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An Analysis of How Female Business Owners Construct and Communicate Identity

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An Analysis of How Female Business Owners Construct and Communicate Identity

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Communication
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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to Elise Peyton Weidhaas, a little girl with an endless curiosity and a positive attitude. I hope you achieve your dreams, maintain your curiosity and develop a love of learning, just like your Mommy.

I also dedicate this to Rob Weidhaas, a supportive husband who helped me achieve my dreams. Thanks for your love and encouragement.
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# Table of Contents

List of Tables v

Abstract vi

Purpose of the study 1

Introduction 2

Chapter 1: Opportunities and conflicts: a review of scholarship on female business owners 9

Entrepreneurship 9

Defining entrepreneurship 10

Categories of entrepreneurship 11

Nascent entrepreneurs must affiliate 12

Female business owners 13

Gendered comparisons create problems 15

Ignorance is not bliss: we can’t ignore gender 15

History of women in the workplace 18

Follow the money to understand American values 19

Work/life issues 23

Public Relations 27

Use of language to construct work identity 32

Identity work: a continuous social process 32

Work narratives explain important aspects of our lives 33

Socially constructed narratives provide fluidity 34

Winnowing identity 35

Integrating identities 37

Social theories that help explain identity construction 38

Research goals 41

RQ1: What existing ideas and concepts do these women use to construct their organizations and identities? 41

RQ2: What structures and forms do female business owners use to guide them in the creation of their new identities? 42

RQ3: What are the practical implications for how they live and work? How will their narrative accounts enable and constrain their personal and work lives? 42
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 2: Methodology</th>
<th>43</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overview of my methodology</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative interviewing defined</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting and design</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics of participants</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturation</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design of the interview questions</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method of data analysis</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Chapter 3: Using existing concepts & ideas | 53 |
| Framing Public Relations | 53 |
| Findings for research question 1: What existing ideas and concepts do these women use to construct their organizations and identities? | 56 |
| Adjectives women use to describe themselves | 59 |
| Calculated risk | 61 |
| Describing their roles | 63 |
| Entrepreneurship | 64 |
| Another layer of complexity: Public Relations | 70 |
| Branding | 75 |
| Storying our lives | 77 |
| I’m different | 77 |
| I’m not superior | 78 |
| I’m a participant in my story | 79 |
| Lessons learned | 80 |

| Chapter 4: Structures & form | 82 |
| RQ2: What structures and forms do female business owners use to guide them in the creation of their new entity? | 82 |
| Working with a fluid business plan | 83 |
| Choosing to stay small | 103 |
| Lessons learned | 104 |

| Chapter 5: Practical implications | 106 |
| RQ3: What are the practical implications for how they live and work? How will their narrative accounts enable and constrain their personal and work lives? | 106 |
| Work/life integration | 107 |
| I’m a Mom-preneur | 110 |
| Control | 115 |
| Gender: an area of control and restraint | 119 |
| Lessons learned | 122 |

| Chapter 6: Discussion | 125 |
| Practical implications | 125 |
| “I’m a mother first” | 126 |
| Business owners control their time | 130 |
Roles and discursive framing | 133
Emerging organizations | 140
The unplanned organization | 140
Mentors as peers | 143
Virtual work | 144
Virtual worker | 145
Virtual teams | 146
Virtual agency | 150
Hitting the business books | 153
Occasions for conversation | 154
Summary of practical applications | 156
Theoretical implications | 159
Reflections about the interview process | 165
Limitations | 167
Opportunities for future research | 171

References | 173

Appendix A: Sample interview questions | 191

Appendix B: Adjectives women used to describe their identities | 192

Appendix C: Phrases women used to describe their roles | 195

Appendix D: IRB approval | 196
## List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1: Examples of how I analyzed interviews</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2: Adjectives women used to describe their identities</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3: Phrases women used to describe their roles</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

Individuals often get asked: So what do you do? This question can be challenging for those in less traditional work settings, such as stay-at-home-moms and the self-employed. To help women better understand the range of possible responses, this study explores how women in Public Relations respond to identity questions that involve both their work and personal lives. I begin by situating the study within relevant literature on entrepreneurship, female business owners, the history of women in the workplace, work/life issues, Public Relations, the use of language to construct work identity, and structuration theory. I conducted one-on-one qualitative interviews as my methodology. Next, I discuss how my research questions led to a variety of often paradoxical findings including: (a) business owners who perceive mothering as their primary role; (b) the development of the “unplanned organization;” (c) business ownership as a phenomenon that seemingly offers more opportunities, but also constrains people in unexpected ways; (d) the emergence of nontraditional work arrangements, which continue to experience some resistance; (e) the idea that advisors can be peers or colleagues; (f) new labels, such as virtual work and virtual agency, that describe individuals’ roles but raise lingering questions about societal perceptions of work; (g) how framing and sensemaking can offer women tools to account for the discontinuities in their narratives.
Purpose of the study

The primary goal of my research is to gain an understanding of how women who own Public Relations practices discursively frame their identities. This includes the narratives they tell, the language they use, and ultimately how these discursive resources shape practical aspects of how these women live and work.

This study originated from a commonplace question: “What do you do?” Frequently, we ask other people this question without realizing how much social pressure some individuals experience as they try to venture an appropriate response. In replying to this question, individuals are called upon to present a socially legitimate work identity. Scholars tell us identity is a fluid, social process that involves an individual offering an identity construction that other people recognize and authenticate (Down, 2006; Karp, 2006). Yet, how do individuals without well-defined jobs or organizational affiliations respond to these questions? For example, how do the unemployed or self-employed respond to these identity questions? This dissertation explores how business owners construct and communicate their personal and organizational identities. The results will both provide deeper insight into the process of identity construction and also offer practical examples of how women do meet this challenge in representing their life choices.
Introduction

Ideas of what constitutes work have intrigued organizational scholars for some time (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2010; Morgan, 2006; Scott & Davis, 2007). These questions have taken on even greater salience as the nature of work in the U.S. has evolved from one of life-long employment to a social contract in which neither worker nor employer feel obligated to one another for the long term (Scott & Davis, 2007). In this tenuous arrangement, employees frequently change jobs in search of better opportunities and employers rarely, if ever, offer the promise of life time employment. Management consultants and some academics now urge people to consider themselves as their own brands (Peters, 1997), and encourage them to think of their careers as boundaryless (Weick, 2001) journeys with many different jobs or stopping points along the way (Bateson, 1989; Whyte, 2001).

Despite these significant discontinuities in work life, people continue to seek ways to make sense of their lived experiences and to find meaning in their occupational activities (Bateson, 1989; Peters, 1997; Weick, 2001; Whyte, 2001). Organizational communication scholars report that an important part of one’s identity is reflected in the language used to describe his or her work. These discursive resources help individuals to formulate ideas about the meaning of their work, which they communicate through the words they use to describe their jobs, duties and work environments (Kuhn, Golden, Jorgenson, Buzzanell, Berkelaar, Kisselburgh, Kleinman, & Cruz, 2008; Tracy &
Specifically, people frame and make sense of their work experiences through the development of narratives designed to capture whom they believe they are for the world (Fairhurst, 2007).

Yet some individuals find themselves far from the canonical story of lifelong employment by a large corporation—those who start their own companies. How do these individuals respond to identity questions? Individuals lacking traditional work environments; such as stay-at-home mothers, the self-employed, and the unemployed; are still called upon to produce a narrative account of their work. This narrative account can be challenging without ready-made and well-understood positions and categories. For example, when you ask a professor at a university what she does, she could respond by explaining she works at X University. However, when a woman answers an identity question with “I am self-employed,” rather than being accepted at face value, this can feel less satisfactory and often encourages even more probing questions.

In responding to identity questions, people often reference their organizational memberships as mechanisms for defining how they represent their actions and speech to others (McPhee & Iverson, 2009). Ahrne (1990) explained that organizations; including work, families and communities; dominate people’s lives because outside of organizations individuals remain largely anonymous. People use organizational resources as references to explain their work lives to others (Giddens, 1984; McPhee & Iverson, 2009), to help create routines in their lives, and to construct a “pragmatic worldview” that enables individuals to make sense of their lives (Ahrne, 1990).
Hytti (2006) similarly emphasized that an individual’s social identity and security are often tied to the organization that employs him or her. Individuals forming new organizations lack the organizational affiliations and resources needed to understand and account for their work experiences (McPhee & Iverson, 2009).

Issues related to identity become even more complex when scholars consider how gender impacts the language people choose to describe themselves and the ways individuals position themselves within different communities, including work, home and organizational affiliations. This study specifically explores issues related to gender and the identity of business owners, which includes the discursive choices they make to describe their occupational experiences. Some scholars (e.g., Gill & Ganesh, 2007; Gupta & Bhave, 2007) suggested that gender influences the language used and that terms such as entrepreneur\(^1\), represent primarily masculine attributes. With few exceptions (Gill, 2006; Gill & Ganesh, 2007; Gupta & Bhave, 2007; Krueger, 2000; Lewis, 2006; Minniti, 2010; Nixdorff & Rosen, 2010; Shelton, 2006), the concept of how self-employed women discursively construct their work identities remains largely ignored. In fact, while female business owners in the United States represent over eight million American women (Pordeli & Wynkoop, 2009), scholarly exploration in this area was almost nonexistent until the 1980s (Nixdorff & Rosen, 2010). In the last decade, the business literature on female business owners primarily examined women in international

\(^1\) Some research suggests the term “entrepreneur” denotes primarily masculine connotations, and thus women may prefer other words or phrases as identity markers. However, the dominant business literature generously uses “entrepreneur”, and thus it appears in this literature review since it may alter the context of the research to use a synonym. However, I deliberately avoided employing the term during my interviews, unless the participant used it first.
settings, the role of mentoring, monetary or funding concerns, work/family balance, technology issues, special strategies for specific ethnic groups, and comparisons between men and women (Moore, 2004; Nixdorff & Rosen, 2010), not how women make sense of and frame their occupational experiences.²

Research on women-owned businesses across a wide-range of industries continues to focus on quantitative studies that imply that males represent the majority of entrepreneurs. Scholars (Aldoory, 2005; Grunig, 2006) indicate a lack of qualitative studies that view women as complex individuals with home and work lives, let alone how women traversed the space between working as an organizational employee and a business owner. In most cases, one must search for research focusing specifically on communication and gender to find scholarship that goes beyond attempts to position men and women as polar opposites, frequently with the male category representing the implied norm.

Qualitative studies of self-employed women would help scholars to better understand the tensions that women experience as they navigate the challenges and opportunities of these unique life choices. Many scholars (Alberts, Riforgiate, Tracy, & Trethewey, 2011; Bateson, 1989; Crittenden, 2001; DeMartino, Barbato, & Jacques, 2006; Edley, 2001; Flaig, 2010; Green & Cohen, 1995; Pfeffer, 2010; Shelton, 2006; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005; Tronto, 1993; Williams, 2007) have attempted to identify the tensions related to women shouldering the majority of household duties and childcare.

² Moore, DP (2004) provides an overview of the scholarship on entrepreneurial women’s topics in key business publications. Interested readers can reference this article for more detailed information.
These studies further scholars’ understanding of gendered stereotypes, but they often focus primarily on childcare and neglect to consider how many gendered assumptions and practices intermingle to constrain women’s lives at home and within their businesses.

In depth, qualitative studies offer a window on how gender issues manifest within the context of women’s careers. Gender influences the careers that women select, the roles of women within these professions, and their likely wages (Ashcraft, 2011; Kuhn et al., 2008). While society continues to make overtures about women engaging in careers related to science and engineering, gender still impacts the ways women react to and pursue these career options (Jorgenson, 2002). A study of women engineers revealed that women actively attempted to dissociate from identification with their gender as a way to avoid the appearance of being different than their male counterparts (Jorgenson, 2002). This suggests that women in diverse professions may react differently to questions of gender based on their career choices, and career may determine whether they will be willing to discuss gender at all. Therefore rather than try to generalize across multiple occupations, I chose to conduct a study focused on a single profession. To better understand the complexities related to women’s careers and choices about their businesses, I used qualitative methods. Qualitative research requires that an interviewer and interviewee form a joint or shared construction of meaning (Mishler, 1986). For this reason, I selected Public Relations, a career field that I worked in for more than ten years.³

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³ As a Public Relations practitioner, I worked for two Public Relations agencies and a large law firm. I left the law firm to work with my husband, who owns a business that sold machinery to companies in the die
By studying this occupation, I also have the opportunity to produce research in an area that remains generally overlooked. Public Relations scholars (Aldoory, 2005; Grunig, 2006) have commented on the lack of scholarship that views women as complex individuals. By adding qualitative accounts, my research will contribute to a growing body of knowledge that recognizes the multifaceted lives of women in Public Relations.

Few studies (Daugherty-Phillingane, 2010) have examined entrepreneurial women, and comprehensive overviews of the available Public Relations literature on women in the field, barely mentioned women business owners (Aldoory, 2005; Grunig, 2006). However, the Public Relations Society of America indicated a strong growth in “solo-practitioners,” which may mean more self-employed women will need to account for their work lives (Crane, 2012).

From both a practical and theoretical standpoint, studies that explore how women frame their work experiences can provide tangible benefits. Research in this area will help scholars to better understand the diverse range of career options, choices and opportunities available to women business owners. From a practical perspective, management scholars informed us that the organizational legitimacy in the early stages is often linked to the founder or entrepreneur (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007; Rode & Vallaster, 2005; Zott & Huy, 2007). Rode and Vallaster (2005) reported that entrepreneurial startups must gain legitimacy as a means of survival and in the initial stages an organization’s brand or identity is a reflection of the founder. The practical cutting industry. Both of these experiences influence my identity construction. Ahrne (1990) indicated people employed multiple and complex organizational affiliations to construct a practical view of the world, and both of these experiences emerged in conversation with the participants in this study.
implication in these studies suggests the ability to communicate one’s identity can
determine the success or failure of the organization. Thus, by helping women to
discursively articulate their identities as entrepreneurs or business owners, this study will
help more women to use this new discursive repertoire to grow their businesses.
Chapter 1: Opportunities and conflicts: a review of scholarship on female business owners

Female business owners experience a number of tensions as they attempt to reconcile their identities; these often include conflicts between the role of entrepreneur or business owner and public expectations related to their gender. Women may experience difficulties constructing their identities as entrepreneurial women based on gendered connotations of the term entrepreneur. Further, by examining research on female business owners and the history of women in the workforce, we begin to see additional pressures emerge for women, including issues related to work/life integration and family obligations. Further, I situate the complexities of female business owners within the Public Relations industry by revealing specific issues for women practitioners in this field. The chapter concludes by examining the use of language to construct narrative identities, which provides a foundation for examining how these fundamental constructs emerge within women’s identities.

Entrepreneurship

By examining the roots of entrepreneurship and its associated connotations, we can begin to situate this experience within U.S. culture and later examine it as a potential identity marker for women who start businesses.
To better understand the importance of entrepreneurship, it is helpful to review some of the business literature that situates the impact of entrepreneurship on the American economy. Essentially, entrepreneurship fuels the U.S. economy with new businesses accounting for 70 percent of economic growth, 75 percent of new jobs and accounts for 99 percent of employers (Chupp, 2010). Business schools accentuate the appeal of entrepreneurship by offering degree programs specifically in entrepreneurship. Zahra, Newey and Shaver (2011) called attention to what they referred to as “phenomenal growth” in business school entrepreneurship programs citing more than 200 entrepreneurship centers that were members of the National Consortium of Entrepreneurship Centers in 2010. Further, Zahra et al. (2011) indicate this number does not represent all of the entrepreneurship programs across the U.S., but rather it hints at the growing popularity of entrepreneurship within U.S. business culture.

**Defining entrepreneurship**

While entrepreneurs represent a significant portion of the American economy, one of the complexities facing a scholar studying entrepreneurship is the many different definitions of the term. Scholars across disciplines cite the difficulty of pinning down a single, agreed upon definition (Hytti, 2005; Johansson, 2009; Sørensen, 2008).

Johansson (2009) credits two French authors, Richard Cantillon and Jean Baptise Say, as introducing the concept to economics in the 1700s. The entrepreneur was commonly referred to as “celu qui entreprend quelque chose,” which Johansson translated to “a person who is active and gets things done” (Johansson, 2009). Other definitions include “an intense drive to get things done” (Murnieks, 2008) and a “person who is willing to take large risks on uncertain ventures” (Sardy & Alon, 2007).
Many of the qualitative studies on entrepreneurship have been conducted outside the United States in places such as Australia (Cross & Travaglione, 2003), Finland (Hytti, 2005), Sweden (Johansson, 2009), and Denmark (Sørensen, 2008). With a few exceptions (Gill & Ganesh, 2007; Murnieks, 2008; Sardy & Alon, 2007; Zott & Huy, 2007), American scholars tend to study other aspects of organization and communication. Yet, if people shape their identities in large part based on their environment and culture, as suggested by narrative scholars (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Garro and Mattingly, 2000; MacIntyre, 2007), then one must consider that U.S. entrepreneurs will frame their business ownership differently than their foreign counterparts and potentially create significantly different narrative accounts. The relatively small number of qualitative U.S. studies of entrepreneurship reveals a gap of qualitative entrepreneurship literature that I intend to address through this study.

**Categories of entrepreneurship**

The research that does exist in the business literature defines different categories of entrepreneurship including the institutional entrepreneur, someone within an existing industry whose actions fall outside the prescribed norm (Dejean, Gond, & Leca, 2004); a franchise entrepreneur, someone who follows a script from a previously established business model; and a nascent entrepreneur, someone who starts a completely new venture that contains inherent risk in its startup stages (Sardy & Alon, 2007). For this dissertation, I will examine the latter category of nascent entrepreneurs because the identity construction for these individuals will likely include more complex identity negotiations since they lack the organizational framework that exists for institutional and franchise entrepreneurs. While nascent entrepreneurs may carry some membership from
previous organizational affiliations (McPhee & Iverson, 2009), they are largely defining a new structure and new membership categories without the help of established members to guide them through anticipatory socialization.

*Nascent entrepreneurs must affiliate*

It makes sense that entrepreneurs must access some sort of occupational affiliation (Ahrne, 1990; Giddens, 1984), but how do they select the appropriate ones? Many options exist, including both semi-organized affiliations, such as shops, the media, travel and leisure activities. More structured possibilities might include family, previous work environments and clubs or organizations, such as trade groups, religious affiliations, and community-based groups. A person affiliates with various organizations to differing degrees during her lifetime, and only she can determine which ones to draw from to construct her worldview (Ahrne, 1990), which will influence how she responds to identity questions.

Considerable pressure exists to select suitable structures and affiliations, because the ability to provide an entrepreneurial account in a capitalist society can influence not only the founder’s personal identity, but the lack of a convincing account can potentially raise questions about her organization’s legitimacy (Rode & Vallaster, 2005).

That said; this is not completely uncharted territory. Weick (2001) provided some insight into how individuals make sense of and explain their new businesses in his discussion of boundaryless careers. He proposed that individuals make sense of the trajectory of their careers in different ways, and often reference previous organizational scripts, behaviors and institutional policies (Weick, 2001). For example, a Public
Relations practitioner who starts her own business may reference her prior experiences working for Public Relations agencies to help her define her new identity. Weick (2001) also indicated that this sensemaking evolves over time and does not follow a prescribed format (Weick, 2001). Thus, one cannot generalize that all Public Relations entrepreneurs will primarily employ their previous work experience as part of their new identities as nascent entrepreneurs.

**Female business owners**

To add to the complexity of discussing identity, one must also consider the impact of gender because it influences women’s choices about the jobs they pursue (Mease, 2011); the constraints they face related to career advancement (Daugherty-Phillingane, 2010; Mainiero, 1994); their role as family caretakers (Bateson, 1989; Edley, 2001; Flaig, 2010; Green & Cohen, 1995; Shelton, 2006; Williams, 2007); and even their perception of their entrepreneurial capabilities (Thebaud, 2010).

Women entrepreneurs or business owners only recently entered the academic literature, and as one scholar wrote as late as 1995, women entrepreneurs are largely “invisible” (Green & Cohen, 1995). Today, studies of women-owned businesses indicate growth that outpaces other businesses (Pordeli & Wynkoop, 2009), but scholarship in this area remains limited (Brush & Cooper, 2012; Warren, 2004). Brush and Cooper (2012) stated that while women “are making significant contributions,” studies of female entrepreneurs account for less than 10% of the academic literature on entrepreneurs. A review of the business literature revealed that scholars select the term female “business owner” and “entrepreneur” based more on the scholar’s personal preference than
distinctly different definitions. Based on limited research studies on females who own businesses (Brush & Cooper, 2012; Green & Cohen, 1995; Warren, 2004), the following section includes both references and uses the terms interchangeably based primarily on the preference of the author(s) cited.

The studies of female business owners that exist in business journals tend to address the difficulty of women obtaining resources (Merrett & Gruidl, 2000; Yohn, 2006; Zott & Huy, 2007), issues related to balancing a new venture and childcare (Green & Cohen, 1995), and trait differences in male and female entrepreneurs (Gupta & Bhawe, 2007; Gupta & Fernandez, 2009; Krueger, 2000). In most cases, one must search publications focused specifically on communication and gender to find articles that consider women as complex, multi-faceted individuals that challenge traditional gender roles.

Warren (2004) explored the complexities of how women form entrepreneurial identities, initially rejecting the role entrepreneur, but later recognizing some social benefits and integrating it as part of their identities. In this study, the women identified first with their professions, and later, based on increasing pressure from social networks, they adopted the term entrepreneur. Warren (2004) refers to this process as a “reflexive journey” in which women work through various discourses to determine the appropriate ones. These discourses are socially vetted in their “communities of practices;” these communities help newcomers legitimize their new identities and form socially acceptable stories of their transition from employment to entrepreneurship. Women initially thought the word entrepreneur held negative connotations, but later the women recognized the need to “play the game”. Warren (2004) attributed women’s acceptance of the term
entrepreneur as part of their alignment with the “discourses of enterprise,” which she indicated in some cases was a means to access business resources, including funding.

**Gendered comparisons create problems**

Several gender-related articles (Lewis, 2006; Linstead & Brewis, 2004; Mirchandani, 1999) pointed out the limitations in comparing the entrepreneurial experiences of men and women, including that these studies almost always attempt to lump all men and women into two categories. This despite the fact that many scholars remind us that binary categories perpetuate the idea that one gender dominates or represents a norm, while the opposing gender represents the “other” or an inferior entrepreneur (Lewis, 2006). Further, it implies that all women or all men will react similarly, reflecting an essentialist view of gender. Thus, academics (Lewis, 2006; Linstead & Brewis, 2004; Mirchandani, 1999) recommended that researchers seek a more granular understanding that considers gender issues as they relate to structure and agency. These and similar articles on entrepreneurial females (Gill, 2006; Gill & Ganesh, 2007; Lewis, 2006) asked academics to consider the complexities facing women as they situated their identities in complex and shifting environments.

**Ignorance is not bliss: we can’t ignore gender**

Some individuals, particularly those in male-dominated industries, may attempt to dissociate from their gender in suggesting they don’t qualify as the typical female, or rejecting their feminine characteristics entirely (Jorgenson, 2002). Lewis (2006) studied female entrepreneurs and suggested that “gender blindness,” or the propensity for women to avoid references to gender, only reified structures that referred to entrepreneurship as a
male category. By ignoring the prevalence of female entrepreneurs and avoiding references to their gender, these women continued to suggest that they existed in the category of “other,” essentially that these women did not represent the norm and allowed gendered practices to continue (Lewis, 2006).

Several examples may help to highlight how gendered norms persist in the discourse around entrepreneurship. Gill and Ganesh (2007) provided examples of how the masculine image of an entrepreneur as a dominant category gets reified in communication. Both Gill and Ganesh (2007) as well as Gupta (2008) pointed to entrepreneurial stories that include primarily male role models, such as Bill Gates, Sam Walton (Gupta & Fernandez, 2009), Donald Trump and Henry Ford (Gill & Ganesh, 2007). Most Americans still recognize historical male business owners, including Henry Ford or railroad barons, such as Cornelius Vanderbilt, but women, for instance the sisters, Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin, who grew their brokerage firm to an estimated $700,000 in 1870 and Hetty Green, a U.S. business owner reportedly the wealthiest woman in the world in 1916 (Yohn, 2006), remain largely forgotten.

Colloquial phrases, expressions and words also further gendered stereotypes. Several of the authors (Gill & Ganesh, 2007; Gupta & Fernandez, 2009) demonstrated that terms used to describe entrepreneurship carry male connotations. For example, words including “assertive, aggressive” (Gupta & Fernandez, 2009) or “autonomy” (Gill & Ganesh, 2007) typically do not portray feminine characteristics.

Many times the use of masculine terms occurs unconsciously. Fairhurst (2007) reminded scholars that gender exists whether people consciously acknowledge it or not,
and it impacts the way individuals organize and identify themselves (Fairhurst, 2007). Giddens’ (1984) theories on structuration explain that social identity categories are discursively constructed and reconstructed in speech acts. Therefore, if scholars hope to transform the way people react to gender, individuals must first recognize that they construct their identities based on gendered structures and power relations in society (Nadin, 2007). These gendered assumptions emerge in discourse and only by consciously acknowledging these practices can individuals hope to eliminate them from their speech and actions.

Regardless of the gender constraints women face when they select entrepreneurship as a career option, women still opt for business ownership (Pordeli & Wynkoop, 2009). The Center for Women’s Business Research stated as of October 2009 eight million U.S. businesses reported a female owning the majority of the business, and these entities earned $3 trillion in annual income, created 23 million jobs, which represented 16 percent of the labor market. Even more interesting, if we classified U.S. women-owned businesses as their own country, “they would have the 5th largest GDP in the world, trailing closely behind Germany, and ahead of countries including France, United Kingdom and Italy” (Pordeli & Wynkoop, 2009).

The sustained growth in female-owned businesses could suggest that a growing number of women will need to negotiate their work identities; thus this research project could provide many women with access to a better understanding of themselves as well as their roles within a structure that simultaneously creates some opportunities while limiting others (Ahrne, 1990).
History of women in the workplace

To better understand the way gender manifests in society, I will review the history of women in the workforce. By accessing gendered structures and patterns from the past, I can identify the gendered practices that continue to get reproduced in society. Weick (2001) explained that people make sense of the world retrospectively as they attempt to find a unique way of framing or “parsing” the information. For example, scholars (Ashcraft, 2011; Kuhn et al., 2008) informed us that women make decisions about their careers and potential wages based on gender. Women reference their gendered experiences and the experiences of other females as they construct their worldview and their place within the business world. Additionally, people access their perceptions of societal norms, which Giddens (1984) indicated get reified generation after generation. Thus, it’s important to review the history of how women’s employment evolved in the United States to better understand what influences the interpretive frames women select.

Framing, according to Goffman (1974), occurs, “when the individual in our western society recognizes a particular event, he tends, whatever else he does, to imply in this response (and in effect employ) one or more frameworks or schemata of interpretation… rendering what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful.” Essentially, framing allows people to interpret and organize their experiences within a given context. Goffman referred to framing as part of a face-to-face interaction, an opportunity for individuals to perform who they believe they are for others. To extend Goffman’s work on framing to female business owners, these women employ a framework to decipher meaning from what could otherwise get construed as meaningless experiences. An individual can use a primary framework to
“locate, perceive, identify and label” (Goffman, 1974) these seemingly diverse items into a cohesive account of her life (Bateson, 1992; Gergen, 1992).

Giddens (1984) also suggested people examine their personal experiences and the social structure to make sense of their lives. This structure does not emerge with their arrival; the social structure exists long before they are born and will continue to exist after they leave. People constantly examine their actions based on the social system to determine if the two align (Weick, 2001), which means it’s important to look beyond the present context. The information in this section explores the history of work as it relates to the segmentation of gender roles and how they continue to, as Giddens (1984) suggested, get reified by social actors. By offering the history of women in the workforce, I hope to expose how power structures that limit women’s value continue to get reinforced and perpetuated in an ongoing social system.

**Follow the money to understand American values**

A review of our capitalist system portrays early American women as controlled by patriarchal constraints that did not allow them access to what society deemed powerful, money.  

While money maintains an important role in a capitalist society, money also is the visual or concrete representation of what we value most. Throughout the 17th and 18th

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4 While this author does not intend to imply a person’s value can be represented as a monetary figure, in a society that often links wealth and power, one cannot ignore the implications of denying women access to a powerful business tool.
century, important moral and political values related to work shifted as well as the ways in which people earned incomes. Tronto (1993) indicated women’s “moral legacy” solidified at the end of the 18th century when men began to view themselves as “bourgeois entrepreneurs” and sought employment outside of the home, while women continued to perform domestic duties. Thus, the change from the home as a place of economic power, as in the days of farmers, to one that situated “valuable work,” as defined by monetary income, to an exterior location relegated women to a lesser societal role (Tronto, 1993).

Early organizations in American society further punctuated the gap between men and women’s moral and social roles. Based on a patriarchal system and furthered by hierarchy, early organizations cared little for workers and focused almost exclusively on producing structures that increased output (Morgan, 2006). Mass production techniques that emerged in the 19th century and the early 20th century continued to enforce organizational control through scientific management and bureaucracy. Morgan (2006) compared many of these early organizational structures to machines. The machine metaphor deemphasized the human aspect of work and further perpetuates a male-dominated hierarchal system. In a male system, Davies (1996) proposed women have long existed as “silent partners.” Essentially, she argued women have long held the support role, such as the male CEO and female secretary. Ashcraft (2011) built on this argument to suggest scholars must consider not merely the gender of the person performing the task, but also how tasks are valued within an organizational structure, thus potentially exposing gender inequalities. If one uses Ashcraft’s (2011) suggestion of attributing organizational value to job roles, one notices that although women’s presence
in the workplace has increased, the value of their labor does not always achieve organizational significance or monetary rewards.

Historically, women’s roles as mothers and housewives virtually went unnoticed in a society focused on money (Crittenden, 2001; Tronto, 1993). As women moved into the workplace, they dominated career fields related to caring, such as teachers and nurses, which garnered lower wages than male-dominated professions (Tronto, 1993). Some scholars also noticed when women moved into conventionally male occupations, these professions started to lose power and, in every occupation, documented pay differences between women and men existed and still exist today (Calas & Smircich, 2006; Jarrett & Tchen, 2011).

Some (Green & Cohen, 1995) suggested entrepreneurship offered women a way to circumvent traditional workplaces that devalued women or placed undue stress on women who tried to balance both home and workplace responsibilities. However, it’s not that simple. As we have been discussing, female entrepreneurs face many challenges to personal identity (Gill, 2006), issues related to juggling the demands of family and work responsibilities (Gill, 2006; Shelton, 2006), and attacks on their morals related to the choices they make about how to construct their work/lives (Yohn, 2006).

A few examples exist of successful female entrepreneurs in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, but these women experienced many challenges that forced them to either deal with ridicule and slander or to “find a beard,” essentially finding a man willing to publically own the company (Yohn, 2006). It’s unclear from these accounts if women understood the gender stereotyping and biased enforcement of the moral codes, but I
argue that these constraints may have been modified over time, but vestiges of these cultural and structural restrictions still exist today. Yohn (2006) expressed similar concerns when she wrote, “what is still needed is a more overt or self-conscious challenge to the stigma attached to female entrepreneurs, a complete airing of the gendered dynamics underlying the process of moneymaking in the US…”

While the civil rights movement in the 1960s provided women with the right to fight for equal opportunity and the 1974 Equal Credit Opportunity Act reduced the credit barriers for women, scholars (Lewis, 2006; Luehrsen, 2010; Minniti, 2010; Nixdorff & Rosen, 2010; Shelton, 2006; Yohn, 2006) have suggested gender stereotypes still exist and males still dominant capitalistic endeavors. I propose that terms, such as “mom-preneur” and “open collars”, which refer to the estimated 9.8 million women who work from home and potentially dress in casual attire (Grunig et al, 2001), only perpetuate the myth that women don’t represent serious, long-term business owners.

Unfortunately, many people in our society still question women’s business abilities. While some may think that by the 20th century Americans have equalized gender inequalities, a 2011 study prepared for the White House Council on Women and Girls proved that women still earned only 75 percent as much as men (Jarrett & Tchen, 2011), and frequently managed income-generating jobs and the necessary unpaid domestic labor (Sharpiro, Ingols, & Blake-Beard, 2008; Shelton, 2006), suggesting gendered perceptions still maintain a strong foothold in America’s capitalist system.

Scholars also pointed out concerns for women such as breaking through the proverbial glass ceiling (Mainiero, 1994) and the sacrifices women make to juggle
home/life challenges (Grunig, 2006; Mainiero, 1994). These issues portray how gender impacts women’s roles within the workplace. For example, the literature rarely examines the difficulties of men attempting to balance a career and childcare in a dual-parent household. Nor do academics typically research how men’s careers get sidelined or stunted based on their gender. Instead, women experience gender-related roadblocks and, in most cases, must also find ways to negotiate the “second shift,” regardless of whether this includes childcare or just household chores (Hochschild & Machung, 1989).

Work/life issues

Many scholars who studied women-owned businesses sought to identify reasons why women selected entrepreneurship as a career choice. In examining career choices, scholars often referenced a push/pull dichotomy (Hytti, 2005). For example, a woman may be pushed out of a traditional work environment because of an inflexible schedule that restricts her ability to care for her family. This push may make owning a business in which she can create her own schedule emerge as a viable career option. However, Hytti (2005) warned academics that reducing career choices to a simple push/pull dichotomy can limit their understanding because it emphasizes a simplistic approach. While many scholars (Merrett & Gruidl, 2000; Shelton, 2006; Yohn, 2006; Zott & Huy, 2007) addressed only one aspect of female entrepreneurs’ decision making process, it’s important to recognize that there are often many complex variables at stake (e.g. finances, family obligations, career opportunities, etc.).

Many scholars who studied the reasons women selected specific career options mentioned women’s struggle to balance a family and career (Albers et al., 2011; Bateson, 1989; Crittenden, 2001; DeMartino et al., 2006; Edley, 2001; Flaig, 2010; Green
& Cohen, 1995; Pfeffer, 2010; Shelton, 2006; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005; Tronto, 1993; Williams, 2007). Much has been written about women’s “work/life balance,” but some academics felt that scholars overused or misused the phrase in ways that implied that an ideal balance existed between work and home life (Caproni, 2004; Gill, 2006). The concept that an ideal balance existed could encourage some individuals to focus on a heightened form of efficiency (Caproni, 2004). On the surface, efficiency may seem desirable, but as Caproni (2004) pointed out, efficiency is not desirable in all areas of life, including relationships with family, friends and communities. Some scholars rejected “work/life balance” in favor of terms such as “integration” (Grunig, 2006) or “crystallization” (Gill, 2006). 5

Regardless of the term used, women must find a way to arrange their lives to accommodate both work and home obligations. In a study of managerial mothers (Buzzanell, Meisenbach, Remke, Liu, Bowers, & Conn, 2005), researchers found that these working mothers engaged in a form of sensemaking that attempted to rationalize their decisions to work and at the same time positioned their children as primary. In this study, the women framed their ability to successfully arrange childcare as evidence that they were responsible mothers. These women framed their decisions to simultaneously work and raise children as superior to the choices of stay-at-home moms. These managerial mothers wanted to maintain primary responsibility for their children while working and also subsequently framed their children’s fathers as less responsible

5 To address these concerns, I find it important to point out that when I use the term balance, I do not mean to imply that an ideal can be reached. When appropriate, I have used other words, but I continue to employ the term when reference to another phrase would alter the meaning or intention of an author.
caregivers (Buzzanell et al., 2005). This study suggested while women can frame and enact mothering in a variety of ways, women overwhelmingly feel attracted to traditional gender roles in which the responsibility for raising a child rested predominantly with the female. One unfortunate by-product of this desire is that it can marginalize and minimize the value of stay-at-home moms and other family members who might offer much needed support.

In some cases, women decide to leave high-profile careers to focus on family obligations (Williams, 2007) because they can’t juggle both demands simultaneously. The choice to leave work—often called the “opt-out revolution”—does not necessarily indicate an intense mothering desire on the part of professional women; many mothers who left the workforce to raise children confessed they missed their former positions, but felt they simply needed to choose between mothering and a career (Williams, 2007). Shapiro et al (2008) appropriately called this a double-bind because if these women continued to work, they faced possible scrutiny as “bad mothers” or may experience personal guilt for not being home with their children. Selecting to leave the workforce to raise children also carried consequences because “opting out,” “off ramping,” or following the “mommy track” all implied negative or even “deviant” implications (Sharpiro et al., 2008).

Shapiro et al. (2008) advocated self-employment as a way out of the double-bind and the assumption that “work is primary,” which implied that the model employee lived to work and placed his or her family as secondary to work responsibilities. While this study provided women with an alternate way of framing choices about their work lives, it failed to recognize the time and resource commitment that accompany entrepreneurship.
Another scholar noted that women business owners often underestimate the amount of time and energy needed to undertake both a new business and domestic duties (Shelton, 2006). In other words, suggesting that women can overcome work/life issues by “simply” starting a business ignores the complexities necessary to make this business successful and neglects to address the societal perceptions that further gendered stereotypes that, regardless of occupation, presume a woman should oversee the domestic sphere.

By suggesting that women start businesses to create a better way to schedule their work and family responsibilities, also leaves out the many other reasons women decide to start businesses. Some women chose to start businesses to advance their careers, achieve a personal dream or in response to an “environmental issue,” such as downsizing (DeMartino et al., 2006). Others wanted to “be their own boss,” reduce the commute or perceive business ownership as a way to avoid office politics (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001).

Several studies (Mirchandani, 1999; Morris, Miyasaki, Watters, & Coombes, 2006) reviewed different categories of women entrepreneurs, suggesting that scholars can’t classify all women entrepreneurs as seeking a way to manage domestic obligations, namely childcare, and work. Morris et al. (2006) proposed that women consciously make choices about the reasons they start a business and the type of business growth they desire. These researchers suggested that women actively chose whether or not they wanted fast-paced or modest growth for their businesses, which often correlated to their life goals that might or might not include children. Scholars need to acknowledge that differences exist for women in the ways they perceive their identities, their families, businesses, and the industries and general environments in which they live and work.
(Morris et al., 2006). Studies showed that even women with both families and businesses may decide to place their businesses before their families, reminding us that work/family relationships and career choices cannot be generalized, even when examining one gender (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005).

However, if women can structure their own environments, females may create environments that align better with their interests. For example, if women preferred close relationships (Stackman & Pinder, 1999), they could start businesses that relied on building strong ongoing relationships, such as Public Relations firms that focused on a few specific clients (Daugherty-Phillingane, 2010) rather than relationships of less depth with more people. Essentially, by starting their own businesses some women can create environments that support their skills, ambitions and needs.

Thus far I have introduced key concepts related to female business owners and the history of women in the workforce. Next, I will narrow my focus to one occupation, Public Relations.

**Public Relations**

This dissertation uses a purposive sample of women working in the Public Relations industry, a career field dominated by women and with a broad, ambiguous definition, which may impact how women construct their identities as not only business owners, but also as women within this professional field.

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the largest, most established Public Relations association stated that “Public Relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their
publics” (PRSA, 2012). This definition purposely employs the term “organization” to encompass a wide variety of entities, including nonprofit and for-profit. Additionally, the use of the word “public” involves the “attitudes and values of” groups including external audiences, stakeholders, employees, media, industry associations, and consumers (Public Relations Society of America, 2012).

Currently, the Public Relations field attracts more women than men. A 2010 study indicated that 80 percent of students studying Public Relations in colleges or universities were women (Daugherty-Phillingane, 2010). One of the most recognized scholars in Public Relations, Larissa A. Grunig, suggested that while women maintained a majority position within the Public Relations industry, the industry culture as a whole still reflected a masculine agenda and did not address issues important to women, such as work/life integration (Grunig, 2006).

In an industry dominated by female professionals, one can still find overt examples of gendered work both in practice and in academic pursuits (Daugherty-Phillingane, 2010; Grunig, 2006). Reports commissioned by academics and industry associations that refer to Public Relations as the “velvet ghetto” signify the role of women in Public Relations and the decreasing status of the field as more women enter the profession (Cline, 1996; Toth, Cline, IABC Research Foundation, 1989).

Historically, feminist scholarship in Public Relations faced challenges similar to other professions, with research predominately addressing issues of power related to women’s unequal representation in management positions (Creedon, 1991; Toth, 1993; Wrigley, 2002), setting parameters that pitted females versus males in studies in which
the male category represented the perceived norm (Aldoory, 2005), and studies of “work-life balance” (Aldoory, Jiang, Toth, & Sha, 2008). Similar to Tronto (1993), Aldoory (2005) reported that feminine professions are undervalued, and thus, when women became dominant players in Public Relations, Aldoory (2005) claimed the profession’s credibility and average salary declined.

Statistics on women in the field continue to indicate widespread and unaddressed inequalities. For example, while more than 85 percent of the Public Relations practitioners are women, less than 20 percent are in a management position, which supports the premise that greater numbers of women do not necessarily eliminate gender inequalities (Aldoory, 2009). In fact, Public Relations research that references feminism often gets rejected as “man-hating” and “radical” (Aldoory, 2009). Stephen (2000) coded 31,500 journal articles from 70 communication journals, including Public Relations journals, between 1962 and 1997, and he noted the lack of scholarship in Public Relations that challenged gendered practices. Out of 103 articles in the Journal of Public Relations Research, only eight covered issues related to gender, feminism or women. The Public Relations Review also offered only three percent coverage for issues related to women, which suggests that gender inequalities remain largely ignored in both the academic literature and in practice (Aldoory, 2009; Stephen, 2000). A 2011 content analysis of industry publications revealed a similar trend, indicating that issues related to gender still lack the attention needed (Austin, 2011). Aldoory (2005) called for a complete deconstruction of the gendered practices surrounding Public Relations and recommended scholars engage in qualitative research methods to uncover the gendered practices of power in the profession (Aldoory et al., 2008).
Grunig (2006) and Aldoory (2006) both completed comprehensive overviews of the available Public Relations literature on women, but neither one cited a focus on women as business owners. In fact, Grunig (2006) briefly mentioned it as a form of “dropping out,” suggesting that it might be a coping strategy for individuals who hit the glass ceiling. In a book that examined women in Public Relations, the chapter on “Women in Management and Entrepreneurship” referred to it as a way of “opt[ing] out of the salaried work force” and focused on how entrepreneurship or “mom-preneurs” can spend more time with their children, estimating that 89 percent of women-owned businesses represented single proprietors working out of their homes. The chapter concluded by stating, “home-based work in Public Relations becomes an attractive option for extraordinarily capable women who are tired of fighting inflexible structures for inadequate pay. These independent women are motivated less by a desire to avoid or escape from sexual harassment than they are to spend time with their children” (Grunig et. al, 2001).

This excerpt indicates that gendered stereotypes continue to limit women in the workplace, and equally as important, limit our thinking about the reasons women opt for entrepreneurship. Grunig (2001) clearly believed women decide to own a business primarily to provide themselves with more time to mother, but this too provides a gendered interpretation of women’s motivations, which could further cement ideas about gendered roles and gendered work in the United States. Is it true that women start businesses to give them more time to mother? Should parenting be primarily a female’s responsibility? I believe our society and academics should question these gendered
assumptions because by leaving them untouched, we reinforce them for the next
generation of women business owners.

The next generation of Public Relations business owners may be much larger
than the last one. A recent article in *Inc.* magazine named Public Relations as one of the
best industries to start a business (Lagorio, 2011). The Public Relations Society of
America reported an increase in what it termed “solo practitioners” or independent
practitioners. In 2010, 15.5 percent of PRSA members reported solo practitioner status,
but this increased more than 18 percent within only the first four months of 2011
(Lagorio, 2011). It’s unclear from this report how many of these independent
practitioners are female, but in a 2007 survey of solo practitioners, 78% were female and
44% of respondents reported children under 18 in their homes (Rayburn, Hazleton,
Jackson, 2008). These numbers indicate a growing number of females who may need to
account for their work lives and that motherhood may not be the only reason these
women decide to start a business.

While several academics (Daugherty-Phillingane, 2010; Gaggioli, 2011) explored
topics related to entrepreneurship in Public Relations following Grunig’s critique, they
focused on gaining an understanding of issues related to practice, motivation, ethics and
mentoring, not an exploration of identity and framing, which leads me to argue that a
deeper understanding of how these women construct their identities through narrative
will provide access to new and thought-provoking ideas for both scholars and
practitioners.
Use of language to construct work identity

The beginning of this literature review explored potential tensions that the women in this study may experience as they negotiate their new identities as female business owners in Public Relations. The next section of the literature review will delve deeper into issues related to identity and how identity gets constructed and reconstructed in everyday life.

Identity work: a continuous, social process

Identity is a reflexive, emergent process that gets constructed as part of a social exchange and gets communicated through narrative (Gergen, 1992; Linde, 1993; Warren, 2004). The process of constructing a narrative identity requires work because identities need to be socially accepted, and these identities are not static. Identities evolve and change based on the listener as well life circumstances (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Alvessson and Willmott (2002) state: “Given the accomplished and sometimes precarious nature of contemporary identity, much if not all activity involves active identity work.” This work involves self-doubt, and often tensions emerge based on contradictions in our lives. People maintain multifaceted existences and so identity work can often involve emotional tensions as people attempt to discursively reposition themselves to meet changing situations (Alvessson & Willmott, 2002).

One might assume that with the work involved in identity that people would attempt to avoid identity construction, but the reverse is true because people need their identities to help them act in a complex world. Identities play an important role in our lives because “identities give behavior a frame through which the environment is
perceived, understood and acted upon” (Sacharin, Lee & Gonzalez, 2009). Thus, people make life choices and act upon these decisions based on their identities. Gergen (1992) explains “…each of us makes sense of our lives, our worlds, our experiences via the repertoire of stories available to us.”

**Work narratives explain important aspects of our lives**

Stories or narratives become the vehicle by which we communicate these identities to others and get feedback to make necessary adjustments to our identities (Dutton, Roberts, & Bendar, 2010; Gergen, 1992; Ibarra et al, 2010; Linde, 1993; Warren, 2004). Through narrative people can explain how their lives include coherence, even though at a glance events in their lives may appear unconnected (Bateson, 1989; Linde, 1993). For example, people often explain the trajectory of their careers through narrative; this forum allows people to explain ruptures in their career path and choices to change or end their careers (Bateson, 1989; Linde, 1993; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

People spend much of their waking days from age 21-70 at work and because of this individuals place great emphasis on work identities (Gini, 1998). Kuhn et al. (2008) specifically studied workplace identity from the perspective that people create their work identities and the meaning of their work through discursive narratives. Individuals’ workplace identities encompass more than simply the tasks they perform; people use discourse to define what work means as part of a coherent whole, which involves conversations both at work and in other locations (Kuhn et al., 2008).
**Socially constructed narratives provide fluidity**

Several scholars (Down, 2006; Eisenberg, 1984; Karp, 2006) suggested that people’s views of themselves emerged in conversation with others. Entrepreneurial identity is also situated in conversations, which vary based on the context (Down, 2006; Karp, 2006); thus one may use different language to explain his or her role as an entrepreneur to family, friends and business associates. Each translation or story exists within a cultural setting that imposes traditions and norms on the way a person responds with the narrative of whom he or she is for the world (Bruner, 1990; MacIntyre, 2007).

Discourse allows people to construct and share narratives that express identity and influence behaviors (Fairhurst, 2007). Down (2006), an author who studied entrepreneurial identity, reminded scholars that people communicate their views of reality through language, and individuals can’t pinpoint one definitive, unwavering definition of reality because language is fluid and part of a social environment that evolves and changes with the situation (Down, 2006).

Several scholars who supported identity as a fluid, socially constructed phenomenon pointed out the difficulties of studying identity by using the personality trait approach, entrepreneurial cognition, and a rationalistic or positivistic stance (Cross & Travaglione, 2003; Down, 2006; Karp, 2006). These approaches imply that entrepreneurism is a static concept and, as in the personality-trait approach, one that can be reduced or defined by a number of traits often used to determine potential success (Cross & Travaglione, 2003; Down, 2006; Karp, 2006).
Instead, business owners can choose from a broad range of options. If one takes a postmodern view of identity, then he or she rejects these earlier theories because postmodernists suggest the lack of a grand narrative and a fragmented self full of contradictions existing in a socially constructed world (Taylor, 2005). Hytti (2005) informed academics that entrepreneurs can reject stereotypical images and act as independent agents in their own identity construction.

**Winnowing identity**

Although a full range of possibilities exist, women must choose how to define and narrate their identities. Several scholars explained how women narrow this selection process. Giddens (1984) indicated people act as independent agents in their identity construction, and they consciously or unconsciously use past resources to narrate their present. Ahrne (1990) reminded scholars that while no template exists, people construct their practical relationship with the world based on many different information sources located in their past, including, “mixing gossip, official news, advice from friends and relatives together with one’s own observations.” To apply the work of these scholars to female business owners, the women construct their identities consciously or unconsciously based on their past experiences as well as practical advice from people in their communities.

A constructionist approach which suggests “human reality is constantly being constructed, narrated and developed,” might be used as a framework to explore identity (Karp, 2006). Karp (2006) explained entrepreneurs do not follow a plan that can be generalized for all entrepreneurs; rather, “entrepreneurs act subjectively in accordance
with their own perception of reality…they engage in a construction of future they believe in, and they develop and create according to their convictions and dreams.” This perception of reality exists within a specific time and place (Hytti, 2005); thus cultural structures and traditions get incorporated into an individual’s perception of identity.

Following the work of academics who suggest people use language to construct reality (Down, 2006; Fairhurst, 2007; Gill, 2006; Karp, 2006; Kuhn et al., 2008), I must also consider that language, as Fairhurst (2007) pointed out, provides people with an opportunity to negotiate and work through identity challenges. Several scholars (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Dutton et. al., 2010) indicate that periods of transition, such as starting a new business, can produce significant identity challenges. However, stories help people to link their past, present and future to create conditional narratives that they can test for salience. Much rests on the acceptance of these narratives, including not only a positive self-image, but also a positive work-related identity can reduce stress, improve creativity, enhance learning and make individuals more adaptable to new settings (Dutton et. al., 2010). One could argue based on these consequences that individuals starting new businesses need to make identity transitions as quickly and smoothly as possible not only for their own well-being, but also the future of their new organizations. Thus, this research project may provide women with an opportunity to work through identity nuances and consider the situational changes they make when discursively describing their identities.
**Integrating identities**

To assist in this process, it’s helpful to refer to Gill (2006) who employed Tracy and Trethewey’s (2005) theory of a crystallized self to allow entrepreneurial women more latitude to find an identity that might include non-stereotypical nuances and provide greater flexibility in creating a coherent self (Gill, 2006). The concept of crystallized self allows individuals to recognize and account for multiple selves in different contexts, as opposed to reducing or separating identities to produce the one most appropriate for a given situation (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Gill (2006) recommended the crystallized self for entrepreneurial women as a way to handle shifting and evolving identities as they discursively explained their work lives. Sacharin, Lee and Gonzalez (2009) proposed that people with “integrated” identities can more easily switch frames between different identities than those with less integrated identities. By specifically examining work and gender, these scholars exposed the disconnect between gender and many careers, and suggested that professional women with integrated identities might perform better at work. In summary, women appear to benefit from integrated identities that connect personal and professional lives, but the path to this integration remains unclear.

Ultimately, the complexity of the process and the inability to generalize or directly influence entrepreneurial identity, leads me to propose that more research is needed. Scholars should continue to study the ways that female entrepreneurs shape their identities, including the social influences, such as how colloquialisms and connotations in the dominant discourse impact identity and how that identity is structured and restructured through narrative.
Social theories that help explain identity construction

To establish a framework for my study, I intend to rely on principles related to structure and agency to determine how women produce narrative accounts of their self-employment. While most people traverse the traditional occupational highways, I want to explore how women business owners navigate an off-road experience. Will they create truly unique narrative accounts? Or, will they draw on their exposure to previous organizations and occupations? The following section provides background on the social theories, including those that depict organizational structures, theories of agency and organization, narrative and how individuals reference past experiences.

Based on Giddens (1984) theories of structuration, I may find that the females in this study intend to build unique discursive accounts, but ultimately that they must draw on the available resources, which include existing structures and patterns. Giddens (1984) introduced the idea of practical consciousness, the taken-for-granted assumptions that people use to shape their actions and speech. People unconsciously access these realities, which may include unacknowledged gender stereotypes, to help navigate the world. When people recognize these assumptions and begin to question their existence, they move into what Giddens (1984) called “discursive consciousness.” Yet, many ideas and cultural beliefs remain in practical consciousness; thus people continue to react to these without questioning the underlying assumptions and then unconsciously reproduce or reify the structures they intended to avoid (Giddens, 1984). The concepts of discursive and practical consciousness are particularly relevant to gender because in many instances we unconsciously reproduce gendered stereotypes, including those about domestic labor, and it’s not until we expose gendered perceptions as part of discursive consciousness that
we can begin to address the impact and create steps to change the future. This dissertation may offer an opportunity to raise our discursive consciousness and enact change.

Ahrne (1990) also discussed how people use existing organizational structures to organize their lives. He argued that formal and semi-formal organizations help people to create identities in what would otherwise be an anonymous existence. Thus, people draw on a variety of organizational structures to create much needed routines, and if I extend Ahrne’s (1990) theories on agency and organization, I could conclude that individuals desire structure in their lives and are willing to negotiate the tradeoffs, which are both positive and negative. Thus, while individuals may think they reject corporate structures and practices that reputedly undermine their abilities to act as free agents, they ultimately reproduce parts of these structures in new organizations because they offer benefits, such as routines or the ability to streamline activities.

Narrative scholars help to place these same principles in the context of culture, when they indicate that individuals create personal narratives based on the available cultural resources (Bruner, 1990; Garro & Mattingly, 2000; MacIntyre, 2007). Essentially, even when people think they are creating unique narratives, they are still drawing on and often repeating patterns and stories accepted by current and previous generations. Whether they choose to call these traditions (MacIntyre, 2007) or folk psychology (Bruner, 1990), I propose that these narrative accounts rely in large part on cultural scripts or preexisting structures.

Weick (2001) informed scholars that while people drew on past experiences for guidance in an unknown world, individuals ultimately selected the cultural scripts they
wished to use. Essentially, there is no master code or template; people select these resources to differing degrees based on their individual preferences. Sensemaking, which informs identity construction, is an individual activity that depends on external input. People use external events and structures to create their own rationale for their lives, including the ways they name and categorize these events retrospectively. At some point, people create “maps” that provide them with temporary guidelines as they attempt to rationalize their past and future actions in an ongoing negotiation that helps the person make judgments that can get reinterpreted into continuing actions (Weick, 2001).

Fairhurst (2007) drew on the work of Weick (1995) to suggest that people make sense of their experiences by placing the information into a narrative or story. Thus the story with its plot and outcome helps to provide a framework for sensemaking (Fairhurst, 2007). By asking participants to provide stories of their experiences, including times when they had to explain their role to others in different contexts, I hope to gain a better understanding of how female Public Relations practitioners use existing resources to answer inquiries about their work identities. Essentially, this study will examine how individuals draw on previous organizational structures and cultural traditions as they define themselves and their organizations for others. While self-employed females may seemingly reject traditional organizational structures, they must affiliate with something to help them make sense of an otherwise meaningless and ambiguous world. An important part of the process will be interpreting the narrative frames to examine how gender impacts their experiences as business owners.
Research goals

The literature review identified a number of important tensions that may exist for female business owners, and at the same time exposed unanswered questions about how women will use narrative frames to construct positive identities for themselves and their new enterprises. The literature also indicated that women not only desire socially accepted narratives, but personal well-being and organizational survival depend on finding suitable narratives to depict personal and organizational identities. Both current and future business owners can benefit from research that identifies socially accepted narrative discourse and explores how these identity constructs also influence the way individuals develop and organize their businesses and lives.

The primary goal of my research is to gain an understanding of how women who own Public Relations practices discursively frame their identities. What identity markers will they use to help them in this process, and how do existing stereotypes and structures help or hinder the creation of identity? A secondary goal is to explore the implications for how their identity conceptions impact their lives both at work and in their communities.

RQ1: What existing ideas and concepts do these women use to construct their organizations and identities?

Specifically, this research question attempts to gain a better understanding of how women use language to define their identities as female business owners. In addressing this question, I examine the discourse women use to explain their identities, as well as the ideas and terms they reject. For example, will women use the term entrepreneur, or business owner, or will they find some other way to identify with their organizations?
How do these discursive terms provide women with agency to craft unique identities, and simultaneously, how do these terms limit women based on preexisting cultural connotations and scripts?

**RQ2: What structures and forms do female business owners use to guide them in the creation of their new entities?**

Specifically, what ideas and concepts do these women evoke as they create the structure and form of their new businesses? Based on the work of Giddens (1984) and Ahrne (1990), I will seek to understand the structures that constrain and enable these women. Giddens (1984) explains that people draw from previous organizational resources, even when they want to create entirely new organizations. This may mean that some of these women reference their work and structures from other organizations as well as the media to help define their new environments and identities.

**RQ3: What are the practical implications for these discursive identity constructions for how they live and work? How will their narrative accounts enable and constrain their personal and work lives?**

This question attempts to answer how women use language to explain their home and work lives. In practical applications, how do these women answer the question, “what do you do?” for friends, relatives, and co-workers? Will these women respond to the question differently based on the individual(s) involved in the conversation, and how do these responses impact not only identity construction, but also the way women organize their lives?
Chapter 2: Methodology

Overview of my methodology

This study employed qualitative interviewing to obtain the narrative accounts of women in Public Relations. During the spring of 2012, I spoke with 18 women to learn about their experiences as business owners. My questions explored both their work experiences and how these work experiences merged into other aspects of their lives. To find the women, I used snowball sampling to recruit participants until I reached saturation, the point when the narratives started to overlap. Snowball sampling allowed me to obtain a purposeful sample, a sampling method used in qualitative research to select from a small subset of the population based on predetermined criteria (Krueger & Casey, 2009). In this case, the quality of the sample is determined by the participants’ responses, which cannot be generalized. Instead, Krueger and Casey (2009) suggest the concept of “transferability,” essentially considering whether similar environments can benefit from an understanding of the results and potentially transfer their applicability.

In this study, I spoke with women in depth until I reached saturation, the point at which individuals’ experiences started to reflect similarities, such as using comparable resources or experiencing similar challenges. In total, I spoke with 18 women who ranged in age from their late twenties to fifties, and the businesses ranged in age from approximately two years to over 20 years in business. The interviews lasted from approximately 45 minutes to over 2 hours, and the average interview length was about an hour and a half.
This chapter describes my methodology in detail, including a discussion of qualitative interviewing as a method, the recruiting and design of the study, basic demographic information of the participants, reaching saturation, the design of the interview questions, and the method of data analysis. The proceeding sections of this chapter cover each area in more depth.

**Qualitative interviewing defined**

My research questions explore a deeply personal topic, identity. Based on the need for women to feel comfortable opening up to me about their personal lives and decisions, I selected qualitative interviewing, a method that provided me with the opportunity to individually interact with each woman.

Qualitative interviewing, touted as one of the most widely used qualitative methods, offers individuals an opportunity to engage in conversation (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002). Fairhurst (2007) informed us that individuals frequently work through their identities in conversation with others. Qualitative interviewing, referred to as a conversation that “encourages others to freely articulate their interests and experiences”, often follows a loose format that resembles a discussion between friends rather than a rigid question and answer session (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002). This ability to co-construct the conversation enabled the women to explore their identities and also provided them with the opportunity to test out their identity constructions. The semi-structured qualitative interviewing style provided the space necessary for the women to tell their stories as narratives accounts while simultaneously working through complications to their stories within the course of the interview. Similar to the tenets of action research
(Greenwood & Levin, 2007), which ask the participant to actively engage in the production of knowledge, semi-structured interviewing allows participants to guide the process and actively engage in producing narrative accounts that reflect their lived experiences (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002; Mishler, 1986).

Scholars often select qualitative interviewing because it allows people to explore multifaceted issues and decisions. For example, Wallace (2007) noted the value of qualitative interviewing to better understand the complex career decisions of female accountants who in many cases chose to limit their career advancement. She recognized the women in her study would provide multiple and varied interpretations of their experiences and felt that qualitative interviewing would provide her with the most comprehensive access to their stories (Wallace, 2007).

Similar to Wallace’s (2007) research, Jorgenson (1991) used interviewing to better understand married couples’ discursive interpretations of family. In addition to gaining a better understanding of the operational language, she also called attention to the role of researcher as a “co-constructor” in the interview process. Jorgenson’s gender, race and the perception of a shared mutual experience, all converged to influence her research. Participants formed opinions about the researcher based on her appearance and the co-constructed conversation (Jorgenson, 1991). These interview experiences remind us that qualitative interviewing is a deeply personal relationship between the individuals involved in the conversation.

Yet, instead of viewing this personal connection as negatively impacting the research, Steedman (1991) proposed this occurs as a natural part of human interactions
and a normal part of the interview. We can’t “separate the knowledge from the knower” (Steedman, 1991). Steedman (1991) argued researchers should reflect on their inability to access one objective truth, and instead understand that each person creates meaning based on her unique way of knowing the world.

When I spoke with the women in this study, they provided me with narrative accounts, which as Freeman (2010) and Lanzara (1991) indicated, communicated their interpretations of past, present and future in response to the context of our conversation.

**Recruiting and design**

After obtaining institutional review board (IRB) approval for my study, I started to recruit participants in spring 2012. To recruit participants, I used snowball sampling, a sampling methodology in which one person recommends another (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002). To start the sampling process, I asked an academic colleague for referrals into the Public Relations community in the southern United States. I contacted women by phone and/or by email to ask if they would participate in my study.

At the end of each interview, I asked the woman if she could provide me with anyone else to speak with. Typically, the women provided me with three or more names. To maintain the confidentiality of previous participants, I recorded all of the names and explained that I could not divulge prior participants’ identities.

I spoke with each woman face-to-face and allowed the participants to select a location for our conversation with the intention of finding an environment that the woman felt comfortable in. In every instance, I met the woman in person for the first time at the start of the interview, which might be why most of the women with home-based
offices selected public spaces including coffee shops, restaurants, a library, and the USF campus. When the interview occurred in a public space, I attempted to find a location that afforded us some privacy, such as the back corner of a restaurant. In other instances, the women invited me to their homes or offices so that I could see their workspaces.

**Demographics of participants**

The University of South Florida IRB approval allowed me to speak with 30 people. I contacted female Public Relations business owners until I reached saturation, the point when the narrative accounts began to overlap and became redundant. Ultimately, I spoke with 18 women over a four month period, starting in January 2012 and ending in April 2012. These women ranged in age from their late twenties to their fifties, and the businesses ranged in age from two years to over 20 years, with a few women starting more than one business as they transitioned multiple times between business ownership and other employment. Additionally, one of the individuals also owned two unrelated retail storefronts. Only two of the women in this study identified active partners who shared in the decision making and day-to-day operations of their businesses. In one case, the woman had two male partners, and the other woman partnered with her husband. In both cases, the women indicated they actively participated in decision making and performed a critical role in the business’s success. In one other instance, a woman indicated she included her husband on the business documents for succession planning only, but that he held outside employment in an unrelated field. In one other instance, a woman indicated her husband worked in the business, but that she started the business as a single mother and her second husband joined “her staff” later.
In terms of business size, nine, or 50% of the women, did not officially have employees, but instead hired outside consultants to supplement their efforts on an as needed basis. The other 50% had employees, although not necessarily employees working in the same office building. Two of the women with employees indicated that they ran virtual firms in which their employees worked from home and interacted via scheduled in-person meetings or attended status meetings via video conferencing software. Those with designated office space also indicated that they frequently worked from home or used consultants who worked out of their homes.

**Saturation**

In any qualitative study, it’s difficult to determine an exact point of saturation because theoretically you can always gain new insight; however, when I spoke with multiple women whose experiences sounded alike, I determined that I reached saturation. In my study, the narratives started to reflect similar concepts, such as women that described comparable challenges related to work-life integration, similar ideas about the resources they used to start their businesses, and parallel accounts of how they viewed their roles within their businesses.

Jorgenson (2002) stated that she selected a small purposeful sample not intending to make sweeping generalizations for a category of people, but instead to construct “information rich cases to describe participants’ experiences in enough detail and depth” to enable the reader to develop an intimate understanding of these individuals. This study shares the same intention and intends to produce in-depth narrative accounts that enable the reader to better understand the participants’ lived experiences and provides information-rich accounts of a group of women.
Design of the interview questions

Lindolf and Taylor (2002) suggested that non-directive interview questions provide the interviewee with space to construct her own narrative account. In many cases, interviews start with a “grand tour question” designed to evoke a long response that provides direction for follow-up questions (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002). For example, a grand tour question in this study was: What lead you to this point? This often evoked accounts of how the women started their businesses and how these businesses emerged from or were shaped by their prior employment experiences.

While I anticipated questions would emerge as part of the conversation, I developed several sample questions included below to stimulate elaborative responses from the participants.

Sample questions include:

- How do you describe your work to family and friends?
- Do you think gender impacts your business?
- What groups/organizations do you belong to?
- How do you blend work and life?

While the questions above indicate the general context, I did not read from a script and allowed the content to emerge in the conversation, rather than forcing a prescribed order to the interview.

Additionally, I asked “operational questions” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002) or demographic questions to gain a better understanding of the individuals and their
businesses. This information was also gathered from examining organizational artifacts, such as websites, company brochures, social media, etc. Archival data or artifacts are often used in conjunction with interviews because they add context and texture to the research, often offering insight on events that are no longer available for observation and they serve as important symbols of organizational principles and motivations (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002).

Operational questions and artifacts were used to answer some of the following questions:

- Do you focus on a particular market segment?
- Can you describe the size of your company? (number of accounts, employees, etc.)
- How long have you been in business?

**Method of data analysis**

Following the interviews, each recording was transcribed, and I analyzed each interaction. In analyzing the data, I looked for common themes among the participants’ responses. After reading the interviews several times, I noticed six dominant themes. I then coded the text in different colors to represent each of the six distinct areas: gender, organization, word choice, control/choice, home/life integration and mentor/advisors.

To give you more insight into my process, I am including a sample of the results for each category.
Table 1: Examples of how I analyzed the interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td>Anything that referred to their role as a woman or a comparison between a male in a similar position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td>Included references to office space, hiring, culture, decisions about how to organize their businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Word Choice</strong></td>
<td>Refers to words that women used to describe themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control/Choice</strong></td>
<td>Making decisions, expressions that directly referred to choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home/life integration</strong></td>
<td>References to hobbies, community activities and mothering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mentor/advisor</strong></td>
<td>Anyone or anything the women indicated helped them to make decisions. In most cases, they referred to people, but sometimes they also referred to organizations, such as the USF Small Business Center.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In analyzing the data, I recognized that interviewees’ responses represented a fragment of their lives that I further segmented when I coded and analyzed the data (Mishler, 1986). Based on the limitations of language and interpretation, a researcher can’t claim one true meaning for the data because there are multiple ways of interpreting an event (Janesick, 2003). To account for these potential problems, I moved back and forth between the data and coding while continuously reflecting on the process. This reflection included not only considerations of the participants’ assumptions and understanding but also my position and potential biases (Charmaz, 2009).

The following three chapters offer the results for each of my research questions based on the information I obtained from my interviews. Participants’ names and identifying information were changed to protect the individuals’ privacy as well as to meet the IRB guidelines.
Chapter 3: Using existing concepts & ideas

Chapter One of this dissertation provided a summary of researchers’ and practitioners’ portrayal of workplace identity and offered insight into both the history of women in the workforce and more specifically in the profession of Public Relations. Although the initial chapter described trends in recent research and offered insight into why and how people start their own businesses, it only speculated on how women who own Public Relations businesses will react to questions, such as “What do you do?” and how they will frame their personal and organizational identities through words, phrases and stories to depict their experiences. This chapter examines the results of research question one, which asked how women would use existing concepts and ideas to construct their identities. Before examining the question, it’s important to examine the industry.

Framing Public Relations

In responding to questions about their work lives, the females in this study incorporated their roles as business owners as well as their profession, Public Relations, which 17 of the 19 women identified as their primary business; the remaining two mentioned it as a component of their overall businesses.

The Public Relations Society of America recently redefined Public Relations through an interactive campaign intended to solicit and decide upon a new definition. The
2012 definition, “Public Relations is a strategic management process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (PRSA, 2012), offers a broad interpretation of the field, and its recent introduction may indicate a widespread difficulty among practitioners to describe their jobs.

Several of the individuals I spoke with attempted to rattle off the above definition or a similar textbook version, however, as one interviewee, Tracy, indicated the “ivory tower” definitions don’t necessarily depict the actual tasks. She articulated the need “to get the work done,” which in Public Relations could indicate the difference between the technician, the individual performing the job, versus the strategist or manager, theoretically the individual with a strategic vision for how the organization should communicate (Wilcox, 2012). Public Relations educators typically encourage their students to aim for the managerial or strategic role, as evidenced by the growing number of “strategic communication” programs, but they also recognize that individuals usually start their careers as technicians. The distinction may explain why some individuals can identify with the rather ambiguous definition, while others explain their job functions by helping people to understand the specific tasks they perform.

The label, Public Relations, denotes a variety of activities and descriptions. For instance, individuals often describe Public Relations by using phrases such as “strategic management function,” which can mean many different things and may even get dismissed as jargon.

6 All names and identifying information are changed to obscure participants’ identities.
Those with closer ties to PRSA, the organization that announced the new definition, used the definition more readily, but even some of these individuals suggested that the definition creates confusion for those with little or no prior knowledge of the Public Relations industry. Business owners expressed some difficulty defining Public Relations and its associated benefits for potential customers, friends outside the industry and, in some cases, for their children.

Some may tout ambiguity as a means to create inclusivity, thereby growing the profession, but in this case, ambiguity appears to lead to greater uncertainty. By adding a second layer of ambiguity to the already nebulous category of business ownership, the women responded to a double challenge as they framed their identities for family, friends, coworkers and the community.

The following three chapters will build on issues related to the personal and organizational identities of Public Relations business owners. The remaining portion of this chapter explores how these women use language, including words and phrases, to describe themselves in conversation with others. The second chapter examines how they make sense of the structures they create, and the final chapter addresses the practical implications for how these identity markers get enacted in their daily lives, including how they describe their actions and decisions in both personal and business contexts.

Before starting the results section, it is important to note at this point that by identifying common responses, I don’t intend to indicate a prescriptive pattern that others should follow, but rather to offer different successful templates or phrases women used to establish their identities in both work and social contexts.
Findings for Research Question 1: What existing ideas and concepts do these women use to construct their organizations and identities?

The first research question focused on the idea that women need to draw from something as they construct their identities in an otherwise unknown environment. This question attempts to ascertain the range of narrative resources women used to explain their work lives to others, including words and phrases that the women deemed appropriate as they responded to identity inquiries.

To answer this question, I asked the women how they explained their work lives to others, including those who may not understand the type of work they perform. In this context, several referred to responses from their parents, whom could not identify with the role of business owner because they compared it with their experiences working for an employer. For example, Elaine said, “Oh yeah, they’re mystified. They don’t get it all because they are very traditional.”

Another participant, Emma described her parents’ fear of business ownership based on a lack of understanding:

No entrepreneurs in my family, which terrified my parents, when I told them that I was going to go into advertising, because they figured, oh, she’ll never work a day in her life. And they never wanted to own a business. That—that was scary stuff for them.

In both of the above excerpts, the women refer to their families’, particularly parents, inability to understand business ownership and, in Emma’s case, the fear of the unknown and the unspoken concern about failure. Another woman said she waited to tell
her parents that she planned to start a business until after she quit her job because “they
are of the generation that you’re supposed to work somewhere and stay there for a long
time, so I-I didn’t want them to talk me out of it…” In the previous comment, the woman
stutters about her parents potentially talking her out of it, which could mean that she
deeply values her parents’ opinions or provide an indication of her own hesitation about
starting a new venture.

If women construct their identities based in large part on the conversations with
others; individuals with close personal relationships will influence how these women
perceive their identities as business owners.

Each of the women quoted above was over 30 years old, which means their
parents were likely 50 years old or older and probably, worked at a particular place of
employment during set hours to receive a regular paycheck. The startup costs for an
individual opening a traditional business with an office and full time staff are much
greater than those associated with individuals working out of their homes. Yet, Public
Relations businesses differ from traditional brick-and-mortar entities because they do not
necessarily require an office space staffed with full-time employees.

Public Relations was named one of the best industries to start a business based on
its low cost of entry. Individuals can work from home with a phone/internet connection,
computer and printer. If they need additional staff, these women can network with other
independent practitioners instead of placing people on a payroll, thus reducing overhead
along with its associated commitment and risk.
In addition to their roles as business owners, the women talked about how others interpreted their profession, Public Relations, a diverse and frequently misunderstood profession. The Public Relations society’s new definition, described above provides a broad explanation of Public Relations that provides little in the way of practical or concrete terms. This underscores the difficultly of explaining Public Relations. Anita, a business owner with an office and staff, said, “It’s—it’s tough because a lot of people don’t understand PR and you know, it is kind of an intangible…even people within advertising and communications, PR’s kind of the strange thing out there…” Consequently, an important component of this project also included asking participants how they framed responses to questions about their chosen profession.

In framing answers to inquiries about their work lives, the women tied their work identities to the businesses they ultimately created. Thus, the final part of this chapter explores how women verbally describe their companies, which ranged from solo practitioners working out of their homes to women with physical office space and multiple employees.

To gain access to the narrative resources women used, I asked open-ended questions that allowed participants to respond in a multitude of ways, and in some cases, work out their identities within the course of our conversation. A sample list of questions used to obtain these accounts appears in Appendix A. More information on how I analyzed and coded the data appears in the previous chapter.
Adjectives women use to describe themselves

The women in this study used adjectives to describe their personalities and their roles as business owners. My first interviewee said, “I’m completely self-driven.” As the interviews progressed, I specifically asked participants for words to describe themselves. Six women used the words “self-driven” or “self-motivated,” and six women used the words “dedicated, determined, tenacious and persistent.” As I reflected on the duties of a business owner, I considered how synonyms for self-driven and determination might be attributed to the tasks and drive of a business owner, but I also think these could be attributed to the canonical narrative of entrepreneurs, which often get depicted as a singular individual with the persistence to overcome difficult odds. Do these women see themselves as self-motivated to persistent against adverse odds, or do they believe that is what others want to hear as part of the story of the entrepreneur?

The examples that follow indicate that these women frame this characteristic not as a survival mechanism, but rather as their everyday attitude toward their businesses. Megan, a woman who co-owns her business with her husband, explained her approach to telemarketing as, “you have to just keep being persistent…I follow up with people…” In other cases, the women used the terms to indicate their ability to focus on the work at hand without getting distracted. One woman explained that some people need a supervisor to keep them on task, but she can manage her own workload and work commitments.

See Appendix B for a full table of adjectives.
The term self-driven may relate to another adjective that frequently emerged--“dedicated.” In most instances, the woman framed dedication as a commitment to their clients, such as a dedication to offer the best services. However, one can also see dedication in the way that these women described their commitments to work. Similar to the comments about being self-driven, the women set their own schedules and in many cases, although not all, the women talked about the necessity of dedicating their time to work as opposed to getting distracted by other obligations. One woman described her dedication as, “I take the work very seriously and I’m big into making the deadlines and trying to not even have deadlines. I mean, just try to exceed them so quickly…” In this case, I believe the woman responds to client deadlines, but that she overstates “trying not to even have deadlines” to potentially impress me or create an inflated story because it corresponds with the identity she desires or thinks a business owner should have. In this exchange, we can see how identity emerges as part of the conversation between individuals. This represents a fluid exchange, and one in which the woman seeks validation. If I rejected the identity she put forth, she would need to rework her strategy for future conversations.

In many cases, the words and phrases women used to describe themselves offer us insight into their identities and how these identities are shaped by existing norms and established stories. For example, many of the stories about business use words, such as dedicated, driven and confident as descriptions of business owners. While these women employ some of the language of business, included in phrases such as “money motivated” and “persistent,” they also embed aspects of what others may consider personal
characteristics when they use phrases, such as “kind,” “cares about others, “loyal,” and “creative.”

One could consider the language descriptors above as gendered. Traditionally, men controlled the business world so the language used to describe business often reflected male attributes, such as aggressive and competitive. While women picked up aspects of traditional business language in their responses, which in select cases included words such as “rebellious” and “aggressive,” we can just as easily find characteristics and language that one could associate as feminine, such “caring about others.” In drawing attention to the gendered nature of language, we can examine how women make decisions about whether to draw from traditional scripts, blend the two or find ways to create their own interpretations, such as the discussion of risk included below.

**Calculated risk**

One of the most interesting findings that emerged from asking women to describe themselves related to their perception of risk. While three women believed they were risk adverse, eight women responded they considered themselves risk takers and then modified their answers to declare themselves “calculated risk takers.” For example, many of the responses appeared as, “I’m definitely a risk taker, but I am a calculated risk taker.” The following statement helps to explain what these women mean by a calculated risk taker:

Yeah, definitely I’m not afraid—calculated risk taker. Because I’ve thought through all the scenarios most of the time about what could and couldn’t happen. If I do this then this, If I don’t do this then this. So I’m always weighing the odds of taking a risk so it’s very calculated.
A couple of women explained that their business ventures didn’t seem too risky because they needed to work and they had confidence in their abilities. Consider the following excerpt:

But, I have confidence in my ability, so I’m not sure how much of a risk it really was. You know what I mean? Like I think it was a—somewhat of a risk, but not a crazy, you know, hanging off the cliff kind of risk.

The women’s level of perceived risk often conflicted with their perception of how others’ viewed them. While individuals may look to others for validation of their identity; in several cases, the women acknowledged that friends and family think their willingness to start a business was risky, but these women still found ways to downplay their risk as Jenny, a woman who started two Public Relations firms and two retail shops, indicated below.

…I mean I would think that a lot of people do consider me, just—just from what I hear from friends and family and—and other people when I meet them at cocktail parties, ‘Wow, that’s a really big step, how did you know that was going to work?’ And, but, um, I would—I would think that they do describe me that way. I know they do. But, I don’t feel like I’m taking big risks. To me it just is like, well, somebody’s got to do it. It’s been done before…I’ve been told I’m a risk taker, but when I do it, I don’t feel it’s that risky. I just feel like let’s do it; let’s jump off a high dive and see how—how it goes. It can’t be that bad, right?

Entrepreneurship often gets associated with a high level of risk, but the women in this study continually rejected the idea of their businesses as risky. Perhaps, the suggested relationship between entrepreneurship and risk compelled more women to select the label business owner to describe themselves instead of entrepreneur as discussed in the next section.
Describing their roles

When the women in my study selected words to categorize themselves, they often distinguished their experiences by employing socially constructed labels to designate their roles as opposed to creating their own terms. These labels included both personal and business roles with terms such as wife, mother, and business owner. The following section examines the labels women prefer, classifications they resist and what these labels represent.

The literature review in chapter one explored the idea that women might not associate with the word entrepreneur, a term used in a variety of contexts in American society from political banter to reality television shows. While the term entrepreneur continues to gain momentum, I wanted to find out if women would use it to describe themselves. In conversation, will women use entrepreneur because the media frequently associate the word with business ownership? Will they identify as business owners or pick a term related to their profession?

To avoid biasing participants’ responses, I purposely did not refer to them as entrepreneurs, but instead asked them to provide me with terms that they felt described their roles. If participants did mention the word entrepreneur, I then asked if they considered themselves entrepreneurs and if so why. If the word did not emerge in the interview, I directly asked the question of whether or not they considered themselves an entrepreneur, which led several women to attempt to define the word and then decide if they fit their own definitions. In one case, the woman asked me if I thought she was an entrepreneur. Nine of the 18 women or 50% opted to identify as entrepreneurs. One
choose to specify that she considered herself a solopreneur because she worked alone, 
and one said she would identify as an entrepreneur, but preferred the phrase serial 
entrepreneur.

Regardless of their preferred label, these women all worked to find some socially 
recognized category with which to identify. The following section will first explain how 
the women defined entrepreneurship, followed by a discussion of words and phrases the 
women deemed appropriate to depict their roles, a section on nonbusiness roles, and 
finally a discussion of how they represented the Public Relations profession.

**Entrepreneurship**

As women negotiated their roles and appropriate titles, seven of the women 
struggled to define whether or not they considered themselves entrepreneurs. Six of these 
women worked through the definition in our conversation, and one paused to contemplate 
her response to my question about whether she categorized herself as an entrepreneur. A 
few women questioned whether starting a business that didn’t provide a novel product or 
new form of employment would get classified as entrepreneurial. For example, Annie, a 
local advocate for female business owners, said:

> I mean I don’t know- it’s funny because when you hear the sound bites coming 
> from candidates, you know, they always call people entrepreneurs, you know. 
> And, I’m not quite sure that meaning of entrepreneur, you know. Would I be- 
> Would I fall under the classification or the definition of an entrepreneur because I 
> opened a business? I never really thought of myself as an entrepreneur. Am I 
> doing something new or different? No, I’m providing a service that people need. I 
> don’t know. I mean, what’s- what would you- what would you consider an 
> entrepreneur?

> In the quote above, Annie struggles to define entrepreneur, and in this excerpt, we 
> see this struggle emerge not just as a theoretical argument, but her uncertainty has
practical implications for her identity. Should she call herself entrepreneur? Annie wrestled with whether it was appropriate to call herself an entrepreneur, and ends by asking me for the “right” definition. She indicated she never thought of herself as entrepreneur, and at the same time she described her perception of the society’s definition of an entrepreneur.

This same woman continues to explore the definition of entrepreneur within the course of our conversation and references her perceptions of the importance of this word.

Yeah, I- I always wonder that, because you hear that word tossed about so much. You know, America’s- you know, welfare is on the backs of our entrepreneurs and that entrepreneurial spirit. Well, what does that mean? You know, does it mean because people like me open a business or is it- or is it something else? Like people who actually try to- try to maybe create or fix something that is already there. You see, my business is based on needs that are already -- already there. I don’t think I’m inventing anything new. I know I’m not inventing anything new. I’m doing what organizations and corporations need and expect. I always kind of envision an entrepreneur as kind of seeing a need out there that is unmet and then figuring out a way to meet that need. That’s kind of how I envision an entrepreneur so you invent that new widget or you figure out a new system that is going to help the business and then you create that business, and you make it work. And if you’re a high-tech entrepreneur, you sell it for billions of dollars and buy an island and retire. [laughs] Those people are entrepreneurs, you know. They saw a need and they created and they met that need. Me, I already know the needs out there, and so I’m just meeting the need that is already existing so I see myself as a person who creates a business in taking advantage of an opportunity that exists. I know people need PR services so I’m taking advantage of that opportunity and providing it to them, and they hire me because number one I know how to do it and number two I’ve got a reputation that I know how to do it [laughs] so.

The above selection shows how a woman works through her identity in discourse as she questions and revisits the meaning several times. In chapter one, the section on identity described how people formed identity in conversation with others, and the above excerpt clearly showed a woman who struggled to determine if she fit with her perception of how society defined entrepreneurship. She also indicated the term carried some
positive social value exemplified in phrases, such as “welfare is on the backs of our entrepreneur” and “you hear that word tossed around so much,” which indicate entrepreneur could be a positive social label for this woman to use.

However, since we don’t have one clear definition of entrepreneur, as we would for some professions, such as a plumber, the women needed to work establish their own ideas about the term. Some of these ideas come from well-recognized stories, such as the classic inventor who produces a novel product that makes him or her rich. Annie referred to the “widget” inventor in the quote above who gets so rich he can “buy an island and retire.” Since this perception of the entrepreneur didn’t fit with her personal experience or ambitions, she reconciled her account by indicating she met an existing need and therefore couldn’t attribute the term entrepreneur to her role.

Several others considered whether or not a drive or desire to create a business should factor into the definition of entrepreneurship. “You know, but I was not a natural one. You know, I was not one of those ‘I’m going to go out and start my own business kind of thing.’ I really did it out of necessity.” In this case, the woman defines entrepreneurship as something intentional or deliberate, but indicates that in her case she might not fall into the category of entrepreneur because she needed to create a way to earn an income. Another woman touched on this point, but instead framed the idea of needing employment as a reason people opt for entrepreneurship “…it’s almost like everybody’s now becoming an entrepreneur because you are so replaceable…” Yet, earlier in the interview, she told me:

I guess a lot of people would say I’m not really an entrepreneur, I’ve just created my own job, is how some people would probably phrase it. Because the
difference—this is what I hear and read is that if you walk away from your business as an entrepreneur it continues to make money for you. But in our situation, if we’re not there doing the work, there’s no cash flow.

Between the two excerpts from our conversation, we can see how women continue to refine and question the parameters of this socially constructed category based on how they perceive society or the media define entrepreneurship. In the quote above, the woman defined entrepreneurship, not solely based on creating employment, but whether or not her business can generate revenue in her absence, and as she continued to work through her definition, she further honed her criteria. “It means that you’re pretty much starting from scratch, and you – it’s up to you to have the building blocks and put them together to create something.” Again, I think we see aspects of a perpetuating narrative about entrepreneurs as inventors or creators, but the term lacks a succinct, clear definition, which means that these women can rewrite the script for how society collectively defines entrepreneurship if they choose to do so. However, it also suggests that women may struggle with the ambiguity surrounding the term and perceptions about the “correct” narrative.

One narrative surrounding entrepreneurs involves the idea of risk, which evolved from the classic French definition of an entrepreneur. “I think it means that you’re willing to take a risk and go out on your own and having the guts to make it and to fight for it.”

Others framed entrepreneurship as an opportunity to initiate something. A couple of women identified as entrepreneurs because as one woman said, “I’m an entrepreneur. [long pause] I think because I started something.”
Ultimately, the women interpreted entrepreneurship based on some established narrative threads in our society, but their interpretations of these narratives varied widely. As demonstrated in the previous examples, what one person might categorize as entrepreneurial, another might dispute based on different criteria.

Instead women preferred words, such as “business owner” and “business woman.” Fourteen of the 18 women used some form of the term “business owner” to describe their roles in their businesses. The term “business owner” appealed to both individuals with employees as well as those working independently.

The independent practitioners also favored the term “business owner” rather than call attention to their independent status. Only three of the nine independent practitioners I spoke with identified themselves as “independent practitioners,” a term the Public Relations Society of America uses to identify solo practitioners. While a couple used synonyms as indicated in Appendix C, several pointed out that they work with a network of other professionals in what some term a “virtual agency,” which in this case means they intend to remain solo practitioners but present a full range of services by contracting with other professionals. In this case, the image they wanted to present to the clients informed the identity markers they selected and rejected.

The descriptions women used depicted their roles in the business with one exception; women also identified with the role of mother. Nine out of the 18 women discussed their role as mothers to at least one child, and the tenth woman indicated she

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8 A full table of words and phrases the women used to describe their roles can be found in Appendix C.
was not biologically a mother, but she often felt she played the role of “mother” to her staff.

The role of mother came up as an important construct because surprisingly several of the women mentioned their role as mother as an important factor in how they structured their time. In several interviews, the women indicated they decided to start their own businesses to give them more time to fulfill their role as mother. For example, Annie, a mother of one child and in business 10 years said, “…I had this very demanding executive-level job, and I had to make the choice, to either which is my priority, so I choose my daughter as my priority.” In most cases, women discussed how their roles blended to allow more time for their children’s activities, but in two instances, participants discussed how they used their role as mother within their business. In one instance, Peggy, a woman who raised five children, said:

I primarily see myself as a mother and everything I do is really just mothering. Business is mothering. Men just flip when I say that, but that's the truth. That's how I see it. You know, and I have unruly children and rebellious children and compliant children and you know. I think you know I say to my team we have to meet clients where they are, which means you have some spoiled children, some entitled children, compliant children, easy-to-get-along-with children and those are our clients and you figure out how to work it. It's the same with staff.

The woman above blends her roles as both mother and business owner in the analogy, but one of the challenges that often emerges for female business owners is how to juggle two demanding roles, mother and business owner.

The women repeatedly positioned the role of mother as their primary role, which I noted in phrases, such as “…wanted her to be my priority…” as well, as in comments about how they managed their time, “after my son goes to bed at nine or 9:30, I get back
on the computer…” Others talked about taking work to their children’s sporting events, working after their children went to bed, taking time off for school events, and shuffling client calls around the carpool schedule. The descriptions depict the women arranging work around their children’s schedules, not vice versa, suggesting that the traditional role of mother as the dominant role for women may still maintain a strong foothold in our society. The women talked about mothering as a choice, and a choice they could make because they owned a business that they perceived offered opportunities to make choices about how to construct their workday and their personal obligations.⁹

Yet, while the majority of mothers framed the role of mother as the most important, one participant cited her role as business owner as her primary responsibility, indicating that her spouse arranged many of her daughter’s activities. This allows us to see yet one more area in which women can choose to select from the dominant discourse on mothering or find other ways to rewrite traditional scripts as they navigate the complexities of multiple identities in ever-changing environments.

**Another layer of complexity: Public Relations**

In many cases, there are businesses that conjure up an instant picture of the associated activity, such as a childcare provider, plumber, housekeeper or someone who makes a tangible product. Women who own Public Relations businesses face an added layer of complexity when they tell people they are not only business owners, but that they also work in Public Relations. Women often struggled to explain their work lives to

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⁹ Please see chapter 5 and the discussion section for a deeper analysis of the perception of “available mother” and the ability for mothers to construct schedules that allow them to “do it all.”
family, friends and even potential clients. This section expands on this issue because if these women struggle to define their jobs, women may also experience this as an affront to their identity, and equally as important, an inability to offer a clear definition may impact their abilities to attract new clients, thus creating social and financial implications.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the women in this study experienced the most difficulty explaining their work to their families. In some cases, participants shared that family members, especially parents, had difficulty understanding a work environment that in many cases did not involve a 9-5 job in an office setting. They explained that their families could not relate because their work lives followed a more traditional script, as in the account from Elaine, an independent practitioner:

> Well, first of all, very few people in my extended family [pause] –they’re mostly all in education. There are a few more what would you call corporate types? And then there are people who like deliver flowers and so – they have no context for me to plug into to explain…Oh yeah, they’re mystified. They don’t get it at all. Because they are very traditional. Got to be at work at eight o’clock, get up at five, leave the work at the office or wherever, you know, yeah.

The above excerpt serves two important roles. First, it offers a first-person account of how Public Relations practitioners can organize their lives differently than those in traditional workplaces and hints at some of the identity challenges this creates. Elaine explained to me that she can work from any location, including while traveling, because the work is both portable and, depending on the project, may offer her the opportunity to set her own schedule. Second, the above quote reminds us that as the nature of work changes, individuals may experience some identity challenges as they attempt to reconcile with what others consider a real job. Elaine explained that her family considers work as an activity that occurs in a specific location and/or during set hours.
Public Relations business owners, as well as some other professions, offer individuals an opportunity to craft nontraditional schedules.\(^{10}\)

In some cases, the women mentioned that their parents worried about their well-being and suggested they try to find a job working for an employer, which implied an uncertainty about their daughter’s role and ability to make a living. In response, the women indicated that either their parents gave up trying to coax them back to an office setting or the women brushed it off as concerned parents who simply could not understand their career choices.

Challenges related to explaining Public Relations or the full range of communication services were not confined to only family and friends. Many women explained that potential clients also struggled to understand the services offered. As one woman said, “We don’t really have like a concise buttoned up way of referring to our business so much. Probably would be helpful if I did, but I haven’t come up with it yet…you can’t meet somebody and just start telling them all the stuff that you do because they’re like, ‘Oh, that’s too much information.’”

In a profession that encourages straightforward communication with a specific audience, it was interesting to note the range of definitions for the profession. Some of the women discussed the strategic side of Public Relations; while others indicated that the description varies based on how well the recipient understands the field. To give you an idea of the range of definitions, I am including several below.

\(^{10}\) A longer discussion about the changes in work environments, including virtual work, occurs in the next chapter and the discussion section.
Well, in a nutshell, I help [pause] businesses, organizations, um…

I try to frame it in the context that I think they’ll understand based on their business, or what their experience might be…the definition kind of fluctuates depending on the circumstance and the person.

It’s, um, owned, earned and shared is kind of how we’ve been starting to break it down if you’re looking at a continuum.

…it’s good behavior well communicated.

I just saw the other day one of my PR friends posted this picture that was sort of a montage of those “Believe” posters. I don’t know if you saw it or not, but it was really funny. It said, “This is what my boss thinks I do.” And it shows a picture of, like, someone on the phone. And, “this is what society thinks I do” and “this is what my mom thinks I do.” And it’s like six different examples, and when you get to the end it says, “This is what I really do.” And it’s Batman.

Based on the excerpts above, one can see that the Public Relations profession lacks one clear definition. The woman depicted their own examples based on feedback from prior conversations, the media and conventional symbols, such as Batman and the phone. The final example in which the woman describes a collage of pictures that represent different perceptions is indicative of the range of social perceptions of Public Relations practitioners.

Almost every woman I spoke with explained her services by offering examples of tangible tactics. The most popular was media relations because people could physically see a news story and, as more than one participant expressed it, most people understand news. They may not always understand the process of getting someone in front of the media, but people can relate to the end result.
While the explanations varied, the women with businesses that served a specific industry or niche market had the most succinct answers and, if they pointed to tactics, they used common examples for that industry segment. For example, several women worked for the local transportation authority or government-related projects involving community outreach. These women could talk about their community outreach efforts with similar clients.

The definitions of Public Relations and its related duties involve an important part of these women’s lives because the responses transcend a congenial conversation and impact how they describe their businesses and the work or clients that they ultimately attract. Eleven out of the 18 women I spoke with fall into what Public Relations practitioners typically call the generalist category, which means they service a variety of industries and in most cases perform a range of communication functions for their clients. This can often lead to more confusion because the choices one uses to explain her business become almost limitless, but yet, the practitioner must find a way to explain what she does so that others can understand her services. One woman mentioned that she made “little aids” that helped to break down her services. Additionally, she came up with the idea of making models for individual clients:

I’ve designed models for people…I mean, I made three different models using their business to show them like gaps in their communication process. It was almost like the traditional, you know, the arrow planning…it is, you know, it’s a hard concept for people to grasp.

As these women struggled to explain their work lives, I realized the importance of finding a condensed, meaningful way to account for their work because it impacts their
ability to solicit new business and to sell additional services to existing clients as well impacting individual identity.

**Branding**

As the women discussed their businesses, they frequently referred to their Public Relations activities. The women all actively worked in their businesses as opposed to delegating responsibilities and acting merely as figureheads. In several cases, the women emphasized how they promoted their roles in the business to clients. One woman explained, “…what they pay for is to work with the person whose name is on the door and not three people down the food chain…”

The concept of the women actively working in the business was further emphasized by the number of women who used their name or some portion of their name when they selected a business name. Eleven out 18 businesses used some part of their founders’ name. Of the nine business owners who did not use their name, one regretted not using her name and another explained that she named her business based on a comment from a business colleague about one of her professional attributes.

In selecting a name for their businesses, the majority or approximately 72% of women wanted to communicate something about themselves, which may be why several of these women also discussed personal branding, including speaking engagements, radio talk shows, television appearances, and one described herself as a “[industry name omitted] lifestyle expert.” Another explained that she places her face on every page of her website because she feels that people make connections with people. In these cases, we can see a direct link between an individual’s personal identity and the business’ brand.
While several of the women specifically talked about building their own brand, most discussed branding their companies. Although as one pointed out, her company brand is an extension of her. “…[I] have been the longest standing employee, and because I’m the business owner and I am for most of the time the uh acting creative director, um, it would be safe to say that my personal brand probably, uh, translates to a lot of the brand of the firm.”

Nevertheless, in building their organizations the women pointed out that while the organization may be an extension of their personalities, including their values, they wanted an organization that included people with many different skill sets, not simply replicas of themselves. In several cases, the women with employees discussed looking for people with opposite skill sets, such as people with more attention to detail or someone able to manage employees. In searching for individuals with different personalities, they recognized a deficiency in themselves that they perceived as a necessity in a successful business. For instance, one woman said she didn’t like managing people so she hired someone with an aptitude for working with others. In these conversations, we talked about the necessity for different personalities and skill sets, but the desire to create a culture with a shared value system. In one conversation, a woman said:

And so [laughs] the culture that is created within any organization for any entrepreneur, is by nature, I think, a reflection of who they are…So, you know, in big companies and in small, you either manage to create the culture that you want, or you allow it to emerge. And, um –you know—[pause] either way, it’s a factor in what happens with your company, and —and probably in the clientele that you end up with.
**Storying our lives**

When we ask people to account for their lives, they often respond with stories or narratives. In examining the theme or narrative thread, it’s often possible to discern commonalities. In this study, I found several interesting narrative threads from the participants, including (1) the desire to cast themselves as unique, (2) the lack of a linear storyline that focuses only on a specific, unwavering goal and (3) the absence of a heroine. I discuss each theme in turn.

**I'm different**

When I explored their discourse, I found that the women believed they were different from other individuals. For example, one woman said:

> And, I am not normal. I am not usual. I know that. I mean I am 55 years old, and I know that I'm different. I was just with a bunch of girlfriends recently and they were just saying you’re not normal.

In this case, the woman intended to describe her personal habits, such as her energy level and lack of interest in television. In other cases, women described how they believed they run their businesses in unique ways. For example, one woman said she knew that most people start with a business plan, another explained that she believed her profit sharing plan was unusual, and a third described the necessity to “focus on distinction” as part of her business model. In each instance, these women expressed their perceived individuality.
I’m not superior

However, in offering examples of their self-ascribed unusual qualities, these women rarely cast themselves as superior. In some cases, they offered up their differences almost as an apology. For example, one woman started her business in what she believed was an unusual manner. “I can’t—I honestly can’t say I had this grandiose plan. I didn’t have a business plan. I didn’t have – the things you’re supposed to have. I just really was looking for something else to do…”

These stories stand in contrast to a hero’s tale, which typically follows a pattern that generations of listeners could identify with. It includes a rising action, conflict and a hero attaining a goal. Yet, the conversations with these women lacked a clear cut storyline and hero, and instead revealed the complexities of women’s lives, which manifested in unpredictable, non-linear and emergent dialog that described decisions about childcare, hobbies, personal illnesses, and relationships.

As these women responded to my open-ended questions, they had the opportunity to reply with responses that only focused on their businesses. However, the conversation detoured from a sharply defined script of a business owner following a path to business success. Instead, the narratives included rich complex accounts of how women intertwined their personal and professional interests. For example, several women discussed their interest in teaching and recounted how they mentored students or visited local universities. In several instances, the women apologized for what they described as “rambling,” but instead of considering it irrelevant, I believe it added to the richness of
the narratives because these nuances portrayed a well-rounded individual for whom work could not be described as an isolated activity.

**I’m a participant in my story**

The women narrated their stories as participants in the action rather than a heroine that takes full credit for her business achievements. In each instance, the women recounted how they relied on support networks. Instead of depicting the success of their businesses as singular endeavors, they acknowledged their significant efforts, but at the same time indicated that others helped them along the way. These individuals included employees, spouses, childcare providers, family, friends and professional networking groups.

In 16 of the narratives, the women started their stories by indicating their lack of agency in the startup phases of their businesses. In most cases, the women explained they started their business not based on the strong desire to own a business, but rather as something they fell into. The majority of women explained starting a business was not a goal, but rather a decision they reached based on life circumstances. They framed it as a necessity rather than a choice, and often failed to see it as a risk because as one woman explained, “I really didn’t see going down the path of freelancing and creating a company—I didn’t see that as risky…yeah, I’m definitely not a risk taker. [laughs]” In this case, the woman viewed starting a business as a natural evolution; she needed to earn a living and she created her business as a way for her to make money.
Lessons learned

This chapter detailed how women described themselves and their various roles in all aspects of their lives. Throughout the chapter, we saw the blending or intersections of personal and professional lives as opposed to attempts to quarantine the two. Initially, the chapter introduced adjectives that women used as they attempted to describe their personalities. In selecting adjectives, these women considered how their personal attributes affected their businesses. In employing words, such as self-driven, the women naturally transitioned to stories of how these attributes unfolded within their businesses. Additionally, in describing their roles, the women selected from socially separate categories, such as mother and business owner, yet in conversation the women found ways to intermingle these roles, which suggests that women discursively resist placing boundaries on their roles. This desire to join personal and business identities includes references to branding; for example, the majority of women discussed how their personal identity gets reflected in their business name by either using a portion of their name or a personal attribute. Additionally, the women discussed how they wanted people to see them as the face of their organizations, again indicating their perception that business and personal identity should coexist.

Another important finding from this chapter related to socially constructed categories, including the use of terms such as mother, business owner, independent practitioner and entrepreneur. In many cases, as indicated above, the women found ways to successfully blend their roles, including mother and business owner. In other cases, they attempted to redefine what these roles mean as in the case of entrepreneur, and in still other instances, they challenged the necessity of using preexisting social labels, such
as independent practitioner, to define their work lives. In accepting socially identified roles, such as mother and business owner, I believe the women acknowledged some type of shared understanding for what they perceive the roles mean. Yet, in discursively debating the role of entrepreneur, we witnessed how this term and role continue to evolve in our society and get enacted differently within the course of conversation. Ultimately, these labels impacted the narrative threads that these women used as they attempted to define their lives via examples and stories. The narrative threads explored at the end of the chapter indicate that the majority of women view themselves as unique individuals driven by circumstances into business ownership, opposed to risk, and active participants in their life stories and businesses.

The next two chapters will review how the roles discussed above impact the organizations these women ultimately build and how these discursive frameworks impacted the course of their lives.
Chapter 4: Structures & Forms

RQ2: What structures and forms do female business owners use to guide them in the creation of their new entity?

Given that these women were all starting new businesses, what language did they use to describe the structure or form for their new entities? This research question examines how women described the resources they used to develop their organizations. I asked broad questions to determine how these women structured their businesses. For example, when they started did they model their businesses after an organization they saw in the media, a professional association or previous employer? Did they seek guidance from others as they determined the configurations for their current and future businesses? What factors influenced their decision making and ultimately shaped their present organization?

In responding to inquiries about their business structures, women recalled many aspects of the startup phases of their businesses, discussed current organizational configurations and, in some cases, discussed their visions for the future. This chapter will explore the different phases of the business and the associated resources that these women used.
This chapter will commence by exploring how the women described the initial phase of the business, including their personal intentions, business models and mentors. Then the chapter will move into an exploration of ongoing decisions, including choices about growing the business, office space and their interactions with other professionals. Finally, the chapter will conclude by looking at some of the ways that work and life comingle as women attempt\textsuperscript{11} to determine the appropriate mix.

**Working with a fluid business plan**

Virtually all of the women in this study stated that they never intended to start a business. While two confessed to an “entrepreneurial spirit” as a child, the vast majority had planned to work in a corporate setting. As Jenny, a woman with two current businesses, including one business with two retail storefronts explained, “I -- when I graduated from college I wanted to wear a suit, carry a briefcase, and work in Downtown [city name omitted]…” In this case, as well as the majority of other cases, these women attributed evolving life circumstances as influencing their choices to pursue self-employment. Some of these circumstances included the desire to spend more time with their children, perception that they were unappreciated, stress leading to health or family issues, and the belief that they could create a better work environment than previous employers.

Every woman in the study worked in the Public Relations industry for at least one employer before deciding to go out on her own, but the ways in which these women

\textsuperscript{11} I purposely use the word attempt here because I believe that women continuously negotiate the space between work and leisure with, in some cases, significant overlap.
transitioned from prior employment to owning a business varied greatly. In some cases, the women planned their exits by squirreling away a nest egg to sustain personal and business expenses until their new businesses generated revenue. A few women left prior jobs with existing clients, and a couple did consulting work for previous employers during the startup stages. Others pointed out that they didn’t want to seek out clients while working for someone else. For example, one woman said, “…I never wanted to be accused of feathering my own nest…” Another said she worked too hard at her previous job to balance full-time employment and part-time recruiting or consulting. In some cases, the women worked in difficult environments, and one explained she just “snapped.”

This woman, as well as the vast majority of other women in the study, started her business without a well-defined plan. Vicki, a woman in business nine years with nine current employees, said, “I honestly can’t say I had this grandiose plan. I didn’t have a business plan. I didn’t have – the things you’re supposed to have…” The quote indicates not only the lack of a plan, but also her perception that one should start a business with a plan, an idea echoed by other women. Initially, this lack of planning surprised me, but women successfully started businesses without the notorious business plan, which is touted by many business authors

Business schools also encourage their students to focus on developing well-defined plans that include budgets, information about the market, and income forecasts. Many professors insist on detailed documents with charts and graphs, which influence our perception that businesses must follow a rigid script set forth well before people engage in new ventures. For individuals seeking venture capital, such as tech companies
with a novel new product, this type of plan may be necessary to attract investors. However, Public Relations requires very little initial capital investment. Similar to many other home-based businesses, this business requires little more than knowledge, a phone and computer equipment. While businesses that require office space or manufacturing equipment may require more planning, the many service-oriented businesses in the United States today can start with few expenses.

Today more small business owners in service-oriented industries recognize that detailed plans take time away from income generating activities. In a volatile market, the time spent generating a plan may get constructed as wasted effort if the market continues to change and thus requires continuous revisions to a long formal business plan. Some popular business books, such as The Toilet Paper Entrepreneur, recognize the resources required to write a formalized plan and instead encourage people to start businesses with less structure (Michalowicz, 2008). While business schools might not readily adopt this philosophy, I think this viewpoint identifies that small businesses, regardless of the owner’s gender, can get stuck in the endless cycle of planning, which at times can be counterproductive.

The women’s perception that they should have started with a plan actually refers more to how they interpret society’s perceptions than to gender issues. Once again, women tap into the stereotypical story of what one expects a business owner or entrepreneur should do, and they apologize for the incongruity of their story with their perceptions of what actions a business owner should take. Perhaps, the only gender issue is that women admitted to the lack of formal plan and apologized for it.
Several women indicated that they had more of an organic plan, which evolved as their businesses grew. Yet, just because these women did not have a traditional business plan does not mean that they didn’t have focus. For example, Vicki, the woman quoted above intended to focus her Public Relations efforts on a specific industry segment and grew her business by seeking clients within that niche. Three or four years later, she decided she needed a plan, but she didn’t regret starting without a formal document. “I did things a little bit backwards, but I don’t think I would have started it in the first place if I had taken the more traditional approach.” In the previous quote, Vicki referred to her idea that the “traditional approach” would include a formalized plan, but she felt this could have prevented her from starting a business at all. While Vicki believed she worked backwards, she may actually have followed a practical approach for many small business owners.

Several women intended to freelance until they decided what to do next. As one woman explained, “And honestly, with like nothing going on the freelancing came very naturally. It was just like you gotta do something, right, while you’re making up your mind?” A few women intended to consult until their children reached an age where they could go back to work. Annie, a woman in business over 10 years, explained:

It’s been—it was a great happenstance. It was unplanned really. I fully intended to either stay with the company I was with or go back to work, and it just turned out

12 This naturally raises the question as to whether this woman has a stable, wage-earning partner who can sustain her during the transition. In this case, the woman’s spouse had a full-time job when she started her business, but now he also owns a business. However, in many cases the women addressed the transition between salaried work and an irregular income by saving money prior to starting a business. Others relied on their spouses or an ex-husband to pick up the slack during periods of inactivity. While the women anticipated fluctuations in their income, each woman dealt with this instability in her own way.
that the fates had other plans for me…now I can’t imagine going and working for an organization. I, I—I can’t. I love what I’m doing now, so.

While the women might not have planned to start a business, they still needed to rely on something or someone as a guide. Yet, close to 100% of the women in this study said they did not have a role model from the media or copy a template from a family business. Additionally, since many of the women decided to start their own businesses based on their dissatisfaction with some aspect of their previous employers, these women resisted using previous companies as a guide and indicated that they looked to these organizational experiences as templates for what NOT to do. Peggy, a woman who in business for 14 years, explained: “…I worked in so many bad cultures and I don’t want that experience for myself because I don’t want to live like that, but I don’t want that for other people too because it can be done.” This interviewee frequently referenced her previous job and how she witnessed other women struggle to juggle both work and family obligations. However, she indicated she didn’t experience the same challenges as other women because she was a leader.

At times during the interview, I got the sense she might be portraying an overly positive role for how she juggled work and life. For example, she said that she blatantly challenged her former boss. These verbal displays supposedly provided her leverage to act as she pleased. However, she later said, “it [her job responsibilities] definitely contributed to the dissolution of my first marriage and definitely had I not left, it would certainly [have] impacted my children.” This contradiction could indicate this woman used overly positive descriptions because she wanted to provide me with a specific
portrait of her identity. In this case, I believe this woman struggled with work/life integration, but perceived it as a negative reflection on her capabilities. This could indicate an ingrained corporate culture or reflect the ideology that women should be able to manage it all.

Many of the women referenced their previous work experiences as they decided what type of employer or practitioner they wanted to be. For instance, several of the independent practitioners mentioned past challenges with managing employees, which made them realize they wanted to remain as solo practitioners. In other instances, these experiences helped to shape the values of the new organization, such as the desire to work in an ethical manner or provide flexible schedules for employees.

In some cases, the women resisted some aspects of their previous jobs, but later realized why certain policies or structures existed.

…it’s kind of funny because I can remember her implementing all these changes at the [organizational name omitted] that employees really kind of pushed back on, or didn’t like, or just complained about. And, you know, I look back on it now and I – I have to laugh because I’m doing the same thing, and I understand now why – the importance of, you know, organizational structure and organizational health and I understand why she was doing all those things…

The above quote was one of the few instances in which the women acknowledged the benefits of her previous organization. In most instances, the women attempted to downplay the influence of previous organizations on their businesses’ current structure or form. One had to listen carefully to locate references to prior employment. The women mentioned their previous organizations in small ways, such as offering similar incentive plans, accounting systems or ways to counsel a client. Yet, 15 women or 83% of the women I spoke with indicated that they either retained their previous employer as one of
their first clients or stayed in the same industry segment. This suggests that while a number of women hesitated to acknowledge that they followed a similar form or structure to their previous organizations, they most likely incorporated some successful tactics, especially for the eight women who described their former employer as one of their first clients.

In addition to previous jobs, one might wonder if organizations outside of business; such as professional associations, community organizations or religious affiliations; influenced these women. Did they look to these organizations as prototypes or use some of the resources, such as PRSA’s group of independent practitioners? While the women used professional communication associations for networking and for continuous education, most abstained from using these organizations as models. In many cases, women joined associations related to their clients’ industries as a way to better understand their clients’ needs and in some cases to find new business opportunities, not as resources for starting a new entity.

The most influential model for these women included the experiences of other business owners. The majority of women consulted with at least one other person to help structure their businesses. In some cases, this included a combination of people, such as accountants, previous supervisors and other business owners. In many cases, women relied on other female Public Relations practitioners for guidance, although a few did consult with men. The women received guidance on a range of issues related to being self-employed, including employee problems, billing issues and determining how many proposals to send out at once.
However, the most common struggle was how to determine their hourly billing rates. Several mentioned talking with others and even sharing proposals with each other, but still struggling with how to set their rate. In more than one instance, the women discussed how they realized they should have charged more for their work, but when they estimated the cost, they didn’t feel comfortable asking for a higher rate. One woman explained how she found out that a male friend with less experience charged more. “…I was like, well, we’re cutting ourselves back just because we’re a woman. [laughs] you know? I mean, I just didn’t think [pause] I could get it, I guess.” If women share billing information with other women, they may decide to charge more or at least have the confidence to do so. Two of the women I spoke with had non-competing agencies and they discussed financial information with each other, including how to package different services and even how to read a balance statement.

Unfortunately, pricing strategies are often considered proprietary because individuals competing in the same market can use the information to underprice the competition. This often means that consultants, regardless of their gender, are unwilling to share this type of information. Yet, the issue of underpricing services indirectly affects other consultants by potentially lowering the value of services in a competitive market. By gaining more confidence in pricing services by sharing information, female consultants could increase the value of not only their services, but also the value of Public Relations services in a geographic area.

In many cases, women mentioned how they relied on a limited number of people for morale support. Olivia, a business owner for five years, said, “If it wasn’t for [client
name omitted] and Peggy, I wouldn’t do it. I wouldn’t have been able to do it. It really does take sometimes that one person…”

Many of these women seek ongoing support and counsel from other practitioners. In some cases, they lean on other women who have noncompetitive communication practices, and some participate in organized meetings with business owners in completely different industries.

Typically, these women contacted personal acquaintances for advice. However, one woman said she used online forums, such as LinkedIn, to post questions and receive feedback from people she never met. However, the personal interaction with colleagues may offer these women more than just business advice. If we consider that identity crystalizes in social interactions, these women may use these social exchanges with other business owners as ongoing opportunities to test the legitimacy of their business identities in safe environments. By getting face-to-face feedback from a friend in business, often from another female, the new business owner gains an opportunity to not only learn about appropriate ways to structure her business and sometimes personal affairs, but she also gains strategies and confidence to navigate the complex ongoing identity questions from nonbusiness owners.

Almost every individual expressed the importance of having someone she could trust to bounce ideas off of or to share some of her business challenges. “That’s [an informal group of women who meet to discuss their PR businesses] important to have, because it’s hard to be ‘on’ all the time. And it just doesn’t feel very genuine and real. It’s nice to be able to kind of break down in front of somebody and say [laughing] I need
help.” In this exchange, Emma, a business owner for six years, recognizes the need for authenticity, which indicates that she likely needs to perform for others, whom could include employees, clients and possibly family or friends. In the company of other female business owners, she feels comfortable enough to genuinely share her challenges and ask for help.

In several instances, the women initiated regular meetings with friends in the industry to discuss business challenges and hold each other accountable for business growth. For instance, two of the women I spoke with met with several other women business owners on a monthly basis to discuss not only issues, but also as an opportunity to learn from and motivate each other. In this group, they formalized a reading plan, which required them to read a section of a business book and bring examples from their own businesses. At the time of our meeting, one member told me the group planned to start reading a book on how to operate a Public Relations agency.

Remarkably, these busy women all expressed a desire to help others, including, in some cases, acting as advocates for their gender. When I asked one woman what advice she would give to other women just starting out, she replied:

I would suggest reaching out to other women who have already done it. I think- I think women are more open to providing that kind of council and support to other women, and I'm a big believer of you know being my sisters’ keeper. And I think that if women did that more for other women, we wouldn't- we wouldn't be in the position we're in this country right now with women only having what some sad percentage of members of Congress and very few corporate CEOs. And you know I read the other day that which organization was it that hired an African-American woman as their CEO? It was a big one. And I went yeah, but it's so rare even today and here we are 2011 [2012]. And still women don't have those— we’re over 50% of the population in this country and what do we have like 20 something percent of women in Congress? That's wrong.
Annie, the woman quoted above, indicated that women should help each other. In the excerpt above, she explained how this advice and support could advance women’s careers and their roles in society. Annie, an active member of the PR community and an independent practitioner for over 10 years, described an influential female who answered her questions and showed her how to have a family and run a business. She also talked about another woman who spent time guiding her after she completed college. Now, Annie actively advises other female business owners because, as she alluded to in the excerpt above, she believes women are underrepresented and need to help each other. Additionally, Annie acknowledged the valuable contributions of other females in shaping her career, and she used the rule of reciprocity, which in this case, meant paying the favor forward by advising the next generation of female business owners.

While many studies attempt to label people who provide advice as “mentors,” several of the women quickly pointed out that they considered these women as equals and the term mentor conveyed a hierarchy that didn’t exist. The women’s outright rejection of the word “mentor” surprised me because many studies suggest that successful people need mentors, which I associated with a leader guiding a novice through unknown challenges. Yet, while a few of the older participants used the term mentor, many of the younger women preferred terms with less status oriented connotations. One suggested the term “advisor,” and several women referred to these individuals as friends or peers. Regardless of the term, women relied on friends for support and guidance as they made the transition to business ownership.

When people make life-changing decisions, they often seek more than one source for information and validation. As these business owners considered how to structure
their businesses, several individuals also talked about their experiences working as employees in an agency or hiring an agency in a corporate environment. These women explained that working with or in an agency helped them to understand how to estimate billing and the importance of billable hours. If they employed people, the agency experience also assisted them in understanding the need to keep the team focused on billable work because this directly translated into revenue.

Several of the women talked about working “on” their business and not just “in” their business. According to one of my participants, this phrase comes from the book *The E Myth* by Michael Gerber. She showed me a baseball cap, and one side, it said “on” and the other “in.” The theory is that small businesses fail because owners spend too much time doing tasks in their businesses, and not enough time working “on” their businesses (Gerber, 1990). Some of the women hired business coaches to help them work “on” the business and focus their energy on tasks such as setting goals, organizing their accounting practices, and planning their futures. Working “on” the business could include things such as writing a business plan, learning about profit and loss statements, looking for new clients, and refining the company’s marketing or branding. Working “in” the business could include completing client work or dealing with immediate problems, such as reprimanding employees.

In many instances, the women reflected on the need to complete revenue-generating work, described as working “in” the business during their startup days, but as the business matured they recognized the need to work “on” strategic functions, such as developing a focused business plan or developing materials to brand their organizations. A case in point, this business owner explained, “…doing both of those things in the
startup phase takes, you know, a little more effort than one might imagine. There’s a lot more to it...when you’re just starting out, and it’s just you, you’re everything.” The challenges of business ownership continued beyond the startup phase, even for those with several businesses. As one woman said, “the majority of us, don’t have business degrees...we love to communicate and we’re good at communicating, but we aren’t necessarily good at running a business.”

The women-owned businesses in this study ranged in duration from two years to more than 20 years in business. Those in business longer reflected on their early experiences and often referred to personal growth and the maturation of their businesses. A 55-year-old woman in business for 14 years said:

…a lot of figuring out where you belong in the professional world is figuring out where you are and who you are personally. If you can figure that out the rest will come to you...but if you don’t have a sense of who you are, you’re going to just get tugged around or pulled around, not going to be very fun. But, if you’re smart, those experiences will also inform who you are, so you will get better as time goes on…

The woman above ties a person’s career to her personal life, “where you belong in the professional world is figuring out where you are and who you are personally,” indicating that she sees a connection between her personal and professional identities. She equates the personal growth of an individual through lived experiences with maturity in the professional world. In the statement above, the woman indicates the importance of personal and professional identities, when she says, “…but if you don’t have a sense of who you are, you’re going to just get tugged around or pulled around, not going to be fun.” In this quote, “not going to be fun” acts as an understatement because this woman
intends to communicate the importance of identity construction in a person’s life, and later she indicates that life experiences should “inform who you are.”

Karen, a woman in business for over 20 years, suggested that people as well as their organizations go through various life stages that help them mature, not get stagnate, but rather gain a firm foundation based on life experiences. Below is Karen’s explanation and related analogies:

I mean, I feel like in some ways the business is like a human being, you know, I remember that was when I was like in grammar school, and I can remember feeling at one point in time in my business that I was a teenager. I was now, you know, had moved to the next stage and uh – and then I remember almost probably like, you know, being a young adult. Okay, I’m glad the Wild West is over, now I’m ready to kind of settle down and now I know more about, you know, what I like, what I don’t like. Um, and I – I’m probably in a – in maybe much like myself personally, if I feel like I’m in—I’m in a midlife in the business. In a good way. You know? All that’s behind me. That – a lot of that – not the experimentation. If anything, experimentation is rampant right now, but I have a foundation of knowledge, experiences – life experiences, successes and failures under my belt from which to pull from to go to the next level.

Karen also related her business to her personal development. We can see this in phrases, such as knowing “what I like, what I don’t like” and “in maybe much the like myself personally.” By examining how these women narrate their businesses and personal growth, we can see how the two overlap, indicating that professional and personal identities merge in more than just the startup phase. Instead, women continually mingle personal and business identities in a continuous evolution.

In the excerpt above, Karen discussed going “to the next level.” Yet, when the women referred to maturing their businesses, they didn’t necessarily mean growth. Karen later clarified by stating, “…going forward isn’t always about getting bigger, going
forward is getting smarter, getting more efficient, aligning the work that you do more closely with the skills you have. Choosing better clients.”

Several women in the study talked about choosing clients. One woman in the early stages of business said she preferred specific industries, but at this point she needed to take what came her way. Nine out of 18 women focused their businesses solely on a particular industry segment. Some said they preferred to work in a variety of industries because if one market collapsed, they could rely on their other industry segments to provide a revenue stream.

Regardless of their philosophy on the types of clients or the size of their businesses, every person I spoke to discussed how they worked in teams that transcended the organizational walls. Many independent consultants hesitated to use the term “independent” or “solo” to describe themselves because they worked with a network of individuals to offer clients a full range of services and frequently partnered with local communication agencies to offer additional support when needed. The woman below summarized the relationship as well as the camaraderie among many, but not all of the independents:

We just all know our niches you know. We’ve got somebody who does a lot of hotels and hospitality, so we’ll put it that way you know. ...So it’s, it’s actually worked as a more beneficial relationship. It’s funny because I worked at an agency; you would never do that with another agency. You know, it’s like that whole competitive spirit. But, with independents, at least in this market, for the most part, we don’t- we kind of see each other as helping each other out you know? It seems to be plenty work for all of us so. It’s worked out so far.

The independent practitioner above organizes a group of independents, which may influence her glowing response on camaraderie. She indicates the competition that
can occur within and amongst advertising and PR agencies, but may describe a more open system of exchange than actually occurs among independents.

Some of my interviewees talked about sharing work within a small network, not necessarily that they would share the work by doling it out by specialty as suggested above. In fact, three interviewees talked about protecting their client base. At least one person in my study discussed how she attempted to share work with another independent who later stole her client. Yet, she still works with a small group of people that she said she can trust. The two other participants hired people for specific projects, but cautioned me to not include any information in this report that could affect their competitive advantage within their specific industries, indicating to me that a few consultants recognize the potential for unethical group behavior.

Working in small teams offers advantages because the individuals can pool their resources for large projects, but maintain small, nimble organizations that can weather periods of low or no income. However, one must balance that with concerns about client poaching and other potential challenges of working in teams, such as social loafing or free riding.

The individuals in this study focused primarily on the benefits of working in teams that extend beyond their organizations. For example, one independent explained “…so there’s a real good marriage of um—of meeting each other’s needs there that, um, you know, we sort of ride the wave of each other’s successes.” In this excerpt, Rose, a woman in business 17 years, describes the relationship she has with her small network of independents as a marriage, an analogy that suggests a long-term relationship with a
limited number of people. The other analogy “ride the wave of each other’s successes” could point toward a mutually beneficial relationship that helps her and others in her network overcome periods of inactivity. She follows this statement by explaining that the two other people she regularly shares work with bring a different skill set to their informal organization, which means she can call in her custom team to meet her clients’ needs rather than retain a number of staff members. She thinks this is the evolution of the agency business: “It’s boutique centered now. Agencies don’t have 25 people sitting around anymore, just waiting for the work to roll in.”

The above quote represents an overstatement. Agencies can’t afford to pay their staff, unless they can bill their time. Similar to lawyers, advertising and Public Relations agencies focus on billable hours, which they often break into 15 minute segments and they emphasize keeping their staff at healthy billing rates to maintain profitability. When agency personnel find themselves without work, they will actively seek work by pitching new business or by attempting to sell additional services to existing clients. As one interviewee alluded to, in a full service agency, a client may only need one service, but the company decision maker may be persuaded to buy other services. For example, the client may need Public Relations, but since the agency wants to keep its web designers billable, the account executives must also sell the client on redesigning a website.

In principle, a small loosely affiliated network of professionals/organizations might not feel the same necessity to sell others’ services. However, even loosely defined networks can feel obligated to help others in times of need. None of my interviewees addressed this, but one could feel obligated to help a friend, especially because these people may represent an important source for their ongoing professional identity
construction. In other words, when a woman works with other communication professionals, she reinforces her role within that community, which might influence her choices about how to sustain that community through challenging times.

In some cases, women referred to their informal networks as “virtual agencies.” This extends the principles of an agency, which bills clients and offers a range of services. In this case, the virtual agency denotes a semi-formal organization that lacks the configuration of a traditional agency with its full-time staff working set hours in a physical space.

Emma, an agency owner with a small office and staff, shared her belief that people are “a lot more open to the idea that talent doesn’t have to be under your roof in order for it to be yours.” She felt the economy prompted people’s perceptions to shift. Emma started her business working from a home office and still uses consultants to supplement the efforts of her small staff.

Independent practitioners often partnered with marketing communications agencies without Public Relations staff to extend the agency’s services, and at times, independent practitioners worked with an agency if the agency needed industry specific expertise. For example, an agency might attract a healthcare client, but not have anyone with a background in healthcare on staff. The agency could bring in an outside consultant to educate and work with existing staff to service this client.

The term virtual agency was also used to denote an organization that employed full and part-time staff who all worked in remote locations. In several instances, the women said that technology allowed them to hold meetings via conference calls and
webcams so that their teams could work remotely. In two of the 18 businesses, the women’s employees resided throughout the United States and met on a bi-weekly or daily “huddle,” which served as a virtual status meeting.

The concept of virtual agency provides opportunities to expand our perception of work from the traditional model of work occurring during a set period of time when all individuals show up in the same location. Several women touted the benefits of virtual work, including lack of a commute, ability to work from remote locations, no need to get dressed to go to an office, and the ability to intermingle work and home activities, such as throwing in a load of laundry or being home for a repairman. Some of the women even communicated it as a benefit to their clients because the lower overhead translated to more attractive billing rates. A few of the women rented office space on an as-needed basis, such as for client meetings, but most said they simply scheduled meetings at their clients’ locations.

However, virtual work does present some drawbacks. While one employer stressed that she knew what her employees were doing at all times, another admitted that she had less control over her staff and needed to rely on them to motivate themselves. Additionally, many people with virtual offices talked about the isolation of working with little human interaction. Some compensated by structuring their days to include breaks, consulting with colleagues on projects or joining associations to get out of the house. While virtual work enabled them some freedoms, it also restricted other opportunities, such as the opportunity to physically leave work at the office.
The concept of virtual work continues to experience pushback from those in traditional environments as well as those who still cling to the idea of a traditional office as a “real business.” One woman with a virtual agency told me she never invited clients to her virtual office, which consisted of a small conference room in a high-rise building. This woman said she didn’t want clients to know that she didn’t have a physical location where all 13 of her employees worked. Another independent consultant also defined work as occurring in a traditional setting, “…a real firm, not somebody working out of their house, but a real company with actual people at work, every single day…” In other instances people mentioned the difficulty of explaining virtual work to individuals more accustomed to traditional workplaces. One woman said she hoped the term virtual agency would grow in popularity, which indicated to me that it has yet to reach its tipping point where the majority of Americans consider virtual work and virtual teams a norm.

Part of the struggle with virtual work was tied to the concept of office space, a physical location outside of the home. The women in this study seemed split, with some indicating they loved the benefits of working from home, and others indicating they needed an office or space outside of the home to complete work that required concentration. One person said, “…there’s something to be said for having a grownup address.” Another explained that working outside the home had more to do with “context…this is the workplace, and that’s not.”

However, working outside of the home didn’t necessarily require individuals to rent office space. Several mentioned borrowing office space from a client or working in spaces that offered Wi-Fi access, such as Starbucks and Panera Bread. Technology allowed these women to work from just about anywhere, but several women pointed out
that technology could cause them to work too much. So, while technology, such as smartphones and Skype, allowed people to choose where to work, it could also mean they never stopped working.

The discussion of virtual agency frequently occurred in conjunction with discussions about how to join work and life in some type of harmonious arrangement. Some women felt that creating their own structures, including those with virtual agencies, helped them to manage a lifestyle of their choosing. Yet, others still felt conflicted about how much time they should work versus the amount of time spent in leisure or family activities. In several instances, women who worked from home struggled to break away from their work because it was always present, but others said they learned to “compartmentalize” and thus walked down the hall and completely forgot the work they left in their offices. A larger discussion of work/life integration will occur in the next chapter.

**Choosing to stay small**

Working in a virtual environment often allowed people to craft an organizational size of their choosing because adding staff didn’t necessarily require them to add office space. Interestingly, many of the women discussed their desire to stay small, regardless of the opportunity to expand. As Karen, a business owner for more than 20 years mentioned in an earlier section, maturing as a business didn’t necessarily mean growing in the size of accounts, number of employees or the volume of work. As another said, “I never wanted to be big. You lose all quality control. You lose the ability to make a decision. You lose the ability to react quickly, to be nimble.” Still another person tried the model of
a large agency and scaled her organization back, “I keep it small so that I can manage the quality of it and ensure that we deliver, but absent that I had no desire to grow a big enterprise. I did that within the first 18 months and I wasn’t happy, so I keep it small.”

Women expressed a desire to control the quality of the work, and in the case of independent practitioners, the ability to control their own destiny as opposed to the responsibility of worrying about others’ needs. For example, several independents said in previous jobs they needed to fire or downsize people, which led them to realize they didn’t want to manage people based on the potential for a similar situation to arise. One woman said a layoff doesn’t just affect that person, but the individual’s family as well. Instead, she preferred to remain an independent practitioner and worry only about her own needs.

The women’s comments about size might have reflected the economic trouble in 2012, but instead of framing this as a negative, such as “we don’t have enough business to grow,” these women primarily communicated it as a choice that enhanced their abilities to respond to market needs.

**Lessons learned**

This chapter explored how these women developed and continue to sustain their organizations. In reflecting on the women’s comments, one can see how their organizations and philosophies differed from those touted in many traditional business schools. For example, my entrepreneurship class at the University of South Florida emphasized the necessity of a business plan that included a complete study of the market prior to starting a business. Yet, the overwhelming majority of women described a more
fluid and emergent plan, not a formalized document with charts, graphs and projected income statements. Traditional approaches also stressed the need to find a mentor as a determinate of business success, but while these women seek counsel from others, they don’t feel the necessity to find a superior. Instead, they reflected on these relationships as peer groups, similar to the social networking phenomenon that breaks down hierarchical practices. Further, the women described the maturation of their business, not in terms of size, as touted by some as the pinnacle of success, but instead these women described maturity as an ability to focus their efforts and brand their identities in a concise and well-defined manner. Finally, the concept of virtual organizations challenges notions of traditional work as occurring in a specific location during a designated time. While virtual work continues to gain momentum as organizations struggle to reduce costs, it still experiences resistance from both those in traditional employment as well as those leading virtual teams.

All of these challenges to a traditional system of work mean that not only do our ideas about work shift, but the practical ways we enact our work lives must also change. The following chapter explores what all of these changes mean for these women as they struggle to produce their identities in an environment where social perceptions of work and leisure remain in flux.
Chapter 5: Practical implications

RQ3: What are the practical implications of these women's discursive identity constructions for how they live and work? How will their narrative accounts enable and constrain women's personal and work lives?

In the final chapter of the results section, I will explore the practical implications for how these identity constructions play out in individuals’ lives. This chapter seeks to identify concrete examples of how these women employ their identities in their multiple roles, including their experiences as business owners, wives, mothers and community members.

The second part of this question explores this issue as both opportunity and constraint because in some ways these women view their experiences as enabling them to take certain actions or experience advantages not available to others, yet at the same time, their role places limitations on them. For example, the women expressed satisfaction over setting their own schedules, but one woman mentioned how she worked more hours than she did at her previous employer, a job that left her feeling “burned out” and propelled her to start her own company. While she can set her own hours, she currently works long hours and hopes one day to return to the four-day workweek she experienced at her last job.
The chapter begins with a discussion of integrating work and life, which in many cases involves finding ways to work and care for children. Childcare emerged as the primary issue related to mingling work and life and gets extensive coverage. Additionally, many women discussed issues related to control, including the ability to control their own schedules, pay and happiness. In this section, I will explore how women discuss control and consider both how they framed their lives as being in control, but how they experienced frustration from events outside of their control. Finally, I will conclude the results section by exploring how gender manifests in both positive and negative ways.

**Work/life integration**

While retail business owners need to keep a consistent schedule, individuals who own service-oriented businesses can often schedule their work days around other obligations. In many of the interviews, we discussed how owning a Public Relations business afforded these women more liberty to schedule their activities, especially if they worked in virtual agencies or worked from home.

Even the women who worked in offices with employees commented on the flexibility of occasionally altering their schedules to enjoy an afternoon off or take care of a personal obligation. For example, I interviewed Stephanie, a woman with an office staffed with several employees, on a Friday afternoon in the spring of 2012. She remarked during our interview that she had “spring fever” and wanted to release the staff early so they could enjoy the beautiful weather. Lily, a woman with 13 full-time virtual employees, commented that she didn’t need to report to anyone if she wanted to stop on
her way to work to take care of a personal matter. She also said she was very family oriented and thought that owning a business would provide her with flexibility when she decided to start a family.

Some individuals in my study designed their work day around their daily commitments. One woman left her home office to take an afternoon run, others talked about taking long lunches to spend time with their husbands, and nearly all of the mothers in my study discussed how they organized their work around their children’s commitments. Several talked about getting children off to school before their work day officially started and then working during the hours their kids attended school or daycare.

Yet, to declare that business ownership provided these women with unconditional freedom suggests too rosy of a picture. Most of these women discussed business ownership as offering them far more freedom than their past employers, but at the same time, they are now accountable for themselves. In more than one case, women expressed a tendency to work more hours, to experience trouble disconnecting during non-work activities, and the continuous stress of maintaining and growing a business. In comments, such as “…the biggest challenge for me right now is the lack of balance in my life. It’s very heavily tipped on the work side and, um, it’s something I’ve been struggling with for, you know, for a really long time…” one can see that business owners struggle to disengage from work. Others conveyed the same issue in less direct ways, such as women who discussed taking work to restaurants, vacations and working on the sly. Several women talked about hiding work. One said she worked in a closet so her kids didn’t see her working, and another talked about working in her car while her child played an athletic sport.
Yet, while the opportunity existed for people to work continuously work. At least one individual in the study told me she preferred to work less and enjoy life more, which in some cases meant that her projects dragged on too long and complicated the relationship with the client. Several women commented that not everyone can manage their own schedules to determine what time they should designate toward work and what time should be reserved for play.

While I believe some individuals prefer that someone else manages their schedules, I also wondered if at least a couple of these women emphasized this point as a subtle opportunity to point out their achievements. For example, Jenny, a woman with PR business and two retail stores, said, “…[slight pause] some people shouldn’t be in business. They don’t understand business…I do—I do have a really strong business acumen that you—I can apply to something else.” She stumbles and pauses several times attempting to explain her business skills, which could be because she hesitates to tout her achievements. Peggy, a woman in business over 14 years, spoke at length about her belief that most individuals don’t understand the difficulty of starting and maintaining a business, particularly the time commitment. Peggy said she had a “vision” and “was willing to pay the price, but everybody is not willing to pay the price, but they do want the perks and benefits.” In these statements, these otherwise modest women suggest that they consider their businesses and time management skills as achievements that not everyone could or possibly should strive for.

A single template for integrating work and life does not exist. For example, some of the women discussed taking vacations that allowed them to entirely disconnect from work. “I’ve always taken off and gone and left it. And I mean I leave it…I go to third
world countries. I mean I’m not here. You can’t—I’m not having you track me down in Cambodia.” Others found it unsettling to leave it all behind. Yet, this isn’t always framed as a negative. As Karen said, “It doesn’t mean I’m taking client calls when I’m on vacation, but to read some emails, often times allows me to—to have an okay reentry…”

*I'm a Mom-preneur*

As the women in this study negotiated their work/life arrangements, many discussed how their family dynamics impacted decisions about their businesses. Decisions related to mothering dominated the conversation about work/life integration.

Many of the women in this study cited mothering as their primary job category and consequently the reason they left other employment. However, no single script for mothering exists. For many years, women felt the need to act as the primary caregiver for their children, but this was not always the case with women in my study. One woman told me her husband took on the role of caring for their daughter, while another said she and her husband both only work 25 hours a week so that together they can spend more time with their two young daughters. Both of these instances appeared as outliers at different ends of the spectrum.

Mothers still overwhelmingly felt some necessity to serve as the primary caregiver for their children, a role socially allocated to generations of women. Yet, rather than perceive this as a hindrance, the women in this study celebrated it and, in most cases, strived to make arrangements to ensure their children’s needs went before their businesses’ needs.
Several talked about arranging their work schedules so that they worked while their children attended school or daycare. For example, Annie said she struggled with the decision to put her daughter in daycare, but when her daughter turned three, she enrolled her in a program so that she could spend more time on her business, but she arranged her business around her daughter’s schedule. “…I put her into a half-day center and a Montessori that was local so I had the morning time when I would set up my meetings and everything, and I would go and get her, then I would be able to do the writing work, the research work that I could do from my house.” A range of options exists for mothers with young kids. Olivia, a mother of one child under 10 years old, said, “I always had him in daycare because I—there’s no way I could’ve worked at home and—and had a child at home.” Annie and Olivia both indicated that juggling their children’s needs and their work became easier when their children reached an age when they attended school full time.

Many of the mothers expressed the desire to spend more time with their children while their children were young. Anita explained, “they’re only little for a few years so, we’re just really focusing on raising them and spending time with them.” Elaine said, “So—and I was able to have two kids and not have to worry about going back to work after six weeks or whatever…it’s just really important to us to have that opportunity, especially when they are so small.”

Many women agreed with the idea of raising kids and fitting work around their children’s schedules rather than vice versa. The following quote exemplified ideas expressed by the vast majority of mothers in this study, “You may or may not get to take those kinds of days or time off, but because I can, you know, work a little bit differently,
This quote includes several important nuances. First, it indicates this woman considers “being there” for her children to be a luxury; one that may not be available to the majority of working mothers. Second, she indicated a commitment to her work in the phrase “whatever it takes to get the job done.” She stated that she worked nights and weekends to compensate for the daylight hours she spent with her children. This indicates that while she may shift the hours she works, she doesn’t necessarily work less.

The majority of women chose to make their children the primary focus of their days, regardless of whether that meant they needed to work nontraditional hours. Yet, it didn’t come without sacrifices. While the woman above framed it as a luxury, Peggy, a woman looking back with grown children, talked about the personal costs. “I mean when my children were young after they did their homework and got their stuff and went to bed, a lot of people just pass out on the couch. Not me. I was working, figuring out how to do this.” In the interview, she talked about how difficult it was to juggle mothering and business.

Several others also discussed taking client phone calls while they waited to pick up their kids from school, sneaking away from sporting events to work, or juggling small children at home during work hours instead of putting them in daycare. Elaine said, “…my younger, would play in the – in my office. I have toys and crayons. It was a playroom/office for a long time.” She emphasized the importance of shifting her work schedule to spend time with her kids. “So I’m really grateful that I had the time that I had,
and continue to be able to—I don’t drop my kids off at 7 in the morning and pick them up at 6 at night.”

The women framed the role of mother as a choice, but within this choice, they still made different arrangements for childcare. Some talked about keeping their children home as infants and toddlers; others discussed daycare, nannies that came to the house, or friends that watched the children at their homes while they worked. Some attempted to juggle childcare and business simultaneously, but even in this area disagreement existed. As one woman said, “So I don’t believe in having your child home when you’re working if it’s a real job that you need to talk to people…” Another talked about calling clients while she shuttled her kids from school or waited in the carpool line.

Regardless of the specific choices of how individual mothers broke up their work days, an overwhelming majority framed alternate scheduling to meet their children’s needs as choices they willingly made.

- I found myself working nights, put her down to bed, I’d work till midnight, you know, if I had writing assignments, you know, you kind of steal those hours when your children aren’t demanding of you. But again, I did that because I wanted her to be my priority so that is just a sacrifice I made at first. It was a good sacrifice, but it was challenging.

The woman might willingly make the choice, but the phrase “steal those hours” hints at a feeling of guilt, but one that can be rationalized as a “good sacrifice.” Connotations from the words “sacrifice,” “challenge”, “steal” and “demanding” imply that this woman may have some negative feelings about raising a child and running a business, even though she continually attempted to frame it as a positive. However, she could have selected a different word, such as choice or decision, which evokes more
positive connotations. Whereas, sacrifice literally means that someone gave something up. She mentions sacrifice twice within this short excerpt, and the second time states it was a “good sacrifice.” The addition of “good” made me wonder if she hoped to convince her listener and possibly herself that she made the right choice in what remains a highly sensitive decision. Women still agonize over the allocation of time for work and mothering, and this passage reminds us that women still feel pressured to frame childrearing in positive terms, but women could also experience it as an unacknowledged “sacrifice.”

While it’s somewhat outside of the scope of this study, it’s interesting to consider if these female business owners act as a model for their children. For example, do they influence the types of careers their children intend to pursue? A couple of the women in my study speculated on this. Several hoped they offered their children alternate scripts for how one’s career might look, but others said their children decided they didn’t want to be like their parents. “Julie at the time was eight. [pause] So she was young, and she has told me that I’ve—watching me work has caused her to never want to work in a corporate environment. That’s just not her style.” And another said, “And I’m glad to be modeling that [business ownership] for the kids, so they can like decide, because it’s easy to run into somebody with a job and see how that works out.” In this statement, the woman implied she is different from other mothers because the kids can easily find someone with a job, but she hoped that she modeled an alternative way to mother and work.
Control

Many of the women in this study used the word control when they described aspects of their businesses or the integration of their businesses and work lives. As one woman suggested the phrase “entrepreneurial spirit” might be another way of saying “control freak.” This may sound extreme, but most of the women expressed their use of control as an opportunity to make choices without needing to consult others. For instance, Regan, a business owner for over 14 years with two offices, said, “no, I didn’t explain it [a business decision] to anybody. Didn’t need to, that’s the beauty of owning your own business; you don’t have to make any explanations. You just make the change.”

In addition to not needing to explain their decisions, many of the participants expressed satisfaction in their ability to choose the type of people they worked with and the type of accounts they worked on. For example, Regan commented, “I’ve constructed my life so that I can work for people I like and causes I believe in.” Another spoke about the satisfaction she derived from these choices:

And I really created my own little fiefdom here. We get to pick the business we want to do. We get to work on the kind of practices I’m interested in and don’t care about the other stuff. I don’t. If I can have nirvana in my workplace, I achieved it.

These comments reflect the perception that a business owner can control her environment to create the type of work she desires. The two women above both suggested that they can pick and choose the work they want, and words and phrases such as “fiefdom” and “don’t have to make any explanations” indicate that they dominate or control important decisions to create their own nirvana.
Regan emphasized her ability to control and arrange her environment right down to her physical setting. "Well, this building, I selected every color. I selected every stick of furniture. I selected every wall decoration." Another woman explained that it’s not simply about selecting the type of work or her physical surroundings, but she felt owing a business also gave her control over her future income.

I also completely disagree with people that don’t start their own businesses because they said, “well, when you have a job it’s guaranteed pay”… So, if you lose a job, your job, you have to find a whole other job. If I’m like totally broke, I just have to find one client. It’s actually way easier for me to make money than it is for you to make money…I am in more control of my destiny I think than I would be if I had a job.

When the above interviewee suggested she could control her ability to make money more so than an individual with a job, she was not only confirming her choice to start a business, but she was also suggesting that was “easier” for her to control her earning power than an employee.

At a surface level, this appears sensible. Someone might experience more difficulty finding a full-time job than a project, but the woman’s comment omitted any negative associations related to lack of work or non-billable time, such as maintaining databases, billing clients or prospecting for more work. Did this woman truly control her ability to make money? Did she want me to think that she controlled her destiny because it’s part of the myth that a business owner or entrepreneur controls more than a typical employee? This same woman at other points in the interview told me that if she didn’t work, she would not make money. During our conversation, she raised a few issues not reflected in the statement above: (1) she admitted that she occasionally experienced periods when she didn’t have billable work; (2) she needed to network to find more jobs,
which suggested there was not as much control as the previous statement led us to believe; (3) sometimes clients decided to stop a project in the middle so that the income she anticipated never appeared. She indicated in this type of business practitioners need contracts. She used the comparison of installing a pool to make her point. An individual can’t decide after he or she contracted to dig a hole in the yard not to install the pool, but someone can start a website or publicity efforts and decide the priorities changed or the budget decreased. Thus, one must consider whether business ownership offered individuals the level of control they indicated.

In almost every interview, we discussed the ways in which these women used their role as business owners to control an aspect of their lives that they could not control in another environment. For example, many women discussed their inability to leave work for family obligations, to assist a professional association with an event or to schedule a leisure activity, such as an afternoon run.

While the women primarily framed their business experiences as offering more opportunities to shape their lives and work, I did specifically ask each person about what she perceived as the challenges and opportunities presented by her role. When responding to the question about challenges, many reflected on areas of their businesses they felt they could not control, such as the economy, rent, and employees.

The most common response that women with employees cited was the difficulties related to managing people. In many cases, these accounts included an inability to control some aspect of the person’s behavior; for example two interviewees discussed how their employees created an office culture that they felt did not reflect the direction they wanted
to take with the company. In both of these examples, the women related how they needed to make staffing changes to regain control over the office culture.

While the majority of stories reflected ways that women can shape their lives based on the flexibility available to business owners, no one can control everything. One aspect that several women claimed they controlled was their client base. However, a few alluded to the need to take on clients, regardless of their interests, because as one solo practitioner said, “…I mean, you can’t turn everybody down or else you’re not going to have any business…” In terms of scheduling, while they had more control over their daily activities, they were still governed by their clients’ needs and deadlines. As one woman said, she may own the business, but her clients are the boss. If the client needed an immediate response, these women might work late to meet that need.

The very nature of the Public Relations business only provides limited control. As one woman said, “You can control what’s coming out of your mouth, but how someone interprets it and gives you feedback on that isn’t always the same.” In part, this statement reflects the traditional distinction between Public Relations and advertising. In many entry-level classes, instructors will indicate that you can’t control the media. If you want to control the message, you need to take out an advertisement. Of course, the above statement reminds us that regardless of the communication vehicle, one can’t control the interpretation of the message or the feedback provided. This insight reminds us that while we may desire to control communication, whether it’s a Public Relations statement, an ad, or an interview with a researcher, the context only provides limited control.
**Gender: an area of control and restraint**

In the previous section, I discussed the possibility of controlling some aspects of business ownership and framing these experiences as successes while at times downplaying the limitations. The same dichotomy also occurred in issues related to gender.

The issue of gender came up primarily as it related to the role of mothering. As mentioned above, women framed gender roles within the family as positive, meaning that if they shouldered the majority of childcare responsibilities, they viewed this as an opportunity. As mentioned in the previous section, the women in nearly every instance expressed it as an honor or “luxury.” Yet, while it’s framed as a positive, women who shoulder the majority of childcare responsibilities, also experienced some tradeoffs including limited hours in which to complete work and sometimes a reduced income based on the need to choose between paid work and spending time with their children.

In reference to their businesses, women only expressed gender as a constraint in select instances and many refused to consider it an issue. In fact, almost every woman in the study articulated dismay about women-owned businesses being federally designated as “minority businesses.” The following response typified discussions of the women-owned business classification:

> Um, I—I bucked um filling out the minority business owner thing for a long time because I don’t think I’m a minority. I didn’t like having my gender be something, um, that was considered that, or I didn’t want to be handicapped. I didn’t want—I wanted to earn business for who I was…

Some women said they felt gender only surfaced as a component of their persona in the same way age might affect the way people interpreted their abilities. Two of the
younger women in the study suggested their age might have as much or more bearing on their abilities to influence clients as their gender.

While I think many people want to think of gender as a non-issue, it did emerge more than some women wanted to admit. One of my interviewees, Regan, almost refused to speak with me when I told her I wanted to talk specifically with female business owners because she felt gender had nothing to do with her business. Yet, I recognized some gendered language in our discussion. In one instance, Regan told me how one of her employees told her a “lesser woman would be offended” by a clients’ comment. This indicated to me that gender, regardless of whether she wanted to tout a tough, gun-toting persona, still influenced how she reacted. In fact, Regan may have wanted to tell me gender had nothing to do with who she was, but her words and stories contradicted this.

She proudly shared a story about the reason she earned a PhD.

‘Why the PhD?’ And I said, ‘Because I sit at the table with a bunch of men’— because my world is populated by technicians who are all men, and I said, ‘I sit at the table with them and they are PhDs and PEs and PGs and, uh, when I sit at the table I don’t want there to be any doubt that I’m as qualified to be there, saying what I say, and doing what I do as they are.’

The above story as well as her frequent retelling of it indicated that gender played a greater role in her business than she wanted to let on. By stating that men with advanced degrees influenced her decision to earn a PhD because she wanted them to know she was “qualified,” signifies that she acknowledged the influence of gender, even if it’s only on a subconscious level.

In some cases, the women reluctantly indicated gender bias existed and in other cases, they specified that it depended on the industry segment. For instance, Public Relations is dominated by women, but specific categories, such as technology, medical or
utilities might expose women to more males than others who served generalist or female-dominated markets. Those who served professional categories that attracted more men than women tended to cite more instances of gender bias, though not all of these instances were framed as negative experiences. As one woman said, “It can work to your advantage or your disadvantage, so you have to learn how they think so that you can make decisions accordingly.” This statement indicates women frame their interactions based on gender. Some women said that in select instances, like attempting to attract men to a tradeshow booth, a young female face worked to their advantage.

One woman said she didn’t think men realized gender differences existed. She said men told her they communicated in the same manner as women. She, however, insisted that women discussed more personal matters while men rarely talked about their personal lives, preferring to stick with less intimate topics, such as sports or getting right to business. She also believed women felt uncomfortable with the “toe-to-toe screaming;” while men could yell at each other and a few minutes later forget the encounter and act like best friends.

Several of the women’s comments indicated that men appeared not only more comfortable in combative situations, but as one woman related sometimes they were more effective. When Jenny needed a client to pay the $60,000 the company owed her, she “took her penis.”

But, I mean, I’ve had – I’ve had really tough times and then I just show up with a man and it’s like – something that I’d been like trying to get – for instance, I had a $10,000 a month retainer uh client, six months in arrears, I just couldn’t get them to pay, and I showed up with my penis and I got paid that day. [Laughs]
Jenny may laugh about taking her “penis” along to convince a client to pay his bill, but $60,000 reflects a serious debt for a small business. Based on her experience attempting to convince the client to settle his outstanding balance and then immediately getting paid when she brings her token male friend, one can see that gender still matters in business.

While Jenny called a designated male her “penis,” she also admitted that when this male PR consultant needed to present to a primarily female audience, she would attend his meetings so that he could better relate to the audience. “And—and so, I wish we could all say that it [gender] has nothing to do with it, and we can just relate as humans, but there is [are] still people out there that—don’t, and so yeah…” In the previous quote, this woman alluded to gender discrimination and suggested that discrimination in other contexts also occurred as people made hasty judgments and tried to apply one template to an entire group of people.

**Lessons learned**

This chapter built upon the observations of the previous two chapters as women used their new roles and structures to manage their work and personal lives. Several themes emerged in this chapter including the aspect of control, which surfaced as both enabling some actions and restraining others. Ultimately, this chapter offered both a review of women’s choices and the practical implications for these choices. For example, women continually referenced their roles as mothers as a positive choice, and yet several also admitted that mothering included some sacrifices, such as altering their work hours and at times working while others in more traditional jobs experienced leisure time. In
other examples, some of the women who selected working from home for its perceived benefits of integrating work and personal activities, also admitted that home/work integration meant that they could not disconnect the two, which made it difficult to relax or enjoy their free time.

This chapter concludes the results section, which explored several important issues, including how women celebrated some traditional gender roles, such as mother, while still negotiating the definitions of other roles, including entrepreneur or independent practitioner. In examining socially designated roles and words that women used to construct their identities, we saw how rigid categories of work and life broke down and gave way to lifestyles and definitions that provided evolving continuums that allowed women flexibility in a world that challenged traditions. Instead of getting rooted in business plans and structures that followed a traditional business school philosophy, these women incorporated changes in the business environment in ways that emphasized flexibility and, more importantly, the pragmatic need to be nimble and reinvent to meet changing demands in both their personal and professional lives.

Conversely, while women created some new paradigms, they also felt the tug of some social traditions and norms, such as those related to mothering and gender roles. At times, tension appeared in the women’s comments as they attempted to account for home and work.

They also at times tapped into their perceptions of what they believed reflected appropriate roles or experiences of business owners or entrepreneurs. Aspects of the traditional narrative, including ideas about control, planning and innovation surfaced as
these women attempted to articulate how they either fit within these perceptions or how their experiences differed from what they recognized as a canonical narrative for these roles.

The women’s comments indicate that experiences of identity in many ways get reified by societal norms, and when our experiences don’t reflect what we perceive as appropriate for these roles, we must then find ways to account for these in our narratives. In some cases, the words we select to frame these experiences belie our conscious or subconscious feelings about these experiences, such as the case of mothering as a “good sacrifice” or getting a PhD to indicate a woman is as “qualified.” By examining the words these women selected, one can locate a subtle counter narrative that these women do not intend to report because it contradicts how they want to portray their identities.

The results chapters paved the way for the discussion section in which I will examine the implications for the way women describe themselves, the acceptance and rejection of social roles, the development of their businesses, and how these women applied their identities in their professional and personal lives.
Chapter 6: Discussion

In researching how women communicated their identities as business owners, I not only learned how these women described themselves and their organizations, but I also gained access to how these women used their roles to shape many aspects of their lives. The following section discusses the practical aspects of how these women use language and action to make sense of their lives and includes some of the real-world experiences and future implications.

Practical implications

As I reflect on this dissertation, I am struck by the way women used existing resources to accommodate narratives that continued to evolve and, in some cases, dramatically change. The following section examines several of the narrative threads that these women drew upon as they explained their work and negotiated how their careers fit into their lives. As Downs (2006) pointed out, these women found ways to alter their narratives based on the social context, and as Weick (2001) indicated, the women in this study continually reassessed the situation and made small changes to their interpretations. These interpretations impacted the decisions they made, or the actions they took, as well as how they communicated about their actions and work lives to others.
“I’m a mother first”

One of the surprising findings for me was the strong maternal desire that most of these women expressed. In a society in which women continually advocate for gender equality, I questioned whether childrearing would still get construed as a primary role. Some of the literature (Shapiro et al, 2008; Williams, 2007) indicated that working mothers struggled to achieve an idealized arrangement of work and childcare. These studies overtly implied that women needed to make choices between raising a family and a full-time career or business venture. Articles with titles, such as “Why Women Still Can’t have It All,” depicted the struggles working women faced as they attempt to manage demanding careers while raising children (Slaughter, 2012). According to Slaughter (2012), women struggled with a misguided feminist mantra that encouraged women to enact the role of “super mom,” a career performance that inaccurately suggested that if one could not raise high-achieving children while simultaneously climbing the proverbial corporate ladder, the woman lacked the desire or was deficient in some way. Slaughter (2012), a scholar as well as someone with practical experience, implored women to acknowledge the social nuances of a society that simultaneously touts that women can “have it all,” but never explains the cost for women who try to achieve this ideal.

It’s important to remember this social backdrop as I explain that the majority of mothers in my study stressed how their businesses allowed them to play the role of “available mother,” a label I’m using to indicate their desire for their children to perceive them as engaged mothers. I based this assertion on comments, such as how one woman described working in a closet so her children didn’t see her working at home and others
who explained that they work when their children slept, attended school/daycare or other outside activities. These women wanted their children to literally see the role of mother as primary, yet they acknowledged this required some negotiations. As one mother said, “I found myself working nights, put her down to bed. I’d work till midnight you know if I had writing assignments. You know, you kind of steal those hours when your children aren’t demanding of you.”

In the previous excerpt, the woman referred to her work as “stealing those hours,” which could suggest she felt some guilt. If one considers the social context, an environment that encourages women to find that unrealistic balance, we can begin to see that even women who can schedule around their children’s commitments still struggle with social illusions about mothering. Great pressure exists for mothers to not just be “good enough,” but to reach a level of perfection that requires constant self-scrutiny and adherence to rigorous unachievable standards (Crittenden, 2012). In a society that offers women the opportunity to make choices about the time spent mothering, a double standard still exists that often pits stay-at-home-moms as ideal mothers meanwhile categorizing working mothers as “good enough.” Crittenden (2012), a well-recognized authority on the struggles of mothers, wrote about the unrealistic expectations Americans place on mothers. In a quest for perfection, mothers often place undue stress on themselves to get it right because the implication exists that poor mothering can spell disaster for a child’s future (Crittenden, 2012).

In an attempt to offer their children bright futures, many of the mothers in my study said they opted to start a business because they believed it would allow them more flexibility to mother. Mothers who decided to place mothering as their primary role while
running a business as secondary made adjustments to allow for the time commitment required for childrearing. The women mentioned working during nontraditional business hours to get the work done or “hiding” work so that their children believed their mothers placed their needs first. In this conversation, we can observe vestiges of the idea women can “have it all.” Yet, the women in this study admitted they struggled. For example, “It was a good sacrifice, but it was challenging.” While Slaughter (2012) might suggest most women would avoid any portrayal other than “super mom,” some of the women in my study reluctantly admitted to the hardships involved in raising kids and running a business.

In using the words mother and hardship in the same sentence might suggest that the women resented their roles as mothers, but the women expressed quite the opposite. The women framed their ability to mother as a “luxury.” They recognized that many working women could not arrange their schedules for their children. In framing the ability to mother as a luxury, I believe these women situated mothering as something that afforded them not only time with their children, but also allowed them to gain the social acceptance of a society that judges “good moms” based on the mom’s ability to be engaged or available in their child’s life. As these women enacted the role of available mother for their children, it provided them some of the social approval available to stay-at-home moms, who seemingly placed their children’s needs above their own career fulfillment.

However, as mentioned in the results section, the choice to enact the role of available mother requires some sacrifices, and in at least one case, one can question
whether or not the “sacrifice” was as satisfying as the interviewee intended to communicate.

In many respects, this communication about the satisfaction of mothering offers insight into social perceptions and how this impacts ongoing communication about identity. Giddens (1984) indicated that social perceptions and norms govern our identities, and Fairhurst (2007) explained these identities are “reflexively organized narratives drawn from an individual’s involvement with competing Discourses and life experiences.” Both of these scholars help to explain how Annie, the woman with one child who repeatedly communicates how she places her child as her “priority,” reconciles her identity within several competing narratives. She must deal with her perceived discourses about mothering as a primary role, which conflicts with her perceptions about her role as a business owner, her identity as a PR professional, and identity as a leader within her professional community. As Fairhurst (2007) indicates, these competing discourses and experiences must coalesce within her narrative account, but it’s not necessarily always a smooth process.

We see bumps when Annie tries to explain mothering and business. She states that her experience as a mother was a sacrifice twice within two sentences, and that deciding to place her in daycare at age three so she could work was “harder for me than it was for her,” but it was necessary because she needed that “valuable time” to run her business. In these statements, we see how competing discourses create tensions that must get resolved in an ongoing communication that reflects identity. In this case, Annie feels conflicted about the role she should choose as primary, even as she indicates that the roles co-exist within her discourse. She portrays herself as an available mother, but the
interview conversation also offers her an opportunity to articulate her role as a successful business owner, a role that empowers her, but one that simultaneously conflicts with ideas about mothering as her primary, full-time job.

**Business owners control their time**

The mothers in my study were not the only ones who struggled to determine how much time they should spend working and how much time to commit to other activities. Women repeatedly talked about their ability to control their time and that owning a business offered them the luxury of choosing to mother, get more involved in professional organizations or pursue a hobby. The word “control” emerged as a way to describe how they could potentially garner more personal time or divide their time differently than in past employment.

Yet, I noticed an inconsistency in many instances between what they said about their ability to control their time and their satisfaction with how that time ultimately was allotted. For example, Vicki explained that she started her business to “be more creative and more in control.” Yet, she explained later, “I ultimately want to work four days a week, and, um, I used to work four days when I worked at the [name omitted] and it was wonderful. Um, but, I – I don’t seem to ever get closer to that.” Other women explained how they controlled when their workday ended, and then later confessed that they returned to the office late at night to complete tasks.

Thus, while these women framed and sincerely wanted to control the way their time got divided, in most cases, they ultimately struggled with the difference between what they intended and what actually occurred. To better understand how women
continually make sense of this discontinuity, we must remember that no script existed for how these women enacted their roles. They faltered between what they perceived their lives should look like and the way it actually occurred. Ahrne (1990) pointed out people must find ways to function in an unknown environment without ready made plans. To compensate they rely on “gossip, official news, advice from friends and relatives.” In this study, the women often referred to friends, relatives and social perceptions to craft their understanding of how a business owner should control her workday.

People often believe business owners or entrepreneurs can control their schedules and enjoy more free time than the rest of society. One woman in my study discussed how her family believed she could arrange her schedule at a moment’s notice for any personal commitment. As she said, “it’s almost taken for granted if something’s happening we’ll be there.” She related how her father called to ask if she could attend his surgery the following week. She said, “Really? You think I can just drop everything and, you know, pay 600 bucks and fly up? Oh, hmm. But the expectation is yes. Yes, you can.” In this example, we can see how social perceptions of business owners continued to get reified in conversation and in the woman’s actions because she said she would likely attend her father’s surgery. The perception of the business owner as someone with a flexible schedule for leisure or personal commitments continued to make the person believe she should control her life to achieve these results.

Every person customizes her belief system based on her unique set of experiences that limit or allow a certain set of responses (Herrinstein Smith, 1991). In the case above, the woman’s belief system, which she indicated included a strong commitment to family as well as the perception that business owners control their schedules, provided her with a
limited array of options in this situation. Herrinstein Smith (1991) advocated that beliefs, defined as a person’s fluid “tendencies to perceive-and-act-in the world in certain ways,” face differing degrees of stability in our lives. In some cases, the stability of a belief came from the affirmation of others. In the example above, the woman discussed her family’s beliefs about the flexibility of her life as a business owner. This belief guided her actions, and the beliefs or perceptions got reinforced when she later acknowledged her agreement with her father’s statement and indicated she would likely attend his surgery.

As we analyze social interaction, we pull it out of the natural flow of human interaction and call attention to it. However, humans structure their lives in such a way that they don’t acknowledge the unconscious rules and social practices that construct how they interact; they need to make ongoing decisions and don’t have time to analyze each one for meaning or consistency (Giddens, 1984). This applies to the way women construct their interactions because whether they realize it or not, they respond to these social expectations, often without consciously recognizing their existence. In the above example, if the woman flew out to attend her father’s surgery, she reinforced a social belief that business owners can control their schedules more so than other individuals and continued to cement the idea that she can alter her schedule with little notice.

The woman above needed to manage the disconnect between what she initially stated, a reluctance to rearrange her schedule, and her final decision to arrange her schedule to meet her family’s needs. Without the woman’s awareness, she organized and responded to a social system, in this case her family. Scholars (Ahrne, 1990; Giddens, 1984) informed us that we organize and often unconsciously respond to the social
structures of a system because this system helps us to make ongoing decisions without continuously stopping the flow of action.

When women unconsciously respond to social structures, often their discourse reflects the disconnect between how they intend to act and how this action occurs. In conversation, people don’t acknowledge disconnects between their actions and speech, but they need to find ways to manage the incongruities. Fairhurst (2007) indicated people work with two different types of discourse; one that governs everyday interactions in which people make conscious decisions. At the other level of discourse, individuals respond to a social system and this often occurs at an unconscious level (Fairhurst, 2007). In recognizing the differences between how women intended to control their lives and how circumstances within a social system infringed on these intentions, I hope to draw the conversation from an unconscious state to what Giddens (1984) called “discursive consciousness” or an opportunity for people to discuss the social values that undermine intended actions and aspirations.

**Roles and discursive framing**

In examining the discourse in this study, I reviewed the ways women framed their identities. Essentially, framing allowed the women to interpret and organize their experiences within a given context (Goffman, 1974). Goffman (1974) referred to framing as part of a face-to-face interaction, an opportunity for individuals to perform who they believe they are for others.

As the women framed their experiences for me, they used specific words and phrases to create a representation of themselves they wanted me to experience. For
example, many of the women wanted to communicate about their ability to meet clients’ needs. These women offered numerous examples that included how they relentlessly pursued opportunities for clients and worked late hours to complete jobs. In their self-descriptions words, such as “dedicated” and “driven,” emerged in their conversations. In these interactions, they performed the role of a hard-working Public Relations practitioner, a role that afforded them some social value in both the context of our conversation, but perhaps more important, in conversations they have with new clients as they attempt to explain their abilities and services to others.

In explaining their services, these women faced multiple complexities as they framed their abilities and that of the organizations they ultimately created. In addition to explaining their personal abilities, they also needed to help their clients understand how they could assist them. The women shared that new clients came from a variety of sources including previous employment, referrals from other professionals and casual conversations at social events. For example, one woman related how she went to a party and met a woman who sold a popular woman’s accessory. After several conversations, the female business owner found a way that she could promote the woman’s career story as a testament to female business ownership. The previous example indicates women can promote their PR services in both professional and personal contexts, which creates an ever-present need to craft an acceptable response to inquiries about their work. The example indicates that this ongoing need to explain their work lives to others not only impacts women’s personal identity, but also may play a role in the business’s success.

In responding to questions about their work, women experienced a double challenge both in the use of a label to designate their role and the explanation of their
profession. Women can respond by offering a label, such as business owner or entrepreneur. If women decided to use a label that indicated their role in founding the business, most women relied on some version of the “business owner” classification. As noted in the results section, half of the women after some discussion elected to use the term entrepreneur to describe themselves, but the label caused confusion. In most cases, I directly asked if they considered themselves entrepreneurs, and the majority of women worked through the nuances of that role within the interview. While some scholars (Gill & Ganesh, 2007; Gupta & Fernandez, 2009) suggested women hesitate to use the term based on gender, my interviewees showed reluctance to identify with the term primarily because they didn’t have a clear definition. In the course of the interviews, many of the women attempted to articulate a definition and repeatedly admitted their indecision. This indicated a lack of social consensus surrounding the term, and rather than embrace the word based on the opportunities afforded by ambiguity, basically the ability to shape the definition as they saw fit, the women preferred terms that seemingly offered more social agreement. Issues related to ambiguity also surfaced when women needed to explain their chosen profession, Public Relations.

Public Relations is an umbrella term for an array of services, which may have influenced PR professionals to also choose an ambiguous definition that indicates people in this field perform “strategic communication processes” (PRSA, 2012). Some might suggest ambiguity allows people to shape their businesses in nearly limitless ways, yet the challenge still exists that people need some consensus about the type of work that either will get completed, or in the case of a potential client, a shared understanding of the type of work that the organization can offer.
The women asserted that the lack of a clear definition for the profession presented challenges, and the communication of this definition frequently varied based on the other individual(s) involved in the conversation. Women explained that the definitions of their work depended on how much they believed the other person(s) would understand.

When ambiguous definitions, such as “strategic management function,” caused too much confusion, the women expressed their skills in terms of the outcomes, such as showing someone a news story. By offering an artifact from their previous achievements, the women helped the other person make sense of their work. Sensemaking always involves an aspect of identity construction because actors [female business owners] offer up this symbol [news story] as a retrospective cue that the other person can use as a sensemaking tool (Weick, 2001). Yet, Weick (2001) reminded us that sensemaking in large part depends on the other person’s reaction or validation. In this scenario, the female business owner sought the other person’s understanding because it validated and reinforced her identity, in effect assuring her that the description or example she offered presented an acceptable and coherent account. Linde (1993) informed us that individuals who consider themselves middle class are particularly sensitive to the development of coherent, accepted narrative accounts of their professional lives because the accounts validate their individual worth. If one applies this to this study, these middle-class women needed others to accept their accounts because it reinforced how they constructed their identities. This reinforcement of a female business owner’s professional identity is an ongoing process that requires continuous feedback (Down, 2006; Karp, 2006).

When I asked female business owners to describe themselves, they took aspects of their socially vetted identities and shaped them into a coherent life story. These stories
helped individuals to weave together what might otherwise seem like incongruities into their life histories (Linde, 1993; Bateson, 1989; Gergen, 1992). In their narrative responses, the women blended aspects of their lives including mothering, previous Public Relations experience, prior career aspirations and their current businesses. For example, one female business owner related how her previous work in a corporate PR department, experience raising five children, and her various personal interests led her to her current position. An individual can apply a primary framework to “locate, perceive, identify and label” (Goffman, 1974) these seemingly diverse items into a cohesive account of her life (Bateson, 1992). One woman summarized it as, “…all those different uh arenas of experience come together at some point in your career in different ways and shapes and take on a new life or reinvent in new—and take you down a new path, but it’s all because of the work that you did back here.”

While framing helped individuals to notice cues within a context, sensemaking helped them to understand and make decisions about future actions (Weick, 2001). Weick et al. (2005) defined sensemaking as “the primary site where meanings materialize that inform and constrain identity and action.” In this process, a person looks back at past experiences and finds ways to create “rational” accounts for herself and others that inform her future decisions (Weick, 2001). Bateson (1989, 1992) informed scholars that this “rational” account could weave many discontinuities together as a cohesive life story, and this story could take many different forms.

Just as an individual must rationally account for her actions, an organization must also communicate about its actions to help people identify with its mission and purpose. In the case of a business owner and an organization, often the accounts are closely linked.
The women in my study commented about how their work and personal identities overlapped. In some cases, the women professed a strong personal connection with an industry, such as a woman who loved art\(^{13}\) and started a Public Relations agency that specialized in the art industry. In other instances, women indicated their business name incorporated some aspect of their own name, which forever linked the identity of both the founder and her organization. In the quote below, the business owner indicated an overlap in her personal and business identities.

-um I think that people know that when they work with us, they’re really working with the principle and that’s what you—what’s what they pay for is to work with the person whose name is on the door and not three people down the food chain, so to speak, that may have three years of experience but be very, very capable. Um, they’re paying for 20 years of experience, and that’s what they--they want. You know? Does that make sense?

In the excerpt above, the woman mixed her personal and organizational identities when she described her 20 years of experience as the reason clients selected her firm. In including her personal experiences, which included both the organization and her previous employment, the woman above indicated her personal background created legitimacy for her organization. Scholars (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007; Rode & Vallaster, 2005; Zott & Huy, 2007) validated the woman’s practical experience by indicating that the legitimacy of an organization in its early stages is often linked to the founder. While this woman’s business existed for 17 years, she still indicated an ongoing connection between her personal identity, her 20 years of experience, and the reason that

\(^{13}\) I changed the industry to protect the woman’s identity.
clients decide to work with her organization. Yet, at the same time, she skill seeks ongoing validation as evidenced by the questions at the end of this excerpt.

A continuous shift between the individual and the organization naturally occurs and individuals should not attempt to segment their identities from that of their organizations. In fact, Cooren (2012) suggested that organizations and the individuals who affiliate with them could metaphorically get categorized as ventriloquist and puppet. The organization and individual fluctuated between the two so at times the organization emerged as the puppeteer and at other times the individual appeared as the spokesperson for the organization. An outsider might even get the puppet master and puppet confused (Cooren, 2012). The concept of puppet master and puppet reminded me that an individual’s identity not only shapes the organization she created, but the organization also played an important role in shaping the business owner’s actions and identity. A fluid shift occurred between the organizational leader and the organization as she danced between her personal identity and that of her new entity. At times the business may appear to speak for her. For example, one woman said she told people that she worked for her organization. Just as the business gains an identity by an association with the founder, the female business owner also gains social legitimacy as a business owner when she describes her new organization. In other words, organizational and personal identities continually play off of each other as both the individual and organization accept a level of social legitimacy within their given communities.

This shift between the individual and the organization occurs as a natural transfer and one that an individual cannot entirely control (Cooren, 2012). An individual can start
a business, but that does not mean that the person maintains control over that entity. To sustain itself, the organization must also develop an identity.

**Emerging organizations**

**The unplanned organization**

In 16 different accounts, the women shared that they never intended to start a business. In almost every account, the women said they reacted to life circumstances, not a childhood dream of owning a business. In sharp contrast to business schools that implore people to research the market and develop a business plan, these women responded to life circumstances that included a variety of factors, including frustrations with previous employers, the perception that a business would afford them more time with their families, and a financial need to earn an income.

Many described using a “fluid” plan, one which could change as circumstances dictated. The following excerpt provides a typical scenario in which the woman didn’t want to start a business, and ends with a metaphor that explains how one can continue to move forward, even without necessarily planning what the future might look like.

I didn’t want to be a business owner, and when I was working for the woman that I was working for before I ended that relationship and broke out on my own, I did it really under duress. I mean, I wasn’t -- it wasn’t what I wanted to do, I did it because I found myself in a situation, and it was really the best situation. It was the right situation. It was the healthiest situation. So I broke off and I could have at that point gone back to work for somebody else, but I didn’t. I just started. I -- I just -- I just started it. You know? You don’t think, “What’s it going to look like 25 years from now? Are you going to be…” It just, you know, like so many things, you put one foot in front of the other every day and you wake up and something’s, you know, not -- not to say I wasn’t working on the business and planning the business but I don’t think at the beginning [pause]. You know, it’s like having a baby, right? That one day you’ll wake up and your baby will be five and you’ll say, “Well, how did that happen?” Like, you know, did you plan on
having a five years old? And you would say, “No. Every day I woke up and I just took care of that baby, and we went to bed every night and we woke up the next day and we did it again, and then, poof, one day, it’s been five years.”

In the excerpt above, we can see organizing as a continuous action in which the business owner works “in” her business, not “on” her business (Gerber, 1990). While business gurus, like Gerber (1990), discouraged such an approach, it clearly worked for this individual, a business owner for over 20 years, as well as other women who discussed the necessity of completing tasks or billable hours as opposed to outlining business strategies and performing market analyses. Yet, how and why can this work in a business environment governed by rules and plans? How does one organize? How does one achieve this level of fluidity?

Bateson (1989) and Gergen (1992) suggested women are particularly adept at managing changing circumstances and finding continuity among many disparate activities. This agility in finding commonality between diverse endeavors may help female business owners envision how to integrate past, present and future activities, but it doesn’t completely explain how one’s actions shape an organization.

Weick (2001) helped explain it when he stated: “Whenever people act, their actions may become binding if those actions occur in a context of high choice, high irreversibility and high visibility.” These female business owners made a highly visible choice to start a business, a decision that many would construe as a high choice based on the necessity for individuals to find and sustain work. When one declares her intentions and begins to act in accordance with those intentions, she creates irreversible actions. In this case, the women declared their intentions to start businesses, began to attract clients, and later grew a business, creating a pattern of “irreversible” actions. Organizational
goals can emerge from what originally started as personal objectives because in most cases these “personal justifications” involved broadly defined goals (Weick, 2001). For example, the women in this study often mentioned their intentions to focus on an industry segment they previously worked in. The women then attracted clients in these industry segments and, in some cases, later hired other individuals who specialized in these areas, turning a broadly articulated personal goal into a more focused business goal.

The way people make sense of their actions occurs in hindsight (Freeman, 2010; Weick, 2001) and impacts the future, so as these women evaluated in retrospect the outcome of their businesses’ successes and failures, they simultaneously continued to act and make small unconscious choices as they moved their businesses forward. Without realizing it, these women made course corrections, similar to the metaphor of a mother raising a baby. At first, a person might hold a baby in an awkward fashion and then gradually he or she learns how to comfortably rock a child. Unconsciously, this person continues to make small almost unperceivable adjustments until one day he or she realizes the baby grew into a child. In the same way, the women continually made small adjustments to sustain their businesses.

Mike Michalowicz, a business owner and author of The Toilet Paper Entrepreneur (2008), advocated that business owners should follow a fluid plan, such as the business models set forth by the women in this study. Michalowicz (2008) joked that a business plan should fit on a sheet of toilet paper because long plans delay action and sometimes by the time someone completes a full business plan, the market changes, rendering the plan obsolete. Based on Michalowitz’s (2008) advice, the female business owners in my
study followed a practical approach to starting a business and an approach that others could use as a model.

**Mentors as peers**

While the majority of women in this study explained they rejected traditional business plans, these women needed to reference something or someone as they evaluated their actions, developed identities as business owners, and attempted to make adjustments. Some women compared their business experiences to previous work environments, but the women overwhelmingly discussed the relationships that shaped their business decisions. In some cases, women reached out to family for guidance and/or relied on perceptions of how they believed business owners should act. The majority of women said they most contacted other business owners for advice as they made sense of their new realities.

Yet, several women rejected the term “mentor” to describe this relationship. In many cases mentoring presumes a junior/senior relationship, not a co-construction of a relationship that involves both individuals entering on equal footing. The women repeatedly discussed relationships in which they called on peers, often referred to as “friends,” to vet ideas, share challenges, seek advice and rely on for emotional support. Gone are the hierarchal structures discussed in traditional organizations (Morgan, 2006); instead these women talk about peer groups that bear striking similarities to the peer groups found on social media. Yet, only one woman discussed how she used social media as a way to inform her decision making; the majority relied on advice from colleagues who also owned businesses. In some cases, the women sought counsel from business
owners in completely separate industries, and in other instances they relied on advice from people who owned non-competing Public Relations agencies. The majority mentioned female advisors, but several also asked males for advice.

**Virtual work**

Frequently, the women not only asked other practitioners to provide them with business advice, but they also enlisted them to work in virtual teams to complete client projects. The concept of virtual workers and their corresponding virtual teams has attracted attention from both the mass media as well as academic scholars who attempted to better understand the nuances of virtual work and the leadership of virtual teams (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Watson-Manheim et. al, 2011; Hislop & Axtell, 2007; Hislop & Axtell, 2009). In attempting to study virtual work, scholars struggled with labels and classifications intended to define who and what qualified as virtual work and how that work got performed (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Watson-Manheim et. al, 2012; Hislop & Axtell, 2007). Similar to the scholars, the practitioners in my study offered many different and situation-based examples of virtual work, indicating to me that virtual work can get enacted in a variety of ways.

The majority of women in my study used some type of virtual work arrangement, whether it involved the woman working remotely, hiring consultants to form virtual teams or establishing a functioning virtual agency with full-time employees geographically dispersed throughout the United States.

These women discussed both the benefits and pitfalls of not working in an office setting. Some of the benefits these women mentioned included no required dress code,
ability to eat lunch at home, lower transportation costs, ability to simultaneously work and perform small household chores, and not feeling obligated to attend frivolous social functions at work or immediately after work. While those working from home emphasized their ability to control their workday, the women also noted that virtual work produced some challenges unique to those not employed in office settings. In some cases, they discussed pitfalls such as isolation, inability to engage in face-to-face brainstorming sessions, and difficulties associated with separating work and leisure time.

The women engaged in several coping strategies to mitigate these challenges, including setting up virtual or in-person meetings with co-workers, joining associations to decrease isolation, engaging in work or leisure activities outside the home, and developing teams that extend beyond the organizational boundaries.

**Virtual worker**

Several of the women discussed how they wanted to organize their work as solo practitioners because they didn’t want the responsibility of managing employees. They also acknowledged the opportunities and challenges of working from remote locations.

Technology allowed these virtual workers to work from many mobile locations, including airports, coffee shops and even in their cars (Hislop & Axtell, 2007). The women in this study worked in a variety of locations, which provided both benefits and challenges.

As one woman explained, “And it’s not the distractions, it’s just [pause] the context.” The women in this study interpreted the context of work in many different ways; some needed to work in an office setting, others said they could concentrate better
with the blenders at the local Starbucks than they could in the quiet of a home office, others worked outside when the weather permitted, while still others felt completely comfortable working in a home office. Watson-Manheim et al. (2012) drew attention to the many studies that attempt to situate boundaries on virtual work, and they suggested that often we attempt to problematize aspects of virtual work, especially workspace, that exist as problems in one organization and not in another. Thus, while one woman placed parameters on the hours she worked or the space she worked in, another may not recognize these boundaries as problems. This reminds us that work can get constructed in many different contexts and styles based on the needs of individual workers and their organizations.

**Virtual teams**

In many cases, the individuals in this study participated in virtual work via virtual teams, often distinguished from traditional teams based on their teammates being “distributed and technologically mediated” (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). The geographical distribution varied from teams of individuals located within the same region to teams of employees spanning several states. In many instances, some type of technology facilitated the interaction, such as smartphones, video conferencing software, email, or social media. Scholars indicated that virtual teams involved four characteristics: temporal distribution, boundary spanning, lifecycle and member roles (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). For purposes of this discussion, I will focus primarily on the lifecycle or duration of these teams. However, for a more comprehensive overview of the classifications of virtual teams, a reader can refer to Bell and Kozlowski (2002).
When scholars referred to the lifecycle of a virtual team, they often classified these teams as either continuous, they work for the same organization and will complete multiple projects, and discrete, the individuals formed a team for the duration of the project and disbanded when they completed the project (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). The women in this study used both types of teams, but I will reserve a longer discussion of continuous teams for the section on virtual agency and initially focus on discrete teams.

Many of the solo practitioners as well as those with agencies touted the benefits of discrete teams, defined as teams comprised of individuals from various organizations who work together to meet a client’s specific needs. The solo practitioners explained that they can network with other solo practitioners and sometimes agencies to form custom teams to address a client’s specific needs. One solo-practitioner explained, “And that’s really how the agency business has evolved over the last 20 years since I’ve been doing this, where it’s very, very custom...[it’s] leveled the playing field for small firms like myself...” In addition to the advantages it offers individuals, clients can also benefit from lower costs based on lower overhead that can translate into more competitive billing rates. Women also discussed the ability to provide clients with services they need as opposed to selling them services they may not need to provide work for full-time employees.

Agencies also benefit from discrete teams when they can engage talent that exists outside of organizational boundaries. In some cases, it allowed an agency to bid on projects that might otherwise fall outside its expertise, but by engaging outside consultants, the agency broadened its capabilities and organizational leaders could
complete a finite project in which the team members engaged and disengaged quickly and easily without the constraints associated with continuous teams.

While the participants and some of the academic literature (Bell & Kozowski, 2002; Watson-Manheim et al., 2012) tout the potential benefits of virtual work, one also must consider the negative aspects of virtual work. In addition to social isolation and the potential distractions from working remotely, one must also question whether these teams can really oscillate between functioning discrete teams and disparate units with ease. These individuals establish working relationships, which must either end or experience a period of hibernation until the next project. For the independent virtual worker, this can signify the difference between an income and unemployment. Individuals in larger organizations that employ these virtual workers will likely maintain their jobs after a project ends, but in a slow economy, they too may experience downsizing if organizations favor virtual or independent practitioners who don’t require health benefits or a regular paycheck from the organization.

In some cases, business owners with employees explained that independent practitioners willing to work on discrete teams can provide significant benefits to PR firms, but one can find some potential hazards for workers by digging deeper into the conversations of business owners who hire these individuals to supplement their organizational needs. Karen, a woman with a physical agency address, explained her employees decreased as “a product of the economy.” She goes on to describe, “we didn’t rehire. We have added, uh, numerous contract employees that we will not bring on board full time…” Thus, these virtual workers fill the void of full-time employees, and virtual workers don’t require long-term commitments if the business environment changes.
Karen said they follow what she referred to as the “Hollywood studio model,” which meant a core group of employees worked on each account, but the firm contracted with independent practitioners to assist with the extra work. Thus, to a client it may appear that the organization’s staff manages the account.

Another business owner explained that using independent practitioners added to her company’s legitimacy. She said, “…If you don’t have a real staff you’re not legitimate. And so, you know, overcoming that a little bit and making it seem like we were bigger than we were, and maybe not telling the whole truth…there’s five people in the office, but we’ve got a stable of 20 that we rely on…” These discrete teams can help a small business grow slowly and offer services that initially might not warrant a full-time employee, but in this case, this small business owner uses it to mislead her clients into believing that she maintains a larger organization so that she can gain the perception of legitimacy, which she equates with the number of employees.

In at least one instance, a business owner admitted to borrowing an independent practitioner’s design portfolio to pitch her first client. She said, “it was his work, but walking in saying, ‘This is what we’ve done,’ when granted, I had nothing to do with his portfolio at that point in time…” In the context of the interview, she uses this as an example of a time when it was necessary to “fake it until you make it” as she explained it. It’s unclear from her comments whether this person later became a full-time employee because the conversation moved to other related topics.

While the women in this study emphasized the benefits of discrete teams, particularly to clients, one must not forget that virtual teams can also represent significant
risk for individuals and the benefits are not necessarily in favor of the independent practitioner.

**Virtual agency**

Virtual agencies work as both discrete teams, teams that disband after the project ends, and as continuous teams. Similar to a traditional agency, the people in continuous teams work together even when the client changes.

The women in this study used the phrase virtual agency to describe both types of work arrangements; essentially the women indicated a lack of social agreement for the phrase virtual agency. Some referred to it as discrete teams, such independents working with other independents on a specific project and disbanding after the project ended, while other women used the term to refer to people who worked remotely, but continuously worked for the same virtual organization. The conversation about virtual teams varied based on the work arrangement of the interviewee; those with virtual agencies with employees defined it as such and independent practitioners who worked with other independents also referred to their work arrangements as virtual agencies. For example, Mary, a woman in business for two years who worked out of her spare bedroom, rejected the term independent practitioner to describe herself and instead explained, “…legally, structure wise, I am more of an independent. But, the fact that I do subcontract with other providers and offer things beyond what I can just do myself I think makes me more—you know, pushes me more into the agency side.” In the course of our conversation on the topic, she attempted to position herself as a virtual agency and, at the same time, tested the concept as part of herself description. Tentative phrases, such as “I
think” and the structure of the sentence, which built up to the idea that she owned a virtual agency indicated she may not be entirely comfortable using the phrase to describe her business. In fact, Mary later stated, “…you have to decide who you’re talking to. Like, if I’m talking to a—somebody who works at another big PR firm, I might hesitate to—to like call myself a PR firm.” Again, Mary struggled with the term “virtual agency” or virtual firm, but lacked an alternative that she found as acceptable to describe her business, which, of course, impacts her personal identity as well. In our discussion, Mary indicated that she hoped the phrase virtual agency gained social acceptance in the PR community. This conversation not only raises questions about how we label individuals and their organizations, but it also indicates the term virtual agency was used to describe a variety of work arrangements.

The previous conversation is indicative of the growing number of solo practitioners in this position who need a socially acceptable label. Scholars who analyze dialog help us recognize that “categories” or labels people use in conversation with others help cement these nuances within the existing social structure. As people continue to use these categorical references, they define the emergent social structure (Fairhurst, 2007). If people continue to use the term virtual agency to refer to both independent practitioners as well as continuous virtual teams, then we will see this emerge as a new, accepted definition.

Presently, individuals in this study seemed more comfortable using the term virtual agency to refer to continuous teams, or those organizations that hire employees to work on client accounts from remote locations. While the clients may change, in this type of virtual agency, the team members remain with the organization and simply reconfigure
to form new teams to service different clients’ needs. In this study, two women led virtual agencies with employees who served clients from remote locations. These virtual business models enabled the women to start a business without incurring the high overhead associated with maintaining office space. By consistently working with the same people, continuous team leaders often find it easier to manage the members of their teams (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). This may also provide insight into why consultants tend to repeatedly work with the same network of individuals. If, as Ahrne (1990) indicated, humans crave routines and require organizations as a mechanism to create coherence and visibility in an otherwise confusing and lonely world, continuous virtual teams will provide individuals with the continuity needed to sustain some aspect of predictability in a continually changing work environment.

In practice, virtual teams still experience some pushback. As indicated in the results section, even people who engaged in virtual teams noted the potential stigma associated with this classification, especially if the team members worked primarily from home. If we apply the classic model of five steps to adoption, we can categorize several individuals as still evaluating virtual work (Beal, Rogers, Bohlen, 1957). The national bestselling author, Malcolm Gladwell (2002), might suggest virtual work has yet to reach its proverbial tipping point, the point at which a phenomenon gains widespread acceptance. Some women easily admitted that they work in virtual environments; while others overtly attempted to maintain a façade of traditional corporate office space, even when it didn’t exist. This reluctance for some women to admit they worked in virtual environments leads me to suggest virtual work within the PR field has gained some momentum, but has yet to gain widespread acceptance.
Hitting the business books

In terms of organizing, many of the individuals in this study indicated they lacked any formal training on how to run a business and relied on other resources. In addition to asking advice from colleagues, several women turned to popular business books, such as “Business for Dummies,” to gain basic business skills and a few women engaged in continuing education by reading popular business literature to help them with their ongoing business challenges. These practices indicated that Public Relations education needs to incorporate more business-oriented programs and courses. The PRSA, the industry’s largest association, in conjunction with several private companies decided to address this gap in the fall of 2012 by offering pilot MBA programs at several US business schools including, Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College, Robert H. Smith School of Business at University of Maryland, Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, School of Business at Quinnipiac University and College of Business Administration at University of Texas El Paso (“Public relations coming to a B-school near you”, 2012). Based on the new programs as well as comments from my research study, such as “…we love to communicate and we’re good at communicating, but we aren’t necessarily good at running a business,” I believe we will see an increase in the number of PR practitioners who also opt for a business education.

Public Relations professors often encourage Public Relations students to take business classes because it may help the students better understand corporate clients and it could help PR business owners interpret balance sheets, financial planning, as well as other aspects of running a business.
However, a business education could also stifle female business owners by suggesting that they must follow a prescribed business plan. Female business owners in this study followed an organic plan that evolved with the business’ changing needs. Michalowicz (2008) indicated that an overemphasis on business plans can encourage people to continually revise their plans rather than starting their businesses. Thus, a business school education can appear as an attractive add-on for a PR student, but if the school places undue stress on the importance of planning, it can discourage the very fluidity and organic business evolution that worked successfully for many women in this study. As Vicki, a woman in business nine years, said, “…I don’t think I would have started in the first place if I had taken the more traditional approach.” This quote indicates that business educators will need to find ways to address the different needs of prospective female business owners.

**Occasions for conversation**

Quite apart from the research findings, qualitative studies open a space for participants to reflect on their lived experiences. In the section above, Vicki takes a few minutes out her busy day to consider how her business experiences fit into what she perceives as the “traditional approach.” In so doing, she has the opportunity to make sense of her life history in ways that are often not available in ordinary life. Frequently, we think about the ways that a researcher benefits by obtaining information that furthers his/her career, but in so doing, we miss the chance to consider qualitative research as a space for personal reflection. This research project created a positive opening for participants to actively consider their life and work.
I know that participants valued the interview because they articulated their appreciation. For example, Rose made a point of saying,

I appreciate the opportunity to just talk about this. It’s really neat because other than my friend [name omitted], you know, I don’t really talk to anybody about—too much about some of the things that you’ve asked me about, so this has really—really been an interesting experience for me to articulate, ‘what does it all mean?’ So, thank you, and I appreciate it…

For Rose and the other participants, this research project offered them an opportunity to reflect on how they frame and make sense of their lives and work experiences that, as Rose indicates, is not often available. She acknowledges that my research gave her a chance to think about the question “what does it all mean?” Further, she and other participants thanked me at the conclusion of our meeting, which also indicates that they perceived this experience as personally valuable.

In addition to reflection, qualitative research emphasizes building relationships with individuals. Unlike a survey, which involves very little personal information from the researcher and much input from the participant, qualitative interviewing is a personal dialog, which implies an information exchange by both people. For example, if an interviewee told me a story about a dog sleeping at her feet while she worked, I might relate that I also have a dog that sleeps at my feet while I type. Another participant might tell me that she has children, and I might relate that I also have a child. In these small exchanges, we begin to build rapport and share similarities, which I believe improves the research and the experience for everyone involved.

In several instances, the women asked me to stay after the formal interview to talk. Since I was asked to turn the tape recorder off, I will not report on the contents of these conversations, but instead, suggest that they also provide a strong indication that
this research project opens a valuable space for people to communicate about their work and personal lives. As humans, we share the fundamental need to connect with others, and I believe this project opened up a space to share some of life’s important moments.

As a researcher, I also saw this project as an opportunity for personal reflection. As I pored over the interview transcripts and made sense of the findings, I reflected on how these women’s lives either bore similarities to mine or appeared quite different. For example, many of the interviewees discussed the issue of raising children and working, as a new mom, it gave me the opportunity to consider how social norms play out in my own life. Do I also feel the need to show that I am an available mother to my young child? Do I feel a desire to mother based on an innate instinct, or a gendered norm passed down through generations of women? As women talked about mingling their personal and work lives, I also thought about the ways that I attempt to integrate a Ph.D. program and a personal life. When was the last time I went to the gym? Do I work too much? By examining how women navigate similar issues, it offers me the opportunity to reflect on my own choices. I learned as much about myself as I learned about others through this project.

**Summary of practical applications**

This dissertation offered a wide range of practical implications for not only the individual but the organization the women created. In sharing their narrative accounts, these women created a repertoire of socially vetted labels for roles, such as business owner, and drew attention to labels with vague meanings, such as entrepreneur, or descriptors still in flux, such as virtual agency. By engaging in dialog about these terms,
we begin to develop a social consensus about the acceptable use of these words and their associated connotations.

This social acceptance can influence women’s identities. The independent practitioner and who preferred to refer to her business as a virtual agency, said she hoped the term virtual agency “picks up steam.” In this example, Mary desires social acceptance for this label because it has important implications for her personal identity. Social acceptance would provide her with more confidence in describing her business and her role within it to others, particularly those in the PR community. By discussing how one uses labels that denote roles and organizational structure, we place these into discursive consciousness, which could ultimately impact the terms’ acceptance and enhance women’s confidence when they use these terms to describe their identities.

Socially vetted labels and the descriptions of how these women enact their roles can provide other women with confidence as they test out their identities as business owners. By offering a range of labels and descriptions as well as conversation about the complexities of using these, I intended to share not necessarily a predetermined script, but rather a list of options, similar to ordering off of a menu. Analogous to going to a restaurant, a female business owner has a list of socially vetted options, but just as in a restaurant, a woman can place a special order to conform to her individual preferences.

Additionally, by examining the social expectations that often undermine an individual’s intentions; as in the cases of family care, gender and allocating time; individuals can make cognizant decisions about their communication and actions. In many cases, we aren’t aware of how our actions get interpreted in ways that reinforce
unintended outcomes. Giddens (1984) explained: “Human history is created by intentional activities but is not an intended project.” Humans act with intentionality, but the end result is not necessarily what people intended.

This dissertation also presented an opportunity for individuals, both scholars and practitioners, to reflect on the social patterns and behaviors that we continue to reinforce. For example, while some of the women in this study openly engaged in alternative work arrangements, such as working during nontraditional work hours and working in virtual environments, some people still harbored resistance to alternative models of organizing. Technology; such as smart phones, inexpensive video conferencing, and portable, information-rich devices; that make accessing documents and information easier means that issues related to virtual work and work during nontraditional work hours will likely increase. By offering examples of the challenges and negative connotations of virtual work, this presents practitioners with an opportunity to reflect on social issues and enact small changes. As Giddens (1984) indicated change occurs gradually, which is why we still see vestiges of previous expectations about work, but small changes over time can shift social norms.

Finally, women expressed a strong desire to blend work and leisure in unique ways, suggesting that our traditional ideas of separating the two may experience a shift. Perhaps, it’s time for us to reflect on how organizations can better facilitate home/work integration. As I listened to accounts of women who managed their days and their personal commitments simultaneously, I envisioned the many ways business owners’ work and personal lives already overlap, including business owners who shape their schedules, business philosophies and office space to reflect their commitments and
personalities. Perhaps it’s time to consider ways even large organizations steeped in hierarchy can appreciate people’s need for better work/life integration. When work shifted to locations outside of the home, it created a distinct separation between work and home (Tronto, 1993). As people bring work home, it’s time to consider the ways in which we can not only find more time for work at home, but also how we can incorporate the two in healthy ways that allow for more personal fulfillment.

**Theoretical implications**

In reviewing aspects of personal identity and organization, this dissertation added to the literature on emerging organizations and offered insight into how gender impacted decision making for female business owners.

By applying a structurationist lens to emerging organizations, I found that individuals don’t start with a proverbial blank slate; instead they employed their past and present experiences, even when they intended to create an entirely different organization than the ones they previously experienced (Giddens, 1984). In accepting this premise, people can begin to understand how starting a new business seems less daunting, perhaps not even a risk. By considering how people made sense of their choices and reinforced those decisions within their daily activities, academics can also begin to understand how women rationalized their new entities and then communicated about their work lives to others.

Ultimately, when these women communicated about their work lives, they exhibited their choices to the world and further committed to their organizations as they solidified their rationale within their own minds and received reinforcement in social
contexts (Weick, 2001). When a woman communicated her decision to start a business, she made her choice available for scrutiny, allowing people to either support or question her choice. The feedback from other individuals helped her to continually refine the ways that she framed the experience.

While this study reinforces aspects of structuration theory, it also challenges some accepted beliefs about education and entrepreneurship. The women in this study rejected traditional business plans, touted as a necessity by many scholars in Schools of Business around the country. Instead, women reported fluid business plans that evolved as their needs changed. In one instance, a woman referenced her belief that people should start with a business plan, but then later indicated she likely would not have started a business if she followed the more traditional route. By exposing scholars to the lived experiences of female entrepreneurs, it gives us an opportunity to consider how theory might not reflect practice. While several scholars; such as Ghoshal (2005), Pfeffer (2005), Nord (2005); have attempted to expose or reflect on problems in business school education within U.S. universities, many management theories and practices get so reified in the academic structure that they seem unchangeable. By exposing a disconnect between practice and scholarship, I hope to reinvigorate conversations about scholarship and teaching in business management.

Additionally, my research study exposed a discrepancy between my study participants’ rejection of entrepreneur as a label to describe themselves and previous research (Gill & Ganesh, 2007; Gupta & Fernandez, 2009), which suggested that women reject the term based on gendered nuances. While previous studies indicated that women directly commented on gender issues with the term entrepreneur, in this study, none of
the participants discussed issues with the term based on its potential masculine connotations.

Instead, the women in this study who opted not to use the term cited a variety of socially constructed images, which did not fit with their experiences. The conversation revealed that in some cases women rejected the term, not based on gender, but rather because they couldn’t agree on a socially vetted narrative that fit with their experiences. Instead of embracing the opportunities associated with ambiguity, the women preferred labels, such as business owner or business woman.

Women not only examined the label entrepreneur in this research project, but several also tested whether words, such as independent practitioner or solo practitioner, appropriately described their businesses because to them the label indicated they worked alone, but in fact, most independent practitioners band together to offer a wider range of services in what several referred to as a virtual agency. These conversations indicate that the nature of work has shifted over a short period of time, and these women struggled with whether previously constructed labels or categories for their jobs still fit their experiences.

In some cases, the women attempted to expand labels, such as the label agency, to not only designate those employed full-time by a single agency, but also as a designation for individuals loosely affiliated in virtual teams or those working remotely. The term virtual agency emerged as a description for both independent practitioners working together to service a client and for organizations in which employees worked for a single entity from remote locations. The practitioners used the same term, virtual agency, to
refer to two different types of organizations, suggesting that scholarship on virtual agencies may continue to produce valuable insight as practitioners continue to negotiate how they enact virtual work.

While virtual work is not a new concept, several women indicated that virtual work may still experience resistance. In one instance, a woman hid her firm’s virtual work arrangements from her clients, others referred to the need to have a “grownup address,” and still another mentioned that she hoped the label “virtual agency” would gain widespread acceptance. In theory (Hislop & Axtell, 2007), one may believe that virtual work proliferates our society, but my research indicates that virtual work still experiences resistance, particularly as it relates to social perceptions of what constitutes work, how work gets performed and, perhaps most importantly, where work gets accomplished.

While the social acceptance of their work impacts their identities, these women maintain some agency in how they craft the narratives that shape their work identities. Bateson (1989) reported that women experienced more discontinuities in their lives, and thus she proposed that women were more adapt at narrating through any trouble spots, which in her narratives included time out of the workforce for mothering or moving for a spouse’s job. Yet, I think that we can extend this premise that women, if they so desire, not only have the power, but also the tools to navigate through many complex identity challenges, including juggling a family and business, working nontraditional hours, and operating virtual agencies.
Gergen (1992) touted the complexities of women’s narratives as being more reflective of human experience; conversely she suggested that male narratives followed a linear trajectory that restrained them from including important dimensions of human interaction and instead focused on uncomplicated plots that failed to depict the true nature of the human life. Women’s stories, which tend to include many complexities and subplots, communicated a life that involved emotions, the influence of family and friends, as well as “fuzzy” boundaries between work and home. Gergen (1992) suggested these spaces of “uncertainty” reflect the natural human experience, albeit one frequently undermined by the traditional masculine story, but one that should be celebrated.

Gergen (1992) also wrote, “These socially constructed narratives we tell of our lives are rooted not only in our repertoire of experience but also in our interactions with others. Each of us brings to every interaction the sum of our experience.” In this statement, she pointed out that people can’t construct their life stories in a vacuum; people take into account their experiences and the feedback from others.

My research expands on Gergen’s (1992) statement in two ways. First, the women in my research project accessed all of their past experiences and interactions as they developed a narrative of their experiences as business owners. The results showed the women referred to comments from family members, networking with other women to understand how they narrated and worked through similar experiences, and accessed events from their previous jobs as they attempted to articulate and make decisions about their present experiences. Second, Gergen (1992) informed us that these socially constructed narratives not only occur in participation with others, but they follow a gendered social pattern. This gendered pattern blended family and work, but as
importantly, women constructed their life stories with “much less emphasis on a heroic struggle” (Gergen, 1992). The women in this study supported that theory as women referenced the support of employees, families, other business owners and friends as part of life stories, which involved many complexities and, at times, showed vulnerability. We saw this vulnerability in the results section in various areas, including but not limited to, when women discussed the challenges of incorporating family life and work, when another woman questioned the viability of starting a business without a plan, and another talked about the growth of her business as compared to a human being fraught with its obligatory growing pains. In these examples, we see the human experiences, which struggles, questions and grows.

By adding narratives of female business owners to the available theory, this research reminds scholars that gender not only impacts the narrative, but also gives us the opportunity to pause and consider whether the traditional tale of the heroic, unwavering male hero exemplifies human experience. By adding to this conversation, I believe this research not only enhances this body of knowledge, but also adds to the relatively small body of qualitative literature on female business owners. It gives scholars the opportunity to celebrate the complexities of human life and provides us with a more in-depth view of the experiences of a small business owner.

One of the gendered complexities that emerged in this study was the concept of available mother; women in this study framed mothering as a luxury and one that should be celebrated. Yet, at the same time, the results section revealed examples of challenges and opportunities that exist for women who opt to mother and run a business. Further research could continue to explore the ways in which social perceptions of women as
nurturing children constrain as well as enable women to craft work narratives. This research project exposed the difficulties of mothering and business, but also clearly showed the importance of family within women’s lives.

While gendered narratives emerged as part of this project, women also tapped into some narrative scripts that surface regardless of gender. Many of these women expressed their belief that they were different, a phenomenon in scholarly work referred to as the uniqueness paradox (Martin, Feldman, Hatch, Sitkin, 1983). Individuals and organizations often believe their stories represent a unique instance, at times defined as an organizational distinction. However, the scholars who proposed the uniqueness paradox assert that while individuals believe their stories represent unique situations, in fact, these stories tend to repeat scripts used by other organizations (Martin et al., 1983). This study extended the principles of the uniqueness paradox to the life stories of business owners. By comparing multiple stories and finding commonalities among the individuals and their organizations, scholars can see that while the individuals created noteworthy organizations, these entities and their owners bore similarities to each other because similar to the uniqueness paradox, organizational leaders drew from accepted cultural scripts, which created more commonalities than differences.

**Reflections about the interview process**

In addition to sharing similarities with other women in the study, it’s also important to reflect on how a researcher’s shared experiences impact the process. Scholars (Charmaz, 2009; Jorgenson, 1991; Steedman, 1991) inform us that our persona impacts the interview. In these interviews, I reflected on how my experiences as a former
Public Relations practitioner, business owner, scholar and mother influenced the construction of these interviews. The women consciously or unconsciously reacted to the person that I portrayed in these interviews. For example, in one instance, a woman indicated that she was flattered that a university researcher with business experience wanted to speak to her. I noticed when I arrived at the interview that she dressed professionally and that recent issues of a PR industry publication were neatly arranged on the table where she invited me to sit. Based on this early interview, I thought about how my physical appearance impacted the conversation. I dressed in business casual attire with the intention of not appearing too formal or too informal for those who preferred more formal attire.

I also recognized how perceptions of my identity impacted the interview, not only my identity as researcher, but also my identity as a former Public Relations professional. In some cases, I intentionally withheld that information because I was concerned that it might influence how women described their professional roles. In interviews where the women knew early in the interview that I previously worked in Public Relations, they often glossed over definitions, but without that knowledge some individuals provided greater detail. In other instances, my role as a new mother influenced the conversation, potentially opening up a space for participants to expand on their experiences with motherhood and business ownership.

We can’t separate our identities and how they get interpreted from the information gathered (Steedman, 1991). In the same way that our personal experiences influence the interview process, it’s important to also reflect on how our experiences can impact the interpretation and reporting of the data. I recognize the potential for personal bias, and I
used reflexivity at every stage of the process to offer my readers the most insightful and representative accounts.

Additionally to offset misunderstandings, I shared several interviews with the chair of my dissertation committee to determine if he identified any other themes or interpreted the data in a different way.

**Limitations**

In addition to considering the ways participants might react to me, I also think it’s important to consider other limitations to my research. Each research project exists within a specific time and space; each study also inherently experiences some limitations. The following section describes the limitations of this research project.

This study examined the ways women within the southern United States discursively framed their identities through narrative. My study specifically focused on women who owned Public Relations practices, but future studies could explore other industries. These industries may experience additional challenges in articulating their identities than this study of women, a group of communication professionals that theoretically may have more exposure to communication practices than other business owners. The suggestion that female communicators need assistance articulating their identities and rely on the experiences of other business owners for assistance prompts me to suggest that women in other industries may need as much, if not more, support in developing narratives to articulate their identities. By studying individual industries, scholars can begin to understand the nuances related to a particular profession.
Future scholars could also consider how geography and culture may impact the frames women select. By using snowball sampling, I ended up with a familiarly homogenous mix of individuals. While a few did identify as a minority-owned business based on their ethnicity, all of the women spoke English and none of the women discussed being raised in a different culture. The influence of a different cultural upbringing and its associated values would likely impact the results of a similar study. Additionally, the influence of geography, specifically that these women lived and worked in close proximity to a city, may also influence the resources and work available to them. A study in a rural area with a different segment of the population, such as those without college degrees, may produce different results.

I am also obligated to reflect on how my own persona impacted the context of the interviews. Scholars (Charmaz, 2009; Jorgenson, 1991; Steedman, 1991) pointed out that individuals shape an interview because conversations are locations of personal interaction. As a former Public Relations practitioner, my experience may have shaped the dialog as well as my appearance and gender. I am a short, Caucasian female who just prior to the interviews experienced the birth of my first child. If this experience emerged in our conversation, women have felt more at ease discussing their own experiences as mothers. Mishler (1986) also expressed a similar view when he indicated an interview is the site of shared meaning. The interview, unlike a questionnaire, requires the interviewee to form a relationship with the participant and to share a version of self in that process. Ultimately, context matters and individuals in different environments may produce varying results.
Additionally, the study used snowball sampling, which can provide a researcher with a fairly homogeneous population. A different sampling method may provide scholars with more diversity in age, ethnicity and family status. Scholars could also consider studies that focus on a specific demographic, such as women with a particular family situation, such as single moms, or solo practitioners, individuals that provide PR services to only male-dominated professions. The sample included in this dissertation did not narrow the criteria to a particular subset of the Public Relations population.

The sampling method also encouraged people to respond who owned successful businesses. Based on the way I framed my invitation to participate in the study, I attracted a group of individuals inclined to respond to this type of request, which could include those who potentially consider themselves successful in some way, not necessarily people who failed to make a business work or experience problems articulating their identities. Thus, these individuals may not be a representative sample, but rather an available, willing sample of individuals who are comfortable discussing their businesses.

Presently, this study includes 18 interviews, and additional interviews might provide new perspectives that would add to the existing data. Future studies could also distinguish between perceptions of female business owners in the early stages of business development versus those with more established businesses, which will likely provide different interpretations. The women discussed different stages of business development primarily depicted as maturation process that occurred with age. However, it might also interest future scholars to consider how business size impacts identity. The women in this study all maintained small business with less than 20 employees. One might want to
explore the changes based on the number of employees and increased or decreased revenue, which reflects both challenges and opportunities.

This study used purposeful sampling to select women within a certain geographic area with a shared industry experience. I used gender as the primary criteria for sampling and, as discussed in the literature review, purposely did not include male business owners as a comparison. However, future scholars may decide to include males within their study and find successful ways of balancing the concern that situating men and women as comparisons typically suggests one gender is better than the other, or in this case, one gender may seemingly emerge as a superior business owner. This study purposefully avoided comparisons and instead focused on the unique experiences of females, but future scholarship may explore ways to integrate the male and female experiences, including studies of husband and wife teams or family businesses.

Additional scholarship could also examine how children interpret their mothers’ businesses. Do these women act as role models for their children as several women suggested? Future researchers could also add other parameters in addition to gender, such as sexual orientation and marginalized populations that were outside the scope of this study.

Ultimately, I hope this research will cause others to think critically about female business owners and the issues addressed within this paper will represent a jumping off point for future scholarship. As Down (2006) wrote, “… notions of narrative identity applied to the entrepreneur are just starting to cause morning sickness, and it would be indulgent to attempt to close off different horizons.”
Opportunities for future research

After I completed this research project, I recognized the need for continued research in the following areas:

- **Defining success**- The women in this study articulated a desire to blend work and life. Is this the new way we define success, or is success defined based on life choices? For example, will individuals who opt for self-employment frame success differently? Will gender influence how people frame success? Will age alter a person’s perception of success; thus, will those of a certain age frame success based on business accomplishments, while those in younger age groups define success as a blend of work and personal activities?

- **Heroic images**- As a society, are we moving away from an individualized articulation of success, or is this based on gender, such Gergen (1992) suggested? Does one gender frame success as the singular hero; while another gender is more collectivist in framing success?

- **Performing work**- If we build on Goffman’s (1974) suggestion that we express our identities as a performance for others, and this performance varies based on the audience, how do our children impact this performance? Do parents want to perform a particular ideal about work? Does this performance depend on the parents’ gender or profession? Do parents consciously consider how they perform work for their children, or is it subconscious?

- **Kids’ definitions of work**- Two women specifically referred to their kids’ perceptions of their mother’s role as a business owner, but how do these kids really perceive their mother’s work? Do they feel that it conflicts with their role as
mom? Does it impact how the children perceive their future work? If I ask kids for a definition of “work”, how will they describe it?

- **Hiding work** - Several of the women in this study discussed how they felt the need to hide work from their kids. What does this say about their work? Does it mean they don’t enjoy work, or that they feel their maternal duties are more important? How do these women articulate the reasons that they hide work? For example, when asked will the women rationalize hiding work, or articulate it as an expression of guilt? What are the implications for hiding work on future generations of workers? Will they believe their parents work less and therefore believe that they too should craft some idealized, nonexistent work/life balance?

These questions offer scholars opportunities to further investigate the ways that people frame important concepts, such as success, which impacts their identities and the way they enact work. It also provides academics opportunities to explore how the performance of work by one generation potentially impacts the way future generations frame their work lives. I hope this provide a jumping off point for future scholarship in business ownership, parenting coupled with work, and definitions of successful work.
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Appendix A: Sample interview questions

1. What led you to this point?
2. In your own words, can you describe your business?
3. Do you have models that guide what you do?
4. How do you describe your work to family and friends? What are their reactions?
5. What are some challenges and opportunities?
6. Do you think gender impacts your business?
7. How do you blend work and life?
8. What groups or organizations do you belong to?
9. Do you have a legacy of business ownership in your family?
10. What are three words that you would use to describe yourself?
11. Do you consider yourself an entrepreneur? Why or why not?
### Appendix B: Adjectives women used to describe their identities

Table 2: Adjectives women used to describe their identities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word or Phrase</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-driven, self-motivated</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calculated risk taker</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedicated, determined, persistent, tenacious</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident, self-confident</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivated, motivated by others’ success</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a risk taker</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthy, enormous amounts of integrity</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driven</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idea person, creative</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never afraid to look dumb, unafraid</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cares about others, “kind”-explains it as “interested in the person”</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money motivated</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyal</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workaholic</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Taker, but qualifies “that doesn’t mean I don’t think before I take a risk,” and “I also like to hedge my bets.”</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimist</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High energy, energetic</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trait</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfectionist, overachiever</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebellious</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuasive</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambitious</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calm/levelheaded</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crazy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not aggressive</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funny</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientious</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs alone time</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helper</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a self-promoter</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliable</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive—“defined as sixth sense about business”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big picture person</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intuitive</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer focused</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgoing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resourceful</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenally curious</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open minded</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good listener</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juggler</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun-loving</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong headed</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix C: Phrases women used to describe their roles

Table 3: Phrases women used to describe their roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exact Word or phrase</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business owner, business woman, small business owner, women-owned business</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher, educator</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent practitioner</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spokesperson</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Relations consultant, Public Relations practitioner</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager, supervisor, leader</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent or sole proprietor</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home-based business owner—while many of the people in this study own home-based businesses, this woman emphasized this as an important part of her identity</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freelancer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-worker, friend</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trusted advisor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent consultant</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serial entrepreneur</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Director</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Founder</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publicist</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D: IRB approval

3/5/2013

Allison Weidhaas, M.A.
Communication
4202 East Fowler Avenue
CIS 1040
Tampa, FL 33620-7800

RE: Expedited Approval for Continuing Review
IRB#: CR2_Pro00003496
Title: Narrative Accounts of Women Business Owners

Study Approval Period: 3/30/2013 to 3/30/2014

Dear Ms. Weidhaas:

On 3/4/2013, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above application and all documents outlined below.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol Document(s):
- Narrative Accounts of Women Business Owners: Final for Committee.docx
- Study Protocol 2
- Women in Public Relations: Exploration of Entrepreneurial Identity

The IRB determined that your study qualified for expedited review based on federal expedited category number(s):

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.