

A silhouette of a woman in a dark dress juggling five balls, set against a white background and enclosed in a red border.

*Examining how University Women  
Administrators Experience  
Leadership at Doctorate-Granting  
Institutions: A Qualitative  
Analysis*

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# Background Issues:

## *Women's Advancement to the Presidency*

- ❖ In the **mid-1970s**, women constituted less than **5%** of all college presidencies.
- ❖ However, by **1985**, the percent of women presidents increased to **9.5%**.
- ❖ **As of 2011**, women comprise **26%** of all college and university presidents.
- ❖ Women are now at **30%** of college presidencies

## *Statement of the Problem*

- Women continue to be the least (8%) likely to serve as presidents of *doctorate-granting universities*.
  - The percentage of women holding *administrative positions* (e.g., dean, VP, CAO) that most often lead to a presidency is lower at **doctorate-granting universities**.
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# Previous Research on Leadership in Higher Education

- Masculine-Associated Leadership Theories:
  - E.g., Trait, Behavior
- Feminine-Associated Leadership:
  - E.g., Consensus-building, relationship-oriented

## Gender-neutral approach to leadership:

E.g., Androgynous style-the ability to demonstrate masculine and feminine-leadership attributes

## New leadership paradigms, concepts, and theories:

E.g., Pluralistic Leadership

# Pluralistic Leadership

- Examines the intersection among various dimensions of a leader's identity (e.g., race, gender, family, education)
- Women leaders and leaders of color are more likely to practice pluralistic leadership

- Pluralistic leadership is characterized by:

1. *Awareness of identity, positionality, and power conditions;*
2. *Acknowledgment of multiple views of leadership; and*
3. *Negotiation among the multiple views of leadership*

# ~Purpose~

- **Rationale:** A dearth of empirical data concerning the career paths and leadership experiences of university women administrators and presidents.
- **The purpose** of this study was to explore how women's gender intersects with the other salient aspects of their positionality to influence the formation of their leadership identities and experiences at doctorate-granting universities.

# Conceptual Framework

- This study combined a *postmodern feminist* theoretical framework with a *pluralistic* approach to leadership; both emphasize the importance of *positionality* as an analytic tool.
- This framework provided a useful lens for critically evaluating how the participants' *gender* intersected with other salient dimensions (e.g., education, marital status) of their *positionality* to inform their unique identities and experiences as university women leaders

# Research Questions

## Research Questions:

1. How do participants define their personal leadership style;
2. What personal traits and/or qualities characterized participants' leadership practices;
3. How has their own gender identity shaped their individual leadership styles and practices; and
4. How does women's positionality influence their leadership?

# Research Method:

## *A Qualitative Design*

- ❖ **Sample:** A purposive sample of 14 female participants who were senior administrators or presidents at doctorate-granting universities.
- ❖ **Data Collection:** In-depth, semi-structured interviews taking place in-person or by phone.
- ❖ **Data Analysis:** Inductive and comparative using a constant **Constant comparative method** of coding, categorizing, and identifying concepts (Glaser, 1965).
- ❖ **Strategies to promote credibility of findings:**
  - **Positionality, peer review, & audit trail**

# *Trustworthiness*

- Triangulation employing peer review, audit trail, researcher reflexivity
  1. **Peer Review**: invited peers with expertise in content area and methodology to review/assess findings' credibility
  2. **Audit trail**: research journal detailed processes involved with data collection, clarify researcher experiences, assumptions, biases, and worldview
  3. **Reflexivity** on the researcher's positionality vis-à-vis the research participants.

# Composite Demographic Profile of Participants

- Among the 14 participants, the sample included: **4 presidents, 2 provosts, 5 VPs, and 3 academic deans.**
- Employed at doctorate-granting universities located across the Southeast (AL, FL, GA, MS, LA, TN).
- 12 were “women firsts” in their current post.
- Most had over 20 years of career experience in HE
- **Race:** 12 =White/Caucasian & 2=Black/African American.
- **Median Age:** 62
- 10 were currently **married**; 2 were divorced, and 2 never married, & 11 had children
- Most identified with **Christian religious affiliations** (e.g., *Baptist, Methodist, etc.*).

# Findings

## *Three* Major Categories/Themes

1. Participants' **pluralistic leadership** styles and practices;
2. The salience of **gender** in shaping women leaders' perceptions and experiences, and
3. The influence of women's **intersecting identities** in shaping their leadership.

## *I.) Pluralistic Leadership Styles*

Identification with multiple leadership styles, traits, and behaviors.

For example, one dean described her pluralistic leadership style as “*collaborative, conversational, consensus building, . . . empowering, . . . empathetic, . . . understand[ing], . . . helpful, . . . sociable, . . . [and] relational.*”

## Participants' Self-Identified “Feminine” Leadership Styles, Traits, and/or Behaviors:

- Caring
- **Collaborative \***
- Compassionate
- Communicative
- Consensus-building
- Conversational
- Egalitarian
- Empathetic
- Empowering
- Inclusive
- Listening
- Participatory
- Relationship-building
- Sharing governance
- **Team-oriented/building\***
- Transparent

# Collaboration

All participants spoke to including others in:

- ✓ Creating a vision,
- ✓ Decision-making,
- ✓ strategic-planning
- ✓ Goal-attainment, and/or
- ✓ Problem-solving

“I love the process of gathering input from everybody. I can’t really imagine leading in any way that wasn’t very collaborative [or ] sort of [as] the lone solitary decision maker.”

*-Dean Mills*

## II.) *The Influence of Gender on Women's Leadership*

**NONE** of the participants in this study viewed their gender as a *direct obstacle* in their advancement to their current positions.

❖ *“I don't feel that I've been really subjected to abject discrimination at any point in my life.”*

*-Dean Rawls*

❖ *“I never felt like some less-qualified man was chosen [over me for a job.]”*

*-Dean Sims*

## *II. The Influence of Gender on Women's Leadership*

### *Sub-themes*

- ❖ **Generational differences concerning gender bias against women leaders**
- ❖ **A positive view of gender difference**
- ❖ **Nine out of 14 expressed a sense of ambiguity concerning the role of gender in leadership.**

*“That’s a very hard question to answer because I don’t know to what extent it’s my gender that shaped the way I lead and to what extent it’s just all the experiences that I’ve had.”* –Dean Mills

### *III.) Women's Intersecting Identities*

Participants described how multiple, unique and individualized aspects of their lives (e.g., *motherhood, academic discipline, educational attainment, or spirituality*) had influenced the development of their leadership identity and pluralistic leadership style.

- **Transferring skills** (e.g., nurturing, caring, compassion, etc.) from family roles to leadership roles.
- Attribute gender differences in female leadership to the “spillover” of gender roles in family to professional roles.

# Quotes from Participants

- *“Christian beliefs definitely guide my style of leadership. I try to use [them] to guide my interactions with others [and the] decisions that I make.” -President Reese*
- *“I think that there are certain aspects of my being a mother . . . that have carried over into my professional career. Many times I find that I am very protective. I find that I . . . get concerned about things much like a mother would about her children.” - Vice President Dawson*

# Implications

- ✓ *Research*: This study's findings contribute new insights into how female administrators and presidents experience, view, and practice leadership at doctorate-granting universities.
- ✓ *Theory*: A combined postmodern feminist and pluralistic leadership framework represents a new direction for illuminating how the salient features of participants' identity and positionality shaped their leadership styles and practices.
- ✓ *Practice*: Leadership training and mentoring programs.

Questions?  
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