew that everyone was being polite and nice, but I knew that they were waiting for me to leave the room first because I was the woman. I hated that because I felt like it was so obvious that I was this, so I used to constantly tell them to go ahead of me. Then someone said to me, “oh is this the Asian in you?” And I remember thinking no. It's not the Asian me that's making you go first it's the woman in me that doesn't want to go first.

Amy's example highlights the ways in which perceptions can be different for different people. For her it was her gender identity that seemed salient, but for her co-worker, it was her racial identity. As mentioned previously it is the participants who provide the lens on what was most salient for them during an encounter. However, it is also important to recognize that aspects of their accounts, when they tell you what others say, can shed light on how others may enact bias based on a different identity group. This, however, does not change that their decisions to exit or stay were linked to their own perceptions of the identity-linked behavior.

In an example of undisguised racism, a participant described an encounter that led to her leaving and not returning to her organization despite her role in senior leadership.

Needing an unplanned leave of absence, Amanda went to her direct supervisor, a White male. In order to clarify that her actions were not a result of irresponsible planning and to make clear the reason for the sudden nature of the leave, she shared with him some personal details about her pending adoption of a Black baby. Despite her request that he not share the details of her leave with her colleagues, he addressed the pending adoption during a senior leadership meeting in front of all of them.

Amanda, Multi-racial woman in her sixties: (He said) ‘Well do you think that this child that you're picking up, do you think that her parents are drugged out addicts, alcoholics or were in prison?’ *That's what he said to me!* A person going to pick up an adopted child, what's the worst thing you could say to someone? And that is so racist. I couldn't, and this is pre-Trump and everything, but I couldn't believe my ears. That someone would say something like that to me. I knew at that point, that my days were numbered there.

While she did not make the decision to exit in the moment, she never returned from her parental leave. In retelling the story to me, she was still emotionally upset about what occurred. She described it as a heavy decision given that she was walking away from a hard-earned executive leadership position at a prestigious organization.

The underrepresented minority women in this study shared examples of being passed over for jobs and growth opportunities they felt they were qualified for, examples of being treated differently than their White counterparts, or where they had difficulty finding employment within their industry.

Jimena, Indigenous Latina woman in her forties: I was usually the only woman and usually, the only person of color. And so, when it continually happened I, you know, I learned quickly that that was most likely the reason I was being passed over.

Camila, Latina woman in her fifties: But then the role that was open for the head of communications, I wasn't considered for that job, but I was actively doing it.

Amy, Asian woman in her fifties: I had to apply for a leadership role. All my other peers were being promoted, I actually had to apply.

Maria, Latina woman in her fifties: Not only I couldn't get a job, but I had my goals that I would get a job at some point. But not only was I a minority woman Latina with limited language capabilities. Which at the time, you know, I spoke English, but you could still see the difference, thick accent and things like that. I felt like those were seen as limitations and things for me to achieve my goal. You know coming in here it took me two years to get a job in (my field).

The participants explained that there were times when they knew exactly what was going on and could point to specific behaviors or actions. While other times they understood something negative was happening but couldn't necessarily point to a specific behavior in the moment. They described feeling like there was a double standard, that they were undervalued and isolated. They attributed the discriminatory behavior to being linked to their intersectional identities of race, ethnicity, and gender.

Barbara, black woman in her fifties: What I called the shenanigans of excluding me from key meetings or bringing me at the eleventh-hour into a critical discussion about my perspective on a (project)...I had a boss who was threatened by me. There are people who have been promoted who were on very shaky ground and who had not delivered on their goals and metrics and so forth because they worked for a friend. Meanwhile, I happily exceeded expectations...I was always very data-driven because I knew that as a woman of color, I needed to be better and I needed to measure, and I knew that I needed to have data to corroborate what I was saying.

Daniel, Black man in his fifties: In terms of me missing out on opportunities I'm sure that in the span of my career, but there are probably opportunities that I missed out on because of my race or discrimination and my gender. I couldn't point to a specific incident, but it doesn't mean that it didn't happen.

Camila, Latina woman in her fifties: The CEO said to me, something that I needed to work on, that I needed to be a little more gentle, or patient with some of my colleagues because they thought I was a little harsh. I said to him, if I were a White male would you be saying this to me? And he said, “probably not.”

April, Black woman in her thirties: When I noticed that since I talked to him (supervisor) about that, when future issues would arise, he would disappear and I would have to go through his admin assistant, which is yet another fence. But I've noticed that my colleagues around me all had his phone number. They would text him. He was one call away for everybody else. But for me, I was either an email away or had to go through his assistant.

Some of the discriminatory behavior described was overt and undisguised and some of the oppressive and hostile behaviors described were perpetrated by individuals who also identified as underrepresented minorities, in other words, these colleagues were “in-group” in terms of their identities, but they were also “out-group” in terms of their status within the larger organization. Participants said they were exposed to disparaging comments, jealousy, and micromanagement as a result.

Valentina, Indigenous Latina in her fifties: He (a subordinate that she terminated for cause) called me spic and, you know, this and that and other things. I don't recall exactly, but I think he said the C word. Mm hmm. And “spic”, “who you think you are spic?” And you know, he alluded that I was doing something to get promoted or something like that...Those folks who were usually, as you can imagine, they were minority or whatever, not White. Most of them. And I had issues with them. They did not like it when I became the boss. They hated my guts. And mostly the women. There was a Dominican woman that even cursed me out and she said she was going to put “Santeria” (witchcraft/curse) on me and all this crap because she didn't like that I was the boss.

Faith, Black woman over sixty: The new administration was more micromanaging and didn't know a thing about diversity but wanted to tell me how to do it.

In considering the scholarship of Edmondson Bell and Nkomo (2003), a racialized form of sexism was highlighted in the stories of women participants. Only one male participant of the eight in the sample, Daniel, mentioned gender linked to his race, making a comment about being a Black man. But he did not have a specific example to offer, whereas, many of the women participants had numerous detailed examples. Women in this study not only linked their race and ethnic identity to their experiences of oppression in significant ways, they also linked these experiences to negative impacts on their health. These experiences informed many of their career decisions. Basford et al. (2014) discussed the progressive range of microaggressions as moving from subtle to overt forms of discrimination. For example, while other colleagues got promoted without the act of applying for opportunity, Amy had to actively apply and exercise voice in the process to even be considered (subtle). Then, for Valeria, racist and sexist slurs were hurled at her by a subordinate (overt). Regardless of where the discrimination happened on the range of behaviors, the impact over time led to the participants' decision to launch their own businesses.

Experiences Linked to Race, Ethnicity, and Age

The theme centered around the intersectional experience of race, ethnicity, and age includes subthemes: microaggressions and discrimination. It includes descriptions of being stereotyped, feeling invisible, feeling powerless, and being exposed to rude and offensive behavior.

April, Black woman in her thirties: Such as it was so profound that in such a small space, you know where I was the only woman of color that I wasn't recognized as the director of diversity and inclusion. You know, I was called a student more often than I was called the director...It just felt like you know

when my email came through. There was no weight there, so you know many of the things I would request would never happen. You know, the people that I would talk to in order to set it up, it would be as though it just wasn't it didn't happen. I was just often confused, because I would do the right things. I would follow the steps just to situate events and position the planning process, but it still would never actually happen. And I would speak to my colleagues about it. And when they reach out to these very same people, it would be situated quickly. So, in those instances, I guess it was great to have allies, but it also kind of it became very apparent that I didn't have any jurisdiction or any control or I didn't really have any visibility in that space.

Ana, Multi-racial woman in her fifties: Yeah, if you agreed with (the supervisor), you were at the table. If you didn't, then you weren't. I think he started bringing in very young, straight out of (school) students. People that I grew up with at the (organization) and the industry who were you know (subject matter experts), were not being valued in terms of their craft and what they had to contribute. And these weren't just people of color but the majority of the people who I was very close with and who were impacted very deeply were people of color.

April and Ana both had experiences that they linked to both their race and their age. April, as a young Black woman, was treated as though she was invisible and though she engaged in organizational processes by following the rules that were laid out, she felt she was ineffective at getting results due to discrimination. She expressed frustration that in order to accomplish her career goals she would have to lean on her colleagues who were older and had different group identities. Ana reflected on the shift in organizational culture which marginalized the aging workplace population by bringing in younger, more moldable employees. While the implementation of the recruitment strategy was not specifically targeting the racially and ethnically diverse cohort of employees, it disparately impacted them. Both intentional and unintentional forms of discrimination were motivators for exit and for launching businesses for these participants.

Experience Linked to Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Age

The intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and age included encounters with microaggressions and discrimination. This section focuses on the accounts shared by Barbara, a Black woman in her fifties. Her interview was the only one in which this particular intersectionality was highlighted, but in her case, it had a dominating impact on her early career and her overall career trajectory and therefore was significant to include. Her experiences included stereotyping, disparaging comments, and mistreatment at the nexus of her race, age, and gender. She felt specifically that age was a factor through her early to mid-career as she was always the youngest in her work peer groups.

Barbara: Again³, people were like, “how the heck did you get that role?”... She (a supervisor) didn't have much experience with people like me, whatever that means for her in terms of leading a major project like that. I think they were all of these biases that were projected onto me for whatever reason. I had too many situations of being told that, referring to my age, it was definitely age bias, in terms of what people thought I could handle at such a young age, and I think a lot of racial undertones, some of them are pretty blatant. And then there were the, “who do you think you are?” Then there were the looks, looking me up and down. But the message that they were trying to say, that I don't think you belong here.

Barbara: I really did a lot of soul-searching around do I want to be in an environment like this, in terms of whatever seemed to be, discrimination, sexism, ageism because the assumption was that because I was young, I couldn't possibly know what I was doing.

Barbara had been raised to pursue her goals with tenacity. She expected some amount of discrimination, and originally took a role in the South, but those

³ Barbara's use of the word “again” denotes her understanding that her age, in addition to other factors of her identity were being held against her.

experiences in her early career also followed her to the New England. She said she persevered because she had grown up in poverty and did not want to do anything that would risk her financial stability. She was taught to be polite, so she focused on proving that she was competent and that she had the right to be there. She had to actively address the stereotype threat from the earliest examples of encounters she shared through to the last organization she worked for before exiting and launching. Encounters linked to overlapping identities of race, gender and age deeply affected her career decisions every step of the way.

Observations Linked to Class

The observations linked to class are separate from and not shown on the intersectional experiences diagram due to how the stories emerged in the interviews, honoring the phenomenological method applied to the study. The themes and sub-themes covered in the diagram in Figure 2 reflect the negative impact of patterns of direct or indirect behaviors experienced by the participants. When they were describing their experiences of class, participants focus was more on themselves than on the others' behaviors. Most of the participants who discussed class status concerns described personal concerns related to their self-esteem, feelings of self-worth, and financial security, rather than examples of being treated differently at work. They did not link the workplace encounters to their socio-economic upbringing or background. They were not comparing themselves to others of a different class. They focused on what they felt they did not bring with them into the workplace, like elite college degrees (pedigree), networks as assets (connections/clients) and money (resources) prior to arriving.

Ana, Multi-racial woman in her fifties: I think being a Black woman and being an attractive Black woman and not having the

pedigree for a lot of my colleagues back then. You know a lot of them were like (college)⁴ graduates. I just had kind of a natural gift, I guess. I always second guessed myself.

Barbara, Black woman in her fifties: I don't ever want to be in a position where I feel financially insecure based on my upbringing in life experience...I felt like the deck was stacked against me in a lot of ways because I wasn't the traditional (employee), I didn't have networks, I didn't have resources (to bring in), my family was poor.

Delia, Multi-racial woman in her forties: I knew that would be hard to create those connections to the business world...I felt that as a woman that was hard for me...it was maybe more class. I didn't come with those connections. I didn't have those networks when I first started working. So, I thought about how I would create them because I started from zero, and knowing that those relationships were all about who you know, sort of from a like how you grow up...I think my whole life experience had been shaped by growing up poor because once you have some level of financial security you do everything to not lose it...I think it's that for me it's that poverty experience like I never want to go back to that I never want to feel like I need help or that I need somebody else to support me so I don't know above anything else it's like life experience of not having, of having needed because when I was growing up my mom had to be a public assistance, you know we lived in public housing and that's what I never ever want to feel like I would go back to that or lose everything to the point where I needed help.

A couple of participants felt their anticipated challenges in the workplace were connected to their class. They wondered if how they valued themselves might have translated into how the organization viewed them and treated them. They discussed how they perceived the organization demonstrated who they valued.

Diego, Latino man in his forties: I settled for that job, and I said to myself I am not going to settle for this anymore, I know what I'm worth. And it's sad, because I felt like with corporate giving you a job description and telling you that this is what you are going to make. And I felt like regardless of our

⁴ College name excluded as it would denote the industry and could be exposing for Ana.

experience, and our diplomas, and if I graduated from Harvard that's a prescription. They put me in a box.

Valeria, Latina woman in her forties: I feel like I'm not being paid what I'm worth. I think there were poor choices I've made. Because I didn't go for what I knew I was worth. I think I decided my work, my job, my job choices are what people thought what's worth for me. I think the society said what I was worth. And by that, I mean because I (have a disability), because I'm bilingual, because I am Latina, these are the jobs that I should that people would say okay yeah, receptionist? yeah okay, she should do that.

Valeria describes falling victim to stereotype threat, where she lives up to the low expectations that others had of her early on in her career. But she also was clear that she felt they only treated her that way because she allowed it and hadn't set the bar high enough for herself. More research in this area is necessary to understand the intersectional links to workplace experiences that include class as a factor.

As noted in Figure 2, encounters with bias and oppression marked the experiences of 93 percent of the individuals in this study. While the representative quotes touch the surface of the narratives they shared, the stories alone do not explain the rationale for choosing to exit or straddle and launch a business venture. Additional themes emerged as salient in their rationale. The connection to identity, however, is a critical variable in that rationale. The following two sections discuss issues of *power and powerlessness*, as well as the *health impact* of these encounters which contributed to the decision to exit or straddle, and launch.

Regardless of whether or not participants linked their exit decisions to their identity-related experiences, all of the participants had amassed experiences that led them to entrepreneurship. In none of the cases did a singular incident of identity-based oppression lead to exit and launching.

Power and Powerlessness

The wishes for power and powerlessness emerged as a theme in some of the participants' stories. They were identified by the participants as a specific motivator for leaving and launching as well as for staying and launching. Experiences of oppression that participants linked to identity were often intertwined with the power structures within organizations. They were all very aware of where the power was and was not.

While considering power-related reasons linked to identity for choosing to exit, I examined instances of exercising voice and silence (Kolarska & Aldrich, 1980) within the shared stories. Both voice and silence played roles in the feedback loop to an organization about the level of dissatisfaction of its employees. Kolarska and Aldrich (1980) wrote that a silent exit had the potential to interrupt the feedback loop an organization needs, possibly giving them a false sense that everything is going well. Participants were asked if they had ever pushed back, called out behaviors or otherwise challenged the individuals or systems that were creating the oppressive environments and experiences. Here is a sample of their responses organized by type of response: *Silence* and *Voice*, followed by an examination of their sense of power and powerlessness considered in their decisions. It also includes representative samples to help us understand the process of choosing either option.

Silence as a response

The samples below represent distinct perspectives on their choice of remaining silent. From basic coping, stereotype threat and unconscious bias, to figuring it out or leaving, each had a unique rationale. Hirschman's theory (1970) on silence as a response raised the question about why someone would stick around to exercise voice and risk drawing negative

attention to one's self if one had the option to just leave? Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, and Mainous III (1988) found that individuals who had experienced high job satisfaction were more likely to enact voice to address concerns. Those who experience oppression in the workplace in this study expressed dissatisfaction. Below are their reflections on silence as a response.

Ana, Multiracial woman in her fifties: I don't think I did (I don't think I spoke up or pushed back). I don't think I did. I think I maybe just internalized it and kept going?

Maria, Latina woman in her fifties: No of course not. Because that is seen as you playing the race card. And that is seen as a big thing here. So as soon as you bring that up, why am I being re-assigned or is why is my job being eliminated? Or why is there not an opportunity offered to me? It's always going to be because of the budget, or we are doing things differently, we are making things improving the organization. It's never going to be this is a racial issue. They may not even think that it is, in the decisions, you know, unconscious bias? You know, somehow, somehow, that is taken into consideration when decisions are made. But we can see it, but they cannot see it. I kind of compare it to the fact that we had the shock that we had in 2016. We see the world in a completely different way than other groups see the world. I never thought that people could see the world in so many different ways. And I believe that's what happens here. I just don't think people can understand where we come from as minorities. You know and as people without the same level of privilege, and they just don't see the issues. It's not that they don't care, they just don't see it. And then we see it loud and clear, right? So, to answer your question, no, I never brought it up.

Faith, Black woman over sixty: I made a pact with myself that I was not going to change who I was, but that I was going to respect who was in leadership at the moment. And that type of respect shows that you get to know the person and how they operate, then you try to get on board to the extent that you can. But where the rubber met the road on certain things, I would not bend. That's why I knew that I could not stay under that regime.

As Maria highlights in her comments, managers who are unable to see the problem will be unable to address the problem and the perpetuate the discriminatory practices through

neglect. It puts the burden of making the problem visible to management on the individual being discriminated. “If people believe in the possibility of improvement, then they will stay (Barry, 1974), if not, then they will exit – leave the organization. After the first choice is made (between exit and non-exit), then a second choice must be made: should the dissatisfied person remain silent or protest?”(Kolarska & Aldrich, 1980, p. 43). In these examples, the participants were aware of their active decision to remain salient. As Kolarska & Aldrich stated, a component of that decision was to make a choice to exit or stay. Ana couldn’t think of an instance in which she pushed back, but she knew she was encountering oppression and just pushed on. Maria didn’t want to be seen as playing the race card. In other words, she did not feel she would be taken seriously if she exercised voice to call attention to the concerns. In her interview, Faith discussed her upbringing as a part of her disposition around respecting those in power. Each was aware of what power barriers they were dealing with and each coped by responding through silence, but in their own way.

Voice as a response

Exercising voice as a response was an option that many in the sample engaged in when they encountered negative experiences connected to their identities. They said their reasons for choosing voice was often rooted in frustration or a desire to confront injustice. Meyerson and Scully (1995) would call those who exercised voice while staying, tempered radicals. “They are radical in their desire to change the status quo and tempered in the way they have been toughened by challenges and anger at injustice ” (Meyerson, 1995, p. 383). Though for these participants, they eventually exited the organization due to ongoing experiences of oppression. In other words, nothing changed. Scholars found that employees

who believe that improvements are possible will exercise voice (Hirschman, 1970; Rusbult et al., 1988; Zhou & George, 2001). Isabella, in her frustration and hope for change, would challenge the problem behaviors by trying an education angle. Ultimately this was not effective in creating the change she wanted.

Isabella, Latina in her seventies: I always have. I mean it frustrates me... I would advocate, would push on the system, I would give them another way to think about it because they were just, they had a big blind spot when it came to our culture.

Camila, Latina woman in her fifties: I have actually. One that resulted in me being terminated, and another resulted in this idea that I was being too sensitive. And that was just not the case. Most recently in my company I am dealing with similar issues still.

Nancy, Black woman in her sixties: Oh yes. Behind closed doors, especially after a meeting where there was this kind of takedown. I would march right into her office afterwards. She suggested that I was being emotional or thin-skinned. She would suggest that instead of worrying about that, I should go help Johnny down the hall.

Kevin, Black man in his fifties: Yeah, I did. I spoke to the person who hired me, which was the president, oh, and who shrugged it off. Once I felt that I wasn't going to get anywhere with the direct president who hired me, oh, I knew that my cause was kind of lost there.

Amanda, Black woman in her sixties: I challenged it really, really, big time...I challenged it so much...We ended up and going and I placed a discrimination claim against the (supervisor) and won.

The participants discussed a range of the responses they experienced as a result of their decision to speak up. From being terminated, to being marginalized or ignored, none of the participants shared examples of the organization or the individual they spoke to engaging in dialogue or activities that worked to address the oppressive behaviors. The participants in the study lacked the power to make an impact on their organization. Isabella saw her feedback as

an opportunity to educate those engaged in the behavior. Camila, despite repeated negative consequences, continued to exercise her voice. This was something she did until she exited to launch her own business. Kevin said in his interview that he was disillusioned and said he wouldn't even consider his former organization as a customer of his personal business venture. Amanda was one of two participants who used the legal system to challenge the discriminatory behavior. Both individuals prevailed, however, both individuals opted for entrepreneurship over working for another organization.

Examination of power and powerlessness in choosing a response

The decision to exercise voice or remain silent is intertwined with the understanding of the impact that execution of one option over the other would have. Impacts can be positive or negative. They could take the shape of shifting a practice, getting an apology, or of being marginalized, being seen as a problem, and being retaliated against. Maria, a Latina woman in her fifties, discusses the decisions you have to make when challenging authority.

Maria: That gets to the core of your question. And it's because by being assertive it just makes it worse. There were situations where I tried to be assertive in the past, not necessarily using the race card or the woman card, but assertive in the way of saying what I think or what should be done or calling people out or holding them accountable. But then I was being perceived as being aggressive or problematic or you know, being not a team player, or those types of things. And so, you just say this will just make it worse. Will it make the situation better or worse? And the outcome of that is usually that you have to leave, or you have to be silent in order to be able to keep the status quo. And I'm not like that, and that's why I have to leave. As soon as I see something isn't fair, not only for me but for others, that's when I start speaking up. For the most part I don't use those two cards. But I try to fight it in any way possible without having to mention those. And then it gets to a point where, you know, I have to make a decision whether this job is a good fit or not. And one thing I learned a while ago, was that my future and my career

is in my hands. If I cannot change something, then I just move on. Sometimes you say why don't you just stay and fight? But is it worth it? How much change can one person bring from the inside? Yes, we are all change agents and I'm sure we can do it, but it's very hard.

April shared an encounter with a person she felt repeatedly patronized her and demeaned her in their interactions to the point where she would be left in tears. A self-described confident, competent, organized Black woman, April said this woman did not treat her with either dignity or respect.

April, Black woman in her thirties: I had issues with the booking, and I had to deal with the finances, the accounts payable office so she can help me with that. And so, the problems arose when I was actually at (the conference), where when we checked in. They claim that accounts payable never sent them the credit card information, so we actually didn't have a room. It was just a number of things like that. So, the next day I reached out. I called accounts payable directly and her response to me was, "you know, April, I don't know if you're just not doing very well in this role? I don't know if you're not understanding me, but I just don't understand what's going on." You know, so that was her initial response to me calling her about verifying the credit card information, and it just felt like in that space you have an employee that is a few states away, and they're asking for assistance so they can situate a resource for the students. It's not the time for the passive aggressiveness. You know, and so in that space, I actually, it was a lot, she had a lot more things to say it was, it was very, very rude. It was it really took me aback and so I actually broke down and cried after I got off the phone with her.

April, Black woman in her thirties: I felt like I had no power and no visibility, and I was filling a requirement rather than actually like, you know, creating positive ripples on campus.

Faith, Black woman over sixty: I always saw that how far I moved in the organization and when I moved, those were decisions that were going to be made by someone else, not me.

Participants expressed feelings of powerlessness feeling like no matter what they did, others were going to treat them how they were going to treat them. Other study participants

not included in this representative sample discussed the impact of having a supervisor who believed in you and one who did not, one who would listen to your ideas and one who would not. Their stories showed that their identities affected the manager supervisee relationships and demonstrated a misuse of power that decelerated career progression in a way that was visible and impactful for them. Some tolerated it until they no longer could. A few took advantage of the first opportunity that presented itself to try launching their own business, for example: unexpected financial supports. For example, some talked about layoff severance packages, others talked about accessing unemployment benefits, and one even talked about using a medical leave to plan her exit. The desire to separate from someone else having so much power over you in such a way that it determined your future was high in this sample. Individuals wanted to determine their own direction, their own projects and clients, their own method of practicing their craft. They did not want the microinvalidations to hold them back.

The following section truly brings to the surface the way that power and oppression interacted with the health and well-being of the participants in the sample who had negative encounters connected to their identity.

Health Impact

Participants were asked if they felt their negative identity-based experiences affected them. Two sub-themes emerged from their responses. The two types of impacts were *mental health* and *physical health*. Researchers have found that individuals who experience microaggressions report feeling distressed in ways that has a “detrimental impact on their well-being” (Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, & Rasmus, 2014, p. 58). Furthermore, Nadal et

al. (2014) found that the individuals who experience microaggressions are able to identify the impact of these experiences and would be able to make the connections to their identities.

Mental Health

The range of responses which included language that described impact on their mental health was extensive. Some participants described navigating through hurt feelings, trying to repress them until the feelings didn't bother them. Others discussed accessing mental health treatment, suffering from nightmares, stress, and living with imposter syndrome. There was a pervasiveness around participants descriptions of feeling hurt, feelings of self-doubt, frustration, and anger. Below are statements made by the participants that highlighted their descriptions of the mental health impact. A majority of the comments about the mental health impact corresponded with this category although an argument could be made of the compounding physical health impact of the anxiety and depression described below. Lorena described a range of intense health related impacts that she linked to encounters with oppression.

Lorena, Indigenous Latina in her forties: Both the trauma and the oppression impacted me negatively. It's compelled me to speak out and do things. It was like vicarious trauma, there was also all of those cases that I would work with, not being able to sleep. All of those symptoms, from having nightmares, being afraid to be alone, and then also a sadness and frustration about the institutional racism within organizations.

Isabella blamed her cultural heritage for the way her experiences showed up for her. She called herself naïve for expecting fairness in her work environment as though of course she should have expected some level of oppression.

Isabella, Latina woman in her seventies: I feel like sometimes to this day, I'm still naïve and then I get over being nice, because then I recognize that there's more going on. I've gotten more

sophisticated about it now, and I'm trying not to become cynical at this stage of my life. But it definitely affects me because I think most humans wish for there to be fairness in the world. How you're treated and how you treat others, that there's an element of fairness. And sometimes it doesn't always "feel fair" that this feels unfair for any number of reasons. And so, how do I feel about that? I get angry that I get my feelings hurt, which is very Latin. And so, I'm true to my culture and I get my feelings hurt. Then I feel like, damn it, you know what I said earlier, you wanted me, you got me. You're stuck with me. When my perception is that I'm being used, then whether it was because I'm on a board or because I'm in a job or something. I mean, I'm qualified I meet the criteria and I can be vanilla and just 'fit in', assimilate, and I'm not one to do that. I'll acculturate, I'll make choices. However, it's asking them about how I feel, the way I deal with my feelings of dang, and I feel like I'm being used, rather than getting angry, I feel like, okay, it's a call to action.

Participants had many different ways of coping including Daniel's shrugging his shoulders, a salient way of exiting while staying. For Camila it was working harder. For Maria, it was resignation to the fact that nothing will change. Barbara would have a good cry and go back to work improving she deserved to be there. Each was aware of what is happening as they engage in their coping strategies. Their positionality within the organization and their industry did not change whether or not they would be the targets of discrimination. Coping is a survival mechanism for them. Their awareness of what was happening did not change the performance expectations. They still had to show up at work and they still had to deliver. Even when they delivered top quality work, that work or effort would not always be recognized. That lack of acknowledgement or appreciation had a compounding effect.

Daniel, Black man in his fifties: I'm sure there was disappointment in there. I mean after a while you sort of become numb to these things. You know what tends to have, overtime for me anyway, the amount of time I spent thinking about, the amount of time I let it impact me, has gotten shorter and shorter to the point now where like I just shrug my shoulders.

Camila, Latina woman in her fifties: Interestingly enough, I find myself dealing with what we all know to call now imposter

syndrome. That I am having to prove myself more consistently and more frequently than I should be doing.

Maria, Latina woman in her fifties: You get depressed, you see it and you kind of feel, what am I going to do about it? Am I still going to try to fight it, using your skills and trying to prove that you are good enough to hold the particular job or to do a particular project, to do a particular challenge, but that gets again undermined by -- well that's the decision and that's what we have to go with, right? So how I felt, really badly.

Barbara, Black woman in her fifties: I mean yes, it impacted me. There were times that I was very hurt and there were times that yes, I was in tears in the bathroom.

As a researcher, I could hear the sadness in the recounting of these stories. Even after exiting and launching their own businesses, these participants were still feeling the effects of the negative experiences of the past.

Amy, who spent many years working for an organization where she had to fight to be seen had to deal with less competent dominant group members receiving promotions. She worked harder but the impact of the anger on her health remained with her even in the interview these many years later.

Amy, Asian woman in her fifties: Clearly, it's affecting me emotionally because I'm emotional now. At the time it was just a constant feeling of **I'll show them**. I remember this other guy who was such a lazy guy, he never did any work and he got promoted and I was just shocked. That's probably where I got the most emotional. I didn't sleep. It was festering inside me for a while. I would say that be **I'll show them**. And I was really angry about this one particular promotion. I remember that. But I worked like 15 hours a day.

Kevin, Black man in his fifties: I mean it stunts you in a whole host of ways. Because what it does is it takes away the very essence of who you are. Knowing that you. If you are a person of confidence as I have always been, it takes away your confidence. your ability to see yourself other than being stuck in a role, that you are feeling worthless and some facets. And then you almost kind of believe it. Is it me or is it them? You start saying is this real or is this not, until you start speaking to other

people that have gone through similar situations. Once you get out of that environment your confidence is restored. Then you start really being able to dissect it and just learn that area, that arena, was not a good place for somebody like myself.

Kevin found that he started to believe he was as unworthy and unskilled as his encounters with bias and discrimination told him he was. His revelation that it was his toxic encounters and not his actual performance that were the problem was healing for him. For others, the feelings and emotions were drivers, propelling them to find their direction and purpose, helping them exit and launch.

Amber, Black woman in her thirties: I think it was really interesting to see how I had to deal with a lot of anxiety. Anxiety and burnout, and what it took in order for me to get to a point, understanding that my job and my mission aren't one in the same.

Amanda, Black woman in her sixties: I think they are sad stories. They don't feel good. You know for me, I want people to hold hands and sing kum-ba-yah, and not have prejudices and not think that way. It also helped me find a direction.

April, Black woman in her thirties: It was tumultuous. It did impact me. At one point in time while I was working at the institution, I did go to therapy and I started going to therapy because I felt like I needed an outlet. I just think the veil was, pulled off.

These quotes also describe mechanisms for coping with the emotional impact. Some of those examples include developing a sense of indifference, learning to not let it bother you, making you a fighter, and leaving so you do not have to be confronted with it anymore. In fact, some participants said it was important to leave so that you can gain some perspective on the impact of these negative experiences.

Physical Health

For this study, I listed quotes under physical impact that specifically describe something physical, however, many of the emotional symptoms above may also be contributors to physical health concerns. Roberts et al. (2004) found that “discrimination is a stressor to which minorities are disproportionately exposed in American work organizations” (p. 130). In researching whether or not racial and ethnic minorities exposure to discrimination at work impacted their physical health, Din-Dzietham, Nembhard, Collins, and Davis (2004) found that “stressful racist/discriminatory encounters at work are associated with increased systolic blood pressure and diastolic blood pressure and increased likelihood of self-reported hypertension in African–Americans when discrimination originates from non-African–Americans as well as from other African–Americans” (p. 458). Klonoff (2001) found that chronic exposure to racist events decreased the likelihood that African-Americans would seek treatment for either their physical health or their mental health which could have long-term fatal consequences. Stress was a common theme for the participants in this study and sometimes that stress was manifested in physical symptoms. For example, Nancy, a Black woman in her sixties, talked about physical symptoms that she experienced only when she entered her work building and that no one else experienced.

Nancy: Emotionally, I don't know. But physically, I started having stomach aches and I didn't attribute anything initially. But then I started paying attention and then I thought it was an odd smell in the building because I would come into the building and I would get this achy feeling in my tummy. You know I said I'm smelling something, and the guy said no nothing. So, I realized that this place was making me sick which is not good. I literally felt like it was toxic.

Faith, a Black woman over sixty, talked about feeling the physical manifestation of stress. She dreaded going into the office and doing a job she loved. She later said that the

symptoms completely disappeared once she left the job. She said she also no longer had headaches, which she felt were also due to stress.

Faith: I felt that being at that organization was a tremendous deficit on my health. I can remember being in meeting where I actually felt my body being stressed beyond anything I've ever experienced before. It was a very accusatory and unforgiving environment because they basically were oh, they have this compliance thinking. And it's a blaming culture. You are always defending yourself, and you are always on point. You're always wondering Is that person coming to my office, and what are they going to say? What are they going to complain about today? Or what happened? It was just a real difficult circumstance.

Clear threads of connectedness existed across the descriptions of encounters and the impact of those experiences. For Kevin, Nancy, and Faith, it took leaving for them to recognize their symptoms were associated with the stress of the job. Along with others in the study they said that leaving (exiting) was good for their health. Exiters were asked if they had any regrets about leaving an established organization to launch their own businesses and for many their responses were emotional and emphatically affirming that it was the best decision they ever made.

Emerging Themes

The individual stories expressed during interviews provided contextual background for understanding shared lived experiences among the participant group, despite working in different organizations across a variety of industries. These concrete examples of multiple oppressions nested within organizations provide us with some insight into participants' rationale for exiting an organization and launching an entrepreneurial venture. Whether the connection to identity was tangible during the moment of decision, or something that formed in their conscious thoughts over time, it was exhibited in reflections during participant

interviews. Identity-based experiences of bias, discrimination, and microaggressions marked participants' careers. For example, in some experiences the presenting issue was connected to gender, while others felt the relevance of race, class, or immigrant status. The pattern of responses in the interview data resonate with the results reported in the work of Calas, Ou, & Smircich, (2013), Holvino (2010), and Bernstein et al. (2015). Sometimes the participants experienced oppressions simultaneously. Participants' perspective and interpretation depended upon the specific subject or incident they were describing.

Theme One: Encounters with bias and oppression.

Under *Encounters with bias and oppression*, there were threads of similarities both in how the behavior unfolded and in how it impacted the participants. In all but two cases, the participants had negative experiences connected to their identity. The participants expressed varying levels of concern related to how those experiences impacted them. Not all of these experiences were motivators for leaving their organizations, if they left. They were, however, either partial motivators or the driver for launching businesses. Twenty-eight participants (93 percent) had negative encounters related to their race, ethnicity, gender, or age leading to exit or straddling. This theme reached across multiple identities and includes all forms of bias, discrimination, and microaggressions including misogynistic examples such as sexual harassment. The participants conveyed a sense of the injustice they felt at the treatment they received. They were clear that dominant group members were not having the same level nor same kind of negative experiences in the workplace. Ana offered that everyone had been impacted by new leadership in the organization but noted that the people of color were disproportionately impacted by the policy and practice changes that were implemented. Valeria, who entered the workforce with low self-esteem and a low sense of self-worth had

her fears affirmed. People in her workplace and in her identity group held low-level, menial positions. Kevin was used to leading. After entering two positions in a row where he was persistently attacked both verbally and through marginalizing behavior that led him to feel devalued, he started to believe that he was no longer leadership material. Camila constantly confronted the bias but was frequently labeled a problem employee. Valentina changed the way she talked, the way she dressed, and the way she carried herself in the workplace to detract from being sexualized, painfully giving up a piece of who she was. And Amber did everything she could to make herself less attractive to her supervisor, to distance herself from having to have contact with him. Only exiting the organization stopped the harassment.

These are all very different stories, and yet they are all rooted in oppression. Those connected lived experiences occurred across industries and it did not matter if the people were lower level in the organization or in senior leadership roles. The behavior was perpetrated by their supervisors, colleagues, and subordinates. Maria exclaimed her surprise at how much more empowered White colleagues in lower-level positions felt compared to how disempowered more senior colleagues who identified as underrepresented minorities felt in expressing their ideas and putting forth their agendas.

It is also important to note that 40 percent of the sample identified as immigrants. I noted in my memos that of the individuals who were the most emotional (defined by heightened volume, animation when speaking about a particular circumstance, or crying in the interview) were immigrants. Amy and Valentina in particular often became animated, angry and hurt in recalling the encounters. I was not an unaffected observer. I felt myself wanting to hug them and tell them how sorry I was for the pain they were feeling. In both cases I knew the women personally. I also noted that in the stories of oppression, many

talked of the added isolation of being a newcomer to the area. They mentioned that for minorities in Boston, it is not easy to get “in” with the locals and discussed the process for enduring and pushing to be let in. This experience coupled with the workplace oppression made for some difficult times for immigrants.

While theme one, *encounters with bias and oppression*, described how the participants experienced their workplaces connected to their identities, theme two, *power and powerlessness*, demonstrated why navigating those experiences was so precarious.

Theme Two: Power and Powerlessness

In the *power and powerlessness section*, each story of how this behavior presented itself and how it impacted them was unique. There were descriptive themes within the stories. While I was only able to share representative examples of the volume of examples provided in the interviews, there were several of the participants who were concerned that pushing back, exercising voice, would be construed as using the race card to promote themselves. They took it for granted that they would not be believed or taken seriously. So, they opted for silence. Maria observed that pattern and refused to say anything because in her experience it would not have a positive impact. She also didn't assume that those engaged in the behavior that negatively impacted her understood that impact as linked to her identity in the way that she did. In fact, several others, like Barbara and Sharon, expressed similar thoughts. Silence in the participants was not due to loyalty to the organization as Hirschman (1970) theorized. It was connected in their lack of faith that the organization would be moved to act or correct the problem. Hirschman also theorized that the strength of the voice would have to be significant enough to compel the organization to act. In the cases in this sample, it was not. Even when participants left the organization, they often left silently, with only six of

the participants telling their organization the real reasons they left. The underrepresentation that was discussed in theme one, *encounters with bias and oppression*, means that their numerical presence within the organization was so low as to not impact the operations in a way that compelled a response.

Another expressed reason for silence not previously noted is the concern about Boston being too small and the initial concern that having a positive relationship with the organization mattered to these individuals who had become entrepreneurs.

And still, there were those who chose to exercise voice despite the odds that it would result in additional and compounding negative experiences. Maria's comment about remaining silent because it only makes it worse highlights her previous experience with voice. It was either something she experienced directly or witnessed, but something of which she certainly had intimate knowledge. Camila recalled being fired in one instance and being told she was too sensitive in another. Nancy was told she was too sensitive. Kevin was ignored. Amanda and Sara filed lawsuits against the organizations they exited and won. The responses to their enacting voice further reinforced the feeling of futility in trying to impact change in their organizations.

This second theme would be incomplete if it weren't intentionally connected to theme three, *health impact*. There is emotion attached to the decision to enact voice or remain silent. You also cannot fully understand theme one, *encounters with bias and oppression*, without also connecting it to this health impact. The next section describes the ways in which the experiences of the two themes affect the mental and physical health of the participants in this sample.

Theme Three: Health Impact

The third theme provided an extensive list of representative quotes that were included because the participant descriptions brought to light the ways in which the behaviors affected them. It was not everything every participant said about their emotional responses, but the nuances in this section are important. Consider the lack of awareness of why some said they were not feeling well or smelled things others could not smell. Consider the nightmares, sleeplessness, stress, anxiety, and trauma that they described. Specific words and phrases they used to describe the emotional toll on their mental health included: trauma, not able to sleep, sadness, frustration, hurt feelings, disappointment, imposter syndrome, angry, festering inside me, felt badly, stunts you, lost confidence, feel worthless, devastating, isolated, anxiety, in tears, tumultuous, needed therapy, and triggering. The physical effects of not sleeping and having nightmares, the physical toll of high stress levels all have an impact on an individuals' ability to be productive and be fully engaged in their work. Faith talked about the all-consuming impact describing it as a deficit to her health beyond anything she had ever experienced before. April said the location of her office, in the basement, signaled the value her organization placed on her role as a diversity professional. She said the long-term physical effect of that required that she take Vitamin D supplements which she had never had to do before.

These three themes are enmeshed and though they were discussed separately, the following section links them together.

Analysis across themes: How did this shape or inform their decision to exit or straddle and launch their own business?

The study finds that the experiences with bias and oppression, the struggle with power leading to a desire for autonomy and the health toll of these experiences are motivators for exiting or straddling and launching an entrepreneurial venture. As we consider these motivators for launching a business, it is also important to consider some additional relevant variables. Some relevant non-ethnographic descriptive characteristics of the participant pool from their interviews are listed in Table 4 below. Note that the interview questions were intentionally designed to help draw out lived-experiences, including motivators behind choices the participants made leading up to a decision to exit their organization.

Table 4. Non-demographic descriptors of the participant pool

16 said they anticipated identity-based challenges in the workplace prior to entering the workforce or soon after beginning their careers

19 challenged the oppressive behavior at some point, with 10 of them reporting significant retaliation as a result

6 said they told the organization the complete truth about reasons for leaving, while 3 of those individuals did not tie their reason for leaving to identity-based oppression

14 were primary wage earners in their household at the time of exiting

Only 1 had a written business plan prior to launching; 2 others eventually wrote one

Sixteen of the participants anticipated some challenges, though twenty-eight experienced them. More than half provided examples of pushing back with half of them sharing examples of retaliation for having done so. Whereas organizations need employees to function, and whereas they have increasingly invested significant financial resources in diversifying their employee pool, it would behoove the organization to act in ways that assists them in retaining this talent. “Organizations need to be able to recognize and discourage even subtle forms of discrimination but identifying such discrimination can be

challenging because it may be largely in the eye of the beholder” (Offermann et al., 2014, p. 499). If they do not believe the employees who are enduring the experiences, or if the employees are not disclosing the problems, and they do not otherwise have a way to assess the reality of the discriminatory effects of individual actors and organizational culture, the behavior will continue. The burden to see and identify the oppressive behavior and the structures that perpetuate them should be on the organizational management. The organizational bind is this: If the oppressed do not feel safe or do not feel it will matter to share their experiences, then the managers do not have the feedback needed to enact more effective diverse and inclusive cultures. Without this kind of information, dominant group leadership loses opportunities to question and grow their own competencies and build the organizations’ capacities to create truly inclusive policies and practices.

My first research question: *How do identity-based concerns impact the experiences of underrepresented minorities in organizations and their decision to stay or exit?* is answered in the following way:

The negative identity-based experiences rooted in organizational power structures have significant health impacts on underrepresented minority professionals. These negative experiences motivated them to escape the oppression and exit the organization. The phenomenological approach was important as it allowed for the sharing of the stories without validating or confirming them. The relevance of an approach such as this is to understand the drivers for the individuals’ choices. What matters is what they perceived, believed, and acted on. While there may have been plausible explanations for some of the behaviors that were not rooted in oppression, the participants belief in the link was the motivator for exiting or straddling and launching.

This does not account for why they do not leave and join another established organization. Why did they instead opt for entrepreneurship? Close to half of the participants were primary wage earners at the time of launching their businesses and took on significant risk in doing so. Chapter 5 is organized around research question two: *Why do underrepresented minorities choose to become entrepreneurs rather than join a competing organization?*

CHAPTER 5

CONTEXT AND INDUSTRY CHANGES

Thus far, this study has explored participants' intersectional experiences linked to bias and oppression, power and powerlessness dynamics, and health impacts. Throughout their careers, these underrepresented minority professionals have navigated switching roles, switching organizations, and shifting to different industries. Grappling with a variety of decisions connected to managing their daily lives, they have had to consider how the decisions they made along the way might influence future outcomes. Continuing to use a qualitative framework, I arrange the stories and experiences to showcase the participants' shared lived experiences. Chapter Five is organized around research question two: ***Why do underrepresented minorities choose to become entrepreneurs rather than join a competing organization?***

This chapter presents findings that emerged from an analysis of the choices participants made leading them to entrepreneurship. Three themes emerged connected to these choices during their time within established organizations. Participants had to determine a path toward entrepreneurship that involved deciding whether or not they should remain at their organization while launching another business – straddle, or whether they

should leave employment at their organization – exit, and then launch. In making these decisions they needed to consider the importance of their relationship to the organization and the individuals within the organization. For some, the ongoing need for a connection to the organization impacted the “what to say” about the reasons for leaving. Furthermore, in launching their own businesses, the entrepreneurs have had to consider whether or not they would remain within the same industry. The following sections will review the three themes: ***Straddling and Exiting, Voice and Silence in Leaving, and Exiting Industries***. So as not to confuse these themes with the previous three themes in Chapter Four, the themes in Chapter Five will be labeled themes four through six.

Do I Stay or Do I Go?: Straddling vs. Exiting

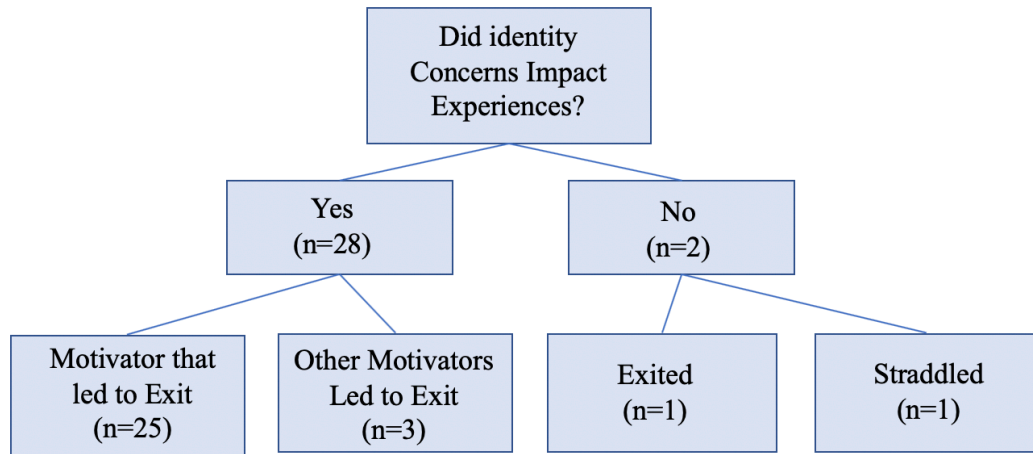
This study found that identity concerns impacted underrepresented minorities’ decisions to launch their own businesses. The struggle between deciding to exit and launch, and deciding to straddle while launching, was apparent in their accounts. The majority (n=28) said their experiences in the workplace were impacted by bias and oppression. Additionally, nearly all (n=25) described those experiences as having a direct impact on their decision to launch and exit or launch and straddle. Of those, three indicated that although they had these negative experiences, ultimately, the experiences were not the motivators for exit. This group of three included two Latina women and one Black woman. Additionally, two men did not present any experiences in the workplace connected to their identities. Bao, an Asian man in his forties, left because a layoff package was presented that was appealing and provided him with an opportunity to take a risk investing in the real estate market. He told himself he would try entrepreneurship for the duration of his unemployment benefits,

and if successful, would remain an entrepreneur in real estate. Bao said he was treated well at work and did not perceive there were any opportunities withheld from him. Heng, an Asian man in his fifties, always felt he was treated similarly to his counterparts and that identity never played a role in his advancement or project opportunities. He ultimately left the organization over dissatisfaction with leadership decisions he said impacted everyone. He expressed an overall desire to be autonomous in his craft. Bao and Heng mentioned that perhaps their lack of negative experiences was connected to their identity in the way that Asians are seen as “model minorities”. However, the Asian women in this study did have negative experiences connected to their identities. This presents an opportunity for future research about the impact of gender on the concept of bias linked to model minority status.

The literature discusses the various motivations individuals have for becoming entrepreneurs. Linan and Chen (2009) wrote that “where culture is relatively unfavorable toward entrepreneurship, ‘dissatisfied’ individuals would seek personal realization through self-employment” (p. 597). Buttner and Moore (1997) found that “women’s entrepreneurial motivations were a complex function of personal aspirations and organizational influences” (p. 41). Schjoedt and Shaver (2007) asserted nascent entrepreneurship was motivated by the following “preentrepreneurial job satisfaction would show evidence of some form of pushing individuals towards entrepreneurship” (p. 746). Consistently, the organization shows up as playing a role in the decision to launch.

In considering participants’ motivators for launching and exiting or launching and straddling, Figure 3 portrays the identity impact model for the sample in this study.

Figure 3. Did identity concerns impact experiences?



For twenty-five of the participants, negative encounters with bias and oppression motivated exiting the organization or remaining as *straddlers* with the goal of launching a business. Participants were asked questions about the reasons they decided to become entrepreneurs. First, I will discuss the responses of those who decided to stay and launch, the *straddlers*.

The Straddlers

At the time of the interview, seven participants identified as individuals who were working for an established organization while operating their own business. I have called these individuals *straddlers*. Several others mentioned they had also straddled prior to exiting permanently for entrepreneurship. While some entrepreneurs straddle out of necessity, many take advantage of the networks afforded to them by way of remaining employed at an established organization. Still, others leave the organization and change industries entirely. The entrepreneurship literature is more likely to consider entrepreneurs

taking on de novo ventures from scratch. Little attention is paid to entrepreneurs who have rich career histories and whose existing careers are even the platforms on which they launch.

The decision to straddle was driven by a range of needs including financial security, access to networks and perks such as health benefits, and traveling. Financial security was by far the strongest reason for straddling. The following representative quotes provide insight into the way the participants understood motivators for staying or exiting.

Donna, Black woman in her thirties: The work (at the established organization) expands my reach and my brand. It also expands my knowledge and my intellectual capacity because of what I need to learn on the job. It's a reputation builder because I tend to select an organization that is a boost and because you're affiliated with this organization it just looks good on the side of your business. So those are the reasons I tend to stay (employed) in some capacity (at) some great organizations. And I don't mind the work because it's always aligned with the services I provide for my business.

Maria, Latina woman in her fifties: It was my first attempt at having my own business. I had it for almost 10 years. Then I got divorced and things got really hard for me...So, I just had to leave the business behind and then went on with my career, which I never left. Then, where there was a situation where I was not happy with the job, I decided I just wanted to work for myself, and started my own business...And my new goal is to be able to go full-time. I'm still not full-time, but my goal is that I work for myself. I no longer want to be going through all the decisions that we are discussing.

Valeria, Latina woman in her forties: Personally, I think I am super, super, super underpaid. And that's a struggle for me. (I stay employed) because I'm still trying to figure out how (entrepreneurship) works.

Helen, Black woman in her twenties: Well, for one, I definitely still need the funds...And okay, are you married, and you have a spouse to carry your insurance plan? Do you have children?...And that's what I need my full-time job for...It's like I do want to be able to get into a corporate environment, and get that experience of moving on up, kind of exploring what other career options I have, because I know that experience that I

haven't even had yet is going to be so much more valuable to me down the road. So I think that it's important to stay employed, not just because I need the money, but also because of the experience that I still have to gain.

Faith, Black woman over sixty: Just basically dollars and cents. I was offered a job that was paying really good money at the time. Also, there was childcare. And basically, the opportunity at (the organization) to travel, and that was something really appealing to me...But basically, the perks the travel the money.

Other reasons participants shared for remaining as *straddlers* included: it gave them flexibility to take risks they couldn't otherwise take, it was too risky to leave, taking time to learn the elements of their business before leaving a steady paycheck, being a single income household or primary breadwinner, and taking on a different job that did not require mental energy allowing for focus during personal hours on the entrepreneurial venture.

Some participants who identified as *exiters* at the time of the interview had straddled at some point prior to exiting. Below are the reflections three of the participants shared about the various stages they flowed through: staying, leaving, returning, and straddling.

Ana, Multiracial woman in her fifties: I still need a paycheck. The organization that I went to work for wouldn't have given me any options of interest in terms of what I wanted to do with my business. It (the new employer) really was a space where my mind could take a rest from the 25 years I was at (the organization), where I could kind of take a little bit of a pause and refocus. Kind of try to prioritize what I wanted to do...I think that everything happened kind of organically and wonderfully...And yeah, the mortgage has to get paid.

Kevin, Black man in his fifties: Yeah, so it wasn't until around two and a half years ago that I started doing it on full-time basis...(The business) needed much more attention to detail. An opportunity arose where I could do this on a full-time basis. 1) The business was growing. 2) I wanted to take it to the next level 3) I knew that I didn't want to work for anybody else.

Delia, Multiracial woman in her forties: I was doing it for almost two and a half years so I started in 2015 and then I went

back to the company last year part-time so that I could still do some of it. Part of it was, after seeing the model of the business that I wanted to really launch, it was very capital-intensive...I explored other models, but it wasn't the way I wanted to grow the business. So, part of it was just, I don't know, maybe it was about being an entrepreneur. There's certain things you really want to do, and there's certain things you don't. I didn't want to pursue a mobile pop-up, I wanted a thing for the long-term, I wanted a physical space and I knew very well the challenges with that and never found the right place because there's so much risk you can take and I didn't, having been an older entrepreneur, I wasn't willing to take the risk of putting up my 401K plan and all my savings for this like some people are willing to do. I kept thinking how do I keep growing in the least risky way financially...I haven't completely given up but it's a very specific thing I'm looking to be able to fully launch the business that I want...I'll be honest I want to be an entrepreneur I don't want to work for anybody else but because these networks don't generate enough money just to sustain, like be financially sustaining, I can't. Like I need a steady paycheck.

Ana took a lower-level job at another organization as a bridge for a couple of years as she prepared for her launch. Kevin also talked about reclaiming his self-esteem through building and running his business. He was adamant that unless he had no other choice, he would not ever work for someone else again. Delia had taken a severance package to launch her business and encountered many unexpected challenges. Although she has returned to work for an established organization, she is resolute in her goal to become a full-time entrepreneur. In her interview, Delia was clear she was only willing to take on risk so long as it did not put the financial stability of her family in jeopardy. Having Grown up in poverty is an experience she carries with her and works to avoid at all costs. While her class status has changed as a result of her career, she has not forgotten what it was like.

The Exiters

At the time of the interview, twenty-three participants identified as individuals who left an established organization to operate their own businesses. The reasons for choosing to exit included sexual harassment, discrimination, desire to follow a passion or mission, a temporary patch that turned into a permanent opportunity, and autonomy. In most cases, participants identified motivators as a combination of experiences rather than a singular issue. The following representative quotes provide insight into the ways in which the entrepreneurs considered their options and made the decision to leave.

Amber, Black woman in her thirties: I wanted to get away from everything that made me feel uncomfortable.⁵

Ana, Multiracial woman in her fifties: (I didn't join another organization because), it would be too easy to step into the same role I was in. Answering to someone else. Doing what other people dictated of me. I wanted to make the decision to be able to pick and choose (my own projects).

Barbara, Black woman in her fifties: Because in my view a lot of the issues that came up at these companies...I didn't think that it would be necessarily any different anywhere else.

Lorena, Indigenous Latina in her forties: I like that I'm not part of the everyday dysfunction (of an organization). Whereas if you're in an organization, and it's funky, well you are in it.

Nicole, Black woman in her sixties: Well that was the last full-time day job I had were somebody was ruling my life...I think in going other places It was going to be the same. I was like, what am I going to see that's going to be different? That I would work and be an excellent employee and still not get what I want?

Samuel, Latino man in his sixties: Working for somebody else you're not going to get anywhere. You have to work for yourself.

Maria, Latina woman in her fifties: I think it's because of especially my previous jobs more than this one. Having been in

⁵ In Chapter Four, Amber shared her experience of sexual harassment.

the executive level and the way that I was treated. I feel like I was treated more fairly when I was in the front lines than I was when I was at the executive level. And I have to say that it's not by everyone, but usually your direct manager had a lot to do with it. They have your life in their hands. They are the ones who write your performance reviews. They are the ones who feel empowered over you... There's not that much you can do.

Amber didn't just want to get away from her organization, she left her industry entirely. She shared that she didn't want to have a reason to interact with anyone from the organization or the field, and that she had lost faith in the industry, not just the organization. Maria felt that it was harder for her in her executive role. Collectively, participants expressed a sense that if they joined another organization, they would continue to experience similar bias and oppression. The only way to end the risk of continued negative experiences was to run their own organization. As Heilman and Chen (2003) note: Earlier, we read quotes from Despite the increased number of women and minority group members entering work organizations, and the explicit efforts of corporations to provide access to those in these groups through recruitment and affirmative action programs and policies, there remains an insidious barrier to their advancement. They often are not placed in the visible and demanding jobs that provide a conduit up the organizational ladder. The reasoning underlying these placement decisions is based on stereotypical beliefs about what women and members of various minority groups are like and the inconsistency of these conceptions with what is thought to be necessary to succeed in a corporate position of responsibility.

Diego, Kevin, and Valeria who discussed the experience of being put in a box and being told what others think you are capable of based on your identity. Launching a business was their way of taking back control of their potential and leaving was a way of taking back their self-worth. Four entrepreneurs in this study started their careers knowing they wanted to

own their own businesses someday. For the remainder, those who hadn't thought much about running a business, they turned it into a port of last resort when the workplace became too toxic.

In leaving an organization and in operating an entrepreneurial venture, participants needed to make decisions on how to go about leaving in a way that would not negatively impact their business. They had to consider what to tell their supervisors and colleagues. They had to decide whether or not to tell the full reasons for leaving. Theme Five discusses the considerations and choices related to *Voice and Silence in Leaving*.

Voice and Silence in Leaving

Six participants claimed they told the organization their full reasons for leaving, while three of those six individuals did not link their reason for leaving to identity-based oppression. If they use voice at the junction of leaving the organization, they provide the organization with vital information which is lost if they simply exit without voice, as Hirschman points out. Voice enables organizations to hear how their operations are not performing well. Whether or not organizations can truly comprehend or make changes based upon that voice is a separate question, but is not an option if voices are not raised in the first place. It disrupts the feedback loop. Theme Five, *Voice and Silence in Leaving*, is organized around the participants who linked their negative identity-based experiences to their decision to leave and their rationale for doing so. It is followed by those participants who provided partial feedback about their reasons for leaving and those who said they did not provide any feedback. First, the participants who said they shared the complete reasons are represented in the following quotes:

Isabella, Latina woman in her seventies: I left them because my boss and I did not get along, and it was one of those examples of, it's not fair. He and I argued probably three or four times a week. He made me crazy and I apparently made him crazy. He eventually got fired...He, in my opinion, was dishonest. We would go to meetings and he would say things that I knew were untrue...(a colleague) said, it'll catch up with him someday...But I would go in and I would take him on and say something. That didn't go down well, so eventually we came to a point where basically, I had to go. So, I negotiated a deal with him for me to leave...otherwise I was going to go and spill the beans...So that then gave me the cushion. I needed to then decide what I was going to do next.

Nicole, Black woman in her sixties: Well what I had decided at that point, was that I would start my business...What I told them was, if I'm going to work this hard for anybody It's going to be for me. And that was the reason.

April, Black woman in her thirties: I did express (the full reasons) during my exit interview...I was really open with the why. You know, I was raised to not always articulate myself or to kind of just go along with things right, to kind of just get along, to accept the opportunities that I've had. So, when I left (the organization), and also with my departure at the other institution, I really like coaxed myself to speak my truth even if my voice quivered. I could have just left without really saying much, especially with the last institution, I could have just left. But I really wanted to use my voice like a resounding drum. Like I really wanted to. I really wanted someone to know why I left and not to put (words) in my mouth. I really wanted my last institution to recognize the various reasons why (April's) not here now...it was partly making a stance.

Isabella's full interview revealed that the reasons she and her supervisor did not get along was connected to identity-based harassment and his sexual harassment of one of her female subordinates. Nicole did not think about the racial and gender dynamic at the point that she left the organization, so, in her mind, she told the truth. It was only much later that she was able to reflect on those dynamics as her motivator for leaving. Amanda, a Black woman in her sixties who sued her organization for creating a hostile environment connected

to race and won, is not represented in these quotes as her story was already included in Chapter Four. However, through her lawsuit, her reason for leaving was made clear to the organization. This was also true of Sara, a multiracial woman in her forties. She sued one of the organizations she exited and she won. She made her reasons for leaving clear. However, she did not tell the full story when leaving the last organization she worked for before launching her business.

Sara: Oh, I told my boss. Yeah, I told her...But I didn't tell central office... I was conscious about, you know, needing to stay connected to my mentor (her boss). That's who I cared about.

Sara initially took a medical leave due to the stress of the oppressive work environment. She said she used the time to consider her next steps and set up her business. There were many who said they did not tell the full reasons, and others who said they told some of the reasons. There were also a few who said they told the full reasons, however, in sharing their stories it was clear to me they only told a partial version of the reasons. For example, they shared information about a specific driver and skipped the history of bias and oppression they had experienced. Next are some representative samples of what participants said about why they did not tell the full reasons about leaving.

Camila, Latina woman in her fifties: No, not at all. I told them I was going to explore other things. That I was thinking about moving and you know it wasn't really honest. It wasn't honest. I didn't think it mattered really. I didn't want to be vulnerable in their eyes...I wanted to leave with my head held high as opposed to being defeated by them.

Nancy, Black woman in her sixties: I told them I was leaving to return to my business. I didn't talk real specifically about anything other than that. I didn't tell most people because I negotiated a severance coming out of there. Even though I was resigning. I didn't even think I have a chance of getting it. I knew that I was capable of doing this work and I knew that we didn't

get along, but I suggested to her I had taken a risk coming in here. And I had abandoned my business and through no fault of my own, we're not getting along. I'd like to leave, and I put a number out there. She agreed to it and then we literally shook hands.

Amy, Asian woman in her fifties: I was always told to be very polite when I leave, so I was extremely polite. At first, they were shocked because they had never heard of someone who is leaving with no prospects. They were like what are you going to do?

Tomas, Latino man in his fifties: No, I didn't really tell him I just said it was time for me to move on. And so, he was good with that.

Ana, Multiracial woman in her fifties: I told them that I was ready to figure out what I wanted to do for the next part of my life, the second half of my life. It did not reflect the real reasons I was leaving.

Kevin, Black man in his fifties: I had an exit interview that, quite frankly, wasn't an interview. That if I were to be truthful, how can I say? Oh, the things that I'm saying to you I would never express to them. It was very congenial. You know, hey thank you for this opportunity sort of thing. "Wish you the best. If you need anything Kevin." Hey absolutely. "Take care." So, there was an opportunity for me to say something, but I chose not to...Because this is the thing I have to be very careful about. Because all-in-all, I don't think it would have made a difference. If I really felt that by me saying something it would have made a difference, I would have. And up until the end, I don't think it really would have made a difference. So, it's best to leave on terms of making the relationship of the closure on the positive side.

Except for Amy and April,⁶ none of the participants shared examples of their supervisors or organizations expressing any sign of regret connected to their decision to leave or making attempts to retain them in the organization. It demonstrated either a lack of interest or another apparent negative act of bias against the participants. It reinforced for the

⁶ April's quote was not included.

participants that they were making the right decision, as illustrated by Giancalone and Knouse (1989: 60): “Dissembling to avert a negative recommendation. Interviewees distort information because they fear that if they do not, the information provided will have a boomerang effect in the form of organizational retaliation.” By leaving without kicking up any dust, these participants avoided retaliatory behavior that could follow them into their entrepreneurial venture or affect their ability to return to the field if that became a necessity in the future.

The following examples are from those participants who said they didn’t tell the full reasons or who said they relied on the reasons to reveal themselves to the organization.

Diego, Latino man in his forties: They know the reason why I left because they put me in that predicament to train other people. If you've been there for 18 years and you have all the qualifications to work in every single department, and then you apply for a position and everyone in HR said you aced it, you have it, congratulations! And then, they give someone else the position who has no experience at all, and then they ask you to train them? I think you have a general idea of how they view you at that point, you know?

Faith, Black woman over sixty: It was a personal contract between me and the CEO. He knew that I was going to leave, and he supported it. And he said, well, how do you want to leave?

Sharon, Black woman in her sixties: They would ultimately realize (why I left). Which they did...And he (the owner) knew how crazy their dynamics were.

Barbara, Black woman in her fifties: I also acknowledge the fact that a lot of these people were well-meaning people who just don't understand or take it personally because they feel like they are doing so great. But they have a hard time taking feedback...I had an executive say if there was anything negative, he didn't want to hear it. *So, you don't want to know what's going on in your organization?*...So I'm like, not only do you not know what's going on, but you're telling me you don't *want* to know?...I can't trust you. And you know what, NO, I'm not

going to say anything. You might turn it around and make it a comment about me. And I want to leave with good relationships.

In his interview, Diego said he did not plan his exit. He just went in one day after he had been asked to train the person who was hired in the role he had applied for, and just made a decision on the spot. He wanted more for himself and knew he was not going to get it there even after eighteen years. Faith knew her boss did not want to work with her and did not have a reason to terminate her. She made a deal with him he couldn't refuse. These encounters suggest that the organizations were not blind to what was happening. Their lack of response is an indicator of a lack of capacity or willingness to respond effectively. Sharon started an organization that would directly compete with the one she left. While she did not tell them, the community was too small for them not to find out. It is possible, as Barbara suggests, that some individuals were well-meaning and were unaware of the impact of their behaviors. In the end, even she did not feel that it was safe for her to provide direct feedback about her experiences. She was not alone in that concern. Kalarska & Aldrich wrote, "people who use voice while remaining in an organization are vulnerable to retaliation from management or leaders" (1980, p. 55).

There were several examples when the dominant group members, in the roles of managers, supervisors or executives, could have shown-up and co-created a supportive work culture. They could have responded to what was happening in ways that left the participants feeling supported. In these narratives, they did not. Those who exited were either in a position in which it was a feasible choice economically or they felt so oppressed by the behavior of those in their organization that they felt compelled to take large risks in order to maintain their identity in an environment free of the bias they had experienced for so long. At the point where they made the decision to leave, they did so without having an impact during

their time employed by the organization and therefore did not see their leaving as a time when they would be heard. Therefore, when the participants were asked about their reasons for leaving, they did not trust the motivations of the person conducting the interview as a representative of the organization. According to Giacalone and Knouse (1989), “all too often, exit interviews pit the interviewer's objective (getting useful information) against the interviewee's objective (distorting information for self-protection or the protection of others)” (p. 60).

Whether the participants told the full reasons, partial reasons, or none of the reasons, for twenty-five of the participants, the negative experiences linked to identity directly impacted their decisions to either exercise voice or remain silent in leaving. Regardless of whether they enacted voice or remained silent, the act of leaving is considered a form of *voice*, feedback for the organization to consider (Hirschman, 1970).

For these participants bias and discrimination in the workplace had become so unbearable it compelled them to take drastic actions to disrupt the power dynamics and position themselves in a place of autonomy. But some couldn't do it fully – they needed a reliable income or even more interestingly (in my opinion) they need the relationships they've procured in order to successfully launch, so they did not see fully exercising voice as an option even during the process of disrupting those power dynamics. So, while on the surface, the bias and discrimination may appear in some ways to have had latent positive impacts in motivating change, in other ways they simply repositioned already oppressed individuals into further dependence. Prior to launching they simply had to show up to work and do their job and get paid, albeit while enduring acts of bias. After launching, however, they've invested finances and time and their actual identity into this new venture, allowing

themselves to consider the possibility of being autonomous while in reality they must negotiate relationships with their oppressors either to maintain that income (straddlers) or in order to grow their venture (exiters).

Even when they exit, they cannot fully leave; they carry these experiences of bias and discrimination with them into their new venture and this historical oppression dictates their actions in a new space. The emotional labor of enduring bias is not fully relieved by launching a new business; in many cases it's displaced and in fact exacerbated by the stress of self-employment while necessarily maintaining professional relationships with the offenders.

This leads to a consideration of Hirschman's (1970) assertion that if you keep individuals from the leaving the organization, it leads to more individuals exercising voice. However, Kolarska and Aldrich (1980) found that keeping individuals from leaving may have an opposite effect, creating an environment where individuals feel they cannot speak. I found that individuals who stayed, and who had experienced identity-based bias and discrimination, responded to the decision of enacting voice based on their history of observing the organizations' response to acts of bias and discrimination over time. Their sensitivity to the systems of oppression operating in their work environment provided them with the indicators of the likely organizational response to their voice. In the cases in this study, those who enacted voice, did so out of frustration despite the indicators that their voice would not create change in the organization. Exiting not only has a negative impact on the *exiter*, but it can also be negative for the organization. The literature shows that employees leaving to launch their own businesses has a worse impact on organizations than employees

who leave to work for other established organizations (Campbell, Ganco, Franco, and Agarwal, 2010).

Leaving, for some of the participants, meant not only leaving their organizations, but sometimes leaving the industry they were working in. Theme Six is structured around the complex nature of the decisions participants shared linked to their decisions to exit industries when launching their business.

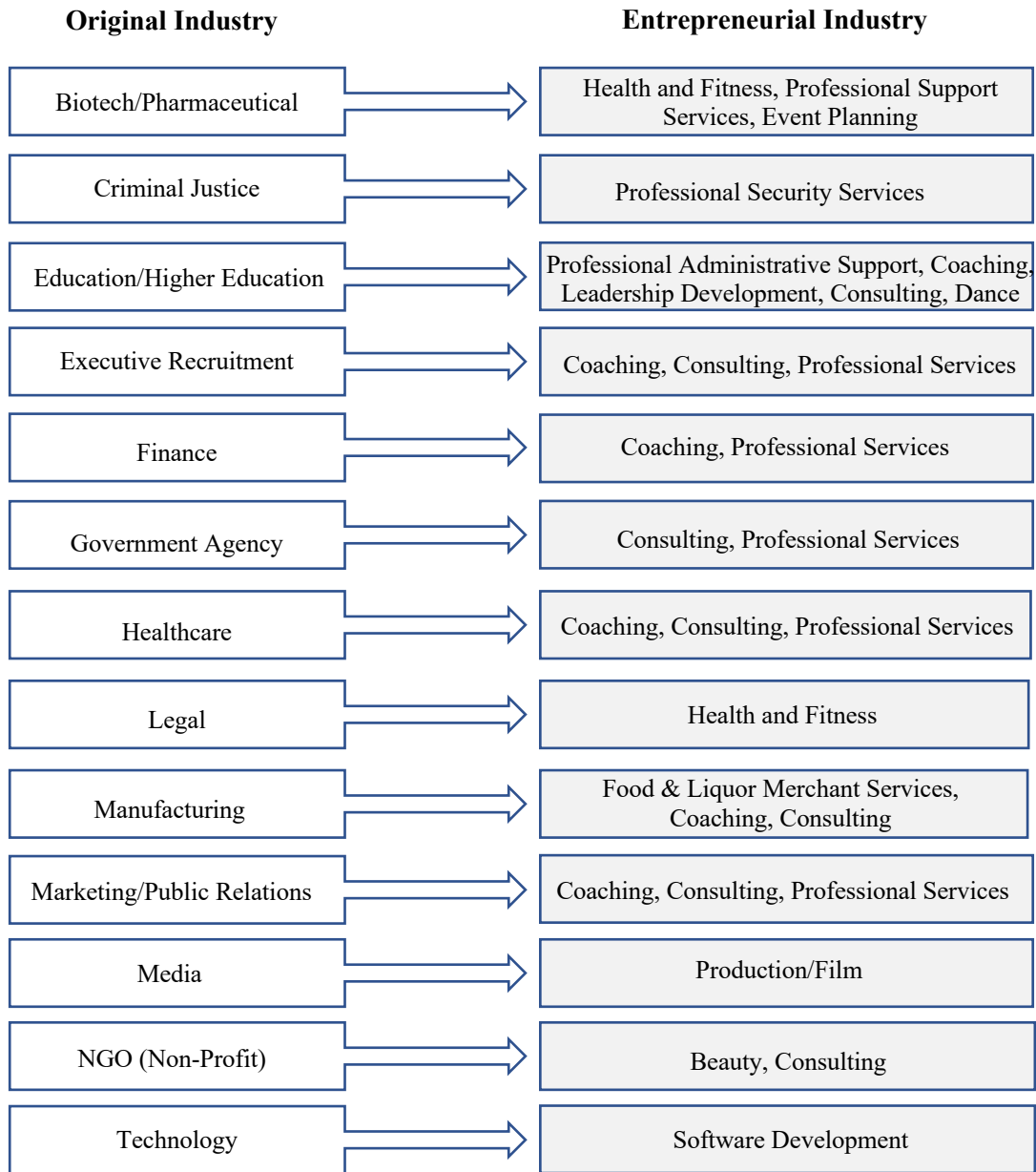
Exiting Industries

For this study, participants shared experiences in organizations from throughout their careers. They did not exclusively focus on the organization they were leaving or that they left to launch their businesses. Organizations represented in the narratives of the participants were a representation across sectors including NGOs, government organizations, and private sector organizations. The thread of negative identity-based experiences wove across and through them all. The participants walked through histories of working in various industries and discussed the cumulative impact of bias and oppression on their choices. For example, one participant started out working as a public relations and marketing professional and finished in higher education before launching her own business. There were a few who remained in the same field throughout their entire career, although they may not have stayed within the same industry. For example, one participant always worked in human resources, but in changing jobs, switched from the manufacturing industry to the higher education industry. “Women and minorities encounter experiences within traditional organizational settings that can result in feelings of disenchantment with corporate life and their opportunities for career advancement” (Heilman & Chen, 2003, p. 350). For some in our sample, this disenchantment resulted in an industry shift.

The industries where the participants worked before launching their own ventures are shown as “Original Industry” in *Figure 4. Industry shifts by underrepresented minority entrepreneurs* below. The column that describes the “Entrepreneurial Industry”⁷ lists the various new industries that the participants in the study switched into from the original industry. For many, these are completely different from anything they had ever done, and for others their choices led them to evolutions of the work they had been doing. In fact, a few commented they wanted to have nothing to do with the industry or have a reason to cross paths with those within that industry.

⁷ Not all entrepreneurs switched industries. Only those who did are represented in this narrative.

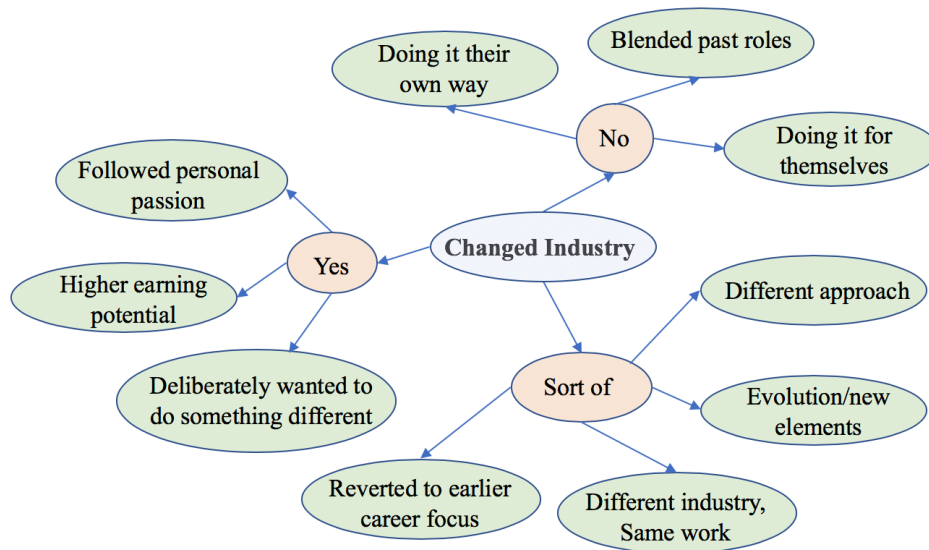
Figure 4. Industry shifts by underrepresented minority entrepreneurs



One Latina woman earned two master’s degrees in order to pursue her “dream job.” When the industry turned out to not be the welcoming environment she had envisioned and was compounded by the extreme stress of the role, she walked away wishing she had known how hostile an environment it could be prior to investing time and resources to get there. She launched her own business, shifting to an industry that provided her with a sense of personal

fulfillment and the kind of flexibility and autonomy she craved. She provided professional administrative support remotely and repeatedly stated she could not be happier. She did, however, reflect on the peer pressure and family pressure that pushed her into the initial pursuit of the “dream job.” She was raised and coached to believe that certain kinds of jobs were more respectable than others, and it caused to her to not even consider pursuing her personal passion. Figure 5 below provides a glimpse at some of what the participants stated about what they decided on whether or not to shift industries.

Figure 5. Participant industry shift map



Study participants who did not change industries explained that they were doing the same work, but with autonomy over their work and their earnings. For those participants who said “sort of,” they explained it in several ways, including that the work they were doing did not change, but the industry they worked within did; they were able to apply creativity and innovation to the work they were doing in a way they could not at their previous organization; some went back to work they enjoyed from their earlier career. For those who shifted industries, the explanations ranged. Taking advantage of the moment in time to

pursue something they had always been passionate about and pursuing a dream came up for several of the participants. They talked about engaging in careers that lifted others up, a result of their previous careers being held back. A couple pursued new careers in industries where they felt they had the highest earning potential, even though it was not something they had ever done before. And others were escaping the hostility of the industry and the people they encountered in that space.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

This phenomenological study explored the workplace experiences rooted in oppression of underrepresented minority professionals that were motivators to launch their businesses and for twenty-five of them, the decision to straddle or exit established organizations in favor of entrepreneurship. I was interested in discovering how the participants described their experiences in the workplace as it pertained to their intersectional identities along with their process of meaning making. This study offers insight for researchers, organizational leadership, human resource professionals, and others who seek to understand the attrition issues connected to underrepresented minorities in organizations as well as those who seek to understand underrepresented minority entrepreneurs' reasons for launching. The lived experiences of the 30 underrepresented minority professionals from the metropolitan Boston area of Massachusetts were captured through semi-structured phone interviews, and clustered into six emergent themes. This Chapter summarizes the research and contributions, discusses directions for future research, and the implications for practice.

Summary of Research and Contributions

In Chapter Two, I presented three areas of literature that established the foundation for the framing of the study within existing research on why employees exit, the experiences of underrepresented minorities in the workplace, and the experience of minority entrepreneurs. The studies that discussed employee exit spanned employee exit interviews, feedback loops, exit and voice, and job satisfaction. Empirical studies on the phenomena of why employees exit provided a basis for the exploration of the data in this study. Literature on the experience of underrepresented minorities in the workplace was consulted. Similar to the stories of the participants in this study, researchers discussed the issue of underrepresentation (Hirschman, 1970; Watkins, Simmons, & Umphress, 2018), career progression concerns and experiences of oppression (Zane, 2002). The literature also cautioned that exercising too much voice can negate the effectiveness of using it at all (Hirschman, 1970). Yoder (1985) indicated that more research is needed in this area as underrepresentation itself does not explain the negative effects. While the study highlights the phenomena that is characterized in the literature, it also brings to life those shared lived experiences in a way that allows you to examine the ways in which these experiences are connected and the ways in which they are elucidate the specific negative impact of their intersectional identities. While categorically there is some consensus that dissatisfaction at work can motivate employees to exit, the stories here move our understanding of identity-linked causes for that dissatisfaction and shows the long-term coping can reach a tipping point. For some it meant they reached that tipping point and stopped in that moment. For others, it meant they began to think about their pathway towards an exit plan long before they implemented it. Although both were conscious of their need to work, the conditions of their

work environment became intolerable. Not only were the discriminatory behaviors tolerated, they were just as frequently perpetrated by leadership as by others in the organization, including peers and subordinates. From a lack of intervention during the encounters to a lack of curiosity or intervention when they exited, the message was that the organizational structures tolerated these lapses in performance and were not motivated to engage in a process to change the conditions that allowed for them to happen.

The emergent themes in this study provide additional context to demonstrate the alignment of similarities and differences across experiences allowing the reader to see the nuances and complications of the stories. It is not enough to know that these occurrences take place in organizations, it is important to see who the perceived offenders are, how the organization responded to voice, and where the missed opportunities were. These participants left their organizations without impacting change in the behavior that oppressed them. Those who follow them are likely to be exposed to similar bad behavior and the exit door will continue to revolve. Just as these participants were not likely the first to leave their organizations due to negative identity-based experiences, the ones left behind will have to make their own decisions about how they will cope with workplace oppression. This lack of impact is visible to the underrepresented minorities left behind.

Only a few in this study shared the full reason for exiting with the organization, citing their lack of confidence that it would make a difference along with being concerned about the potential that exercising voice even in exit could backfire in some way. If their motivation for exiting was rooted in their negative past experiences, they were not motivated to participate in a feedback loop that even slightly risked any level of retaliation. In telling their stories, some even focused on other non-identity-based experiences as the major driver, despite the

emotion they attached to the negative encounters. They had gotten to a place where they had moved past the hurt and disappointment, focused on their future goals and in leaving, provided a limited lens for the organization to assess their institutional performance. The small number of underrepresented minorities exiting, coupled with the lack of details in their feedback to the organization, did not provide the organization with an opportunity to correct their lapses in performance as Hirschman (1970) indicated was a possibility when exit was enacted and Branham (2012) said was important in retention efforts.

The themes provide a way to look at the stories, netting together the encounters, the impact, the influence on their voice, and the influence on their career trajectory. The first theme, *Encounters with Bias and Oppression*, highlighted the ways in which the participants negatively experienced their work environments linked to their identities. The stories, while unique in their circumstances, shared common patterns of oppression that shone through, elucidating the encounters as well as the emotion linked to those experiences. Excluding the two individuals who did not link any of their workplace experiences to identity, the remaining 28 participants had identity-based encounters. Of those participants, 25 were motivated to launch a business. Of those underrepresented minorities, all had experiences connected to race or ethnicity. Of those participants, only women shared experiences of sexual harassment. Most identified intersectional links to their negative encounters. While the participants did not link their experiences to their intersectional identities, it is possible they were overlooking the role their other identities were playing in the ways their colleagues interacted with them. Their underrepresentation in the workplace made it difficult to contextualize their experiences as simultaneously linked to their multiple identities as they could not observe similar treatment to others in the same identity groups.

Tokenism held a strong presence in their stories. Participants consistently identified being either one of one or one of a few. They said that lack of representation signaled their value in the organization. In other words, they did not feel the organization fully embraced their worth nor did they make an effort to ensure the practices were inclusive or responsive to their needs. These stories revealed a lack of intervention by organizational leadership or directly implicated organizational leadership in the oppressive behavior. There were many opportunities for interventions. Several discussed colleagues intervening by helping them access what they needed to get their jobs done, but willingness of colleagues to assist them is not the same thing as the willingness of colleagues to engage in behavior that calls out the bias, sexual harassment or discrimination in a meaningful way. This aligns with research by McKay and Avery (2005) that the diversity climate in an organization should be where efforts are invested. The participants in this study who were dissatisfied⁸ with their organization linked it to the diversity climate. Although Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, and Mainous III (1988) claimed that a higher invested employee would be more likely to enact voice than a dissatisfied one, in the case of bias and oppression, voice rose out of frustration versus out of being invested. Participants linked their underrepresentation in their organizations to experiences of the kinds of oppression highlighted in the literature by Buttner, et al. (2010). And given the challenges that underrepresented minorities face in launching their own businesses as described by Bates (2011), many of the participants had to straddle before exiting for good.

⁸This excludes two participants, one who was dissatisfied for other reasons and one who took a layoff package but was not dissatisfied.

The second theme arising from the data, *Power and Powerlessness*, discussed the pressure and strain that power dynamics in the workplace placed on participants and the resulting impact on their voices and career trajectories. The decision to exercise voice or remain silent did not always appear to be a conscious one. In the manner in which some participants discussed their choices, it appeared to be a given that they would not exercise voice and a given that there was no expectation of change taking place. Participants did not want to be seen as over-using the “race card,” and so when they had negative encounters, they did not speak up. Others leaned on their cultural upbringing where you show respect to those in power, or that you are always polite, or take the high road. And some participants were so frustrated by their ongoing experiences that they felt they had no option but to speak up, and often to their detriment. From experiences of being sidelined to being fired, retaliation is often a consequence of exercising voice in the workplace for the participants in this study. One participant even remarked at how unreal it felt to her that lower level White employees felt more empowered to express themselves or speak up than more senior ranking underrepresented minority employees. And while many individuals leave organizations connected to issues of power and powerlessness, the distinction in this study is that for the participants it was specifically linked to their identity as an underrepresented minority that they expressed feeling oppressed and powerless. The issue of feeling invisible and undervalued was raised consistently. For them, it was not for a lack of trying to be visible and have their value seen, it was something they could not control. The lack of responsiveness from the leadership, and the pervasiveness of this across their various places of work, made entrepreneurship a necessary option. As long as someone else controlled their career progression, their creativity, their ability to participate and contribute, the possibility

of being marginalized and discriminated against, they risked further health concerns. The research on the health impacts of racism left room for future research, citing the need for more qualitative evidence. Rodriguez, et al. (2016) recommended the intersectional lens on investigating power structures. Here we can see the way that power structures validate and support negative identity-based experiences.

The third theme arising from the data, *Health Impact*, highlighted the health impact of the encounters with bias and oppression under the weight of power structures and practices within the organizations. Physical health impacts included, headaches, nausea, ghost smells, and stress-related symptoms. Mental health impacts were more extensive and for some were the ultimate reason for exiting. These experiences made the participants question their competence, their right to be at their places of employment and caused varying levels of distress and drive. The distress led some to seek professional help and medication to cope with their emotional state. The drive for some was less about being the best they could be because that was what they wanted to do, rather an “I’ll show them I belong here” defiance. Participants shared examples of reaching out for organizational support only to have them overtly say no, some were avoiding the conflict of confronting the oppressor, and others just disappeared. It is not surprising that the individuals in this study felt compelled to strive for a way to take back their power and get healthy again. The ongoing stress the participants endured impacted their health and consistent with Klonoff’s (2001) findings on health impact of racism, very few of the participants discussed seeking professional help for their symptoms.

The fourth theme arising from the data, *Straddling and Exiting*, discussed the choices the participants made in the face of deciding to launch their own businesses as a result of the

collective impact of the first three themes. The literature portrays voice and exit as two quite separate options. I found something quite different. First, I observed that multiple efforts at voice often precede exit, making the two intertwined. Second, I discovered a set of folks who "straddled" the organizational boundary. I coined this term "straddling," because I observed employees who were still employed while simultaneously starting a new business. The straddling represented a "dual commitment," with some partial attention to their remaining tasks at work and a part-time ability to direct energy to the new venture. Straddling is more about pragmatism than indecision. Many employees could not let go of the income and/or health benefits provided by their job while starting their new venture. Like the exiters, many had tried to use voice and to find a bearable way to stay with their employer despite slights and disappointments, so straddling was ultimately their more gradual pathway toward exit. For all but one who straddled, this was a necessary approach versus a preferred approach. Given the right resources, they would have exited outright.

With careers that had been marked by negative identity-based encounters, reinforced by a lack of power and harmful health impacts, these participants grappled with the decision of how to reclaim that power. For all of them, launching a business was the option they landed on. Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, and Mainous III (1988) described the act of staying with an organization but not being fully committed as a form of exit. So, whether the participants straddled or left the organization, they all "exited." Balancing the relationship with an organization while they ran their own ventures was a delicate dance for the participants. I called this straddling since the participants had one foot in their organization, needing to be employed, and one foot in their venture, looking to have a place where they could reclaim their power and autonomy. They discussed whether or not their employer knew about their

ventures and if they did, what those dynamics were like. One employer asked for a non-compete document to be signed. Another thought it was fine as long as it did not interfere with their brand and work-related activities. Some participants just never told their employer. One had the full support of their organization as it had a positive impact on the brand of the company. For all but one of the straddlers, the ultimate goal was to exit by leaving the organization. Straddling for the participants in this study was mainly a financial necessity which is consistent with the literature on minority entrepreneurs (Mora & Dávila, 2014). Launching a business is risky. As the literature showed, more businesses fail than succeed. And underrepresented minority entrepreneurs are typically under-resourced (Bates, 2011). A couple of participants in the study had exited, took the risk, and then returned to straddle maintaining the goal to exit permanently. The reasons for the returns was financial. All discussed how difficult launching a business was. They went into detail about the specific challenges they encountered related to accessing capital, establishing a client base, and generating revenue. Even with those challenges it was striking that in the interviews, when asked if they had any regrets about exiting and launching, whether they missed the steady paycheck of working for an established organization, they consistently and emphatically said the words “absolutely not!” or “no!” They were clear that being their own boss, selecting their own projects, choosing their own clients, and being seen as an expert in what they do was restorative and necessary. If they had to go back to straddling out of financial necessity, it would only be as a last resort. For those who had to return, I heard the resignation in their voice and I also heard their past coming up to haunt them: the past that was a childhood defined by poverty, and the past that was working in organizations where they experienced discrimination.

Exiting came about in a variety of ways. For some, they spent years deliberating their options, the possibilities and then their path before leaving and launching. For others, like Diego, Amanda, and Amber, they made a snap decision to exit when the weight of the negative climate hit a tipping point and became intolerable. Some were able to leave and launch when they did because of severance packages, unemployment or sick leave. This bridge that gave them space to launch without the added burden of a full-time job at an established organization competing for their time and energy. Not one of the participants discussed having significant savings, wealthy relatives, or a partner whose income would take care of them while they figured out the entrepreneurial pathway. In fact, fourteen of them identified as the primary breadwinners of their household. Financial bridges mattered for them to exit when and how they did. It was surprising how many of them said they did not lean on their previous organization for the network or support in the execution of their business. Only eleven participants said they remained in contact on some level, with eight of them maintaining regular contact.

The fifth theme arising from the data, *Voice and Silence in Leaving*, delved into the rationale participants had for choosing voice over silence or vice versa in their decision to leave. These decisions were informed by their experiences with bias and oppression linked to the power structures and practices of the organization. Some kept positive relationships with their former employer just in case they needed their reference or network. And many said they never leaned on that relationship like they anticipated they might have needed to do. Whether the participant chose voice or silence, their negative identity-based experiences informed their decisions. It was the conviction that nothing would change. So why bother? It was the certainty that voice would backfire and they would be labeled a troublemaker. It was

the trauma of having been fired for speaking up in the past. And it was so many of the stories they shared that would become salient at the moment of deciding “do I say something or not?” The issues raised in the literature were real experiences for these participants. Deitch et al. (2003) wrote that these occurrences of prejudice were not rare, in fact they were repeated patterns. And these experiences coupled with the impact on their physical and mental health and were drivers to exit.

The experiences also shaped the manner in which the participants exited. The literature on the experiences of underrepresented minorities in the workplace provided the context of a history of discrimination in the U.S. that permeated places of employment. It showed us that underrepresented minorities were sensitive to the diversity climates of their organizations. And it showed us that these underrepresented minorities had expectations that the organizations would act to address the concerns that are raised (McKay, et al., 2007). The experiences of the twenty-eight participants who had negative encounters linked to their identities highlighted the phenomena in the data, and it also provided the much-needed details to provide context on the way the intersectional experiences looked from their own perspectives. The narratives provided the necessary evidence of the harm that motivated them to become entrepreneurs.

The sixth theme arising from the data, *Exiting Industries*, was the final decision related to the negative workplace experiences. The participants made decisions about their futures that were informed by networks, emotional impact and power. For some, maintaining any connection to the industry was not an option if they were going to heal and stay safe. For others, needing to maintain those networks and relationships were factors in considering their launch plan. For those who did not shift industries, they remained because this was their area

of expertise and they had established relationships that would allow them to be successful. They expressed that they wanted to do it their way and make money for themselves instead of for someone else. For those that “sort of” changed industries, they brought skill sets and applied them to either new industries or new ways of doing the work. And for those who completely left their previous industries, they said they were following their passion, reverting to an earlier career goal, had higher earning potential in a new industry, or they deliberately wanted to do something different.

These themes highlight the ways in which the lived experiences are similar in nature and how they are different. They provide details that increase our understanding of what conditions exist for underrepresented minority entrepreneurs such that they choose entrepreneurship over joining another established organization. The study provides needed examples of the nuances and complications that inform the participants choices.

Directions for Future Research

The study’s findings provide a basis from which future research may continue to explore these phenomena. The areas where I suggest there is opportunity for future research include: exploring organizations responses to exit and the impact of the responses or lack thereof on the remaining underrepresented minorities employed at the organization; more could be learned about how the voices of underrepresented minority employees may be silenced through the lack of effectiveness of voice via the exit of other underrepresented minority professionals; considering whether leaving gradually versus suddenly stamp the times of new ventures they founded, having different amounts and types of slack to gradually ramp up or quickly get to work on the new venture? The new venture might have different features in these cases. And the entrepreneurship literature does not currently consider these

types of “origin stories” in looking at varieties of timing, scope, nature of new ventures – where were these founders coming from?; a deeper intentional intersectional look at class, race, and gender, could provide useful information in understanding the experiences; particularly it would be interesting to learn more of the role that a history of poverty plays on entrepreneurial risk taking; further exploration of why underrepresented minorities may make industry changes when they become entrepreneurs.

The more specific stories we can uncover and share, the deeper our understanding of the phenomena of underrepresented minorities exiting and launching will be. This study explored the participants’ perceptions of the actions that the organizations took and did not take related to concerns linked to bias and oppression. As organizations continue to recruit underrepresented minority professionals and engage in retention efforts, they need to consider the experiences of the participants in this study and the real possibility that these encounters are happening around them and cause their employees to exit. They may also have to consider that the feedback loop that they have relied on may not provide them with the rich details that narratives like these provide. Knowledge of the patterns and experiences is being siloed in our society – with subordinate group members aware of and discussing their experiences of discrimination and dominant group members keeping themselves unaware of the patterns they themselves create, participate in. The power structures within the organization and in a U.S. social context inhibit honest feedback in exiting that could assist the organization in addressing their performance lags in the management of its employee resources.

Limitations

The study provided a portrait of negative identity-based experiences of underrepresented minorities which traversed industries and regardless of positionality within the organization, elucidated the struggle to regain self-esteem and autonomy through self-employment. Previous research held gaps in considering implications for the feedback loop that organizations rely upon for correcting lapses in performance. Limitations in my study were specific to the phenomenological approach to investigations. A limitation of this study, noted earlier, is the phenomenology method does not provide for seeking out the “other” side of the stories. It intentionally looks at the shared experiences and how the individual who is the focus of the study interprets meaning of their experiences and makes decisions. Not having the perspective of the other individuals who were involved nor the perspective of the organization and the context for the encounters is also a limitation. Participants in this study were employed by multiple organizations where they had encounters that they interpreted to be biased and oppressive and that impacted their career trajectories. This study contributes to our understanding of how the participants experienced their workplace environments and how the experiences influenced their moves across industries and the decisions in their careers that led to self-employment. The findings are best understood through the circumstances of the 30 underrepresented minority entrepreneurs I interviewed for this study. Generalizability can be determined through taking into account the stories shared by the participants in their specific settings and circumstances.

Implications for Practice

My study presented an account of the workplace experiences of 30 underrepresented minorities in Massachusetts. Their accounts helped portray their shared lived experiences and

elucidated examples so that we might understand how those experiences led to the choice to launch a business and either straddle or exit. I draw my observations and recommendations for practice from the six emergent themes and the specific examples shared across those themes. Through a phenomenological narrative approach to documenting their shared stories, I explored and established the connections. My recommendations stem from the learning I experienced through this investigation and from the cumulative impact of the stories grouped together in a way that the systemic bias issues across industries and organizations cannot be ignored.

Organizational demographics are changing. Underrepresented minorities are still faced with negative identity-based experiences today. Organizational structures exist that reinforce and support oppression. Part of the impetus for me to launch this investigation was connected to my sense that organizations believed or wanted to believe that the reasons their talented underrepresented minority employees were leaving had nothing to do with the organization itself. I had heard organizational members frequently place the responsibility for leaving on the person exiting. For example, they went back to school, they wanted to work fewer hours, they moved. I would then speak with individuals who had left organizations in Boston about their reasons for leaving and they sounded like the stories the participants in this study shared. When I asked them if they provided that feedback to the organization, more often than not, they said they did not. Their reasons mirrored what the participants said here.

The narratives provide specific stories of encounters that were both visible and harmful to themselves and often to the organization as well. In Barbara's example of being brought in on a decision for a project at the last minute that had cost the organization a lot of

money to pull together, only to have to provide her much needed lens and explain to them why it could not be executed in the way it was presented was harmful to Barbara, her colleagues and the organization. It was harmful to her because she knew what they did to her, and why they did it. It also put her in the position of giving them critical bad news that had to be issued. It harmed her colleagues because they had to toss aside the work they had spent many hours and weeks preparing. It harmed the organization because of the lost work time, negative morale, and the lost financial resources spent on getting the project to that stage. Barbara was well aware of the negative feelings towards her that always resulted from her doing her job, and that it was linked to her identity as a Black woman.

Organizations need to embrace policies and practices that create a safe and supportive work environment that is truly inclusive. This means providing true opportunities for evaluation or input, where the response to that feedback is predictable and not retaliatory. Many of the behaviors that were shared had occurred in front of other members of the organization. Yet, in Chapter Four, I highlighted that none of the participants shared examples of the organization working to address the oppressive behaviors. Organizational leaders and dominant group members have a responsibility to call out oppression, remedy the bad behavior and engage in a process that ensures that this same behavior does not reoccur. The presence of diversity in organizations needs to be matched with inclusive practices, policies, processes. This requires the presence of dominant group members who can see and understand these dynamics and use their power in supporting or challenging discriminatory structures, and systems. It is not a simple matter of just increasing representation in the organization and in leadership, though that certainly helps. It is necessary to be able to see what is happening, have a plan for intervention and prevention of

future occurrences. The siloed conversations need to engage with each other. Employers need the feedback to begin a change process. Underrepresented minority employees need to feel safe in order to provide that feedback.

Conclusion

As a researcher, entrepreneur, senior ranking underrepresented minority professional employed in an organization in Massachusetts, the connected experiences of the participants in this study interested me. To address the gap in our understanding, my study explored the shared lived experiences of underrepresented minority entrepreneurs across their careers and its' link to their identities and the way it informed their decision to straddle and launch or exit and launch their own businesses. I applied a phenomenological methodology to solicit details of the experiences that led to six emergent themes that provided insight to the phenomena. I interviewed 30 underrepresented minority entrepreneurs who met the study criteria of having been previously or currently employed by an established organization that they do not own and who also run their own businesses. These participants were from the Metropolitan Boston area of Massachusetts. The semi-structured, in-depth interviews provided rich data from which the examples in the themes were extrapolated.

Six themes emerged relating to how underrepresented minority entrepreneurs' experiences led to straddling and launching or exiting and launching their own businesses: *bias and oppression, power and powerlessness, health impact, exiting and launching, voice and silence in leaving, and exiting industries*. These participants derived negative impressions of organizations that were linked to their identities as underrepresented minorities. Those experiences had an enduring influence on their choices connected to their future careers. Organizations did nothing to stop them from exiting. This cycle of

experiences will continue unless organizations make intentional strides in addressing the structures and behaviors that lead to these outcomes.

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