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**Childfree Women:
Navigating Perceptions and Developing a Leadership Identity**

By
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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of
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Table 1: Childfree Women Leaders' Pseudonyms, Age, Industry and Titles

Abstract

The number of childfree women in the United States has increased in recent decades (Martinez, et al., 2012), and those women occupy managerial roles at a higher rate than mothers (Abma & Martinez, 2006). Childfree women, and women in leadership roles, encounter negative perceptions due to the inconsistency between their identities and the patriarchal views of the roles women should assume (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Hird & Abshoff, 2000). This study examined how childfree women navigated perceptions assigned to them by others in order to gain credibility in their leadership. In qualitative interviews of 13 childfree women leaders, participants described others' perceptions of them and discussed a variety of strategies they utilized to gain credibility in their leadership. Importantly, they navigated perceptions while also trying to gain credibility by being authentic to themselves. Goffman's (1973) presentation of self theory served as the theoretical framework used to examine the findings.

Childfree Women: Navigating Perceptions and Developing a Leadership Identity

Selfish, Shallow & Self-Absorbed is the title of a group of autobiographical essays collected and edited by American author and essayist Meghan Daum in 2015. Imagine the central theme that unites these essays: Perhaps it is a collection of stories about run-ins with members of the millennial generation? Or maybe it contains reflections and musings about the contributors' teenage years? Actually, the uniting theme is clarified in the subtitle of her book: *Selfish, Shallow & Self-Absorbed: Sixteen Writers on the Decision Not to Have Kids*. Daum used anecdotes from the writers when she titled her book, but research supports her assertion that society assigns these characteristics to childfree people (Bays, 2017; Callan, 1985; LaMastro, 2001; Polit, 1978) and further views them negatively (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Jamison, Franzini, & Kaplan, 1979; Koropecj-Cox & Pendell, 2007).

If the adage “perception is reality” rings true, what does this mean for childfree women? This is the question that launched my research: I explored how childfree women navigate the perceptions others assign to them in order to gain credibility in their leadership.

Reflexive Statement

In recent years, I have spent a great deal of time examining two specific aspects of my identity. The first is my identity as a leader. Nearly five years ago, I started the Masters of Arts in Organizational Leadership program. One year after that, I accepted my first management position leading a team of six individuals. These two events pushed me to analyze my leadership identity on multiple levels. On a daily basis, in and out of the classroom, I examined who I was and who I wanted to be as a leader.

The second aspect of my identity I have examined is my parental status. My husband and I have been together for 11 years and married for nearly seven years. Before I was in a long-term

relationship, I always assumed I would have children, but I never described myself as maternal. I trained as a social worker and interacted with many children during that time. I was even a nanny for a family with four children. But, I never truly enjoyed the time I spent with kids. After a great deal of self-reflection, I realized that motherhood is not my calling in life. I do not venture into endeavors that I am not passionate about, and I am simply not passionate about motherhood. I now see myself as childfree – as choosing to not have children.

I acknowledge that this choice is a privilege. The opportunity to make this choice for myself is not only a material privilege, but also a privilege of character. I entered adulthood and witnessed friends and family unexpectedly become mothers because they did not have the material access to the resources they needed to prevent their pregnancies. Motherhood happened to these women. Through self-reflection, I have further realized that the privilege to choose and maintain a childfree lifestyle derives from my character and conviction. It is a privilege to be able to pick a path and have the determination to see the journey to the end, especially if that path is filled with obstacles.

As I continued to reflect on and grow into my two identities – childfree and leader– I noticed they started intersecting with a third aspect of my identity: my identity as a woman. Seeing myself as a childfree woman leader brought me to the doorstep of this topic. Exploring the relationship between my childfree identity, leadership identity, and my identity as a woman felt exciting to me. The value that is central to my personal philosophy is equity, and the juncture between women in leadership and childfree women presented an opportunity to explore an area I viewed as inequitable with other ways of being.

However, this viewpoint also reveals a potential bias. If I believed that women in leadership and childfree women were treated differently than others, could I approach this

subject objectively? Acknowledging this bias made me conscious of it throughout every step of the process and allowed me to truly explore the subject from every angle. As I continued to investigate this subject, I reflected on my objectivity and examined my own experiences. I felt I was perceived differently than other women and other leaders. But I did not know why I was viewed differently. And, I did not know how this perception was, or was not, impacting women like me. My research is intended to answer the question: how do childfree women navigate others' perceptions of their identities in order to establish credibility in their leadership?

Overview and Context

While many may see parental status as black or white – parent or nonparent – there are nuanced differences when discussing people without children. The term childfree is defined as an individual who has made the intentional choice not to parent. I will use the term childfree most frequently; however, this status is also referred to in the literature as childless by choice and voluntarily childless (Bays, 2017; Martinez, Daniels, & Chandra, 2012). These terms differ from the more expansive term of childless, which generally describes any individual without children regardless of their desire to have, or not to have, children. Therefore, the term childless may also include voluntarily, involuntarily, and temporarily childless individuals (Bays, 2017).

The existing body of literature on childfree women has primarily focused on the prevalence and perception of childfree women. Little attention has been given to childfree women in leadership. Even though focus has not been given to childfree women in leadership, the broader topic of women in leadership has been explored in some depth. In the following sections, I review the current literature associated with childfree women, women in leadership, and the societal perceptions these two groups encounter. However, in order to provide additional context regarding the perceptions childfree women and women in leadership face, I will first

discuss how the presence of *patriarchy* frames our understanding and perceptions of these two groups of women.

Patriarchy

Simply stated, patriarchy creates barriers for women. As I continue to outline the current literature regarding childfree women and women in leadership in the following section, these barriers become evident. In many ways, patriarchy is societally constructed to center around the contributions and actions of men and, therefore, dictates and reinforces assigned gender roles for men and women (Lindsey, 2016, p. 3). Specific to this study, the reinforcement of assigned male and female gender roles constrains women in both the realms of leadership and parental status. Specifically, patriarchal societies create situations where the role of mother is imposed on women through such practices as limiting women's access to birth control and abortions (deBeauvoir, 1949). deBeauvoir believed that reproduction restricted a woman's ability to participate in the aspects of society that were dominated by men. Therefore, the continued exclusion of women from certain aspects of male-dominated society, along with the structures that encouraged or imposed reproduction on woman, reinforces the notion that motherhood is synonymous with womanhood. Linking the two concepts— womanhood and motherhood — simultaneously reinforces gender roles and constrains women's opportunities.

As a result of this societal construct, childfree women seeking acceptance and credibility as leaders are challenged by the perceptions patriarchy has created for three reasons. First, because patriarchy reinforces stereotypical views of women as mothers and nurturers, they are not seen as having the traditional male-oriented leadership traits. Second, when women do display traditional leadership traits, they experience backlash for not prescribing to the female gender role. Third, because childfree women reject the role of motherhood, they are not seen as

possessing the communal characteristics that may make them more likable as leaders. These three aspects of patriarchy provide necessary context to the topics of childfree women and women in leadership, and will be discussed and supported in greater detail in the following sections.

Prevalence of Childfree Women

The rate of childless and childfree women has grown in recent decades. One data point that demonstrates this trend is the national birthrate. The birthrate in the United States has been on the decline for the last decade and has not reached the rate of replacement – the point at which current births can fully replace the current generation – since the early 1970s (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Driscoll & Mathews, 2017). The decline in birthrates can be attributed to many factors.

One of those factors is the increase in childless women over the last several decades (Bachu, 1999). From the late 1970s to the early 2000s, the number of women between the ages of 40 and 44 without children nearly doubled (Smock & Greenland, 2010). By 2010, 44% of women between the ages of 15 and 44 were childless (Martinez, et al., 2012).

While not all studies of childless women clarify whether a woman's childless status is temporary, voluntary, or involuntary, some studies have quantified the prevalence of childfree women. Of the 44% of women who were childless in 2010, six percent were voluntarily childless. This is up from nearly five percent of voluntarily childless women in 1982 (Martinez, et al., 2012). However, if you look at the data from 2002 for women between the ages of 35 and 44 – who are the women most likely to know their fertility status and who are more reliably categorized as either childfree, temporarily childless, or involuntarily childless – seven percent of those women have made the decision to be childfree. This percentage represents a larger portion

of the overall number of childless women in the 35 to 44 age range than does the percentage of women who consider themselves temporarily childless, which was five percent in 2002 (Abma and Martinez, 2006).

The increase in childfree women during recent decades is thought to be a result of changes in societal factors. Political and economic policies, increased access to birth control, education, and paid work for women have all contributed to the increased prevalence of childless and childfree women (Hird and Abshoff, 2000). According to Lundquist, Budig, Curtis, and Teachman (2009), education is a strong predictor of childlessness among women in the United States and the likelihood for childlessness grows at each level of educational attainment (p. 749). This could be due in part to higher levels of education serving as gateways into new ways of thinking about traditional family structures, and the roles of women in society. (Gubernskaya, 2010). These educational factors, along with the societal, economic, and accessibility considerations cited earlier, demonstrate that the choice to remain childfree is a privilege not all women are awarded. There appears to be a correlation between access to higher levels of education and economic prosperity and the opportunity to choose whether or not to become a mother.

Childfree Women in the Workforce

Similar to educational attainment, the literature also shows connections between childlessness and workforce participation. Abma and Martinez (2006) found that more than 75% of childfree women between the ages of 35 and 44 were employed full-time. This is compared to slightly more than 50% of all women in the same age range. They also found that almost 85% of childfree women in the same age range had worked a total of 15 years or more since adulthood

compared to slightly more than 55% of women with children (p. 1052). These statistics demonstrate the potential significance work has in the lives of childfree women.

Casper, Weltman, and Kwesiga (2007) found that childless workers perceived family-friendly institutional cultures and associated policies to be unequally distributed. For example, support of non-work activities was not given equal attention in the eyes of the childless employees. Parents are often given priority in scheduling, leaving childless individuals to fill undesirable evening, weekend, and holiday shifts, or to take vacation time during periods that do not align with school break schedules (Hayden, 2010; Runkles-Pearson, 2002). Additionally, a survey of childless women found that 54% experienced situations where burdens fell to them because workers with children were unable to complete assignments (Hewlett, 2002, p. 91).

Childless and childfree women in the workforce are more likely to occupy managerial and professional occupations as compared to mothers (Bach, 1999; Abma & Martinez, 2006). This could be attributed to the number of hours childfree women put into their careers. Since the late 1980s, childfree women have participated in full-time employment at higher rates than women who want, or have, children. Furthermore, childfree women accumulate more working hours over the span of their careers (Abma & Martinez, 2006). These additional hours spent working may help childfree women gain additional skills, as well as seniority in their fields, which results in more leadership opportunities.

Though childless and childfree women are more likely to be managers, literature on how they lead or manage is limited. Instead, the research is focused around why childlessness occurs in women leaders. For example, Wood and Newton (2006) found that childlessness among women managers may be an effect of a sacrifice that women feel they need to make in order to achieve their career goals. The perceived time commitment needed to succeed in the workplace

runs counter to the demands of motherhood (p. 355). This argument is supported by a survey that focused on the personal lives of what the study defined as high-achieving women (women making more than \$55,000 annually) and ultra-achieving women (women making more than \$100,000 annually). This survey found that 33% of high-achieving, and 49% of ultra-achieving, women were childless at age 40. However, only 14% of the total group of respondents said they had intentionally decided to be childfree (Hewlett, 2002, pp. 85-86). Many of the childless women respondents directly cited tradeoffs and sacrifices they made in their personal lives in order to achieve in their professional lives (Hewlett, 2002, pp. 118-119).

Although this research offers useful context about childfree women in the workplace, it does not venture far enough. There is a gap in the literature related to the experiences of childfree women in leadership.

Women in Leadership

The higher concentration of childfree women in managerial positions led me to investigate the potential relationship between leadership identity and childfree women. One of the steps to understanding childfree women's experiences in leadership is to understand the larger relationship between all women and positions of leadership.

Since the concept of the *glass ceiling* was introduced in 1987, the idea of an unbreakable barrier for women in their quest to reach the highest levels of leadership has been a unifying theme in the research dedicated to women and leadership (Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1992). Catalyst – a nonprofit organization that aims to promote the inclusion of women in the workplace – has gathered several statistics over the last few years that demonstrates women's current standings in leadership. Women currently make up slightly less than 47% of the total American workforce (Catalyst, 2017b). However, only 14.6% of executive roles in Fortune 500

companies were held by women (Catalyst, 2013). If you travel higher up the ladder, just under five percent of Fortune 500 companies had a woman as their CEO (Catalyst, 2014). Furthermore, if we look at women in political leadership roles, women only make up 19% of the House of Representatives and 21% of the Senate (Catalyst, 2017a). It is clear that the glass ceiling is still in place 30 years later.

Perceptions of Women in Leadership

There are a variety of individual factors that contribute to the low participation of women in leadership roles, but, as discussed earlier, many of those factors can be attributed to the overarching context of patriarchy. The reinforcement of traditional gender roles is a pervasive theme throughout feminist leadership literature. Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) emphasize the role of patriarchy in the realm of feminist leadership theory by stating, "...because men have long held [leadership] roles, they have defined the styles to which people have become accustomed" (p. 782) This patriarchal context creates an environment in which women who want to ascend to higher levels of leadership must act like men. However, Heilman (2001) reveals that:

...discrepancy between the stereotyped conception of what women as a group are like and of what upper level managerial jobs entail leads to expectations that women will be unable to perform such jobs effectively. These expectations create a predisposition toward negativity that precludes the recognition of a woman's competence... (p. 670).

What Heilman observes here is seen throughout the literature. Women who act more like men and demonstrate male-assigned leadership behaviors such as assertiveness and ambition encounter obstacles to, and backlash against, their leadership (Perdue, 2017; Rudman, Moss-

Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2011). Therefore, women are caught in a double bind. To be seen by others as competent leaders, women need to possess leadership traits that are traditionally assigned to males. But, displaying those masculine leadership behaviors is counter to the stereotypical behaviors of collaboration and sensitivity which are typically assigned to women (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Rudman, et al., 2011). Therefore, behaving as a leader is often perceived negatively because it pushes against the boundaries our patriarchal society has set for women.

Even though women experience backlash for their attempts to obtain higher levels of leadership, it appears that some of the negative perceptions associated with fighting against the norm can be mitigated. Heilman and Okimoto (2007) found that women in leadership roles who were perceived to have communal traits, such as being caring and sensitive, were seen more favorably (pp. 90-91). In this case, women who were seen by others as competent leaders were also seen as more likable and suited for leadership roles when they also had communal attributes. However, women did not need to outwardly demonstrate these communal behaviors. Simply knowing that a woman leader was a mother was enough for others to see her as communal and negate the negative perceptions stereotypically associated with women in leadership positions (p. 91).

Demonstrating communal characteristics through the status of motherhood may assist women as they navigate their way up the corporate ladder, but where does this leave childfree women leaders? Bierema (2016) warns that by essentializing women leaders as nurturers and caregivers— i.e., creating classifications that permit society to stereotypically define what it means to be feminine – we do women leaders a disservice. Essentializing forces a comparison between the traditional male leadership traits and the communal (i.e. mothering) traits expected

of female leaders (p. 126) This comparison reinforces a patriarchal view of women's leadership that limits not only the contributions of childfree women leaders, but also all women in positions of leadership.

Perceptions of Childfree Women

The perceptions women leaders face due to the inconsistencies between traits assigned to women and traits assigned to leaders is parallel to the perceptions associated with childfree women. As outlined earlier, childfree women find themselves battling against the patriarchal construct that womanhood and motherhood are equivalent. Therefore, the childfree status lives outside the realm of what society typically views as the feminine experience (Hird & Abshoff, 2000). The research regarding the contradictory status and perceptions associated with childfree women has been consistent through the decades.

Research regarding the perceptions of childfree individuals started in the late 1970s. At that time childfree women were perceived to be less sensitive, less satisfied, and less psychologically fulfilled compared to parents (Jamison, Franzini, & Kaplan, 1979). More recently, research not only found that childfree women continued to be perceived as less psychologically fulfilled, but also that childfree women elicited greater feelings of moral outrage from others (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017). The societal perception of the childfree identity has not strayed from the idea that being childfree and being a woman are two competing identities.

The literature presents a variety of themes regarding the perceptions associated with childfree women, both positive and negative. On the positive side, there is evidence that some perceptions may contribute to their attainment of leadership roles. Bays (2017) describes that childless women and mothers are seen as emotionally warmer than childfree women, but childfree women are seen as more competent than mothers and childless women. This perception

may contribute to childfree women obtaining higher levels of leadership. Bays also found that childfree women elicited feelings of envy in some participants. This feeling of envy may be due to the higher levels of professional and economic attainment that childfree women achieve compared to temporarily childless and parenting individuals (Abma & Martinez, 2006).

Despite the presence of these positive perceptions, what is most pervasive and consistent in the literature is a general negativity assigned to the childfree status. Childfree women are associated with a variety of negative characteristics when compared to involuntarily childless women and mothers. As previously cited, childfree women are seen as less psychologically or emotionally fulfilled compared to mothers (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Calhoun & Selby, 1980; Jamison et al., 1979). While these women are not seen as emotionally fulfilled as women who raise children, psychological or emotional fulfillment is perceived more as something someone lacks versus being a negative trait someone possess. However, in regard to traits and characteristics, childfree women have been characterized as being less communal – loving, sensitive, and warm – (Bays, 2017; LaMastro, 2001) and more selfish and immature (Callan, 1985; Daum, 2015; Polit, 1978). Immaturity, selfishness, unloving, insensitive, and cold are seen as negative traits by most. But, in addition to being perceived as emotionally cold, childfree women produced feelings of disgust in others (Bays, 2017).

Some research has explored how childfree women manage the negative perceptions they perceive. A study conducted by Morison, Macleod, Lynch, Mijas, and Shivakumar (2016) found that childfree women rely on scripts to cope. For example, when childfree women were confronted about their status they would rely on one of two scripts. One was the choice script that would outline their decision to be childfree as a responsible and logical choice in order to reduce the associated perception of selfishness or immaturity. The other script was the

naturalization or non-choice script that would explain their childlessness as a mental or physical condition that presented their childless status as out of their control and would elicit empathy from others. These strategies helped these childfree women manage the perception others had of their non-parenting status.

Theoretical Framework

In order to effectively answer the question, how do childfree women navigate others' perceptions of their identities in order to establish credibility in their leadership, I needed to approach the topic from a recognized theoretical perspective. Erving Goffman's (1973) work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* presented a theory – which will be referred to as *presentation of self theory* moving forward – that served as a useful guide for understanding identities and perceptions.

In order to understand how an individual navigates others' perceptions, it is important to first recognize how that individual presents their identity to others. Goffman (1973) describes two key concepts that are vital to the comprehension of the presentation of self theory and how it can be used to explore both the presentation of one's identity and the perception others have of that identity. Those concepts are *expression* and *impression*. An individual's identity is presented in their expression (i.e., actions and communication). Someone's perception of that individual is the impression they receive (p. 2). In other words, an individual's expression leaves an impression on others.

To expand on the concepts of expression and impression, Goffman (1973) offers the analogy of a theater performance. He describes an individual as a performer playing a character and those around the performer as the audience. The performer's goal is to express their character in a way that will leave a favorable impression on the audience. He explains that the

performer's true self and the character they perform are, to some extent, equivalent to each other, but the character is what is shown to the audience. Further, Goffman explains:

In this report the performed self was seen as some kind of image, usually creditable, which the individual on stage and in character effectively attempts to induce others to hold in regard to him. While this image is entertained concerning the individual, so that a self is imputed to him, this self itself does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action, being generated by the attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses. A correctly staged and performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited (pp 252-253).

In others words, Goffman (1973) attempts to explain the relationship between a performer's identity and the character they present to the audience. The performer attempts to present a credible character by adjusting and adapting their actions to the audience. It is up to the performer to present actions that are acceptable to the audience. Therefore, the self (i.e., identity) is not the performer but, the product of their performance.

The presentation of self theory explores many aspects of identity expression, but for the purpose of this research, attention will be given to two areas. The first area will expand on the concept of performance by further dissecting the elements of an individual's expression. The

second area will detail elements of how an individual can manage the impression the audience receives.

Performances

In order to comprehensively describe the presentation of self theory through the theater analogy, Goffman (1973) expands on the imagery by explaining that an expression of one's identity is like a performance. That performance is informed by several factors that will ultimately leave an impression on the audience. Goffman describes many concepts that assist in the understanding of an individual's performance, but the concepts of *front*, *dramatic realization*, and *idealization* are the most helpful when applied to childfree women in leadership.

Front. The front is the part of the individual's performance that is witnessed by the audience. A front is established by the performer's setting, which consists of elements such as the physical space, their appearance, and their actions (Goffman, 1973, pp. 22-25). Fronts are often pre-established by societal norms and practices and are often familiar to audiences. A performer needs to find a front that is appropriate for the character they portray (Goffman, 1973, pp. 27-28). Goffman uses examples of medical professionals to illustrate established fronts. An individual entering the nursing profession has a well-established front in which to assimilate. This front includes a hospital setting and the expectation that scrubs will be worn and that caretaking actions will be performed. Anything that departs from these characteristics would appear out of place to the audience.

Because fronts are pre-established and performers are asked to choose from existing fronts instead of creating a front, Goffman (1973) acknowledges that issues may arise when established fronts fail to fit the needs of the performer. This results in the forced selection of a front that is not completely suitable for the performer (p.28). For example, when women venture

into professions that are traditionally occupied by men, they find themselves unable to find a front that suits both their professional role and their gender expression in a way that is familiar to the audience.

Dramatic Realization. For the benefit of the audience and to gain credibility, a performer may need to call additional attention to particular aspects of their character. Goffman (1973) characterizes this behavior as dramatic realization. Dramatic realization takes place when a performer carries out an action for the purpose of emphasizing the central traits of their character. Highlighting certain aspects of a character is a strategy performers use to establish credibility with their audience. Dramatic realization is often seen in a performer's ability to make what is invisible to the audience visible (pp. 31-32). This can be as literal as a chef making a meal in front of the diners instead of in the kitchen. However, dramatic realization can be much subtler. For example, a supervisor may want to highlight their ability to recognize and celebrate accomplishments. The supervisor already acknowledges individual contributions of employees in private, but if the supervisor formalizes those acknowledgements through an employee-of-the-month style program, the supervisor would then emphasize a behavior that is seen as desirable to a larger group of employees. This act provides another layer of credibility to the supervisor's performance.

Idealization. Another way a performer can gain credibility is through idealization. Similar to dramatic realization, idealization is a performance concept that emphasizes particular character traits. However, instead of simply emphasizing these traits, the performer decides which traits to highlight and which traits to conceal based on the audience's values. This idea can be illustrated by social mobility. A performer attempting to move from a lower socioeconomic class to a higher class will emphasize or conceal certain elements of their setting in order to

reflect back the values of the new audience (Goffman, 1973, pp. 35-36). Goffman states, “If an individual is to give expression to ideal standards during this performance, then he will have to forgo or conceal action which is inconsistent with these standards” (p. 41). A performer may decide to hide or downplay certain aspects of their identity in order to establish credibility with their audience. For example, participants in Park’s (2002) study, described situations where they would conceal their childfree choice and try to pass as someone who wanted children (pp. 32-33). These participants found it necessary to conceal that aspect of their identity in order to gain acceptance with their audience because they saw being childfree as inconsistent with the values of the audience.

Impression Management

Goffman (1973) details an individual’s performance and the various elements that contribute to the impression the audience receives. However, the elements of the performance described above are not the only tools performers have to ensure that their audience receives the intended impression. Goffman outlines three categories of techniques for impression management, titled *defensive attributes and practices*, *protective practices*, and *tact regarding tact*. However, the category of defensive attributes and practices is the most relevant to the topic of childfree women leaders.

Defensive Attributes and Practices. Within the category of defensive attributes and practices, Goffman (1973) details three subcategories: loyalty, discipline, and circumspection. These subcategories feature behaviors both a team of performers (e.g., family) and an individual performer can exhibit to manage impression. For the case of the individual performer, the defensive attributes and practices of discipline and circumspection offer the most insight.

Goffman (1973) describes a disciplined performer by saying, “A performer who is disciplined, dramaturgically speaking, is someone who remembers his part and does not commit unmeant gestures or faux pas in performing it...He is someone with ‘presence of mind’...” (p.216). A performer who demonstrates discipline is intentional about their performance and aware of their expression. They manage the impression of others by being dedicated to their character. By doing so, they ensure that mistakes are not made that would jeopardize the desired impression.

The defensive practice of circumspection – which Goffman (1973) also refers to as prudence – also assists an individual performer in managing the impressions of the audience. This defensive practice relates to discipline, because in order for a performer to practice circumspection they need to be disciplined and confident in their character (p. 218). One way circumspection is practiced is through audience selection. Performers may simply choose an audience that is best suited for their performance and forgo other audiences. Goffman uses the example of teachers selecting school districts based on the socioeconomic background of the students and their understanding of how their teaching style would be received in different audiences of students (p. 219). The careful selection of an audience is vital for the deployment of the circumspection defensive practice.

Critique

Goffman’s (1973) presentation of self theory offers helpful insights into the understanding of a childfree woman leader’s identity and how others may perceive her identity. However, it is important to note the potential conflict between Goffman’s male-normative approach and the implications this may have when his work is applied to a topic centered around the perceptions of a subset of women. When referring to groups, Goffman’s work relies on the

use of generic masculine terms instead of the now preferable gender-neutral terms. This style of writing, coupled with the fact that the majority of Goffman's work did not focus on gender or sex, may call into question whether his insights have relevance to this topic.

However, even though the presentation of self theory was the foundation for some aspects of feminist theory, specifically those that dealt with women's navigation through society (West, 1996), it is important to point out that Goffman was creating his theory during the late 1950s and within the confines of a patriarchal society. In a sense, the performance Goffman theorized was constructed by a male-dominated society, for the benefit and preservation of that society, and performed for a patriarchal-programmed audience. This is an important observation to consider as the presentation of self theory is applied to the experiences of childfree women leaders.

Method

Research Design

Through my research, I intended to answer the question: how do childfree women navigate others' perceptions of their identities to establish credibility in their leadership? I took a qualitative approach to my research. According to Creswell (2016), qualitative research is often deployed when the researcher wants to develop an understanding of a complex topic from a small group of participants (p. 7). Furthermore, the qualitative method offers two other components that are important to me as a researcher. First, participants' voices are heard. Qualitative research relies not only on perspectives from participants, but also on their expressions and quotes. Second, the qualitative process allows researchers to examine what they personally bring to the study (Creswell, 2016).

Expanding on the second aspect of qualitative research, it was particularly important to me to acknowledge and reflect on my personal experiences and how those experiences relate to my study. Although the qualitative method does allow for self-evaluation, I believed there was more I could bring to the study. Therefore, I decided to explore the autoethnographic research approach. Chang (2016) describes autoethnography as, "...a research method that utilizes the researchers' autobiographical data to analyze and interpret their cultural assumptions" (p.9). I looked to social justice researcher, Theoharis (2007) to guide my research method. In his research, he used a version of autoethnography in order to include his experiences with the experiences of others for a better understanding of the subject matter (p. 225). By including myself as one of the participants in the study, I was able to examine this topic from both a self-reflective perspective and from the viewpoint of other women who share my childfree and leadership identities. However, mine is only one experience of many, and it was not my intent to have it be the focus of my study. That is why I assigned myself and all other participants a pseudonym and will discuss all subjects in the third person.

Participant Selection

I used my personal LinkedIn and Facebook networks, as well as posts on childfree Facebook groups, to recruit participants. Interested participants reached out to me via email, where I confirmed their eligibility for the study. The women needed to confirm that they fit the study's definitions of childfree and leadership. For the purposes of my research, childfree was defined as a woman who has intentionally chosen to not have children in her lifetime. A leader was defined as holding a position in their place of work that requires management of people, or holding a position on a board of directors or other organizational structure that requires high levels of responsibility (e.g., chair, co-chair, president, etc.).

Participants

More than 20 women expressed interested in participating, and I ultimately qualified and completed interviews with 13 childfree women leaders, including myself (See Table 1). The women who participated in the study had an average age of 40 and the median age was 41. The youngest two participants were 32 years old. The oldest woman in the study was 48 years old. Although not requested as part of the demographic survey, two of the participants self-disclosed their identities as women of color during the interview process. Participants held a variety of positional leadership roles, including managers of small teams, senior leaders of large multi-national companies, and a small business owner. One women identified as queer, and the remainder of the participants identified as straight. Eight of the women were married, two were cohabitating, and three were single and never married. Ten of the women lived in metropolitan areas of the Midwest, one lived on the east coast, one on the west coast and one in Canada.

Table 1

Childfree Women Leaders' Pseudonyms, Age, Industry and Titles

Pseudonym	Age	Industry	Title
Daisy	36	Health Care	Team Leader
Emily	43	Health Care	Instructor
Heidi	42	Agriculture	Program Manager
Molly	37	Higher Education	Director
Natalie	41	Insurance	Director
Nicole	48	Social Services	Program Manager
Nina	44	Manufacturing	Vice President
Paige	32	Higher Education	Director

Paula	43	Personal Services	CEO
Penny	39	Technology	Senior Manager
Ursula	35	Financial Services	Senior Manager
Vanessa	47	Marketing	Senior Director
Vivian	32	Higher Education	Director

Data Collection

Data was collected through 35 to 55-minute interviews. The majority of interviews took place in-person, but three interviews were conducted via video call for participants living outside the Midwest. In order to include myself as a participant in the study, I asked another researcher to conduct my interview. Another thesis student in the Masters of Arts in Organizational Leadership program at St. Catherine University agreed to conduct the interview and followed the same semi-scripted interview style used in the other interviews. The semi-scripted approach offered consistency between participants while allowing for flexibility for follow up and probing questions. The questions covered both the participants' identities as leaders and as childfree women. A list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A. Additional data was collected as part of the consent form and included demographic data points such as age, marital status, sexual orientation, and job title. Information regarding racial identity was not collected as part of the demographic survey. The intersectionality of gender and race are important factors to consider as a researcher, but I felt adding the element of racial identity would make the scope of my research too wide to successfully address. However, as noted earlier, two participants self-identified as woman of color during the course of the interview process. I also wrote post-interview memos in order to gather my initial thoughts and impressions. The interviews were

transcribed and, along with the demographic survey, were added to my post-interview memos for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved coding and organizing the data. I audio-recorded the interviews and had them transcribed. I read through each transcript and post-interview memo and then I listened to the recorded interviews. I decided to read through, and listen to, roughly half of the interviews before reviewing my own interview. I did this not only so I could give credence to the experiences of other women in the study, but also so I could compare and contrast my experience against theirs in a more reflective and informed manner. In the second phase, I generated a list of 64 codes that were relevant for the study. Each line of the transcripts was assigned appropriate codes. Data points associated with individual codes were then compiled by code for analysis.

In the second phase, I reviewed the data points under each code for primary themes. I was able to identify pertinent themes and relationships by using both inductive reasoning – using specific points from the data to draw conclusions – and deductive reasoning – coming to the data with specific theories that need to be tested (O’Leary, 2017). Through the data analysis process, I was able to organize my findings into three key categories. These categories will be explored at length in the Findings section.

Validity

In order to ensure the validity of my research, I initiated three categories of validity checks. First, I was able to ensure triangulation – which, “refers to building evidence from different sources to establish the themes in a study” (Creswell, 2016, p. 191) – by involving a total of 13 childfree women leaders in my data set. The use of multiple participants ensured a

level of validity. Second, the involvement of an experienced research advisor provided an outside audit and additional lens to the research (Creswell, 2016). Finally, I intentionally built reflexivity into my research. According to Creswell, reflexivity happens in the qualitative research process when the researcher reflects on and writes about their personal experiences, as well as their values and views on the area of study (p. 223). My blended qualitative and autoethnographic approach to data collection, coupled with my writings in the Reflexive Statement section, ensured that I approached this topic reflexively.

Ethical Considerations

O’Leary (2017) speaks to the ethical obligations a researcher has to their participants. The core principles include ensuring confidentiality, informing participants of potential risks, and securing the informed consent of the participants (p 70). To that end, all the women in my study participated voluntarily and were given a consent form to review prior to scheduling the interview. Before conducting each interview, I reviewed the process I used to ensure confidentiality, which included assigning pseudonyms and de-identifying their data. I asked the participants questions about their understanding of the study and their rights as participants. To ensure comprehension, I allowed them time to ask additional questions. I also clearly explained that if they felt upset or distressed during the course of the interview, we could pause or end the interview at any time. Participants signed the consent forms immediately before the interviews were conducted.

Findings

By strategically analyzing the data, I found three clear themes that helped explain how childfree women navigated others’ perceptions of their identities in order to establish credibility in their leadership. I have named these themes *Defining the Perception*, *Navigating the*

Perception, and *Leading Authentically*. Each of these themes will be supported, and relevant sub-themes within these three areas will also be explored, by the voices of the 13 childfree women leaders involved in this study.

Defining the Perception

All 13 of the participants were either implicitly or explicitly aware of the perceptions associated with being a childfree woman. From a combination of their own experiences, and from witnessing the experiences of other childfree women, these women were able to assess the environment around them. The participants' identification and definitions of the perceptions, especially in the context of a professional work and leadership settings, are presented under three categories: gender perception, equality and work-life balance, and social isolation.

Gender Perception. Several participants spoke about their female gender identity and how it relates to their childfree status and leadership positions. A few directly addressed the idea that they were not certain if the stigmatization they felt was due to challenging the norm by deciding not to be a mother or if it was because they were challenging the norm by being a woman in a leadership role. Paige, who leads a fundraising team at a college, referred back to an early leadership experience where she developed a new program at a university and needed to create buy-in at various levels within the institution. She stated:

I do not know how much the childfree [identity] played into that or not. I mean, I was young enough at the time that people might have assumed we just hadn't gotten there yet, but of course, the more I tried to advocate the more it just reinforced in their minds that I was this aggressive, feminist, unreasonable, angry woman.

Vivian, also a fundraiser in a leadership role, discussed the relationship between her gender identity and her decision to be childfree. She talked about the difficulty of being a woman in

leadership when leadership roles are traditionally occupied by men. Additionally, she described herself as a very direct and straightforward communicator and was aware that assertive women leaders and childfree women can both be seen as cold and uncaring.

The idea of being seen as cold and uncaring was an area of concern with other women in the study. Heidi, a program manager leading a small team in the agriculture industry, stated that she feels stigmatized because she is a driven “whip cracker.” She fears that people see her as insensitive and unfeeling because of her ambition and no-nonsense approach, even though she also sees herself as a very empathetic person. She believes that her childfree choice emphasizes the negative perceptions people assign to her. Another participant, Paige, described a similar experience:

I had more than one person tell me that I wasn't a team player, which is the exact opposite of all feedback I'd ever gotten anywhere else, and of the style that I try to cultivate, but it was too aggressive. All the stuff that people say about woman who are forthright, right? Just because I was willing to actually speak an opinion in a meeting, and that kind of thing. So I did always wonder how much not having kids contributed to that, but people were like I wasn't feminine enough ... having children softens you because you must be maternal, you must be feminine, so I always wondered it was hard enough being a young woman trying to advocate in a leadership role in a division that was run by men in a conservative place, but if I'd have children if that would have been any better.

In this situation, Paige described both the perception associated with being an assertive woman leader and the idea that motherhood allows others to see women as more feminine. Similar to Paige, some of the other childfree women interviewed commented on the association between being a woman and being a mother. Participants not only saw this as an association

made on a societal level, but also as something that they experienced on an interpersonal level.

On the societal level, Molly, a fundraising director at a small college who grew up in a conservative Christian environment and identifies as queer, described the following perception:

I'm pretty confident that I've been judged because I'm also single and I guess kind of sort of by choice, but in the conservative religious world when you start hitting your late 20s, early 30s, and now I'm getting up there closer to 40, and you're not, well, in the case of conservative Christianity, married to a dude and popping out babies by the time you're in your late 20s, then that means something's wrong with you, which is not the case, it's just not how my life has worked out.

Daisy and Emily, both leaders in the healthcare field, also spoke to the intersecting societal views of women and the childfree status. Daisy felt that the voluntary choice to be childless was not yet socially acceptable, and that, "as a woman, your value is as a mother." Emily felt that similar pressure was assigned to women and described it this way:

I think women are so programmed to not be outspoken, especially about the role of being a mother or not being a mother or their freedom of choice in the matter, that I think probably the times I've gotten resistance or a sideways look or judgment about it, has probably been more of my presentation of it than anything else.

Emily was describing not only what she viewed as societal judgements, but also judgements of her on a personal level. Molly outlined earlier what she saw as broader negative perceptions from a segment of society toward her status. But personal experiences also impacted her. Molly shared:

I have had women, fellow females tell me that I am selfish for not having children, to which my response is, "I should have an unwanted baby just to fulfill my societal role

that you placed upon me? Isn't that selfish, to bring this innocent human into the world that I don't want?" I can't understand that mindset.

Natalie, a leader in the insurance industry, summarized the balance between gender, leadership, and the childfree identity this way, "I think women who are childfree, we kind of become quasi-men when it comes to careers..." It appears that the childfree women in this study examined both the perception associated with being a woman in leadership, as well the perception associated with being childfree.

Equality and Work-life Balance. Twelve of the 13 women in this study mentioned dealing with seemingly unfair workplace policies around benefits and work-life balance. These policies were both spoken and unspoken, but they contributed to the perceptions these women experienced. The concern around equal benefits and work-life balance varied in importance from woman to woman, but, as a whole, it played a central role in demonstrating the differing expectations and perceptions childfree women in this research encountered from their audiences.

Almost half of the participants mentioned feeling pressured, or being required, to compensate for people on their teams who were unable to put in hours due to family commitments. Nicole, a leader in the social services sector, as well as Emily and Daisy in the healthcare sector, described the situations where they were mandated to pick up shifts to accommodate the schedules of their coworkers with kids. Both Emily and Daisy used the phrase "picking up the slack" when referring to the night, weekend, and holiday shifts they were slated to work over the years due to being childfree. A few participants, including Nina, a vice president in the manufacturing sector, recounted situations where they needed to put in extra time to cover for colleagues who had to miss work in order to care for their children due to snow days and sick days. Nina described the experiences this way:

[Having children] is a really viable excuse to not go to work, and I'm not saying that that's a wrong thing. I'm not laying judgment on it, but when you're in a ... Especially in human resources, which is 95% female, and schools close, well you're it. You're the one left standing.

In the cases outlined above, the women were required to put in extra time to compensate for parenting colleagues. In other situations, participants felt pressured into working additional hours. Ursula, a leader working in the financial services industry, explained it this way:

People forget that just because you don't have kids doesn't mean you don't have a life. It's a little bit more imbalanced when you don't have kids. Like, somebody might walk around and say, "Hey, you should get out of here and go hang out with your kids tonight," or people that have to leave because they have to pick somebody up. When you don't have that external pressure, it's just easier to get sucked in.

Vanessa, a senior account director in marketing, and a few other interviewees, also felt the pressure to put in hours above and beyond those put in by colleagues who parented. Vanessa said the following about the pressure to put in more time:

I think from a work perspective, you do run into a little bit more and it's in the context of, "Well you don't have kids to get home to so you can just sit here all night and work on this thing." And I'm like, "I'm not doing that. I got other stuff going on." And that's an unfair expectation...

Vanessa's statement also touches on the idea that childfree women in this study did not feel they had the same opportunities to create flexible schedules for the priorities in their lives.

Penny, a manager in the technology field, and Heidi both specifically called out situations where parents on their teams adjusted their hours to accommodate childcare schedules, but they

felt judgment when they changed their schedules to accommodate fitness class schedules. Both women cited health and fitness as priorities in their lives. Three of the women in my research stated that they felt having kids was an acceptable “excuse” that offered parents a sense of work-life balance not afforded to them. Some of these women stated that people simply do not understand their work-life balance needs as childfree women. For example, Nicole described how she valued the time with her family even though she did not have children:

I think it's even harder though when you're a single person because you still have family and you still have people you care about or you still have your own self-care, whatever that picture is, but it's harder for people to understand. Even in the social services context, it's harder. People don't see that as the same as married with children.

Although most participants felt workplace policies around scheduling and time were not serving their needs, some also acknowledged the conflict around wanting to advocate for their own work-life balance while also advocating for the work-life balance of the mothers on their teams. Nina, Paige, Molly, and Vivian all described situations where they tried to balance their work-life needs with those of their employees. Molly describes the balance this way:

I think that there is, probably if I'm being honest, a little bit of cognitive dissonance because I consider myself to be a feminist. I have a staff member who's on a little bit of a flexible schedule and I absolutely support that and I have fought for her to continue to have that schedule because I don't really care when you work, as long as the job gets done. Then, at the same time, sometimes it does frustrate me that people with children are given more flexibility. I support it and I guess I just want to have some of that freedom, too.

Molly summarizes what many of the participants felt. These women tried to navigate the perceptions of their childfree identity while advocating not only for their work-life balance, but also for the work-life balance of their teams.

In addition to the considerations around scheduling and work-life balance, a few of the childfree women noted what they perceived were unequally distributed benefits. Penny spoke about her workplace's paternity leave policy and observed that her company did not have leave policies that extend to individuals who may be caring for sick parents, partners, or other family members. Vanessa and Molly cited some financial benefits that parents received that did not have an equivalent benefit for childless individuals. Parents at Vanessa's employer were given contributions towards college savings plans in addition to baby shower gifts. Vanessa acknowledged and appreciated the celebration but asked the question, "Well, how do you offset for people who haven't chosen to have kids?" Working in the higher education sector, Molly described the common practice of offering free tuition to employees' children as a benefit. Again, Molly acknowledged the generosity of the benefit and did not believe these institutions should discontinue the practice but stated, "There's nothing that [childless people] get that compensates for that really significant benefit."

These childfree women leaders attempted to define the perceptions they experienced and those perceptions are partially shaped by the work-life balance and benefits that are afforded, or not afforded, to them in the workplace.

Social Isolation. As the childfree women leaders in this study tried to outline the perceptions they faced, the concept of social isolation continued to appear. The perception of their childfree status made some participants feel like outcasts. The perceived isolation has had some influence on how they decide to lead and conduct themselves professionally.

Paula, a small business owner, said “I feel like an outsider” as she referenced experiences, personally and professionally, where people discussed their children. Penny had similar feelings when dealing with family, friends, and coworkers with children and stated:

I perceive of circles and conversations that I can't participate in in the same way. As more of my coworkers, more of my friends, colleagues, people got married and coupled up ... it's just different conversations. I found I have a certain tolerance of how long I can hold that conversation with somebody when it's about your kids. I've also had some college friends just drop off the radar because they have their careers and they have their kids.

Like with Paula and Penny, the sense of not being able to participate or not being part of the in-group was relevant for other childfree women in this study. Ursula plainly stated, “I can think of situations where I wasn't included because of [being childfree].” Ursula, along with Nina, Paula, Penny, Daisy, and Vivian, experienced situations where they felt isolated because they did not have the shared language that parents seemingly had available to them. As Nina put it:

It is something social to talk about in the workplace, and to create relationships on. Oh, my kid's in hockey. Oh yeah, my kid is too. Blah, blah, blah. My kid's in basketball. There's a social aspect and a relationship builder of which none of that exists for me.

This lack of common ground made it difficult to start conversations and make connections with parenting colleagues and employees. For some of the childfree women in this study, feeling like, or being perceived as, an outsider contributed to the negative or unwelcoming perceptions they experienced. Some of the women in the study commented on the lack of support their choice to be childfree receives. These women felt unsupported, or sometimes pitied because of their choice. Paige commented by saying, “People feel like I'm missing out on this quintessential life experience and that does really bother me because I think there are so many

incredibly rich and valuable life experiences.” The feeling of being labeled as someone living outside the normal realm of experiences contributed to these childfree women leaders’ understanding of the perceptions they faced.

Navigating the Perceptions

During the interviews, it became clear that once the participants identified and defined the perceptions they experienced, they began to find ways to navigate those perceptions in order to establish credibility in their leadership. There were three distinct, but not mutually exclusive, categories of tactics these childfree women used. Those categories were: concealing their status, adapting their leadership style, and emphasizing innate leadership traits.

Concealing their Status. In both the professional and personal areas of their lives, the women in this study attempted to conceal or minimize their status as childfree women. This practice seemed to be both for their benefit and for the benefit of the audience they were in front of at the time.

Several of the participants described scenarios where they hid their choice to be voluntarily childless in order to avoid potentially negative perceptions and blend-in with a group. Daisy and Ursula both stated that they do not bring up the subject of their parental status, but they redirect the conversation when it does come up. Others, including Emily, Nicole, Paige, and Nina discussed how they would use excuses that seemed more socially acceptable to explain why they did not have children even though they made the intentional decision not to be mothers. Some said they were currently focusing on their career, others stated they had a medical condition that prevents them from having children, and the older women in the study relied on their age as a reason. As Nina put it:

So, there was no politically correct way to say, "I don't want [kids]." There still isn't a politically correct way to say that, and so I would just kind of say, "Oh, I'm working on my career first," or "Oh, I'm just, I haven't found the right guy," or "Oh, my husband and I, we're waiting until we're together a little bit longer. We're just enjoying being married.

When the women in the study decided they could not, or would not, hide their decision to be childfree, they found ways to make their identity less threatening to those around them. Paula, Emily, Natalie, and Vivian all described using humor to help ease tension or transition conversations, but many of the women demonstrated that they were intentional about when, how, and who they shared their childfree identities with. Vivian described one of her first experiences telling an acquaintance that she was not going to have children. The acquaintance argued that Vivian would change her mind even after Vivian explained her reasons for not wanting to be a mother. Vivian expressed the following about the interaction:

I don't like those experiences where I feel like I just have to cover for [my childfree choice]. But at the same time, it's like I have to weigh the social capital of the situation, "Okay, am I going to see this person again? What type of relationship is this?"

Vivian, and others, appeared to make decisions about whether or not to conceal or minimize their identities by weighing others' needs against their own.

Adapting Their Leadership Style. Of the 13 participants, 12 talked about the various ways they adapted their leadership to meet the needs of others. While each woman explained how she adapted in different terms, Molly said it this way:

I also think it's really important ... that leaders adjust to their staff and not make their staff adjust to them. I cannot treat my green staff members in the same way that I treat my seasoned staff members. Everyone is different. Everyone's motivations are different,

personalities are different. I feel like it's my responsibility as the leader to understand what makes everyone tick and develop strategies accordingly.

Vanessa, Molly, Paige, Ursula, Emily, Vivian and Paula all described ways they modified their behaviors and strategies in order to best serve their individual team members. These behaviors and strategies included challenging their employees, nurturing them, and spending focused one-on-one time with them in order to help them grow and learn. Furthermore, the majority of the women demonstrated some form of adaptive leadership, but a subset of the women made a direct connection between adapting how they lead with their childfree identity.

In several cases, the childfree women leaders who were interviewed tried to adjust their leadership approach in order to bring less attention to their status. For example, Paige explained that she went out of her way to celebrate a new mom on her team. Paige commented, "I do feel like I have to compensate a bit to let people know that I'm not a child hater." Paige's experience relates well to the experiences of both Vanessa and Vivian. Both participants were afraid that employees judged their decisions as managers because childfree leaders, as Vanessa put it, "won't get it" because they do not have to balance children and work. Vivian described the way she addressed having her team request vacation, which she believed helped her manage the perception of her status. She said:

We have a vacation policy. They get 22 days. We also get unlimited sick time... so I'm like, "I don't care if it's your kid that's sick, I don't care why you're leaving early. If you have the time, just take it." Because if people are giving me multiple requests and I have to make decisions, what I don't want to do is subconsciously assign value to the reasons why they're not at work.

Vivian's actions relate to measures both Paula and Emily used to reduce the negative perceptions associated with their childfree choice. Both talked about how they felt they needed to deliberately think about how their words or actions were being interpreted. Emily said she thought she needed to "tread a little more carefully" when speaking with parents and Paula stated, "... I have to stop and think about what I'm going to say, so that I don't offend anyone that has a kid."

As Paula and Emily already illustrated, being aware of, and modifying, communication styles was a strategy other women in the study employed. Daisy and Vivian discussed adapting how they communicated with members of their teams who had children. Even though Daisy had a difficult time relating, she started talking to her employees about their children in order to build relationships with them. Vivian also explained that it was hard to connect with employees with children, but that she eventually was able to understand them and found common ground. She gave this example about a former employee:

[I] had someone on my team that had three very active kids. When I'd ask her ... "How are you doing? What's new?" And her responses were always, if I asked her how she was doing, she'd repeat back what her kids were doing. So it was very obvious that, that was a huge part of her life... And it took a long time for me to relate to, well this is her. She is, in a sense, living through her children, and this is the life that she wants to lead.

Heidi also demonstrated how she adapted her communication style as a leader. Heidi emphasized that she is a "get stuff done person". She spoke about how her ambition, coupled with her childfree identity, highlights the negative perception of childfree women as being cold or un-nurturing. She adjusted by actively seeking out feedback and insights from others to ensure she kept the feelings of those around her at top of mind.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, the childfree women leaders I spoke with were actively adapting to the individual needs of those around them. These women adjusted their behavior in a way that could make them appear more credible as leaders.

Emphasizing Innate Leadership Traits. As mentioned earlier, participants discovered that one challenge they faced as childfree women leaders was that society is conflicted regarding seeing them as traditionally female – with the feminine traits assigned to that gender – without the aid of being mothers. Many participants felt they themselves were assigned negative traits such as being cold, uncaring, too assertive, or selfish because they did not have children. This sub-theme illustrates that one way these women try to fight those perceptions is by emphasizing the traits they possess which counteract the negative perceptions assigned to them as childfree women in leadership.

One trait these women decided to emphasize was empathy. A few of the participants either demonstrated or directly spoke to the part empathy and compassion played in their leadership styles. When talking about her leadership practices, Heidi said, “I tend to be empathetic so I use that to my advantage sometimes.” Ursula also spoke about how empathy and emotional connections factored into her leadership. She commented, “So my leadership style, I often describe it as soft. I'm somebody that tends to connect with emotions and what motivates somebody.”

While Heidi and Ursula enforced the role of empathy and emotion, many others specifically highlighted their caring nature and how that interacted with their style of leadership. Paige remarked on how much she cared about her staff, their wellbeing, and their growth as professionals and people. Molly echoed Paige's approach and commented on her leadership identity by saying:

It's important to me that my staff know that I value them as people first and employees second and that I am concerned about their professional development and want to know where they see themselves and figure out how I can help them get there.

In addition to Paige and Molly, Paula and Vanessa remarked on how important it was to them that they cared for their staff and helped them develop professionally. Vanessa spoke about her open-door policy and how she would listen and guide employees through difficult situations. Paula explained that in her personal and professional life, she tended to attract people who needed support. She noted, "...my confidence and my directness and my humor and my everything that I have that's a strength allows them to blossom. I can't take the credit for it, but it's like I'm the fertilizer."

The concept of helping others grow through nurturing came up with a number of participants, but two specifically related the idea back to the concept of motherhood. Ursula commented: "I feel like I'm a contradiction, because I feel like I'm missing that maternal instinct, but yet when I'm leading people, I lead with a maternal instinct." And Molly mentioned motherhood by saying:

I feel like I mother my staff. I do feel like I do that and I try to create that kind of environment where my door's always open, if things are going on, that they can come in and talk to me, that it's a safe place, that even if it's not work related, that I'm there for them.

In addition, Nicole commented on cultivating a nurturing environment for her employees by trying to understand the needs of her employees on a deeper level. She spoke of her ability to pick up on nonverbal cues and other forms of communication in order to understand the individuals on her team. She said this was a necessary part of her leadership practice because it,

“... helps facilitate camaraderie...” and Nicole, like others in the study, believed that building a team and fostering collaboration was another way she could prove herself to be credible leader.

Fighting the negative perceptions of being selfish and too assertive appeared to be counterbalanced by some in the study by their ability to underscore collaboration and team building, as demonstrated earlier by Nicole. Molly spoke about using a collaborative style. She stated that even though she can make decisions independently, she feels the best work comes from a team environment where everyone has a part to play. She explained, “Collectively, when we come together, we always end up with something better than what someone could come up with individually.” Molly further clarified by saying, “I'm not afraid to make the decisions, but I want to take the time to gather people's feedback.” Penny, Natalie and Paige also commented on how they valued collaboration and building trust among a team. Allowing employees to weigh-in on decisions and creating space for collaboration was a strategy they used to mitigate the perception that childfree women can be too assertive and too self-centered.

Leading Authentically

The childfree women leaders who participated in this study demonstrated that they experienced perceptions and used various strategies as an attempt to alleviate the impacts those perceptions had on their credibility as leaders. However, these women also demonstrated that they tried to do more than just meet the expectations of others. They became agents for their own authentic style of leadership. Within this theme, three categories emerged. Those categories are: utilizing time, focusing on career, and being authentic.

Utilizing Time. The women leaders in this study were able to utilize time in two ways that helped them establish credibility in their leadership. First, they were able to spend more

emotional time and energy on their teams. Second, they were willing to put more hours in at work and take on more time-consuming opportunities.

Nearly half of the participants mentioned that they had more emotional energy to spend on their teams and careers because they did not spend that energy on mothering. Ursula expressed her experience this way:

I think that we all only have so much emotional capacity, and the fact that I'm not exerting that at home, I think that I'm able to reallocate all of that energy to my team. Which I think actually helps me be a better leader because when I'm there, I'm invested, I'm there. ... because then when I get home, it's about me, and it's about me relaxing, and me decompressing... I think that's the big one is just the amount of energy I'm allowed to put into the job.

Paula and Paige talked about spending emotional energy on their teams and how that was important to how they identified as leaders. Penny commented on having time outside of work to decompress. She commented by saying:

I think it's helped my ability to lead in the sense that I have more time to reflect, I have more time to do things that recharge me, I have a lot more flexibility in my schedule outside of my working hours.

Vanessa talked about the emotional time commitment between career and family this way:

I honestly don't think you can be successful if you're trying to divide your time among some very high priorities. And somewhere along the line, something will suffer. And it's either going to be your career and suffer in a way that maybe it's just not as, the potential isn't as great as what it could maybe have been if you had the time or put the effort

behind it or it's your family and somebody else is guiding your kids or you're just not giving them what attention that you could have gotten.

Vanessa's concerns appear to stem from achieving a sense of accomplishment along with a sense of work-life balance. Even though nearly all of the participants mentioned work-life balance – and specifically the expectations others put on them to work more to compensate for parents – these women were also aware that putting more time into work also afforded them opportunities to grow in their careers. They acknowledged that the imbalance helped them to establish credibility. For example, Emily commented on this subject by saying, “I think being childfree actually granted me credibility. I would slip it into interviews because I knew it would make me more valuable as an employee.” Paula commented by saying, “I was able to work 24/7, 365” and she remarked on how employers saw her by stating “They know I'm a work horse, and they know I'll be the one to come in. When someone calls in sick, they know I'll be the one to come in and work on a holiday.” Emily and Paula truly saw their childfree status as an asset to employers, and Natalie did as well. She explained her viewpoint by saying:

I like to be honest about [being childfree] because in a work situation, it's kind of a good thing. It's a reassurance to your employer. "This isn't going to happen, so you don't have to worry about it," sort of thing. If it gives me a leg up over somebody else, so be it.

That's one of the benefits of this lifestyle choice.

Penny spoke about how putting in additional hours at work, and the freedom to put in those hours, helped her get to where she was as leaders. “I was able to put [in time] without having a really strong conflict between kids and office. That helped me continue to progress in my career. I was rewarded for it.” Daisy explained her experience by saying:

The people who put in the extra hours, who are there late, who have the flexibility in their schedule to really go the extra mile. They do have advantages to be able to move forward.

So I think that if I had kids I probably wouldn't be in a leadership role.

Nicole added to this idea by commenting:

I think the time is a bigger factor. I think my willingness in the past to work a lot of those hours really did help ... because I was willing. It probably helped establish a level of trust with some administrative folks that, I can't say for sure, but might not have existed on the same level with those who couldn't do that whether it was for kids or other reasons.

With the exception of one participant, all of the women who commented on how they utilized their freedom to put in more hours because they did not have the responsibility of childcare also acknowledged that they felt they were not awarded the same work-life balance given to parents. However, the women I interviewed were able to mark the differences between these two seemingly competing ideas by recognizing that one was a voluntary choice and one was an expectation that was forced upon them. This was noted, for example, by Nicole saying she was "willing" to work extra hours.

A few of the participants talked specifically about how putting in additional hours helped them accelerate their careers. Penny spoke to the fast-paced environment of her industry and how choosing to work the extra hours kept her moving forward. Vivian also mentioned that she was able to become a leader at a younger age than her peers because she did not take time off to have children. Natalie described her journey as a childfree woman achieving higher levels of leadership by commenting:

I think it's allowed me to progress more aggressively up the ladder... I've been able to progress faster than other women my age. My company right now, for example, I'm not only the youngest VP, I'm also the only female one.

Essentially, these women made a connection between putting in the time and achieving higher levels of success, which lends them credibility.

Focusing on Career. While none of the participants explicitly stated that they did not have children because they wanted to focus on their careers, many of the participants did cite their childfree choice as a key reason why they were able to focus on professional development.

Participants mentioned a variety of professional development opportunities that were open to them because they had more time to focus on their careers. Paige, Vivian and Molly talked about pursuing higher levels of education. Molly stated:

I think because I don't have children, I was able to pursue a master's degree in counseling, which bodes very well for being a manager, because those skills come into play. Again, because I don't have children, I was also able to pursue a PhD in leadership, which I draw from every day. ... I've benefited, I think, from being childless, because I've had those opportunities, I've had the time to do that.

In addition to pursuing advanced degrees, participants spoke about other professional development opportunities. Paula talked about organizing weekend-long retreats with other childless colleagues, and both Paula and Ursula noted the importance of networking.

Nina, as well as Ursula and Molly, spoke about their ability to take work assignments that required extensive travel and how those assignments propelled their careers. Nina commented on this experience by explaining:

[Being childfree] allowed me to travel the world. I've been able to take jobs that other people with families have been unable to take. I've moved to Europe, I've moved to England, I've moved to Switzerland, ... I've taken jobs that require high volumes of travel. ... When I think about women moving up in the world, that absolutely is a barrier, 'cause I would say I travel 50-75% of my time, and I would say if I had kids that were young, that would be almost impossible.

As Nina referenced, the ability to travel in order to gain experience also came up in the context of relocating for career opportunities. Paige commented that she had to move every time she was presented with a new job opportunity. She was relieved that she did not need to consider items like access to affordable childcare and maternity leave policies when deciding to make these moves. She could take on additional risk because she was not supporting a family.

Ursula, and especially Paula, spoke about the ability to take on additional risk because they did not have the responsibility of children. Ursula stated, “When you don't have somebody else that's relying on your salary, somebody that's relying on stability... you're able to take on a lot more risk.” As a small business owner, Paula emphasized risk taking as a benefit of her childfree status. She recounted her story by saying:

I had no idea about entrepreneurship. The only way that I know that I was able to surpass things or do them quicker than most people was because in having conversations with them ... I'd be there at a certain amount of years versus them ... I was further ahead in a shorter amount of time than they were because I didn't have recitals ... Being able to take a risk and put my money into the business. You can't do that when you have a kid.

Being Authentic. As the women in this study recounted how they were able to use their childfree status in order to establish credibility, several of them underlined the importance of

being authentic to their natural leadership identity. A few of the participants talked about how they fought against expectations being set for them in order to stay true to themselves. Paula told a story about a former manager who told her she could not be friends with her employees. She remembered saying, "I'm with my staff more than I'm with my significant other, so how can you expect me not to build a relationship?" Vanessa also described the importance of relationships. She said, "If there isn't a relationship there, my leadership style isn't going to work. It relies on a lot more openness and a lot of trust." To Paula and Vanessa, having these personal connections helps them feel as if they are being true to themselves as leaders. Some other participants have mixed feelings about personal connections with those they lead. For example, Nina talked about how she wants to get to know those she works with but she also does not care to discuss people's children. Nina shared:

When people come into the work and they're like, "Oh, this is what my kid did last night," I was like, "Okay. Alright." And I'm happy that they're sharing with me, and of course I want to get to know them, but if you were to ask me my employees' kids' names, I would never know.... I won't remember. It's just not who I am. That's really horrible to say, but I don't give a shit.

Heidi goes a step further by stating, "I don't want to small talk with you about anything." She believes her ambition and drive are assets that keep her and her team committed to achieving goals. At their core, these two contradictory approaches to relationships still reflect the value these childfree women place on being authentic.

Roughly half of the participants in the study characterized their childfree status not as a decision they made, but as something innate that they always knew about themselves. With this in mind, it may not be a surprise that many of the women in the study valued being able to rely

on the leadership style that came naturally to them. Natalie said that she knew since childhood that she did not want to be mom, and she has always been driven to be a leader. “I’ve always been career-oriented. I knew that no matter what I did in life... I knew that in some capacity I wanted to have eventually some kind of management role.” Daisy, another participant that knew from a young age she would be childfree, emphasized the importance of her authentic leadership style. She said:

I like to think of myself as servant leader. I’m not really a bossy pants. I don’t have a desire to be in charge as much as I just love supporting talented workers. So they can do the thing that they do best...I love leading teams.

Vivian felt that being authentic was the best approach for her team and the best way to gain credibility as a leader. She talked about how she often struggled with effectively acknowledging and celebrating her team. She shared:

I know that people needed that kind of praise and recognition, so that’s something that my team really sees me struggle with. In a weird way, I think that’s good for them, to see that I’m being authentic, that I want to find ways of giving authentic feedback ... they know that it’s something that as a leader, I’m constantly trying to grow and change, and that, that’s really important to me too, is to be really reflective and authentic. To finding authentic ways to get my team what they need, but not betray what I feel like I need to be in the world.

Authenticity was important to many of the participants. These women did not want to sacrifice their true selves in order to navigate the perceptions of others. They attempted to find strategies that allowed them to be authentic while also gaining credibility as leaders

Summary of Findings

The intent of my research was to determine how childfree women navigate others' perceptions of their identities in order to establish credibility in their leadership. Through the interviews I conducted with the 13 childfree women leaders, I identified three categories of findings: Defining the Perception, Navigating the Perception, and Leading Authentically. Each of these categories offered a degree of understanding about how childfree women leaders navigate perceptions and gain credibility. These women are defining the perceptions they are experiencing. The definition of their perception was complex because it included perceptions of their gender identity, themes regarding equal distribution of benefits and work-life balance, and feelings of social isolation. Navigating the Perception presented the childfree women the opportunity to explore the perceptions they were experiencing. They did this in a variety of ways, including concealing their identity, adapting their leadership style for the benefit of their audience, and emphasizing the innate leadership traits they possessed. Leading Authentically was the participants' opportunity to utilize their status in order to gain credibility. They found chances to use their time in order to gain experience and focus on their career. They also emphasized the importance of being authentic and staying true to themselves.

Discussion

As I looked to understand how the childfree women in my study navigated the perceptions of others in order to establish credibility in their leadership, I found the presentation of self to be a helpful theoretical guide (Goffman, 1973). This theory will be applied to my findings in order to better recognize how these women navigated perceptions and gained credibility in their leadership.

Performances

As discussed earlier, Goffman (1973) used the theater analogy as a guide to explain how individuals present their identities to others. Goffman specifically discusses how individuals performed characters. Performers were seeking to establish credibility in their characters by offering a performance to their audience. The childfree women leaders in this study found themselves using some of the previously outlined elements of performance including front, dramatic realization, and idealization in order to leave their audience with a credible impression of their identities.

Front. Goffman (1973) describes the front as the part of the performance that the audience sees and that is recognized by elements of a setting (i.e., actions, physical space, etc.). He also warns that issues may arise when performers seek to use fronts that are ill-suited for all elements of the performance. The conflicts that arise when appropriate fronts cannot be selected was seen when the childfree women leaders discussed three areas. First, the intersection of gender, parenting status, and leadership. Second, their struggles with appropriate work-life balance. And, third, the authentic representation of their identities.

Natalie and Nina perceived themselves as outsiders to some extent because they were the only women at their levels in their organizations and the front they chose was traditionally performed by men. Vanessa spoke to how difficult it could be to be taken seriously as a woman leader. Paige and Vivian both struggled to understand whether the perceptions they were feeling from their audiences were because they were pushing against the norm by being childfree or because they were women venturing into leadership roles traditionally performed by men. All of these observations could be attributed to ill-fitting fronts. When these women could not find an established front for their identity, they sought to use a front that was familiar to their audiences

– a front of traditional leadership. However, the front was inconsistent with the established fronts for women in the workforce and a woman's place as a mother.

All but one of the women interviewed commented on what they perceived as imbalanced work-life expectations assigned to them versus those assigned to their parenting colleagues. Nicole, Emily, Nina and Daisy all spoke to the expectation that they would cover shifts for co-workers with parenting responsibilities, and Penny and Heidi spoke to the perception that their work-life balance needs were not valued to the same degree as those of parents. The imbalance these childfree women perceived could also be attributed to a front that is inconsistent with their performed character. In a simplified sense, their audience is potentially familiar with only two fronts, a front that requires an employee to emphasize work and career and a front that requires an employee to emphasize family and caretaking. As Goffman (1973) states, "Since fronts tend to be selected, not created, we may expect trouble to arise when those who perform a given task are forced to select a suitable front for themselves from among several quite dissimilar ones" (p. 28). In the case of childfree women and work-life balance, the trouble arises because the audience believes they should be selecting a work and career focused front, but the childfree women are seeking the actions that are associated with a family and caretaking front. The selection of the family and caretaking front is seen by the audience as ill-fitting.

When attempting to establish an appropriate front for their performed character, many of the childfree women in the study acknowledged that the established fronts did not meet their needs, especially when considering their desire to be authentic. Goffman's (1973) presentation of self theory, and the use of fronts, is supposed to assist performers in establishing credible characters by offering appearances and actions that are received favorably by the audience. However, the limitation in available fronts for these childfree women leaders had them searching

for ways to remain authentic while gaining credibility. In order to stay true to themselves, Paula, Daisey, and Vanessa relied on fronts that allowed them to call upon their natural caring and relationship building skills. However, as previously discussed in the literature, childfree women are seen as less caring and communal when compared to other women (Bays, 2017; LaMastro, 2001), so the discrepancy between their childfree identity and their authentic leadership style is perceived by their audience. Additionally, some of the career-driven participants, including Nina and Heidi, commented that their more task-focused, less communal approach to work made them feel more authentic to their true selves. However, this was still perceived as ill-fitting to their audience because their selected front was inconsistent with traditionally assigned gender roles.

Dramatic Realization. Dramatic realization is used by a performer in order to call added attention to their character's performance. This additional focus is meant to make the character appear more credible to the audience. A performer will often attempt to make the unseen aspects of their character more visible to the audience (Goffman, 1973). The childfree women leaders in this study used dramatic realization in two ways. First, they actively adapted their leadership style and then highlighted those characteristics, and second, they emphasized their natural leadership abilities. Both of these strategies assisted the childfree women leaders in establishing a more credible character for their audience.

Twelve out of the 13 participants spoke about adapting certain elements of their leadership in order to fit the character their audience expected, and six of them specifically adapted their style in order to present aspects of their childfree status in a better light. Paige went out of her way to celebrate the first child of an employee. Vivian adjusted workplace policies around vacation to be more inclusive. Paula, Emily, and Heidi examined the specific ways they communicated with parents on their teams. Daisy and Vivian reflected on how they built

relationships with the mothers they supervised. All of these adaptations could be classified as dramatic realization because they were attempting to call their audiences' attention to actions that would give their performance more credibility. By bringing specific attributes to the forefront, these women were able to establish a certain level of credibility by making their leadership process more visible to their audience.

Dramatic realization was also used by some childfree women leaders when they added emphasis to the leadership traits they already possessed. By doing so, these women were able to keep a higher level of commitment to their true selves while also establishing a character with desirable traits. Participants in the study who described themselves as natural collaborators or nurturers found themselves stressing these traits for the benefit of their audience. Paula, Ursula, and Molly discovered that demonstrating their care for others established a degree of credibility in those they led. Collaboration was also an asset that many of the participants emphasized. Nicole, Penny, Natalie, and Paige were all naturally drawn to developing a collaborative spirit. Therefore, by emphasizing those aspects of their leadership identity, they were able to perform a character that satisfied their audience while still reflecting their authentic identity.

Idealization. It was outlined earlier that idealization can be demonstrated by both the emphasis and concealment of actions or traits (Goffman, 1973). Idealization differs from dramatic realization due to the intentionality of the traits or actions the performer is selecting. Emphasis is placed on traits or actions in order for the performer to demonstrate a shared value with the audience. For example, Paige spoke to being intentional about celebrating a new mother in her office for the purpose of highlighting her caring nature while at the same time deemphasizing her childfree status. Vivian discussed inquiring about an employee's children for a similar reason. Both participants were attempting to call attention to a shared value.

Idealization was most evident in the participants' concealment of their childfree choice. Many of the women in the study described scenarios where they felt it best to conceal their childfree identity. Most of the situations were related to family or social situations, but some participants, including Daisy and Ursula, stated they would avoid bringing up their childfree status in the workplace. A few of the women relied on medical conditions as a way to conceal their childfree identity by using an involuntary childless identity in its place. For these women, the concealment of their childfree identity assisted in helping them gain credibility in their leadership. The women who concealed this aspect of their identity believed that being childfree was a trait that the audience would not view in a positive light. These women used idealization to conceal elements of their identities and manage the impression their audience had of their leadership.

Impression Management

The participants in this study actively tried to gain credibility in their leadership by navigating the perceptions of their audience. Impression management – the means by which a performer ensures that an audience is receiving the intended impression from the performer's expression – was a way the childfree women leaders sought to establish their credibility (Goffman, 1973). Specifically speaking, the childfree women I interviewed used the defensive attributes and practices of discipline and circumspection to manage the ways others perceived their leadership identity.

Defensive Attributes and Practices: Discipline. Goffman (1973) explains that a disciplined performer can manage the impression of the audience by committing to their performance. These performers are dedicated to the character they represent, and this dedication ensures that mistakes which could leave an undesirable impression on the audience will not be

made. In the case of the childfree women leaders in this study, discipline as a defensive attribute comes in two forms. One, in the way they spend their time and, two, in the focused attention they have on their careers. Both of these actions demonstrate discipline and help the childfree women establish the impression of credible leadership.

Emily and Paula explicitly stated that they used their childfree status in order to help them in their careers. They believed employers saw them as more reliable and willing to take on extra assignments because they were childfree. They were able to manage the impression of their status by demonstrating their discipline and commitment. Nearly all the women in the study stated that they choose to put in more hours at work in order to advance their careers. Their audience saw this dedication and discipline. The discipline they demonstrated through increased commitment to their careers provided them with the ability to manage the impression their audience received.

Many participants demonstrated their disciplined commitment to their leadership identity by seeking out additional opportunities to advance their careers. Molly, Paige and Vivian discussed the role obtaining advanced degrees had in their leadership journeys. Others discussed the importance of networking and building relationships. A few participants decided to take on assignments that required extensive travel or relocation in order to move their careers to the next level. Searching for opportunities helped these women gain experience and ensured that they had the discipline to maintain a credible performance.

Defensive Attributes and Practices: Circumspection. One way to manage an impression, according to Goffman (1973), is by being prudent. This partially comes from the discipline a performer demonstrates, but it also comes from a performer's ability to be circumspect of certain situations. This can be seen in the action of audience selection (pp. 218-

219). To some degree, audience selection was used by the childfree participants in their places of work. These women were able to select their audiences by knowing which audiences to avoid. For example, Paula, Penny and Ursula clearly felt that there were subgroups within society that they were simply not welcomed into because they were not mothers. Childfree women avoided these audiences or they concealed their childfree identity when these audiences could not be avoided. Through experience, they realized that these subgroups were audiences where their childfree identity would not be perceived well, therefore, they started to isolate themselves from those subgroups. This sense of social isolation that the participants felt relates to their use of the circumspection defensive attribute.

Implications

The 13 childfree women leaders in my study were aware of the perceptions others had of them and developed strategies that helped them navigate those perceptions in order to establish credibility in their leadership. These women were able to identify the gender perceptions, work-life balance and benefits issues, and social isolation that they faced. When the participants started to navigate those perceptions, they found ways to conceal their childfree identity, adapt their leadership style and/or emphasize their innate leadership abilities in order to manage their audience and gain credibility. These women also demonstrated their readiness to act authentically. They wanted to find ways to gain credibility by being true to their childfree and leadership identities. These women were able to utilize their time to gain experience and focus on their career development.

The presentation of self theory (Goffman, 1973) was vital in my understanding of how the interviewees in my research presented their childfree identity and established credibility in their leadership. From this study of childfree women leaders, I offer the following implications

and recommendations for other childfree women aspiring to be in leadership roles. I will also discuss the limitations of my study and recommendations for future research.

Recommendations

My research findings present new opportunities for childfree women in leadership roles and childfree women who aspire to be leaders. There is value in these women continuing to create a community. While online and social communities exist, none of them speak directly to the challenges childfree women in leadership face. The formation of a supportive, understanding, and empowering community could help to combat the effects of social isolation these women experience. Furthermore, continuing to grow and nurture these communities will also help childfree women create new fronts for their identities as childfree and as leaders. I disagree with Goffman's (1973) idea that fronts are selected and not created. In a patriarchal sense this is true, but in order to expose the childfree status as a legitimate choice for women and to elevate the ability for childfree women, and women in general, to be leaders, new fronts must be created.

Keeping with the stage and performance analogy Goffman (1973) offers for the presentation of self theory, childfree women leaders can think about creating new fronts as workshopping their performance. In the theater community, workshops are used to test out various elements of a production on smaller audiences in order to perfect the play before staging a full performance to a large audience. Workshops allow performers to experiment with different aspects of their characters in a safe space. Elements of this workshopping approach can be seen in the childfree women who share their identities with increasingly larger audiences. They may start with close friends and family, they learn from those encounters, and then they begin to increase the scope of their audience. It is doubtful that the individuals that contributed to Daum's (2015) book of essays that I referenced at the start of this paper shared their choice to be

childfree for the first time on the big stage of a *New York Times* bestselling book. They worked on that narrative over time before they presented it to a much wider audience.

I referenced in the critique of Goffman's (1973) presentation of self theory that his theoretical framework was created within the context of a patriarchal society. Ultimately, the theory works to preserve patriarchal societies by outlining ways to manage impressions within the confines of the established culture. Therefore, the workshopping approach may help childfree women leaders create new fronts that work within the construct of patriarchy instead of fighting against it. By accepting and utilizing Goffman's theory, these women can create new fronts that will help them establish an audience, but that still conforms to societal expectations. In other words, they can find ways for their identities to assimilate to the current standards society has created. However, these childfree women leaders can also take another approach to creating new fronts that fights against tradition.

Yoshino (2006) discusses how current societal constructs in the United States mandate assimilation and conformity. He expands by saying, "Until outsider groups surmount such demands for assimilation, we will not have achieved full citizenship in America" (p. 23). Yoshino references his own experiences of being gay and Asian-American, but he argues for fighting against assimilation for all groups seeking equality and understanding. It is not necessary for childfree women to assimilate in order to gain acceptance and establish credibility. I recommend that these women establish new fronts through what I call, in the terms of the theater analogy, *performance art*. It is a style of theater and art that the audience is not necessarily used to experiencing, but over time, it gains understanding. However, performance art is not designed to conform to traditional standards for art and performance in order to establish credibility. A performance art piece can be anything from a choreographed dance

spontaneously performed in the middle of a crowded market to a loosely scripted play that demands audience participation. This performance art approach to creating new fronts can be seen in some online forums and communities for childfree women and feminist. Members in these groups take on a more unapologetic approach to their identities and are not afraid to speak candidly about their choices. They often use attention grabbing phrases and headlines in order to draw in an audience and make a point. For example, a headline for one such article reads *The Maternal Instinct is a Myth and We've Got the Science to Prove It* (Neal, 2017). Crafting headlines like this one helps to establish new fronts by presenting an unconventional point of view to an audience.

Establishing credibility by creating new fronts will take time and determination. But childfree women leaders have the resolve to accomplish this feat. I believe this because I see a connection between the determination and commitment it takes to remain childfree and the determination and commitment it takes to be a leader. Childfree women have found ways to ensure they can live out their childfree choice even when our society has created a system that imposes motherhood. These women have the skill and ambition to navigate a complex healthcare system for the resources they need to stay childfree. Leaders also need to be skillful and driven in order to successfully guide their teams. Childfree women have the emotional fortitude and resiliency to stand up to the demands of society and choose their own path. Enduring leaders achieve their goals by demonstrating emotional strength and commitment. I believe there is a connection between being childfree and being a leader. This connection may uniquely launch childfree women leaders into positions where they can drive change for other women leaders and childfree individuals.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

There were two notable limitations to this study. First, because I conducted a qualitative study, my findings cannot be generally applied to all childfree women leaders. My research went in-depth with a small group of childfree women and was designed to investigate the richness of their experiences (Creswell, 2016). While there is a great deal that can be learned from this small group, I caution against the attempt to generalize these findings and apply them to all childfree women leaders.

The second limitation was the study's lack of exploration into the intersectionality of race, age, and sexual orientation. Although I did document the age and sexual orientation of the participants, I did not explore the impacts of these aspects of their identities in depth. Furthermore, I neither asked about nor explored the participants' racial identity. Not expanding on these three aspects of identity limited my understanding of these women's experiences as childfree and leaders. All three elements add both a layer of understanding as well as a layer of complexity to the topic and warrant further study.

The findings from my research raise opportunities for future research around the intersection of childfree and leadership. Specifically, three potential areas of inquiry could prove valuable. First, this research focused on the perspectives of the childfree women leaders, but it would be interesting to hear the perspectives of their followers. What perceptions do these followers have? Do they believe these women are credible leaders? Do childfree women's efforts to manage impressions have the desired effect? It would be valuable to see how the followers' findings relate to those of the childfree women leaders. Second, as stated in the above limitations, this study did not focus on the unique experiences of women of color, women who identify as something other than straight, or women in different generational cohorts. Therefore,

it would be fascinating to see a similar study that is able to address the intersectionality of these identities as they relate to leadership and being childfree. For example, women who came of age in the 1970s, when the choice to be childfree was starting to rise, could possibly be different than the experiences millennial women are currently experiencing as they launch into leadership positions. Additionally, women of color are likely to experience different barriers and perceptions than white women. Finally, a study comparing childfree women leaders to mothers in leadership roles would be a valuable addition to the body of research. How do the leadership experiences of childfree women compare to those of mothers? The answer to a question like this could benefit both mothers and childfree women in leadership roles.

Conclusion

Childfree women leaders encounter unique challenges to their leadership. As childfree women, this group may be seen as selfish and cold by society (Bays, 2017; Callan, 1985), but the 13 childfree women in this study demonstrated that there are ways for them to move beyond these negative perceptions. The data collected through their interviews outlined that they could define, navigate, and ultimately find ways to be authentic in their quest to establish credibility in their leadership. The first finding, *Defining the Perception*, described how these women were able to identify the perceptions they experienced as leaders and childfree women. The second finding, *Navigating the Perception*, revealed the strategies they used to manage those perceptions. And the third finding, *Leading Authentically*, explained how these women advocated for themselves as leaders and find ways to be true to themselves.

The presentation of self theory (Goffman, 1973) provided a framework for understanding how these childfree women leaders performed and managed the impressions their audiences had of them in order to establish credibility in their leadership. It was my hope that this research

could contribute to and expand on the limited body of research regarding childfree women in leadership. I have a personal stake in this area of study and I believe it is my responsibility to contribute to society's understanding, and possible acceptance, of childfree women leaders.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Interview Questions:

Please tell me a bit about your career path and how you came to your current position.

How did you come to see yourself as a leader?

Describe your leadership style.

How did you come to the decision to be childfree?

How have others in your life, and specifically those you lead, reacted to your decision to be childfree?

- Tell me about situations where people responded positively and you felt supported.
- Were there times when people reacted negatively or judgmentally? What happened, how did you feel and how did that impact you?

In your leadership role, when have you felt most impacted by your decision to be childfree?

- Please describe an example or two?

How has your decision to be childfree influenced your leadership style?

- Please describe examples of times when you felt your decision to be childfree helped your ability to lead? Or times when it hindered your leadership?

How do you think your colleagues, supervisors and/or direct reports perceive you in relation to those who are mothers?

- What events led you to believe that this was their perception?
- How do you respond or act when you believe these perceptions are at play?

Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think would be useful to know for my study?

Is there anyone else you think I should talk to about this topic? If so, would you be willing to pass on the information about the study to them, along with my contact information?