

DISSERTATION

AN ENTREPRENEURIAL LEAD(HER)SHIP JOURNEY:

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### AN ENTREPRENEURIAL LEAD(HER)SHIP JOURNEY: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

This autoethnographic dissertation explores the researcher's evolution into becoming an entrepreneurial leader, emphasizing the development of an entrepreneurial mindset within the cultural context of higher education. The study's research question explores how the researcher has come to understand herself as an entrepreneurial leader through her identities. The study defines an entrepreneurial leader as someone who empowers others to act, solve problems, navigate uncertainties, embrace ambiguities, and take risks with greater confidence while understanding underlying motivations through identities, strengths, and values.

The research advocates for a founder-centric approach to bridge the gap in the literature between methodologies that concentrate on founders and those that focus on start-ups to deepen our understanding of the developmental processes involved in incorporating entrepreneurial leadership traits. This approach sets the entrepreneurial mindset apart from conventional managerial approaches by highlighting purpose-driven ventures that incorporate impact.

The study examines the researcher's experiences as a woman in higher education, incorporating gender theory and feminist perspectives to promote inclusivity. Employing an autoethnographic framework, the researcher blends personal narratives with broader cultural contexts, emphasizing the importance of leaders adopting an entrepreneurial mindset to make impactful contributions to the world by actively pursuing personal growth through self-reflection, cultivating self-awareness, and fostering self-acceptance.

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#empoweringwomenforthenation

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I dedicate this study to the next generation of courageous leaders – especially women leaders setting out to find their best path to their destination. Remember the legacy of the trailblazing women before you. Let your journey be inspired by their courage, tenacity, and innovation. As you embark on new ventures - and adventures! - remember that your efforts will contribute to an empowering future for all women. Aim to be an empowered woman who, in turn, empowers others. Stay true to your values, leverage your strengths, seek collaboration for good, and let every step of your journey, including the challenges, inspire those around you. Give back at the same rate you learn and grow. FLOURISH!

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## CHAPTER ONE

*“Leadership is autobiographical.*

*If you don't know who you are as a person, I do not know who you are as a leader.” - Noel Tichy*

The appeal of entrepreneurial leadership is to create lasting change that "launches something new, turns around a failing enterprise, and anticipates and makes a change before needed" (Peterson, 2020, p. xviii). The essence of being an entrepreneurial leader is to thrive in dynamic markets with abundant opportunities by harnessing an entrepreneurial mindset to be visionary, innovative, charismatic, and creative (Bojović, 2019; He, 2017). Leaders who invest in becoming more entrepreneurially minded are more adept at stepping out of their comfort zones, embracing uncertainty, and taking risks that can lead to significant opportunities and rewards that launch new initiatives while simultaneously inspiring others and championing innovative approaches (Bojović, 2019). Specifically, entrepreneurial leaders are “individuals who possess a growth mindset and demonstrate high levels of emotional, social, and cognitive competence to facilitate follower intrinsic motivation to act entrepreneurially to recognize and exploit entrepreneurial opportunities” (Taylor et al., 2022, p. 1).

According to Reid et al. (2018), successful entrepreneurship requires the “effective leadership of people, resources, and processes to create new value” (p. 1). As companies and organizations increasingly pursue innovative strategies to navigate dynamic and competitive environments, entrepreneurial leadership is evolving, demonstrating its growing relevance in the field/workplace. Entrepreneurial leadership has emerged in recent years as a new and more modern approach because entrepreneurial leaders cultivate greater self-awareness and adopt empowering mindsets and methodologies that enhance their adaptive capabilities to reimagine

their operational dynamics within and across leadership teams (De Smet et al., 2023).

Collectively, entrepreneurial leaders iterate and evolve their foundational principles, operating frameworks, and business strategies, steering their organization toward prosperity (De Smet et al., 2023). Kuratko (2004) asserts that entrepreneurial leadership is the leadership style of the 21st century because it emphasizes modern characteristics such as adaptability and unconventional approaches in uncertain environments. Other behavioral traits and characteristics entrepreneurial leaders often possess include 1) risk-taker, 2) proactive, 3) visionary, 4) innovator, 5) experimenter, 6) charismatic, and 7) creative (Bojović, 2019).

Despite the growing significance of entrepreneurial leadership, much of the existing literature has focused on the mechanics of entrepreneurship—such as ‘how’ to start a business—and often overlooks the values and motivations, or the ‘why,’ that drives entrepreneurs. By shifting the focus of entrepreneurship research from ‘how’ to ‘why,’ this study emphasizes the development of the entrepreneur as a leader rather than focusing on the business venture itself. The people, or founders, behind starting businesses are pivotal in shaping a company's culture, vision, and innovative spirit. Understanding their values, leadership style, and motivations contributes to growth and adaptability, which fosters innovation and a startup mentality, or entrepreneurial mindset, that "identifies and makes the most of opportunities, overcomes and learns from setbacks, and succeeds in various settings" (Entrepreneurial Mindset | NFTE, 2020).

Examining founders' characteristics, such as identities, personal histories, and entrepreneurial and intrapreneurial backgrounds, is essential for understanding the dynamics of entrepreneurial leadership through characteristics, attitudes, behaviors, and skills, leading to venture success (Entrepreneurial Mindset | NFTE, 2020; Bojović, 2019). This research advocates

for cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset to nurture visionary, innovative, authentic, creative, and deeply introspective leaders.

To address a significant research gap in this study, I leverage a founder-centric approach that merges entrepreneurial characteristics with leadership theories. Through the lens of my journey toward defining entrepreneurial leadership for myself, I focus on the connection between innovative ventures and their alignment with a founder's values and strengths. Through this approach, I recognize entrepreneurship's inherent complexities and social dynamics, highlighting the necessity to embrace various theoretical perspectives from different fields to understand entrepreneurial phenomena (Zahra, 2005). A founder-centric approach sets entrepreneurial leadership apart from conventional managerial approaches by focusing on purpose-driven initiatives with significant impact. The research presents an opportunity to deepen our understanding of effectively incorporating entrepreneurial leadership into creating innovative ventures by acknowledging the literature gap between studies centered on startups versus founders.

### **Research Problem**

This study addresses two challenges I have observed in entrepreneurship education. Firstly, I examine the pressing need for leaders to engage in critical self-reflection to understand the impact of their cultural backgrounds, values, beliefs, behaviors, and practices on their approach to entrepreneurial leadership (*What Is a Cultural Analysis?*, n.d.). Secondly, I focus on cultivating the essential qualities of an entrepreneur, like passion, resilience, self-confidence, adaptability, and vision, to better recognize the entrepreneurial potential in myself and others.

Addressing the first problem, I have learned through my own journey the importance of engaging in critical self-awareness in contributing to the broader conversation on developing the

competencies and characteristics necessary for entrepreneurial leadership. For instance, I have experienced that by profoundly engaging with my cultural identities, such as sexuality, gender, religion, ethnicity, and social class (*Cultural Identity*, n.d.), I can uncover my inherent strengths and pinpoint areas for improvement, thereby maximizing my leadership potential. This is why the heart of my entrepreneurial leadership journey has taught me the critical role of self-understanding, particularly the exploration through my cultural identity, to shape my leadership competencies and characteristics. Discovering my inherent strengths and areas for improvement through this reflective process has been vital to maximizing my potential as an entrepreneurial leader.

Secondly, I focus on the difficulty that Business and Badal (2014) highlighted in identifying individuals with a natural inclination toward entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial traits are exceedingly rare, with only about five out of every thousand people displaying the essential qualities of an entrepreneur (Rampton, 2014). As outlined by Rampton (2014), to become a successful entrepreneur is not about possessing extraordinary talents or having a specific personality type. Instead, successful entrepreneurs share the following five common traits: 1) passion, 2) resilience, 3) self-confidence, 4) adaptability, and 5) vision. These qualities enable entrepreneurs to navigate the complex journey of building and growing a business, transforming challenges into opportunities for innovation and impact (Rampton, 2014).

Identifying these five shared traits highlights the importance of recognizing those with entrepreneurial potential. Further outlined in the *Entrepreneurial StrengthsFinder* (Business & Badal, 2014), the fourteen strengths commonly associated with successful entrepreneurs include 1) achiever, 2) activator, 3) adaptability, 4) analytical, 5) command, 6) communication, 7) connectedness, 8) developer, 9) empathy, 10) futuristic, 11) ideation, 12) learner, 13)

self-assurance, and 14) significance. I understand that failing to identify and nurture these unique entrepreneurial leadership traits risks overlooking countless individuals who could excel in entrepreneurship.

Through my research, I aim to bridge the gaps between these two problems by promoting a founder-centric framework that helps me - and other leaders - confidently articulate and embrace a more entrepreneurial identity. This approach offers a more straightforward path for individuals to recognize themselves as entrepreneurial leaders while providing a structured method to support entrepreneurial talent. My study reflects my commitment to addressing overlooked entrepreneurial potential and the need for a leadership approach (and framework) that is both self-reflective and culturally informed.

### **Research Purpose**

The research purpose blends my interest in the intersectionality of entrepreneurship and leadership through a feminist lens to understand and define what it means to be an entrepreneurial leader. This focus is unique because it critically evaluates gender dynamics within entrepreneurship education through my personal and professional experiences as a director and lecturer at a women's entrepreneurial leadership institute. This study is informed by my journey as a cisgender woman navigating the complex landscapes of entrepreneurship education within higher education.

Central to the study is a reflective approach that employs critical self-reflection and self-awareness to examine how my gender has influenced my experiences and, consequently, my approach to leadership and education. This self-examination reveals profound insights into how identity, strength, and vulnerability are pivotal in shaping leadership styles and strategies. Through narrative inquiry provided through an autoethnography methodology, I explore and

analyze my two-decade career in higher education, highlighting the unique challenges and triumphs I have encountered along the way, enriching academic discourse on entrepreneurial leadership from a gender-aware perspective.

My research highlights the significance of reflexivity in educational methodologies. I advocate for curricula that foster resilience, innovation, and an entrepreneurial mindset by prioritizing self-awareness, inclusivity, and identity exploration. My reflective journey not only aids in personal transformation but also contributes to the broader entrepreneurial leadership conversation, emphasizing the importance of diverse narratives and perspectives in creating a more empathetic and inclusive educational landscape.

By sharing my story, I seek to illuminate the transformative power of embracing one's identity and experiences in understanding oneself as entrepreneurial leaders. Therefore, this study serves as a testament to the dynamic interplay between personal growth and professional development, offering valuable insights into cultivating leadership qualities that resonate with entrepreneurship. Ultimately, my research aims to inspire a new generation of (women) leaders, equipping them with the confidence and skills necessary to navigate the complexities of entrepreneurship and leadership in diverse settings.

### **Research Method**

This study originates from my personal experiences ('auto'), where I reflect on my identity as an entrepreneurial leader in the cultural context of higher education ('ethno'). Autoethnography serves as the methodological framework, allowing me to make sense of my experiences by self-examining the cultural influences at an higher education institute while teaching entrepreneurial leadership, specifically at a public state university.

My choice of autoethnography for this study is deliberate. By acknowledging my role as both the researcher and the subject, this approach embraces subjectivity, emotionality, and my influence on the narrative construction (Ellis et al., 2010). Embarking on this autoethnographic journey empowers me to extract meaning from my experiences and share them with a broader audience, recognizing the power and vulnerability inherent in such self-disclosure (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022).

By employing an autoethnographic approach, this study provides a deeply personal and reflective exploration of my journey into entrepreneurial leadership, mainly through the lens of being a white (cisgender) woman. Autoethnography enables me to construct my narrative through broader cultural and social contexts, revealing the interplay between my identities, experiences, and the dynamics of leadership and entrepreneurship. As the researcher, I navigate my dual roles of observer and active participant within this distinctive research methodology, allowing me to embody the roles of storyteller and subject, weaving my narrative as I explore and derive meaning from my journey (Mueller, 2019). In this process, I actively engage in shaping the story while simultaneously being molded by the experiences analyzed.

Autoethnography serves as a powerful approach to facilitating an intimate exploration of my development as a leader and the complexities of navigating the entrepreneurial landscape in higher education. By adopting autoethnography as an introspective and methodological approach, I illuminate the leadership development process from my viewpoint, highlighting the crucial evolution from self-reflection, self-awareness, and self-acceptance. I reveal the transformative journey of becoming an entrepreneurial leader through autoethnography, highlighting the significance of understanding oneself in broader social and cultural contexts.

This study, therefore, is a testament to the power of personal narrative in uncovering factors that influence leadership and entrepreneurship, with a particular focus on gender.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Navigating my positionality within this autoethnographic study has been a complex and profoundly introspective undertaking, a crucial element of the unique autoethnographic research approach (Koopman et al., 2020). This study constitutes the ultimate reflexivity exercise, centering me in the research process by merging my personal, social, academic, and work lives, including my identities, background, beliefs, values, and experiences. Recognizing the centrality of this positionality is vital for understanding how the reader can comprehend my identity (i.e., who am I?) and the subject under exploration (i.e., me).

As the director and lecturer at a public state university's women's entrepreneurial leadership institute, I am both the researcher and the subject. This unique vantage point adds a dimension to my perspectives, biases, and potential influence, encompassed through multiple other dimensions of my identity, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, religion, political beliefs, nationality, and education. By reflecting on my positionality, I am mindful of the complexities of my identity. I have come to define my identity as a white, cisgender, heterosexual, non-disabled woman who is a middle-class, non-believer, democrat, U.S. citizen pursuing an advanced degree in higher education leadership. I am critically aware that these attributes afford me privileges and inform how I interact, perceive, and react to my existence.

These privileges from my identities fuel my determination to use my education as a resource to effect change while informing my approach to leadership, driving me to be mindful of the spaces I occupy and my impact on those around me. I know that my journey is one of

continuous learning. I want to leverage my privilege for positive change while remaining conscious of the diverse experiences and challenges others face. I strive to lead with empathy, understanding that the perspective I gained through my unique lived experiences is mine alone - just one of many. Acknowledging the privilege and experiences these identities provide me is integral to this study—understanding how they influence my interactions, reactions, and perceptions of the 'how' and 'why' of my journey to becoming a more entrepreneurial leader.

With a feminist research focus, I critically examine the role of gender dynamics in shaping my experiences as a white woman. I recognize the importance of using the privileges of my identity to actively support historically marginalized groups by examining how I operate in the world (O’Keefe, 2020). Expressly, through my commitment to empathy, support, and ongoing self-education, I better understand the systemic barriers underrepresented entrepreneurs face, including racial, gender, and socioeconomic challenges. I continually reflect on my actions and listen to the experiences of those I aim to support. This journey requires ongoing learning and a willingness to adapt my approaches for meaningful impact and allyship.

This transparent acknowledgment forms the foundation of my self-awareness. It shapes the narrative in this autoethnographic exploration, empowering me to be subjective, confront and deconstruct biases, and undergo a more transformative process of self-discovery. Acknowledging these facets is crucial as they shape how I perceive the world, formulate research questions, interpret data, and communicate findings—primarily addressing the study’s research question.

### **Research Question(s)**

The central question of my research is: *How have I come to understand myself as an entrepreneurial leader?* Further, the study explores how various aspects of my identity help address a larger question: *"Who am I?"* by specifically focusing on what influences my identities

have on my growth as an entrepreneurial leader. I want the answers to this research question to help cultivate a new generation of entrepreneurial leaders prepared to tackle challenges, seize opportunities, and excel in various environments.

## **Summary**

This dissertation enriches the understanding of entrepreneurial leadership by shifting the focus from the mechanics of starting a business, or the ‘how,’ to the underlying motivations, or ‘why,’ for venture creation. By leveraging my personal stories, background, and motivations through autoethnography, the study offers an intimate and accessible pathway to becoming a more entrepreneurial leader, emphasizing the importance of a leader’s developmental journey toward becoming visionary, innovative, charismatic, and creative.

Utilizing a holistic approach, the study interweaves my personal and professional experiences with the broader discourse/research on entrepreneurial leadership and education. It highlights the transformative potential of entrepreneurial leadership to effect significant change and invigorate new enterprises, specifically within the cultural context of higher education. The study also advocates for founders to invest in themselves through critical self-reflection and identity exploration.

Purposefully, by integrating gender and feminist theories, I examined the interaction between gender identity, expression, and the unique experiences of women in entrepreneurship, promoting the inclusion of intersectional feminism to address diverse and overlapping forms of discrimination. My personal narrative intertwines triumphs, challenges, and vulnerabilities encountered as a director, lecturer, and researcher, providing practical insights that aim to enhance pedagogical methods and prepare a new generation of reflective and innovative leaders.

Ultimately, the study contributes to the broader discourse on entrepreneurial leadership by emphasizing the crucial roles of introspection, gender awareness, and the embrace of diverse cultural narratives. Doing so seeks to inspire and empower both myself and others, laying the groundwork for developing the next generation of entrepreneurial leaders.

## CHAPTER TWO

This chapter explores the interplay between entrepreneurship, gender, and leadership, particularly emphasizing entrepreneurial leadership. Through my journey, I aspire to enrich the ongoing discourse on entrepreneurial leadership, providing insights and reflections that resonate with others on similar paths. I highlight the achievements and obstacles women entrepreneurs face, underscoring the crucial influence of gender on founders. Critically analyzing the existing literature, I acknowledge women's accomplishments and address their underrepresentation.

### **Definitions**

Entrepreneurship, originating from the French word meaning "to undertake" (Cody, 2017), represents a complex process that includes the establishment of new businesses and the introduction and execution of innovative ideas (Kobia & Sikalieh, 2010). It encompasses various phases, from the inception and maintenance to the formal establishment of a business (GEM, 2022, p. 26). Central to entrepreneurship are the principles of innovation, opportunity recognition, and value creation, all necessitating a strategic approach for the successful management and expansion of the venture (*20 New Definitions of Entrepreneurship from 2015 to 2023*, 2023). This study defines entrepreneurs as individuals or collectives dedicated to discovering, evaluating, and leveraging opportunities to create new value (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Short, Ketchen, Shook, & Ireland, 2010).

Through this literature, I further explore the diverse interpretations of entrepreneurship, setting the stage for a comprehensive review within the research scope. I include additional definitions relevant to this study to broaden my review of entrepreneurship.

*Assertiveness.* Standing up for your personal rights - expressing thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in direct, honest, and appropriate ways (*Assertiveness*, n.d.)

*Belonging.* A subjective feeling that one is an integral part of their surrounding systems, including family, friends, school, work environments, communities, cultural groups, and physical places (Hagerty et al., 1992).

*Critical self-reflection.* The process of questioning one's own assumptions, presuppositions, and meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1990).

*Critical analysis.* To make a judgment about the quality of evidence and include when it can and cannot support your argument (University of Hertfordshire, 2016).

*Cultural identity.* The distinct identities of people or groups in cultural or subcultural categories and social groups that include sexuality, gender, religion, ethnicity, social class, or region (*Cultural Identity*, n.d.).

*Embolden.* To impart boldness or courage; to instill with boldness, courage, or resolution enough to overcome timidity or misgiving (*Definition of EMBOLDEN*, 2024).

*Empathy.* The ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling (*Empathy Definition*, n.d.).

*Entrepreneur.* A person who habitually creates and innovates to build something of recognized value around perceived opportunities (Bolton & Thompson, 2000).

*Entrepreneurship.* The practice of starting new organizations or revitalizing mature organizations, particularly new businesses, generally in response to identified opportunities (Onuoha, 2007).

*Entrepreneurship education.* Seeks to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and motivation to encourage entrepreneurial success in various settings (Hashim et al., 2022).

*Entrepreneurial leadership.* A mindset that focuses organizations on turning problems into opportunities that create economic and social value (Crawford, 2023).

*Entrepreneurial mindset.* A specific set of beliefs, knowledge, and thought processes that drive entrepreneurial behavior (*Entrepreneurial Mindset - an Entrepreneurial Learning Project*, n.d.).

*Inclusivity.* Make sure everyone feels welcome, valued, and respected, regardless of who they are or where they come from (Ricee, 2022).

*Feminism.* The belief that women deserve equal social, economic, and political rights and freedoms (Soken-Huberty, 2022).

*Flourishing.* To find fulfillment in our lives, accomplish meaningful and worthwhile tasks, and connect with others deeper—essentially living the good life (Seligman, 2011).

*Gender.* Refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys that are socially constructed, including norms, behaviors, roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy, and relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time (World Health Organization, 2019).

*Intersectionality.* Describes how systems of inequality based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class, and other forms of discrimination “intersect” to create unique dynamics and effects (Center for Intersectional Justice, 2022).

*Leadership.* The accomplishment of a goal through the direction of human assistants (Prentice, 2004).

*Lived experience.* Knowledge is based on someone’s perspective, personal identities, and history beyond their professional or educational experience (*What Is Lived Experience?*, n.d.). It is a category of qualitative research that focuses on society and culture.

*Male dominance.* Conceptual label to characterize the unequal power relations between men and women as a group (Male Dominance, 2014).

*Reflective teaching.* It involves examining one's underlying beliefs about teaching and learning and one's alignment with actual classroom practice before, during, and after a course is taught (Yale, 2017).

*Reflexivity.* A critical introspection of our identities as researchers, exploring how these identities inform and direct our scholarly activities (Jamieson et al., 2023)

*Social entrepreneurship.* A for-profit business model that strives to impact social issues or the environment positively (Peek, 2020).

*Social impact.* Any improvement that confronts or solves inequalities and injustices in a community (MasterClass, 2022).

*Social justice.* The view that everyone deserves equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities (SDF, 2016).

## **Entrepreneurship**

As Hayes (2023) described, entrepreneurship is the process where an individual acts on an innovative idea to disrupt existing markets with new products or services. It often begins as a small business aiming to gain market share and scale for high profits. Entrepreneurship is crucial for economic growth and innovation, creating jobs, fostering competition, and developing new technologies and solutions (Ooi et al., 2011; Yanya et al., 2011). Success in entrepreneurship relies on entrepreneurial leaders who can inspire teams, build stakeholder relationships, and innovatively address challenges.

Since the late 1870s, entrepreneurship has been a strategic, risk-taking wealth generator (Brown & Thornton, 2013). Today, facing economic disparities, unemployment, inadequate

education, inequality, discrimination, and climate change, investing in entrepreneurship underscores the need to foster attitudes, skills, and behaviors toward innovative solutions (Ooi et al., 2011). By acting as a catalyst and a significant driver of economic growth, entrepreneurship has the potential to address these societal challenges by promoting innovation, creating jobs, and generating both social and financial wealth (Ooi et al., 2011).

Entrepreneurship significantly impacts innovation, economic development, and societal issues, especially those affecting women. Entrepreneurship allows women to launch businesses catering to their unique challenges and needs, fostering financial independence and challenging traditional gender norms. This empowerment enhances women's representation in business leadership, highlighting the necessity of understanding how societal norms and gender biases influence entrepreneurial experiences and leadership styles. The literature reviewed highlights the importance of incorporating gender perspectives in entrepreneurship to address wide-ranging societal challenges.

### **Gender and Entrepreneurship**

Entrepreneurship is crucial in addressing global challenges through economic development. However, several barriers and challenges prevent certain groups from effectively starting and leading businesses, with women being one such group. In 1982, the *Encyclopedia of Entrepreneurship* formally recognized entrepreneurship as a subject of study, marking its increasing popularity in business literature over the years. However, early on, entrepreneurship research often assumed that male and female entrepreneurs were identical, neglecting the necessity for a separate investigation (Hanif et al., 2021; Yadav & Unni, 2016).

Bourdieu (2001) pointed out that history tended to favor masculine dominance, and it was not until feminism challenged historical conceptualizations that researchers began to recognize,

understand, and incorporate women's roles in the literature. The inclusion of women in entrepreneurial studies gained traction in 1987 when scholars started to identify and advocate for this overlooked population, acknowledging the potential to learn and appreciate the impact of this collective group. Notably, during the 1980s and early 1990s, studies focused on men, intentionally disregarding women-owned businesses (Loza de Siles, 2011).

Research on women entrepreneurs must be expanded, and even when women are included, the focus tends to center on the challenges and barriers they encounter when starting a business. Consequently, the representation and documentation of women's history in entrepreneurship are shaped by the dominant culture's attitudes, values, and perspectives. Revisiting, acknowledging, and affirming the evidence of women's lives will make their experiences and achievements emerge in the literature.

Over the past decades, women entrepreneurs have worked to overcome obstacles to starting businesses. While progress has been made, there is still a need to address the persistent inequalities women entrepreneurs face. It is essential to recognize the challenges women encounter and emphasize the necessary support for their business success, promote economic growth, and address social justice issues. The following section addresses the status of women entrepreneurs, their strengths and assets, the challenges and barriers women face, how women founders are often underestimated, the motivations driving women into entrepreneurship, and the resources needed to foster the growth and support of women-owned and women-led businesses.

#### *Status of women entrepreneurs*

As highlighted in the *2022/2023 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report*, *women entrepreneurs play an essential role and have a globally recognized positive impact on society and economies*. Women generate employment, drive innovation, and address social,

environmental, and economic challenges. Despite these contributions, a notable gender gap in established business ownership persists, emphasizing the urgent need to challenge biases and stereotypes (*GEM, 2023*).

Women-owned businesses are "at least 51% owned, operated, and controlled by one or more females" (*Women-Owned Business Report, 2019*). Half of all women-owned businesses are in three industries: 2.8 million in sectors considered to be 'other services' (i.e., hair salons, pet care, etc.); 1.8 million in health care and social assistance; and 1.5 million in professional/scientific/technical services (i.e., lawyers, accountants, architects, consultants, etc.) (*Women-Owned Business Report, 2017*). The tendency to create service-oriented businesses among women entrepreneurs presents opportunities and challenges. While these sectors often have lower barriers to entry, they also tend to be highly competitive and low-margin, which can limit growth potential and profitability (*GEM, 2022*).

Over the five years from 2014 to 2019, the annual growth rate for women-owned firms more than doubled that of all businesses, highlighting the dynamic growth of women entrepreneurs. The *GEM 2022/2023 Women's Entrepreneurship report* reveals that nearly one in every three entrepreneurs managing established companies is a woman. When examining startup activities, the gender ratio stands at 0.80 women for every man, with global disparities across the entrepreneurial life cycle (*GEM, 2023*). One in six women expresses an intention to start a business in the near future, with higher intentions observed in low-income countries, particularly in Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and Africa (*GEM, 2022*). Despite facing global adversities, women's entrepreneurship activities are evolving and diversifying, with one in three high-growth innovation-oriented entrepreneurs being women (*GEM, 2022*). Moreover,

globally, women-owned businesses are among the fastest-growing entrepreneurial populations (*GEM, 2022*).

In the U.S., approximately one-third of all companies are women-owned, contributing to a high net in business births (*GEM, 2022*). This surge in new businesses, especially those initiated by women of color, creates access and opportunities for a diverse range of entrepreneurs. The *World Economic Forum's 2022 report* reinforces this upward trajectory of women entrepreneurs, focusing on the United Nations (2020) SDG5: Gender Equality. This report underscores the role of women entrepreneurs in bolstering household incomes, global economic growth, and poverty reduction (khaled, 2022).

Over the past three decades, the landscape of entrepreneurship has witnessed dynamic growth, with a twofold increase in the number of women-owned businesses in the U.S. between 1987 and 1999 (*World Economic Forum, 2022*). This remarkable growth positions women as a significant population in the entrepreneurial world, with ongoing progress and growing recognition of the importance of diversity and inclusion in entrepreneurship. This growth is especially evident in initiatives addressing gender disparities and promoting equal opportunities (khaled, 2022).

#### *Strengths and assets of women entrepreneurs*

I propose a departure from current literature that tends to relegate women as "secondary to men" and portrays women's businesses as of lesser significance or merely complementary (Thangaraju, 2006, p. 595). Instead, entrepreneurship research should give significant attention to the role of gender (and other identities), moving beyond the dominance of masculine norms in entrepreneurship studies and challenging assumptions around success models favoring masculine leadership traits (Ahl & Marlow, 2012).

Women bring remarkable strengths to business creation, and gender should not act as a limiting factor. Therefore, it is crucial to challenge and dismantle the myths surrounding women in entrepreneurship, as women contribute invaluable ambition, drive, skills, and experience to the business landscape (FasterCapital, 2024). By addressing these myths directly, we facilitate the creation of a more inclusive and supportive environment for women entrepreneurs, which is essential for promoting gender equality in entrepreneurship. For example, the qualities and skills I observe in women entrepreneurs include resilience, empathy, strong communication, collaboration, and adaptability. Successful women entrepreneurs are also characterized by creativity and a strong commitment to their business missions (FasterCapital, 2024). Successful entrepreneurs advocate for a more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem for everyone with diverse perspectives and backgrounds that foster inclusivity in entrepreneurship, creating environments that value and harness individual strengths.

Literature has primarily focused on external barriers faced by women, such as lack of support, limited access to mentors and networks, cultural barriers, male-dominated sectors, and the undervaluation of women as leaders and business owners (Yu, 2011). Internal challenges related to the identity of being a woman in business, including low confidence, fear of failure, and the difficulty for women to see themselves as entrepreneurs, have been less emphasized (Yu, 2011). Despite these challenges, there are many reasons to be optimistic about the future of women in business. The number of women-owned businesses is growing rapidly, and more and more women are achieving success in various industries (FasterCapital, 2024). Brush, De Bruin, and Welter (2009) assert that women significantly contribute to innovation, employment, and wealth creation in economies. When women succeed, it often defies societal expectations to fail (Brush et al., 2009). Investing in women-owned businesses within their local communities

transforms the entrepreneurial landscape, inspiring other women to view venture creation as an achievable aspiration. The impact of such representation is immeasurable, with one woman-owned venture at a time reshaping entrepreneurship into both an economic and cultural phenomenon. Evidence from various studies is beginning to highlight higher revenues, better return on investment, and more significant job creation by companies founded or co-founded by women (Mehta, 2023).

Exemplary women entrepreneurs like Sara Blakely, founder of Spanx, a billion-dollar shapewear company addressing common challenges for women, Whitney Wolfe Herd, founder and CEO of Bumble, a dating and social networking app empowering women to initiate connections, and Sheila Johnson, co-founder of Black Entertainment Television (BET), demonstrate traits like creativity, adaptability, and a commitment to their vision. In addition, Oprah Winfrey serves as a prominent example of a resilient entrepreneurial leader. Her journey from a challenging childhood marked by poverty and abuse showcases the ability to overcome adversity through a determined mindset, leading to establishing a diverse empire encompassing television, magazines, production, and personal branding. Oprah's success underscores the significance of entrepreneurial leadership characteristics such as challenging conventional thinking, focusing on broader goals, learning from setbacks, cultivating a strong sense of self, and effective communication. Her ability to redefine failure as an opportunity for growth and success, coupled with her impactful philanthropy, exemplifies the traits of an entrepreneurial leader focusing on positive social impact—a true embodiment of the spirit of an entrepreneurial leader and an incredible social entrepreneur. These women actively advocate for mentoring other women and creating more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems, challenging conventional

perceptions of what a founder looks like. Their stories inspire and demonstrate that gender and race should not be limitations to success.

As Steyaert and Hjorth (2003) note, entrepreneurship "is not just creating jobs; it is creating people's lives" (p. 17). Consequently, the economic impact of women-owned businesses, especially within their communities, promotes innovation, generates jobs, and creates social and financial wealth for women, distinct from enterprises owned by men. The success of women entrepreneurs contributes to changing the narrative by redefining and reshaping traditional assumptions about what entrepreneurial success can and should include.

#### *Challenges and barriers for women entrepreneurs*

Despite the upward trend of women initiating businesses in the U.S., research (Elam, 2006) indicates that, on average, women are only half as likely as men to start businesses, especially high-growth and high-profit ventures. In 2022, the *World Economic Forum* reported a 3-to-1 ratio of men to women in business ownership, even as more women actively engage in entrepreneurship (Masterson, 2022). This persistent gender gap underscores the need to understand women's considerable challenges and barriers in starting and growing their businesses (Masterson, 2022).

Women entrepreneurs are significantly overrepresented in smaller businesses within highly competitive, low-margin markets (*GEM*, 2022). Despite the essential role of women in innovation and job creation, women entrepreneurs face a unique set of societal challenges that hinder their ability to start or expand businesses effectively. According to the latest *GEM (2022) report* entitled, *Challenging Bias and Stereotypes*, challenges faced by women in entrepreneurship include inequalities in the home, balancing work and home responsibilities, difficulty securing external funding, time constraints, limited entrepreneurial knowledge and

skills, and service-oriented business tendencies. The World Bank notes that these obstacles significantly hinder women's ability to start or expand businesses (Kuratko, 2004).

Women founders create companies that generate substantial revenues, drive greater employment growth, aspire ambitiously, and achieve superior execution (Mehta, 2023). However, existing research on women in entrepreneurship must sufficiently offer practical and promising ways to support the substantial increase in women starting businesses. Despite the ongoing growth in women-led businesses in the U.S., there remain reasons for the discrepancy between men outnumbering and outperforming women in entrepreneurship. The biggest reason is that investors predominantly fund men-owned companies (Mehta, 2023). Women encounter additional hurdles rooted in gender biases when seeking financial backing from investors and banks.

Contrary to the expectation that venture funds prioritize return maximization, ingrained prejudices often affect investment decisions, leading to a preference for companies founded by men (Mehta, 2023). A few other reasons men outnumber women in starting businesses include aspiring women entrepreneurs facing substantial challenges in acquiring startup capital (Mehta, 2023). These critical barriers often prevent women from realizing their entrepreneurial dreams. Additionally, the propensity for "overconfidence" found among many men is less common among women. While such confidence does not guarantee business success, it is a significant factor in the decision to pursue entrepreneurship, suggesting that high self-confidence is essential for anyone wanting to start their own business (Mehta, 2023).

Women founders create companies that generate substantial revenues, drive greater employment growth, aspire ambitiously, and achieve superior execution (Mehta, 2023). Entrepreneurship has become crucial for creatively addressing global issues through economic

development, but various barriers prevent certain groups, especially women, from successfully leading businesses. Women's challenges in starting and sustaining businesses are multifaceted. On average, women are about half as likely as men to start businesses, particularly high-growth, high-profit ventures (Elam, 2008). Women-run businesses tend to be smaller, experience limited growth, and rarely employ staff (Hadary, 2010). These businesses have shorter survival rates, lower capital levels, and less financial support than those run by men (Siemieniak et al., 2017).

Moreover, women often initiate smaller businesses in highly competitive service industries with lower startup costs and return rates (Brush, 1992). They utilize less startup capital, adopt more flexible and conservative strategies, work fewer hours, and face more family-role demands than their male counterparts (Cassar, 2004; Brush, 1992). Additional factors, such as age, technical education, and industry-specific experience, contribute to the disparities between women and men in entrepreneurship (Brush, 1992).

Eliminating barriers hindering women's success is an economic imperative, fostering innovation, improving productivity, creating jobs, building wealth, and growing the economy (Women-Owned et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in 2021, emphasized the need to support women in starting, developing, and sustaining thriving businesses. This crisis presents a genuine opportunity for entrepreneurship to empower the most vulnerable, including disadvantaged and marginalized individuals, with women and girls often disproportionately affected (Orser & Elliott, 2020). Therefore, literature supporting and empowering women in business creation can play a vital role in post-COVID recovery efforts, contributing to a resilient action agenda.

Women entrepreneurs face numerous challenges in smaller businesses, from balancing work and home responsibilities to securing external financing and overcoming limited

entrepreneurial knowledge. Addressing these issues requires coordinated efforts from various stakeholders, including policymakers, financial institutions, and support networks, to create a more equitable and supportive environment for women entrepreneurs (Tiao, 2006). Thus, practical strategies to manage these responsibilities are crucial for sustaining business operations. Societal norms and business practices must evolve to support women entrepreneurs better. Policy changes, community support, and an increase in mentorship and education opportunities can play a pivotal role in mitigating the challenges faced by women in smaller businesses. The *American Express State of Women-Owned Business Report (2019)* highlights the necessity of creating policies, advancing advocacy efforts, and establishing entrepreneurship-focused initiatives that support and empower women in starting and growing thriving businesses. It is crucial to acknowledge that these barriers are even more substantial for underrepresented women in entrepreneurship, as there remains a significant disparity between minority and non-minority women seeking to become entrepreneurs (Carter et al., 2015).

#### *Underestimated women founders*

The *Women-Owned Business Report (2019)* sheds light on the economic, social, and cultural impact of women-owned businesses, particularly those owned by women of color, revealing a remarkable 43% growth in women of color-owned businesses from 2014 to 2019. Masterson (2022) reported a threefold increase in Black and African American entrepreneurs, rising from 3% in 2019 to 9% in 2021. This surge translates to approximately 6.4 million companies, employing 2.3 million people and generating a substantial \$422.5 billion in revenue (Women-Owned et al., 2019). Notably, African American/Black women-owned businesses demonstrated the fastest growth at 50%, followed by Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (41%),

Latina/Hispanic (40%), Asian American (37%), and Native American/Alaska Native (26%) women-owned businesses (Women-Owned et al., 2019).

However, a closer look reveals a significant disparity between minority and non-minority women, impacting the average revenue of women-of-color-owned businesses. For instance, if the average income of minority women-owned firms matched that of white women-owned businesses, an additional four million jobs and \$981 billion in revenue could be realized (*Women-Owned Business Report*, 2019). This funding imbalance has profound and immeasurable implications for the U.S. financial landscape, presenting a substantial challenge - especially for women and underestimated founders. Understanding the inequality between racially marginalized women is crucial for future research to comprehensively grasp the state of women in entrepreneurship and, more specifically, how entrepreneurship can contribute to equality for all.

Numerous barriers and inequalities influencing women's paths to entrepreneurship, the characteristics of women entrepreneurs, and their motivations are extensively documented in the literature. These challenges and obstacles that prevent women from entering or considering entrepreneurship include a lack of support, confidence, access to mentors and networks, cultural barriers, male-dominated sectors, and technology; the devaluation of women as leaders and business owners; and the difficulty women face in identifying themselves as entrepreneurs (Bu & Cuervo-Cazurra, 2020). Despite the emphasis on the challenges women encounter in entrepreneurship, Cody (2017) outlines five prevalent characteristics: 1) fear of success, 2) risk aversion, 3) failure to delegate/lack of management skills, 4) lack of leadership development, and 5) insufficient funding. However, a limitation in the literature is its tendency to attribute internal reasons for women's struggles, placing the blame solely on women.

Blaming women for their business struggles is both unfortunate and unjustifiable, as observed through this literature review on women in entrepreneurship. Narratives that perpetuate this blame contribute to gender biases and stereotypes, portraying women as less competent in business creation. This portrayal fosters self-doubt among women, further exacerbating their underrepresentation in entrepreneurship. Therefore, it is essential to shift the focus from blaming women for their lack of success in starting businesses to addressing the systemic issues and biases hindering women's progress in business.

Existing research predominantly focuses on the challenges women entrepreneurs face compared to their male counterparts. Encouraging women in business supports diversity and inclusion, promotes equity, and challenges gender stereotypes, representing essential steps toward creating more supportive environments for women to succeed in business. This redefinition of what it means to be a founder or entrepreneur emphasizes impact and potential over unfair societal expectations and ascribed personal deficits.

The literature presented here primarily focuses on the positive impact of increasing and supporting women as a collective group to start businesses, highlighting women's holistic strengths and assets. Future research should examine the strengths and assets women with different racial and ethnic identities bring to business and how these women initiate and build businesses differently than men. By intentionally focusing on the journey to entrepreneurship, specifically motivations, this literature review addresses the numerous barriers women encounter when starting businesses and the strengths and assets women bring when embarking on a business venture.

### *Motivations driving women to entrepreneurship*

Contrary to the assertion that men and women entrepreneurs share more similarities than differences when starting a business, evidence suggests otherwise, as they typically face distinct circumstances (Carranza et al., 2018; Eagly et al., 1995). Buttner and Moore (1997) highlight various factors motivating all genders to become entrepreneurs: independence, personal development, welfare improvement, and the aspiration to emulate role models. While there is a tendency to overlook gender differences in business creation, a closer examination of reviewed studies reveals discernible distinctions between men and women (Carranza et al., 2018).

As a collective group, women approach business startups from diverse social positions characterized by different resources and rates of return (Elam, 2008). The evidence suggests that women embark on business ventures with distinct values, goals, and strategies compared to men (Brush, 1992). The *State of Women-Owned Businesses* (American Express, 2019) notes, "Women are more likely than men, in general, to see a need in the market and start a company to fill it" (p. 2). Therefore, women who venture into entrepreneurship tend to succeed tremendously from various factors (Mehta, 2023). Most notably, the high standards set for funding mean that women founders are compelled to present superior business plans with typically less capital raised (Mehta, 2023). Furthermore, women's higher communal tendencies, including openness and collaboration, alongside a greater level of loss aversion, position them as better risk managers (Mehta, 2023). Unlike men, most women founders are driven by intrinsic motivations, such as autonomy and the desire to make a societal contribution, rather than external motivations like financial gain (Mehta, 2023).

Analyzing the motivations for women to become entrepreneurs reveals an authentic and liberating effect, enabling women to attain greater professional and personal satisfaction through

business creation (Brush, 1992). Williams et al. (2020) contend that entrepreneurship becomes a source of identity, a unique form of work, and a cultural imperative that transcends perceptions of capitalistic and financially driven activities. Running a business offers women enhanced opportunities and flexibility, serving as an empowerment tool for career growth. Women with caregiving responsibilities find self-sufficiency and independence associated with owning a business and creating financial stability for themselves and their families (Livingston, 2017). This perceived flexibility, independence, and the ability to set their schedule and working hours are frequently cited as significant motivators for women to become entrepreneurs (Elam, 2008).

For some women, entrepreneurship means higher flexibility in employment, allowing them to be their own boss, set goals, and shape their work schedule around a vision or purpose they believe fills a void. Career advancement and systemic disparities in women's treatment within organizations also motivate women to become entrepreneurs, as described by Buttner and Moore (1997). Many women start businesses due to unemployment, underemployment, or the need to supplement their income. Others identify a market gap and start businesses directly to address that need (Buttner & Moore, 1997). Some, grappling with caregiving responsibilities, seek the flexibility to set their schedules post-parental leave as balancing work and parental duties becomes a reality (Siemieniaket et al., 2017). It is clear that despite progress toward gender equality, the persistent societal expectation for women to prioritize domestic responsibilities, such as homemaking and childcare, continues to present unique challenges for women entrepreneurs seeking to achieve better work-life balance (Macan, 2023). Approximately 18% of U.S. parents are stay-at-home parents, with a significant majority being women (Fry, 2023). The key to mastering the balance between professional and home life lies fundamentally in social support (Macan, 2023). Support networks, quality childcare services, and favorable

parental leave policies are crucial in offering the support needed to foster an environment where women can thrive in their professional and personal roles (Macan, 2023). Leveraging resources like these can enable women entrepreneurs to reduce some challenges of juggling motherhood, allowing them to grow their ventures without compromising their caregiver role. Regardless of the motivation, it remains evident that more resources and support are crucial to fostering the growth of women-owned and women-led businesses.

#### *Resources and support for women in entrepreneurship*

Historically, literature has predominantly focused on women's challenges in entrepreneurship, including societal, structural, and systemic barriers during business initiation and sustainability. However, recent research findings present a more optimistic perspective, unveiling resources and support tools designed to empower women to translate their passions into profitable ventures. This shift, notably emphasized in the *2022/23 GEM Women's Entrepreneurship Report*, calls for a reassessment of harmful stereotypes about women entrepreneurs.

Despite being overrepresented in small and vulnerable businesses globally, women are also at the forefront of high-potential and impactful ventures. It is imperative for stakeholders, including policymakers and educators, to challenge and avoid actively perpetuating these stereotypes. Additional significant findings include women's robust engagement in business startup activities, their high entrepreneurial intentions on a global scale, and their active participation in high-potential entrepreneurship, leading to the creation of innovative and large companies (GEM, 2023).

Recognizing the diversity among women entrepreneurs is crucial, and it is essential to refrain from undervaluing the efforts of high-potential women due to prevailing stereotypes.

Global challenges in the entrepreneurial landscape include disparities in established business rates, elevated business exit rates, industry segregation, family impacts, and obstacles to women entrepreneurs' accessing resources (*GEM*, 2023). Recommendations to address these challenges include supporting high-potential women entrepreneurs, understanding the importance of segmentation for tailored support, addressing digitization costs and access, and acknowledging women-led businesses' social and environmental sustainability impacts (*The Case for Investing in Women Entrepreneurs*, 2022). Celebrating these impacts and providing incentives for sustainability can contribute significantly to fostering inclusive entrepreneurial landscapes.

Belli and Smith (2018) identified ten focus areas that entrepreneurship education programs can adopt to engage women entrepreneurs and mentors, propel new ventures, and facilitate the growth of women-led enterprises from startup to expansion and beyond.

These ten focus areas, as Belli and Smith (2018) outlined, include:

1. Raising accountability and awareness around diversity in entrepreneurship,
2. Tracing diversity metrics,
3. Community outreach to engage entrepreneurially minded women,
4. Creating intentional diversity in leadership,
5. Activating a female-supportive network,
6. Building solutions for a work/life balance,
7. Increasing visibility and supporting women in tech,
8. Fixing the pipeline for more women in venture capital,
9. Educating about non-dilutive funding opportunities and alternative fundraising platforms, and,
10. Emphasizing soft skills for women entrepreneurs when pitching to investors.

Belli and Smith (2018) propose that women entrepreneurship communities should support one another through extensive knowledge sharing and provide support tools to educate and collectively reshape the narrative on the most effective ways to maximize and support each other, individually and collectively, in business creation and leadership.

### **Entrepreneurial Leadership**

Over the past three decades, entrepreneurship has grown significantly, leading to various definitions of entrepreneurial leadership that blend leadership qualities with an entrepreneurial spirit (Bojović, 2019). This concept, which merges entrepreneurial traits with practical leadership approaches, represents a modern paradigm in leadership. Recent studies in leadership, especially in competitive environments, suggest a shift from traditional to more contemporary approaches, such as entrepreneurial leadership (Bojović, 2019). According to scholars like Kuratko (2004), entrepreneurial leadership is considered the leadership style of the 21st century, suitable for organizations emphasizing unconventional approaches in uncertain environments. In contemporary settings, entrepreneurial leadership challenges traditional models, especially in competitive environments, emphasizing the importance of strategic planning, risk-taking, and effective decision-making (Bojović, 2019).

Entrepreneurial leadership encompasses strategic planning, risk-taking, timely decision-making, problem-solving, and effective negotiation (Bojović, 2019). Noteworthy scholars, such as Bojović (2019), He (2017), and Clifton and Badal (2014), outline seven key characteristics defining entrepreneurial leaders: 1) risk-taking, 2) proactivity, 3) vision, 4) innovation, 5) experimentation, 6) charisma, and 7) creativity. Examining these traits, entrepreneurial leaders emerge as risk-takers, unafraid to embrace calculated risks for innovation and growth. Entrepreneurial leaders are also described as proactive, actively seeking new

opportunities and steering change while possessing a clear and compelling vision, guiding their teams towards ambitious goals. They foster creativity and experimentation at the forefront of innovation, earning them the label of innovators because of their openness to experimentation, viewing setbacks as opportunities for growth. The charismatic nature of entrepreneurial leaders enables them to inspire and motivate others, drawing people toward their vision. Lastly, entrepreneurial leaders are creative thinkers, consistently generating innovative solutions to complex challenges. Together, these seven characteristics summarize the essence of entrepreneurial leadership.

Literature reviews on entrepreneurial leadership reveal inconsistent definitions, lacking a consensus. The multitude of definitions poses a significant challenge for studying entrepreneurial leadership. This ambiguity drives the present study, arising from the need to make sense of the emerging concept of entrepreneurial leadership. The quest for understanding the concept of entrepreneurial leadership is personal and professional, as I have had to define the term because I lead an institute with 'entrepreneurial leadership' in its name. Navigating this complexity involves understanding the competencies of entrepreneurial leaders, particularly grasping the essence of an entrepreneurial mindset, which is a crucial component for defining the intersectionality of leadership and entrepreneurship and, more importantly, how to become one.

### *Entrepreneurial mindset*

According to Bojović (2019), embodying an entrepreneurial leader's essence involves cultivating a visionary, innovative, charismatic, and creative entrepreneurial mindset. The Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) outlines eight essential competencies for developing this entrepreneurial mindset: 1) critical thinking, 2) flexibility and adaptability, 3) communication and collaboration, 4) comfort with risk, 5) initiative and self-reliance, 6) future

orientation, 7) opportunity recognition, and 8) creativity and innovation (*Entrepreneurial Mindset | NFTE*, 2020). Leaders can comprehensively address various aspects of business processes by engaging with these competencies, creating significant value (Bojović, 2019).

Individuals with an entrepreneurial mindset possess the ability to identify opportunities that may go unnoticed by others (Higdon, 2005). As Higdon (2005) emphasizes, they recognize opportunities and act decisively upon them, mobilizing the necessary resources to execute a holistic plan. Entrepreneurially informed leaders, characterized by traits relevant in today's unpredictable environment, include 1) challenging conventional thinking, 2) perceiving connections others may overlook, 3) recognizing the value of teamwork, 4) maintaining focus on overarching goals, 5) learning from setbacks, 6) developing and appreciating a sense of self, and 7) communicating effectively (*Do Entrepreneurs Need to Be Team Players?*, 2024).

Contrary to the belief that entrepreneurship is an inherent trait, Allahar (2021) suggests you can acquire an entrepreneurial mindset through practice. Entrepreneurs are often characterized by their ability to identify market gaps and mobilize resources to address them, leveraging creativity and innovation as fundamental tools (Allahar, 2021, p. 2). This implies that similar to other behaviors, entrepreneurial skills can be taught and learned, particularly in formal educational settings, and applied across various stages, including business activities and new ventures (Allahar, 2021; Kuratko, 2004). Therefore, leaders committed to learning and practicing an entrepreneurial mindset can begin to think like entrepreneurs and embrace a straightforward problem-solving approach that exhibits resilience, particularly when challenging established norms, especially within education.

### *Entrepreneurship education*

The literature highlights the imperative of integrating entrepreneurship across all levels of education, emphasizing the need to offer students and educators opportunities to develop entrepreneurial skills, even in resource-constrained circumstances (Kurshan, 2022.). Educational institutions can support Entrepreneurship Education and Training programs (EETs) by creating conditions encouraging exploration and growth, allowing for failure, promoting learning from failure, and encouraging learners to solve real-world problems through entrepreneurial thinking. Kurshan (2022) advocates for treating entrepreneurial thinking as a fundamental life skill, representing a shift from traditional teaching methods to entrepreneurial discovery learning.

Preparing the next generation for a future where the entrepreneurial spirit aligns seamlessly with the human spirit, education must cultivate environments that encourage exploration, view failure as a learning opportunity, and promote real-world problem-solving (Kurshan, 2022). EETs empower students to develop innovative abilities, foster an entrepreneurial mindset, and acquire practical knowledge for an entrepreneurial journey or career (Chen et al., 2022).

Bu and Cuervo-Cazurra (2020) underscore that EETs provide aspiring, young, and practicing entrepreneurs with the tools to launch new businesses or enhance existing ones, fostering a conducive learning environment for entrepreneurial thinking. By implementing strategies such as self-correction of exams and peer-to-peer feedback loops, EETs can acknowledge failure as a valuable part of the learning process, positioning EETs as a significant opportunity for evolving and expanding responsibility and influence. This empowerment allows students to develop innovative abilities and the competencies necessary for entrepreneurial journeys or careers (Chen et al., 2022). Elliott, Mantler, and Huggins (2021) foresee EETs as

practical tools to boost the entrepreneurial spirit in the upcoming generation, expecting a global increase in such initiatives. The early cultivation of an entrepreneurial mindset, particularly within colleges and universities, sets the stage for students to explore entrepreneurship, contributing to developing a dynamic pipeline of future entrepreneurs.

**Promoting inclusivity through EETs.** In 2014, the Council of the European Union suggested that entrepreneurship education increase and expand to include more under-represented groups, especially women, universally benefitting entrepreneurial thinking across diverse individuals. In this study, EETs are critically examined because, as a discipline, entrepreneurship education has evolved to begin including a gender-aware lens to avoid gender blindness (Bruni et al., 2004). By redefining and reshaping traditional assumptions of what entrepreneurship curriculum has included in the past, the evolution of more gender-inclusive instructional practices, vocabulary, and broadened definitions of what it means to be entrepreneurial can be witnessed (Elliott et al., 2021). Thus, EETs have enormous potential to help women students by providing the support and encouragement needed to see themselves as entrepreneurs and, eventually, business owners (Bu & Cuervo-Cazurra, 2020). Therefore, research supports EETs (especially in higher education) as a unique opportunity that can highlight gender inequities, disadvantages, and discrimination around starting a business, in addition to the successes, celebrations, and communities that gender provides in creating businesses in positive ways to move society toward the feminist tenet of ‘universal love for all’ (Tong & Williams, 1998).

As a result, many EETs specifically targeting women have formed, and their impact is taking shape (Robb et al., 2014). Unfortunately, little empirical research exists on women's participation in EETs despite a significant increase in EETs worldwide, providing women with

business leadership skills (Bu & Cuervo-Cazurra, 2020). Women are underrepresented in most university EETs and less likely than men to pursue business ventures as a career (Elliott et al., 2021). Higher education must design equity-centered strategies to understand better why women are not starting businesses at the same rate as men to address the need for more representation of women in EETs. By providing welcoming and safe environments, fostering communities and partnerships, and guaranteeing diverse leadership positions, EETs can be inclusive in a way that centers on the voices of marginalized communities. Elliott (2021) proposes that systemic change should begin with collaboration among multiple partners – educational leaders, policymakers, instructors, and curriculum developers to advocate for, develop, and promote gender-inclusive programming.

A lack of entrepreneurial knowledge and skills can be a significant barrier for women entering or expanding into the business world. Thus, education and mentorship programs are vital in bridging this gap, providing the tools and confidence needed for women to become confident in successfully navigating the business landscape. Further programming that fosters gender inclusivity in EETs is outlined below.

**Promising proposals for gender-aware approaches to EETs.** Women entrepreneurs must be part of the conversation to develop and promote gender-inclusive programming. Elliott, Mantler, and Huggins (2021) believe women must be included in the discussion and part of changing the dialogue. This dialogue change deliberately re-creates images and role models centered around women. It proposes alternative business models that appeal to different values, motivations, and interests (i.e., classical, non-traditional, cooperative, social enterprises, and non-profit organizations (Elliott et al., 2021). By broadening gender-inclusive programming and practices, Elliott et al. (2021) predict that more students will see themselves as entrepreneurs and

be inspired to participate. This self-realization is critical because if the next generation of women students cannot see themselves as successful entrepreneurs, they will not view entrepreneurship as a viable career (Elliott et al., 2021).

According to Al-Dajani and Marlow (2013), the possibility of the entrepreneurial experience has been incredibly empowering for women. "To teach women how to develop their businesses effectively, scholars and program designers must recognize the role of finance, management, and leadership skills, as well as the influence of the marketplace, family, and the cultural and institutional environment, on women" (Yu, 2011, p. 251). To encourage women to participate in the entrepreneurial journey, Elliott et al. (2021) broadly outline four fundamental and foundational ways a gender-aware approach can supplement existing entrepreneurship education:

1. Redefine entrepreneurship using gender-inclusive language that appeals to all students at all levels of the education system,
2. Critically examine current entrepreneurship education epistemologies and assumptions;
3. Address stereotypes of the male, high-tech entrepreneur, and
4. Debunk the notion that innovation only relates to technology.

**The future of women in EETs.** As a field of study, entrepreneurship has the potential to be an area of positive growth for intentionally creating content that includes gender-enlightened approaches. Elliott, Mantler, and Huggins (2021) foreshadow entrepreneurship education, increasing the entrepreneurial spirit among the next generation through an upsurge of worldwide colleges and university programs. These approaches highlight gender inequities, disadvantages,

and discrimination around starting a business and the successes, celebrations, and communities that gender provides in creating a business.

To fully realize the social and economic power of women's entrepreneurship, it is essential to establish a vibrant pipeline of entrepreneurs. However, to inspire students to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams, they must learn to see themselves as enterprising and successful. Research suggests that change in self-perception is underway (Elliott et al. (2021). Entrepreneurship education is evolving to include gender-aware practices to reshape how women (and all genders) see themselves in creating new businesses and how society redefines success by bringing the strengths and assets, especially of women, into the conversation. While masculine entrepreneurial stereotypes persist, more gender-inclusive androgynous language and vocabulary of entrepreneurship are slowly emerging, and a new set of entrepreneurial attributes has captured this progression (Elliott et al., 2021). As previously mentioned, many attributes like risk-taker, innovative, opportunistic, assertive, communicator, and well-connected are related to entrepreneurial skills and competencies that can be taught and modified to include gender in the framework.

By creating gender-inclusive curricula and broadening the definition of entrepreneurship, EETs have significant potential to close the identity gap and inspire the next generation of entrepreneurs (Elliott et al., 2021). Environments like those found in college EETs aim to directly influence aspiring entrepreneurs by providing access to resources and, indirectly, by shaping social values and priorities, particularly in the foundations of social entrepreneurship and social impact (*GEM*, 2022). For students, the prospect of becoming an entrepreneur is a source of hope, as it represents an opportunity to make a lasting impact on the world by imagining the chance to introduce innovative solutions that tangibly improve lives.

## *Social entrepreneurship*

In entrepreneurship, the transformative power of social change is explored through social entrepreneurship or social impact. This term signifies positive changes when individuals or organizations commit to beneficial transformations within their communities. The dedication to social impact revolves around goals, efforts, or activities aiming for positive societal consequences (Ricee, 2021).

Social impact, formally defined as "any significant or positive change that solves or at least addresses social injustice and challenges" (Ricee, 2021), goes beyond profit-centric metrics. Social entrepreneurship redefines business success by focusing on enriching lives, uplifting communities, and catalyzing societal change, emphasizing the understanding of motivations in narratives and stories—an acknowledgment of the profound reasons driving individuals to initiate businesses.

The *2021/2022 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) Report* provides evidence supporting the idea that engaging in entrepreneurial behaviors contributes positively to a better world, serving as essential drivers of societal health and wealth. According to Shane and Venkataraman (2000), entrepreneurship involves discovering, evaluating, or creating opportunities to innovate or integrate new values, products, or services. This disruptive yet positive entrepreneurial process plays a pivotal role in addressing society's challenges, as seen in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (*GEM, 2022*).

Already, social entrepreneurship has left a profound mark on the United Nations' SDGs, demonstrating the potential for sustainable and profitable business models to align with each SDG. Entrepreneurial leaders committed to social impact navigate the launch of new initiatives,

inspire others, foster lasting change, and champion innovative approaches by investing in an entrepreneurial mindset (Martin & Osberg, 2007). These leaders focus on starting or leading businesses for the greater good, viewing the world's problems as opportunities for innovative solutions through the power of entrepreneurship. Ventures rooted in doing good blur the lines between profit and purpose, showcasing entrepreneurial leaders who defy conventional wisdom, employing creativity, resourcefulness, and resilience to address global challenges.

Entrepreneurial leadership at this level entails an unwavering commitment to community and equitable solutions that challenge the status quo and bring about systemic changes through entrepreneurship.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks**

In my autoethnographic research, I explore the interplay between structural and cultural forces in higher education and how these dynamics have influenced my development as an entrepreneurial leader in a gendered sector (Kimbu et al., 2021; Moyer, 2023). Despite the growing presence of women in higher education, gender inequality and discrimination persist. A study by the Public Library of Science (Dada et al., 2022) reveals that the gender composition of leadership roles significantly contributes to these disparities. For instance, men overwhelmingly hold leadership positions—even as they represent a minority in higher education—highlighting a clear gender imbalance, with women comprising only 17.5% of board members at elite universities (Amrein et al., 2011).

Studying the connections between gender identity and expression is intricate and multifaceted, particularly in the context of women's experiences in business creation. Both gender identity and expression are shaped differently to recognize, express, and analyze the various social norms and practices women encounter in entrepreneurship. It is important to note

that describing the experience of being a woman in entrepreneurship as a singular narrative is challenging because each individual's journey in starting a business is unique and deeply personal. The emphasis on women in entrepreneurship allows me to highlight how women collectively utilize their gender identities to strive for equity, ultimately leading to success and overall economic growth. To thoroughly explore how gender identity influences women's experiences in entrepreneurship, it is crucial to explain why defining women as a social group is significant, thus forming the foundation for analyzing the connections between the various theoretical concepts.

### *Gender and feminist theory*

Theoretical frameworks such as gender and feminist theories are particularly relevant in this study, as they complement each other and highlight the importance of studying at the intersection of gender and entrepreneurship. Gender, as a significant aspect of identity, forms the basis of understanding in feminist theory. This understanding aids in examining how entrepreneurs shape their identities through their choices, experiences, and motivations on their journey to becoming entrepreneurs and, ultimately, entrepreneurial leaders. Feminism, among various movements striving for equality, equity, and social justice, continuously challenges and influences our perceptions of individuals, their interests, capabilities, and how to effectively encourage their societal contributions (Harquail, 2020).

By exploring my journey, I analyze entrepreneurial leadership competencies and how gender influences my understanding of myself. Using a poststructural feminist perspective, which questions conventional views of entrepreneurial leadership, I analyze qualitative data to understand my motivations and experiences as an emerging entrepreneurial leader. By integrating feminism more deeply into this research, the study aims to illustrate how a

poststructural feminist approach can reshape businesses towards collaborative efforts that generate value for everyone, not just women. This transformation involves integrating feminist principles into entrepreneurial leadership traits and characteristics (Harquail, 2020).

Poststructural feminism offers a framework to challenge and reform existing typologies, such as the label of 'women entrepreneurs,' thereby advocating for significant changes in contemporary business environments (Dean & Ford, 2017). Additionally, when examining the cultural context of my story, I deliberately incorporate an intersectional feminist perspective to acknowledge the influence of other social identity markers in environments, including race, class, privilege, oppression, and motivations. Intersectional feminism promotes inclusivity, adaptability, and empathy, crucial for societal progress and human flourishing (Kimbo et al., 2021). As stated by Kimbo et al. (2021), "In today's world, intersectional feminism is the closest pathway to humanity, human solidarity and sisterhood, and universal love for all" (p. 12).

The following section frames gender in a socially constructed way that showcases the uniqueness gender brings to the study of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial leadership.

### *Gender theory*

Gender is complex. An often overlooked ideology, Ettl & Welter (2012) present gender in a way that creates a structure to shape, define, limit, and legitimize the choices, behaviors, and roles assigned to men's and women's sex categories. The term "gender" has been defined in various ways in the literature, sometimes interchangeably with biological sex (pertaining to reproductive organs) or socially constructed sex (involving social practices and representations linked to femininity or masculinity) (Kachel et al., 2016; Vossenber, 2016).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), gender is the socially constructed attributes of women and men, encompassing norms, roles, and relationships within and between

groups (2019). As our comprehension of the role of gender in society deepens, there is an increasing diversity in how individuals express their gender, often deviating from existing or perceived stereotypes (Jule, 2004). For instance, transgender individuals may experience a misalignment between their gender identity and biological sex, prompting many to choose to live by their gender identity rather than their biological sex (Jule, 2004).

Gender is a chosen variable in this study because of the uniqueness gender brings to entrepreneurship. Gender ignites more creative innovations due to the different perspectives, skills, knowledge, and life experiences that all genders bring to starting or sustaining a business. A primary reason for focusing on gender theory as a centering piece in the research is that, as a theory, "it places the valuation of experience as central in its usefulness and as a point from which to think and theorize about larger social, political, and economic processes" (Jule, 2004, p. 2465). Gender brings diverse perspectives, skills, knowledge, and life experiences to starting, owning, or sustaining a business. Thus, gender theory is "the study of what is understood as masculine and/or feminine and/or queer behavior in any given context, community, society, or field of study" (Jule, 2004, p. 2464).

To comprehend the significance of the terms "masculinity" and "femininity" in the literature, it is crucial to establish clear definitions for these attributes, behaviors, and roles. According to Merriam-Webster (2019), masculinity is defined as the "quality or nature of the male sex: the quality, state, or degree of being masculine or manly." Additionally, Hofstede (2001) characterizes masculinity as a trait emphasizing ambition, wealth acquisition, and distinct gender roles. In societies with high masculinity, men are expected to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success. In contrast, women are expected to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life (Hofstede, 2001). Femininity in such societies implies

overlapping gender roles, where both men and women are expected to embody traits like modesty, tenderness, and a focus on the quality of life (Hofstede, 2001). Gender fluidity refers to individuals expressing both masculine and feminine traits.

A critical analysis, guided by gender theory, views "conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity as modes of performing identity rather than natural manifestations of biology" (Jule, 2004, p. 2464). Gender, according to this perspective, is performative and extends beyond societal expectations and stereotypes. Stereotypes may exaggerate or challenge, making gender theory a foundation for the study's conceptual framework. Gender theory does not assume universal tendencies, recognizing that gender performances can vary (Francis, 2000; Jule, 2004). Gender, as explored in this study, becomes integral to how we perceive and are perceived. Gender roles, however subtle or established, often result from societal perceptions, making gender an epistemological element that operates on both conscious and unconscious levels (Elicker et al., 2009).

Jule (2014) outlines two primary objectives of gender theory: 1) to contest the traditional hierarchy that deems feminine-associated traits (like passivity, cooperativeness, and relational emphasis) as lesser than masculine-associated qualities (such as aggressiveness, competitiveness, and an emphasis on abstract principles), and 2) to reduce or abolish constraints, thereby enabling individuals to manifest their preferred degree of masculinity or femininity without restraint. This attempt to empower unrestrained self-expression, particularly of feminine traits, is critical due to the established and often unperceived presence of masculine dominance within societal structures. According to Bourdieu (2002), male dominance has become so normalized within societal expectations that questioning its existence proves challenging. To unravel this complex issue, an autoethnography study utilizing feminism as a conceptual framework emerges as a

relevant approach. Drawing inspiration from Bourdieu's (2002) analysis, we have valuable instruments to decipher the concealed dimensions of gender relations in our communities. For example, Bourdieu's examination of masculine domination unveils it as a prime manifestation of symbolic violence—a form of gentle, invisible, and pervasive coercion embedded in the mundane practices of daily life. To comprehensively grasp this form of dominance, it becomes imperative to scrutinize the social mechanisms and institutions that perpetuate it, such as the family, school, church, and state. These entities are crucial in transforming historical contingencies into perceived natural orders, perpetuating a cycle of norms. Through a feminist lens and my autoethnographic exploration of these societal structures, I illuminate the normalization of gender relations, specifically within higher education.

Literature appearing at the turn of the twenty-first century reflects "the beginnings of greater conceptual plurality with more nuanced analyses of the influence of gender upon entrepreneurship" (Marlow & McAdam, 2013, p. 104). Marlow and McAdam (2013) suggest using gender as a variable for comparing men's and women's entrepreneurial activities across various performance indicators to support this conceptual diversity. Applying gender theory offers a more practical approach to framing discussions about gender parity and the relevance of entrepreneurship. To further structure this diversity, feminist theory becomes another relevant construct worth exploring.

### *Feminist theory*

Closely related to gender theory, feminist theory supports the critical analysis of the relationship between "difference" and "inequality" through the theorization of gender roles (Jule, 2004; Knopft & Pick, 2023). Feminism uses the vision of gender and sex equality to "promote the fundamental human truth: that all people are equally valuable, all people and communities

have the right to decide how their lives should unfold, and all people equally deserve to flourish" (Harquail, 2020, p. 1). Feminism inserts the woman's experience as its starting point. Gender and feminist theory "seek to explore and understand the process of gender socialization and analyze the relationship of gender or sex to unequal distribution of power in the world" (Jule, 2004, p. 2464).

Feminism is defined in various ways depending on one's perspective. According to Soken-Huberty (2022), feminism is the advocacy for equality among genders in the realms of society, economics, and politics. Feminism asserts that no individual should be denied specific rights, such as voting, participating in politics, or pursuing employment outside the home due to gender or sex (Soken-Huberty, 2022). However, feminism extends its objectives beyond fundamental rights and strives for more profound societal changes, including the elimination of sexism and the dismantling of intersecting forms of oppression based on factors such as gender, race, sexuality, and socioeconomic class (Soken-Huberty, 2022). Positioned within a broader landscape of movements centered on equality, equity, and social justice, feminism, as highlighted by Harquail (2020), is a comprehensive framework that embraces everyone. Embracing feminism challenges conventional notions of equality and parity, transcending distinctions of sex, gender, and sexual orientation. At its core, a feminist advocates for societal change to propel women towards equal opportunities and fair treatment compared to men.

The need for a new theory on women's entrepreneurship is a subject of ongoing debate among researchers (Yadav & Unni, 2016). Some researchers suggest that existing concepts of entrepreneurship can be used with feminist theories to extend the theoretical foundation of the larger entrepreneurship field (Yadav & Unni, 2016). Over time, various theoretical lenses have been applied to examine the phenomenon of women's entrepreneurship (Elliott et al., 2021).

Yadav and Unni (2016) extensively reviewed existing research on women's entrepreneurship, summarizing studies that integrate gender and entrepreneurship with other theoretical frameworks. Summarized by Yadav & Unni (2016), among these contributions are Bowen and Hisrich's (1986) career theory-based model that seeks to explain women's entrepreneurial behavior, Brush's (1992) exploration of gender differences in entrepreneurship through psychological and sociological theories, Brush et al.'s (2009) application of institutional theory to discuss gender as a socially constructed concept, and Sullivan and Meek's (2012) use of expectancy, regulatory focus, and social cognitive theories to dive into the entrepreneurial process model.

Ahl (2006), as cited in Yadav & Unni (2016), specifically explored various offshoots of feminist theory, including liberal feminist theory, social feminist theory, psychoanalytic feminist theory, radical feminist theory, social constructionist theory, and post-structural feminist theory. In this context, post-structural feminism is a branch that draws insights from post-structuralist thought (Randall, 2010). By emphasizing the contingent and discursive nature of all identities, poststructural feminism rejects the idea of a single universal category for "woman" or "man" (Randall, 2010, p. 116). This array of theoretical perspectives demonstrates the diverse approaches researchers take to understand the complexities of women's entrepreneurship, ranging from career and psychological theories to institutional and process-oriented models.

However, relying solely on feminism or poststructural feminism as the exclusive framework for this study poses challenges. Instead, there is a need for social considerations to progress towards intersectionality, allowing for the "interactivity of social identity structures such as race, class, and gender in fostering life experiences, especially experiences of privilege and oppression" (Gopaldas, 2013, p. 90). The overlay of intersectional feminism, especially

incorporated into my journey, becomes a critical component of the study and will be explored in more detail in the methodology.

**Intersectional feminism.** Embracing feminism challenges our perceptions of equality and parity, transcending boundaries related to sex, gender, and sexual orientation. However, acknowledging the complexity of feminism has been crucial, especially when confronted with the reality of current events, such as the disparate impacts of COVID-19 on the pursuit of equality, particularly in entrepreneurship. It is essential to recognize that some individuals resist equality, with those in positions of privilege often perceiving oppression and inequality as advantageous, serving their selfish desires in society (Kimbu et al., 2021).

In response to traditional feminism, intersectionality offers a broader perspective than the initial waves of feminism, which primarily focused on the experiences of white, middle-class, and cisgender women. Instead, intersectionality aims to include the diverse experiences of women of color, poor women, immigrant women, and other marginalized groups (Crenshaw, 1989/2020). The concept of “intersectionality” traces its origins to Black feminist activism and was first introduced by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, an American scholar specializing in critical legal race theory, in 1989 (Crenshaw, 1989/2020). Crenshaw coined the term to describe the compounded discrimination of racism and sexism encountered by Black women, critiquing the prevailing "single-axis framework" in antidiscrimination law, feminist theory, and anti-racist politics (Crenshaw, 1989/2020). Crenshaw (1989) defines intersectionality as a metaphor for understanding how various forms of inequality or disadvantage may intersect, compounding themselves and creating obstacles that are not readily understood within conventional analytical frameworks. This framework, she argued, often focuses on the experiences of the most privileged within marginalized groups.

Feminism must extend beyond a singular focus on women; it must evolve to be inclusive of everyone. Intersectional feminism emerges as a promising avenue for this study, and the conceptual approach presented here provides a more inclusive lens that facilitates better mutual understanding and fosters aspirations for a more just future for all (UN Women, 2020). Intersectional feminism seeks to distinguish itself from white feminism by recognizing and acknowledging the diverse experiences and identities of women subjected to various forms of discrimination surrounding sex, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, economic or social status, immigrant status, religion, caste, weight, physical appearance, and other identity dimensions (UN Women, 2020). Intersectional feminism as a lens interlocks the nature of different forms of inequality, and their cumulative impacts can be understood (UN Women, 2020). It emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing intersecting inequalities and advocates for fairness by acknowledging the historical contexts of violence and systemic discrimination perpetuating these inequalities. The intersectional feminism approach calls for the inclusive consideration of all individuals, recognizing discrimination's complex, multifaceted nature (Kimbu et al., 2021). Therefore, intersectional feminism serves as a prism for understanding how different forms of inequality often intersect and amplify each other (UN Women, 2020). Essentially, it compels the inclusion of intersecting inequalities and advocates for equity by acknowledging the historical contexts of violence and systemic discrimination that have entrenched these inequalities, pressuring for the inclusion of all individuals (Kimbu et al., 2021).

It is crucial to recognize that intersectional feminism does not focus solely on intersecting identities but on the intersecting systems of inequality and how they are produced and experienced (Kimbo et al., 2021). Intersectional feminism critically decolonizes feminism,

challenging the researcher to advocate for gender equity for all, not solely women in entrepreneurship. As a researcher, the challenge lies in discussing inequality comprehensively, encompassing gender, class, sexuality, and immigration status. It serves as a reality check, acknowledging that some individuals experience multiple forms of discrimination, and their experience is not merely the sum of its parts (UN Women, 2020). Moreover, classism and sexism intersect significantly, impacting the economic conditions of women in business.

As a supplementary framework to feminist theory, intersectional feminism is compelling due to its proposition of creating inclusive and robust movements that address overlapping forms of discrimination, connecting justice to liberation beyond gender (UN Women, 2020). This inclusion of an intersectional feminist lens in the research has the potential to enhance its depth in three key ways: 1) recognizing that the impacts of the crisis are not uniform, 2) highlighting and challenging injustices that often go unnoticed, and 3) advocating for a subsequent new standard that is fairer for everyone (UN Women, 2020). Intentionally incorporating intersectional feminism in this study enriches the qualitative data collected and analyzed, exploring how social identities intersect to compound experiences of discrimination (UN Women, 2020). Consequently, intersectional feminism shifts the research from "individual subjective experiences to a shared collective experience" (Kimbu et al., 2021, p. 11). Thus, intersectionality becomes a necessary complement to feminist theory, focusing on how people experience inequality in various social systems, such as political inequality, differing life outcomes, inequality of opportunity, treatment, responsibility, and shared equality of membership in areas of the nation, faith, and family (UN Women, 2020).

According to Kimbu et al. (2021), the disadvantage of not incorporating an intersectional approach in research is that it concentrates on a specific group (e.g., gender/women) and its

oppression, leaving other parts of marginalized groups oppressed. The intersectional feminist approach, considering the overlap between multiple axes of inequality, promotes more inclusivity (Berger & Guidroz, 2009). Applying an intersectional feminist approach allows this study to seize an opportunity to "build back better, stronger, resilient, and equal societies" (UN Women, 2020), particularly in more inclusive entrepreneurship education practices. When effectively implemented, intersectional feminism aligns with 'universal love for all.'

**Autoethnography as a feminist methodology.** Autoethnography, as a qualitative research methodology, combines autobiography and ethnography to investigate the researcher's personal experiences within a cultural or social context through self-reflection. When prompted to explore theoretical constructs through an autoethnographic lens, the ChatGPT-generated text revealed that autoethnography serves as a theoretical framework for analyzing and comprehending the researcher's lived experiences, mainly focusing on identity formation, narrative and storytelling, reflexivity, positionality, and intersectionality (OpenAI, 2023; see Appendix F for the full transcript).

Research engages deeply with the complex ways cultural, social, and historical contexts contribute to forming different identities (Lumen Learning, n.d.). By leveraging theories of identity, notably intersectionality, to explore the interplay between various identity aspects like race, gender, sexuality, and class, literature examines how these intersections frame personal experiences (Nash, 2008). According to Nash (2008), intersectionality has emerged as an analytical framework utilized by feminist and anti-racist scholars to explore the nuances of identity and oppression. Furthermore, intersectionality theory is frequently employed in autoethnography to examine how various dimensions of identity and social categories intersect, influencing both the researcher's experiences and the construction of identities. This holistic and

introspective approach underscores the nuanced and multifaceted nature of understanding identity and experience through autoethnographic research (Srilata, 2022).

At the heart of the autoethnographic methodological approach is the pivotal role of narrative and storytelling (Campbell, 2016). Through narrative theory, autoethnographers apply narrative analysis to dissect and interpret the stories they tell about their experiences, focusing on the narratives' structures and the meanings they express (Campbell, 2016). Reflexivity (Koopman et al., 2020), intersectionality, and positionality (The University of British Columbia, n.d.) are foundational concepts in autoethnographic research. Practitioners of autoethnography actively practice reflexivity, acknowledging and critically reflecting on their positionality—their background, experiences, and social location—and how these elements shape their research perspectives (Koopman et al., 2020). This reflective practice is informed by postmodern and poststructuralist theories, which emphasize recognizing and interrogating one's biases and subjectivities within the research process (Malthouse et al., 2014).

Autoethnography, while not inherently feminist, can be an engaging methodology to examine and address gender-related issues, ultimately amplifying women's voices and perspectives. As a research methodology, autoethnography combines the personal, political, and academic, offering a framework to explore individual and collective experiences (Ellis et al., 2010). In feminist research, autoethnography can transcend traditional methods and boundaries of knowing, integrating being, knowing, and doing in a manner that prioritizes the voices of the marginalized (Ettorre, 2017). Allen and Piercy (2005) laid the groundwork for understanding feminist autoethnography's dual objectives: to narrate the stories of those at the border of society and to harness personal experiences as a powerful tool for academic inquiry. This is why feminist autoethnography can become an exercise in empathy, understanding, and action - embracing the

complexity of ‘being’—the researcher's identity and experiences; ‘knowing’—the deep, often intuitive understanding of gendered experiences; and ‘doing’—the active process of research and writing that seeks to make a difference (Allen & Piercy, 2005). By focusing on marginalized stories, an autoethnographic approach illuminates hidden narratives and challenges the epistemological status quo, advocating for a more inclusive and equitable understanding of the human experience (Ellis et al., 2010).

Ettorre's (2017) contribution to the discourse on feminist methodologies through autoethnography is profound, offering an approach to feminist research that describes four ways autoethnography can advance feminist methods. Central to Ettorre's (2017) framework is “Transitional Spaces,” emphasizing autoethnography's unique capacity to create inherently transitional and transformative spaces. Transitional spaces enable researchers (and participants) to explore and articulate identities and experiences that mainstream methodologies may overlook or marginalize. This aspect of autoethnography is compelling in feminist research, where the exploration of gendered, racial, and socio-economic margins is crucial. By acknowledging and valuing these transitional spaces, feminist autoethnography facilitates a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity and experience, providing a platform for often silenced voices (Ettorre, 2017).

“Personal as Political” is another foundational principle in feminist thought that autoethnography brings to life in vivid detail (Ettorre, 2017). This approach champions personal narratives as anecdotal evidence and is a radical tool for challenging and reshaping societal norms and power structures. Through the lens of autoethnography, personal stories transcend individuals, reflecting broader socio-political realities and injustices. In doing so, feminist autoethnography highlights the inherently political nature of personal experiences, particularly

those stemming from gendered oppressions, thereby contributing to a clearer understanding of power dynamics and resistance dynamics.

“Feminist Critical Writing,” as Ettore (2017) envisioned, transforms autoethnography into an act of activism. This performative aspect of writing is not confined to critique alone but is deeply committed to envisioning and forging a more inclusive and equitable future. Feminist autoethnography, therefore, can become both a methodology and a movement, leveraging the power of narrative to challenge the status quo and inspire change. This power of narrative aligns with the broader goals of feminist scholarship, making feminist autoethnography a powerful tool for social justice.

Finally, “Oppositional Consciousness” is the culmination of Ettore's (2017) vision for feminist autoethnography, focusing on exploring uncertainty in marginalized existences. By examining the lived realities of those at the edges of society, feminist autoethnography can foster a critical consciousness of present inequalities while being inherently hopeful and visionary toward the future. This dual focus enables researchers and readers to engage with the material conditions of oppression and envision paths toward liberation and justice. Through this lens, feminist autoethnography is a catalyst for developing a collective consciousness that is both aware of systemic injustices and committed to creating a more just world.

Ettore's (2017) creation of these four dimensions—transitional spaces, the personal as political, feminist critical writing, and oppositional consciousness—serves to enrich the feminist methodological landscape and empower researchers and participants to engage in transformative research practices, activist, and deeply reflective of the complexities of human experience. Thus, Ettore (2017) broadens the scope of feminist research and deepens its impact.

Engaging in autoethnography as a feminist, I recognize the method's unique ability to carve out critical and interpretive spaces, fostering an intimate, intermediate realm characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and equivocality (Ettorre, 2017, p. 4). By intertwining the autoethnographic study with feminist principles, the aim is to expose the deceptive familiarity that binds individuals to their cultural traditions. Such an approach allows for the identification of power dynamics, as well as identifying subtle forms of oppression that persist within seemingly ordinary practices. This critical analysis serves as a foundation for political action, striving to reignite history by dismantling the mechanisms that have naturalized the relationships between genders.

Employing feminism as a conceptual framework within the autoethnography study enables a journey of self-discovery and facilitates a deeper understanding of masculine dominance. This methodology seeks to challenge ingrained norms through autoethnography, fostering a dynamic space where historical perspectives can be revived and gender relations reevaluated. For example, I identify as a feminist autoethnographer due to my practice of critical and performative writing, a manifestation of my commitment to shaping the future for women.

Modelski (1991) contends that feminist critical writing is inherently performative, embodying a pledge and dedication to the prospective evolution of women, offering new meanings and subjectivities. In recounting my narrative, I convey my vision of feminism, striving to guide the reader (and myself) toward integrating a more feminist perspective into daily life, which aligns with the sentiment expressed by bell hooks (1991), who aspires not to write in a disempowering or disabling manner but to utilize her story, this autoethnography, as a beacon pointing towards women's liberation. I aim to approach discussions about women from an asset and growth mindset, steering away from a deficit mindset. In essence, my theoretical

journey echoes the idea of returning "to that moment when an individual woman or child, who may have thought she was all alone, began a feminist uprising, began to name her practice, indeed began to formulate theory from lived experience" (hooks, 1991, p. 11).

## **Summary**

This literature review explores entrepreneurial leadership, covering its dimensions, outcomes, and implications. It underscores the significance of understanding the developmental processes in defining oneself as an entrepreneurial leader, emphasizing visionary thinking, innovation, charisma, and creativity. The review emphasizes the critical self-realization of the next generation of women as successful entrepreneurs, linking it to societal improvements by highlighting the importance of advancing a framework for women's entrepreneurship research. The deliberate implementation of gender-smart methods in entrepreneurship education is discussed to foster confidence, life skills, and success in starting and sustaining businesses. Entrepreneurial leadership's role in fostering an entrepreneurial mindset promoting adaptability, innovation, and resilience is outlined, with Entrepreneurship Education and Training programs (EETs) identified as pivotal. This emphasizes the importance of a gender-aware approach to encouraging women in entrepreneurship.

In summary, this literature review underscores the evolving nature of entrepreneurial leadership, the importance of cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset, the role of gender-inclusive EETs, and the transformative potential of social entrepreneurship in addressing societal challenges. It navigates the nuanced relationships between gender, feminism, and entrepreneurship, employing various theoretical frameworks and methodologies to enrich the understanding of women's experiences in this domain. Autoethnography is presented as a feminist methodology to amplify women's voices.

## CHAPTER THREE

As the field of entrepreneurial leadership continues to evolve, the quest to define the traits and skills of entrepreneurial leaders continues. By leveraging the distinctive lens of autoethnography, this study explores the journey to becoming an entrepreneurial leader through the central research question: *How have I come to understand myself as an entrepreneurial leader?*

### **Researcher Positionality**

As the researcher, my perspective is profoundly influenced by how I interpret data. This interpretation of the data is influenced by first examining and answering what influences my identities have on my growth as an entrepreneurial leader.

To clarify and define my positionality, I examine my identities within the framework of my worldview. As I reflect, these insights guide my journey toward becoming an entrepreneurial leader, enabling me to identify crucial aspects that mark my evolution of understanding. I openly acknowledge that the interpretation of my narrative, shaped by my lived experiences, is inherently subjective, offering a personal perspective rather than a universal one. It is crucial to highlight that the data I have gathered is singular. Nevertheless, by intentionally focusing on collecting data related to my entrepreneurial leadership journey, I can better pinpoint specific experiences from my life to extract meaningful insights.

### *About the researcher*

I am mindful of the complexities of my identity as a white, cisgender, heterosexual, non-disabled woman who is a middle-class, non-believer, democrat, U.S. citizen pursuing an advanced degree in higher education leadership. I have come to understand how my identities

grant me a certain invisibility, a reality not lost as I navigate my entrepreneurial leadership journey. For example, being white and non-disabled, I recognize the unearned privileges and benefits of these identities, especially in professional and academic settings. As a cisgender and heterosexual woman, I live in a world that, in many ways, is designed to affirm my identity. My middle-class status, precisely my pursuit of an advanced degree, provides me with a ‘safety net’ and access to opportunities many cannot pursue. As a non-believer, I approach problems and solutions from a secular perspective, valuing evidence and empathy over doctrine. My political affiliation as a Democrat influences my commitment to social justice, equity, and the belief that we have a collective responsibility to create a more inclusive and fair society for all. As I reflect on how I show up and occupy space in the rooms I am in, I examine how these attributes afford me certain privileges and critically inform how I interact, perceive, and react to my existence.

In my research, I authentically explore the intersections of my identities while acknowledging the challenges that may limit my ability to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of equity across various categories. My experiences have predominantly involved empowering white middle-class women in Western societies, mainly through my role as the director of a women’s entrepreneurial leadership institute at a public state university for four years. During this tenure, I co-created and taught the course 'Entrepreneurial LeadHERship' (EntreLeadHER), which launched the new Women in Entrepreneurship specialization. Now in its fourth iteration, EntreLeadHER reflects my ongoing commitment to addressing the underrepresentation of women in business and promoting a gender-aware approach to entrepreneurship education to attract more women to the field. Through my efforts, I have become a strong advocate for increasing the number of women-owned and women-led businesses, highlighting and celebrating the unique strengths women bring to entrepreneurship.

### *Researcher paradigm*

My research journey into understanding the essence of entrepreneurial leadership within higher education is rooted in a constructivist paradigm, emphasizing how I actively construct my notion of reality that is subjective and multifaceted (Shannon-Baker, 2023). This belief assumes that reality is constructed through human experiences and social interactions, particularly within the cultural context of higher education institutions (ScienceDirect, 2017).

My ontological stance is that there is no objective reality; individual perceptions and experiences shape multiple realities. This perspective is crucial in my exploration of entrepreneurial leadership, as it acknowledges the diversity of experiences and interpretations that contribute to understanding what it means to be an entrepreneurial leader. From an epistemological standpoint, knowledge can only be gained through subjective experiences, introspection, and action (Schwitzgebel, 2010). This view aligns with the autoethnographic method, which emphasizes the validity of personal narrative and emotional truth in acquiring and conveying knowledge.

My approach to knowing reality involves a deep dive into my experiences as an entrepreneurial leader, leveraging the power of narrative to explore and understand the cultural influences that have shaped my journey. Through rigorous self-reflection and critical analysis, I engaged in a methodological process that allows for discovering my reality but also invites others to find resonance and validity within their contexts (Yoon & Uliassi, 2022). For example, in qualitative research, the expression “the researcher is an instrument” underscores the researchers' pivotal role throughout the research process (Yoon & Uliassi, 2022). Scholars in the field, such as Creswell (2009) and Denzin & Lincoln (2005, 2018), emphasize the researcher's role in collecting, interpreting, and presenting data. According to Corbin & Strauss (2015), the

researcher informs meaning in the data at every phase of the research journey. This perspective highlights the unique position of the qualitative researcher as a vital tool in shaping the outcomes and insights derived from the study (Yoon & Uliassi, 2022).

Methodologically, my research navigates through collecting and analyzing my narratives, drawing from my experiences, emotions, and the cultural settings of my academic and career journey. This autoethnographic approach facilitates a rich, introspective exploration, enabling me to process and analyze my experiences in a manner that is both systematic and deeply personal (Ellis et al., 2010). By intertwining narrative inquiry with analytical reflexivity (Jamieson et al., 2023), I construct a framework that supports the discovery of insights into entrepreneurial leadership and ensures that these findings are grounded in the authenticity and validity of lived experiences. The autoethnographic methodology underscores the importance of subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence in constructing a narrative that genuinely reflects the journey of becoming an entrepreneurial leader within the academic realm (Ellis et al., 2010).

My research is an intimate exploration of self within the broad expanse of entrepreneurial leadership in higher education. It stands on a foundation that values the subjective construction of reality, seeks knowledge through personal narrative and reflection, and employs an autoethnographic approach to uncover and validate the complexities of this leadership paradigm. Through this journey, I aim to contribute to the evolving discourse on entrepreneurial leadership, offering insights and reflections that resonate with others navigating similar paths. As a precaution, I have engaged in bracketing throughout my qualitative research approach to minimize the potentially harmful effects of biases that could compromise the integrity of the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2012). By recognizing my potential biases, I uphold transparency, rigor, and ethical conduct, as understanding my positionality offers me a critical

lens to authentically reflect on how my identities, experiences, and perspectives inform the research process.

### *Ethical considerations*

Autoethnography inherently intertwines personal narratives with the lives of others, acknowledging our interconnectedness (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). This study engages with the complexities of gathering and analyzing data from the intricate relationships inherent in autoethnography (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). As an autobiographical approach, autoethnography necessitates navigating the multifaceted landscape of personal and professional connections while exploring my identities. Ethical considerations extend to the responsible treatment of participants mentioned in my narrative. Reflection on the potential impact on family and colleagues has led to deliberate steps to minimize risks and safeguard identities through pseudonyms (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022).

Throughout this autoethnographic journey, I have recognized the importance of caring for others involved in the research while prioritizing my well-being and practicing self-care. This exploration has been marked by emotional intensity and vulnerability, leading to unexpected conclusions and unresolved aspects. Managing expectations is vital as I acknowledge the challenges of understanding my entrepreneurial leader identity within the unique cultural context of higher education.

I employ autoethnography as the foundational methodological framework to assist with this understanding. This approach originates from a deeply personal standpoint, reflecting on my experiences and the cultural influences shaping my leadership, particularly in my roles at a public university's entrepreneurial leadership institute. By its very nature, autoethnography

allows for a rich, introspective examination of my journey, blending my personal narrative with broader cultural and societal dynamics grounded in qualitative research.

### **Research Methodology**

In this qualitative research, I aim to understand human behavior and experiences through comprehensive data-gathering methods emphasizing a personal and adaptable approach (Poulos, 2021). Qualitative approaches are widely accepted and embraced in the social sciences due to the inherent complexity of the phenomena under investigation, requiring deep inner reflection and thorough examination (Poulos, 2021).

Choosing a qualitative approach allows for a more naturalistic study, enabling the exploration of phenomena within their authentic settings or research scenes, as highlighted by Denzin and Lincoln (2008). This approach becomes essential for interpreting phenomena and grasping how the setting influences the researcher's experiences, especially regarding meaning-making and identity exploration. Creswell (2013) outlines key characteristics of the researcher's experience in a qualitative approach, such as collecting data as words, prioritizing the process over the product, focusing on participants' sense-making of their lives and experiences, and expressing findings through language.

Embracing a qualitative methodology aligns with the deliberate choice to provide narrative descriptions of lived experiences, aiming to "craft tales that shed light on particular phenomena encountered in the research scene" (Poulos, 2021, p. 6). Specifically, my narrative descriptions of lived experiences primarily align with Creswell's (2013) third qualitative characteristic—focusing on how participants make sense of their lives and experiences. I describe my lived experiences more intentionally through an autoethnographic lens.

## *Autoethnography*

In my qualitative research methodology, autoethnography becomes a potent avenue for storytelling—a means to narrate events and experiences and encapsulate the essence of my journey as a researcher (Poulos, 2021). This approach underscores the importance of storytelling beyond recounting events, creating a narrative that explores the intricacies of my inquiry into entrepreneurial leadership. Autoethnography aligns to "describe and systematically analyze personal experience to understand cultural experience" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273), connecting me to my experiences and making my interpretations the primary data (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

An autoethnographic study “draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules, and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues" (Poulos, 2021, p. 4). This study uses autoethnography to convey the researcher's story through narrative descriptions, feelings, and memories, offering context to a lived experience (Poulos, 2021). Autoethnography intentionally combines autobiography and ethnography, using lived experience as evidence to explore cultural phenomena (Harrison, 2018). It views research as both a process and a product, embodying a politically and socially conscious act (Ellis et al., 2010). Reflecting on 'ah-ha' moments from cultural participation and specific cultural identity illustrates how autoethnography shapes and is shaped by cultural identities, influencing researchers and others.

Autoethnography provides accessible data by documenting personal experiences, contributing to broader knowledge, and emphasizing personal and social connections. Ellis et al. (2010) describe autoethnography as a way of being in the world involving conscious living, emotional engagement, and reflexive examination. It requires self-observation, questioning of

beliefs, and challenging assumptions, aiming for a narrative where authors emerge as survivors of their lived stories.

The autoethnographic researcher, often the sole participant, critically explores experiences to provide cultural insight, presenting lived experiences as part of society (Harrison, 2018). Crafting compelling stories illuminates specific phenomena encountered, aiding in making meaning from direct experiences. This self-narrative approach connects me to the cultural experience, allowing an examination of changes in roles and functions within the context of higher education (Reed-Danahay, 1997). As the researcher, I assume a dual role—an observer and an active participant in this unique research methodology. Through autoethnography, I become both the storyteller and the story, actively shaping and being shaped by the narrative as I seek meaning in my journey. This transformative process evolves the research from 'sense-making' to 'sense-sharing' and, ultimately, 'meaning-making' (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022).

Autoethnography emerges as a pedagogical tool across disciplines, exploring self-reflexive methodological approaches, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. This approach facilitates a wide-angle perspective, linking individual histories, lived experiences, and broader educational and sociocultural concerns in teaching and curriculum development (Mitchell, 2019; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012). In higher education, autoethnography serves the purpose of understanding, articulating, and critiquing the complex interconnections between personal histories and broader academic, cultural, political, and social contexts (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012).

**Cultural identity.** Utilizing autoethnography as my qualitative method, I blend personal reflection and cultural analysis to gain insights into my experiences in the larger cultural landscape of higher education. I specifically approach this exploration through the lens of my

identities as a director, lecturer, and researcher. As I explore my cultural background and values, I contemplate how my cultural norms, traditions, and beliefs have shaped the intersectionality of my cultural identity, or my sexuality, gender, religion, ethnicity, and social class (*Cultural et al.*). I facilitated the transformation of my autobiographical data into cultural identity themes from my reflective journaling, memory, and artifacts. These cultural themes included awareness of my gender, ethnicity, social class, and nationality.

Recognizing the importance of addressing cultural identity, emphasizing gender sensitivity, and an awareness of individual complexities, I underscore the significance of encouraging self-reflection. Engaging in this self-reflective process involves exploring various elements that have contributed to shaping my identity, including family history, traditions, language use, and personal experiences within specific cultural contexts. Incorporating my cultural identity as a director and lecturer throughout this autoethnographic study provides a rich and nuanced exploration of the cultural identities I embody within the context of higher education. This approach enables a deeper understanding of my personal experiences, highlighting the influence of my culture on my professional life and ultimately contributing to broader implications for academia.

**Narratives.** The choice of autoethnography is deliberate, embracing the subjectivity, emotionality, and narrative construction shaped by my dual role as both the researcher and the subject. This methodological stance acknowledges the power and vulnerability of self-disclosure. It facilitates a meaningful exploration of my experiences navigating leadership and entrepreneurship in academia as a woman. Through this lens, I share my deeply personal and reflective narrative, highlighting the complexities and transformative journey of becoming an entrepreneurial leader.

This study serves as a testament to the significance of personal narrative in uncovering the nuanced factors that influence leadership and entrepreneurship, with a particular focus on gender. By situating my experiences within the larger discourse on leadership, entrepreneurship, and gender dynamics, I offer insights into the interplay between identity, personal growth, and professional development. My dual roles as an administrator and lecturer have provided a unique vantage point to examine the intersection of tradition and innovation in higher education, further informing my understanding of entrepreneurial leadership.

I examine the complexities of navigating the entrepreneurial landscape through autoethnographic reflection, highlighting the crucial role of self-reflection, self-awareness, and self-acceptance in the leadership development process. My narrative captures moments highlighting my leadership evolution, incorporating the administrative and pedagogical challenges and insights gained from my experiences. This journey of discovery is not just a methodological process but a deeper engagement with the themes of women's empowerment, identity, cultural intersectionality, and the broader societal changes influencing the academic landscape.

The analysis and interpretation of my autoethnographic data connect deeply with my lived experiences, facilitating a transformation of my autobiographical data into themes that resonate with broader cultural identities. This analytical-interpretive style helps to narrate my story, linking concepts and themes that address how I have come to understand myself as an entrepreneurial leader. Through this process, I explore the significance of cultural background, values, and the intersectionality of my identity as a white middle-class U.S. citizen in shaping my journey.

In summarizing the lessons and reflections that arise from my autoethnographic exploration, I bring to light the power of narrative and reflective practice in navigating the intersections of identity within the cultural context of my career trajectory. My strength in seeking significance has motivated me to make impactful contributions, guiding my exploration of personal and professional growth. This ongoing process of self-discovery and self-acceptance highlights the dynamic nature of defining oneself as an entrepreneurial leader, emphasizing the importance of contributing to something larger than oneself and continuing to evolve and make meaningful contributions to the world.

Understanding these influences on my experiences in higher education administration has significantly contributed to my comprehension as a woman leader. Acknowledging these external influences on my life, such as societal norms, historical events, geographical factors, and exposure to diverse cultures, has been essential for sense-making and recognizing the intersectionality of my cultural identity with a more nuanced understanding of "who I am." I trace my identity development to my elementary and teenage years to better understand myself. I recognize the impact of early role models, adaptability, resilience, and a global mindset as critical aspects of how I perceive myself as an entrepreneurial leader.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks**

In the context of my autoethnographic study, I examine the dynamics between structural and cultural forces within higher education and their influence on my growth as an entrepreneurial leader in a gender-focused industry. This exploration highlights the persistent gender disparities in higher education leadership despite the increased participation of women, as highlighted in recent studies (Kimbu et al., 2021; Moyer, 2023). Research indicates that the gender makeup of leadership in higher education significantly impacts these inequalities, with

men predominantly occupying leadership roles despite being a minority in this sector (Dada et al., 2022; Amrein et al., 2011).

The complexities of gender identity and expression in entrepreneurship are varied, particularly concerning women's experiences. Women entrepreneurs' personal and collective narratives reflect diverse interactions with societal norms and practices, challenging the notion of a single woman's entrepreneurial experience. This research emphasizes women's collective strategies based on their gender identities to navigate and challenge norms, thereby contributing to broader economic success and gender equity for all.

### *Gender & Feminist Theories*

This research draws on gender and feminist theories to provide a comprehensive framework for examining the interplay of gender with entrepreneurship. Gender theory is a foundational lens that enhances understanding of how identity influences entrepreneurial leadership (Harquail, 2020). Feminist theory offers critical insights into the role of gender in shaping power dynamics and societal contributions. A poststructural feminist perspective is intentionally employed to challenge traditional leadership views, enabling a deeper analysis of how gender affects entrepreneurial motivations and experiences (Harquail, 2020; Dean & Ford, 2017).

My journey, analyzed through these theoretical lenses, reveals how gender constructs influence my entrepreneurial leadership competencies. By incorporating an intersectional feminist perspective, I acknowledge the role of other identity markers, such as race and class, in shaping my experiences and those of others in similar contexts (Kimbu et al., 2021).

### *Gender Theory*

Gender theory proposes that gender is not just a biological distinction but is socially constructed, influencing behaviors, roles, and societal expectations (WHO, 2019; Ettl & Welter, 2012). This framework is crucial for understanding how gender diversifies entrepreneurship, as it brings unique perspectives and innovations from various gender experiences. The theoretical discussion is expanded by acknowledging the performative nature of gender, which transcends traditional stereotypes and roles (Jule, 2004).

### *Feminist Theories*

Intersectional feminism is integral to this study, providing a lens through which to view the compound effects of various forms of discrimination. This approach recognizes marginalized groups' unique challenges and advocates for a more inclusive understanding of feminism that encompasses all individuals regardless of their identity dimensions (Crenshaw, 1989/2020; UN Women, 2020). By adopting this framework, the research uncovers the layered realities of oppression and privilege, fostering a more equitable society.

**Autoethnography as a Feminist Methodology.** Utilizing autoethnography allows for a personal and reflective exploration of how gender and entrepreneurship intersect. This methodology combines narrative with critical analysis, enabling an examination of how societal norms and personal experiences have come together to shape my identity and leadership style. By employing feminist autoethnography, this study narrates personal experiences to advocate for societal change and a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in entrepreneurship (Allen & Piercy, 2005; Ettore, 2017).

In my autoethnographic research, I explore the interplay between structural and cultural forces in higher education and how these dynamics have influenced my development as an

entrepreneurial leader in a gendered sector (Kimbu et al., 2021; Moyer, 2023). Despite the growing presence of women in higher education, gender inequality and discrimination persist. A study by the Public Library of Science (Dada et al., 2022) reveals that the gender composition of leadership roles significantly contributes to these disparities. For instance, men overwhelmingly hold leadership positions—even as they represent a minority in higher education—highlighting a clear gender imbalance, with women comprising only 17.5% of board members at elite universities (Amrein et al., 2011).

Studying the connections between gender identity and expression is intricate and multifaceted, particularly in the context of women's experiences in business creation. Both gender identity and expression are shaped differently to recognize, express, and analyze the various social norms and practices women encounter in entrepreneurship. It is important to note that describing the experience of being a woman in entrepreneurship as a singular narrative is challenging because each individual's journey in starting a business is unique and deeply personal. The emphasis on women in entrepreneurship as a group allows me to highlight how women collectively utilize their gender identities to strive for equity, ultimately leading to success and overall economic growth. To thoroughly explore how gender identity influences women's experiences in entrepreneurship, it is crucial to explain why defining women as a social group is significant, thus forming the foundation for analyzing the connections between the various theoretical concepts.

### **Research Design**

In this qualitative study, I purposefully adopted autoethnography as the research design to present a subjective and reflective account of my transformative journey toward becoming an entrepreneurial leader. The deliberate use of autoethnography enhances the richness and depth of

the narrative, providing valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of the transformative journey toward entrepreneurial leadership. This approach emphasizes the identification of common themes and attributes from the collected data to understand the personal and cultural dimensions inherent in the explored cultural context of higher education, including specific subcultures, namely a university classroom and a women's entrepreneurial leadership institute, providing contextual layers to my experiences within a large public state institution.

The intrinsic nature of the autoethnographic research design positions the "self" as the primary data source. I document through reflective journaling and memory recall throughout the fall of 2023. This data serves as lenses through which the narrative of my journey is captured and analyzed. This study deliberately takes a first-person perspective, structured as a self-narrative, tracing the development and reflection of my identities, with a particular emphasis on gender, through the lens of these research questions. Through this intentional self-reflection, framed within an autoethnographic framework, the objective is to offer a personal and professional viewpoint deeply rooted in core values and strengths. The goal is to inspire others, especially as a woman in leadership and entrepreneurship, by highlighting the strengths I have derived from these identities. This purpose-driven approach aims to empower others to find their best path, reflecting my leadership philosophy centered on vulnerability and authenticity.

The research design involves active participation and self-description within the cultural context of higher education, unfolding as a means to develop, verify, and share personal constructions of the setting. The research design contributes to meaningful knowledge expansion (Erlandson et al., 1993). Following Chang's (2008) framework, I move beyond self-narration to engage in cultural analysis, or the study of the culture of a group or society (*What Is a Cultural Analysis?*, n.d.), connecting my personal experiences with broader social contexts and adding

collective wisdom by highlighting the intersections of self and culture. To better understand the relationship between self and culture, I used the following ten strategies outlined by Chang (2016):

1. Search for recurring topics, themes, and patterns;
2. Look for cultural themes;
3. Identify exceptional occurrences;
4. Analyze inclusion and omission;
5. Connect the present with the past;
6. Analyze relationships between self and others;
7. Compare yourself with other people's cases;
8. Contextualize broadly;
9. Compare with social science constructs and ideas; and
10. Frame with theories.

From these ten strategies, the most effective analysis strategy for me was searching for recurring topics, themes, and patterns by holistically reviewing my entire data set for specifics related to people, places, ideas, or activities. Additionally, guided by Cooper and Lilyea's (2022) prompt questions: 1) "What cultural issues or features do I want to address?"; 2) "What do I aim to learn from my story?"; and 3) "Which aspects of my lived experience do I wish to explore?" I shape the research design process to be reflective, identifying culturally significant themes through narrative exploration (see Appendix C).

As the cultural aspects of my identity are better understood and the intersections of my roles in higher education are explored, this study contributes to a broader and deeper comprehensive understanding of my journey to becoming an entrepreneurial leader, addressing

identity, leadership, and the culture of entrepreneurship. Throughout the research design process, reflexivity remains vital, allowing for critically examining biases and assumptions, enriching the depth of the narrative, and contributing to broader academic discussions on how I can merge my personal, professional, and cultural experiences as an entrepreneurial leader.

### *Research questions*

This study centers around the central research question: “*How have I come to understand myself as an entrepreneurial leader?*” This question is a guiding thread in navigating the intricacies of identity formation within entrepreneurship and leadership. By embarking on my leadership journey, this research question emphasizes the impact of my personal and professional experiences, illuminating how these factors influence my pedagogical choices and professional decisions and incorporating an entrepreneurial mindset as a leader.

As I dig deeper into my entrepreneurial leadership journey, I reflect on how my identities influence my growth - aligning the autoethnographic method with a focus on how these influences play within the cultural context of higher education. Addressing this broader query fosters a comprehensive awareness of how I define myself first, shaping my understanding of entrepreneurial leadership for myself - and others.

To help answer this research questions and further explore aspects of my entrepreneurial leadership journey, I incorporated the following prompts to focus my journal writing as part of my writing process:

- “How have I come to know who I am?”
- “What are some of my earliest memories of ... entrepreneurship?” “... strong women characters?”

- "What lived experiences impacted my career choice to become an entrepreneurial leader?"
- "How have my experiences shaped my identity as a leader?"
- "What are my strengths?" "... weaknesses?" "... values?"
- "How does my gender affect me as an entrepreneurial leader?"
- "How does my journey influence how I teach and approach my work as a faculty member and director of a women's entrepreneurial leadership institute?"

These prompt questions frame my autoethnographic journey in ways that help me better understand the interplay between my personal and professional development, especially during my early foundational years and with the people in my life. Choosing when to use journal prompt questions was an interactive process that helped me go deeper and explore specific themes further, primarily asynchronous to what was happening in my course, work, and personal life.

#### *Data collection and analysis*

Autoethnography, as defined by Poulos (2021), is an "autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experiences of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules, and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues" (p. 4). As a method, autoethnography helps make meaning from the researcher's direct experience of the world in a way that provides a framework for the researcher to write reflexively, from memory, and about social or cultural phenomena from a singular 'first-person' perspective (Poulos, 2021). Data collection encompasses personal narratives,

self-stories, and first-person accounts (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), emphasizing lived experience, reflexivity, and personal narrative (Bolen, 2019).

Understanding that autoethnography aims to explain and extract meaning from lived experiences (Ellis et al., 2010), I collected my data on personal experiences through reflexivity and personal narrative. Reflexivity is the “act of examining one's own assumption, belief, and judgment systems, and thinking carefully and critically about how these influence the research process” (Jamieson et al., 2023). Reflexivity involves a critical introspection of our identities as researchers, exploring how these identities inform and direct our scholarly activities (Jamieson et al., 2023). In the research process, I intentionally embraced vulnerability, expressing the sides of me that I am least confident about (*How to Be Vulnerable*, n.d.) to recognize and address subjective biases arising from emotional writing. This critical examination of emotions and biases guided my research, fostering continuous questioning and acknowledgment of feelings, assumptions, and interpretations.

During journal writing, I engaged in reflective practices, revisiting past entries multiple times and emotionally recalling the sentiments associated with significant experiences. The simultaneous review and analysis of collected data was therapeutic, with writing and analysis unfolding concurrently. I learned that writing can be a tool for meaning-making and a place to process my understandings and experiences about my place in the world (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005). The ongoing review of the data collection and analysis consistently prompted questions about the study's significance and encouraged reflection on how my self-identity is expressed in my writing.

Through continuous review, I captured past and present perspectives in my journey toward becoming an entrepreneurial leader. This process involved observations, interpretations,

and reflections collected over the fall 2023 semester. Eighty-seven journal entries were documented during daily writing sessions, weekly faculty development retreats, and bi-weekly online writing retreats. These entries contributed to the continual refinement and enrichment of the study's overall significance, revealing transformative elements that have shaped my role as a woman leader in higher education.

**Coding.** Autoethnography is characterized by its distinctive blend of narrative and academic rigor. This writing style integrates personal narrative with scholarly analysis, guaranteeing a robust data collection process. To enhance the rigor and validity of my data, the following details how I structured my process for the qualitative analysis of my autoethnographic study.

1. **Journaling and Digitization** - Consistent journaling captured reflections, experiences, and insights on my entrepreneurial leadership journey within the cultural setting of higher education. Utilizing paper and a reMarkable tablet, this dual-modality allowed me to be flexible in capturing my thoughts. Upon completing a journal entry, I digitized each entry and uploaded it into a Google Doc. This step allowed consolidation and preliminary cleanup, enhancing clarity and readability (especially for the Remarkable tablet). This initial organization facilitated a smooth transition to analyzable data, laying the groundwork for the subsequent coding phases.
2. **Identification and Color-Coding of Themes** - Organizing journal entries after the initial coding phase allowed me to employ a strategy to highlight key themes directly emerging from the data using different colors. This visual differentiation helped me distinguish and categorize initial themes. Following Feldman's (2003) criteria, this step highlights the

importance of providing detailed descriptions through side comments to better construct my data.

3. Thematic Consolidation and Narrative Analysis - I could quickly identify initial themes through color coding by aligning my coding process with narrative inquiry techniques. Seeing what colors were used more than others made it easier to create overarching thematic categories visually. This consolidation also involved a reflective and analytical process, evaluating themes for relevance and interconnectedness. Utilizing frameworks by Gibbs (2007) and Janesick (2010), this phase incorporated thematic analysis and narrative research methods, focusing on content and structure. Forty-two themes were then further examined through narrative inquiry, highlighting the storytelling aspect of my autoethnographic analysis.
4. Refinement and Selection - After establishing thematic categories, I reviewed the data again to select which journals to purposefully include in Chapter 4. Specific entries were chosen based on relevance, illustrative potential, and their contribution to the narrative arc of my dissertation. This selection process was complex because I tried to select journal entries highlighting my narrative while accentuating key themes, contributing to a deeper understanding of my identity as an entrepreneurial leader.

// 8/15/2023  
 "we can do anything. We are WONS"  
 WOA = woman of the nineties  
 Being a WOA meant it was a  
 rally cry, an identity, and my  
 first memory of women's empowerment.  
 Being a WOA was more of a  
 statement, not needing men. It was  
 an intro to feminism and power  
 of being a woman. Whether or not  
 my mom knew it, she was empowering  
 (and my twin sister) to realize  
 that women didn't need to depend  
 on men, instead, women have strength  
 and confidence to assemble together.  
 It was the way my mom talked  
 herself, and for our twin teenage  
 daughters, to be strong and independent.  
 It was a common phrase in my  
 upbringing, and the impact of the  
 sentiment of needing a rally cry  
 as a divorced mother of three is  
 only just now being felt. And, I  
 think that is a perfect place to  
 start, on the origin point of women's  
 empowerment in my life. I realize  
 now that being a "WOA" in the 90s  
 and the third-wave of feminism that it  
 is now remembered for. It's my intro to  
 "girl power".

Aug 15, 2023 - I. We are WONS

"We can do anything We're WONS". Being a WON meant being a 'woman of the nineties'. It was a rally cry, an identity, and my first memory of women's empowerment. Being a WON was a statement that was more than being an independent woman. It was about women not needing men. It was an introduction to feminism and the power of being a woman. Whether or not my mom intentionally knew it, she was empowering me (and my twin sister) to realize that women didn't need to depend on men, instead, women have strength and confidence to assemble together.

It was the way my mom rallied herself, and her two twin teenage daughters, to be strong and independent. It was a common phrase in my upbringing, and the impact behind the sentiment of needing a rally cry as a divorced mother of three is only just now being felt. And, I think that is a perfect place to start - the origin point of women's empowerment in my life. I realize now that being a "WON" in the 90s, and the third-wave feminism that it is now remembered for, was an introduction to "girl power". Just as I was beginning to work, and have disposable income, I was buying my first CDs. With an hour-long bus ride to and from school every day, my education was informally being shaped by TLC, Destiny's Child, Lauren Hill, the Spice Girls, and No Doubt. With those CDs on repeat, I was transported into the girl bosses of my generation and a reality where girls could do anything. And, I was being raised to witness that - as my divorced mother took care of three kids while managing to start and grow her career to achieve her own income/independence.

Figure One. Example of Coding Process

Through my coding process, from the initial collection and organization of journal entries through thematic analysis to the selection of excerpts, I could constantly reflect on my commitment to methodological rigor. By systematically organizing, coding, and analyzing my journal entries, I aimed to offer a transparent and richly textured exploration of the themes that organically emerged, thereby contributing to the broader academic discourse on leadership, identity, and cultural dimensions of entrepreneurship education.

## Data Interpretation

In my autoethnographic data analysis, I consistently connect myself as the researcher, aligning with Cooper and Lilyea's (2022) perspective that autoethnographic analysis is a test for both the ethnographer and the data. This self-exploration involved ongoing data organization through labeling and classification, continuously refined throughout the analysis and interpretation process. My data analysis aimed to derive meaning to contribute to my cultural understanding, specifically within my experiences as a woman in higher education. My analysis

and reflection adopted an analytical-interpretive style to narrate my story, linking concepts and themes to address the primary research question: *How have I come to understand myself as an entrepreneurial leader?*

Following Chang's (2016) advice to view the self as a carrier of culture, I facilitated the transformation of my autobiographical data into cultural identity themes from my reflective journaling, memory, and artifacts. These cultural themes included awareness of my race, gender, social class, and nationality. As I explore my cultural background and values, I contemplate how my cultural norms, traditions, and beliefs shaped the intersectionality of my cultural identity as a white woman who is a middle-class U.S. citizen pursuing an advanced degree.

**Identifying Themes and Lessons.** Coding to identify themes and lessons involved labeling text segments by organizing my thoughts and identifying distinct ideas. I mainly used side comments to identify these ideas while carefully noting patterns. This process laid the groundwork for a deeper thematic analysis where I examined colors and comments to reveal forty-two overall broad *Captured Themes* (examined deeper in Appendix A):

1. Women's Empowerment
2. Feminism
3. Independent & Self-Reliance
4. Working Mothers
5. Generational Changes
6. Self-Discovery & Identity
7. Privilege & Intersectionality
8. Activism & Allyship
9. Social Justice and Equity
10. Self-Reinvention
11. Role Modeling
12. Music & Pop Culture
13. Empathy
14. Intersectionality
15. 'White Feminism'
16. Identity & Privilege
17. Women in Entrepreneurship
18. Asset-Based and Growth Mindset
19. Leadership Development & Challenges
20. Stress Responses

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 21. Stress & Anxiety                   | 33. Action Orientation & Decision Making |
| 22. Values & Decision-Making           | 34. Team Dynamics & Culture              |
| 23. Recognition & Validation           | 35. Ethics                               |
| 24. Self-Reflection                    | 36. Emotional Intelligence               |
| 25. Purpose / Ikigai                   | 37. Personal Growth                      |
| 26. Patience & Persistence             | 38. Self-Awareness                       |
| 27. Environment                        | 39. Adaptation & Learning                |
| 28. Iteration                          | 40. Cultural & Personal Influences       |
| 29. Personal Growth & Self-Discovery   | 41. Strengths & Weaknesses               |
| 30. Challenges & Resilience            | 42. Leadership Philosophy                |
| 31. Strategic Focus & Goal Orientation |  |
| 32. Innovation & Knowledge Seeking     |  |

These captured themes represented broader patterns or topics that emerged from my data, showing recurring concepts throughout my reflections. This stage of grouping related codes into themes helped me reflect on my personal experiences, the cultural contexts I navigated, and the intersections of my identity within these spaces.

### *Focus Areas*

To extract cultural meaning, I leaned on ten strategies outlined by Chang (2016), focusing primarily on searching for recurring topics, themes, and patterns and connecting the past with the present. Throughout the fall 2023 semester, my reflective journaling journey profoundly connected me with my personal experiences, particularly viewed through gendered social changes. Guided by the concepts of "sense-sharing" and "meaning-making," as proposed by Cooper and Lilyea (2022), I immersed myself thoroughly in the data to examine instances that

illuminate how I could derive and construct meaning from my experiences. To achieve "meaning-making," I created an interpretative process to make sense of my actions and experiences by organizing initial codes into broader, recurring areas that reflected distinct aspects of what I defined as 'sense-sharing' and 'meaning-making.' I then developed areas that captured the essence of my experiences and insights through processing and refining the data. This process uncovered 42 recurring areas, which I meticulously refined to 10 primary overarching areas of focus (see Appendix A and B):

1. Women's Empowerment and Feminism - Reflects the focus on empowering women, advocating for feminist principles, and recognizing the influence of female artists and intersectionality in feminism.
2. Identity and Self-Discovery - Highlights the importance of understanding one's identity, personal growth, and the role of personal history in shaping one's self.
3. Independence and Self-Reliance - Emphasizes the value of independence, self-reliance, and the collective strength of women supporting each other.
4. Role of Working Mothers and Generational Changes - Reflects on the challenges and changes in the roles of working mothers over generations and the evolution of women's societal roles.
5. Privilege, Intersectionality, and Social Justice - Focuses on recognizing privilege, committing to intersectional analysis, and promoting social justice and equity.
6. Activism, Allyship, and Empathy - Captures the journey from advocacy to allyship, the importance of empathy in research, and active engagement in social causes.

7. Music, Pop Culture, and Role Modeling - Highlights the influence of music and pop culture on empowerment and the significance of role models in shaping identity and aspirations.
8. Purpose and Personal Growth - Focuses on the search for meaning and the continuous journey of personal growth and self-reinvention.
9. Leadership Development and Challenges - Explores the challenges leaders face, the importance of emotional intelligence, and the impact of personal growth on leadership philosophy.
10. Adaptation, Learning, and Strategic Focus - Underscores the importance of adaptation, continuous learning, strategic focus, and the readiness to innovate and make decisions.

Engaging with the data through “sense-sharing” and “meaning-making” was not just a methodological process but a journey of discovery (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). The iterative engagement with the data allowed me to refine my understanding and interpretation to enrich my analysis through alignment with my lived experiences.

Through the comprehensive analysis of my data set and the ten focus areas, I shed light on my competencies in entrepreneurial leadership, including an evaluation of my leadership strengths, weaknesses, and core values. This reflective process underscored how my journey in entrepreneurial leadership is intrinsically linked to the evolving narrative of my life and career, profoundly influenced by my identities and global outlook. These insights provide a holistic understanding of my experiences, highlighting the interplay between identity, feminism, leadership, and personal growth. This exploration enriches the broader conversation on women's

empowerment and societal change, showcasing the complex dynamics in my professional and personal development.

### *Theme Exploration*

Through my journaling, I dug deep into these ten themes in the following ways: *Women's Empowerment and Feminism* uncovered my deep-rooted beliefs in advocating for feminist principles empowering women. My writings led me to appreciate intersectional feminism, recognizing the complexities of identities and championing the rights of marginalized communities, inspiring me to advocate for inclusivity more than before. *Identity and Self-Discovery* quickly became core themes in my reflections, guiding me to understand myself. This self-exploration allowed me to see my experiences as the foundation/blueprint of who I am or what makes me me. Through my entries, I celebrated my journey toward *Independence and Self-Reliance*, highlighting the importance of self-sufficiency and the collective power found in a community of supportive women. This theme also highlights the strong value I have of independence.

My journal also reflects on the role of *Working Mothers*, primarily through memories of my mom working and navigating the dynamic challenges and evolving roles of women from the nineties to today. I often wrote about the balance between professional aspirations and familial responsibilities, recognizing the shifting societal perceptions of women's roles through generations.

In grappling with my *Privilege*, I wrote about *Intersectionality* and *Social Justice*. I wrote about being committed to examining privilege, advancing inclusivity, and advocating for social equity. My writings show the importance of education in fostering social justice, especially from my middle and high school experiences at a magnet school. This also came through throughout

my journey from *Activism to Allyship and Empathy*. My journal is well-documented in shedding light on my evolution in understanding and supporting social causes, especially women's economic empowerment.

*Music and Pop Culture* have significantly influenced my reflections, highlighting how artists and cultural figures can empower and inspire. For example, I included a lot of song lyrics and memories from songs. A surprise was how much my journal entries celebrate the influence of music and pop culture in shaping my societal norms and personal aspirations. In my pursuit of *Purpose and Personal Growth*, my journal is an apparent continuous journey of self-reinvention and development, focusing on the search for meaning, specifically from the Japanese concept of *ikigai* (Appendix D). Reflecting on *Leadership Development and Challenges*, my writings explored my lessons in bad leadership, especially recently. These reflections shaped my understanding of effective leadership and the critical role of personal growth. Lastly, my journal entries on *Adaptation and Learning* highlight the importance I place on adaptability and lifelong learning, emphasizing my readiness to innovate, make decisions, and the value of drawing lessons from experiences.

Through my journal, these ten Key / Recurring themes guided me on my entrepreneurial leadership journey. The next step in data analysis was refining the ten themes into the six lessons. These lessons are included in Chapter 4 and required me to shift towards a higher level of synthesis, reflecting on thematic analysis to distill meaningful lessons from my journey. As a result, these six lessons were ultimately chosen because they signified my personal growth, shifts in understanding, and the emergence of new perspectives I gained from this autoethnographic exploration. To detail the specific findings from my analysis for each lesson, I included entire journal entries or important excerpts, ensuring that the lessons drawn from my thematic analysis

were presented clearly, offering readers a coherent understanding of my study's findings and their relevance.

Through the inclusion of Feldman's (2003) criteria and narrative analysis frameworks, I was able to ensure a process that was both comprehensive and academically rigorous. This facilitated a thorough examination of my personal narrative within the broader cultural context of higher education. This process also honored the raw emotions and experiences captured in my journaling while highlighting the significance and impact of emotions on data analysis and collection. Through this authentic and vulnerable exploration, my dissertation aims to contribute meaningful insights into the complexities of navigating entrepreneurial leadership within academia.

### **Summary**

Autoethnography is a powerful tool for understanding the impact of research by addressing fundamental questions such as "Who reads our work?", "How are they affected by it?" and "How does it keep a conversation going?" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 284). Choosing autoethnography as the methodological approach for my study is both vulnerable and empowering, allowing me to explore my identity and aspirations as an entrepreneurial leader. At the same time, I extract meaning from personal experiences (Garrels et al., 2022).

Throughout my nearly two-decade journey in higher education, I have navigated diverse leadership roles, prompting critical self-reflection. Autoethnography becomes the lens through which I examine my roles as a director, lecturer, and researcher at the intersection of entrepreneurship and leadership. The study unfolds as a transformative process, emphasizing self-reflection and exploration to unveil my perception of how I have come to understand myself as an entrepreneurial leader while also answering the sub-research question of "Who am I?".

By embracing my cultural identities, the coding process significantly influenced the direction of my research, underscoring the importance of self-awareness in grasping the effects of my positionality. These coding and analysis approaches helped navigate the complex self-discovery process and acknowledge the interpretive essence of working with emotional data. The unique capacity of autoethnography to tackle essential questions about research impact becomes apparent, offering a powerful combination of storytelling and analytical depth that enriches knowledge while promoting empathy, understanding, and a dedication to social justice, or the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities (SDF, 2016). This method distinguishes itself by centering the researcher's personal experiences as the core of the investigation, resulting in a study marked by vulnerability.

My engagement with autoethnography as a methodology has been a transformative experience, enabling me to reconstruct my narrative and identity. This journey has been immensely empowering and sets a foundation for a legacy of storytelling that transcends its immediate influence, sparking more comprehensive changes and enriching the broader discourse on women in entrepreneurship, incredibly grounded in gender and feminist theories.

This research highlights the profound impact of gender on my career trajectory and leadership approach in academia, clarifying the social construction of gender and its profound influence on identity formation within the entrepreneurial landscape. Autoethnography intertwines personal narratives with cultural analysis, employing feminist theory to explore gendered experiences in entrepreneurship. This methodology emphasizes the political nature of personal stories, leveraging narrative as a tool for social critique and change. It acknowledges the complexity of gender roles and identities, advocating for a critical examination of societal norms and power dynamics through a feminist lens.

Applying poststructural feminism criticism on traditional leadership views, I advocate for a transformative approach that values collaboration and inclusivity from a feminist perspective. I use the conflict approach to examine the reinforcement of gender roles and inequalities to critically explore the role of gender dynamics in shaping my experiences (*The Feminist Perspective*, 2018). This reflection highlights the unique obstacles and opportunities I have faced as a (cisgender) woman in the academic and entrepreneurial fields, analyzing how these gendered experiences affected my approach to leadership.

Intersectional feminism extends throughout my analysis, considering the impact of race, class, privilege, and other social markers on experiences of discrimination and entrepreneurship. Intersectional feminism broadens the scope of inquiry to include the intersecting forms of discrimination that affect women, particularly in the context of current challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach advocates for a comprehensive understanding of feminism that promotes inclusivity, adaptability, and empathy toward creating a fairer society for all.

Through an introspective examination of my interactions with gender dynamics, I gain insights into how gender has influenced my access to resources, decision-making, and visibility—and possibly other women in leadership positions. Gender theory provides a structural lens to examine the roles, behaviors, and expectations assigned to different genders in society. It emphasizes the importance of gender as a variable in entrepreneurship, highlighting the creative and innovative contributions from diverse gender perspectives. My navigation through higher education as a gendered environment (Ronai et al., 2014; Moyer, 2023) sheds light on how societal and cultural perceptions of gender affect the growth and acknowledgment of women entrepreneurial leaders. By viewing my experiences through a feminist lens, I offer a more specific understanding of entrepreneurial leadership. This study contributes to the broader

discourse on women's leadership and entrepreneurship and highlights the importance of developing future strategies and recommendations to support and enhance women in entrepreneurial spaces.

Bourdieu's (2001) concepts of masculine domination provide a valuable counter lens through which to interpret my experiences in higher education. Understanding the significant tenets that influence masculine domination in educational systems, I acknowledge these gendered structures through my experiences advocating for the incorporation of gender-smart and gender-aware frameworks. These intentional approaches seek to situate gender in a socially constructed manner, celebrating the unique contributions of women.

Throughout this study, the literature highlights women's relevance by acknowledging them as integral parts of history, current power players, and advocates for the next generation. Leveraging gender distinctively to promote equity, creativity, and innovation, the conceptual framework of this study contributes to the ongoing narrative of women's empowerment, especially in entrepreneurship. I establish a critical intersectionality link between feminist theory, gender theory, and the pervasive influence of masculine domination. These connections offer insights into the relationships among these ideas within the context of my autoethnographic study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

This chapter represents my exploration of the intersection of leadership and entrepreneurship, employing autoethnography as the chosen research methodology. Autoethnography, characterized by its immersive nature, allows me to comprehensively examine my evolution into an entrepreneurial leader by empowering me to actively engage, deeply analyze, and self-reflect on my experiences within the cultural landscape of higher education, particularly within a university classroom and an entrepreneurial leadership institute.

Throughout my twenty-year career in higher education, I have simultaneously served as an administrator (director) and faculty (lecturer). These dual roles have given me a distinct perspective on the interplay between tradition and innovation within higher education. With its blend of established practices and progressive approaches, higher education as a cultural setting has proven conducive to my strength as a "learner," or my great desire to continuously improve, by satisfying my intellectual curiosity (Rath, 2007). This curiosity has been instrumental in shaping my identity as an entrepreneurial leader, underscoring the significance of self-exploration and introspection.

My exploration of the cultural landscape of higher education has given me profound insights into the intricate dynamics of leadership and entrepreneurship. My autoethnographic data, gathered through my reflections, are the foundation of my study. Through the lens of autoethnography, I capture moments within my narrative that highlight how I have become a more entrepreneurial leader. As an institute director, my responsibilities include building infrastructure for a women's entrepreneurial leadership institute, navigating bureaucratic intricacies often present in higher education, and monitoring political dynamics on campus and at

state-wide levels. This administrative position has granted me valuable insights into the operational dimensions of higher education, offering numerous examples of diverse leadership styles, both good and bad. As a lecturer, I have found myself deeply immersed in the classroom environment where I guide students through a semester devoted to self-exploration and growth, aiming to empower students to become leaders in their own right.

Balancing these dual roles has created an ongoing learning and development process as I draw insights from what I teach, contributing to the continuous growth of myself, my students, and my staff. Emphasizing this delicate balance between authority and leadership has become a central theme of my narrative that introspectively examines my professional journey alongside my personal growth, contributing to the broader discourse on leadership, entrepreneurship, and gender dynamics within academia.

My experiences in higher education intersect with faculty, staff, and students from diverse backgrounds. It is at this intersection where I embody my multifaceted role as faculty (lecturer), staff (director), and researcher (student). These role dynamics influence my power and privilege, affecting my interactions and shaping my academic presence. As all three roles exist concurrently, I try to be continually aware of how my positionality as a white (cisgender) woman impacts my students' learning experiences, my staff, and those reading this study. To hone my awareness, I investigate moments of realization, discomfort, and growth through an autoethnographic lens, deepening my understanding of how I intentionally navigate and exist within the culture of academia. I write about these findings as lessons or literal 'ah ha' moments in numerous journal entries.

Embarking on an autoethnography study within the cultural landscape of higher education, my identity as a white woman becomes central. The classroom and the women's

entrepreneurial leader institute serve as a higher education subculture, mirroring the broader cultural setting. As my narrative evolves, my awareness of my identity begins to encompass my race and gender and the array of opportunities and challenges I encounter in academia, including how others, especially my students, perceive me.

Through various journal entries, I unravel the layers of my own identity, questioning how all aspects inform my worldview and interactions within this chosen cultural setting. This study serves as a tool for dismantling barriers of privilege, fostering empathy, and engaging in meaningful dialogues about equity and inclusion. By recognizing the delicate balance required to acknowledge societal advantages and the responsibility of understanding and dismantling existing structures, my narrative evolves from self-discovery to ownership. Throughout this research journey, I explore my personal and professional experiences within broader systemic issues shaping the academic landscape. Therefore, my narrative transcends my expertise to contribute to a collective understanding of the intricate interplay between identity, politics, and culture in higher education. This study's chosen themes, lessons, and reflections make these interplays evident.

### **Lessons and Reflections**

Autoethnography is a powerful tool for self-discovery, rooted in personal narrative and reflective practice, empowering individuals to navigate their lived experiences through the intersections of identity. In navigating my story, I discovered that my socially constructed self cannot be separated from the broader cultural context of my career trajectory. Because of my *StrengthsFinder* assessment results, my strength in “significance” motivates me to make a significant impact (Rath, 2007). Significance means that I take pride in my work, and it must always contribute to a mission I believe in and where my impact can be felt. My strength of

“significance” has encouraged me to be more vulnerable when my values toward work become misaligned within my work environment, primarily as I have experienced in higher education. By acknowledging “significance” as a strength and a weakness, I have come to appreciate both transformative traits that define me as an entrepreneurial leader.

Defining myself as an entrepreneurial leader is an ongoing process of self-discovery that continues to evolve. By embracing self-acceptance, I acknowledge that my story extends beyond this narrative or this study. While celebrating the progress I have made throughout this study to understand better "who I am," I also emphasize the importance of my personal growth in continuing to make meaningful contributions to the world. For example, the quest to find purpose to contribute to something bigger than oneself has become a core belief or principle in my teaching, underscoring the significance I attribute to my personal and professional growth. By becoming an entrepreneurial leader through self-awareness and understanding foundational memories and experiences, I thought and wrote through the attributions and experiences that make me me. As a result, I answered my research question: *How have I come to understand myself as an entrepreneurial leader?* through six identified lessons.

#### *Lesson one: “Girl Power”*

An autoethnographic study investigating my journey toward becoming an entrepreneurial leader necessitates an examination of my past - it requires an understanding of my roots. My journey to this response has been a vulnerable exercise in examining my past. I must reflect on “who I was” through some of my earliest foundational memories to understand “who I am.”

Upon reflection, I discovered some of my initial encounters with entrepreneurship and feminism through early experiences during my teenage years. One of my earliest journal entries captures these foundational experiences, serving as recollections that helped shape my

understanding of “Who I was.” Using journaling prompts that asked, "What insights do I possess about entrepreneurship?" and "Who are examples of entrepreneurial leaders from my past?" the reflections below were crucial for identifying the origin points of early entrepreneurial leaders who have been memorable and impressionable.

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*I now realize that my free time outside school (real and pretend) was spent learning. I invested my time (and allowance) in Nancy Drew mystery novels and The Babysitters Club (T.B.C.). Unbeknownst to me, my shelves became full of books, each holding unassuming “girl power” lessons that only now resonate as early introductions to the spirit of entrepreneurship and leadership. I wanted to emulate these young women. I wanted to travel and go on adventures like Nancy Drew.*

*Moreover, I was only interested in being Kristy Thomas, the Founder and President of T.B.C. I fondly remember Kristy as the lead in T.B.C. She was my favorite because she was assertive and ambitious. She led with an entrepreneurial spirit that enamored me and that I distinctly remember trying to emulate when I was nine and was elected as the Student Council President. Kristy was relatable. Her character as the founder and president of T.B.C. influenced my personal life as Kristy's parents were divorced. Her mom was dating a new guy, and Kristy started T.B.C. to make money. At that time, my mom was divorced and dating a new man, and I knew that money was tight. To read about another young girl going through something similar was a comfort. I was committed to Kristy as a character before I was committed to the book's storyline, a group of young girls starting a babysitting business. Still, after all these years, I find Kristy's independence and leadership empowering because she was not just focused on babysitting but on something more meaningful: creating financial freedom for herself and the*

*other Babysitter Club members. I remember saving my allowance to buy Babysitter Club sheets for my bed. Even back then, I invested my hard-earned allowance in buying my favorite books of each series and organized my own Babysitters Club with my sister. However, we never got to babysitting because I liked creating the club structure more than watching the kids.*

*Simultaneously, as I would switch between book series, Nancy Drew's adventures created a fearless work that challenged stereotypes and solved mysteries alongside breaking traditional gender roles. I admired Nancy Drew's freedom, sense of adventure, and bravery in confidently pursuing her desires. Furthermore, though much of her storyline was not directly relatable to my life when I was reading about her adventures, my respect for her is as an inspirational woman showcasing the possibility and opportunity to be independent. With a magnifying glass in her hand, Nancy was the dreamer who activated mysteries that led my impressionable mind through story plots that twisted and turned in ways that uplifted the strength of young girls through curiosity and courage. As I turned pages in each book, I learned how to be a problem-solver, an adventurer, and a leader who transformed my girlhood ambition into an early role model of entrepreneurial leaders.*

*However, upon further reflection, as I read Book 1 to my six-year-old daughter, I do not believe that Nancy is relatable for all women. Her story is about a character with privilege and naivety. However, she was the first character to challenge traditional gender roles. Because of Nancy, I realized she was one of the earliest feminist icons advocating for women's autonomy before I even knew what that meant.*

*I am lucky, through this introspection, to have had these young women available to me in ways that represented early on in my life that women could solve problems, run businesses, be independent, and, most importantly, be leaders. I distinctly remember thinking, "I want to be a*

*leader. I want to start something". I loved my first experience with leadership as the Student Council President, and I know that confidence was gained early on through role models like Ms. White, Nancy, and Kristy. These were my original "girl power" feminists. As the stories of these fictional heroines faded in my memory, and as I picked up required readings for other class assignments, the stories of Kristy and Nancy unknowingly became the building blocks of a mindset that defied limits and embraced the boundless possibilities of entrepreneurship.*

**Lesson one - reflection/analysis.** Thirty years later, the nostalgia for these characters lives on as I prepare my seven-year-old daughter to embark on a reading world that promotes girl power and the spirit of entrepreneurship. Just as those early adventures of Kristy and Nancy were foundational tales in my childhood, they probably also profoundly affected other young girls in the nineties. Maybe soon, other books can spotlight girls, especially from marginalized backgrounds, to continue serving as foundation blocks for the next generation of leaders - for my daughter - in a world where stories on a page can transform into reality and the anthem of “girl power” can prevail.

As I reflected on the early heroines in my life and revisited books I loved as a child, I experienced an ‘ah ha’: T.B.C. marked my inaugural encounter with entrepreneurship. Throughout the series, T.B.C. navigated the highs and lows of entrepreneurship, guiding young readers on how to embark on starting a business. From budget creation to insurance considerations, scheduling, overbooking, and prank phone calls, the series provided a foundational lesson on "how to start a business" at a young age. This inspiration prompted me to initiate my own babysitters club, although the administrative responsibilities outweighed the joys of actually babysitting.

Recalling my fictional relationships with Nancy Drew and Kristy Thomas between the ages of seven and ten, I now comprehend the power, relevance, and necessity of such characters for young girls. I am profoundly reflecting on the power of representation and one of the mantras I have learned by leading a women's entrepreneurial leadership institute, "If you can see her, you can be her." These characters served as aspirational figures, allowing me to project my identity onto them and aspire to be a girl capable of achieving anything. Both Nancy and Kristy challenged traditional gender roles, embodying intelligence, physical prowess, and independence, which served as a liberating and empowering force during my formative years. Through these reflections, my life's work has evolved into creating a world where women's empowerment is fostered through a network of influencers, mirroring the magic of sisterhood depicted in T.B.C.

As the T.B.C. series unfolded and relationships and friendships developed, I now recognize feminist moments that subtly influenced the trajectory of my life. Notably, the earliest "girl boss" in my memory is Kristy, who independently conceived a business idea and assembled a diverse team, showcasing both the successes and challenges of entrepreneurship. Unknown to me then, the series depicted underlying feminist perspectives, portraying a diverse group of characters with varied backgrounds regarding race, religion, family dynamics, and perspectives. At its core, the storyline highlighted a group of women collaborating to start a business while fostering genuine friendships. Storylines emphasized the importance of female companionship and mutual support. The series intentionally avoided centering around boys, promoting the narrative that women can thrive without competing with each other, without prioritizing boyfriends or dating.

As T.B.C. exemplifies what a successful business venture led by strong women leaders like Kristy can look like, I now understand this as an early immersion of leadership meeting entrepreneurship. The evolution of my identity as an entrepreneurial leader traces back to childhood, shaped by the characters and role models that have influenced my journey to contribute to the person I am today.

*Lesson two: Becoming an independent woman*

I was raised in a household that embraced the mantra, "We can do anything. We are WONs." WON, standing for "woman of the nineties," served as both a rallying cry and an identity, marking my initial exposure to women's empowerment and liberation. To be a WON was not just a statement but an affirmation and proclamation of being more than an independent woman - it conveyed the idea that women did not need men.

Through journaling, I understood my home as a cultural setting. In this environment, community was built on feeling safe and heard through countless lessons from my mother about how to be a self-reliant and resilient woman. These lessons were my first introduction to feminism and the empowering essence of being a WON, an independent woman.

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*Impeccably decorated for every holiday, the "Little Blue House" was a testament to my mother's resilience and strength as a single, working woman in the nineties. Thinking back on growing up in the 90s and the cultural setting/environment/community my mother built in the "Little Blue House," I now recognize this era as a unique time in society, where second-wave feminism was producing working mothers as beacons of strength, resilience, and determination. Or, at least, this is my memory/experience.*

*In my teens, the 90s served as a movement to become an independent woman. I remember*

*being raised to be self-sufficient, not necessarily a 'latchkey kid,' but one who woke up early with my siblings to take responsibility for my education and hobbies. We were responsible for waking up on time, getting breakfast, and getting on the bus at 6:50 am - because my mom had already left for work. I volunteered at the neighborhood dance studio to have my classes paid for. Moreover, I was responsible for having a job to save up to buy a car. The rule was that if you worked to contribute to a car payment, then Mom would cover the gas and insurance. There was early empowerment from running my schedule and balancing school and my social life with after-school responsibilities. Though this independence has served me well into adulthood and my ability to be independent, it was one of the earliest seeds of self-resilience. Out of necessity, independence has now become the foundation of the confidence I hold today. For example, I can travel alone because I have navigated so much of life with just me.*

*The household my mom created in those formative years still expressly and profoundly impacts who I am. I see glimpses of my mom's household translated into mine. An unknowingly feminist role model led her household. These memories make me proud of and astonished by my mom. Her resilience and adaptability instilled in her kids a sense of agency that I can now pinpoint - and the belief that my gender should never be a hindrance to my independence or ambitions.*

*In many ways, the era I was raised in, the 90s, has laid the foundation for the woman I am today — someone who values the principles of feminism, embraces the spirit of “girl power” - or empowering women to lead - and strives to break down barriers for the generations that follow (especially for my daughter one day). “We are WONs” as a rallying cry was my mother's anthem. It was her way of affirming to herself (and her twin daughters) that being a divorced single mother was not something to be ashamed of but something to embrace and leverage. This*

*mindset was powerful, especially at the age of seven. Whether or not my mom intentionally knew it, she was empowering me to realize that women did not need to depend on men; instead, women have the strength and confidence to assemble.*

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Reflecting on the power of my mom's "WON" movement is a perfect starting point, representing the origin of empowered women empowering women in my life. In the 90s, being a "WON" meant influential and powerful women significantly shaped my upbringing. As I entered the workforce and gained disposable income, my formative years were marked by purchasing my first CDs (and T.B.C. bed sheets!). During daily hour-long bus rides to and from middle and high school, my informal education was curated by iconic artists like TLC, Destiny's Child, Lauryn Hill, the Spice Girls, and No Doubt. With these CDs on constant replay, I transitioned from the era of "girl power" to embracing the ethos of the "girl bosses" of my generation.

Surrounded by peers finding their voices and platforms, I lived in a reality where anthems like "I am Just a Girl" (No Doubt) and "Independent Women" (Destiny's Child) resonated. Importantly, these songs became the backdrop to witnessing my divorced mother with three children start and thrive in her career, achieving financial independence—an empowering demonstration of what a "WON" could accomplish. Upon reflection, these early anthems were the soundtrack of my childhood, and journaling about the power of pop highlights the need for representation, especially strong, independent women.

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*Blasting music from Shania Twain, Destiny's Child, No Doubt, and more women at the height of pop culture as I navigated adolescence, CDs transported feminism as a not-so-distant*

*ideology to become a lived reality. Manifested in the strength, resilience, and unwavering determination of the women surrounding me - singing the lyrics of “Man! I Feel Like a Woman!” These lyrics became anthems, or early indicators of feminism, through pop stars, fictional characters, and our mother.*

*The message we received across our dial-up internet was clear (though slow) ... women could be architects of their destiny, unbounded by societal expectations. Kelly Clarkson declared that being “Miss Independent” was the best way to be. I believed her. Lyrics like “Miss Independent. Miss self-sufficient. Miss keep your distance. Miss unafraid. Miss out of my way. Miss don't let a man interfere, no. Miss on her own. Miss almost grown. Miss never let a man help her off her throne” became the soundtrack of my youth. Being a WON has laid the groundwork for a future where twin girls could envision a world that was theirs - with resilience as the centerpiece to independence.*

*As Taylor Swift dominates streaming and Shania Twain makes her come back, I can blast a new set of feminist icons on Spotify for my daughter. As Taylor asserts, “Wondering if I would get there quicker if I were a man” creates a thought-provoking commentary on today’s gender roles and the current inequality. As new powerful lyrics are sung from the backseat, “I’m Invincible” by Kelly Clarkson and “I Am Woman” by Emmy Meli, my daughter and I can sing together, “I am woman, I am fearless / I am sexy, I’m divine / I’m unbeatable, I’m creative / Honey, you can get in line.”*

**Lesson two - reflection/analysis:** The lyrics of my life continue to influence my worldview, serving as a constant reminder that even the most minor acts of defiance, especially against gender norms, contribute to the ongoing narrative of progress and equality. Growing up

in the 90s, a decade I now perceive as a privileged era for the emergence of womanhood, I enjoy the fruits of previous feminist movements while envisioning a new world where I can carve out my identity and independence.

My mother, shaped by the second-wave feminism of the 70s (GALE, 2023), reaped the benefits of increased career opportunities and more equitable pay. Despite working full-time, she shouldered the dual responsibilities of domestic and work duties as both a mother and employee. Her aspirations for a better life for her children and her commitment to self-improvement were evident. Witnessing her navigate these challenges independently, I recognize the power of being raised by a working mother and understanding the importance and sacrifices of pursuing a career while being a mother. In hindsight, I appreciate that my mother, through her evolving roles and identities, defined women's empowerment for me, extending beyond traditional roles of motherhood and homemaking.

As my mother raised herself and her twin daughters into strong and capable women, the profound impact of being raised as a "WON" became apparent - transcending a mere saying into an embodied mindset that my older brother also got to witness. The significance of needing a rallying cry as a divorced mother of three is only now resonating with me as I position myself as an entrepreneur and a mother within the broader context of women's empowerment. Through the lens of my narrative, I recognize that being raised as a "WON" shaped my family's attitudes and has become an essential aspect of the cultural analysis of my life.

My journey of self-awareness finds its roots in early memories of entrepreneurship, deeply influenced by my mother's resilience and determination. Growing up in an environment that embraced unintentional feminism, I observed firsthand the challenges and triumphs inherent

in navigating life's complexities as a resourceful single working mother. Challenging societal expectations, my mother's unwavering pursuit of a better life instilled a profound appreciation for self-reliance. Her unnamed entrepreneurial spirit left an enduring impact, fostering within me a strong sense of independence and responsibility - two core values of mine.

Upon reflection, my mother's impact has been transformative, significantly contributing to the evolution of my belief in creating a world where women's empowerment flourishes through self-reliance. It has become clear that my mother's determination, strength, and commitment to independence were transformative forces that shaped my worldview and my career path. Her example highlighted the importance of empowerment through steering one's course.

I hope that one day, my daughter can see me as her resilient and self-reliant mother, much like how I perceive my mother. It is clear to me now that I have become an empowered woman who actively supports and empowers others. I aspire to leave a lasting legacy by giving back to women. I hope this commitment continues with my daughter and extends to future generations, including grandchildren. My goal is to make her as proud of me as I am of my mom, especially when I observe my older brother and his two daughters and my twin sister and her two sons, knowing that the valuable lessons from our mother are also embedded in their lives - her legacy.

### *Lesson three: Transformative educational and cultural experiences*

As I journal and reflect, I revisit pivotal experiences that significantly influenced my perspectives, like my mother's deliberate choice to provide me and my family with intentional educational environments. During my middle and high school years, my siblings and I applied to and attended magnet schools designed to attract students from diverse districts by offering specialized programming. In Tulsa, we attended magnet middle and high schools that offered the

International Baccalaureate (I.B.) program. The I.B. program was our high school's competitive edge. In 2009 and 2016, our high school received the Blue Ribbon distinction and ranked as a top high school in the U.S., prioritizing drawing students from diverse racial backgrounds.

Though I did not know much about what a magnet school was, I did know, according to the seal in the front hallway, that our high school was established as a magnet school to promote excellence and acceptance of diversity. I was reflecting on the deliberate choice to enroll us in an educational setting that prioritized diversity; this transformative educational and cultural experience significantly shaped my understanding of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) initiatives. My teenage experiences at magnet schools played a crucial role in heightening my awareness of the intricacies and complexities of race and educational environments that purposefully teach beyond the textbook. Thus, my experiences in magnet schools brought forth new insights and perspectives that contributed to the evolution of my worldview. I was immersed in an environment where students from diverse racial backgrounds coexisted and collaborated - and that was the overarching goal.

As I reflect on my educational experiences, I have come to appreciate the importance of acknowledging my own racial identity as a white individual through the context of the diversity my magnet school experiences provided me in my adolescent years. These experiences hugely influenced my intentional pursuit of diverse environments for myself and my daughter, where diverse viewpoints are actively recruited, cultivated, and celebrated.

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*“Who are, who are, who are we? We are, we are ... BOOKER T!” At the heart of my educational journey, and through my observations of the educational landscapes that have raised me, I think back to my family’s decision to apply to magnet schools. I remember my brother, twin*

*sister, and I advocated changing from our zoned neighborhood schools to magnet schools. I remember this feeling like a joint decision, where we felt empowered to choose the educational environment we wanted to be part of. Though I cannot remember precisely why, I remember this decision felt bold at the time - being met with mixed reactions from friends and neighbors. I think this was probably because many preferred the comfort of familiarity in staying in south Tulsa versus venturing north. I also remember prioritizing the magnet school experience because I knew it would open more doors academically, providing opportunities I might not have encountered had I stayed the course with our zoned neighborhood schools.*

*Fueled by a desire for academic excellence and knowing that just getting into each magnet school was competitive my siblings and I forged ahead on a 1.5-hour bus ride each way from our cul-de-sac, which happened to be the furthest bus stop in the Tulsa Public Schools district to one of the most northern points of the district. However, these academic strides came at a cost, as navigating the social landscape of north Tulsa and campus proved tricky and divided along racial lines (literally between north and south Tulsa).*

*Attending magnet schools has made me more aware of racial divides. This reality was heightened early on as my awareness of deep-seated racial disparities grew within not only the school community but also the Tulsa community. While academically, I succeeded by taking AP classes; I was simultaneously being educated in the hallways and cafeterias as I became more aware of the racial divides of friends. This only became exaggerated on the weekends when friends from school lived on the other side of town, and getting together took work. I quickly became aware of the contrast in living conditions from south to north and the racial makeup of neighborhoods in those areas of towns, which highlighted early on the systemic issues deeply embedded in the city.*

*These experiences made me feel like I was in a social experience to see if secondary schools could create environments of inclusion. I remember being disheartened by witnessing segregation not only in the physical spaces of the school but also in the broader context of the city. As I navigated this environment during my middle and high school years, these observations instilled a profound value for educational settings prioritizing diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. It became clear that high school would be a truly enriching educational experience beyond academic excellence and the classroom. I began to see learning from the perspective of “the world as your classroom” - necessitating a diverse and inclusive environment. I realize now that because of this broader context of what learning can look like and, more importantly, where it can occur, I have always sought environments that prioritize differences - perhaps even foster entrepreneurial thinking.*

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**Lesson three - reflection/analysis:** I recognize that my experience in magnet schools is a testament to the transformative influence of school choice, providing environments that shape perspectives and foster understanding across racial lines. This realization remains a guiding force in my commitment to actively seek and contribute to diverse spaces that embrace the richness of diverse experiences.

Looking back, the challenges and insights from my years at magnet schools have profoundly shaped my perspective on the role of education. My experiences ignited a passion for promoting diversity, challenging systemic inequalities, and fostering an inclusive mindset. Reflecting on my formative years at magnet schools, I now understand the 'why' behind my commitment to contribute to educational environments prioritizing diversity, equity, and

inclusion. I discovered that creating and advocating for environments that celebrate diverse lived experiences is a core value of mine.

As I further reflect on my time in education, especially at a public university, I am beginning to see how politics played a role in my core value of living and working in diverse communities/environments that foster inclusivity. It turns out that misalignment with this value is non-negotiable for me, especially because learning and discourse are paramount to the mission of where I choose to work. This is why recent legislation, such as Texas State Bill 17 (SB17), which “prohibits public institutions of higher education from establishing or maintaining DEI offices, officers, employees, or contractors that perform the duties of a DEI office, including related training” is in opposition of my core values (Texas Senate, 2023).

Ultimately, one of my primary goals is to ensure every student has the opportunity to thrive, regardless of their background or zip code or in which school district they live. Even today, middle and high school memories linger, especially in moments of division. I often remember our high school mascot, a hornet, and the buzzing spirit of resilience and unity associated with my high school experience. Despite the challenges and racial inequality spotlighted during high school, I reminisce about the community my classmates and I tried to build within the hallways, echoing the rallying cry of "Back that sting up!"

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*Looking back, I realize that our magnet school journey was not just about academic excellence but about fostering a sense of belonging and support. The hornet's sting, though perhaps cheesy, symbolized my first collective effort of resilience against the ‘stinging’ effects of systemic oppression and racial divides in my hometown. Early discussions about equity, inclusion, and social justice contrasted with the priorities of my neighborhood friends' concerns,*

*usually focused on football and cheerleaders. For example, living through the OJ Simpson trial in 1995 while at a magnet school, I felt the genuine tensions of a high-profile case with obvious racial bias and the social, political, and legal stakes at play with the verdict.*

*The biggest takeaways from my middle and high school education were not confined to classrooms but were taught through daily interactions with diverse classmates. "Back that sting up" echoed as a call to 'backup' commitment with action, to move from ally to accomplice - proactively dismantling barriers hindering our school community's growth. We were not just students attending classes but a community dedicated to creating positive change. I laugh because, as a mantra, "Back that sting up!" continues to guide me - urging me to back up my words with deeds, challenge the status quo, and represent resilience and determination to create an inclusive and supportive environment. It fuels my passion for justice, equity, and advocating for all, primarily through entrepreneurship.*

*Carrying the lessons from middle and high school, I understand how these experiences influence my decisions today—especially in seeking out "school of choice" (or a more updated way to say magnet school) options for my daughter, prioritizing Spanish language and cultural immersion through her enrollment at a dual language school. Thus, my biggest takeaway from middle and high school is a commitment to continue "backing that sting up" in my life, advocating for a society where the collective strength of communities overcomes the challenges of systemic oppression.*

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By navigating my privileged identities, I scrutinized societal and political structures that have granted me advantages, particularly in the context of race. My commitment to having a broader perspective on social justice has been evident throughout my journey as a Ph.D. student.

For me, I recognize that my privilege as a white (cisgender) woman comes with a responsibility to actively contribute to dismantling the structures that perpetuate inequality and inequity. It has been evolving and ongoing through self-reflection and a willingness to engage in uncomfortable conversations, interactions, and analysis (i.e., this research study). However, this self-reflection is where I take my advice to be comfortable being uncomfortable, especially as I recognize and address my own biases and blind spots. I do not always get it right. Being uncomfortable has become an ongoing process of unlearning and relearning, ensuring my actions align with the principles of equity and justice I must have as a leader.

Embarking on this journey of self-awareness has broadened my perspective, fostering a leadership approach that celebrates diversity rather than just acknowledging it. In the communities of care I build, I prioritize embracing differences in backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, recognizing them as valuable assets that contribute to the community's richness, where each individual brings a unique perspective from their own lived experience, reinforcing a culture of respect and appreciation.

My narrative centers on the flourishing of communities through a strong sense of belonging, emphasizing the transformative power of introspection and the vulnerable shift from self-awareness to self-acceptance. This shift underscores the importance of fostering inclusive environments where authenticity is encouraged, and individuals actively contribute to the community. Another leadership motto, "You do you; I got you," captures the need for leaders to share their growth and experiences of resilience, collaboration, and collective wisdom within these supportive communities.

#### *Lesson four: Becoming an intersectional feminist*

My cultural identity as a white woman, shaped by my education in magnet schools, significantly influences my approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion practices, especially within the educational landscape. My mindset has transitioned from an individual focus to a broader societal understanding - aligning with my commitment to leveraging my privilege to amplify marginalized voices and communities.

As I examine the assumptions tied to my core identity as a white woman, I make a conscious effort to question and confront any preconceived ideas that may arise. One specific assumption I am committed to challenging is the concept of "white feminism." This term refers to a situation where an individual from a majority or privileged group (such as white, straight, cisgender, or abled individuals) expresses support or solidarity with a marginalized group (identifying themselves as an ally) in an unhelpful way, diverts attention from the marginalized group, or actively harms them (Joseph-Saunders, 2021).

The criticism directed at the women's entrepreneurial leadership institute I led was that our programs primarily focused on issues affecting white women, neglecting the intersectionality of challenges encompassing race, class, and other identities. White feminism is perceived as being limited and exclusionary, falling short in addressing the distinct obstacles faced by women of color and other marginalized communities. In my role as the director of an institute focused on women, the institute was accused of pushing a white feminist agenda, being performative in women's empowerment, without addressing the needs of all. I am profoundly aware that the initiatives and programs we create cannot just benefit specific segments of gender, and instead, we must recognize and address the complexity of identity to ensure that everyone feels supported - and is represented. To understand the intent of this accusation, I immersed myself in a coaching

prompt from a women's leadership program in which I participated. The prompt urged me to reflect on an unresolved leadership challenge or opportunity in my professional life. I seized this opportunity to journal my thoughts on white feminism, performative feminism, and a new term, "femwashing," or the use of feminist values in advertising campaigns for purely economic purposes (Ginesi, 2020). The following represents my response to the leadership challenge prompt.

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*Feminism cannot be privileged or performative. Feminism has to become intersectional and focused on systems of oppression that impact people differently based on their race, class, ability, sexuality, and other characteristics and identities. If your feminism does not make everyone feel included and safe, it is NOT feminism.*

*As I understand the term "white feminism" and the accusation, I am experiencing a whirlwind of emotions and introspection, a journey through the complexities of feminism that I never anticipated. Am I guilty of white feminism? Is what I am doing at the Institute performative? Are the intentions of the donor "femwashing"? What stings the most is the accusation that something I lead, my commitment to feminism, is considered insincere.*

*Is "empowering women to lead" actually exploiting the movement for revenue? Or, even worse, personal gain? As I write about this accusation, I understand it is not a personal attack. However, it is personal because the external has become internal. I, as a white woman, could be viewed as only engaging in feminism to boost my image or to be seen as an ally without genuinely understanding the intersectional struggles that many women face. As I learn (and incorporate) intersectional feminism more into my dissertation, I have begun to acknowledge my narrow definition of feminism, which focuses only on gender and not equity for all.*

*So, where do I go from here? I keep researching, I keep learning, I keep trying to do better ... to be better. The introspection here, writing right now, reinforces the necessity but exhausting nature of continual learning and self-reflection within the feminist movement. I need to define what being a feminist means to me. When I champion and cheerlead a slogan, such as “empowering women to lead,” I need to pause and reflect... What does that truly mean? How can I protect my identity from others who may not have aligned intent with moving such a mission forward - for all?*

*This reminds me, especially throughout this dissertation journey, that while my intentions may be pure, the impact of my words and actions can be perceived differently. I am responsible for actively engaging with the critiques, learning from them, and striving for a more inclusive and empathetic feminism. I have a long way to go – but it could be longer. My next steps, my commitment, is to embrace the discomfort, learn from my missteps, and work towards a feminism that is genuinely intersectional and empowering for all (not just white women).*

**Lesson four - reflection/analysis:** Engaging with an intersectional feminist framework has enabled me to actively unlearn internalized misogyny and bigotry while addressing intersecting systems of oppression. I understand that "white feminism" reinforces existing power structures, perpetuating exclusionary practices and biases faced by marginalized groups (Bones & Mathew, 2020). Therefore, a significant goal in my leadership journey is evolving as an intersectional feminist scholar, striving for a more inclusive understanding that addresses the diverse needs and experiences of all individuals, not just white women.

As an intersectional feminist scholar, I provide a gender lens to research and address the interconnected nature of social categories, centering the voices and experiences of all - while simultaneously acknowledging different forms of oppression. My responsibility is to share these

experiences to create inclusive and equitable learning objectives, promote social justice, and recognize the unique challenges that intersecting marginalized identities pose for women, particularly those aspiring to be entrepreneurial leaders.

Prioritizing the experiences of those facing intersectional marginalization is crucial in my journey from ally to accomplice. Recognizing the importance of actively challenging and dismantling oppressive systems, I learned the significance of using my privilege to disrupt and change the status quo. While working towards becoming a better accomplice, my Ph.D. journey has allowed me to leverage my influence to better understand my experiences with inequality and contribute to meaningful and impactful changes guided by my lived experiences. Because I teach, I am responsible for recognizing inequalities and inequities beyond my perspective. The central focus of this study must evolve into a continuous commitment to not only address and challenge my primary experiences as a white woman but also to recognize the unique and sometimes exclusionary nature of this identity in contrast to those of marginalized groups. Importantly, it is essential to acknowledge and reflect on the positive opportunities and strengths that emerge from marginalized identities. These identities often cultivate resilience, foster a rich sense of community, and unlock access to diverse perspectives and innovative problem-solving strategies. By embracing this broader view, we can work towards a more inclusive understanding that values the contributions and potential of all identities.

Recognizing and embracing the various facets of my identity has led me to find communities where I belong. It has also forced me to acknowledge my privilege. This acknowledgment has profoundly influenced how I approach challenges, perceive success, and empathize with those with diverse lived experiences. Self-awareness transcends a focus on a few

specific identities; it involves understanding the intersection of all aspects of my identities and how they interact with others.

My awareness of privilege profoundly influences how I approach challenges, perceive success, extend empathy, and be inspired by those with diverse lived experiences. Scrutinizing societal structures that grant advantages, especially in the context of race and privilege, has led me to address systemic inequalities, leading to a key finding that gender and leadership are not just about gender identity. Instead, I have shifted my perspective from a narrow, individualistic focus to a holistic understanding tied to positive impacts within a societal context. This aligns with my commitment to using privilege to advocate for equity and amplify marginalized voices, evolving from an ally to an accomplice. Therefore, answering "Who am I?" goes beyond gender identity, requiring a broader understanding of all my identities and their interactions with others.

Thus, a key takeaway from this study is the need to expand my narrative beyond my gender identity and comprehend how all facets of my identity contribute holistically to shaping my story. This realization has laid the groundwork for my journey toward becoming an empathetic and inclusive entrepreneurial leader. In response to the Institute I was associated with being accused of promoting "white feminism," I have deliberately heightened my self-awareness and intentionality to invest my work through this study to explore further "Who I am."

Therefore, this entrepreneurial leadership journey allows me to understand myself more deeply and how I can address gender equality issues. As I consider my intersecting factors like race and class alongside my unique identities to ensure a more comprehensive and inclusive approach, I continue to ask myself, "Who am I?".

*Lesson five: Self-exploration and self-awareness*

Understanding my positionality and influence on this study has been complex. It comprises my personal and social positions, including my background, beliefs, values, and experiences. Positionality is crucial because it can be a centering force for the reader to understand better *who* the researcher is (i.e., who am I?) and *what* is being researched (i.e., me). This ultimate self-reflective exercise critically embeds me within the research process, which is the uniqueness of doing an autoethnographic study.

Being able to answer “Who am I?” largely influences an autoethnographic study. Furthermore, upon reflection, I have come to understand I am a white, cisgender, heterosexual, non-disabled woman who is a middle-class, non-believer, democrat, U.S. citizen pursuing an advanced degree. I acknowledge the privilege and experiences these identities provide me – and how these identities influence my interactions, reactions, and perceptions of the *how* and *why* of my journey as an entrepreneurial leader.

As I have reflected on “Who am I?” I also have to be mindful to reflect on how others perceive me. I write about my process for attempting to answer this life-long question in the following journal entries, aided by numerous self-assessments:

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*Who am I? If I can figure that out, I will have done life right - as the answer to this question should be evergreen and ever-evolving. In these now routine moments of self-reflection, through journaling, I go beyond the surface of my identity, going deeper into the essence of my 'being' as a white, cisgender, heterosexual, non-disabled woman. Thus, realizing that I am a human 'being' rather than a human 'doing' has been a profound journey of self-discovery.*

*Growing up, societal expectations often nudged me towards defining myself by my actions - focusing on achievements. Success was measured by external validation. Success was also determined by carving out my own identity, separate and unique from my identical twin. However, as I navigated through the complexities of my life, I gradually uncovered the importance of embracing the core of my existence beyond just accomplishments. Beyond just my values of achievement and top strength of achievement.*

*As a white woman, I recognize the privilege of this identity significantly. It is an acknowledgment that prompts me to engage in meaningful conversations about equity and justice, to challenge systemic inequalities, and to amplify the voices of those whose stories have been marginalized. Understanding my place in the world means recognizing the responsibility that comes with privilege – a vital aspect of my identity. And so much of this journey is how I engage with myself.*

*Being cisgender and heterosexual, I have come to understand the significance of empathy and allyship. It involves actively supporting and advocating for the LGBTQ+ community, fostering an environment of acceptance and understanding. In doing so, I create a world where everyone can be authentic. Love wins, and I must seek more ways to support this.*

*Navigating life as a non-disabled woman, I have learned the value of empathy and the need for an inclusive society. My journey has led me to recognize that true fulfillment comes not just from personal success but from creating a world where everyone can thrive/ Bonus points for creating ways we can all flourish.*

*Yet, I pause. I understand that 'being' has to transcend societal roles and expectations. As I teach, it is about finding my 'ikigai' – a Japanese concept that encapsulates the intersection of what I love, what I am good at, what the world needs, and what I can be paid for. A delicate*

*balance brings a sense of purpose and fulfillment to my existence. Seeing this as a framework (Figure 1) has clarified how I can be who I am through what I do.*

*Over teaching ikigai for four courses, my ikigai lies in the harmony of embracing my passions, honing my skills, contributing to the greater good, and sustaining a financially stable life. Thus, it involves 'doing' for achievement and 'being' authentically aligned with my values and purpose. As I work through answering the question, “Who am I?” so much of that answer is beginning to emerge through trying to answer my ikigai. I am curating responses that are starting to feel like me at the core:*

*“My Ikigai is the intersection of my passions, mission, and strengths. I am passionate about feminism, women in entrepreneurship, nurturing a growth mindset, gaining new perspectives through travel, and embracing the thrill of trying new things. I find immense joy in pushing my boundaries and getting comfortable with the uncomfortable. My mission is to empower students, particularly women, on their unique journeys towards self-discovery and fulfillment.”*

*“I excel at curating transformative experiences that inspire individuals to unlock their full potential. My enthusiasm is contagious, and I offer unwavering encouragement to those I serve. I have a remarkable ability to translate ideas into action and create a lasting impact. My top strengths—significance, connectedness, and achievement—drive me to make a meaningful difference in the lives of others”.*

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“Who I am” as a leader is consistent with who I am - just me. I have always wanted to be a leader. I was born to lead. Moreover, as I journal, I realize it has always been this way.

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*I knew I wanted to be an administrator since I was in first grade. I did not have any context back then to define what that meant. I was aware at the age of seven that my interests were helping to organize business operations to run smoothly. Reflecting on my childhood, I remember three distinct ways I created administrator roles. My first memories of play involve my twin sister and me "playing school." She was the teacher, and I was the principal. She was happiest teaching in front of a stuffed animal class, and I excelled behind the scenes, making the morning announcements over our household intercom system and preparing the lessons for the day. I also distinctly remember answering, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" with wanting to be a principal. Elementary school highlights included shadowing Ms. White when I was selected to be Principal for the Day and elected Student Council President in fifth grade. I even remember my campaign slogan, "Les is the Best," and my twin sister serving as my campaign manager.*

*Reflecting on my years in elementary school, some of the most formative, I remember the roles and responsibilities versus relationships and free time. I found fulfillment in the library, working during recess, creating agendas for the next Student Council meeting, and gummy worm fundraisers to get more exotic fish in the school's fish tank. What I now recall is that I did not care about the fish. I was focusing on rallying my classmates behind a common cause, and fish just happened to be the unifying force.*

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This journal entry serves as an insight into early self-awareness. As I recall these moments, I realize the memories that stand out are often when I operated from a position of strength, aligning with my core values. These instances usually involved taking on leadership roles and feeling a sense of purpose and fulfillment, notably starting during my time as Student

Council President in fifth grade. This experience has continued to influence my life, threading through subsequent leadership positions I have held.

In my journey of self-exploration, I felt compelled to revisit the *StrengthsFinder* assessment (Appendix E) to better understand my strengths and values. By reviewing the assessment results, the exercise was not just about a list of strengths but a deeper insight into how these qualities intertwine with my core values, shaping my identity. When I examined how my reported strengths intersect with my core values, I had several moments of clarity, revealing the more profound significance behind my actions and aspirations. I realized that my strengths are not merely tools defining me but reflections of the values that anchor my identity, particularly during challenging times.

Through journaling, I recognized that integrating strengths and values goes beyond answering "Who am I?" It is about embracing the complexities of my identities with intentionality and purpose, acknowledging that my strengths intentionally mirror the values that define me. This realization shapes the narrative of this study and my life in profound and meaningful ways. The following journal entry illuminates some moments of realization on how my strengths and values help me be more self-aware.

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*I lead with my strengths and find vulnerability by owning my blind spots. By investing in a thorough analysis of my strengths, I am more transparent about how they reflect my values. My strengths shape my actions and mold the foundation of what I hold dear—my core values.*

*As an **Achiever**, the relentless pursuit of excellence aligns seamlessly with one of my fundamental values—ambition. The drive to set high standards and consistently work towards achieving something, especially a mission aligned with my work, reflects my deep-seated belief*

*in the power of individual effort and the transformative nature of hard work. This alignment propels me forward, a perpetual journey towards self-improvement guided by the conviction that success is not just a destination but a continuous process. This is also why being an Achiever is exhausting for me. For example, throughout this journey as an entrepreneurial leader, I have always brought intensity and effort to achieving. I do not always understand it, but I find fulfillment and value in simply achieving. This has sometimes equaled me being called aggressive when I think people mean to say ambitious - but that is gendered. My need to achieve has propelled me to set high standards and consistently work towards them - for the sake of me and those around me. I know I operate from being "tasks over people," but is that good? Maybe this is why empathy is so low for me. However, I have also experienced burnout when I pushed myself too hard without considering the need for balance. I am there now. Balance does not exist. I think I know why... my other strength/value of significance.*

*My value and strength of **Significance** require me to contribute to meaningful causes, intertwining with my core belief in the importance of making a positive impact. This harmony between my strengths and values fuels a sense of purpose, guiding my choices toward jobs that resonate with a higher calling. The satisfaction derived from meaningful contributions reinforces my commitment to values that transcend personal success, emphasizing the interconnectedness of individual actions with broader societal well-being - hence my obsession with embedding impact in everything I do. Moreover, it also encourages students to focus on solving problems through a social impact lens. Being significant / doing significant work has exhausted me. I have discovered that seeking significance in my work has driven me to take on ambitious projects that align with my values and make a positive impact. But, for the sake of my relationships - and*

sanity. “Who am I?” is very much reflective of the projects I am involved with. So, answering this question opens up the portfolio of things to which I am committed.

Through my strength of **Focus**, I set specific goals with timelines, resonating deeply with another core value, discipline. My ability to channel my energy into well-defined objectives reflects a commitment to structured growth and organization. This harmony ensures that my actions align with a broader framework (like ikigai!), emphasizing the importance of order and purpose in pursuing personal and professional goals - providing a framework that defines not just what I do but who I am. My value of discipline is a silent force that not only sets the rules in which I live my life but also a conscious choice to embrace a systematic approach. From how I organize my daily tasks to how I approach challenges, discipline is the compass that steers me - consistently guiding me through moments of chaos. It is why I think I have been described as being “tasks over people.” However, as much as I did not understand focus or discipline as a strength or a value, I can recognize that consistency and dedication are the foundation of my personal and professional success. They are the two traits that allow me to do so much - sifting through distractions to get to what truly matters. With focus as my ally, I navigate the complexities of a fast-paced world, ensuring that every step I take is purposeful. It is not just about setting goals but about channeling my efforts with the precision understanding that excellence often lies in the details. Maybe this is my superpower? Maybe “Who am I?” is a distraction sifter - getting to a clear vision of how I perceive the world and how the world perceives me.

Being a perpetual **Learner** supports my fundamental belief in the transformative power of knowledge and is the primary reason I work in higher education. I have to be immersed in learning environments. My passion for learning fuels personal growth and aligns with my core

*value of curiosity. I also think curiosity is essential for entrepreneurs. Thus, I have seen how my exhaustive pursuit of knowledge (hello, PhD!) is not just a means to an end but a lifelong journey driven by an insatiable curiosity about the world. I experience the world as my classroom because challenges become opportunities to stretch my intellectual boundaries. Each encounter, whether with a book, a mentor, or the world around me, is a chance to glean insights that contribute to the evolving narrative of my identity.*

*As part of my identity, being a learner has become a commitment to embracing the unknown, acknowledging that every experience, success, or setback carries lessons waiting to be unraveled. It is a lesson in resilience and a source of empowerment – a reminder that the quest for understanding is not a burden but a privilege. As a learner, I navigate the complexities of existence with a sense of wonder, always eager to uncover the next layer of wisdom that enriches the narrative of who I am and who I aspire to become (i.e., this entrepreneurial leadership journey).*

*Finally, as I reflect on my strengths as ways to understand “Who am I?” I think about being an **Activator**, or the strength that empowers decisive action, resonating with my value of courage. By confidently activating, I can take bold steps, even facing challenges, reflecting a commitment to facing adversity with resilience and determination. This alignment underscores the belief that meaningful progress often requires stepping out of one's comfort zone and embracing the unknown. An ‘ah ha’ this is where I thrive in being comfortable being uncomfortable. This is where this leadership mantra comes from! As an activator for good, I find purpose in taking decisive and meaningful action to drive positive change. It is a commitment to leverage my skills, resources, and influence to contribute to the well-being of others and the broader community. This identity is rooted in a belief that individual actions, no matter how*

*small, can ripple outward, creating waves of positive impact. Thus, the essence of being an activator for good lies in a proactive approach to making a difference. It means not waiting for change but actively seeking opportunities to contribute to the greater good. Whether championing a social cause, initiating community projects, or supporting charitable endeavors, I see myself as an agent of positive transformation.*

*By seamlessly integrating these strengths into my core values, I have found that self-awareness becomes the compass guiding me through the complexities of decision-making and personal growth – which is why this narrative is a living document shaped by the ongoing journey of self-discovery. In a way, my strengths and core values are the glue that makes me, me – and where I go when I try to understand why I operate and function in specific ways. They protect “Who am I?”*

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I must acknowledge that my strengths and weaknesses continually evolve in autoethnography, primarily influenced by my cultural surroundings. My exploration of personal growth revolves around understanding how interactions in higher education contribute to shaping these traits. Furthermore, I contemplate my decision to pursue a Ph.D. and how this choice distinctly mirrors my values and demonstrates my strengths in action.

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*I had an ‘ah ha’ moment in class when I filled out the education segment on my identity wheel. Because I can put down an advanced degree (my master’s) and know that soon (!) that will transition to a Ph.D., I realize that this doctoral journey is a beautiful combination of my top three strengths: 1) achievement, 2) significance, and 3) learner, aligned with the cultural environment in which I excel in higher education. (Mind blown!).*

*My 'ah ha' is that I am committed to education and personal growth through this pursuit of an advanced degree. What I study and why I study reflect my desire (my significance) to contribute meaningfully to my field. The knowledge I gain is a tool, one that I hope to use to create positive impacts within entrepreneurship education.*

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So much of who I am is shaped by my primary identities of race and gender. Navigating academia as a white woman, I recognize the profound impact of understanding these identities for personal and collective growth, particularly in entrepreneurial leadership. Understanding how this identity impacts my world is vital for my personal and collective growth as an entrepreneurial leader. I write through some of my reflections in the following journal entry.

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*I have privilege. As I made my class fill out identity wheels today, and I filled my wheel out for the fourth time, I can recognize now that the privilege that comes from my identity as a white woman is undeniable. Being white affords me opportunities and societal acceptance that I am now able to recognize and acknowledge. Being white plays a significant role in shaping my path to success and how I can show up and authentically pursue my entrepreneurial endeavors. Being a woman creates challenges and barriers, but being white opens opportunities for me.*

*As I filled out my identity wheel, I reflected that being a white woman spares me from some of the systemic discrimination I heard students talk about today. The stories of others - other identities - remind me of a new identity I must embrace to evolve into an ally (or accomplice) to others with identities I do not have.*

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**Lesson five - reflection / analysis:** I recognize layers of privilege and experience within my identities, understanding their influence on my interactions, reactions, and perceptions throughout my entrepreneurial leadership journey. These identities shape my approach to challenges, frame my perspective on success, and guide the empathy I extend to those with different lived experiences. This acknowledgment goes beyond a mere exercise in self-indulgence or a checkbox on this "MEsearch"; it is a crucial step toward fostering a deeper understanding of myself and the world around me.

Through this reflective process, I have had to take pauses to be conscious of the spaces I occupy, the voices I amplify, and the responsibility I bear as I navigate higher education. By embracing facets of my identity and realities that shape my answer to "Who am I," I understand now that my goal is to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable world, recognizing the interconnected nature of my journey with those around me. As a researcher, this influence necessitates the intentional and authentic exploration of intersections of identities I do and those I may not possess. This intentional exploration expands my engagement with equity on various fronts. It also has become an exercise in harnessing a more empathetic approach to leadership. By addressing the challenge of understanding different identities, I am thankful for my deep dive into intersectional feminism. It has held me accountable and challenged my global perspective to become a more empathetic researcher.

*Lesson six: Language of empowerment*

As I have learned, empowerment is a multifaceted journey encompassing breaking barriers, challenging societal norms, and deriving strength from shared narratives. While at the women's entrepreneurial leadership institute and exploring my cultural identity in higher education, I discovered my strong commitment to empowering women, reinforced in one of my

favorite mantras, "Empowered women empower women." This mantra highlights the strength of collaboration. As I focus on creating communities of care to foster flourishing and uplift others, I firmly believe confidence grows through active contribution.

My contributions are marked by my dedication to nurturing thriving communities, a lasting legacy of empowerment spanning generations. This commitment is especially significant because my daughter accompanied me to many Institute events over four years, experiencing a positive and flourishing environment firsthand. I witnessed how intentional environments prioritizing flourishing can create a supportive foundation for innovation and collaboration. In such settings, individuals feel empowered to express their ideas, explore their potential, and make meaningful contributions due to a strong sense of belonging to the mission and purpose of the collective community.

When I reflect on my experiences with my Japanese "Thursday Night Ladies," the profound impact of language on empowerment becomes evident through the transformative process of acquiring a new language and finding one's voice (or facing the absence of it).

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*In a community room in my host town of Takasai, Japan, I distinctly remember my Thursday nights teaching English to a group of five older Japanese women. So much of what I remember from my time in Japan is now defined through my interactions and memories of my "Thursday Night Ladies," as I affectionately named them. As an English teacher abroad, I understood that my purpose extended beyond the confines of textbooks and grammar rules; I was also there to be a cultural ambassador from the U.S. As much as the English language was the impetus for going to Japan, my time in Japan quickly evolved into lesson plans on fostering a global mindset, primarily through self-expression and empowerment.*

*I remember our weekly gatherings being more than just language lessons; they were a safe place - where boundaries blurred, cultures merged, and the power of words transcended linguistic barriers (mainly because I did not speak Japanese). My mission was clear: to provide these women with a voice and an opinion in a foreign language, empowering them to navigate both confidently. I remember that two of them specifically were learning English because they wanted to travel together, without their husbands, and English was the “language of travel.”*

*Recognizing the transformative potential of our sessions, I decided to alter my lesson plans to more unconventional teaching methods. We translated song lyrics, using music as a medium to understand the nuances of the English language and the emotions it conveyed. From the poetic verses of Simon & Garfunkel (especially teaching them Mrs. Robinson) to the empowering anthems of Beyoncé, we explored language through the rhythm of lyrics, allowing the Thursday Night Ladies to connect with English on a deeper, more personal level.*

*As our lessons progressed, our discussions expanded beyond language acquisition to encompass broader topics such as politics and societal issues. We dissected news articles, debated global affairs, and explored the power of shaping opinions through articulate expression. As we talked through problems, and they confidently tried voicing their views in simple English, I distinctly remember thinking that language was not just a tool for communication - but a catalyst for empowerment. I was already empowered because English was my native language.*

*Reflecting on my time in Japan almost fifteen years ago, I see now that the cultural exchange went both ways, as my Western perspective encountered the nuances of Japanese femininity and the challenges these women faced in a society deeply rooted in tradition.*

*Witnessing the subtle ways language became a gateway to empowerment for each woman was*

*enlightening. Through mastering English, they gained access to a wealth of knowledge and found a voice transcending cultural and gender boundaries. This made me immensely proud. I was teaching a tool for empowerment, and learning English from a Western woman provided a unique lens through which they could challenge societal norms and redefine their roles in a changing world.*

*In the end, as I reflect, our Thursday nights together transformed into a collective celebration of resilience, empowerment, and the shared belief that language, in its complex forms, can influence conversations in ways that uplift voices, opinions, and confidence. The giggles and voices of the Thursday Night Ladies linger, leaving now an undeniable mark on my global perspective of women's economic empowerment.*

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**Lesson six - reflection/analysis:** As I reminisce about being an English Language Teacher in Japan, the lessons extend well beyond grammar rules. Instead, my lessons capture a collective affirmation that every woman's voice deserves recognition, regardless of cultural or linguistic disparities. The “Thursday Night Ladies” refined their language skills with me and embraced the broader notion that empowerment, particularly the ability to express oneself, is a universal pursuit capable of transcending borders and cultures. In exploring these global lessons of empowerment through the lens of language, I discovered, through their experiences, the courage needed to navigate a world that often marginalizes and silences certain voices, specifically women.

My resilience and passion create my purpose: to contribute meaningfully to a world where everyone can shape their narrative, thriving independently and flourishing through the collective power of empowering others. A critical theme from analyzing my narrative is the

distinction I begin to make between thriving and flourishing. To me, thriving involves external success, while flourishing encompasses internal fulfillment and the pursuit of meaning, achieved through self-reflection, courage, and leveraging personal strengths.

Growing up in a household that championed women's autonomy, I internalized the importance of creating supportive spaces for women. This realization has become foundational in guiding me toward a vision where women are seen as equal contributors and have control over their destinies. This early awareness shapes my perspective and drives me to actively contribute to constructing inclusive and flourishing environments that empower individuals to embrace how they can uniquely contribute to their surroundings. My research underscores the importance of cultivating collaboration among women because supportive networks contribute to flourishing communities. Echoing Maya Angelou's wisdom: "Each time a woman stands up for herself, she stands up for all women." In these communities, giving back fosters a cycle of empowerment, creating vibrant ecosystems of shared success.

My work at the women's entrepreneurial leadership institute, empowering women to lead, is how I contribute to true empowerment that involves breaking societal norms to create a life based on aspirations and capabilities. As I reflect on my journey through my global experiences, it becomes evident that studying, working, volunteering, and traveling abroad have cultivated in me a global mindset. These international experiences enhance my entrepreneurial mindset - creating a powerful intersection that enables me to navigate the complexities of an interconnected world better. Studying abroad during college was a transformative force for shaping "*Who I am.*" Being exposed to diverse cultures, perspectives, and ways of thinking, especially in my early twenties, encouraged me to experience the world as my classroom. By cultivating a global mindset, I was enlightened by the people I met and the places I traveled. I am

incredibly grateful for the countless times I found myself in different traditions, languages, and customs. I know now that these environments that were not my own and not in my comfort zone were empowering lessons in shaping my worldview. As I broadened my horizons, I challenged my preconceived notions. I expanded the boundaries of my understanding of myself and how I interacted and co-existed with others.

In the context of building an entrepreneurial mindset, I see now that the lessons I learned from studying, working, volunteering, and/or traveling to 35+ countries have been invaluable for how I understand my unique shared values, beliefs, and practices through my cultural identity as a white woman from the U.S. Just as entrepreneurship thrives on innovation, adaptability, and the ability to identify opportunities amid challenges, exposing myself (intentionally and deliberately) to other cultures forced me to survive and thrive by immersing myself in foreign environments. I fostered a sense of adaptability and resilience—essential traits for any entrepreneur- and especially identified strengths of mine as a leader. By navigating unfamiliar territories (geographical or cultural), I was taught in a global classroom to be resourceful, creative, and open-minded. The beautiful thing is that I still carry lessons I learned about myself from twenty years ago with me today. They are the foundation of “Who I am” and how I perceive myself as an entrepreneurial leader.

How I lead comes from my global lessons, emphasizing the importance of creating communities of care where individuals can explore their strengths, unlock their potential, and pursue the best path to their destination. Knowing oneself and one's strengths is where introspection meets courage. Thus, the true path to our destination is having the courage to confront and embrace who we are. The goal is to be emboldened.

## Summary of Themes

On this reflective journey, I explored my personal and professional life, uncovering more profound insights into the essence of entrepreneurial leadership. This introspection made me realize that my distinct experiences profoundly shaped my understanding of being an entrepreneurial leader. I evolved my definition of an entrepreneurial leader as someone who inspires others to act decisively, faces challenges with resolve, steers through uncertainties with confidence, handles ambiguity with poise, and approaches risks with strategic foresight. This refined perspective on entrepreneurial leadership emerged by focusing on developing myself through alignment with personal aspirations. By critically evaluating my identities, strengths, and weaknesses as a leader, I understood how my experiences, identity, and cultural influences shaped my view of myself as an entrepreneurial leader.

At the core of my analysis and findings is the acknowledgment that the qualities I admire in entrepreneurial leaders—empowerment, resilience in the face of global challenges, and a readiness to embrace risk—are the traits I now use to characterize my evolved leadership identity. This journey of self-discovery revealed key themes, each illuminating how my experiences and values nurtured an entrepreneurial mindset. These themes charted my growth from challenging societal norms to fostering a strong sense of independence and championing women's empowerment. These identified themes (discussed further in Appendix C) have been instrumental in reshaping my outlook on myself as an entrepreneurial leader, influencing not only my self-perception but also how I aim to inspire and impact others. Each theme, reflecting a blend of personal insights and broader societal engagements, has profoundly influenced my approach to leadership, revealing the numerous influences that have propelled my leadership evolution.

Embarking on this adventure, I am committed to contributing meaningfully to the world. I am grateful for the invaluable knowledge, inspiration, and confidence gained from studying entrepreneurial leadership. This study serves as a narrative of my evolution, revealing facets of my identity through self-discovery. By sharing my story, I aim to resonate with fellow educators, urging them to embrace vulnerability, push boundaries, and unlock their entrepreneurial potential. This journey concludes with a self-proclamation: "I am an entrepreneurial leader!"

## **Conclusion**

My exploration of the intersection of leadership and entrepreneurship, employing autoethnography as the research methodology, unfolds as a transformative journey. My autoethnographic data lays the foundation of this study, gathered through deep reflection, revealing recurring themes that explain my entrepreneurial leadership competencies. Embracing a holistic approach, my analysis investigates the cultural setting of higher education, examining the intricate dynamics of leadership and entrepreneurship. Additionally, by emphasizing gender and feminist perspectives, including Bourdieu's (2001) concepts of masculine domination, I could better process my experiences to achieve "meaning-making" by interpreting my behaviors in the cultural setting of higher education. Throughout my journey in crafting the research design, maintaining a sense of reflexivity was crucial, enabling me to critically scrutinize my biases and assumptions, enhancing the narrative's depth. Engaging in self-reflection enables me to critically analyze my role as a researcher, understanding how my biases and subjectivities influence the research process (Jamieson et al., 2023). Through reflexivity, I contribute to the academic dialogue by exploring the integration of my personal, professional, and cultural experiences into my identity as an entrepreneurial leader. This process shapes my worldview and contributions to the broader field.

Balancing dual roles in higher education as an administrator (director) and faculty (lecturer) has granted me a unique perspective on the interplay between tradition and innovation within this cultural landscape. Through this process of self-discovery, I have refined my definition of myself as an entrepreneurial leader, emphasizing empowerment, problem-solving, navigating uncertainty, embracing ambiguity, and taking calculated risks. This clarified definition emerged through the critical themes obtained from my narrative and analysis, highlighting findings and life lessons, shaping my identity as a woman in higher education and now as an entrepreneur.

From the influential power of early role models to today, this journey reflects the profound impact of language, culture, intersectionality, and the guiding principle that "Empowered women empower women." My narrative extends beyond individual experience to contribute to a collective understanding of the intricate interplay between my cultural identities, expressed through gender, ethnicity, social class, and nationality, within the context of higher education. Expressing and owning my values and strengths, including achievement, significance, continual learning, and self-awareness, is critical in personal and professional leadership development. As a leader, I aim to intentionally empower others by sharing insights and urging them to have the courage to navigate their authentic paths. By embracing vulnerability, confronting fears, nurturing potential, and leveraging strengths, I am proud of my meaningful contributions to the world.

A key takeaway from this study is my newfound belief that confidence is derived from making valuable contributions, and the intersection of resilience and passion establishes the foundation for a purposeful and joyful life. In my journey towards greater self-awareness and leading through my authentic self, I discovered that I thrive in adversity, encouraging others to

embrace discomfort as a means of growth. Challenges transform into opportunities for personal development, with adaptation and resilience playing pivotal roles.

Through introspective journaling, I contemplated my leadership style, emphasizing self-reliance, which led to my philosophy: empowering students, particularly women, to discover the best path to their own destinations. This philosophy, underlined by my unwavering belief in the power of self-awareness and self-acceptance, solidifies my commitment to guiding others in their authentic courses. It underscores my understanding that effective leadership involves empowering individuals to navigate their unique journeys, instilling confidence to take action, solve problems, confront uncertainty, embrace ambiguity, and undertake calculated risks.

Recognizing myself as an entrepreneurial leader confirms the goal of this study as I navigated through this leadership journey to understand myself as one. My current aspiration is to inspire others on their journeys of self-discovery to become more entrepreneurial. Through the seven identified themes cultivated from my journaling, I now define myself as someone who "identifies and makes the most of opportunities, overcomes and learns from setbacks, and succeeds in various settings" (Entrepreneurial Mindset | NFTE, 2020). The closing proclamation, "I am an entrepreneurial leader," underscores that the goal for this study has been reached through my commitment to meaningful contributions to the world by striving to flourish through self-reflection, self-awareness, and self-acceptance.

## CHAPTER FIVE

In navigating my leadership journey, I have come to see the journey as a part of a larger narrative that is still unfolding. In my analysis, I connected my experiences to reflect my evolving perspective, aiming not for definitive answers but for understanding and coherence. Throughout this process, I consciously avoided forcing a conclusion or manipulating my experiences to craft a perfect narrative. Instead, I leaned into the complexity of my journey, finding richness in the ambiguity and openness that it presents. My approach was to seek out meaning in the recurring themes, patterns, and topics that emerge from the narrative, as told through my experiences, which span various interactions with people, places, ideas, and activities.

The reflective process of conducting an autoethnography led me to deeply explore the various facets of my identity, significantly shaped by cultural and personal influences. Through this exploration, I gained valuable insights into how I evolved into the entrepreneurial leader I am today. As I explored deeper, I asked broader questions to gain clarity and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the different aspects of my story - and their impact on my life, career choices, and the curriculum, enriching my research experience.

The key themes from this study include women's empowerment and feminism, which stand out as foundational. As I reflected, I identified the effect of feminist ideals and strong women figures and artists on my leadership philosophy. My journey of identity and self-discovery has continuously allowed me to reflect on my personal history, values, and experiences that define me. Independence and self-reliance have been crucial, emphasizing the importance of creating my path and the collective strength of women supporting each other. The

evolving roles of working mothers, including my mother, and the impact of generational changes have also been significant, highlighting the balancing act and shifts in societal roles.

Privilege, intersectionality, and social justice led me to critically examine my privilege and commit to intersectional feminism, guiding my advocacy for equity. My transition from advocacy to active allyship and the development of empathy profoundly influenced my engagement with social causes and research. The profound impact of music, pop culture, and role models enriched my understanding of empowerment and leadership. Thus, my research has meaning and purpose, leading me to live in my ikigai, which has driven my personal growth and shaped my career and academic goals.

Reflecting on the challenges and development of my leadership skills has been essential, emphasizing the importance of resilience, emotional intelligence, and ethical decision-making. Lastly, my ability to adapt, learn from experiences, and maintain a strategic focus has been crucial in navigating the uncertainties of leadership and entrepreneurial endeavors.

By examining these themes holistically, I sought to understand the intricate dynamics of my leadership journey, acknowledging the influences of cultural and personal factors and their broader impact. This study represents my effort to extract meaning and coherence from my experiences, offering insights and recommendations into my evolution as an entrepreneurial leader to inform others.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Through my journey of becoming an entrepreneurial leader focusing on gender, the need for further research is evident. Historically, literature has neglected to include the role of women in entrepreneurship. There remains a significant gap in recognizing women's unique strengths in entrepreneurship. As this study concludes, recommendations for further research can help bridge

this literature gap, fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for women entrepreneurs. Future research should go deeper into understanding the dynamics of women's entrepreneurship beyond just the challenges and barriers. Investigating women entrepreneurs' success strategies, resilience mechanisms, and innovation pathways can provide richer insights into their contributions to economies and societies.

The following research recommendations align with the themes identified in my study, offering promising avenues to deepen an understanding of entrepreneurial leadership. In my self-reflection as an entrepreneurial leader, I recognized that developing content to inspire others to become entrepreneurial leaders must consider the following five recommendations.

*Future research one: Be founder-centric*

The intersection of entrepreneurial traits and leadership practices within Entrepreneurship Education Training (EET) programs presents a rich area for future research. A crucial recommendation is to conduct a comparative analysis that contrasts founder-centric and traditional managerial leadership models regarding their influence on organizational culture and success. Such analysis is pivotal in advocating for a shift towards founder-centric approaches in EET programs, addressing the notable gap in current literature that predominantly emphasizes startup-centric views over the nuanced roles of founders' identities, values, and leadership styles in venture creation.

Research by Renko et al. (2015) lays a solid foundation by identifying the critical dimensions of entrepreneurial leadership—innovativeness, risk-taking, and proactiveness—that significantly impact organizational outcomes. This body of work supports transitioning EET programs towards methodologies that nurture essential entrepreneurial traits, potentially leading to enhanced venture sustainability and success. In addition, Sarasvathy's (2001) effectuation

theory complements this perspective by spotlighting the entrepreneurial process's creative aspects, advocating for the inclusion of founder-centric traits like creativity and adaptability in the entrepreneurial narrative.

Amabile's (1996) insights into the role of creativity within organizational contexts highlight the potential of entrepreneurial creativity in driving innovation, increasing the case for incorporating creativity-focused curricula within EET frameworks. The resilience and self-efficacy in overcoming entrepreneurial uncertainties, as outlined by Bullough, Renko, and Myatt (2014), also support the case for EET programs to prioritize entrepreneurial traits, aiming to develop resilient and adaptable leaders. Further, the cross-cultural construct of entrepreneurial leadership developed by Gupta, MacMillan, and Surie (2004), which emphasizes innovation and risk-taking, supports a comparative exploration between founder-centric and traditional managerial leadership styles.

Collectively, these scholarly contributions make a compelling case for adopting a founder-centric approach in EET programs, highlighting the need for further developing entrepreneurial leadership competencies that resonate with the venture creation process's dynamic and contingent nature. There is a pressing need for more research to substantiate the advantages of a founder-centric approach comprehensively. Future studies should focus on traits like creativity, resilience, and risk-taking to support the design of EET programs that effectively prepare entrepreneurs for the complexities of initiating and managing successful ventures, thereby fostering more innovative and sustainable organizational cultures.

#### *Future research two: Invest in introspection*

The emphasis on introspection within leadership development programs is a crucial strategy for fostering leaders who are self-aware, resilient, and equipped to tackle the

complexities of entrepreneurship. Current research suggests that this focus on introspection has transformative potential in redefining entrepreneurial leadership paradigms.

The work of Daudelin (1996) focuses on the value of structured reflection in increasing leadership effectiveness and problem-solving skills, advocating for integrating introspective practices into leadership development. Similarly, Day (2000) points to self-awareness and adaptability as essential qualities for effective leadership, which can be enhanced through introspection. Moreover, the authentic leadership model presented by Luthans and Avolio (2003), which is based on self-awareness and authenticity, further reinforces the importance of reflective practices. This model is supported by Gardner et al. (2005), who argue that introspection can lead to authentic leadership behaviors by fostering a deep sense of self-awareness. Additionally, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which values reflective observation, highlights the critical role of introspection in experiential learning processes.

These studies advocate for a more reflective approach in leadership programs. I recommend focusing these approaches specifically on entrepreneurship. Therefore, future research should aim to design, implement, and evaluate leadership programs that prioritize introspection, assessing its impact on leadership effectiveness and self-awareness. Research could significantly contribute to cultivating reflective, growth-oriented leaders capable of navigating the entrepreneurial landscape with greater insight and resilience.

There is also a need to explore and validate diverse models of entrepreneurial leadership, especially those that incorporate feminine leadership qualities. By challenging the prevailing masculine norms of entrepreneurship, research in this area can uncover alternative models of success, broadening the scope of leadership styles recognized and valued in entrepreneurial

contexts. This approach promises to redefine entrepreneurial leadership paradigms and supports the development of a more inclusive and equitable entrepreneurial ecosystem.

*Future research three: Engage in intersectionality*

Adopting an intersectional lens in entrepreneurial leadership research is necessary for achieving a holistic understanding of the entrepreneurial landscape. This approach is crucial for recognizing and addressing the multifaceted experiences of entrepreneurs, especially those from marginalized communities. Intersectionality, a framework that examines how various aspects of an individual's identity intersect to impact their experiences, combined with Critical Race Theory (CRT), which focuses on understanding and dismantling systemic racism, provides a powerful toolset for exploring the complexities within entrepreneurship.

Future research should explore how gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other identity markers intersect to influence entrepreneurship and leadership. By focusing on these intersections, researchers can uncover the unique barriers and opportunities that diverse entrepreneurs face, thereby creating more equitable and supportive entrepreneurial ecosystems. Studies should dismantle systemic barriers and highlight the distinctive strengths and successes of entrepreneurs with diverse identities, offering insights that can foster a more inclusive understanding of entrepreneurial leadership.

By integrating CRT into entrepreneurship research, a more in-depth exploration of the experiences of underrepresented founders can be achieved. This includes examining the complex dynamics that entrepreneurs of color encounter, such as racial biases in funding, networking, and mentorship. By utilizing an intersectional perspective, research can provide a more accurate analysis of how intersecting identities affect access to crucial resources and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Scholarly work, such as that by Crenshaw (1989), Brush, de Bruin, and Welter (2009), Bell, Meriläinen, Taylor, and Tienari (2019), Nkomo and Stewart (2006), and Delgado and Stefancic (2017), further confirms the value of this approach. These contributions advocate for the strategic inclusion of intersectionality and CRT in studying entrepreneurial leadership. They emphasize the need to move towards research paradigms that address entrepreneurs' challenges with intersecting marginalized identities and celebrate their resilience and achievements.

Future research in this area promises to enrich the academic discourse on entrepreneurship, urging the field toward a paradigm that values diversity, equity, and inclusion. By highlighting the unique challenges and opportunities within entrepreneurial ecosystems, such research can aid in establishing more equitable and supportive frameworks for all entrepreneurs, paving the way for a more inclusive and prosperous entrepreneurial landscape for all.

*Future research four: Empower women entrepreneurs through community*

Exploring the transformative role of collaborative communities in nurturing women's entrepreneurship is an opportunity for future research, especially for driving economic empowerment and societal change. This research direction seeks to showcase how such communities catalyze knowledge exchange, foster collaboration, and contribute to dismantling gender-specific barriers, offering fresh perspectives on strategies that effectively support women entrepreneurs. The emphasis on crafting and enhancing networks that provide tailored mentorship, guidance, and resources addresses women entrepreneurs' unique hurdles, promoting an ecosystem where knowledge-sharing and collaborative endeavors flourish.

Literature from Welter and Smallbone (2011) highlights the importance of situating women entrepreneurs within their gendered contexts, indicating that supportive communities are pivotal for navigating and overcoming the challenges inherent to these contexts. Similarly, Brush

et al. (2006) examine the mechanisms through which networks and community support catalyze the growth of women-owned businesses, spotlighting the indispensable role of these infrastructures in resource provisioning, mentorship, and collaborative opportunity creation. Further, De Bruin, Brush, and Welter (2007) call for a cohesive research framework that integrates the examination of support structures, including community and network engagement, to support women's entrepreneurship better. In addition, other studies by Minniti and Naude (2010) provide a cross-country analysis demonstrating the influence of community support and social networks on the entrepreneurial decisions of women, while Jennings and Brush (2013) highlight the scarcity of supportive communities and the imperative for research aimed at empowering women through collaborative environments.

These scholarly contributions require further inquiry into how collaborative communities can further support and grow the number of women entrepreneurs. This area of research can significantly shape the ecosystems supporting women in entrepreneurship, propelling the development of more equitable and thriving entrepreneurial landscapes. Future studies in this area will only enhance our understanding of the community's role in the entrepreneurial experiences of women while also providing practical strategies that facilitate the success of women entrepreneurs, thereby emphasizing the criticality of community in the entrepreneurial narrative of women.

*Future research five: Recognize the social impact of women in entrepreneurship*

The evolving discourse on business success metrics now calls for the inclusion of Social Return on Investment (SROI) alongside traditional financial indicators, particularly in evaluating the contributions of women-led ventures. This shift towards a more holistic assessment

framework acknowledges the broad societal impacts of entrepreneurship beyond just economic benefits.

The literature underscores the necessity of this approach, with notable studies highlighting its relevance and potential. For example, Mair and Martí (2006) recognize the critical role of social entrepreneurship in societal betterment, advocating for the development of metrics that comprehensively measure social impact. Nicholls (2009) introduces 'Blended Value Accounting,' arguing for integrating social and environmental considerations with financial performance, providing a methodological basis for assessing women-led ventures.

Yunus, Moingeon, and Lehmann-Ortega (2010) illustrate the Grameen Bank's social business model, exemplifying the profound societal objectives achievable through entrepreneurship, further reinforcing the case for incorporating SROI in evaluations. Hechavarría et al. (2012) explore the inclination of women entrepreneurs towards social and environmental ventures, indicating a prioritization of social impact in women-led businesses. This suggests the need for success metrics that adequately reflect such priorities. Additionally, Orlitzky, Schmidt, and Rynes (2003) present a meta-analysis that identifies a positive relationship between corporate social performance and financial performance, supporting the holistic evaluation of business success.

These contributions make a compelling case for redefining business success metrics to encompass financial returns and social contributions, especially for women-led ventures. Future research should focus on developing and refining these metrics to illuminate the comprehensive societal benefits of such ventures, guiding policy formulations and interventions that prove socially impactful entrepreneurship by women. This enriched understanding of entrepreneurial

success fosters a more inclusive and equitable entrepreneurial ecosystem, recognizing and amplifying diverse identities' unique strengths and contributions.

#### *Recommendations for Future Research Summary*

The outlined future research recommendations serve as a comprehensive guide for advancing entrepreneurial leadership, particularly emphasizing the need for greater inclusivity, a shift towards founder-centric models, and an enhanced focus on the distinct contributions of women entrepreneurs. In summary, this section calls for a deeper exploration of women's entrepreneurship, moving beyond traditional narratives of challenges and barriers to examine success strategies, resilience mechanisms, and innovation pathways. Highlighting the importance of integrating entrepreneurial traits with leadership practices in EET programs, these recommendations advocate for comparative analyses to distinguish the impacts of founder-centric versus traditional leadership on organizational culture and success. Additionally, incorporating introspection into leadership development aims to cultivate leaders who are self-aware and resilient, capable of navigating the complexities of entrepreneurship.

Emphasizing the necessity of adopting an intersectional lens, future research is encouraged to explore how various identity factors intersect to influence entrepreneurial experiences, thereby fostering more supportive ecosystems for all entrepreneurs. The recommendations also stress the role of collaborative communities in empowering women entrepreneurs, suggesting a focus on how these networks facilitate knowledge exchange, collaboration, and dismantling gender barriers. Lastly, there is a push to redefine business success metrics to include social returns alongside financial outcomes, recognizing the broader societal impacts of women-led ventures. Collectively, these research directions promise to

contribute significantly to a more inclusive, equitable, and impactful understanding of entrepreneurship and leadership.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The core of effective leadership is grounded in self-awareness, characterized by a deliberate and profound understanding of one's leadership style (Leadership, n.d.). This understanding reflects an evolution in personal capabilities and identifies areas for growth. Therefore, my reflective journey inspired the development of a transformative curriculum that revisits and redefines my teaching philosophy and practices, culminating in the Entrepreneurial LeadHERship (EntreLeadHER) course, which I present as a fundamental recommendation practice. The inception of EntreLeadHER—a course designed with a focus on the founder rather than the venture—has significantly influenced my teaching philosophy. It has motivated me to create learning environments that prioritize psychological safety, address the complexities of cultural identity, and foster inclusive communities, especially within higher education.

My exploration through this study has mirrored the transition from student to teacher, guided by a profound realization of my purpose. This journey clarified my ‘why’ and led me to critically examine ‘how’ entrepreneurial leadership should and could be taught. By practicing the principles I learned, I propose a shift in the paradigm of entrepreneurship education—from a traditional focus on business creation to nurturing visionary founders. To propel entrepreneurship education forward, I propose a set of practices aimed at entrepreneurship educators:

#### *Practice one: Implement reflective teaching practices*

Integrating reflective methodologies into entrepreneurial leadership curricula is essential for facilitating students' exploration of their entrepreneurial identity and leadership style. This approach, realized through introspective assignments, peer discussions, and personal narrative

projects, deepens students' understanding of their motivations, challenges, and aspirations on their entrepreneurial journey.

Reflective teaching practices, advocated by Schön (1983), are foundational to this process. They emphasize the need for educators to engage in ongoing reflection to improve teaching strategies and establish a deeper connection with students. This enhances instructional techniques and encourages students to self-reflect, which is crucial for developing their entrepreneurial identity and leadership style.

Supporting this, Dewey (1933) highlighted reflective thinking as a careful and thoughtful consideration of one's beliefs or knowledge, underlining its importance in learning experiences, especially within entrepreneurship education's dynamic and uncertain context. Moon (1999) elaborated on reflective practice in learning environments, proposing a framework that can be effectively applied within entrepreneurial curricula to foster an entrepreneurial mindset through a deeper understanding of personal motivations and challenges.

Moreover, Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) highlighted the importance of reflection in learning from experience, pointing out how reflective practices can aid in processing and learning from the practical experiences common in entrepreneurship education. This aligns with implementing reflective teaching practices that emphasize learning through real-world entrepreneurial experiences. Additionally, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which positions reflective observation as a pivotal element of the learning process, supports the adoption of reflective methodologies in teaching, suggesting that reflection on experiences is essential for converting those experiences into knowledge, particularly in cultivating the skills associated with entrepreneurial leadership.

This recommendation for future practice, grounded in the insights of early scholars, advocates for a pedagogical shift in entrepreneurship education towards a more reflective and experiential approach. By incorporating reflective practices into the curriculum, educators can significantly contribute to nurturing the next generation of entrepreneurial leaders, characterized by a profound self-awareness and an adeptness at navigating the complexities of the entrepreneurial landscape.

*Practice two: Foster psychological safety*

For future educational practices, it is imperative to incorporate the concept of psychological safety, a fundamental aspect of team dynamics and organizational culture, as introduced by Edmondson (1999). Psychological safety fosters an environment where individuals can freely express themselves without fear of repercussions, a critical condition for promoting risk-taking, candid discussions, and learning from mistakes. This concept is vital in educational contexts, aiming to cultivate a culture of mutual respect and open communication.

The early work of Kahn (1990) regarding engagement and psychological conditions in the workplace serves as a basis for appreciating how psychological safety enables individuals to commit and engage in their roles fully, highlighting its significance for personal and professional growth. Subsequent research by Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) demonstrates that leadership qualities, such as inclusiveness, markedly improve psychological safety within teams, affirming its applicability in varied settings like healthcare. This notion is supported by the findings of Chughtai, Byrne, and Flood (2015), who connect ethical leadership and trust in leadership with employee well-being, pointing out trust as a crucial element of psychological safety. Furthermore, research by Hirak, Peng, Carmeli, and Schaubroeck (2012) presents leader inclusiveness as essential for establishing a psychologically safe space that facilitates learning

and enhances performance, underscoring psychological safety's role in spurring effective teamwork and innovation.

Translating these insights on psychological safety into entrepreneurship education involves cultivating classroom environments that empower students to experiment, innovate, and communicate without hesitation. This creates a solid foundation for their eventual roles as entrepreneurial leaders. Integrating psychological safety into teaching methods enables educators to improve the learning experience significantly, equipping students to face the uncertainties of entrepreneurship with greater assurance and resilience. Adopting this approach not only supplements the educational pathway but also is in harmony with modern educational innovations, focusing on developing supportive, inclusive, and psychologically safe learning spaces for upcoming entrepreneurs.

### *Practice three: Founder-focused curriculum*

The shift towards a founder-focused curriculum in entrepreneurship education marks a pivotal recommendation for future practice, advocating for an educational paradigm that places equal emphasis on the personal growth and development of the entrepreneur alongside the mastery of business skills. This approach aligns with the insights from Morris, Kuratko, and Cornwall (2013), who argue for a more holistic form of entrepreneurship education that nurtures an understanding of oneself as profoundly as it does business acumen. Morris et al. (2013) contend that self-awareness is as indispensable as business savvy for entrepreneurs, which resonates with the broader call for pedagogical innovation in this field.

Supporting this perspective, Fayolle and Gailly (2008) critique the conventional focus of entrepreneurship education on venture creation as the neglect of fostering critical thinking, creativity, and personal growth. They advocate for educational practices that encourage reflective

and experiential learning, enabling students to explore their entrepreneurial identity and leadership style more deeply. Echoing this sentiment, Neck, Greene, and Brush (2014) champion a practice-based approach that underscores the importance of experiential learning and self-reflection in cultivating vital entrepreneurial competencies. Gibb (2002) further amplifies this call for a new educational paradigm that prioritizes adaptability, creativity, and a willingness to innovate, underscoring the necessity of a curriculum that nurtures the founder's growth and development. Rae (2005) highlights the value of narrative and experiential learning, advocating for a learning environment that leverages personal experiences to cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset.

Together, these scholarly contributions form a compelling argument for implementing a founder-focused curriculum in entrepreneurship education. Such a curriculum addresses the need for contemporary entrepreneurial challenges and fosters a growth mindset essential for navigating the entrepreneurial leadership landscape. By embracing this approach, educators can significantly contribute to shaping the next generation of entrepreneurial leaders adept at creating and managing ventures, deeply self-aware, and capable of personal growth throughout their entrepreneurial journey.

*Practice four: Include gender-smart and intersectional frameworks*

To tackle the issue of women's underrepresentation in entrepreneurship and business, educational institutions and programs focused on entrepreneurship should adopt curricula conscious of gender. Recognizing and valuing the contributions of women entrepreneurs should actively work to deconstruct stereotypes to motivate a greater number of women to embark on entrepreneurial endeavors. Adopting gender-smart and intersectional curricula will lead to a

higher engagement of women and individuals from marginalized backgrounds in entrepreneurship education.

Utilizing a gender-smart approach, like the Gender-Smart Entrepreneurship Education & Training Plus (GEET+) framework suggested by Orser & Elliott (2020), facilitates breaking down stereotypes and biases, fostering an environment of inclusivity and diversity. Gender-smart teaching strategies address inequalities linked to social identity and prepare students and faculty to meet leadership challenges with heightened sensitivity and resilience. Furthermore, an intersectional approach in the curriculum, examining the interplay between various identity factors and gender in entrepreneurship, is recommended.

Support for the integration of gender-smart and intersectional frameworks into entrepreneurship education is found in the scholarly works of Brush, Greene, Balachandra, and Davis (2018), with an urgent focus on the need to improve the representation of women and other marginalized groups in entrepreneurial initiatives—their research advocates for the inclusion of gender perspectives to cultivate a diverse entrepreneurial environment. Ahl (2006) critiques the stereotypical narratives prevalent in research on women entrepreneurs and argues for a shift toward a more accurate representation of their experiences. Marlow and McAdam (2013) further challenge misconceptions surrounding female entrepreneurship, calling for a detailed understanding achievable through gender-smart and intersectional methodologies.

Through their cross-country analysis, the significance of supportive policies for women entrepreneurs, highlighted by Henry, Orser, Coleman, and Foss (2017), underlines the necessity of entrepreneurship education incorporating gender perspectives. Additionally, the work of Ely and Meyerson (2000) on the influence of gender in organizational settings lays the theoretical

groundwork for such innovative educational approaches aimed at fostering organizational change and inclusivity.

These scholarly works form a strong case for implementing gender-smart and intersectional approaches in entrepreneurship education, highlighting the importance of creating a more inclusive and equitable entrepreneurial ecosystem by addressing specific challenges and capitalizing on the distinct strengths of diverse identities.

### *Recommendations for Practice Summary*

Embracing a transformative approach to entrepreneurship education, these recommendations for future practice emphasize cultivating entrepreneurial leaders who are introspective and invested in understanding their identity, empowering them to solve problems and navigate entrepreneurial challenges confidently. Integrating reflective teaching practices and fostering psychological safety within the curriculum are pivotal, allowing students to explore their entrepreneurial identity and leadership styles deeply. A shift towards a founder-focused curriculum underscores the importance of personal growth alongside business skills. Additionally, including gender-smart and intersectional frameworks addresses the critical need for diversity and inclusivity, challenging stereotypes and broadening participation. These practices collectively aim to prepare students not just as business creators but as visionary leaders who are self-aware, resilient, and capable of inspiring change in an increasingly complex entrepreneurial landscape.

### **Research Implications**

I acknowledge specific considerations for using autoethnography as a research methodology in this study. While autoethnography proves valuable in specific qualitative research contexts, it has implications for practice, including subjectivity, bias, and ethical

concerns (Ellis et al., 2010). The primary consideration of using autoethnography stems from its inherent nature to center around a single lived experience - mine.

Despite this implication, I recognize the value of autoethnography within the defined scope of leadership development. While my individual experience may not be broadly generalizable, the in-depth exploration of my personal experiences offers a rich understanding of the complexities inherent in leadership roles and identities. The contextualized nature of autoethnography serves as a valuable resource for future leadership development efforts, shedding light on the intricacies and challenges individuals can face in leadership positions.

### **Summary of Experience**

This study chronicles my journey as a director and lecturer of entrepreneurial leadership, encompassing my successes, challenges, and vulnerabilities. It documents my evolution in understanding myself in this role through critical reflective practices, specifically focusing on deconstructing my identities to analyze how I have come to understand myself as an entrepreneurial leader.

Throughout this introspective journey, I posed specific critical questions to unravel the development of my career in higher education. For example, I deeply contemplated, "How have I come to know who I am?" This inquiry led me to examine personal traits such as my drive for achievement, desire to make a significant impact, and passion for learning, which are identified as my top three strengths. Through this reflection, I discovered my purpose: to guide others in intentionally exploring similar questions and embarking on their journey of self-discovery.

Another question I explored involved considering the impact of specific experiences on my decision to pursue entrepreneurial leadership. By asking, "How have I launched new initiatives, inspired others, and championed innovation?" I examined pivotal moments that

influenced my career choices, connecting my desire for significance to missions that have become foundational experiences shaping my motivations. Understanding these motivations allowed me to explore deeper into my core strengths as an activator, achiever, and learner, elucidating the strategies I employ to initiate projects, motivate others, and foster innovation, all to inspire others. The question, "How have these experiences shaped my identity as a leader?" directly addresses my research goal, showcasing how positive and challenging experiences have contributed to my identity as an entrepreneurial leader. The answer lies in becoming more self-aware, learning from experiences, and adapting to diverse situations, collectively shaping my unique identity.

These guiding questions led me through a reflective process on my experience as a researcher characterized by personal growth and consideration of my cultural identities and influences. By balancing strengths and weaknesses, I defined an impactful leadership philosophy that positions me confidently as an entrepreneurial leader. Thus, the insights gained from this autoethnography study culminated in a practical journey of embracing entrepreneurial leadership through reflective thinking that emphasizes self-awareness. The primary outcome of this study is articulated in my leadership philosophy, which is written as one of my final journal entries.

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*My passion is nurturing a growth mindset by gaining new perspectives.*

*My mission is to empower students, especially women,*

*to find the best path to their own destination.*

*My top strengths of significance, connectedness, and achievement drive me*

*to make meaningful contributions.*

*I am an entrepreneurial leader because I embrace the thrill of trying new things*

*by pushing my boundaries to be comfortable being uncomfortable.*

*I excel at curating transformative experiences that inspire individuals*

*to unlock their full potential.*

*I offer unwavering encouragement through my contagious enthusiasm.*

*I translate ideas into action that create a lasting legacy with impact embedded.*

*Who am I? I am an entrepreneurial leader.*

\*\*\*

By articulating my personal leadership philosophy, I have realized that authentic leadership goes beyond a predefined path; it involves empowering others to navigate their journeys. Now leading with confidence as an entrepreneurial leader, my goal is to continue cultivating self-awareness for myself and others, based on the findings of this study, specifically through establishing communities of care that guide individuals in discovering their strengths and pursuing the best path to their own destination.

### *Epilogue*

As my role shifted from director to lecturer, I became more of a guide, providing support and mentorship while encouraging individuals to choose experiences that lead them to self-discovery. Genuine empowerment comes from fostering a culture that values diversity and champions inclusivity. The transformative power of these insights, rooted in understanding my identity, clarifies my motivations and provides a profound sense of purpose.

My philosophy remains dynamic in my ongoing leadership journey, adapting to changing landscapes and challenges. Steering one's course involves fostering a leadership style that trusts individuals, nurtures aspirations, and celebrates the diversity of unique journeys that enrich our

shared experiences. Ultimately, this reflective leader journey evolved through exploring various themes, lessons learned, and recommendations for future research extracted from my story.

As a woman in higher education, my journey into teaching entrepreneurial leadership has been a remarkable and transformative experience. I recognized the need for more diverse voices and perspectives in the entrepreneurial landscape from the beginning. Filling this void, I passionately dedicated myself to sharing knowledge and fostering an inclusive environment that nurtures the talents of women aspiring to become leaders in the business world - and beyond. Furthermore, as a result, I have now become a business leader, starting my own consulting agency.

Motivated by my strong desire to empower women in entrepreneurship, and as a direct outcome of this study, I have established my consulting Limited Liability Company (LLC) to become a venture that provides a platform through which I can more broadly share the wealth of knowledge and experiences I have gained throughout my career. The mission for my LLC is clear: to give back to the community and create a support system that catalyzes the growth of women-owned and women-led businesses. To do the flourishing thing - giving back what I know to support others.

So, my journey to becoming an entrepreneurial leader has now turned me into an entrepreneur. The next research question is: *Why did I start a consulting LLC?* This can be a recommendation for future research. However, my best attempt at understanding why I decided to start a business is that an LLC structure provides me with a way to create my hub of innovation and mentorship, providing a range of services tailored to the unique challenges faced by women entrepreneurs. From strategic planning and leadership development to networking opportunities and access to funding, I want to address the multifaceted needs of women in

business, which I have come to understand intimately by becoming one. As a testament to my commitment, I am specifically focused on collaborating with college entrepreneurship centers to enhance their programming and curriculum to support aspiring women entrepreneurs better. I reflect on the creation of my LLC and what this has meant to me as a culminating outcome of this study. I also reflect on the name “Embolden Consulting.”

\*\*\*

*When I set out to name my consulting firm, I wanted a title that encapsulated what I wanted my services to achieve. Key words included empowerment, confidence, and the courage to take bold steps toward success, reflecting my leadership philosophy and style. After much contemplation, "Embolden" emerged as the perfect embodiment of aligning mission, values, and strengths.*

*"Embolden" is a verb that means to instill boldness, courage, or confidence. It is about inspiring individuals and organizations to break free from constraints, challenge the status quo, and navigate their paths with commitment and contribution. This name captures the very spirit of what I aspire to bring to clients – a transformative experience that leaves them feeling empowered, courageous, and ready to conquer their goals. Or to take the world by the horns.*

*One of the core principles guiding my work has always been the belief that true empowerment comes from within. As I have strived to create environments that foster self-discovery and self-confidence, I want to encourage others to do the same—to recognize their strengths, embrace their unique perspectives, and overcome any barriers to their progress.*

*As an executor who likes to achieve, Embolden Consulting reflects the power I have been able to harness in my value of being decisive. I want to focus on my outcomes, not just provide*

*solutions; it is about igniting a spark that propels others to take decisive actions. To trust the decision-making process.*

*I understand that empowerment is a continuous journey. I want to focus on cultivating ways to encourage an entrepreneurial mindset of resilience and daring ambition. Whether guiding women entrepreneurs through the intricacies of business leadership or helping organizations embrace diversity and innovation, my goal is to foster a sense of empowerment that transcends passion into purpose.*

*What I want and hope for Embolden Consulting is a belief that when individuals and organizations are emboldened, they achieve their goals and inspire others to do the same. They flourish! The name "Embolden" reminds me of my commitment to contribute. To continue in a way that allows me to authentically be a catalyst for positive change, instilling confidence, courage, and empowerment in others. To truly empower others to find the best path to their own destination.*

\*\*\*

This entrepreneurial leader journey has expanded my knowledge, ignited a passion for action, and transformed me into an entrepreneur. Through this study, I have evolved from theoretical understanding to practical application, inspiring the establishment of my consulting firm, Embolden Consulting LLC. Reflecting on my transition from a woman in higher education to an entrepreneur with a mission to empower others, I appreciate the transformative power of education and mentorship. Through imparting knowledge and fostering a supportive ecosystem, I provide women with the necessary tools for entrepreneurial success and contribute to cultivating a more diverse and dynamic business landscape. This journey has solidified my belief that remarkable things can happen when women support each other, paving the way for a future

where entrepreneurship transcends gender boundaries. I want Embolden Consulting to continue to transcend these barriers.

When naming my consulting firm, I recognized the importance of aligning my mission, values, and strengths, guided by my love for the concept of living in my ikigai (Appendix D). The deliberate choice of the name "Embolden" was a strategic decision aimed at capturing the very essence of my vision. Described as an adjective, "Embolden" means “made bold or bolder: instilled with boldness, courage, or resolution” (Definition of EMBOLDENED, 2024). To be emboldened embodies instilling boldness, courage, and confidence, making it a perfect representation of the mission, values, and strengths that highlight my leadership style. The goal is to embolden individuals and organizations to flourish.

## **Conclusion**

My exploration into becoming an entrepreneurial leader has been deeply introspective, focusing on self-awareness and the nuanced influences of my cultural identities and who I am. This autoethnographic study explored how my gender, race, and social class have uniquely shaped my experiences - and leadership style. By committing to a journey of ongoing self-discovery and growth, I have understood that leadership demands an investment in deepening one’s awareness of one’s identities, strengths, and values.

From the culmination of this study, I have addressed the two identified challenges from my Problem Statement. Firstly, I have explored the critical need for leaders to engage in self-reflection to understand how their cultural identities influence their approach to entrepreneurial leadership. My journey values critical self-reflection in refining the competencies essential for entrepreneurial success. By immersing myself in the nuances of my cultural identity—especially lessons and themes related to my gender, race, and social class—I have

identified my unique strengths and recognized areas needing improvement, significantly enhancing my leadership capabilities. This introspection has increased my empathy and cultural sensitivity and led me to cultivate an authentic leadership style that builds trust and inspires others. This authenticity and self-awareness, nurtured through a thorough understanding of my cultural influences, have been instrumental in my growth and ability to be innovative within higher education.

Secondly, this study focused on the challenge highlighted by Business and Badal (2014) regarding the rarity of being able to identify entrepreneurial inclination. Recognizing the essential traits shared by successful entrepreneurs—passion, resilience, self-confidence, adaptability, and vision—has been enlightening. As I have learned, these traits are pivotal for navigating the complexities of entrepreneurship and transforming challenges into opportunities. Moreover, by utilizing tools like the *Entrepreneurial StrengthsFinder*, I have come to appreciate the importance of identifying and nurturing these distinct strengths to uncover my potential and recognize these traits in my students and staff, which might have gone undiscovered.

My research incorporates a founder-centric framework that promotes a profound understanding of one's cultural identity and its impact on leadership - but also illuminates the path to recognizing and cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset. This approach has deepened my comprehension of leadership in diverse cultural contexts and reinforced my commitment to uncovering the untapped potential at the intersection of leadership and entrepreneurship. Through this study, I bridge gaps in the literature, offering a transferable framework for others to adopt to confidently embrace their identity as entrepreneurial leaders, supporting entrepreneurial talent through a culturally informed perspective. Therefore, I encourage my fellow educators and peers in entrepreneurship education to consider their journeys in relation to my experiences.

Engaging with a broad spectrum of life stories can promote deeper self-awareness, enriching our educational approach and understanding of entrepreneurship.

The reflective practice and narrative analysis process led me to embrace my role as an entrepreneurial leader firmly. This journey highlighted a critical realization: Effective leadership is as much about self-understanding as it is about guiding others. My philosophy, centered on empowering others to find the best path to their own destination, is rooted in empowerment, nurturing a growth mindset, and driving transformative change. Anchored by my fundamental strengths of achievement, significance, and an eagerness to learn, my approach is designed to inspire others toward impactful contributions.

This study enriched my understanding of myself and illuminated my path ahead as an entrepreneur. I emphasize the importance of embracing my unique identities, the necessity of ongoing reflection, and the transformative potential of aligning my passions and strengths with my leadership vision. I am dedicated to fostering supportive and innovative environments, particularly for women entrepreneurs, underlining the significant role that collaborative communities play in promoting economic empowerment and dismantling gender barriers.

Reflecting on this journey and the insights gained, I recognize the incredible potential for future research in entrepreneurial leadership. I advocate for a shift towards education that prioritizes the founder's perspective, redefining the essence of entrepreneurship intertwined with leadership. By challenging conventional startup narratives and highlighting the synergy between entrepreneurial characteristics and leadership practices, I know that by concentrating on the personal journey from idea conception to venture realization, future research can explore how the blend of personal and professional identities affects venture success, impact, and sustainability.

These insights, derived from my experiences as a woman entrepreneurial leader, lay out a strategic framework for deepening my understanding of myself as an entrepreneurial leader. By adopting the recommendations for future study and practice, a new leadership era, especially within higher education, must value inclusivity and focus on contributing with significant impact. My path, characterized by deep introspection, resilience, and a steadfast dedication to growth, exemplifies the crucial role of self-awareness in leadership. Looking forward to an entrepreneurial mindset, I am eager to inspire future leaders to embark on their journeys of self-discovery, understanding that the essence of impactful leadership lies in self-awareness.

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## APPENDIX

### A. Captured Themes

1. Women's Empowerment
  - a. Identity & Empowerment
2. Feminism
  - a. Feminist Ideals
  - b. Influence of Women Artists
  - c. Intersectional Feminism
  - d. Advocacy for Marginalized Identities
3. Independent & Self-Reliance
  - a. Independent from Men
  - b. Collective Strength
4. Working Mothers
  - a. Role of Working Mothers
  - b. Balancing Work & Home
5. Generational Changes
  - a. Evolution of Women's Roles
  - b. Perspective of Freedom
6. Self-Discovery & Identity
  - a. Reflections & Growth
  - b. Role of Personal History & Experiences
  - c. Purpose & Ikigai
  - d. Search for Meaning
  - e. Alignment with Academic & Career Goals
7. Privilege & Intersectionality
  - a. Acknowledgement of Privilege
  - b. Commitment to Intersectional Analysis
8. Activism & Allyship
  - a. Evolution of Support
  - b. Active Engagement
9. Social Justice and Equity
  - a. Responsibility to Promote Equity
  - b. Inclusive Education
10. Self-Reinvention
  - a. Personal Growth
  - b. Inspiration from Music
11. Role Modeling
  - a. Impact of Maternal Role Models
  - b. Aspirational Influence
12. Music & Pop Culture
13. Empathy & Research
  - a. Growth in Empathy
  - b. Reflexivity in Research
14. Intersectionality & Feminism
  - a. Critical Pedagogy
15. Confronting 'White Feminism'
  - a. Awareness & Acknowledgement
  - b. Active Learning & Unlearning
16. Challenges of Identity & Privilege
  - a. Self-Awareness & Reflexivity
  - b. Privilege & Power Dynamics
17. Empowering Women in Entrepreneurship
  - a. Gender-aware Curriculum Development
  - b. Supportive Ecosystems
18. Asset-Based and Growth Mindset Approaches
  - a. Resilience and Adaptability
  - b. Celebrating Diversity of Thought
19. Leadership Challenges
  - a. Unsupportive Environment
  - b. Expectations vs. Reality

- c. Navigating Alone
- 20. Stress Responses in Leadership
  - a. Fight as Advocacy
  - b. Flight as Contemplation
  - c. Freeze as Paralysis
  - d. Fawn as Compliance
- 21. Navigating Stress and Anxiety
  - a. Identifying Triggers
  - b. Strategies for Management
  - c. Impact on Leadership Styl
- 22. Values and Decision-Making
  - a. Decisiveness in Ambiguity
  - b. Perspective in Adversity
  - c. Values as a Guiding Principle
- 23. Recognition and Validation
  - a. External Validation vs. Intrinsic Value
  - b. Achievement and Significance
  - c. Purpose-Driven Work
- 24. The Power of Self-Reflection
  - a. Honesty with Oneself
  - b. Continuous Self-Assessment
- 25. Embracing the Dynamic Nature of Ikigai
  - a. Evolving Passions and Strengths
  - b. Adaptability to Life's Changes
- 26. Patience and Persistence in the Process
  - a. Endurance Through Uncertainty
  - b. Iterative Learning
- 27. The Role of Environment
  - a. Contextual Fit
  - b. Environmental Adjustment
- 28. The Importance of Iteration
  - a. Refinement Over Time
- b. Experimentation and Exploration
- 29. Personal Growth and Self-Discovery
  - a. Continuous Learning
  - b. Self-Awareness
  - c. Adaptability
- 30. Leadership Challenges and Resilience
  - a. Overcoming Burnout
  - b. Navigating Uncertainty
  - c. Conflict Resolution
- 31. Strategic Focus and Goal Orientation
  - a. Goal-Setting
  - b. Prioritization
  - c. Focus vs. Flexibility
- 32. Innovation and Knowledge Seeking
  - a. Embracing New Ideas
  - b. Feedback Reception
  - c. Continuous Improvement
- 33. Action Orientation and Decision Making
  - a. Decisiveness
  - b. Risk Management
  - c. Strategic Planning
- 34. Team Dynamics and Organizational Culture
  - a. Fostering Collaboration
  - b. Empowerment and Delegation
  - c. Inclusive Leadership
- 35. Ethics and Values in Leadership
  - a. Value-Driven Leadership
  - b. Ethical Decision-Making
  - c. Social Responsibility
- 36. Emotional Intelligence and Empathy
  - a. Self-Regulation
  - b. Understanding Others
  - c. Effective Communication
- 37. Personal Growth Journey
  - a. Self-Reflection

- b. Evolution of Leadership Style
- 38. Self-Awareness
  - a. Recognition of Strengths and Weaknesses
  - b. Deep Understanding of Abilities
- 39. Adaptation and Learning
  - a. Adaptive Leadership Approach
  - b. Learning from Experiences
- 40. Cultural and Personal Influences
  - a. Influence of Cultural Background
  - b. Connection to Personal Value
- 41. Balancing Strengths and Weaknesses
  - a. Strategic Use of Strengths
  - b. Improvement of Weaknesses
- 42. Impact on Leadership Philosophy
  - a. Development of Leadership Principles
  - b. Guidance of Decision-Making

## **B. Key / Recurring Themes**

### **1. Women's Empowerment and Feminism:**

- Women's Empowerment, Feminism, Feminist Ideals, Influence of Women Artists, Intersectional Feminism, and Advocacy for Marginalized Identities.
- Reflects the focus on empowering women, advocating for feminist principles, and recognizing the influence of female artists and intersectionality in feminism.

### **2. Identity and Self-Discovery:**

- Identity & Empowerment, Self-Discovery & Identity, Reflections & Growth, Role of Personal History & Experiences, and the journey of self-awareness and reflexivity.
- Highlights the importance of understanding one's identity, personal growth, and the role of personal history in shaping one's self.

### **3. Independence and Self-Reliance:**

- Independent & Self-Reliance, Independent from Men, and Collective Strength.

- Emphasizes the value of independence, self-reliance, and the collective strength of women supporting each other.

**4. Role of Working Mothers and Generational Changes:**

- Working Mothers, Role of Working Mothers, Balancing Work & Home, Generational Changes, and Evolution of Women's Roles.
- Reflects on the challenges and changes in the roles of working mothers over generations and the evolution of women's roles in society.

**5. Privilege, Intersectionality, and Social Justice:**

- Privilege & Intersectionality, Acknowledgement of Privilege, Commitment to Intersectional Analysis, Social Justice and Equity, Responsibility to Promote Equity, and Inclusive Education.
- Focuses on recognizing privilege, committing to intersectional analysis, and promoting social justice and equity.

**6. Activism, Allyship, and Empathy:**

- Activism & Allyship, Evolution of Support, Active Engagement, Empathy & Research, Growth in Empathy, and Reflexivity in Research.
- Captures the journey from advocacy to allyship, the importance of empathy in research, and the active engagement in social causes.

**7. Music, Pop Culture, and Role Modeling:**

- Influence of Female Artists, Inspiration from Music, Music & Pop Culture, Role Modeling, and Impact of Maternal Role Models.
- Highlights the influence of music and pop culture on empowerment and the significance of role models in shaping identity and aspirations.

**8. Purpose and Personal Growth:**

- Merges Purpose & Search for Meaning, Alignment with Academic & Career Goals, Self-Reinvention, and Personal Growth.
- Focuses on the search for meaning, the concept of ikigai, and the continuous journey of personal growth and self-reinvention.

**9. Leadership Development and Challenges:**

- Leadership Challenges, Overcoming Burnout, Navigating Uncertainty, Conflict Resolution, Emotional Intelligence and Empathy, and Impact on Leadership Philosophy.
- Explores the challenges faced by leaders, the importance of emotional intelligence, and the impact of personal growth on leadership philosophy.

**10. Adaptation, Learning, and Strategic Focus:**

- Adaptation and Learning, Adaptive Leadership Approach, Learning from Experiences, Strategic Focus and Goal Orientation, Innovation and Knowledge Seeking, and Action Orientation and Decision Making. Underscores the importance of adaptation, continuous learning, strategic focus, and the readiness to innovate and make decisions.

**C. Discussion of Themes**

*Theme one: “If you can see her, you can be her” OR Women's empowerment, feminism, and inspiring role models*

Exploring the theme of my journey toward becoming an entrepreneurial leader involves digging into my early personal experiences and reflections that have played a crucial role in

shaping my self-understanding. Specifically, I focus on early influences from fictional characters, such as Kristy Thomas from *The Babysitters Club* (T.B.C.) and Nancy Drew. Within this theme, I reflect on how these characters served as role models, embodying qualities like entrepreneurship, independence, leadership, and feminism.

I emphasize the importance of these early influences in shaping my identity and aspirations. This underscores the importance of representation, or the phrase "if you can see her, you can be her." By analyzing how strong women characters in literature inspired my journey, I draw insights from these characters, contributing to an ongoing process of self-discovery. This reflection shapes my identity as an entrepreneurial leader, marked by a dedication to women's empowerment and a strong desire to make meaningful contributions to the world.

*Theme two: "Miss Independent. Miss Self-Sufficient"*

My story centers on my reflections as I journey to become an independent woman, a path shaped by my upbringing and experiences in the 90s. As I explore being a "WON" (woman of the nineties), I realize how this mantra was a powerful affirmation of my independence, feminism, and empowerment. Through memories of witnessing my mother's resilience as a single working woman, I explore the formative years of the 90s, depicted to me now as a movement that inspired women to embrace independence. Through my experiences of responsibility, self-sufficiency, and early empowerment, I highlight the profound impact of these early lessons on my adulthood. This includes the influence of iconic artists, songs, and pop culture figures. By underscoring music's role in shaping my perception of feminism and independence, I recognize that I was coming of age during a time marked by anthems and lyrics that marked a new wave of feminism.

Moreover, my narrative reflects on my mother's unintentional role as a feminist model, navigating the challenges of being a single working mother and redefining women's empowerment beyond traditional roles. I stress the enduring impact of my mother on my beliefs and values, particularly in instilling a sense of independence and responsibility. The overarching goal of leaving a legacy for future generations, especially for my daughter, nieces, and nephews, is a testament to my commitment to women's empowerment and self-reliance.

*Theme three: Back that sting up*

My reflections on the significance of intentional educational environments, particularly my time in magnet schools during middle and high school, digs into how the conscious decision to attend schools that championed diversity profoundly shaped my understanding of diversity-related initiatives, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ). Recalling my experiences at Carver and Booker T. magnet schools allows me to recognize these institutions' transformative impact on shaping my worldview.

Attending magnet schools underscores these experiences' role in heightening my awareness of racial intricacies and complexities. It exposed me to a diverse community where students from various racial backgrounds coexisted and collaborated. My narrative articulates the impact of this exposure on my evolving perspective regarding race and educational environments that extend beyond traditional textbooks.

In recognizing the influence of my magnet school experiences on my commitment to diversity, I reflect on my racial identity as a white individual. I consider how these formative teenage years have influenced my intentional pursuit of diverse environments for myself and,

now, for my daughter. Acknowledging the challenges of navigating social landscapes and racial divides within north and south Tulsa, I stress the importance of environments prioritizing DEIJ.

Subsequent reflections analyze how these experiences continue to shape my values, particularly in my quest for diverse communities and environments. I explore the connection between my educational background and my commitment to promoting diversity, challenging systemic inequalities, and fostering inclusivity. My analysis highlights the lessons learned from magnet schools as a contributing force behind my dedication to diverse spaces, especially within education, that celebrate various experiences.

*Theme four: The importance of intersectionality*

The central theme of this section revolves around my exploration of cultural identity as a white woman and its profound impact on my approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion practices, particularly within the educational landscape. My narrative focuses on my journey from an individual-focused mindset to a broader societal understanding, highlighting my commitment to leveraging privilege to amplify marginalized voices and communities.

A crucial element of this theme involves my examination of the concept of "white feminism" and my conscious effort to challenge and confront assumptions tied to my core identity. Through my narrative, I acknowledge questions of guilt, sincerity, and the potential exploitation of the feminist movement. My narrative evolves through my understanding of feminism, emphasizing the importance of intersectionality and the rejection of performative or privileged forms of feminism. My introspective journey includes acknowledging the need for continual learning, self-reflection, and a commitment to an inclusive and empathetic feminism that addresses all individuals' diverse needs and experiences.

Throughout the writing in this section, my goal is to evolve as an intersectional feminist scholar, emphasizing my responsibility to center the voices and experiences of all individuals while challenging and dismantling oppressive systems. I highlight my journey from ally to accomplice, underscoring the importance of using privilege to disrupt and change the status quo. Through my ongoing commitment to address and challenge my primary experiences as a white woman, I acknowledge the sometimes exclusionary nature of this identity. The awareness of privilege influences my approach to challenges, perception of success, and empathy toward diverse lived experiences. I conclude by emphasizing the need to expand my narrative beyond gender identity, comprehending how all facets of identity contribute holistically to shaping my story, and highlighting my ongoing journey of self-discovery and understanding.

*Theme five: Who am I?*

The key theme of this exploration revolves around my journey of self-exploration and self-awareness, focusing on understanding my positionality and influence within the research process. Through my positionality statement, I consider my personal and social positions, background, beliefs, values, and experiences, engaging in a unique self-reflective exercise that immerses me in the intricacies of the research. Exploring the question "Who am I?" within the sub-research question, I recognize various facets of my identity, including being a white, cisgender, heterosexual, non-disabled woman, a middle-class, non-believer, and a democrat U.S. citizen pursuing an advanced degree. Throughout the narrative, I explore how these identities shape my interactions, reactions, and perceptions during my entrepreneurial leadership journey, acknowledging the inherent privilege associated with them.

Reflecting on the impact of my primary identities, particularly race and gender, I acknowledge the privilege associated with being a white woman and express a commitment to evolving from an ally into an accomplice. This reflection recognizes layers of privilege within my identities and their influence on interactions, reactions, and perceptions throughout my entrepreneurial leadership journey. It emphasizes the importance of intentional and authentic exploration of intersecting identities to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable world, highlighting the integral role of empathy, which I recognize as an area for growth in my entrepreneurial leadership journey.

The narrative unfolds by reflecting on societal expectations, emphasizing the importance of embracing the essence of my existence beyond achievements and acknowledging the responsibilities that come with privilege. Introducing the Japanese concept of "ikigai" as a framework, I recognize its clarity on the intersection of my passions, mission, and strengths. Through a deeper analysis of my strengths, including achievement, significance, focus, learner, and activator, I blend them with core values, examining their contribution to my self-awareness. Additionally, I explore the crucial significance of empathy and allyship, recognizing their role in fostering an inclusive society.

*Theme six: "Empowered women empower women"*

The guiding principle of "Empowered women empower women" profoundly resonates with me, underlining my commitment to uplifting women. Central to my narrative is the transformative power of language, with a particular focus on its crucial role in empowerment, especially for women. Throughout my journey, I have encountered moments that break barriers, challenge societal norms, and foster strength through shared experiences.

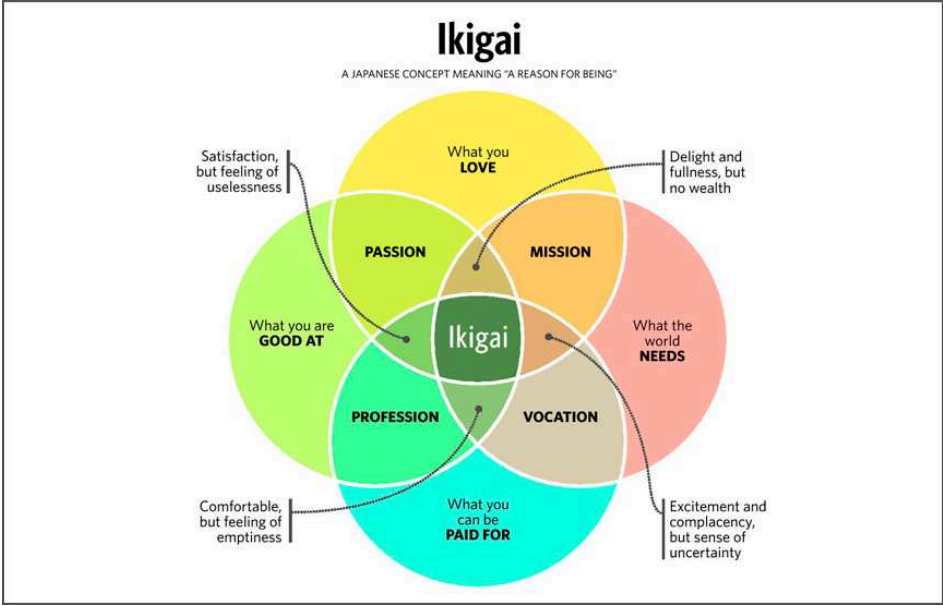
Reflecting on my time as an English teacher to a group of older Japanese women, the profound impact of language on empowerment becomes evident through journaling. In their language acquisition and self-expression journey, the Thursday Night Ladies transcended cultural and gender boundaries globally for me. I learned that language is not just a communication tool but a catalyst for empowerment, providing individuals with the confidence to navigate the world. Our lessons embraced the notion that every woman's voice deserves recognition, irrespective of cultural or linguistic differences.

As I documented my experiences, I realized that my dedication to nurturing thriving communities, as seen through my involvement with the women's entrepreneurial leadership institute and the Thursday Night Ladies, underscores my significance in creating supportive spaces. I emphasize the collaborative nature of building confidence through active contribution. This overarching theme extends to my global perspective on women's economic empowerment, highlighting the courage needed to confront a world that often marginalizes and silences certain voices. I dig into the distinction between thriving and flourishing, acknowledging that flourishing involves internal fulfillment and a pursuit of meaning.

The entrepreneurial mindset, cultivated through my global experiences, becomes a powerful intersection enabling me to navigate the complexities of an interconnected world. Exposure to diverse cultures becomes a source of empowering lessons, challenging my preconceived notions, broadening horizons, and fostering adaptability and resilience—traits I identify as essential for leadership. Ultimately, my story emphasizes the significance of self-awareness, courage, and the creation of communities of care to unlock individual potential and contribute meaningfully to a world where everyone can shape their narrative. The early

awareness of the importance of women's autonomy propels me to actively contribute to constructing inclusive and flourishing environments.

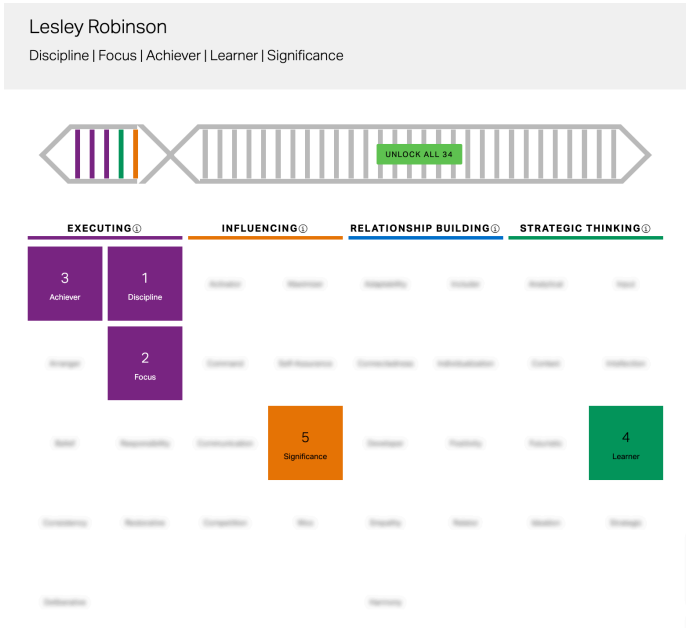
**D. Ikigai Framework**



(adminiolita, 2020)

# E. Strengths Finder Results

2014



2023



## **F. ChatGPT Transcript**

*Prompt: "What are theoretical constructs from an autoethnography lens"*

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that combines elements of autobiography and ethnography. When researchers conduct an autoethnography, they use their own personal experiences as a primary source of data, analyzing these experiences within the context of broader cultural, social, and theoretical frameworks. From an autoethnographic lens, theoretical constructs are key concepts that help in interpreting and understanding personal narratives within these wider contexts. Let's outline the major theoretical constructs often explored through autoethnography:

### Subjectivity and Reflexivity

- Description: Emphasizes the researcher's personal perspective and the reflexive process of examining one's own experiences in relation to the research context.
- Theoretical Frameworks: Phenomenology, Symbolic Interactionism.

### Narrativity and Storytelling

- Description: Focuses on the narrative as a means to convey personal and cultural meanings.
- Theoretical Frameworks: Narrative Inquiry, Hermeneutics.

### Identity and Self

- Description: Examines how identities are constructed, negotiated, and represented in cultural contexts.

- Theoretical Frameworks: Postmodernism, Social Constructionism.  
Power Dynamics and Ethics
- Description: Addresses the ethical considerations and power relations inherent in representing oneself and others in research.
- Theoretical Frameworks: Critical Theory, Feminist Theory.

### Culture and Context

- Description: Explores the influence of cultural, social, and historical contexts on individual experiences.
- Theoretical Frameworks: Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Theory.  
Embodiment and Emotion
- Description: Investigates the role of the body and emotions in shaping experiences and knowledge.
- Theoretical Frameworks: Phenomenology, Affect Theory.

### Subjectivity and Reflexivity

- Subjectivity in autoethnography acknowledges that personal bias, perspectives, and emotions are not only inevitable but also valuable in understanding human experiences. Reflexivity involves a continuous process of self-examination and critical reflection on one's own role in the research, questioning how one's background, emotions, and biases shape the research process and findings.

## Narrativity and Storytelling

- This construct views stories and narratives as fundamental ways through which people make sense of their lives and cultural realities. In autoethnography, the narrative serves as both method and product, offering a rich, contextualized way of presenting research that connects the personal to the cultural.

## Identity and Self

- Autoethnography often explores the fluid, constructed nature of identity, emphasizing how individuals navigate and negotiate their sense of self within various cultural and social contexts. This construct allows for a deep exploration of the intersections of personal history, culture, and social structures in shaping identity.

## Power Dynamics and Ethics

- Power dynamics are critical in autoethnography, as the method involves narrating one's own experiences and potentially those of others. Ethical considerations include issues of consent, confidentiality, and the representation of others, highlighting the need for sensitivity and reflexivity in handling personal and cultural narratives.

## Culture and Context

- This construct emphasizes the importance of situating personal experiences within broader cultural and historical contexts. It explores how these contexts influence and are reflected in individual narratives. It highlights the interconnectedness of personal experiences with cultural norms, values, and histories.

## Embodiment and Emotion

- Embodiment and emotion are central to understanding how experiences are lived through the body and expressed emotionally. This perspective encourages a holistic view of human experience, recognizing the importance of the physical and emotional dimensions in shaping how we understand ourselves and our world.

Autoethnography, through these theoretical constructs, offers a unique and powerful way to explore the complexities of personal experience in relation to social and cultural phenomena. By foregrounding personal narratives within these constructs, autoethnography bridges the gap between the individual and the collective, offering insightful perspectives into the human condition.