

**DOING THE RIGHT THING: EXPLORING THE ROLE COURAGE PLAYS IN
NONPROFIT EXECUTIVE LEADERS' DECISION-MAKING IN A VOLATILE AND
CONTINUOUSLY CHANGING MARKETPLACE**

Doctoral Dissertation Research Prospectus

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Introduction

Courage is a virtue that has been studied since the beginning of time, and according to Aristotle, it is the virtue required for all other virtues to exist (Detert & Bruno, 2017). Although courage has been part of the narratives of all great leaders who conquered in war or led great nations, in recent years, there has been increased interest in courage as a virtue at the management level in the workplace, although few studies have examined its application (Harbor & Kisfalvi, 2014). Courage in the workplace has been identified as a skill that can be developed through experience and practice, and has been examined closely in recent studies, which have coined the term "professional moral courage" (Sekerka et al., 2009).

Most of our understanding of the virtue of courage focuses on a single act, often done on impulse or decided in seconds, in which an individual sacrifices themselves to save another or to further the greater good of the community or society to which they belong (Wan, 2017). However, studies of courage in the workplace are more nuanced and complex. Courage in the workplace can be a multitude of small decisions and acts that create incremental change in the organization (Harbor & Kisfalvi, 2014). For executive leaders, making courageous decisions involves many internal and external variables that influence the successful implementation of the decision (Holmes & Howard, 2023). The act of courage in the workplace is one that is thoughtful and strategic in nature.

Personal, Practical, and Professional Goals

Over 30 years of working and becoming an executive leader in the nonprofit sector, I have witnessed and been engaged in small and large courageous acts in the workplace. Moments that have defined major shifts in the practices, behaviors, and cultural fibers of how mission-focused

work serves its clients, advocates, or organizes its human and financial resources. This study will help me examine how executive leaders develop and exercise professional moral courage and which variables they rely on when making courageous decisions and then acting on them.

As I go through this process, I am reminded of what I learned about sensemaking and how experiences help you frame a situation to find practical solutions. According to Nonaka and Zhu (2012), "Beyond scanning and surveying at the core of sensing is, of course, sensemaking, which is about interpretation, imagination, generating meaning, challenging what is taken for granted and expanding what is believed possible" (p. 278). This topic is close to my lived experience and an issue I believe executive leaders and organizations will grapple with volatility and unpredictability of the current marketplace, especially since the COVID -19, that has driven a sustained shift in human and philanthropic behaviors, the economy, the global political landscape, and the rapid technological progress in AI, while trying to stay relevant, mission-focused, and profitable in the 21st century and beyond (Smith, 2022).

As a woman of color, I often find myself, still in 2026, in meetings as one of the only female executive leaders of color in the C-Suite of the Nonprofit Sector. Although the sector has a diverse workforce, it still has a gap in executive-level representation. Numerous studies identify the barriers that women of color face in advancing to the executive level due to their gender, race, and economic status (Cornielle et al., 2019). Furthermore, in the nonprofit sector, this reality is no different, even though 70% of the workforce is made up of women and 45% are in executive level position, at the intersection of gender and race, only 18% are women of color (Uchida, 2024).

My personal goal motivating this study is to understand how women of color are developing the muscle of moral courage, and what variables are driving courageous decision-making and actions, especially since the lack of mentors, social capital, leadership development, and

managerial advancement are challenges to their advancement to C-suite leadership positions in the nonprofit sector. This understanding will help me better understand the path and variables for developing and exercising the professional moral courage muscle as women of color pursue executive leadership. As a leader in the sector, I am often sought out to mentor and guide emerging leaders. This knowledge would help me become a better mentor by deepening my understanding of this skill and what is needed to support its development.

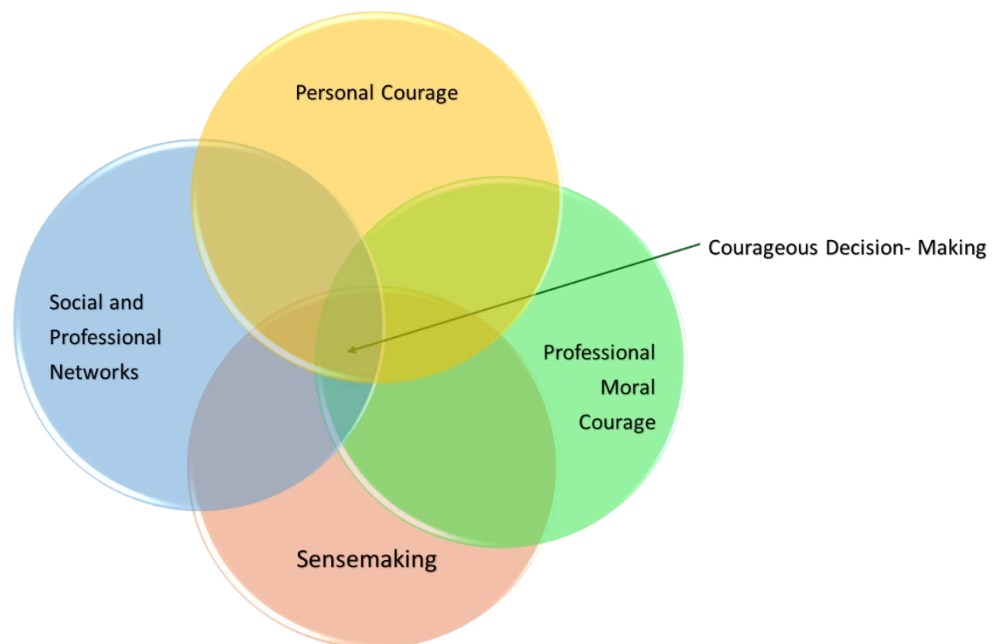
This personal goal leads to the practical goal of supporting the nonprofit sector in identifying the practices organizations need to create or enhance in leadership development programs, and workplace opportunities that support the development of the professional moral courage skill of the talented women of color poised to become executive leaders in the sector. Especially in an ever-evolving, unstable marketplace, executive leaders will need to possess the skill to stay present and mission-focused in the communities they serve.

The intellectual goal will shape the desired outcomes for the research, including:

1. Understand the variables that most influence the development and proficiency of professional moral courage that will more likely drive the courageous decisions and acts to be made when the circumstances demand.
2. Identifying the essential resources and relationships needed to make a courageous executive decision and act on it successfully.
3. Identifying components needed to accelerate the development of women of color in the skill of professional moral courage to create a pipeline for the next generation of leaders ready to be responsive to one of the many market realities they will face.

Conceptual Framework

As we look at the body of work that addresses executive leaders' ability to make and pursue courageous decisions in the workplace, sensemaking, the network and supports available to the leader, their personal courage, and the skill of professional moral courage continue to appear as key variables needed to make a courageous decision and act on it to pursue change or create the realities that will help the organization stay mission-focused and relevant to the constituents it serves by doing what is good and right for all.



As we examine each of these variables, we will determine how they are developed and influence one another. We will further explore whether they are drivers and necessary skills in the process of making courageous decisions and executing courageous actions.

Sensemaking is a skill most leaders develop as they progress through leadership development. It is a continuously evolving skill used in multiple circumstances. Often underestimated, it is “explicit efforts at sensemaking tend to occur when the current state of the world is perceived as different from the expected state, or when there is no obvious way to engage

with the world” (Weik et al., 2005, p. 409). In recent years, a global pandemic has shifted human behavior, marketplaces, and technological advances, demanding that executive leaders continuously make sense of the realities in their communities and how they impact those they serve, making relevant shifts in services, sustainability, and messaging to be responsive and stay relevant (Howard-Greenville, 2021). The importance of this skill and the experiential frameworks executive leaders develop are essential as they assess the continuously changing landscape, impact decision-making, and its perceived needs and risks.

Mentors and social networks have been shown to be important support systems and variables in successful leadership development and advancement for aspiring executive leaders, and as thought partners once they are in executive roles. For women of color, these networks and supports are not always readily available and must be sought, developed, nurtured, and stewarded to gain a seat at the right tables and opportunities to present their ideas, projects, and work products (Pace, 2018). As we study successful executive leaders, they often attribute their advancement and sound decision-making to the mentors and influential networks they developed throughout their careers. These mentors and networks become valuable when the executive faces the decision to exercise professional moral courage. If one barrier women face in advancing is securing these types of relationships (Colvin, 2023), this study will explore how these executive leaders build these relationships and how they guide and support professional moral courage that drives their courageous decision-making and actions.

Personal courage is rooted in our moral values, ethics, and beliefs, which shape how we perceive and respond to the world around us (Benitez & Chung, 2023). An individual's personal courage aligns with their professional moral courage (Sekerka & Bagozzi, 2007). Each is a muscle that is developed and practiced when circumstances call and don't align with the personal and

professional values that the executive has developed and practiced over time. That said, the challenge for women of color is the limited opportunities to be assigned to and lead meaningful organizational projects and initiatives to exercise the skills that test their personal and professional moral courage (Glass & Cook, 2020). As a result, many women of color take on risky assignments that few are willing to take on to be seen, to develop, and to showcase their talents. This phenomenon is known as the “glass cliff” (Glass & Cook, 2020). This study will explore and hopes to identify how executive leaders are developing the muscle for personal and professional moral courage and creating support to effectively utilize it.

The conceptual framework can help us better understand what women of color need to continue to develop the skill of professional moral courage to support their efforts in making courageous decisions and acting on them as they become the executives of mission-focused organizations charged with transforming communities and addressing some of the most complex circumstances and realities that they face.

Research

The study of professional moral courage is in its infancy; more studies focused on the development, practice, and execution of professional moral courage are needed (Holmes & Howard, 2023). Not only in understanding the nuances of developing the skill, but also in what is needed to create an organizational culture that fosters that behavior. A major gap in the current literature is its focus on who the executive leadership is and on the organizational context; this study will address both by examining women of color in executive leadership positions in the nonprofit sector.

Research Questions

By exploring the role courage plays in nonprofit executive leaders' decision-making in a volatile, continually changing marketplace, this study will ask women of color who currently hold executive leadership positions how their experience and expertise have helped them make courageous decisions and act on them. We will try to gain an understanding of their leadership development experience, their views on professional moral courage, their support systems, and professional network, and what they believe are the major drivers of their decision-making process and execution of the strategy.

The study will use a mixed-methods qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews. The first part of the study will assess participants' Professional Moral Courage (PMC) using the PMC scale. Their PMC will provide insight into how their beliefs and experiences shape their actions, and, if there is a correlation, we can determine whether their PMC correlates with their actions. The PMC scale is a 15-question survey that measures what drives their moral compass in five key dimensions (moral agency, multiple values to determine the right thing to do, endurance in the face of threats, going beyond compliance, and moral goals).

The second part of this study will include interviews to better understand the nuances of lived experiences and the processes of sensemaking, mentors/social networks, personal and professional moral courage, and their impact on courageous decision-making and actions. The interviews will focus on four areas aligned with the conceptual framework: Mentors & Networks, Leadership Development, Career Advancement, and Courageous Decisions & Actions in the Workplace.

This method, with the areas of focus for each part of the study, will help determine the drivers for women of color in executive leadership positions, making courageous decisions and taking action in volatile and uncertain marketplaces.

Research Relationships

As a woman of color who is an executive leader in the nonprofit sector, I believe this will both be an asset and a hindrance to this research study. In identifying potential participants for this study, my social network and connections in the sector and partnering sectors can help me conduct a vast search that is random but targeted to be able to identify at least 25 participants that fit the demographic I am targeting, and then I can conduct more in-depth interviews with at least 17.

I will also conduct targeted outreach on social media, LinkedIn, and professional networks to reach the specific demographic. This snowball sampling, although time-consuming, expands the sample beyond the initial group of people closely associated with me toward a more diverse sample, enabling generalization of the findings to the population and limiting bias (Naderifar et al., 2017).

Site and Participation Selection

The nonprofit sector has some major challenges as it looks to the future sustainability of the sector. With the shifts in the economy, philanthropic and donor behavior, and sustainability challenges, the need for succession planning and leaders poised to address these challenges will be in demand (Eisenberg, 2000).

As we look at the emerging population of leaders, we know that the non-profit workforce is dominated by women and women of color, and the next logical emergent executive leaders will be women and women of color in the sector. To that end, studying women of color currently in the

executive leadership position can provide some directional insight as to what is needed to help future leaders develop the skill and exercise the muscle of professional moral courage in their leadership development journey to be ready and poised to make the courageous decisions and acts that the future will demand of them to provide mission-focused, ethical and focused services for the communities and people they serve and aspire to provide solutions to the complex challenges they are facing (Uchida, 2025).

Both the women of color selected as sample participants and the nonprofit sector as the setting are important parts of the research, as they address a gap in the literature and can provide novel information about the sample population in executive leadership and the sector, particularly in the human services and youth development areas. The hope is that this begins to inform the challenges the sector is facing as it continues to identify emerging practices for long-term sustainability in both leadership transitions and financial health over the next decade.

Data Collection

This qualitative study will use explanatory sequential mixed methods. The use of this method will allow mixing quantitative and qualitative data to gain a better understanding of participants' experiences in making and acting on courageous decisions. The rationale for using this approach is that neither qualitative nor quantitative methods alone provides sufficient detail or identification of trends for the robust analysis needed for such a nuanced subject as human behavior (Ivankova et al., 2006). This method combines the best of both and allows the researcher to leverage both methods.

In this research study, we will use the PMC Scale survey pre-interview to collect qualitative data to understand where participants' PMC scale stands relative to the peers interviewed and to assess whether there is any correlation between professional moral courage and how they develop

strategies, make decisions, and act on them. The second part of the study will focus on semi-structured interviews of a sample of those participants who completed the pre-interview survey. The semi-structured interview will allow some flexibility to further probe the participant's ideas, thoughts, and emotions, which may better inform the responses to the structured questions. By using a similar framework and open-ended questions for each participant, one can more readily identify trends and also understand the motives and nuances of the situations.

By using this method, we will be able to explore the intersections among the different variables that make up our conceptual framework. It will provide a richer perspective when analyzing the data.

Data Analysis

To conduct quality analysis, we will use two methods to make sense of the data. The first is to use Survey Monkey and a 7-point Likert scale to determine where participants fall on the PMC scale. These results will not be used for quantitative analysis but will be utilized to determine the relationship, if any, with the PMC scale and their lived experience.

The semi-structured interviews will be conducted over Zoom and recorded and transcribed to accurately capture each participant's responses. Those responses will then be coded and categorized using software to ensure accuracy and fidelity to the findings. The software, MAXQDA, will take both the SurveyMonkey responses and the coding of the interviews to help identify themes and comparative data points.

By using these methods, I ensure that the data is properly collected and stored in a centralized system for analysis. Since we are exploring the variables influencing courage in executive leaders in this demographic, this process will also help with a more detailed and nuanced analysis of responses to determine which factors are truly missing or present in the process of

developing and exercising courageous decisions and actions, allowing for an opportunity for new assumptions to be made because the findings are driving the outcome.

Validity Issues

As someone proximate to the participants' professional and personal experiences, the greatest threat to this study is my inability to remain objective and truly hear their perspectives without assuming sentiments or outcomes based on their statements. The semi-structured interview will allow me to probe and ask clarifying questions of responses to ensure that I am understanding the perspective and personal definitions, rather than adding my own assumptions and coloring to general statements. Using the transcribed interviews and software for coding them will also provide more focus to the analysis process, limiting my own experiences and interpretations from clouding the participants' responses.

The dissertation committee will also play a key role in reviewing the analysis and asking the correct questions to further ensure that my analysis is objective and authentically captures the participants' lived experiences. The peer review process will also help with objectivity and an external perspective of the data and the analysis provided.

The triangulation of the software, committee, and peer review will be central to ensuring that the greatest threat to the study, which is my lived experience, does not interfere with the quality of the analysis and the strengths of the findings to inform the literature in this area of study.

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