

## **Understanding and Supporting Women’s Leadership Identity Development in Higher Education**

**Sapna Thwaite, Associate Dean, School of Education and Human Services, University of Michigan-Flint**

---

### **ABSTRACT**

This research study focused on the major challenges that female leaders face that might impact their sense of leadership identity in a higher education context. The participants, five female higher education administrators from both American and German universities, represented a subset of participants from a larger study. Using a relational leadership lens, a theoretical thematic analysis approach was used through individual interviews with each participant to address the following research question: 1) What are the major challenges that female leaders face that might impact their sense of leadership identity in a higher education context? The study’s findings revealed that the important role of others, the influence of one’s supervisor, challenges with feelings of insecurity and vulnerability, and uniquely female challenges were key themes in the interviews. Implications for the future professional development and training of female leaders in higher education are discussed.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the course of time, mid-career female leaders have often experienced complex tensions between their many roles. For some, balancing personal and professional ambitions has presented numerous barriers, particularly if they feel that they are paying a “motherhood penalty” (Sallee et al., 2016) and experiencing challenges with work-life integration. Women at mid-career often have care responsibilities (including care for children and aging family members), so their career decisions might be impacted by competing personal priorities, contributing to the overall loss of female faculty along the pipeline to professional advancement (Surawicz, 2016). Buch, Huet, Rorrer, and Roberson (2011) found that women were more likely than men to become members of the “13+ club”, holding associate professor status for 13 years or more since earning their highest degree. In higher education, women are generally under-represented as university presidents, upper-level higher education administrators, and senior tenured faculty (Coate et al., 2015). As a result, women are not advancing through the ranks at the same rates as their male counterparts, illustrating that the informal marginalization of women may be contributing to the exclusion of women from formal leadership roles.

Once women make the transition from staff or faculty to administration, they might find that the “gendering of academic careers” extends to their leadership roles in higher education settings (Tessens et al., 2011). Gorska (2016) shares how the ‘Lack of Fit’ theory shows how woman who are stereotypically viewed as communal, when in a leadership position, represent behaviors that are commonly associated with men. This can

sometimes result in an inaccurate portrayal of them and as a result, they are consequently seen less favorably. Furthermore, normal support structures and processes pertaining to career development, coaching and professional development may be more traditional and outdated in their scope, and a lack of female role models in leadership positions might contribute to the confusion of how one should act or behave as a female leader (Redmond et al., 2017). They might experience the double bind in which women leaders who are self-assured are viewed as too strong and not “feminine enough,” while women who are caring are seen as being weak and ineffective (Hannum et al., 2015). This may create a no-win situation, or in many cases, a “glass ceiling” for female leaders (Wahls, 2018). As a result, it is not uncommon for them to feel isolated, stuck, or even experience some degree of imposter syndrome, doubting their accomplishments and carrying the persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud. (He et al., 2020).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified much of the stress and uncertainty faced by female academics and leaders alike. Many women have found that they have had to forego their successful research agendas, which has led to fear and insecurity about the future of their careers (Minello et al., 2020). Others (Mavin et al., 2020) have commented on how the pandemic has halted progress for women leaders, as it may “personify the misfit of woman and leader.” Despite these challenges, however, women are poised to be effective leaders during times of crisis (Peterson, 2016). As Vongalis-Macrow (2016) state, “.the main qualities ascribed to women leaders such as ‘empathetic, supportive, relationship-building, power sharing and information sharing’ are the very qualities identified as essential to leading adaptable and flexible organizations in rapidly changing contexts.” (p. 91). Across the world, women in leadership roles have been at the helm of institutions executing effective and methodical responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, across several industries and domains. Regardless of the many reasons why this might be the case, it is essential that we consider the professional qualities that women consider central to their sense of leadership identity, and which are considered essential to leading during times of uncertainty and change.

The current study uses a relational leadership framework in its examination of women’s leadership identity development in higher education contexts. Pioneers in feminist psychology (Gilligan, 1993; Noddings, 2013) detailed the importance of human connection as a fundamental need and basic to our human condition. A relational perspective to leadership prioritizes our fundamental human orientation towards, and relationships with, others and the society at large, and emphasizes the notion that leadership is co-developed through interconnected relationships and socially interactive processes (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2017). With a relational view, we can focus on leadership identity as not just being connected to individual leaders, but as developing in interaction with other relational beings in context. Through the current study, I aspired to uncover the core professional qualities that female leaders hold central to their senses of leadership identity and the extent to which their higher education contexts have supported or hindered their paths towards becoming

effective leaders while they uphold the professional qualities that they value. An identity-based approach to leadership recognizes each individual's unique understandings about leadership (Hammond et al., 2017), their own specific experiences (Sveinsson & Alvesson, 2003), and their distinctive processes of making meaning within and across many contexts, such as home, work and community. The analysis, which will follow, focuses on a subset of data from a larger study that included male and female leaders.

### **METHODS**

#### **Research Question**

The overarching research question for this study was: What are the major challenges that female leaders face that might impact their sense of leadership identity in a higher education context?

#### **Participants and Procedure**

The participants, 5 female higher education leaders from both the United States and Germany, represented a subset of participants from a larger study. They were recruited via an email invitation that was sent to all members of two different organized groups of higher education administrators. The researcher, who is a female higher education leader (associate dean and interim department chairperson) herself, followed required human subjects' protocols for exempt research projects. A one hour-long virtual interview was conducted via Zoom with each participant. Interview questions focused on professional qualities related to leadership identity as well as the role of the higher education context in supporting leadership identity development. Handwritten notes were taken over the course of each interview. All interviews were transcribed by Zoom. Interview transcripts were edited for accuracy and identifiable information was removed. They were also checked against the recordings and the researcher's notes.

#### *Data Analysis*

Interview data were analyzed using a theoretical thematic analysis method, where each segment of data that was relevant or captured something interesting about the research question was coded. Thematic analysis is a form of qualitative data analysis that includes reviewing data (in this case, transcripts from in depth interviews), finding patterns in meaning across the data, developing initial codes, and concluding with well-defined themes. One must then draw upon the themes to analyze interpret the key issue (s) and develop further meaning. Thematic analysis also involves an active process of reflexivity, where a researcher's subjective experience, may play an integral role in data meaning making. (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

## **FINDINGS**

### **The Important Role of Others**

One prevalent theme that emerged in the thematic analysis was the important role of others for female leaders. This topic came up in a few different ways. For instance, Participant A, a German leader with a professional background in Business Administration, emphasized the importance of having an extensive professional network. “Leaders can use psychological advisors,” she said, “so they know how to deal with things and know what to say when there are difficulties or crises and support them further in their careers.” Another German leader, Participant B, an international center director, talked about the importance of having “a platform of peers with whom to exchange ideas.” In a slightly different context, Participant E, a female assistant dean in the United States, talked about the importance of “intentional relationship building to garner support.” As Participant D, an interim dean and Social Worker, also emphasized, “An important quality is seeing the value in what people bring to you and be humble enough to accept that it is going to make you a better person in the quality of knowing that you are in service to someone or something else.” Hence, valuing and trusting others, as well as providing support to others, were prevalent themes amongst the participants. The core values of trust, integrity, and having a supportive presence were common threads through their responses.

### **One’s Supervisor Really Matters!**

4 out of 5 participants made consistent references to the role of one’s supervisor in higher education and how one’s relationship with him or her could make or break one’s professional experience. As Participant D stated, “You have to have a supervisor who gives you space to fail.” She emphasized the need for leaders to take risks when they were given the space to tackle challenging situations. Both Participants A and B talked about how bosses must have general trust and they both took issue with those who were too rigid or tended to micromanage their work. As Participant B said, “At the end of things you’ve got to realize that you can’t know every little detail and you have to let your people do their job.” Participant C, a senior vice president who worked at a liberal arts college in California, talked about her current boss, who she said she would “follow to the ends of the earth”, and her former boss, who she called “toxic.” Her former boss “had the impulse that everybody had to be sitting at their desk at a certain time and that every minute of the working day you should be there at your desk and be available.” This proved to be challenging from her, as her inclination was “to work from a place of trust.” Hence, participants alluded to the need for time, space, and flexibility to grow professionally without constant interference.

### **Challenges with Feelings of Insecurity and Vulnerability**

Participant A spoke directly to having some feelings of insecurity in her current role. She was primarily concerned of perceptions of being “an elderly woman” and that “they [younger colleagues] know much more than I do.” In voicing her feelings of vulnerability,

she emphasized that “being a leader is to trust yourself and have a thick skin.” Participant E spoke directly to the impact of the current COVID 19 pandemic on her sense of self as a leader: “It’s easy to be a leader on an easy day but it is so much harder to be a leader when you have multiple crises and uncertainty.” Participant B spoke directly to how she felt in a leadership role: “I have never felt strong, and I don’t have the self-confidence...I don’t think I can get this out of my personality; it takes a lot of training and role playing sometimes.” Lastly, Participant D put a slightly different twist on this topic in saying that: “You have to be vulnerable. You have to be willing to jump off a cliff with your people. They have to know what drives you crazy which means you have to be open with them so they know where you fall short..” It must be noted that in the larger study, only one male participant spoke to these topics.

### **Uniquely Female Experiences**

Three of the participants, Participants A, B, and C referred to specific challenges they had experienced as leaders that they specifically attributed to being female. Participant B mentioned that when she first started working in international center contexts, the heads were mostly men and the salary range was higher. She said that more recently, the job postings were written in a way that they could put salaries at a lower level and that “I can only explain this to myself by saying there are so many more females.” Participant B talked about a time when she had successfully completed a major revenue generating project and later asked for flexible hours in her work schedule because she had a young child. “I created the biggest revenue stream” she told her boss, who responded by saying “That is fine, but you have to be here five days a week.” She recalled another time when she was told that she could not take any more time off when her young child had recurring ear infections. As she said, “When you are a woman and a mom, your professional identity can never come ahead from the rest of your identity.” Participant A had a challenging situation involving a former boss who was on maternity leave on multiple occasions, and she, who did not have any children of her own, was asked to fill in for her during multiple occasions. She was never compensated any extra salary for her efforts.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN LEADERS**

This research study contributes to the existing literature on the development of leadership identity by showcasing the unique challenges faced by female higher education leaders using a relational leadership framework. In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that the knowledge and skills needed to be successful during this time of rapid change and uncertainty is largely centered on the development of positive interaction and relationship with others. Our overarching goal, in leadership development and training, should be to help aspiring as well as seasoned leaders learn how to acquire the tools to create a culture of psychological safety within the workplace context. Building an organizational culture

that values others and promotes a sense of belonging can lead to greater trust, less feelings of vulnerability, and an overall deeper sense of integrity within the workplace setting. In turn, it might help female leaders feel more supported and valued with their unique issues and challenges.

Through this research, I propose a professional development model that centers on the notion of developing a sense of psychological safety in the higher education setting. One underlying principle of this model would be a focus on the development of one's sense of self as a leader. Developing a heightened sense of self-awareness and consciousness about one's core values is essential before expending the time and energy to getting to know others' identities. One must recognize, however, that exposure to different individuals, cultures, and contexts can require a leader to change, expand, or refine his or her core values, so as leaders, we must acknowledge the potential fluidity and dynamic nature of leadership identity. A second underlying principle of this model would be the notion that our true selves, as leaders, are constituted in relationship with others around us. Relationships, in this sense, are an important source of "fuel" for leaders. Leaders must put forth effort in building and strengthening their interpersonal skills in order to be effective in their professional roles. Leading during times of change and uncertainty involves productive relationships with others in order to mobilize resources and create possibilities for change. Furthermore, embracing a relational perspective within leadership can help breed trust, more effective communication, and a deeper sense of empathy and acceptance of others and their unique circumstances. Being acknowledged and supported as a "whole person" has become increasingly important as the COVID-19 pandemic has forced a blurring of personal and professional boundaries that might not have previously existed for female leaders.

Lastly, a third underlying principle of this model would be focus on cultivating a sense of belonging in the workplace setting. Learning how to develop an inclusive workplace culture where individuality is supported and appreciated can help address the feelings of "otherness" that some might experience. Taking the time to get to know others in order to better support their needs, both personal and professional, can provide valuable information for a leader to draw upon when making workplace decisions. It may also create a sense of psychological connectedness that leads to higher retention of employees. In order to accomplish this, leaders must build intentional space within one's work schedule to allow these interactions to happen. It is not enough to say that one has an "open door policy." One must be genuinely available and able to listen.

Two possible limitations of this study include the small number of participants and the possibility of researcher bias given the researcher's own professional background as a female leader. However, these data represent a small subset of data from a larger study and are intended to provide us with an initial glimpse of women leaders' issues and challenges that could be explored on a larger scale, perhaps with different methodologies as well as encompassing a vaster variety of organizational contexts. Furthermore, the researcher

employed the assistance of another female leader in a similar professional role to validate the codes and themes generated during the process of data analysis.

### CONCLUSION

From this study and others, it is abundantly clear that we need to work harder and smarter to recruit and retain women in leadership roles. Women who are genuinely recognized for their professional contributions and afforded supportive opportunities to advance professionally are likely to be more fully engaged, not to mention, satisfied, with their work. They will also experience higher levels of trust and feel more comfortable bringing their whole selves to work. As America Ferrera, a Honduran American director, producer, and actress stated in the ever popular “Dare to Lead” podcast, “I can’t be the leader I’m meant to be without all of the parts of who I am” (Brown, 2021). Future research should continue to include a heightened focus on the unique issues and challenges faced by women leaders and what we can do to support them professionally.

### REFERENCES

- Brown, B. (Host). (2021, December 6). Identity and integrated leadership, part 1 of 2 [Audio podcast episode]. In *Daring to Lead*. <https://brenebrown.com/podcast-show/dare-to-lead/>
- Buch, K., Huet, Y., Rorrer, A., & Roberson, L. (2011). Removing the barriers to full professor: A mentoring program for associate professors. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 43(6). 38-45. DOI: [10.1080/00091383.2011.618081](https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2011.618081).
- Coate, K. L., Kandiko Howson, C. B., & de St Croix, T. (2015). Mid-career academic women: Strategies, choices and motivation. Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.
- Gilligan, C. (1993). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women’s development*. Harvard University Press.
- Gorska, A. (2016). Women in top managerial positions. *Journal of Academic Perspectives*, 3, 1-23.
- Hammond, M., Clapp-Smith, R., & Palanski, M. (2017). Beyond (just) the workplace: A theory of leader development across multiple domains. *Academy of Management Review*, 42(3), 481-498.
- Hannum, K.M., Muhly, S.M., Shockley-Zalabak, P.S., & White, J.S. (2015). Women leaders within higher education in the United States: Supports, barriers, and experiences of being a senior leader. *Advancing Women in Leadership*, 35, 65-75.
- He, C., McGregor, A. J., & Lewiss, R. E. (2020). Preinvisible: An Early-Career Perspective on a Midcareer Phenomenon. *The Permanente Journal*, 24. 1-4.
- Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education*, 9(3).
- Mavin, S., & Yusupova, M. (2020). Gendered experiences of leading and managing through COVID-19: patriarchy and precarity. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 35(7/8), 737-744.

- Minello, A., Martucci, S., & Manzo, L. K. (2021). The pandemic and the academic mothers: present hardships and future perspectives. *European Societies*, 23 (sup1), S82-S94.
- Nicholson, J., & Kurucz, E. C. (2017). Fostering an emergent mindset in leaders: The role of caring in leadership development. In *Developing Leaders for Positive Organizing*. Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education*. University of California Press.
- Peterson, H. (2016). Is managing academics “women’s work”? Exploring the glass cliff in higher education management. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 44(1), 112-127.
- Redmond, P., Gutke, H., Galligan, L., Howard, A., & Newman, T. (2017). Becoming a female leader in higher education: Investigations from a regional university. *Gender and Education*, 29(3), 332-351. DOI: 10.1080/09540253.2016.1156063
- Sallee, M., Ward, K., Wolf-Wendel, L. (2016). Can anyone have it all? Gendered views on parenting and academic careers. *Innovative Higher Education*, 41(3), 187-202.
- Surawicz, C. M. (2016). Women in leadership: why so few and what to do about it. *Journal of the American College of Radiology*, 13(12), 1433-1437.
- Sveningsson, S., & Alvesson, M. (2003). Managing managerial identities: Organizational fragmentation, discourse and identity struggle. *Human Relations*, 56(10), 1163-1193.
- Tessens, L., White, K., & Web, C. (2011). Senior women in higher education institutions: Perceived development needs and support. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 33(6), 653-665. DOI: 10.1080/1360080X.2011.621191
- Vongalis-Macrow, A. (2016). It’s about the leadership: The importance of women leaders doing leadership for women. *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education*, 9(1), 90-103.
- Wahls, N. (2018). Voices From The Glass Box: Student Responses from Virtual Exchange on Gender. *Journal of Academic Perspectives*, 2, 1-16.