EXIT, VOICE, AND SENSEMAKING FOLLOWING PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT VIOLATIONS

Women's Responses to Career Advancement Barriers

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Much of the theory guiding career development research is grounded in studies of men's careers in professional positions. In addition to largely ignoring the career experiences of women, the career literature pays little attention to overcoming barriers to career advancement in organizations—a challenge many women and men both face over the course of their career development. Using survey data, analyses of in-depth interviews, and a focus group discussion with female executives in the high-tech industry, this study finds variations of three responses: exit, voice, and rationalizing to remain are used by women in response to career barriers. These responses form the foundation of a career barrier sensemaking and response framework presented in the study. Findings indicate that perceived organizational sanctioning of career barriers and the organization's commitment to the career advancement of other women also influence participants' responses to barriers and their strategies for sensemaking, respectively.

Keywords: *psychological contract violation; sensemaking; career barriers; exit; voice; women's career development*

Shakespeare once remarked, "A promise made is a debt unpaid" (Montapert, 1964, p. 284). Clearly, the playwright-philosopher recognized that promises are inexorably linked to the obligation implied by them. Promises and their unpaid debts lie at the heart of employment relationships in the form of psychological contracts that employees have with their employers. More than simply expectations for employment, psychological

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contracts are beliefs employees have about the entitlements they will receive and that they perceive were promised to them by their employers (Robinson, 1996). The following psychological contracts were found by researchers to be the most frequently cited perceived obligations that employees expect of their employers across a number of professional occupations: promotion and advancement, high pay, pay based on current level of performance, training, long-term job security, career development, and sufficient power and responsibility (Robinson, 1996; Rousseau, 1990).

Violations of psychological contracts occur when the perceived implicit and explicit promises of employers are not fulfilled or are broken (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Rousseau, 1995). It appears that the practice of making and breaking the psychological contracts of employees is becoming increasingly common in organizational life (Buzzanell, 2000; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Researchers indicate that turbulent economies, restructuring and downsizing organizations, foreign competition, trends toward globalization, and demographic diversity all have an impact on psychological contracts. Incongruous understandings of the employment relationship caused by ambiguous job expectations and poor socialization practices can also result in the violation of psychological contracts (Robinson, 1996; Rousseau, 1995).

Weick (1995) contends that when we are faced with incongruous information or events, we employ sensemaking behaviors to sort through and make sense of the discrepancies in our predictions and our experiences. Consistent with Weick's (1995) conceptualization of sensemaking as a response to discrepant information, communication-related sensemaking appears to play a central role in reacting and responding to psychological contract violations. Organizational communication studies of sensemaking have previously examined the communication behaviors of employees in light of organizational changes including newcomers' experiences (e.g., Isabella, 1990) and the adjustment of individuals after a job transfer (Jablin & Kramar, 1998).

The purpose of this study is to explore the interrelationship of communication-related sensemaking and responses to a psychological contract violation. Communication approaches to the study of psychological contract violation draw our attention to the strategies and behaviors individuals use in trying to make sense of the violation and respond to it. As indicated by Rousseau (1990) and verified by Robinson (1996), promotion and advancement together constitute one of the most common obligations employees perceive that their employers have to them. Thus, organizational barriers to one's career advancement represent a clear breach of the psychological contract most employees have with their employers regarding the written and unwritten promises of employment.

Specifically, this study examines women's communication-related sensemaking and responses to barriers to their career advancement.

In the first section of the article, a review of the relevant literature on psychological contracts and sensemaking is presented, followed by a review of relevant literature on women's career development and the research questions posed in the study. Next, the survey, interview, and focus group methods used in the study are described. A report of the findings and presentation of a framework derived from the analysis follow. A discussion of the findings and framework as well as limitations of the study and directions for future research conclude the study.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Psychological Contracts

Research on psychological contracts has focused on defining and describing the contracts (Levinson, Price, Munden, Mandl, & Solley, 1962; Schein, 1965), distinguishing between psychological contracts and related constructs (Lucero & Allen, 1994), and identifying variables that mediate perceptions of psychological contract breaches (Robinson, 1996). In a study of 804 managers (55% male and 45% female), Turnley and Feldman (1999) found that employees with higher levels of psychological contract violation are more likely to attempt to exit their organizations, voice their displeasure with the organization's practices to upper management, and neglect their in-role job performance. They also found that employees with higher levels of psychological contract violation are less likely to be loyal to the organization in representing it to others. While this study suggests that a direct empirical relationship exists between employees' perceptions of a psychological contract breach and increased exit, voice, and neglect and a decrease in loyalty, little is known about the sensemaking process by which employees come to make these important decisions about how to respond to a contract breach.

Morrison and Robinson (1997) created a theoretical model of how psychological contract violations develop. The model focuses on the interpretation of a violation and recognition that a violation has occurred; however, the model falls short of addressing how employees actually respond to psychological contract violations and what influence, if any, the attributions that employees make for the violations have on their choice of response and the communication strategies they employ in

responding. Previous studies have examined outcomes of psychological contract breach (e.g., decreased trust in employer, reductions in contributions to the organization), yet, they neglect the sensemaking that employees engage in to account for and react to the violation of the contract.

Turnley and Feldman (1999) indicate that future research on psychological contracts also needs to examine the attributions that employees make when they perceive their contracts have been violated. They argue that these attributions are "likely to shape employees' perceptions of, and responses to, such violations" (p. 921). The authors hypothesize that employees may respond less strongly to violations occurring because the organization is unable to fulfill its obligations as opposed to being unwilling to meet its obligations. Yet, whether or not the organization is actually unable or unwilling to fulfill the obligation of the contract matters less than what the employee perceives to be the cause of the contract violation. When an employee perceives that the employer has made a conscious decision to not meet the obligations of a psychological contract, a strong negative assessment of the working environment is likely to influence the ultimate response of the employee in light of the violation. To date, research on psychological contract violation has not addressed the attributions that employees make for the violation.

Sensemaking

The process of sensemaking involves framing, the viewing of stimuli through a particular lens or framework. These frameworks enable us to comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). When faced with incongruous information or events, sensemaking is the process we employ to sort through and make sense of the discrepancies in our predictions and our experiences. Louis (1980) studied sensemaking in the context of newcomer socialization and views the process as a cognitive one that uses retrospective accounts to explain surprises. These discrepant events serve as triggering mechanisms that initiate a need for explanation.

Sensemaking is both a cognitive activity (Louis, 1980) and one that involves gathering and sorting information through social interactions. Thomas, Clark, and Gioia (1993) describe sensemaking as "the reciprocal interaction of information seeking, meaning ascription, and action" (p. 240). Louis (1980) indicates that the act of framing, or putting stimuli into frameworks, is most prevalent when predictions break down as in the case of facing barriers to one's career advancement. Weick (1995) suggests that there are seven distinguishing characteristics that separate sensemaking from

other processes of explaining including understanding, interpretation, and attribution. The sensemaking process is (1) grounded in reality, (2) retrospective, (3) enactive of sensible environments, (4) social, (5) ongoing, (6) focused on and by extracted cues, and (7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995). Communication approaches seem especially well suited to the study of sensemaking given that the process is enacted and regularly articulated through communication behaviors.

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Weick and Daft (1983) indicate that interpretation processes drive the sensemaking of individuals in organizations. These authors argue, "The interpretation process is more interpersonal, less linear, more improvisational, and more subject to multifinality than organization scholars may realize" (p. 78). According to Weick and Daft (1983), sensemaking is a way for individuals to map the interconnections of ideas, people, and tasks in order to sort through the often contradictory messages we receive in the workplace.

> People use interpretation systems to try to make sense of the flowing, changing, equivocal chaos that constitutes the sum total of the external environment. People in organizations try to sort through this chaos into items, events, and parts that are then connected, threaded into sequence, serially ordered, and related to one another. In the course of interpretation, individuals, and perhaps the organization as a collective, develop cause maps. (p. 78)

In a study of communication-related sensemaking and adjustment during job transfers, Jablin and Kramar (1998) found that employees who were better able to make sense (i.e., develop knowledge) of appropriate forms of task communication in their new work environments tended to experience more positive adjustment and less negative arousal from unmet expectations than did those who developed less knowledge. Acquiring knowledge about the task communication norms in the organization had a

positive effect on the adjustment of these individuals, yet whether the same could be true for sensemaking strategies in response to a psychological contract violation remains to be seen.

Starbuck and Milliken (1988) note that sensemaking most often occurs in light of "incongruous events, events that violate perceptual frameworks" (p. 52). Trigger events for sensemaking are also conceived of as interruptions. Weick (1995) indicates that undesirable situations, as in the current study, are basically "interruptions produced by new events that were not expected" (p. 100). Barriers to career advancement interrupt the development of a person's career and threaten the continuation of that person's career path. This threat to completion is the crucial aspect of the interruption that becomes internalized by individuals and is manifested in high degrees of uncertainty and stress (Weick, 1995).

Women's Career Development

Psychological contract violations are often precipitated by high degrees of uncertainty and ambiguity (Morrison & Robinson, 1997), not unlike the uncertainty and ambiguity typical of many employee advancement and promotion practices. Career development in many industries and organizations is often shrouded in a veil of secrecy that can undermine the process of hiring and promoting qualified individuals. This ambiguity and uncertainty is often intensified when the individual is a woman or person of color trying to advance in a White, male-dominated industry (Whyte, Cox, & Cooper, 1992).

Not surprisingly, much of the theory guiding career development research is grounded in studies of men's careers in professional positions. This prior research describes the career experiences of men in professional positions and tracks their career training, organizational entry, and career growth through a series of stages (see Whyte et al., 1992). In addition to largely ignoring the career experiences of women, the career literature pays little attention to overcoming barriers to career advancement in organizations—a challenge many women and men both face over the course of their career development.

This study seeks to fill both gaps in the literature by exploring the communication-related sensemaking of professional women in response to barriers to their career advancement. Since sensemaking is best applied in those circumstances where discrepant information or the absence of information makes understanding an issue confusing, how women should respond to barriers to their career advancement is an ideal area to study. As will be

indicated in the following review of career literature, little guidance for women exists on how to overcome barriers to one's career advancement.

Critiques of career research note that the applicability of most career advancement strategies is ill advised if women are the intended audience. Whyte and colleagues (1992) criticize the classic model of career development because it "ignores the unique social and family situation for women, and places no significance on demands on women external to the work environment. As such, it cannot accommodate female experience" (p. 16). Perun and Beilby (1981) further suggest that the determinants of occupational behavior of women are different from those of men and that the trajectory of the work cycle of women is less predictable than that of men such that the two cannot be meaningfully compared. Apparently, even if the traditional career literature did address how employees overcome or respond to barriers to one's advancement, women would still be left in the dark because those studies almost exclusively have focused on men's career paths.

Astin's (1984) sociopsychological model of occupational behavior has been praised by career theorists because it looks at the way social forces reshape occupational decisions and at the impact these forces have on contemporary women and their occupational behavior. While the model appears to more accurately describe the career development of women, researchers have yet to use it to study or derive strategies for women to use in overcoming barriers to their advancement. The dual-development model also stands in contrast to earlier classical models of career development. The model addresses barriers to women's advancement and suggests that the understanding of women's careers requires an acknowledgment that women have fundamentally different situations in developing careers than men have. Sex discrimination, the structure of opportunities, and emphasis on equal opportunities are argued to have altered patterns of women's career development from that of men (Whyte et al., 1992). According to Brooks (1984), not only do we need to consider family and competing demands external to the work environment, but we also need to account for phenomena within the workplace which may distinguish men from women. Morrison and Von Glinow (1990) identified three sets of negative influences on women's advancement in organizations: (1) structural or systemic barriers; (2) gender differences between male and female managers; and (3) sex discrimination, overt or covert. A review of research on women in corporate leadership by Lipman-Blumen, Fryling, Henderson, Webster Moore, and Vecchiotti (1996) revealed that career trajectory studies, which examine men's and women's careers separately, provided greater explanatory power than career models that tried to incorporate both sexes. One of

these studies concluded that women's managerial momentum is lower than men's because "eventually women sense that the glass ceiling will prevent further promotions, and they cease their quest for promotions" (Lipman-Blumen et al., 1996, p. 23). These researchers highlight the differences in men's and women's experiences in terms of potential barriers to career advancement and invite further speculation about the differences in the psychological contract violations men and women perceive.

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Given the potentially theoretically fruitful pairing of sensemaking and psychological contract violation, existing theory and research on these topics, and the exploratory nature of this study, the research questions explore the interrelationships and interactions of these two theoretical constructs in the context of women's responses to barriers to their career advancement. The following research questions were also derived in response to the inattention to overcoming barriers to advancement in the career literature and the barriers women singularly face in terms of their career advancement and the lack of career strategies specific to women:

Research Question 1: Do women in the high-tech industry perceive that a glass ceiling or other barriers to their career advancement exist?

Research Question 2: How do women make sense of barriers to their career advancement?

Research Question 3a: In what ways do women respond to barriers to their advancement?

Research Question 3b: What communication strategies are used by women in responding to barriers to their advancement?

Research Question 4: How does a commitment to the career advancement of women in the high-tech industry influence women's sensemaking and responses to barriers to their advancement?

METHOD

Sample and Research Design

The research for this study was conducted in a large southwestern city in the United States, and the population under study was a local chapter of an international association for female professionals in the high-technology industry. Leaders of the association were interested in conducting a membership study for the local chapter to ascertain women's perceptions of their experiences in high-technology organizations and in the industry. A multimethodological research design including a survey, interviews, and a focus group was used in this study. Jick (1983) suggests that multiple methods increase the potential for different methods to compensate for the other's weaknesses. Between-method triangulation, when both quantitative and qualitative methods are used, can increase the likelihood of gathering reliable and valid data (Jick, 1983). A survey and interviews were included in the study to both increase the potential generalizability of the findings and capture the individual experiences of the women in ways that revealed the process of their career development. A focus group was included in the design to involve the participants in iterative discussions with other women where their experiences could be compared and contrasted. This format engaged participants in such a way that the discussion of discrepant responses could take place with minimal involvement of the researcher. Participants were encouraged to speak up if someone described an experience different from their own so that all possible experiences and interpretations could be recorded.

Procedure

The subsequent study consisted of two parts, an online survey of the association's members and a series of individual interviews and a focus group discussion with mostly those women who were in the association and two who were executives in high-tech companies but were not members of the association. The author worked in partnership with three other researchers to develop the online survey of association members in the first part of the study. Partial results of the online survey are reported in this article. Only four questions that were directly relevant to the present study and demographic data for the respondents are reported here.

In Part 1 of the study, a self-administered online survey was made available to the association's 204 members. Announcements were made at association meetings to encourage participants to complete the survey and an e-mail announcement about the study was also sent to all members. On

two separate occasions three weeks apart, follow-up e-mails were sent to potential participants asking them to participate in the study. A follow-up announcement was also made at an association meeting to remind members about the survey and to encourage them to participate. A final item on the survey asked respondents to indicate whether they would be willing to participate in an interview or focus group on topics similar to those addressed in the survey. Those individuals who indicated that they were willing to participate in interviews comprised the list of potential participants for Part 2 of the study.

Part 2 of the study consisted of in-depth interviews with 12 female executives in the high-tech industry and a focus group discussion with six women, executives, and non-executives, who were members of the professional association. The interviews were private and conducted both in person and over the telephone. A semi-structured interview schedule, adhered to in all of the interviews, allowed for additional probing questions by the interviewer to elicit more detailed responses if necessary. This type of interview format gave interviewees more control over the discussion of their career progression and allowed for more description of examples by participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Ten of the interviews were audiotaped and detailed notes were taken for all 12. The interviews ranged in length from 25 minutes to 90 minutes, and those that were audiotaped were transcribed for analysis.

The focus group included six women who had completed the online survey and indicated that they were willing to participate in a discussion of women's experiences in high-tech careers. The discussion was audiotaped with the permission of the participants and lasted 80 minutes. The focus group discussion was also transcribed for analysis. The discussion was facilitated by the author and a second researcher took detailed notes of the discussion. Questions from the interview schedule used in the individual interviews were also used in the focus group discussion. All of the 14 questions were open-ended and probed the topic areas covered in the survey. Participants were asked to describe their career path, opportunities for and barriers to career growth, industry perceptions in relation to networking with other women and their contributions to this process, perceptions of the glass ceiling, and mentor relationships.

Instrumentation

Respondents were directed to a Web site that featured the online questionnaire. The questionnaire was formatted such that respondents were required to complete each question before they could access the following

question. The questionnaire consisted of 29 closed-ended questions, two open-ended questions, and seven additional demographic questions. Findings from four of these questions and the demographic information are reported in the current study. Respondents were asked whether they perceived opportunities for their career growth to exist in their current organizations and what these were, as well as what types of barriers to their advancement existed. Opportunities for career growth were measured with the following item: "In general, which statement best describes your current work environment regarding career opportunities for yourself?" using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ("There are virtually no opportunities for me at this point.") to 4 ("It's wide open. All options are available to me."). Perceived likelihood of career goals attainment was measured with the following item: "Which statement best describes how you feel about achieving your career goals?" using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ("I have very little likelihood of achieving my career goals.") to 4 ("I am totally confident I will achieve my career goals."). Respondents could also indicate, "I do not have definite career goals."

Whether and which barriers to advancement exist in each respondent's organization was measured with the following item: "Please indicate which of the following barriers to advancement exist in your workplace and affect you directly?" The list of barriers was adapted from a list of barriers that women and people of color indicated they face in a study conducted by Morrison (1992). Respondents had the option of selecting more than one barrier. Two groupings of barriers were included in the options, organizational and intrapersonal-relational barriers, although the labels for each grouping were not included. The options for this item were as follows: (organizational) no barriers exist, pay differentials, risk-aversive culture, business restrictions such as downsizing, lack of accountability or incentives, poor career planning assistance, poor selection or promotion practices, White men already in place (they keep others out), cannot find qualified female candidates, and a poor work environment. The intrapersonal and relational barriers listed were as follows: loss of confidence or motivation, infighting, backlash, a poor social environment, and sexual harassment.

Analysis

The data from the in-depth interviews and focus group were analyzed by first using an open-coding process to identify and differentiate between discrete concepts that were then labeled and sorted. Similar concepts were

then grouped under conceptual categories. This process was followed by axial coding where relationships within and among the categories were identified to verify their discreteness. Next, a selective coding process was used to identify relationships among distinct categories at a more abstract level. As recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998), these abstract level categories were compared and contrasted with the original data to establish their validity. Evidence in the form of key phrases or statements were identified to support or refute the relationships identified during selective coding. Following recommendations of Glaser and Strauss (1967), the interview and focus group transcripts were reread repeatedly using a constant comparative method to generate themes. These themes are reported along with the data from the online survey. Frequencies were calculated for the four questions asked in the survey relevant to this study and are reported next.

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RESULTS

Respondents

From a potential respondent pool of 204 participants, a total of 45 women completed the online questionnaire (22% response rate). Six of these women participated in the focus group and 12 additional women participated in the interviews ($N = 57$). The age of questionnaire respondents and interview and focus group participants ranged from women in their 20s to women in their 60s. Thirty-one percent ($n = 14$) of survey respondents were 20 to 29 years of age, 40% ($n = 18$) were 30 to 39 years of age, 24% ($n = 11$) were 40 to 49 years of age, and 4% ($n = 2$) were 50 to 64 years of age. The mean age range of participants in the study was 30 to 39 years of age. Survey respondents indicated that 8.9% ($n = 4$) were African American, 4.4% ($n = 2$) were Asian, 82.2% ($n = 37$) were Caucasian,

and 4.4% ($n = 2$) were Hispanic. All of the women who were interviewed and participated in the focus group were Caucasian ($n = 18$). Two thirds ($n = 50$) of the women in the survey indicated that they had worked in the high-tech industry for more than 5 years. The mean range for industry tenure was 5 to 10 years.

Questionnaire and Interview Findings

Barriers to career advancement. Research Question 1 asked whether the women in the study perceive that a glass ceiling or other barriers to advancement exist in the high-tech industry. Thirty-one percent of the survey respondents indicated that they perceived no barriers to their advancement. The 69% of respondents who did perceive that a glass ceiling and other barriers to their advancement exist indicated that the primary organizational barriers to their advancement were poor employer selection processes and promotion practices, poor career planning assistance, and pay differentials in the workplace. The predominant relational barrier to women's advancement perceived by survey respondents was "the practices of people in power to keep others out"; this barrier was particularly salient for women over 40 years of age. Infighting and backlash were, respectively, the second and third most frequent barriers to advancement identified by survey respondents.

Interviewees were asked to first describe the critical incidents (or experiences) that influenced their careers in the technology industry and then to discuss barriers to their advancement. Interviewees indicated that the following incidents had significantly influenced their careers: voluntary job changes; serendipitous or "accidental" meetings with people that resulted in a job offer or recommendation; key promotions marked by high visibility job accomplishments; assignment to challenging projects which presented important opportunities for learning; parental influence and support; and internships offering job experience and exposure to a career in the technology industry. In all cases where parents were mentioned in the interviews, a supportive father was indicated as a key figure who influenced the confidence that these women had in their choice of career and perceived self-efficacy or perceptions of their ability to accomplish something.

Early opportunities and setbacks, or obstacles to career advancement, appeared to be equally influential in the career development and decision making of women in the study. While internships, opportunities for increased responsibility, and invitations to take on challenging tasks at work were noted as critical positive experiences in the career paths

of women, negative experiences in the form of confronting institutional barriers to advancement such as "old boy networks" and the glass ceiling were instrumental in shaping the careers of more than two thirds of the women who participated in the study. These obstacles to advancement were viewed as challenges by the women and an affront to their professional abilities.

All of the interviewees and focus group participants indicated that barriers to their advancement existed. In response to the question, "What major factors or incidents have had a negative impact on or posed a threat to your career advancement?" women in the study mentioned an old boy network supported by the organization's culture that did not support women in leadership positions; institutional controls such as assigning women to low-profile positions where their abilities would not be recognized and advancement opportunities were limited; the "Queen Bee Syndrome" of other women in the organization who had attained higher status and were not willing to share it or encourage others to do the same; dislike by one's superior (e.g., conflicting interpersonal communication styles with both men and women); and challenging opportunities that were withheld from or simply not offered to women with children.

The Queen Bee Syndrome described by interviewees is an ironic barrier to women's advancement in organizations but no less harmful than barriers created or constructed by men in the organization. This malady is the tendency of some women who obtain executive-level positions to capitalize on their uniqueness by limiting or not encouraging advancement of other women in the organization. A woman with this perspective views the upper levels of the organization as only having so many spots for women and does not view her position or role as a catalyst for change.

Focus group participants described their experiences as minorities in the workplace as alienating and difficult at first. One participant commented,

> Succeeding in an engineering company is not an easy thing to do, let alone for a woman. People are comfortable with people of their own kind. Establishing trust with people who are very different from you and communicate differently was a very difficult task.

Interviewees ranging in age from 40 to 65 discussed a number of the institutional barriers to their advancement they had encountered. Four of the women interviewed were told directly in some form or another by a manager or senior mentor in the organization, "As a woman you won't go

farther than this in the company." One woman who had advanced to an upper level management position in the organization indicated that her next career move was to have been to an executive-level position over upper level managers in the company. She was told by her boss, "I can't promote you because the men here won't stand for a woman managing over them." This woman's experience is consistent with research on the glass ceiling which indicates that women are often encouraged in their careers by employers as they advance until an executive-level position is in sight, at which time they are prevented from moving into top positions in the organization (Morrison, White, Van Velsor, & the Center for Creative Leadership, 1987).

Making Sense of Advancement Barriers

Research Question 2 asked how women make sense of barriers to their career advancement. An analysis of interview and focus group data revealed the following pattern that women in the study followed in trying to make sense of barriers to their advancement.

1. *Increase focused information seeking*. Upon recognizing or being told that a barrier to their advancement exists, the women in the study sought as much information as possible to get clarification from a mentor or peer that such a barrier in fact existed. Often, information seeking was restricted to those individuals who had informed them of the barrier, usually a male cohort or mentor. All of the focus group participants indicated that they also kept close track of career advancement patterns and did head counts in management meetings to see what the percentage was of women and whether or not it was reflective of the percentage of women in their companies' workforce. As one participant indicated, "You look at the workforce. At my company the workforce is 50 percent women and 50 percent men. But as the ranks go up, the women and minorities are fewer and fewer."
2. *Make barrier attributions*. After sorting through additional information about the barrier, the women in the study made attributions for the barrier and concluded that the barrier was either sanctioned by the organization (e.g., the barrier was an organizational norm that other women also faced) or not sanctioned by the organization (e.g., the barrier was imposed by a person in power in the organization but was not an organizational norm). These attributions for the barrier appeared to influence the way in which they responded to this violation of the psychological contract they had with their employers. As one focus group participant noted, "Some policies are from managers. These are not corporate policy. You have to know which is which."

3. *Attempt to rationalize incongruous information and events*. The women engaged in cognitive and communicative sensemaking through a retrospective accounting of their career advancement and the incongruity of their previous experiences with their organizations and the present barrier to their career advancement. Any encouragement they had received from their employers on their career paths and the belief that their career advancement would be facilitated rather than impeded contributed to the paradox of their strong confidence in industry opportunities and their new negative organizational experiences. As focus group participants shared their experiences of being confronted with a career barrier for the first time, they compared and contrasted the nuances of the different glass ceilings they faced in their companies. One respondent summed up her collective experiences this way: "The glass ceiling is a little different in each company. The assumption that 'all things are fair' is what gets us into trouble."

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Behavioral responses to barriers. Research Question 3a asked in what ways women responded to barriers to their advancement. Of the 69% of the women surveyed who indicated that barriers to their advancement existed in their current organizations, 70% indicated that they would remain in the organization, 21% would exit or leave the organization, 4% would leave to start their own businesses, and 5% did not indicate what they would do. In contrast, 95% of interviewees indicated that they exited a previous organization or would exit their current organization when faced with a barrier to their advancement. Five percent said they would remain. These women indicated that although they perceived that barriers to advancement existed in their organizations and/or in the industry, they were confident that they could either overcome these barriers or leave the organization for another where there were fewer barriers to women's advancement. Four of the women, three interviewees and one focus group participant, left organizations in response to barriers to their advancement to start their own high-tech businesses and work for themselves.

Sensemaking and rationalizing the use of voice. Research Question 3b asked what communication strategies were used by women in responding to barriers to their advancement. Almost all of the interviewees (90%) indicated that they exited quietly or would exit quietly when faced with a barrier. Given that interviewees indicated their communication styles and approaches were direct and somewhat aggressive and that many interviewees attributed their success in part to not being afraid to voice their opinions, these findings are somewhat surprising. Interviewees did indicate that they used voice to talk about or protest the barrier to their advancement after they had left the organization. These women engaged mostly in information seeking to solicit information from others about the barrier and for advice on how to respond to the barrier. A small portion of the interviewees, 5%, indicated that they exited the organization with voice to protest the barrier in an attempt to change the organization as they left it. However, this use of voice was restricted to communication with the individual or individuals who had informed the women of the barrier. Voice was not used in these cases in a political or formal attempt to change the organization's discriminatory practices either through litigation or an internal judiciary process.

The remaining 5% of interviewees indicated that they increased information seeking and began what would become continuous sensemaking of the barrier in order to rationalize remaining in the organization. These women personalized their experiences and did not perceive that the barrier was sanctioned by the organization; rather, it was a person or persons who impeded their career progress. While these women expressed a desire to leave the organization, they rationalized remaining at least for the present because it was better for their career in the long run. One of the focus group respondents indicated that a burden of being the only woman in her technical position was the unwelcome responsibility of representing all other women. She had experience with hitting the glass ceiling at her organization and had rationalized her decision to remain while advocating quietly for women behind the scenes:

> The one thing that we didn't touch on [in the focus group], in terms of being one of the few, is the responsibility that that carries. That your actions become the label for all women. So, one of my dreams, if I was going to play "My Martin Luther King," it would be, "I have a dream, that there would be enough women that people would be judged on their behavior and their actions and their responsibilities as that individual and not as a woman." All women do not behave like me. So, one of my goals has always been: Get more [women] in!

Despite her frustration with representing the views of all women, she remained a self-proclaimed advocate on their behalf.

Collectivist and advocate versus individualist frames. Research Question 4 asked in what ways a commitment to the career advancement of women in general influences women's sensemaking and responses to barriers to their advancement. All of the women in the study indicated that they were highly committed to the career advancement of other women. Women holding senior positions in particular described the strong sense of community they wanted to develop with other women in the technology industry. One woman described how she recognized a need for a professional association for women in the technology industry, so she started the first such organization for women in the city. She was very nervous about speaking in front of people but figured few women would attend the first meeting. "More than 300 women showed up. I was amazed there were so many women and that they wanted to be a part of something like this."

Those women who identified important job assignments and key positions they held as being important for their own careers were very committed to an agenda of identifying similar opportunities for women in their organizations and in the industry in general. Three of the women interviewed indicated how important working with a senior woman who served as their role model in the organization or industry was for them. One woman noted, "I finally saw a woman who was successful doing these things and I could see myself in that same role doing it too." These experiences, when a female role model helped them or served as a symbol of success for women in the organization, were cited by interviewees as experiences that strengthened their commitment to helping other women.

A strong commitment to the career advancement of women did not appear to influence women's decisions to stay or exit the organization. However, commitment to the advancement of other women was a predominant reason for using voice for those who exited the organization and those who remained in their jobs. The women who indicated that they had exited or would exit the organization while voicing their outrage with the barrier (i.e., a vociferous exit) adopted a predominantly individualist sensemaking frame in rationalizing their decision to exit with voice. These women said that they left in order to keep moving forward in their careers, for their own personal well-being, and to get away from oppressive individuals or an oppressive organization.

Women who indicated that they would remain in the organization and use voice to try to initiate change talked about collective goals of changing

the environment for other women as well as for themselves. A sense of camaraderie among women in the organization had already been established in these cases, which may explain why other women who may not have had female colleagues or a supportive work environment would be reluctant to try to initiate change in the organization. The following narrative was shared by a focus group participant who described forming a lunch group at her organization to help change the organization's culture regarding women:

> A couple of us met on a mentor trip with a university and then the two of us, every time we'd see a woman in the hall or meet another engineer in a meeting, we'd kind of get her name and add it to the list and we ended up with a lunch group that met once a month. I was sort of the focal point for this because I like to organize groups. . . . That turned out to be a tremendous support because there were several of us who ended up being in very bad situations with turkeys for managers and yadda yadda and we ended up having this group of people we could go to and say, "Yo, this is happening," and evaluate with the group. "Is this something we need to go to the ombudsman about? Is this something I can deal with? Does anyone know of another group I can get into?" All that kind of, you know, survival mode.

While membership and participation in the professional association that these women belonged to was a public commitment to the advancement of other women, other factors such as preserving one's reputation in the industry and not appearing to be a troublemaker were cited by women in the study as being important in their decision to quietly exit. All of the women who quietly exited the organization both trivialized the barrier incident in rationalizing their decision to exit quietly and cited the incident as instrumental to their career path. In trivializing a negative incident, one woman indicated that she had no interest in trying to change the organization. She had given a presentation to 20 bank executives, and a male colleague who was a friend recommended she not go to the luncheon held afterwards, which was at a men's club. She declined to go to the lunch.

> I decided that's not my war. Focusing on the differences between men and women and inequalities is not my war. Can I succeed on my own merit was what mattered to me. So that was my fight. It was clear to me that company wasn't a good fit. They weren't going to promote women in 1986 so I left.

It was apparent in the interviews and focus group that the act of quietly exiting the organization was perceived as a form of protest and empowering

for many of the women. As one woman in the focus group commented, "When you work for a turkey you've got to be willing to talk with your feet." Many of the women in the study had engineering backgrounds or other technical expertise that many companies desperately needed. The ease with which they indicated they could find jobs elsewhere may have contributed to their willingness to quietly exit as they assumed they could find an even better job at an organization that encouraged women's career advancement.

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DISCUSSION

Women made sense of and responded to barriers to their career advancement by personalizing the barriers in ways that more often relegated the barriers to a personal challenge rather than an institutional problem that all women at the organization faced. The study findings illustrate how many factors including the intensity of the psychological contract violation, whether or not the barrier was organizationally sanctioned, the degree of commitment to women's advancement in the industry, and opportunities for voice all appeared to influence the process of sensemaking and selection of a response to a barrier. The communication-related sensemaking and responses of women to barriers to their advancement found in the current study may perhaps best be explained using Hirschman's (1970) exit-voice model of customer responses to organizational decline.

Based on economic and political theories, the model illustrates the ways in which customers respond, either by exiting the organization (i.e., taking their business elsewhere) or voicing their dissatisfaction, to a decline in the quality of its services or products. For the purposes of this discussion, the women in the study are the customers and the barriers to career advancement are exemplars of organizational decline. Hirschman

(1970) contends that the alternative reactions to organizational ineffectiveness are moderated by customer loyalty to the organization. If loyalty is present, it deters a person from taking the easier short-term resolution of exit and encourages the use of voice to instigate change and encourage the improvement of goods and services. Loyalty seems an appropriate variable to consider in light of the ties that bind customers to the suppliers of their preferred products. Yet, the employer-employee relationship is arguably one that is characterized by a more complex and personalized set of expectations that are dependent upon the employment situation. In lieu of loyalty, for the purposes of this article, the moderating effects of the commitment that women in the study have to the advancement of other women as well as perceived organizational sanctioning of the barrier to advancement will be discussed.

Hirschman's (1970) exit-voice framework has been applied in studies of managerial attachment (Cannings, 1989), employee retention (Farrell & Rusbult, 1985), and opportunities for voice in expressing dissent in participative-management settings (Kassing, 1998) and to develop an integrative model of responses to declining job satisfaction (Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, & Mainous, 1988). The framework has also been used to explain parent involvement in school choice (Matland, 1995; Ogawa & Dutton, 1997), responses to job stress (Mayes & Ganster, 1988), the emergence and impact of company unions (Fairris, 1995), increased opportunities for voice in unions (Bender & Sloane, 1998), worker power under communism (Bergsten & Bova, 1990), Swedish consumer policy (Pestoff, 1988), and consumer activism in the Czech Republic (Gurdon, Savitt, & Pribova, 1999). Critics of the framework claim that while Hirschman notes that voice has a number of advantages over exit, he overlooks the fact that exit permits organizations to potentially ignore those individuals who may prefer a voice (Keeley & Graham, 1991). In a study of graduates from a university business program, Withey and Cooper (1989) found that dissatisfied employees who exited their organizations were influenced by the costs and the efficacy of their responses as well as by their employers. The same study found that employees who used voice to express their dissatisfaction were very difficult to predict. Findings from the present study answer a call by these scholars and others to better understand how and why employees use the more political, participatory, and communicative option of voice. In this study, Hirschman's (1970) framework has been adapted to reflect the sense-making frames, barrier attributions, and communication strategies used

Figure 1. Framework of Women's Responses to Career Advancement Barriers: Influences of Barrier Attributions and Sensemaking Frames on the Type of Exit and Voice Response

by women in responding to career advancement barriers (see Figure 1). The following discussion of the framework will describe each of the four quadrants in relation to the findings in the study.

Quiet exit. Prior research on exit indicates that quiet exit is the most frequent response to decline or organizational ineffectiveness (Cannings, 1989) as is the case in the current study. The exit response means that some customers stop buying the company's products or, in the case of the present study, some members leave the organization. "As a result, revenues drop, membership declines, and management is impelled to search for ways and means to correct whatever faults have led to exit" (Hirschman, 1970, p. 4).

The study findings indicate that 95% of the women in the study chose or would choose to quietly exit the organization in response to a violation of their psychological contract. Located in the lower right quadrant of the framework, women who chose to quietly exit the organization most often perceived that the barrier was sanctioned by the organization. These women believed that they were up against an institutional norm that would

be very difficult to change; using voice to initiate change in the organization was a non-issue. This belief is illustrated in one woman's matter-of-fact retelling of many quiet exits in her career:

> The reason I left [company name deleted] was that I was one of the five people in the department. I managed the budget. I managed three quarters of all the money that was being spent in the department and I was not going to be promoted because I was a woman. So I left. So it's a series of ceilings and either you stay there or move. I have moved.

Women who decided to quietly exit the organization attempted to use individualist and collectivist sensemaking frames simultaneously. They reasoned that their quiet exit was to preserve their career and also that they could do more for the advancement of other women at another organization.

Organizational cultures that discouraged or dictated aspects of their family lives were cited by focus group members as career advancement barriers when they refused to comply with what the company viewed as normative behavior. One respondent quietly exited her organization when her male manager made it clear that she should postpone starting a family if she wanted to advance her career. "He said, 'Once you have children, you aren't interested in us anymore.'" Another focus group participant experienced the exact opposite problem as a single woman: pressure to marry if she wanted to move into the management ranks. "I was told, 'We prefer a stable family environment.' So, I left." After this woman's initial quiet exit, she became much more vocal and a strong advocate for other women in subsequent management positions in the software industry.

Vociferous exit. Alternatively, to exit with voice involves a customer or organizational member expressing his or her dissatisfaction directly to management, to some other authority to which management is responsible, or through a general protest. In Hirschman's (1970) framework, as a result of voice, "management once again emerges in a search for the causes and possible cures of customers' and members' dissatisfaction" (p. 4). In trying to make sense of the barrier to their career advancement they faced, a few of the women adopted a collectivist frame (e.g., upper right quadrant of the framework) and based their decision to exit with voice on the hopes of changing the organization for other women. Unfortunately, their expression of dissatisfaction may have fallen on deaf ears as most of these women limited their voice to those individuals who had informed them that the barrier existed. As indicated in the previous section, this person was more often than not a man in the organization who was a

coworker or mentor. Like the women who chose to quietly exit, these women also perceived the barrier to be sanctioned by the organization and had little hope of changing the culture.

Using voice to initiate change. The upper left quadrant of the framework describes those few women who indicated that they had or would stay in the organization and use voice to initiate internal change. These women were confident that barriers to women's advancement were not sanctioned by the organization and were willing to work to rid the organization of them. A strong collectivist sensemaking frame was adopted by these women who expressed collective goals for women in the industry and identified ways of achieving them. The women in this quadrant had worked to create opportunities for voice through the creation of women's groups or associations in their respective organizations or in the industry.

Rationalizing to remain. The lower left quadrant of the framework describes those women who remained in the organization and rationalized their silence regarding their dissatisfaction with the barrier to their career advancement. These women engaged in continual sensemaking of a seemingly paradoxical situation: They were skilled and highly valued employees and yet faced a barrier to their advancement. Their perception that the barrier to their advancement was not sanctioned by the organization encouraged the women in this situation to wait out the barrier and hope it would dissipate or the person constructing the barrier would leave the organization.

Jablin and Kramar (1998) indicate that the process of sensemaking is complicated when the person is new to the organization or does not possess useful and valid information about the event. Often, psychological contract violations are not precipitated by large amounts of valid and relevant information about why the violation occurred, the causes of the violation, or the potential impact of the violation on the employee. Jablin and Kramar suggest that interruptions in a person's expectations (e.g., a violation of the contract) should result in "sense-making activity directed at understanding why these events happened and how their expectations may need to be revised" (p. 158). The authors also note,

> To effectively understand what is experienced as an incongruous event, one must possess useful and valid information pertaining to the particular event, including information about the expectations of others and relevant policies and procedures associated with the activity. (p. 158)

Yet, for employees who perceive barriers to their advancement, access to the norms or rules that guide communication processes (or, in our case, the informal norms that guide advancement opportunities) and the assignment of meanings in the organization (e.g., positive qualities one must possess to advance) may be limited. In the case of women who remain in the organization, the effectiveness of their sensemaking may be complicated or slowed by not having access to relevant, accurate information about the barrier.

Implications and Future Directions

The present study of exit, voice, and sensemaking following psychological contract violations has important implications for theory building, scholarship, and practice in organizations. Understanding the process by which women make sense of barriers to their career advancement extends Morrison and Robinson's (1997) model of psychological contract violation. Additionally, the inclusion of attributions for the psychological contract violation (i.e., whether or not the barrier was sanctioned by the organization) should inform theory building and increase the explanatory power of predictions of employee responses to psychological contract violations (Turnley & Feldman, 1999).

The limitations of the current study also warrant mentioning and should be addressed in future research on responses to career barriers and organizational exit. The most notable include the nature of the sample for the survey, interviews, and focus group. While purposive sampling served our purposes in reaching female executives within a particular industry, future studies might cast a larger net using a representative sample to examine the process of organizational exit for men and women. Examining the exit process at different stages of one's career and whether and how men and women respond differently to career barriers also warrant further examination. Research that seeks to determine whether differences exist between men's and women's responses to a psychological contract violation could seek to establish the generalizability of Morrison and Robinson's (1997) model of psychological contract violation and do it across occupations and class as in Ellis's (2007) study of blue- and white-collar workers.

Future research on sensemaking should explore the impact of the tension produced as a result of competing sensemaking frames on the communication that subsequently occurs. As was found in the present study, balancing collectivist and individualist sensemaking frames required increased information seeking on the part of the women. Although current models address

the existence of barriers to women's advancement, few consider how women cognitively and communicatively respond when faced with such barriers.

Finally, many practical implications of the current study exist for organizations interested in retaining the professional women who work for them. In light of the shortage of qualified technology workers, particularly those with extensive specialized technical skills, decreasing employee turnover is important. Because the majority of women in the study opt to quietly exit the organization rather than use voice to try to change a discriminatory organizational culture, organizations should explore new ways to increase opportunities for voice for those women who face barriers to their advancement—no matter how subtle or overt they might be. Creative strategies that open a number of avenues for voice with different audiences (e.g., women-only groups, meetings with upper management, online discussions with other women and organizational leaders) may encourage women to stay in the organization rather than exit quietly.

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