Draft 1: Thesis - Gossip, Exclusion, Competition, Spite

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Gossip, Exclusion, Competition, and Spite: A Look Below the Glass Ceiling at Female-to-Female Communication Habits that Impact Upward Progression for Women

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to those who’ve supported me throughout this process. My family; Carolyn, Vern, and Victoria Brownlee and my husband and his family; Matt Abernathy and Mia and John Abernathy.
Abstract

The glass ceiling has been defined as the impenetrable force that keeps women and minorities out of executive corner offices by excluding them from the “old boys club,” the network of men who dominate the upper echelons of business (Callahan & Tomaszewski, 2007). Despite the growing number of female professionals, modern statistics tell a story of sex inequality and male-dominance across all disciplines; providing agency to the purveying thought of feminist scholars that the glass ceiling exists and endures to this day (Hon, 1995). This study examines the nature of female-to-female relationships within the workforce to ascertain what inter-group dynamics may contribute to the enduring glass ceiling. Using a long interview qualitative study, research suggests that indirect social aggression is a part of the organizational experience and therefore may be a contributing factor to the lack of upward progression by women.

Keywords: intrasex competition, relational aggression, organizational communication, glass ceiling,
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Looking Below the Glass Ceiling

The glass ceiling has been defined as the impenetrable force that keeps women and minorities out of executive corner offices by excluding them from the “old boys club,” the network of men who dominate the upper echelons of business (Callahan & Tomaszewski, 2007). Despite the growing number of female professionals, modern statistics tell a story of sex inequality and male-dominance across all disciplines; providing agency to the purveying thought of feminist scholars that the glass ceiling exists and endures to this day (Hon, 1995). Modern research has looked at the “glass ceiling” from a variety of perspectives to identify why women are still not held to the same standards as their male counterparts. Feminist scholars have long explored the various environmental and psychosocial factors that have contributed over the years to the slow progression of workplace equality. From analyzing the how the socialization of men and women differ and its impact on workplace progression, to exploring how mentorship in male circles actively benefits male progression to executive offices a breadth of scholars from varying academic disciplines have explored a full spectrum of factors that impact career progression. Although, there is a plethora of research pertaining to the glass ceiling occupying academic space, there appears to be very little research pertaining to how women impact, perceive, and communicate with one another within the workplace as it may relate to how women progress throughout an organization.

Research from the U.S. Workplace Bullying Institute (2010) states that in instances of office bullying women are more likely to target their female peers than their male competitors. In fact, that statistic states that female aggressors within an office setting target their female coworkers 80% of the time (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2010). This thesis begs the question
that if the “old boys club” has proven so successful, then why don’t women actively band together to replicate this proven method of upward progression? Why are women so prone to aggress against one another within the office? More specifically, this thesis seeks to ask women about their experiences communicating with fellow female coworkers to identify whether relational aggression between women impacts how women progress within their organization.

This qualitative study seeks to identify any niche or similar relational tactics women possess within the workforce. Under the assumption that varying forms of relationally aggressive acts are based in an evolutionary need to compete against fellow members of the same sex, interviews will take place with women of varying ages, from varying disciplines, and of varying experiences to ascertain the extent of relational aggression between women.

Using research stemming from a wide variety of academic disciplines, but using an organizational communication perspective to provide framework for the arguments expressed throughout this thesis, I hope to provide a clearer picture regarding how women are experiencing their fellow female coworkers and whether daily interactions, either positive or negative, impact a woman’s career trajectory.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

As researchers and professionals alike seek to understand why women and men have such differing professional experiences, the research itself must become more specific to identify the factors at play (Hon, 1995). Throughout the literature surveyed for this study, several themes dominated the research the key idea being that the gendered nature of organizational culture is the enduring obstacle that women face within the professional world. Thinking beyond the that thematic strain, this study will explore the internal factors that negatively impact opportunities for upward progression of women, a niche piece of the glass ceiling research upon which researchers have not directly focused.

The following research subdivides into six sections:

1. A Brief History of Communication Study
2. Feminist Perspectives of Organizational Communication Research
3. A Brief History of Women at Work
4. Women in Today's Workplace
5. Gossip, Exclusion, Competition, and Spite
6. Looking Below the Glass Ceiling

However, before we look forward, it is important to explore the beginnings of communication study, organizational communication, feminist communication study, and women in the workplace to provide context for this multidisciplinary study.

A Brief History of Communication Study

As stated by William Schramm, the challenge in summarizing the history of a field like communication studies is the fact that human communication is a central social process (Rogers, 1994). Through attempting to uncover the history of human communication, the study thereof is comparable to work of anthropologists studying the evolutionary path from Homo Habilis to modern man. According to Rogers (1994) the first communication research institute was founded
by Dr. William Schramm in 1943. This institute brought together minds from psychology, sociology, political science, journalism, and behavioral sciences to explore this up and coming academic discipline (Rogers, 1994). Although, the study of communication in the United States has roots in Iowa in the early 1900s, the study and theoretical development of the social sciences can be traced back to 1450 in Mainz, Germany, with the re-invention of the printing press by Johann Gutenberg (Rogers, 1994). The Gutenberg Press removed the substantial communicative power of the Catholic Church and monasteries that had long controlled the power of print and production (Rogers, 1994). The wide-spread access to books, letters, scripture, and education that was brought forth through the innovation of the Gutenberg Press provided future social scientists such as Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Mark with the foundation from which to begin building this new field of academia.

According to Rogers (1994), the direct migration of leading international scientists and scholars as result of the rise of Nazism greatly sped up the growth of the American marketplace of ideas. This migration allowed for the works of leading theorists such as Augustus Comte, Emile Durkheim, Gabriel Tarde, and George Simmel to stimulate the study of social sciences in America (Rogers, 1994). Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, the massive migration to the United States created opportunities and hardships for American citizens, within the realm of academics, particularly communication studies, this realm of growth was made possible by sizable donations from the Rockefeller Foundation (Rogers, 1994). From 1891-1955, Rogers (1994) documented thirteen unique instances where donations from the Rockefeller Foundation directly impacted the progress of communication study (Rogers, 1994). By financially supporting the likes of Harold Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld, Kurt Lewin, and Wilbur Schramm, the
Rockefeller Foundation provided the fathers of communication studies with the means to truly carve out the field (Rogers, 1994).

The founding fathers of communication study.

Although the history of the study of human communication is not as long nor as well-documented as that of its social science-based brethren, it’s important to recognize that the study of human communication was not born to be its own unique research field, but more or less a place where academics of varying disciplines could bring together aspects of psychology, sociology, math, and behavioral studies to explore one or many human communication events (Rogers, 1994). The study of human communication is collaborative and open-minded by nature and it’s because of the vast academic specialties of its fore-fathers.

The multidisciplinary nature of communication studies may in fact be due to the resounding impact of Harold Lasswell. Lasswell, a political scientist by education was a dynamic and bold researcher who led the study of propaganda and created the research method of content analysis (Rogers, 1994). Lasswell, who defined propaganda as “the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols” (pg. 213), created the content analysis way of research to infer the effects of propaganda messages by classifying content in order to measure various variables (Rogers, 1994).

Another major figure connected to the shaping of modern communication research is Paul Lazarsfeld, a mathematically minded, social psychologist, credited with initiating the media effects tradition, a dominant paradigm in U.S. mass communication research, advancing survey methodology through innovative research methods, and creating the prototype for the university-based research institute (Rogers, 1994).
It’s impossible to summarize the history of human communication without discussing the vast impact made by Kurt Lewin. Lewin, a Polish born social psychologist, was exiled to the United States as Nazism spread across Europe (Rogers, 1994). This move also impacted Lewin’s academic interest (Rogers, 1994). Lewin’s contribution to group communication and more importantly organizational communication is profoundly important to this study as Lewin’s work in group dynamics created a niche realm of communication study, which looks at how individuals operate within the workplace (Rogers, 1994). One of Lewin’s most profound contributions to communication study is the role of gatekeepers. Gatekeepers are “individuals who control the flow of messages in a channel; they may withhold information, shape it, expand it, or repeat it” (Shoemaker, 1991, p.1: Rogers, 1994, pg. 335). Additionally, Lewins’ commitment to understanding group dynamics created the foundation from with organizational communication scholars study and research how employees and staff interact with one another (Rogers, 1994).

Lastly, it’s necessary that the work of Wilbur Schramm is highlighted as he developed the academic field of human communication (Rogers, 1994). Throughout his career, Schramm founded communication research institutes in Iowa, Illinois, and Stanford and institutionalized the field of communication study (Rogers, 1994). Moreover it was Schramm’s ability to connect with the great sociological minds of his era such as Kurt Lewin to develop bridges between communication studies and other academic disciplines (Rogers, 1994). Schramm published textbooks and created curriculums for communication study and ultimately his tireless efforts resulted in the widespread and international reach of communication studies as an academic field (Rogers, 1994).

A look at the evolution of organizational communication.
The study of organizational communication, can itself, be traced back to the great Greek philosophers, Aristotle, Plato, and Isocrates, who are often credited with first examining the power of human communication (Claire, 1999). However, it is W. Charles Redding, who is credited with the establishment of organizational communication as a niche field of study within the human communication paradigm (Claire, 1999). The Redding Tradition, Redding’s legacy within the field, believes that communication can profoundly impact workplace practices, however it must understood and explored by a skeptical mind (Claire, 1999). This skepticism allows managers “to use social scientific findings to inform changes in information flow and feedback policy” (Buzzanell & Stohl, 1999, pg. 324). Buzzanell and Stohl (1999) identified four themes in regards to how Redding approached his research:

1. “Human progress through empirical investigations.
2. The power of critique.
3. Message exchange as the core of organizational communication.
4. The need to understand the socio-historical and diverse theoretical underpinnings of the field.” (pg. 325)

Additionally, the Redding Tradition evolved to combine formats for critique and enhancing effectiveness using debate and logic and social scientific processes with a desire to understand the complexities of human behavior (Buzzanell & Stohl, 1999). Using Lasswell’s research method of content analysis, Redding explored how different outcomes and processes could benefit managers and professionals (Buzzanell & Stohl, 1999). So committed to the power of critique, Redding often criticized fellow communication educators for failing to challenge the academic status quo surrounding organizational life and communication professionals for not challenging corporate ideologies (Buzzanell & Stohl, 1999). The lack of critique of the field,
particularly in the late 70s had Redding concerned that the field of organizational communication research was nothing more than a collection of educated guesses and generalizations (Buzzanell & Stohl, 1999). Despite, his concern for the fate of the field, Redding’s impact on organizational is as profound as his work and the work of his graduate students that focused on messages and message exchange processes, which laid the foundation for modern organizational communication study (Buzzanell & Stohl, 1999).

Using Connie Bullis’s (2005) retrospective on the history of organizational communication to guide this fields brief historical overview, the eighties and nineties was an incredibly exciting time for organizational communication scholars. The very first organizational communication seminar, led by Phil Tompkins, lectured on considerations of both the challenge of organizational diagnoses and the importance of the rhetorical tradition (Bullis, 2005). This seminar laid the foundation for future publications to begin discussions which explored organizational communication through the lens of organizational communication as unobtrusive control, the interpretive and critical perspective approach, and importance of metaphor clusters for organization (Bullis, 2005: Putnam, 1982). From a theoretical perspective, organizational communication was driven by effectiveness models, however Deetz (1992) argued at that time that a participatory model based in dialogue and mutual understanding is more beneficial to the organizational environment as it seeks to create a communication democracy between all group members (Mumby, 2000: Deetz, 1992). Discussions and debate surrounding organizational communication further fostered the field and as organizational theory developed throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, organizational communication publications became more and more abundant and in their abundance the need to look to outside research for supporting evidence became less and less (Bullis, 2005). At present organizational communication represents a
dynamic, multidisciplinary approach to scholarship, which incorporates elements of psychology, sociology, feminist scholarship, behavioral science, etc. This is reminiscent of Schramm’s original intent of human communication scholarship being an academic meeting point for researchers and students alike to connect over how messages are sent and received (Rogers, 1994). Due to the multidisciplinary nature of organizational communication, both qualitative and quantitative research paradigms are used and debated over.

Feminist Perspectives of Organizational Communication

This study is built upon perspectives of feminist scholars, particularly, feminist scholars who study the state of organizational culture in the United States. The feminist tradition looks to explain, explore, and identify the various and unique roles women play within society (Rakow & Natasia, 2008). More specifically, feminist theory seeks to understand the nature of gender and sex inequality through various lenses focusing on experience and social role ((Rakow & Natasia, 2008). Although, feminist theory is a strong area of academic research, the niche area of feminist organizational communication is still in a beginning stage with few pieces of literature representing the area.

According to Fine and Buzzanell (2000) feminist organizational theory “strives to understand how gender is constructed through discourse and practices so that traditional gender dynamics remain unchanged within contexts of messages, structures, policies, and procedures.” (pg. 134). Ultimately, the goal of feminist organizational communication scholars is to inspire social change and create the opportunity for women to fully express their human potential within organizational settings (Fine & Buzzanell, 2000).
Feminist organizational communication literature, although still not a popular area of research, readily discusses the many tensions women face within organizational settings. A few of the points of discussion are as follows:

- Presently feminist scholars are divided when it comes to whether gender constitutes culture or whether individuals form relationships in which they replicate societal power struggles (Buzzanell, 2000).

- The literature points to organizational structure and processes that highlight men and marginalize women and value male modes of thinking, feeling, acting and forming identities while devaluing female counterparts. (Fine & Buzzanell, 2000)

- The point at which scholars can agree is that traditionally, career advice and outlined career paths focus on the advancement of white males within one company through executive development programs and sponsorships and not on female or minority employees (Buzzanell, 2000).

The points above represent the main school of thought, which is that the external environment which highlights the patriarchy and disenfranchises women and minorities.

Moreover, feminist perspectives of organizational communication come from multiple approaches, however for the past two decades scholars have explored organizational socialization with growing interest as it relates to the female experience within the workplace (Bullis & Rohrbauck Stout, 2000). This growth in research is in part due to the evolving idea of the organization or workplace as having a distinct culture (Bullis & Rohrbauck Stout, 2000). Research from the 1990s recognized that the predominant culture throughout corporate America is male dominated (Bullis & Rohrbauck Stout, 2000). Using feminist standpoint theory, Bullis and Rohrbauck Stout (2000) explored how organizational socialization from a women’s
perspective greatly differs from the male experience. Socialization is important to understanding the tensions that exist within the female community in a workplace as the socialization process introduces new employees to the culture of the workplace and provides opportunities for new employees to transition from outsiders to insiders (Bullis & Rohrbauck Stout, 2000). The socialization piece as discussed by Bullis and Rohrbauck Stout (2000) is central to this thesis’s argument that evolutionary theory and the way that women are socialized to interact with one another throughout their formative years, are central to how women behave in the office, particularly as it relates to how they communicate with their fellow female coworkers.

A Brief History of Women at Work (1830-1995)

Prior to discussing the present state of women within the workplace, it’s important to first look at the early beginnings of women in the labor force to better understand how women have progressed up until the present decade.

The first documented wage-earning women were domestic servants in the early settlements on seventeenth century America (Kessler-Harris, 1982). However, this is not taking into account the percentage of women who actively contributed to the family-run farms, which served as the primary vehicle from which their children would eat, nor does it account for the thousands of African-American women enslaved by wealthy land owners (Kessler-Harris, 1982). From a holistic perspective, it can be surmised that within a variety of capacities women have been making large scale contributions to the American bottom line from the very start of recorded history. During the first industrial revolution (1830-1880), one of the most significant historical events was the codification of the rights of women through state legislation as they related to trade, property ownership, rights to inheritance, and an absolute divorce (Kwolek-Folland, 1998). Post-Revolution America provided women an organizational environment of
inequity and confusion staunched with the negative perception of the “working woman” (Kessler-Harris, 1982). As noted by Kessler-Harris (1986) “a good woman was one who traded work for marriage” (pg. 22). For women without the luxury of falling into the wife and mother role, they were sought out for positions in mill work, as mill managers recognized the possible negative impact of hiring the farmers who they relied upon for product (Kessler-Harris, 1986). Additionally, as invention and distribution of necessary household manufactured goods hit the market, women who had previously been necessary as domestic servants found that there was no longer a need for their services (Kessler-Harris, 1986). However, in the mid-1830s, cash and capital to purchase these goods became all the more important (Kessler-Harris, 1986). Moving forward toward the 1860s the domestic code that had purveyed biblical notions of women as the purer sex, only furthered the socioeconomic gap that brought some women into the factories and others to the art of home-keeping and propagated the idea that a working wife was a negative reflection on the husband (Kessler-Harris, 1986).

In the late 1880s there was a distinct shift in the labor force with more than 90% of women over the age of 35 being married, more and more married women began taking paying jobs outside of the home (Kessler-Harris, 1986). This is in part due to the drastically low birth rate (62 per 1000 women), meaning that women needed to spend less time in the home managing children (Kessler-Harris, 1986). The opportunity to attend college provided young women (of affluent families) the means to work as librarians, nurses, or teachers (Kessler-Harris, 1986). Additionally, young women argued that a college education provided women with the training to be better wives and mothers (Kessler-Harris, 1986). The additional emphasis on animal and plant biology as well as the science of home economics, “legitimized college education for women” (Kessler-Harris, 1986, pg. 119).
The turn of the century brought forth new challenges and new opportunities for the female working class. A war brewing in Europe drew the male workforce into the war effort and provided women with additional manufacturing and support jobs (Kessler-Harris, 1986). Additionally, the coupling of the First World War with the economic crash of 1929, created a dichotomy of sorts for American women (Thistle, 2006). The opportunities for women to work outside of the home brought forth by WWI, were dashed by both the return of America’s soldiers and the impact of the Great Depression (Thistle, 2006). Moving throughout the 1940s, similar opportunities to work in manufacturing, in offices, and in more typically male dominated areas were made available to women as men were once again shipped off to war (Thistle, 2006). Estimates indicate that between 1940 and 1944 five million American women entered the workforce (Kessler-Harris, 1986). In 1942, after the events at Pearl Harbor, the US Government issued a non-discrimination directive, which created the opportunity for women to work in diverse non-traditional roles (Kessler-Harris, 1986). In addition to the non-discrimination directive, the War Manpower Commission began to actively recruit women to the workforce using the now iconic “Rosie, the Riveter” as a symbol of female empowerment who was “making history working for victory” (Kessler-Harris, 1986). Culturally and socially, the post-WWII era brought roll tensions that women had not faced before (Thistle, 2006). The War Department encouraged company’s to enroll women into role training that used housework analogies, female employees were encouraged to be “neat, trim, and well put together” at work (pg. 288) and when traditional social roles were crossed, such as bringing a lunch pail to work, women were belittled, bullied, or pressured to change their behavior back to that which represented the traditional female (Kessler-Harris, 1986). The tensions only grew deeper when it
came to the comparisons between women’s and men’s wages, with women earning approximately 55% of what their male co-workers earned (Kessler-Harris, 1986).

Although, women had more access to employment ultimately scholars believe that the post-war era did little to improve equality or experience for women (Kessler-Harris, 1986). The 1950s ushered in an era that reinforced traditional female roles within the household and also a governmental shift where the federal powers recognized that women had the ability to positively impact the American workforce (Kessler-Harris, 1986). This shift laid the framework for the incoming 1960s where women who were homemakers became a part of the minority of female workers (Kessler-Harris, 1986). Although in the 1960s nearly 80% of female workers worked in jobs stereotyped as strictly female, a lack of workers in certain traditionally male dominated areas began to drive women to new fields, which required skilled workers (Kessler-Harris, 1986). With the increased demand for skilled American workers came new demands by this population for equal pay. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy created the Commission on the Status of Women to provide federal agency for women’s rights (Kessler-Harris, 1986).

With the release of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, women who had always worked, embraced the culture of assertive individualism that surrounded the “second women’s suffrage battle” and were prepared to go to war with corporate and Federal powers for the rights they felt owed (Kessler-Harris, 1986). This passionate plea for acceptance of the female role shift and the opportunity to gain skilled employment at rates comparable to men was only the very beginning of the women’s equality movement, later to be defined by the affirmative action act of 1973 and then subsequent bills such as Title IV (Kessler-Harris, 1986). According to Kwolek-Folland, (1998), 1963-1997 was the era of the “renewal of the businesswoman”. From a legal perspective the status of women changed more drastically between 1970 and 1995 than it had for
more than 200 years (Kwolek-Folland, 1998). The enactment of both the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Title VII Act of 1964, along with the African-American movement for civil rights provided agency for the women’s liberation movement, the second wave of which the creation of the National Organization for Women (NOW) (Kwolek-Folland, 1998). Statistically speaking, the 1980s was a good decade for women in terms of increase in participation, entrepreneurship, and education with the following increases in representation between 1977-1990:

- In 1985, women represented 31% of all MBA graduates, an increase of 25% from 1977 (Kwolek-Folland, 1998).
- Female representation within the ranks of executives, administrators, and managers went from 5% to 12.4% (Kwolek-Folland, 1998).
- Female entrepreneurship increased greatly between 1977 and 1987 with all U.S. firms owned by women increasing from 7% to 30% (Kwolek-Folland, 1998).
- By 1994 the National Foundation for Women in Business Owners estimated that there were 7.7 million women-owned businesses, which employed more than 15.5 million people with average revenues of nearly $1.4 trillion (Kwolek-Folland, 1998).

The major tension that women faced despite the progression of sex and racial equality was the innate lack of flexibility showcased by the white male majority (Kwolek-Folland, 1998). An example of the experiential tensions that defined the seventies, eighties, and early nineties was that of Dawn Steel, the first woman to run a major Hollywood movie studio, Columbia Pictures (Kwolek-Folland, 1998). Steele was quoted as saying “I was angry about this whole notion of trying to be a man. I was exhausted from it. The hostility was extraordinary…” (Kwolek-Folland, 1998, pg. 170).
The sentiments of Dawn Steel were most likely comparable to those of other women in her field, who were trying to manage the many different roles expected of women and these tensions are similar to those felt by women today. The following research further elaborates on the plight of women post the release of *A Report on the Glass Ceiling Initiative* (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991). The initial glass ceiling report was landmark for women as it finally put a name to the tensions and challenges that women across North America faced in the workplace.

**Women in Todays’ Workplace**

According to a study of 100 upper management executives by Lyness and Thompson (2000) although women and men have similar developmental and career histories, women ultimately face greater barriers and rely on different strategies for advancement than their male counterparts. These differing strategies have been subject to much debate since the early eighties, where researchers began to explore the differences between male and female organizational communication styles. Morley and Shockley-Zalabak (1985) suggest that the organizational communication experiences of women can be characterized as a dichotomy where sex, gender and role exist in competition. According to Morley and Shockley-Zalabak (1985) female and male employees differ in two major ways in regards to organizational communication styles; the first being that women are more open, accessible, and relationship based with their peers and female employees are more likely to share regulative and informative messages with both their peers and superiors. Additionally, since female employees are more likely to operate within a feedback cycle, the relationship between female superiors and their subordinates is more fluid than that of a male superior and his subordinates, meaning that male managers received less feedback relating to performance than a female would in a similar position (Morley, & Shockley-
Zalabak, 1985). These findings have been echoed within similar studies, however as noted by Wilkins & Andersen (1991) there still exists much debate on the differences between female and male organizational communication styles. Ultimately, the enduring stereotypes of male communication styles versus female communication styles has greatly impacted the validity of organizational communication research (Wilkins & Andersen, 1991). These stereotypes are the foundation for rhetoric that implies that women are less qualified for managerial positions because women lack the inherent organizational communication skills to be successful. According to Wilkins and Andersen (1991) although sex differences in communication behaviors exist there is little to no data that suggests that there are organizational communication sex differences in managers. Additionally, the researchers go on to state that allow in the outside world there may be varied sex difference in communication patterns, due to the patriarchal nature of organizations it is more likely that women learn to adapt to these styles to masculine standards (Wilkins & Andersen, 1991).

The relationship between female coworkers within the office environment is a burgeoning realm of study as researchers seek to understand the complexities of women trying to succeed in traditionally male dominated areas of the workforce. Scholars throughout different fields of study such as women’s studies, communication studies, business administration, and psychology have explored and suggested how to counteract the various obstacles women and minorities face within corporate America. Ultimately, current research suggests that many of the obstacles women face may be related to how females communicate with one another within a competitive work environment (Litwin & Hallstein, 2007). According to Eichenbaum and Orbach (1987) relationships that women build within a work environment are at times deeply confusing as office friendships abide by differing codes of behaviors. Eichenbaum and Orbach
(1987) go on to state that “close friendships, work collaborations and entire organizations can be disrupted by the dynamics between women” (pp.22). These dynamics suggest that within the office environment women may engage in aversive behaviors in order to assert dominance between female workers, these behaviors may arise particularly within female-dominant organizations that adopt patriarchal organizational structure that devalues unique feminine skill-sets (Litwin & Hallstein, 2007). Popular literature suggests that correcting relationally aggressive acts between women in the workplace lies solely with the women involved, however this suggestion assumes that women have acquired negotiation skills that often are associated with male skill-sets (Litwin & Hallstein, 2007). Additionally, research suggest that not only are interpersonal conflicts between women in the office prevalent the detrimental effects of these negative interactions ultimately, both consciously and subconsciously impact a woman’s ability to perform her job (Litwin & Hallstein, 2007). As noted by Rakow (1989) traditionally women value equity, honesty, and interconnectedness in their relationships and both inside and outside of the workplace and when a fellow female coworker breaks a woman’s trust, the effects are comparable to when trust is broken within a true friendship (Litwin & Hallstein, 2007).

Ultimately, women expect fellow women to “act like a female friend” in all office situations and when the expectation of feminine friendship rules are violated women can feel hurt, betrayed, embarrassed, disappointed, and angry (Litwin & Hallstein, 2007).

As Eichenbaum and Orbach (1987) stated “Behind the curtain of sisterhood lies a myriad of emotional tangles that can wreak havoc… important friendships occur at work and are subject to all the problems of adolescence” (Litwin & Hallstein, 2007, pp.111: Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1987, pp.10). Modern bullying research, made popular through films such as “Mean Girls” and television shows such as “Gossip Girl” that glamorize girl-on-girl relational aggression, notes the
major comparisons between indirect socially aggressive acts that occur in adolescence and behaviors that occur within the office between women (Litwin & Hallstein, 2007).

**Gossip, Exclusion, Competition, and Spite**

To better understand the role women play in limiting upward progression of their peers, it’s important to explore the tactics and strategies used to denigrate competition. This study will explore indirect social aggression as the main vehicle used when asserting dominance within female groups. According to Anderson and Reid (2009), indirect social aggression is a form of interpersonal communication that uses aversive communicative tactics such as avoidance, teasing, gossiping, and exclusion to negatively impact a target’s face and self-concept. As young children, individuals assert their aggression through physical violence as they lack the verbal skills to communicate the issue at hand; as children develop physically, emotionally, and verbally, the preferred method of abuse tends to evolve from hitting and kicking, to teasing and bullying (Catanzaro, 2011). The primary factor that distinguishes between general aggression and indirect social aggression is the manipulation that occurs during the interaction (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008). Indirect social aggression is generally delivered under a guise with the focus being on protecting the aggressor and further alienating the victim (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008). Understandably, this type of aggression is popular within the halls of middle and high schools across the nation, especially within female social groups (Catanzaro, 2011). Ultimately, the major appeal of using indirect socially aggressive behaviors is the low-cost and high-yield gain it provides, which lends itself not only to the workplace, but also operates effectively within most female communication styles (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008). According to Rucker and Gendrin (2007), women in general tend to use a more indirect communication style compared to their male counterparts, who prefer to use direct communication styles. The tendency for women
to use a more indirect communication style and to use suggestive rather than commanding communicative messaging further explains why women choose to use aggress against one another indirectly (Rucker & Gendrin, 2007).

Indirect social aggression targets an individual’s “face.” Face, within this context, can be defined as creation and management of the identity a person wishes to both assume and for others to accept during interactions (Willer & Cupach, 2008). Additionally, Brown and Levinson (1987) went on to state that individuals have two face needs: “the desire to be unimpeded in one’s actions (negative face) and the desire to be approved of (positive face)” (p.13). Indirect social aggression makes the most impact by contradicting the accepted norm that people will ultimately accept and support each other’s identity, or the identity that is presented to them (Willer & Cupach, 2008). Actions or behaviors that act in opposition to an individual’s “face” are face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Indirect socially aggressive behaviors are, in their simplest forms, face-threatening acts that start one’s defensive systems such as fight or flight (Willer & Cupach, 2008).

Women, due to their strong desire to be accepted, are more susceptible than men to the ill effects of indirect social aggression including anger, hurt, embarrassment, depression, anxiety, and in the most severe instances suicidal feelings (Willer & Cupach, 2008). Although acts of violence may leave marks, modern research suggests that it is the more manipulative and strategic forms of aggression that leave the most lasting wounds and are ultimately, most effective in managing perceived competitors (Catanzaro, 2011). For example, Goffman (1967) rates indirect socially aggressive behaviors on a continuum. The first stage on the continuum is unintentionally face threatening communication (ex. a woman doesn’t wave to a friend on the street because she doesn’t notice her, but the friend is hurt none the less), the second is incidental
(ex. a friend being overly honest in a situation where it is not appropriate) and thirdly, intentionally aggressive behavior (ex. a girl yells across the lunch room that her ex-friend is a loser and no one should sit with her). The aforementioned examples denote that the intentionality of an aggressive act only further contribute to the alienation the target feels in response to the interaction (Goffman, 1967). The relationship between the target and perpetrator, the environment, and the aggression itself, all work synchronously and make the target feel devalued, isolated, and embarrassed.

The bullying spectrum has evolved since its inception in communication research in 1970 (Crothers, Lipinski & Minutolo, 2009). Olweus (1993) initially described bullying as “mobbing” and defined it as “a purposeful attempt to injure or inflict discomfort upon another either through words, physical contact, gestures, or exclusion from a group or peers over time” (Crothers, Lipinski & Minutolo, 2009, p. 98). Olweus’s (1993) original definition speaks to the power of intent to isolate and exclude in socially aggressive messages. Throughout the literature and the multiple definitions of what constitutes bullying these themes are consistent throughout all forms of bullying such as, direct physical bullying, direct verbal bullying, and relational or indirect social aggression (Crothers, Lipinski, & Minutolo, 2009). Additionally, according to modern management research, Harvey, Heames, Richey, & Leonard (2006) added scape-goating, sexual harassment, increasing work/pressure or load, and the destabilization of the workplace, which includes failure to give credit, and setting individuals up for failure, to the original list of types of bullying, these additions all reflect intention to isolate the target as the outcome of the bullying or aggressive act. By using indirect socially aggressive tactics to isolate an individual from social support communities within the workplace the perpetrator denies the target mentorship opportunities that are integral to the process of being promoted within a company.
Inside and outside of the workplace, indirect social aggression manifests both in female and male social groups; however, the effects prove to have far more dire consequences within female social groups (Bjorkvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1992). According to Coyne and Whitehead (2008), relationships, especially close relationships, are more important to women. Therefore, within the nature of female relationships there lies the potential to emotionally hurt, maim, or scar someone using words alone. In the early stages of aggression research, indirect social aggression was defined as non-verbal communicative behaviors such as avoidance and exclusion during interactions (Feshback, 1969). This limited scope has expanded three-fold to include behaviors such as gossip, rumor-spreading, social isolation, exclusion, and alienation. This increase in research regarding indirect social aggression comes as a result of a direct increase in mediated and celebrated image of the “mean girl” across television, movies, and the internet (Meyer, Stern, & Waldron, 2008). According to Meyer, Stern, & Waldron (2008) the increase of these mediated images of “mean girls” is directly related to the increase of actual events of indirect social aggression in young women. The idea of being a mean, manipulative, and calculating young woman extends beyond any evolutionary need to compete for male attention and appears to be transitioning into a cultural norm of young women today. According to Willer and Koenig-Kellas (2009), the aforementioned strategies to denigrate competition extend beyond the teenage experience and, within the past decade, researchers have explored the prevalence and impact of indirect social aggression in sororities and female-groups in universities with the results mirroring that of studies conducted on younger women. Whether a female is 12 or 25, research suggests that indirect social aggression is associated with “less life satisfaction, more antisocial behavior, affective instability, affective features of depression, peer
rejection, negative relationships, stimulus seeking, egocentricity, self-harm behavior, and disordered eating patterns” (Willer & Koenig-Kellas, 2009, p. 5).

When examining female perpetrators of workplace bullying, the research suggests that aggressors generally target those who don’t meet societal norms (Catanzaro, 2011). Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) identified four types or common perceptions of women: the seductress or sex object, the mother, the pet, and the iron maiden. These four iterations of the female norm are represented in television, throughout the pages of magazines, and across the internet and their prevalence in society have create four neat and tidy boxes in which to place women. When women do not meet the criteria of those types, they intentionally or unintentionally become a target of “the herd” (Catanzaro, 2011). “Girls who are intellectually different or who question feminine ideals by their appearance and dress are considered not normal. These girls remind other girls of their potential failure to match up and are considered threats to their peers” (Catanzaro, 2011, p. 87).

According to Hickman (2006), victims of relationally aggressive behaviors in the workplace are more likely to experience increased depressive effects, lower self-esteem, increased physical complaints, and greater alcohol usage. Hickman (2006) also noted that on a smaller scale, victims of relational aggression were found to have distressed supervisor relations, decreased job satisfaction, increased job stress, less adaptive responses to problems, greater emotional disturbances, and increased organizational aggression. What is most alarming about the prevalence of these behaviors is that according to Crothers, Lipinski, and Minotulo (2009), relationally aggressive behaviors are most likely to be used by women in response to a colleague’s attempt to negotiate for a better salary and benefits. Additionally, this ostracism in the light of upward progression by female colleagues often results in the victim being
unsuccessful in her negotiation and leads to lasting dissatisfaction in the workplace (Crothers, Linpinski, & Minotulo 2009).

Through an evolutionary perspective it can be surmised that women, due to an innate desire to protect their reproductive organs, often choose to use indirect social aggression as a way to assert dominance and manage perceived competitors (Marmefelt, 2009). Within the workplace, scholars have denoted several strategies women use to denigrate their competition: gossip, social exclusion, social isolation, social alienation, partner-stealing (both romantic and platonic), and rumor-spreading (Crothers, Lipinski, & Minutolo, 2009). Several studies suggest that women make up the majority of the aggressive behavior with as many as 48 percent of office perpetrators being women (Crothers, Lipinski, & Minutolo, 2009). According to the U.S. Workplace Bullying Institute ‘s 2010 *Workplace Bullying Survey* that randomly surveyed more than 6,000 American workers, female perpetrators target their female co-workers 80% of the time; ultimately, the survey indicated that 68 percent of all workplace bullying incidents (both male and female) is same-sex harassment (Crothers, Lipinski, & Minutolo, 2009). The 2010 *Workplace Bullying Survey* states that although men are more likely to bully within the workplace, women are more likely to target their female peers. Additionally, although both men and women can perpetrate against their co-workers, the type of bullying employed by women tends to be substantially different than the peer harassment traditionally used by their male peers (Crothers, Lipinski, & Minutolo, 2009). According to Crothers, Lipinski, and Minutolo (2009) studies have suggested that “women can be just as aggressive as are males; however, females demonstrate their need for superiority, control, and power differently through … relational aggression…” (pp.102). Harvey, et.al., (2006) indicate that bullying within the workplace has a similarly detrimental effect on an individual’s identity, sense of self worth, and personal
attributes as it does on adolescents. In the workplace, the effects of bullying also impact daily operations of a business. Workplace bullying may manifest as reduced flexibility, increased absences, difficulty implementing organizational change, and lack of organizational commitment, which within the workplace dynamic, mimic research conducted with young women and the impact of relational aggression in social circles (Crothers, Lipinski & Minutolo, 2009).

**Gossip, a tool to bind and a weapon to break.**

Gossip is dynamic, hard to define, hard to predict the outcome of, and even harder to influence its trajectory (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003). Often operating within similar framework, or as an accomplice to, rumor-spreading, gossip is the informal communication of an anecdote to another (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003). Gossip originally comes from the Old English work “god-sibbs”, referring to godparents identifying the religion of their godchild (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003). Gossip eventually evolved into its contemporary meaning, which refers to “idle talk” (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003). Perceived as predominantly negative for centuries, anthropologists and sociologists now speak to “the importance of gossip of a cultural phenomenon” (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003, pg. 119). Anthropologically speaking, the main function of gossip is to identify those that are insiders versus those that are outsiders, this behavior is universally accepted and actioned (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003). From a social psychological perspective, gossip provides individuals with status, intimacy, information, and entertainment and provides opportunities for individuals to compare experiences, feelings, and beliefs (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003).

Gossip can be subdivided into three categories: information, influence, and intimacy (Rosnow, 2001). As it relates to relational aggression and more importantly, organizational
communication, the second function, that of influence, relates to the use of gossip as a control mechanism (Rosnow, 2011). This assertion of control indicates that the gossiper indirectly creates rules about how individuals will behave in certain situations and implies a direct consequence for breaking said rules (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003). Moving back to the relationship between gossip and evolutionary functions, Kantor (1977) recognized that although cultural practices may shift from mere survival mechanisms, these practices evolve and prevail in new forms. As noted by Houmanfar & Johnson (2003), gossip is merely a learned interaction habit evolved from institutionalized stimuli and then shared within groups. More interestingly, due to the overarching prevalence of gossip and rumor across culture, both interaction habits are almost immune from social extinction (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003). Ultimately, although gossip is dynamic in nature, its existence may in fact be detrimental to an organization once it has fulfilled its basic purpose of establishing social norms, spreading information, and managing relationships (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003).

Gossip evolved through the need to respond to the pressure of cultivating and managing interpersonal relationships as social groups grew and diversified (Dunbar, 2004). Gossip and rumor-spreading are two of the most common socially indirect aggressive behaviors individuals employ to intentionally manipulate and inflict emotional pain on a target (Crothers, Lipinski & Minutolo, 2009). According to Meyer, Stern, and Waldron (2008) gossip and rumor-spreading are so effective at changing the behavior of a target because of the exclusive, out-group status of the target once the gossip begins. Through gossip, the perpetrator ultimately accomplishes three goals: isolating the victim, reinforcing relationships with peers, and giving the perpetrator an opportunity to measure her worth in comparison to others (Meyer, Stern, & Waldron 2008). Gossip is significantly related to interpersonal social control and the regulation of group norms;
individuals actively work to conform to citizenship norms rather than become a target of organizational gossip or rumor, therefore creating an atmosphere that punishes those who are outside of the in-group (Hafen, 2009).

**What drives indirect social aggression between women?**

Modern feminist communication scholars Litwin and Hallstein (2007) state that “the underbelly of women’s relationships is directly tied to the material and structural constraints that continue to impact women’s lives in organizations.” (pp.127). Both scholars go on to suggest that the tradition of male dominance in business continues to oppress women within the office and forces women to suppress their natural strengths and this “internalized oppression” manifests as indirect social aggression between female co-workers (Litwin & Hallstein, 2007). By forcing women to fit into the organizational patriarchal fold women feel forced to “compete for resources and for acceptance in the dominant group” (Litwin & Hallstein, 2007, pp.127).

To understand the complexities of indirect social aggression, it is important to understand the innate and cognitive processes taking place during aggressive episodes. Evolutionary theory posits that individuals are naturally inclined to compete for resources, which include displaying both direct and indirect aggressive behavior to denigrate the competition for resources (Koener & Floyd, 2009). This inherent inclination, best explained by Charles Darwin, asserts that the behavior and actions of individuals are all motivated by a need to pass forward one’s genetic material (Koener & Floyd, 2009). One of the major facets of evolutionary theory is the role of evolved psychological mechanisms (EPMs) in cognitive and genetic adaptation (Koener & Floyd, 2008). EPMs are genetically based and are used to understand and explain the cognitive adaptations that guide humanity's innate need for survival (Koener & Floyd, 2008). According to Koener & Floyd (2008) evolved psychological mechanisms or EPMs state that intra-sex
competition is a valuable function of the human race that ensures genetic survival and allows for reproduction to take place in an efficient and reliable manner. This drive to ensure successful reproduction by acquiring a mate manifests in two ways: the need to self-promote and the desire to socially denigrate perceived reproductive competition within social groups (Frisby et. al., 2009). According to Anderson and Reid (2009), women compete with the same vigor as men do when competing for resources; however women use indirect messages as opposed to direct message to protect the perpetrators while further isolating the target. According to modern bullying research this use of communicative manipulation is consistent with trends in organizational bullying in women, who choose to commit aggression under a guise to ensure the distinct isolation of the target, which ultimately negatively impacts the targets ability to do their job (Catanzaro, 2011; Crothers, Lipinski, & Minutolo, 2009).

Evolutionary theory provides the framework for understanding the state of relational aggression in the workplace by suggesting that within environments where the need to survive is elevated women employ certain behaviors intended to denigrate competition and promote themselves. For the purpose of this study, the research will explore how the inherent and innate need to compete extends beyond mate selection and explore whether the same tactics used to compete for a mate are also used when competing for a job or a promotion.

**Tall poppy syndrome.**

Research has also looked at envy and competition between women through the framework of the “tall poppy” phenomenon. Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS) is an Australian cultural expression, which has been borrowed by academics to describe a “disease that feeds on the belief that anyone who appears to represent success, high ability, or admirable qualities must be attacked, demeaned, and cut down to the common level” (Mancl & Penington, 2011, pg. 79).
This phenomenon seeks to explain why certain women may choose to denigrate individuals who seemingly possess traits which “set them apart from the crowd”. Additionally, this phenomenon also suggests that women, recognizing the possibility to be bullied into the norm, may choose to “act small” in order to avoid being excluded from the workplace social elite (Mancl & Penington, 2011). Assuming women are in fact “playing small” to avoid bullying, exclusion, or abuse, Tall Poppy Syndrome provides an alternate, yet similar explanation for how women contribute to their own lack of upward progress (Mancl & Penington, 2011).

The key behavioral process that TPS explores is the area in which envy and competition collide. Additionally, Mancl and Penington (2011) state envious individuals may choose to use “predatory tactics to professionally ambush” (pg. 80) successful female coworkers.

Feminist literature goes on to provide support for the possibility that relational aggression directly impacts the upward progression of women by asserting that when a woman appears to be ambitious or on the promotion track, it can be viewed by fellow female coworkers as “breaking rank” or increasing the expectations of her fellow coworkers (Mancl & Penington, 2011). Recognizing the possible office-wide impact this “high achieving” female may have on the collective female population it becomes the onus of the “herd” to bring said female back into the fold (Mancl & Penington, 2011).

From evolutionary theory to TPS, the varied theoretical considerations that inform why women communicate the way they do within work situations all focus on

Looking Below the Glass Ceiling

In a U.S. Department of Labor (1991) study entitled “The Glass Ceiling Initiative” defined the glass ceiling as “those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into management-
level positions.” (pp.1) According to Wrigley (2002), since the 1991 release of the “Glass Ceiling Initiative” little has changed. Despite representing almost half of the workforce (44%), the average woman makes approximately 27% less than her male counterparts per year do (McGill, 2012). Ultimately, the upper echelons of business are controlled by “the old boys club”, an impenetrable group of wealthy upper-class men who promote from within, which in turn stifles the upward progression of women and minorities (Wrigley, 2002). In addition to the enduring nature of this sex wage and opportunity gap, current media continues to paint prospects for future female industry leaders as bright (Wrigley, 2002). This positive outlook, ultimately detracts from the real issue at hand, despite the fact that more and more women are entering the workforce, organizational sex and minority equality is moving very slowly (Wrigley, 2002).

Research has identified the following limits to upward progression: the patriarchal nature of today’s business and corporate climate, the denial of the glass ceiling phenomenon, traditional gender role socialization, and a lack of woman-to-woman mentorship and support communities (Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Hon, 1995; Wrigley, 2002). These limits have transcended efforts by professional women’s organizations to create organizational environments that celebrate the unique characteristics female professionals bring to the workplace. These limits inhibit female professionals from progressing towards positions in upper management and despite extensive research conducted on why the aforementioned barrier has been so long-standing, statistics show that change is coming very slowly (McGill 2012; Wrigley, 2002). Scholars point to a variety of reasons why this phenomenon is enduring, one being the prevalence of the “the old boys club”, the term used to describe the collective male dominance that leads to the isolation of women from upper management circles is still the dominant perspective in business (Hon, 1995).

According to Rakow (1989), American corporate culture presently celebrates traditional male
traits and values such as aggressiveness, dominance, and strength. As female traditional characteristics and values are most commonly related to maternity the stereotype that transcends into the professional world is that women are too nurturing, too emotion, and too relationship-focused to be successful managers and executives therefore male success is based on values contrary to those women possess naturally (Kanter, 1977).

Moreover, the enduring nature of the glass ceiling is also related to the denial of its existence by both men and women (Wrigley, 2002). A study of 27 professional women found that more often than not women denied the existence of the glass ceiling by personally accepting blame for not advancing (Wrigley, 2002). Additionally, blame was passed from one’s own inadequacies in their role to the fact that because the work force is becoming more feminized wage and opportunity equality must be moving forward as well (Wrigley, 2002). Both of these common responses reflect a generation of women taught to accept responsibility for external factors beyond their control.

Scholars have long explored the contradictions that exist between the feminization of workforce and the enduring the “glass ceiling” (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). Toth and Aldoory (2002) have broken down the major obstacles faced by women in the workforce into three categories: hiring, salary, and opportunities promotion. The perception of equity in hiring practices has shifted considerably over the past two decades with the affirmative action movement and the subsequent feminization of the workforce. In a study entitled Beyond the Velvet Ghetto (Cline et.al., 1986) researchers noted that sex equity within highly feminized fields such as public relations and communications could only be achieved through the efforts of individual women (Toth, 1989: Hon, 1995). This statement alone has caused dissension among academics and in Toth and Cline’s (1989) critique of the original velvet ghetto study, Toth noted
that the study was in fact very limited in scope. Modern scholars argue for a more radical approach to gender equity, recognizing that the onus can no longer be placed on the shoulders of female professionals themselves (Rakow & Natasia, 2008). The enduring nature of sex inequity points to a far more social and systemic issue.

In addition to salary based inequalities, opportunities for promotion continue to factor into the organizational limitations that women face. This enduring gender and sex barrier inhibits women from progressing towards positions in upper management despite the extensive research conducted on why the aforementioned barrier has been so long-standing (Wrigley, 2002). Academics point to a variety of reasons why this phenomenon is enduring one being the prevalence of the “good-old-boy” network. This cultural touchstone celebrates the maleness of the workplace, by fostering social circles where relationships are built both in the boardroom and on the golf course (Hon, 1995). From a radical feminist perspective, Toth (1989) suggested that the onus of advancement should be the responsibility of all stakeholders involved and it is the onus of both corporations and governments alike to recognize the flaw in the institutional and social ideologies surrounding the role women play in business (Rakow & Natasia, 2008).

Ultimately the basis of this argument is that it’s important for all entities involved to expel the myth that “men make better managers” and that women are “too emotional to make the decisions necessary to be an excellent manager” (Toth, 1989).

Another perspective provided by Linda Hon (1995), states that the problem of glass ceiling is in part due to the socialization of women in western society. Cognitively, when women are raised with traditional gender roles, women at a natural disadvantage as they are less inclined to argue for their own worth (Hon, 1995). Modern university curriculums choose not to differentiate between gender and sex needs and therefore skills such as strategic management,
salary negotiation, and critical thinking, common in business school curriculums are not focused upon (Hon, 1995). These disadvantages alongside the deep and inherent “maleness” of the professional world compromise the opportunity for women to move into upper management and executive positions.

Finally, the present state of the marketplace has impacted upward progression of women because of downsizing due to economic hardship brought forth by the global recession (Hon, 1995). Downsizing means for fewer jobs and ultimately lower salaries for both men and women (Hon, 1995).

According to Kyness and Thompson (2000) women specifically report that the exclusion from informal networks experienced distinctly by female’s in elite corporate positions directly impacts a woman’s ability to perform in their role. According to Kanter’s (1977) original tokenism theory women who work in predominantly male-dominated organizational cultures, women face obstacles that their male counterparts do not. Additionally, this theory states that women may possibly face six negative consequences that impede their ability to be promoted (Kanter, 1977; Lyness & Thompson, 2000).

The six consequences are as follows:

1. Women are more likely to feel as if they do not fit into the male dominated culture that exists in upper management circles and also feel that they need to change in some way to fit within the culture in order to be successful. (Kanter, 1977; Lyness & Thompson, 2000)

2. Kanter (1977) states that in work groups with skewed gender rations, men tend to exaggerate gender differences by emphasizing male camaraderie and excluding women from informal interactions. (Kanter, 1977; Lyness & Thompson, 2000)
i. Additionally, “62% of female respondents in senior management positions reported that the “old boys” network perpetuates gender bias against women.” (Swiss, 1996; Lyness & Thompson, 2000)

3. A third consequence of token status is that women ultimately receive less mentoring (or less effective mentoring) than male executives. (Kanter, 1977; Lyness & Thompson, 2000)

4. Women are dependent on male executives for formal organizational career management processes. Additionally, women’s dependence on formal organizational processes for advancement hampers opportunities for advancement, whereas their male counterparts use more informal networks to solidify promotions. (Kanter, 1977; Lyness & Thompson, 2000)

5. Women are more likely to be viewed stereotypically, which makes it increasingly difficult for women to garner critical developmental assignments needed for advancement. (Kanter, 1977; Lyness & Thompson, 2000)

6. Finally, because women may be viewed stereotypically they may have difficulty obtaining opportunities for geographic mobility. Ultimately, women are less likely to be chosen for overseas assignments. (Kanter, 1977; Lyness & Thompson, 2000)

The negative consequences mentioned above have transcended the times and although Kanter’s (1977) tokenism research is close to three decades old these consequences still apply within contemporary corporate culture.


**Fostering sisterhood.**

Kanter (1977) first noted the importance of mentorship for women looking to climb the corporate ladder more than three decades ago. In 2012, the need for mentorship between female professionals is as important as ever and it should be considered as a key strategy to breaking through the glass ceiling. Mentors are defined as “higher ranking, influential, senior organizational members with advanced experience and knowledge who are committed to providing upward mobility and support to a protégé’s professional career” (Ragins, 1989, pp.2). Mentoring relationships are significant in one’s career development, success, and satisfaction and according to Ragins (1989) mentoring relationships are directly related to one’s opportunities for advancement.

Research on the impact of female to female mentoring relationships indicates that women who develop and foster mentoring relationships fare better within male-dominated organizational cultures than those who do not (Ragins, 1989). In a longitudinal study of 199 female managers with AT&T, female protégées indicate mentors assisted with promotions, career-planning, education and provided protégées with advice, feedback, direction, and support (Ragins, 1989). Additionally, mentors, particularly white powerful male executives, give legitimacy and agency to female professionals and through that relationship the stereotypes can be broken down and a new light may be shed on the female protégée (Ragins, 1989). Through strategic advice and showing their protégée the “in’s and out’s” of corporate politics as well as providing instrumental feedback regarding the protégées management style, mentors help their protégées move through the corporate world with expediency (Ragins, 1989).

In a study conducted by Reich (1989) that compared two studies, one of 131 female executives and 416 male executives, it was noted that female executives were more likely to
report positive benefits from mentoring relationships such as increases “in self-confidence, useful career advice, counseling on company politics and feedback on weaknesses” (Reich 1985: Ragins 1989, pp. 5). Moreover, what makes mentorship a key strategy to breaking through the glass ceiling is that despite research positing the positive impact of increased female-to-female mentorship, research also suggests that women do not engage in these networks with other women (Callahan & Tomaszewski, 2007).

The present research suggests that there is a gap in communication between female professionals. On one hand there is a distinct need for women to assemble to support one another, share information and knowledge, and provide guidance to young female professionals. However the wage gap and perceived few opportunities for women within an organizational environment create an air of competition that permeates the office environment making this assembly near impossible. To better understand the factors at play, this study will ask professional women to describe their relationships with fellow female employees to help identify what makes developing “a good old girls club” so hard to do.

Research Questions

Research questions within qualitative research help to guide the study and provide a framework for exploration. The following overarching questions guide this thesis:

- **R1:** How do women perceive and communicate with their fellow female employees?
- **R2:** How are women impacted by female to female communication within the workplace?
Chapter 3: Methodology

The feminist theoretical discipline as well as the organizational communication discipline both use qualitative data methods to seek answers in a holistic way. Following the methodology of Hon’s landmark study *Toward a Feminist Theory of Public Relations* (1995), this study used a long-interview process from which to gather data. The long interview is important as long interviews “go beyond studying individual perceptions and feelings” and allows the researcher to be flexible in their role as observer and ask questions that reflect the experiences of the participant (Hon, 1995, pg. 39). Most importantly, the use of the long interview was used to give all participants the opportunity to share their experiences in their own words. Recognizing that this method of data-collection is less rigid than others, a set of questions were developed with the intention of framing or guiding a conversation. The questions were not used exclusively and in some cases, were used only as touch points throughout the conversation. This allowed for fluid conversation and the opportunity for participants to lead the interview.

There are two challenges that this methodology presents, the major challenge is that this holistic way of conducting interviews relies heavily on the openness of the participant and in cases where participants were less inclined to share their personal stories, little data could be mined from the interview.

The second challenge as noted by Marshall and Rossman (1989) and reiterated by Hon (1995) there are plenty of opportunities for misinterpretation within the long interview style methodology and all though all efforts to ensure data was understood and transcribed with the original intention present, there are always different perspectives to take into account during interpretation.
Description of Sample and Procedure

A snowball sample was used to obtain 10 participants for 10 interviews. The age range was from 25-54, with the mean being the age of 40. Participants came from health, business, communications, education, public administration, IT, and sales fields. The average years of lifetime work per individual is 17 and the average size of organization or company is 3,000 employees. The participants were found by accessing a variety of networks and relying on ideal candidates to nominate additional candidates who have more than five years or work experience and have experience working in offices with women. The limiting factors of this study were few as all female voices (over the age of 18 and with more than five years of work experience) could contribute to this study. In addition to age and experience restriction the only other limiting factor was that possible participants who worked in occupations that have isolating work environments such as individuals who work from home or who work in sales independently, were not asked to participate.

Although working with 10 participants may seem concerning to scholars who abide by the “more is better” principle, the intention of this study was to gather rich data that would provide the researcher with depth and an authentic account of each participants experiences.

Long Interview Process

The general questions which were developed are rooted in literature relating to indirect social aggression in the workplace and similar studies pertaining to the glass ceiling and the develop of feminist theory. The identification section was crafted to ascertain from all participants their age, the sector in which they work, and the size of the organization they work for. These questions were used to help identify any generalizations that could be made during the
analysis portion of the study as they relate to age, field, and size. The limitations of the identification section was that no data was collected relating to diversity.

The questions which followed the identification questions ranged from 11-22, depending on the individual’s own experiences and willingness to share their stories with the interviewer. The overarching research questions seek to explore how women perceive and communicate with their female coworkers and how those interactions and conversations impact their overall ability to progress upward within their organization. Participants were asked about their experiences interacting with female coworkers both inside and outside of the office. Participants were also asked about instances of conflict between women and instances where they witnessed a relationally aggressive act taking place in their workplace. As stated previously, not all questions were used and some spontaneous questions were asked during the interview to enrich the conversation and data collected.

**Participant Recruitment**

Participants were recruited through a variety of means stemming from a snowball sample. The first participant was found and vetted through the principle researcher’s professional network. In the beginning, five ideal participants were identified. They were chosen based on their total experience, field of work, size of organization worked for, proximity to the principle researcher, and breadth and depth of their overall experience. The five initial participants represented the fields of: education, business, health, arts, and communications. The initial participants recommended additional participants with similar, but not identical career experiences. The in-person interviews were conducted in locations agreed upon by both the interviewer and interviewee. An informed consent form was signed prior to any conversation
taking place and was logged. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. Transcriptions were completed by the principle researcher.

Recommended participants who did not reside within the Knoxville-area had the option of conducting a phone interview or filling out an online open-ended survey. The phone interview was conducted in the exact same manner as the in-person interview with the informed consent form being signed and returned prior to conversation taking place electronically. The online survey was created from the question list compiled at the beginning of the research and incorporated 11 questions. All participants who completed an online interview were first asked to initial an informed consent form prior to beginning the study. The online interview was facilitated through Google Docs and then imported to a larger excel file where each participant received a unique identifier, which was catalogued by the principle researcher.

**Data Analysis**

Using constant comparative analysis the data was coded and categorized into themes. These themes were identified through a similarity matrix created for the purpose of this study, which helped catalogue similarities and chart major differentiations in responses (Appendix C). Ultimately, the data revealed four major thematic considerations and therefore the data was codified and interpreted accordingly to be included in the following sections.
Chapter 4: Results

For the purpose of this thesis, ten women were interviewed about their experiences with other women in the workplace. From a quantitative perspective, results of this research find the following:

- Participants reported that their integration into office culture occurred through both formal and informal networks, with the emphasis being on formal orientations and job shadowing.
- When asked about the feel of their offices or workplaces, participants described their spaces as “fun”, “casual”, “busy”, “professional”, “open-door policy”, and “stressful”. Participants also remarked on dress which ranged from “professional with casual Fridays” to “we wear scrubs”, and “we wear athletic apparel daily”.
- When asked how participants would introduce a new employee to the organization and whether the introduction process would differ depending on the sex of the new employee, 100% of participants indicated that they would not tell a woman something different than they would a man.
- 100% of participants reported witnessing or being a victim of organizational gossip at one point in their careers.
- 100% of participants reported experiencing conflict with another female coworker.
- 50% of participants reported being the victim of social aggression by a female colleague.

Ultimately, the results paint a portrait that represents the myriad of tensions that exist deep within female groups in the workplace. These tensions are important to continuing studying and understanding as they may be able to provide researchers and managers a like with information
on how to develop and foster truly sex-equal workplaces that allow women to excel without having to compromise their relationships or inherent unique skillsets.
Chapter 5: Interpretation and Discussion

As a qualitative study the research questions guiding this piece of research were to explore how women perceive, communicate with, and are impacted by their female co-workers. The interviews have uncovered four themes that seek to inform the above overarching question. Gossip, relational dialectics or the tensions between female colleagues, competition for roles, status, and opportunity, and the perception of the ambitious female all arose from the conversations as important facets of the unique relationships between women in the office.

Gossip

Gossip, as was indicated by the research, continued to be a defining feature of female communication within the workplace. With all participants indicated that at one point in their professional careers they had encountered or been a victim of organizational gossip with in some instance detrimental effects, one could say that in terms of impact, gossip is key to understanding how women can impact one another’s career trajectory and office relationships.

Of the various themes that arose throughout the research, competition, ambition, exclusion, clique-behavior, gossip was by far the most prevalent with 100% of responders stating that at one time they had witnessed, passed on, or been a victim of office gossip. In some cases the prevalence of gossip seemed less like an abnormal and negative communication habit and more like a daily occurrence that had little impact on social structure. One of the participants spoke of gossip as a daily facet of her organizations culture, casually stating “I’ve heard, passed along, and I’m sure was the target of gossip in the office.” These results align with previous research recognizing gossip is used throughout culture, sex, nationality, and age as a way to differentiate between insiders and outsiders, with the emphasis being on the innate need for such hierarchies to exist (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2003).
The normality of gossip is further exampled through the following statement, made by a participant who saw gossip as a manifestation of acceptable organizational dysfunction. “Everyone talks about everyone behind their backs at some point; nothing is ever malicious, just a bit dysfunctional. It’s primarily about work habits, and if people would just talk to the source I’m sure things could be resolved much faster.”

Ultimately, the issue at hand seems to be less about the prevalence of gossip and more about its overall impact. As noted by Litwin and Hallstein (2007) women expect their female colleagues to “act like a female friend” in office situations and this unrealistic expectation results in increased levels of hurt, disappointment, betrayal, and office conflict. For one participant, the gossip she faced from a female coworker forced her to leave her position and find new employment.

“Interviewer: What did the drama look like?
Participant: Exclusion, gossip, rumors etc. [The drama] actually drove me out of that job. I loved that job and was very, very good at that job. I loved the interaction with people, there was always a new challenge, but when I would come back to the office there was the token female who had been in there for decades and just didn’t have the skills to be in her present role so she just never was able to move up. She was never interested in learning anything to help her move up. She just stood around and talked to people and she liked to massage people – make baby blankets for women expecting or food for all the guys. Someone who was constantly trying to win you over. Shortly after I’d joined the group I was promoted above her, even though she had been there three years longer than me. She pretty much set out to destroy whatever I had built and she did it really well.
Interviewer: What tactics did she use?
Participant: She constantly questioned what I was doing, but not by questioning me, by questioning my work to other people. She made me lose confidence in what I was doing. The project that finally pushed me to leave had me working remotely so I was at the facility working and she was at the office saying “Why is [Participant] doing that?” and “Did you here what [Participant] was saying.”… It was very ugly and she got what she deserved. It came full circle after I left.”

Gossip is powerful tool. Anthropologically speaking, it’s essential for building relationships, but also can be a weapon, with which the wielder gains access, power, and the ability to alienate an individual from the group (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2007). To foster positive workspaces where women can excel without the fear or retribution from the “herd”, it’s important to create environments where employees can openly discuss with management any instances of social aggression that may be impacting their ability to succeed in their role. When asked what was needed from management to keep a 40-year-old systems analyst in her role when faced with months of defending herself from office gossip she said “She could’ve given me a lot more support.”

The support piece is key, as it can provide avenues for employees to address how they are impacted by their colleagues, particularly in situations where same-sex indirect social aggression is taking place. Gossip is immune from social extinction and therefore it’s another facet of organizational communication that has to be acknowledged and managed by a supervisor (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2007).

**Relational Dialectics, The Tensions Between Female Coworkers**

The secondary theme was that of the inherent tensions that exist between women in the office. This theme could easily have been labeled “Mean Girls and Women” as all participants
were able to recount at least one instance of conflict they experienced with a female coworker; behavior which could have been easily found in the halls of a high school. It appears as though from this study, that it’s a inherent challenge for women to get along with one another in situations where competition may exist. A partner in an investment firm recounted a situation where a new female employee tried and failed to assimilate into the company’s culture, “We had one very strange girl. She was very awkward and tried too hard to get people to like her. She was often excluded from after work drinks etc. It was much like high school where you see the popular girls [think] she is weird and you have all the guys who want to be with the popular girls so if they don’t like Morgan, then the guys don’t invite her [out to drinks]. Funny how things seldom change!”

These sentiments echoed research conducted on young women within the bullying paradigm, which states that when a girl doesn’t meet the social norm, those who do meet the standards, actively isolate and exclude the individual in punishment (Catanzaro, 2011). Similar instances of exclusion and isolation were shared by participants, an assistant manager for a major retail chain spoke of an instance where she was excluded from a conversation by her staff, “There was an instance when a group of people where chatting about the accomplishment of an individuals goals… I was also never completely looped into what was happening as I was occupied by another task, I felt excluded and “not cool” in the end.”

Although the majority of participants recounted situations where they were involved in conflict with their female co-workers, certain participants also commented on the possibility of increased success when women work well together. As participant who works as a partner in an investment firm stated, “From part experiences though, usually the women teamed up with each other. For example, if we had business partners, they would pair up. We rarely had two guys pair
up or one guy and one girl, but we often had two women become a team. It was an interesting

setup and most of those teams were successful, if they got along.” The operative phrase here is

“if they got along”, which recognizes that women don’t always play nice with one another, in

fact, the implied skepticism of that comment is representative of the aforementioned research

with shows that women are more likely to bully coworkers of their own sex (Crothers, Lipinski,

& Minotulo, 2009). However, this statement also recognizes that women who do work together

well, can have incredibly successful partnerships in the office.

Competition

The third theme was that of competition, which also arose in various contexts throughout

the study. Although, not as prevalent as gossip or relational tensions, competition was discussed

in terms of how it further aggravated the sometimes tense relationships between women

particularly in fields where deadlines fuel the company fire. Competition between women was

defined as “fierce, but supportive”, “hard to define”, and “similar between men and women”.

This broad range reflects not only how competition is perceived by different people, but also the

differing levels of competition within different fields. For example women who work in fields

such as investments, IT, sales, and marketing discussed competition in very real terms, whereas

individuals who work in fields such as education defined competition differently. A humanities

and drama teacher saw competition as follows, “…perhaps competition takes the form of heated

discussions on how a student should be helped, or disciplined, or even granted an extension. In a

school it’s really hard to decipher what being competitive means.”

Contrarily, a participant who worked in communications and marketing saw competition

from a completely different light, “Competition in my last job was pretty fierce. There was a girl

in a similar position, as mine and she would throw me under the bus whenever she had the
opportunity to do so. It got to the point where our meetings were more about how crummy the other guy was and less about what needed to get done and how to do it. I eventually quit because I was tired of spending all my time defending my work.”

The results from this research indicate that not only does perceived competition fluctuate from person to person, but also from field to field. Although, it’s different for everyone, the one thing that this research and the literature agree upon is that competition is a constant and whether it manifests as open social warfare or through heated discussion and debate, it exists throughout the female workplace experience. One participant who was looking to be promoted to a managerial position at her workplace recounted her strategy to denigrate the competition thusly, “I worked in store and was competing for a promotion to be a manager and basically, I just looked at my competition and analyzed where their biggest weaknesses were and made sure that I was incredibly strong in those area's. I didn't want to give my overall manager any room for doubt that I was the best candidate.”

Koener and Floyd (2009) identified in their evolutionary theory work that humans are naturally inclined to compete and whether it be within a work setting or for a mate, competition exists. It is only made a more interesting relational and communication phenomenon within female groups, because of how women perceive relationships with other women. According to Litwin and Hallstein (2007) relationships are more important to women than they are to men despite the fact that men capitalize on their relationships better than women do within the workplace. The crux of this study was to explore why although women value their relationships more in the office, they don’t capitalize on those relationships in the same way their male counterparts do. The prevalence of competition in conjunction with desire for friendship-based relationships by women appears to be positively correlated with why women aren’t progressing
up the corporate ladder as men do. The results of this study beg the further question of whether women are possibly the reason why the glass ceiling endures. If competition manifests in manipulative and indirect fashion, it can be hard for a manager to identify the cause of the communication problem within her/his staff. Indirect social aggression by nature protects the perpetrator and further isolates the victim (Catanzaro, 2011), but what if, managers were trained to identify and create conversation around the prevalence of relationally aggressive acts between women in a way that made it easier for women to speak to their supervisors if they happened to become a victim of it? Could bringing this dark side of female relationships into the light possibly chain the self-destructing nature of female relationships when tested by competing interests? As stated by an assistant sales manager for a large retail chain “Competition can be fierce… it is consistently between two women so there is no way to differ (between women and men) at times it can get a bit dirty and can seem to be more about friendships rather than skill set.” The evidence of this study suggests that the solution lies less with changing the structure of the male-centered workplace and more about changing how female employees communicate competition with their peers and management. Despite the 1950s stereotype women aren’t always delicate flowers, they are inclined to be just as strategic and ruthless as any male counterpart and when that ambitious side to the female worker is celebrated and then focused, there may be an opportunity for women to really change the statistics on workplace equality.

The Perception of the Ambitious Female

Finally, the fourth theme that arose from this study was how women perceive ambitious, competitive women within their workplace. As stated in the section above, the ambitious, competitive, skilled female worker is somewhat legendary. She is either a “bitch” or a “Jill-of-all-trades”, but throughout this research the idea of female ambition still appears to slanted to the
negative and not yet a standard that can encompass a new generation of educated, skilled, and capable women. Although this study primarily explored how women impact each other in instances of conflict within the office, another facet of this research was to understand how perceive impact one another and what better archetype to ask after than the elusive “corporate bitch”. The aggressive, pants-wearing, go-getter who has the skills to become one of the 18 female CEO’s that presently hold seats on the Forbes 500 list (McGill, 2012). The responses collected for questions about conflict, communication, and relationships all tended to reflect instances where competition negatively impacted relationships, however when asked about what was thought of ambitious women the responses were resoundingly positive.

- “I consider myself to be ambitious and I admire ambitious women. There is a lot to be said for women who can manage all kinds of pressures: family, work, health etc… I find the most successful women are those who embrace their femininity. They focus on what they’re good at and bring that perspective to the table.” - Partner, Investment Banking
- “I love ambitious women. I don’t always love working for them, because they have incredibly high expectations. I understand and respect where those expectations come from because I think ambitious women feel as if they have to be the best in their role to be able to advocate for their own abilities.” – Coordinator, Communications and Marketing
- “Ambition is key, if you are not ambitious you’re not inspiring… they are often vocal about their goals are willing to try just about anything” – Assistant Store Manager, Retail
Statements such as these reflect the positive perception of ambitious women. The disconnect is that although participants thought highly of ambitious women, they also found that in instances where they worked underneath a female manager or supervisor to be challenging, once again reflecting the inherent tensions between female relationships and ego.

- “(I) have had several female managers. The most recent (5 years ago), I worked for a very career-minded manager. She was very demanding and not very sympathetic for family-related leave.” – Program/Policy Analyst - Government

- “I've had three [female supervisors]. One was exceptional… The second one was a selfish-tyrant who was more concerned with her image than she was helping her staff be successful. She was also a terrible micro-manager, who would hire women with strong personalities and then fight with them on absolutely everything. My third female manager, is a truly inspirational woman, but has a tendency to micromanage in a way that makes it hard to do my job. She will edit a two-page document thirteen times playing with sentence structure or changing the tone of a piece over and over again. It's gotten to the point where I don't look at edits until she's sent at least 5 drafts.” – Coordinator – Marketing and Communications

The tensions between perception and reality in term of how women see ambitious women and how they relate to women in supervisory roles examples the challenges that women face just relating to one another in the workplace. Couple that with the tensions of working in a male-centric environment that doesn’t always value traditional feminine skillsets and there lies a lot of opportunity for conflict.
A Management Model for Identifying and Managing Social Aggression in the Workplace

As first noted by Charles Redding communication can profoundly impact workplace practices, however it must understood and explored by a skeptical mind and its this critical viewpoint of all human behavior that can stimulate progress (Claire, 1999). This research is in part based on Redding’s principle of looking at all things from a critical perspective and asking questions that run contrary to the status quo. To help future researchers further explore this unique communication and relational phenomena that exist in the workplace, I’ve created a preliminary model that provides a framework for identifying and managing female conflict in the workplace. This model seeks to provide managers and future researchers with additional tools to use to ensure that their organization in operating efficiently and that each female employee is given the opportunity to succeed and grow in their role.

![Figure 1: Relational aggressions impact of female employee satisfaction](image)

(Crothers, Lipinski, & Minondo, 2005)
Considerations consulted when creating this model were the responses from conducted interviews and also literature regarding the consequences of relational or indirect social aggression between women in the workplace (Hickman, 2006). Ultimately, this model is both an outline for managing employees who are being subjected to indirect social aggression and a showcase of the benefit of early managerial intervention. When asked about what her manager could’ve done to keep her, the IT systems analyst who has forced out of her job because of the social aggressive acts of a fellow female employee she simply said “She could’ve supported me.” This support is essential to fostering positive relations between female employees and also giving women the support needed to be able to truly excel in their role.
Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Using research to fill in any gaps from the interview process, it appears as though women perceive their fellow colleagues with respect and in some cases admiration, particularly for those who juggle multiple roles. The challenge in communication lies not in perception; so much as it lies in how competition and relationships are managed. The distinct similarities in bully research, organizational indirect social aggregation research, and the results of this study indicate that managers may benefit from adopting socialization techniques used by teachers within a high school setting to manage intersex conflict. The responses of this study and research conducted by Crothers, Lipinski, and Minotulo (2009), Harvey et. al. (2006), Hafen (2009), and Litwin and Hallstein (2007) all speak to existence, prevalence, and overall impact or relational aggression in the workplace between women and as was noted by an IT analyst in this study, gossip, exclusion, social isolation, and manipulation as perpetrating by female employees creates dysfunctional work environments and makes it impossible for certain women to move upward throughout their organization. This additional challenge created by women that impacts women, is another major consideration to the glass ceiling phenomena. This study suggests that the slow progression of equal-pay and equal opportunities for women may be in part related to how women communicate and impact one another in the office particularly as it relates to the use of social aggression as a way to deter an individuals advancement. The responses indicate that gossip, exclusion, isolation, and intrasex competition are directly related to increased levels of job dissatisfaction, which aligns with previous research conducted by Crothers, Lipinski, and Minotulo (2009). This study does not intend in anyway to paint women in the office as gossiping bullies, but it does offer qualitative research that further supports the need for more conversations at all levels
surrounding the glass ceiling and how companies can create environments which empower both men and women to operate to their full potential.

**Implications**

This study is unique in the fact that it explores the female-to-female dynamics that impact whether a woman feels empowered and supported enough to progress upwardly within her organization. Generally, glass ceiling and feminist organizational communication research explore primarily the impact of white men on the opportunities of those not in the majority, however this study suggests that although the patriarchal nature of organizations impacts opportunities for women to be successful, there may be outside factors that are equal contributors. The implications of this study are multifaceted as they inform disciplines. Firstly, by exploring the unique relational tensions that exist within female organizational relationships, we’ve discovered identifiers, which can be used to help managers support their female employees to ensure they’re able to work to their full potential. From a research perspective, this research has far-reaching implications as it casts a critical eye towards continued research on the effects of male-centric work environments. As noted by Dr. Linda Hon (1995) in her study on female public relations managers, it can’t always be about how women are affected by environmental and cultural challenge at some point it will be the onus of women to demand support from not only their fellow female employees, but also from their male managers.

**Limitations**

This study was limited in the following ways: accessibility, diversity, and breadth. Due to the time-restrictions and the area in which this study was conducted, the sample was skewed. As participants came from a snowball sample, the demographics of all participants were similar with the majority of interviewees representing middle to upper socioeconomic classes. Researchers
looking to expand this study should aim to include participants from all socioeconomic brackets to explore the prevalence of relationally aggressive behaviors in entry to lower-level positions. Additionally, this study suffered from a lack of diversity. As this study incorporated a large portion of glass ceiling research it would behoove future researchers to ensure that the sample incorporates individuals representing a variety of races, religions, and nationalities. Finally, due to time restrictions this study could have benefitted from a larger sample. The relatively small size of the sample, particularly because most participants hailed from one geographic location, skews the sample as it only represents one perspective. Future researchers should explore similar research in a more culturally diverse and ultimately, a larger city than that of Knoxville, TN.

**Future Research**

Future research should look to narrow this study by exploring the unique communicative habits of women within differing fields or sectors. As this study pulled participants from a wealth of disciplines, it would be interesting to identify whether the results of this study differ from sector to sector. Additionally, as this research only sought views from women, to balance this study, a male perspective could provide more complete insight on how women interact with one another within the office.
**References**


*Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering, 66, 5731.*


Appendix

Interview/ Open-Ended Survey Questions

Age:

Career Field:

How large (number of employees) is the company you work for?

How many years have you been a part of the work force?

Describe the environment in which you work:

How did you learn the ropes or the way things work around your office?

Tell me about the relationships you have with the women in your office:

What would you tell a new female employee in your office to help them thrive/survive?

Tell me about the last time you asked a fellow female employee for career advice?

Tell me about your most poignant mentor relationship:

What would encourage you to be a mentor?

What concerns do you have about being a mentor to a young female professional in your field?

What are some of the major communication obstacles you face in your office?

Tell me about a time when there was a major conflict between two or more females in your office?

Tell me about a time when you felt isolated or excluded by your coworkers:

Tell me about how gossip circulates in your office:

Tell me about a time when you heard about, passed along, or were the target of a rumor in your office:

Tell me about a time when a female coworker made you frustrated or angry. What did you do about it?
What does conflict between women look like in your office:

Tell me about a time when you had to compete for a promotion or opportunity in your office:

What does competition look like in your office?
INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT
Female to Female Communication in the Workplace

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to participate in a study conducted by Katelyn Brownlee, University of Tennessee, Knoxville. To participate you must be 18 years of age or older, if you do not meet the age requirements please notify the researcher immediately. We hope to learn about your experiences with female-to-female relational aggression within the workplace.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY

If you decide to participate, you will be asked questions about your experiences in the workplace as they relate to female to female communication.

You will be asked to sit down with the interviewer for no longer than 45 minutes. Once you have left the conversation you will not be contacted by the researcher.

All sessions will be audio-taped. These tapes will be used for the purpose of this study alone and once this study is completed they will be archived and then destroyed.

RISKS

This interview will be conducted at the discretion and comfort of the interviewee. If discussing instances of bullying, teasing, gossip, isolation in the workplace may cause stress, please notify the researcher immediately. The health of all participants is paramount to this study and at any time if you feel like you would like to end the interview please notify the researcher and the interview will end.

BENEFITS

There are no benefits offered to participants.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All records obtained throughout this study will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless participants specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports, which could link participants to the study.

________ Participant's initials (place on the bottom front page of two-sided consent forms)

EMERGENCY MEDICAL TREATMENT
The University of Tennessee does not "automatically" reimburse subjects for medical claims or other compensation. If physical injury is suffered in the course of research, or for more information, please notify the investigator in charge (list PI name and phone number).

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,) you may contact the researcher, Katelyn Brownlee, at 615-975-8780. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed you data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature ______________________________ Date __________

Investigator's signature ______________________________ Date __________
Vita

Katelyn Elizabeth Brownlee
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Education
University of Tennessee – Knoxville
Bachelor of Arts in Communication – GPA: 3.01

University of Tennessee – Knoxville
Masters of Science in Communication and Information – GPA: 4.0
Anticipated Graduation Date May 2013

Masters Thesis
Gossip, Exclusion, Competition, and Spite: A Look Below the Glass Ceiling at Female-Female Communication in the Workplace

Publications
Anticipated Release Date 2014

Submitted Course Research
Debunking the Myth of June Cleaver: Social Aggression in Women as a Tactic Used to Compete for Resources

Ethics in Modern Public Relations Professional Practice: The Importance of Transparency for Ethical Communication

The Moral and Social Capital of Sarah Palin: An Analysis of Post-Election Social Media Communications

Putting Out the Fire Before it Starts: Identifying Internet Contagions

We Can’t All Be Meredith Grey: A Study on the Impact of Television on the Perception of Self, Others, and Total Life Satisfaction

Related Coursework
Human Communication Research Methods
Interpersonal Communication
Organizational Communication
Public Relations Management

Committee Involvement
University of Tennessee – Knoxville
• Communication Studies Graduate Student Association: August 2011-2012
• Graduate Student Senate – CCI Masters Representative: August 2011-2012
• Division of Student Life Assessment Team August 2011- May 2013
  o Communication Committee
  o Assessment Conference Committee
  o Steering Committee
• Courage to Climb Student Recognition Awards Committee
  o Interviewer, photographer
• Diversity Calendar Committee
  o Publications
• Moving Diversity Forward Committee
• Division of Student Life New Staff Orientation Committee

Experience
Graduate Assistant: Assessment and Divisional Effectiveness
Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Life, University of Tennessee - Knoxville
August 2011- May 2013
• Support Division of Student Life assessment initiatives by managing assessment projects for seventeen departments and supporting the Assistant Vice Chancellor with Division-wide strategic and diversity planning and reporting.
• Communications specific roles included writing and developing the creative concept behind the first (and second) annual report ever published by the Division of Student Life at UT and writing a monthly assessment and student affairs focused newsletter.
• Develop and present benchmarking reports that inform University-wide Top 25 initiatives.

Community and Charitable Giving’s Keyleader: lululemon athletica
Ottawa, ON
December 2010 – August 201
• Managed on-floor sales, customer relations, and employee effectiveness at high-traffic yoga and lifestyle retailer.
• Managed and organized weekly in-store events from local yoga instructors, running gurus, and fitness leaders.
• Successfully managed store relationships with all city-wide yoga and fitness studio contacts and built new relationships with new up and coming community fitness studios.
• Lead manager for Parliament Hill Yoga series. Managed all instructor relationships and created a great experience for the 500+ attendees who joined lululemon for a free weekly yoga class on the front lawn of Parliament Hill.

Communications/ Campaign Coordinator : Volunteer Canada
Ottawa, ON
December 2009 – December 2011
• Created the concept (look & feel) and managed the National Volunteer Week campaign. Produced the Volunteers All Around You video, which was sent coast to coast to celebrate Canadian volunteerism.
• Main point of contact for all media relations and publicity for the organization.
• Secondary lead on marketing and communications departmental strategic plan, social media marketing plan, and inter-office budget.
• Lead content manager/writer for social media communities, blog, and monthly newsletter.

Community Involvement
Varsity Men’s Rowing Coach: Atomic Rowing/ Oak Ridge Rowing Association
Oak Ridge, TN
August 2012 – June 2013