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ABSTRACT

Social constructions of sexism many times become evident in a public school system when the superintendent is a woman. This paper offers a view of sexism from the perspective of women superintendents. The text discusses the distinction between sex and gender and how the role of the superintendent itself is a socially constructed position. A study here drew on interviews with three former women superintendents; each woman was interviewed three times. The findings examine generally accepted constructions of femaleness; rules of exclusion; silence; counter constructions of femaleness; the social construction of the superintendency; male constructions of the superintendency; counter constructions of the superintendency; interactions of the constructions of female gender and the superintendency; opposing constructions of femininity and the superintendency; social discourse; and leadership styles. The results show that the women in the study seemed to simultaneously embrace and reflect the prevailing constructions of femaleness where stereotypically feminine characteristics were described as points of pride and sources of strength. The women were aware of the discriminatory nature of the social constructions of the superintendency and dealt with this as part of their daily lives. (Contains 54 references.) (RJM)

The Social Construction of Gender in the Superintendency

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The Social Construction of Gender in the Superintendency

"You know, it's a shame about Amanda. I guess that community just wasn't ready for a woman superintendent." Two years ago, I listened to these words in amazement and dismay as a (male) executive director of a regional education service center[1] unconcernedly ascribed to femaleness the departure from the superintendency of a woman who had successfully lead a nearby school district for the five previous years. What was going on in society, I wondered, that made it acceptable for a man in the influential position of service center director to make such a statement in front of a group of school administrators? Would this man have been as comfortable attributing a superintendent's professional demise to race? Religion? Disability? I assumed then, as now, that he would not have been.

These questions that the service center director's remark raised for me lingered in a corner my consciousness and eventually lead me to develop a research study that focused on the ways in which certain things become visible in society, things that can be seen and talked about, while other things, such as the sexism inherent in the service center director's words, remain invisible (Scheurich, 1994). In other words, as Anderson (1990) phrased it, "How are current constructions of social reality accomplished?" (p. 39). More specifically, I became interested in designing a study to examine the ways in which social constructions operate in the public school superintendency when the superintendent is a woman. I wanted to know what was "going on" with these social constructions from the perspectives of women superintendents themselves. The ultimate result of my strong interest in researching women's perceptions of social constructions in the superintendency was a qualitative case study in which three female former superintendents participated. Portions of the findings from that study are discussed is this paper. I begin with a background section in which I discuss social constructions and the theoretical

context of the research in more detail. The second, and major, section of the paper is devoted to my actual study findings. This second section discusses the study participants' perceptions in three areas—the social construction of the female gender, the social construction of the superintendent's role, and the interactions of the constructions of gender and the superintendent's role.

Study Context

> Every postmodern hipster knows how to talk about the social construction of gender, the doing of gender—but . . . the words swirling about this idea are pretty slippery, and the substantive meanings of this idea [are] often difficult to articulate, explain, and connect to praxis. (Adams, 1996, p. 1)

This part of the paper frames the context for my study of the social construction of gender in the public school superintendency. In this section, I address the "So, what?" question that others often asked me when I initially designed this study. In other words, why is this a topic worth researching and writing (and caring) about? My answers to that question are outlined in the four parts of this section. In the first part, I define and discuss the terms sex and gender that have been used to construct the problem I investigated. Following the discussion of these terms are two subsections that deal with social constructions in the superintendency and research on women in educational administration. The final part of this section contains a brief discussion of the design of the actual research study.

Sex and Gender

To begin the discussion of the social construction of gender in the superintendency, some definition of the ways in which I use the term gender is probably necessary. Much has been said and written about distinctions between the terms sex and gender. As Reese (1995) points out,

"The terms . . . are sometimes assumed to be synonymous; they are not" (p. 96). Generally, sex is used to refer to biological categories, male and female, into which one is classified at birth based on genitalia or before birth based on chromosomal typing (Reskin, 1991; West & Zimmerman, 1991). Gender, on the other hand, is used to reference socially created distinctions between the sexes, and the terms feminine and masculine are assigned (Reese, 1995). In fact, according to Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1990), "Gender is used in contrast to terms like sex . . . for the explicit purpose of creating a space in which socially mediated differences between men and women can be explored apart from biological differences" (p. 29).

Not all researchers, however, would agree that the distinctions between these two terms are as simple as is described above (Tavris, 1992). For example, West and Zimmerman (1991) argue that gender is routinely, methodically, and recurrently produced through social interaction; that is, gender is something a person "does" according to societal rules, rather than something a person is or has. To elaborate:

> Doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological. Once the differences have been constructed, they are used to reinforce the essentialness of gender. . . . Any interactional situation sets the stage for depictions of "essential" sexual natures. In sum, these situations "do not so much allow for the expression of natural differences as for the production of that difference itself." (pp. 24-25)

One's gender, then, in West and Zimmerman's view, is something that is never completely accomplished but is always in production—in every social interaction one has.

Judith Butler (1990), similarly, rejects the notion of gender as an essential or natural substantive category. In her widely-cited work Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Butler declares gender to be performative:

> Gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, . . . gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. . . . There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results. (pp. 24-25)

For Butler, then, gender is seen as a perpetual performative, a simulacrum, an imitation for which there is no original. She has pointed out, though, in several works published subsequent to Gender Trouble, that performativity should not be misunderstood as performance—it is not a role that one casually chooses from among genders of choice and dons for the day (McMillen, 1997). The performative is enacted, as gender is "done," following West and Zimmerman (1991), in interactive social settings under the influence of "a set of meanings already socially established, . . . the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation" (Butler, 1990, p. 140).

Social Constructions in the Superintendency

It is these socially enacted, produced, established, constructed renderings of gender that serve as the topic for this paper—within the specific context of the public school superintendency. In the same way that gender is constructed through socially shared and agreed upon meanings created in interactions, the role of the superintendency is also socially constructed. As Guba (1990) points out,

> All social realities are constructed and shared through well-understood processes. It is this socialized sharing that gives these constructions their apparent reality, for if everyone agrees on something, how can one argue that it does not exist? (p. 89)

These agreed-upon social constructions create the apparent realities of roles in society such as that of the public school superintendent. These roles, according to Johns (1996), are "positions in a group that have a set of expected behaviors attached to them. Thus . . . roles represent 'packages' of norms" (p. 244). The package of norms associated with the superintendent in US public schools is, I would suggest, constructed assuming that males will inhabit this role. That is, the superintendency traditionally has been occupied almost exclusively by men (93 percent in 1992 according to Glass); these men have certain characteristics and behave in certain ways; society expects that men in the position will have those characteristics and behave in those ways; and, thus, the role of the superintendent has been created (constructed) by society as masculine. More specifically, according to Bell (1988), "The expectations . . . of superintendents are likely to be based on a taken-for-granted conception of the superintendent as a middle-aged, conservative, married man" (p. 42).

In the same way that American society has constructed the superintendency as male, it has created a package of norms about femininity and female behavior.[2] Bardwick and Douvan (1971) describe that package as consisting of "dependence, passivity, fragility, low pain tolerance, nonagression, noncompetitiveness, inner orientation, interpersonal orientation, empathy, sensitivity, nurturance, subjectivity, yieldingness, receptivity, inability to risk, emotional liability, and supportiveness" (p. 147). These same societal norms for femininity were more succinctly summarized by Tavris (1992): "Females [are] the repository of nature, intuition, and weakness" (p. 20).

There is little overlap in these social constructions of feminine characteristics with the constructions of masculine characteristics. In contrast to Bardwick and Douvan's (1971) list of terms associated with weakness and passivity in women that is cited above, the list that typically describes men contains terms that are associated with strength and decisiveness. Table 1 below shows a more expanded and parallel list of these stereotypical socially constructed characteristics of males and females.

Table 1
Characteristics associated with males and females

Male	Female
Logical	Intuitive
Rational	Emotional
Aggressive	Submissive
Dynamic	Receptive
Mature	Personable
Competitive	Cooperative
Strategic	Spontaneous
Reliable	Sociable

Source: Images of Organizations by Gareth Morgan, 1986 &
Women in Educational Administration by Charol Shakeshaft, 1987.

It seems, then, that the social construction of maleness in our society, and, therefore, the social construction of the public school superintendency, is incompatible with the social construction of femaleness. Blackmore (1989) described the results of this incompatibility: "[Educational] leaders display attributes and behaviors . . . which are generally associated with 'masculinity'. It is a view which has effectively displaced women in educational thought, and therefore rendered women invisible in administrative practice" (p. 94). To further illustrate this point, Bell (1988), in researching factors that boards use in superintendent selection, found:

> Given a general cultural preference for male leaders in our society (Kanter, 1977), the tradition of male leadership in schools, and the predominantly male membership of school boards, the most persuasive characteristic a candidate for superintendent could possess seems to be maleness. . . . Maleness signifies to board members . . . shared language and experience, predictability, connection with the power structure, and leadership that satisfies stereotyped preferences. (p. 50)

Thus, women in the superintendency face an incredibly complex and difficult situation, as Shakeshaft (1987) pointed out: "How does a woman become identified as 'in charge' without also being identified in negative or 'unfeminine' ways?" (pp. 203-204). Other researchers have examined this seeming oxymoron of female organizational leadership. For example, Acker (1991) found that male sexual prowess and patriarchal paternalism are embedded in notions of leadership and that "women's bodies [cannot] be adapted to hegemonic masculinity" (p.174). Furthermore, Kanter (1975), in her work on women in organizations, found that "if it's hard to demonstrate competence as a woman among men, it may be even harder to exercise leadership" (p. 60). Sociolinguist Deborah Tannen (1994) found much the same thing in her study of conversational styles in organizations:

> A woman is in a double bind. Everything she does to enhance her assertiveness risks undercutting her femininity, in the eyes of others. And everything she does to fit expectations of how a woman should talk risks undercutting the impression of competence that she makes. This . . . [is] the damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't double bind that women in authority confront. (p. 203)

Similarly, Bell (1988) pointed out that cultural expectations in education are compatible with masculinity and that when a woman exercises authority, it is not always perceived positively by

the board, community, or press. Brunner (1994) also found that "because women are expected to remain feminine, they must remain feminine in order to be accepted . . . without being labeled a 'bitch' " (p. 21).

Research on Women in Educational Administration

How, then, do women superintendents perceive and experience the interactions of these conflicting constructions of femaleness and the male-constructed superintendency in their day-to-day work lives? Unfortunately, previous research in this area, while yielding a few tantalizing glimpses, has largely left us wondering, as Bell (1988) points out:

> Research on the superintendency . . . reflects what Crowson calls the "strange demographic consistency" of the superintendency (1987). It deals almost exclusively with men's experiences and is authored almost entirely by men. . . . Thus, we continue to wonder what women's ambitions and perspectives are, how women perceive and experience their work, and how women think about their colleagues. (p. 35)

We continue to wonder about women superintendents' perspectives, perceptions, and thoughts because, historically, women's views have been largely ignored in research on the superintendency (Bell, 1988; Blount, 1995; Hyle, 1991; Shakeshaft, 1987; Scheurich, 1995). This androcentric result has produced a unidimensional knowledge base about "what male leaders thought and did" (Bell, 1988, p. 34). More recently, however, some researchers have begun to attempt to research women's experiences in the public school superintendency from the perspectives of the women themselves. In the ten years that have passed since Bell's (1988) work cited above, there has been some progress toward production of research on the superintendency that is inclusive of women's perspectives (see, for example, Beekley, 1994; Brunner, 1994, 1997; Chase, 1995; Grogan, 1996; Tallerico, Burstyn, & Poole, 1993).

Somewhat ironically, however, new barriers to gaining this type of knowledge have surfaced. Some of the women participants in these recent research studies have been reluctant or unable to talk openly about their experiences with sexism, discrimination, and unequal treatment in the role of superintendent (Beekley, 1994; Chase, 1995). This reluctance to talk about their differential treatment has been attributed by other researchers to lessons women learn from the political culture of educational administration (Anderson, 1990; Bell, 1995; Schmuck & Schubert, 1995). For example, Marshall (1993) found that "women learned to downplay isolation and sexism . . . they must not make trouble" (p 173). Similarly, Rizvi (1993) described a myth of neutrality that effectively prevented most school administrators from confronting issues of sexism.

These and other researcher's findings about women's constraint in conversations dealing with sexism underscore the need for woman-centered research designs and appropriately empathetic interview techniques in research with women superintendents. Chase (1995) pointed this out in her call for researchers to listen "much more carefully to professional women's stories as they are told . . . in the safe spaces produced by relationships with those they trust" (p. 216).

Study Design

The design for the study on which this paper is based was influenced by Chase's (1995) call for sensitivity and by other researchers' findings about constraint in research interviews with women superintendents that were mentioned in the previous section. Therefore, to get at women superintendents' perceptions about the social constructions of gender and the superintendent's role with the goal of "correct[ing] both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position" (Lather, 1991, p. 26), it was necessary

to create a conversational space in which the women study participants would feel free and safe talking about these issues.

Three features that contributed to the creation of such a space were built into the research design. First, the women invited to be study participants were former superintendents who had exited the profession. The exit phenomenon has been studied by other researchers (e.g., Allen, 1996; Beekley, 1994; Tallerico, Burstyn & Poole, 1993) and was not the focus of this study. Instead, former superintendents were chosen rather than currently practicing ones because it was thought likely that they would be able to talk more freely about their experiences. With a few exceptions, participants in previous studies that attempted to focus on gender-related issues in the superintendency were women still working in public schools. In spite of the anonymity provided by these studies, the pressure of having to maintain employment in the superintendency most probably constrained their interview conversations. In fact, one of Bell's (1995) participants said this directly: "If I weren't involved with schools, I might be radical" (p. 288). Thus, the choice of women who had exited the superintendency as participants enhanced the likelihood of openness in the interviews.

A second feature of the study design intended to contribute toward a safe and open interview space was the actual interview technique. The interactive-relational $(I:R)^3$ (Chirban, 1996) approach to research interviewing was used to facilitate the development of rapport between the participants and the interviewer. Through the use of the I:R approach, according to Chirban, "participants may unravel defenses, present more of themselves, and even experience the opportunity for growth."

In addition to the selection of non-practicing superintendents as participants and the use of the I:R interviewing approach, a third facet of the study design was purposively included to

increase the likelihood of getting behind, below, and beyond conventional answers to conventional research questions. This third feature was a three-stage interview design. Each study participant was interviewed three times, twice individually and once in a focus group, using sequentially and individually constructed interview protocols. Three interviews with each woman provided for prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) between the interviewer and the study participants. Further, the use of interview protocols structured around emergent themes from the previous interviews enhanced the likelihood that the interview conversations would transcended the surface-level discourse on gender that is ordinarily filtered by the "social regularities that . . . operate like a grid that generates what may be seen and talked about" (Scheurich, 1994, p. 445).

Study Findings

Because of the constructivist nature of the study, the section title "Study Findings" appears to be somewhat contradictory. These findings, though drawn from the women study participants' thoughts, feelings, and perceptions on gender, the superintendency, and social constructions, are also social constructions and, as such, should remain open for additional interpretation. These findings, then, may be seen as what Lather (1987) describes as permanently partial, and readers may make alternate or conflicting constructions about what is in this section for themselves. Nonetheless, for the findings of this study to have any meaning at all, constructed or otherwise, they had to be organized into some understandable format. Therefore, three interrelated categories of study findings that parallel three of the original study's research questions—the social construction of the female gender, the social construction of the superintendent's role, and the interactions of the construction of gender with the construction of the superintendent's role—are discussed below.

The Social Construction of the Female Gender

The study participants' perceptions of the social construction of the female gender were gathered during the course of seven interviews. Through their narrations in the first round of individual interviews of the stories of the superintendencies they exited, through direct questions in the second individual interviews, and from the course of the conversation among the four of us in the final, focus group interview, a multi-faceted picture of their views of women in society emerged. All three women could well articulate the stereotypical characteristics of women recognized by American society—the generally accepted social constructions of the female gender. While these constructions seemed to come easily to mind for the study participants and were among the first they mentioned when they were asked directly about their perceptions of the social construction of femaleness, these stereotypical views were by no means the only, nor even the most prevalent, constructions talked about. In fact, the study participants painted a complex, often seemingly contradictory, portrait of women. These complicated constructions of the female gender articulated by the study participants seemed to exemplify what Lather (1991) termed "a heteroglot articulation premised on multiplicities and particularities [that is] contestatory and contradictory" (p. 27) and what Davis (1993) described as femininity that "is fragmented, messy, or haphazard rather than coherent" (p. 194). These heteroglot, messy constructions of femaleness, from the perspectives of the study participants, are outlined in this section.

Generally Accepted Constructions of Femaleness

The expected feminine characteristics of passivity, subservience, and other-orientation were among the first constructions about which the women talked. One participant described a woman's role as "that of a servant being subservient to whomever is in power and trying to make

everyone feel happy." Another interviewee, similarly, described this as the cheerleader syndrome: "Women are raised to be pleasers . . . just go out there and be nicer, and kinder, and sweeter, and prettier, and you'll get ahead." Within the broader theme of these generally accepted constructions, however, three subthemes emerged that delineated the clearly circumscribed nature of these constructions and the force of the social penalties extracted from those who fail to conform.

The rules. The first of these subthemes was termed "the rules" by one interviewee: "The rules [of femininity] are very, very defined, but they're not talked about. . . . We have to take it for granted that we are in a fishbowl." The same participant elaborated by saying, "Things that we say, things that we do, places we go, all of those things are being evaluated . . . the judgmental factor is definitely out there." Apparently, these rules for appropriately feminine characteristics and behavior are widely shared and agreed-upon social constructions. The penalties for not following these rules appeared to be clearly understood as well. A second woman, who had been one of the pioneer women superintendents in her state, said, "If we were to try to do something other than being in a subservient role, then there will be waves to face and problems and concerns will be raised. . . . Throughout my life, I would testify to that."

Rules of Exclusion. In addition to pressure to follow the rules and maintain a subservient role, a second facet of stereotypically female constructions that emerged from interviews with the three study participants had to do with restrictions on women's speech. As one study participant put it,

> You can have a brain, you can have viewpoints, but you have to be careful in who you express those to or how you express those. . . . You cannot get out there on a limb. You know, I think that to be feminine, you just have to ride a line, and you have got to watch

> everything you say. . . . There are certain things that you can say and certain things that you cannot say. And I know, in several situations with myself, or with other female administrators in my past position, that I feel like a man could say the exact same thing, and it would be all right, but for that woman to say that, it was very cold; it was inappropriate. [emphasis added]

It seemed for this participant that women's speech was acceptable, but only in narrowly defined or carefully controlled circumstances. Part of being female in society, from this woman's perspective, seemed to be the internalization of the rules governing women's speech.

Foucault (1972) described these societal rules that govern who may speak of what things as rules of exclusion:

> In a society such as our own, we all know the rules of exclusion. The most obvious and familiar of these concerns what is prohibited. We know perfectly well that we are not free to say just anything, that we cannot simply speak of anything, when we like or where we like; not just anyone, finally, may speak of just anything. (p. 216)

These rules of exclusion for women's speech were mentioned numerous times in the interviews. One study described an experience she had this way, "I went and testified [in court about] my opinion as an educational leader, and then I was chastised that at a school board meeting." The same study participant told another, similar, story during the group interview about appealing a decision about athletics to an all-male governing body. The decision went against her school district, and this former superintendent described feeling at the time that "there is no way I am going to win this" because, as a woman, she could not speak with authority on the subject of athletics.

Silence. Sometimes, as illustrated in the previous section, satisfying societal expectations for femaleness, in the study participants' perceptions, involved knowing how and on what and to whom to speak; sometimes satisfying these expectations meant not speaking at all. A third facet of the generally accepted constructions of femaleness that appeared in several places in our conversations was women's position of silence in society. One participant made poignant reference to this when she said, about the social construction of the female gender in society, "[Its] almost like what we used to say about children—not being heard?" Her musing question evoked the metaphors of silence and voice described by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) as applicable to many aspects of women's experience:

> In describing their lives, women commonly talked about voice and silence: "speaking up," "speaking out," "being silenced," "not being heard," "really listening," . . . and so on in an endless variety of connotations all having to do with sense of mind, self-worth, and feelings of isolation from or connection with others. (p. 18)

In numerous places throughout the seven interviews, the three former superintendents talked about feeling like the societal expectations were that they keep quiet and maintain appropriately demure demeanors. One participant, particularly, talked often about struggling to "keep my mouth shut" during school board meetings.

Counter Constructions of Femaleness

While all the study participants were easily able to list the expected characteristics of femaleness, including the rules, the prohibitions of speech, and the expectations of silence, at other times during the interviews, they also rejected those constructions and offered counter constructions instead. In describing these counter constructions of femininity, the interviewees

seemed to use two strategies—the displacement of prevailing societal constructions of femininity as weak and passive with constructions of strength and agency and the use of a reverse discourse.

Strength and agency. The first of these counter-constructing strategies, descriptions of femininity in terms of strength and agency, was used by all three study participants. In fact, most often in our conversations, when an interviewee talked about a stereotypical construction, a countering one followed almost immediately. Reflecting this strategy, the same study participant who was quoted earlier describing the social construction of femininity as "the cheerleader syndrome" also said this:

> In the family . . . women were strong, very outspoken, very opinionated. Quite capable of doing what they needed to do. There was little sympathy for somebody curling up and not just dealing with things and moving on. . . . Women are strong. They are the adhesive, they're the glue that holds it all together.

Similarly, another interviewee said, about herself, "I could conquer the world. I felt very confident, and I could go out and do just about anything." In much the same way, the third study participant, also talking about herself said, "I took control of situations" and, in another interview,

> I did his job [a principal], and I did the curriculum job, and I did the superintendency for an entire year. I went to the middle school and reprimanded students, and I conferenced with teachers, and . . . I rode with the bus drivers on buses . . . I'd take a jacket off, and I'd get right up there with them [in the cafeteria line] and serve . . . I am not above sweeping.

Clearly, these descriptions of themselves and other women as strong and capable appear to run counter to the prevailing constructions of femininity as fragile and passive. If, as Cherryholmes

(1988) asserted, "social and political purposes, power arrangements, institutions, and practices constitute the possibility of and confer meanings on what is said," (p. 71) then, despite the hegemonic influences of stereotypical constructions, the study participants seemed to find it both possible and meaningful to offer counter constructions.

Reverse discourse. While the interviewees in this study rejected some of the prevailing constructions of femaleness outright (as in the examples above), they actually embraced other "soft" female characteristics and presented these as sources of strength—often as strengths unavailable to or unused by men. Foucault (1978) described this discursive strategy as reverse discourse:

> The formation of a "reverse" discourse . . . demand[s] it legitimacy or "naturality" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which is was . . . disqualified. (p. 101)

Furthermore, Weedon (1987) pointed to the importance of the formation of a reverse discourse through the appropriation of devalued feminine characteristics, such as emotion and intuition, as the first stage in challenging meaning and power. The study participants seemed to see many of these devalued characteristics of womanhood as sources of strength. For example, one interviewee said,

> They [women] have a real sense of what other people feel . . . and a women uses that to lift up, not to destroy . . . Our weaknesses are our very strengths. Women are nurturing. They are the team builders. They are able to bring groups together.

A second interviewee, similarly, said, "From a woman's perspective . . . I look at it as a team. I saw a lot of men in my position as exactly the opposite; they were very authoritative, and I knew they were not going to get out of their co-workers what they needed to." The third study

participant, also, talked about her district's administrators functioning under her leadership "as a team; we could sit down and talk things out and get things done."

This reverse discourse about femininity with its metaphors of teamwork served as a counterpoint to the traditional constructions of femaleness that the participants talked about in other cases. By appropriating some of the devalued characteristics of womanhood and presenting them as strengths, as well as countering some of the traditional weak and passive constructions of femininity with constructions that emphasized strength and agency, the interviewees added dimension and complexity to their descriptions of the social construction of the female gender.

The Social Construction of the Superintendency

As with the social construction of the female gender, all three study participants were able to describe the social construction of the role of the superintendent in terms of expected societal characteristics. When questioned about the role of the superintendent in the communities they left, the former superintendents initially described a role that emphasized typically masculine characteristics. However, while the study participants seemed to have no trouble coming up with the expected male-defined role, they did not elaborate on this construction overmuch. Instead they moved on to other, more complex and contradictory constructions of the public school superintendency. This untidy picture the study participants painted of how the superintendency is constructed, however, according to Kincheloe (1997), is as it should be; in presenting these messy constructions, an attempt has been made to avoid "closure to open-ended questions and premature resolution to disconcerting contradictions" (p. 71).

Male Constructions of the Superintendency

Setting the stage for some of the disconcerting contradictions that came later, all three women study participants initially described the superintendent's role as constructed around expectations such as those described by Bell (1988)—the superintendency was understood in their communities to be a role for a white, middle-aged, conservative, married man. According to one interviewee, the superintendent was expected to be "the coach/principal/superintendent [who] held down the job and was a church-going, family-type person." She added, "It was not so important what he did for children as long as our taxes didn't go up a whole lot." A second participant described the superintendent's role in her district in similar terms:

> [If you were a board member] you were male, and you probably grew up in the town. Odds were that you played football on the team that had gone to the state championship in the late 60s. And your expectations of the superintendent were that he would keep the taxes down, that he would accommodate local businesses getting the business, and that he would run things from that office there entirely.

In much the same way, the third study participant said that people in her community were used to a superintendent who "maintained the status quo—the principals did their own thing; he kept the business office running straight." In short, all the interviewees, at least initially, described the social construction of the superintendent's role in the expected terms, that is, as based on male norms that emphasized an authoritative style and maintenance of the status quo.

Counter Constructions of the Superintendency

These stereotypically male constructions, however, were quickly replaced, expanded, contradicted, and complicated by the interviewees as they offered additional insights on their views of the social constructions of the superintendent's role. The study participants described

these counter constructions through the use of two strategies. First, they talked about feminine constructions of the superintendency in contrast to stereotypical masculine ones. Second, the interviewees emphasized the extreme complexity and often conflicting constructions of the role of the superintendent, pointing out, in fact, that the role defied any fixed construction at all.

Feminine constructions of the superintendency. An exchange between the interviewer and one of the study participants exemplified the first of these two strategies for offering counter constructions to the stereotypical male-defined constructions of the superintendent's role. Immediately after describing the coach/principal/superintendent role that was mentioned earlier, this same interviewee countered that description with one of the superintendency as a woman's role:

> I was a woman in a man's role.
>
> [Question from the interviewer: How is the superintendency a man's role?]
>
> Historically, I think that's how it's viewed. I don't agree at all that it's a man's role. I think that if you know people, if you can read people, if you know instruction, if you're willing to get in there and roll up your sleeves and get the job done, I think it's very much a woman's role because women have worn the hats. . . . And I really think honestly that a woman does a better job in a superintendency because of seeing the whole picture.

This study participant seemed to redefine the role of the superintendent to include the typically socialized characteristics (strengths, from a reverse discourse perspective) of women.

Another example of this counter constructing strategy came from a second interviewee who said that the role of the superintendent was evolving toward more of a woman's role. In other words, while the stereotypical male-constructed role may still be the most prevalent one, societal factors are forcing change in the superintendent's role that will make it more compatible

with what are typically seen as women's strengths—instruction and human relations. She said, "The role of the superintendent may be changing in . . . the importance he or she places on certain issues. Obviously people are paying more attention to [student performance] and community involvement."

Complex constructions of the superintendency. While the study participants' comments cited above seemed to reject the notion of the superintendency as exclusively a man's role, other statements made during the seven interviews seemed to reject the whole idea of a fixed superintendency role for either men or women. One participant expressed this view particularly eloquently (and is worthy of quoting at length) in emphasizing complex and often conflicting constructions of the superintendent's role based on varying expectations from different constituencies and mismatches between people's espoused and lived philosophies:

> For everything you say, there is a constituency that expects the opposite because it suits their purposes. So, there is a constituency that expects you to be ethical. . . . Then there's a constituency that, in essence, either differs with those ethics, or does not want ethical because it doesn't suit their needs. . . . everything from somebody who's got their finger in the pie somehow in the system and doesn't want you messing with it and straightening it up in terms of fiscal [management] to people who really don't give a damn, if you will, about what happens to black kids and who don't want you doing what's ethically right by black kids, or poor kids, or anybody that they don't value. And they actually, truly believe that it's wrong to do . . . People will articulate and describe a visionary leader, when in reality that is the last thing they want. I think most of them do want a culture builder, but they will differ on what the culture should be. I think they want the [the superintendent] competent in fiscal matters, but they don't want, in some cases, them to

be able to show that they really need to spend more money. They don't want somebody that is smart enough to show them where they are screwing up.

This interviewee's description of the complex and oppositional nature of role expectations for superintendents was consistent with Burbank (1968) and Blumberg's (1985) findings about role expectations emerging from conflicting reference groups.

In much the same way, a second study participant described trying to meet the expectations of different constituencies simultaneously as like "hitting my head against the wall . . . I was frustrated." The third interviewee said, about trying to satisfy all the role expectations that were place on her as superintendent, simply "I could never keep up."

As the interviewee's words show, the construction of the superintendent's role is complex and emerges from differing, and often conflicting, constituencies. When these constructions of the superintendency are viewed together with other constructions described in this section, a multidimensional picture emerges. While the expected male-defined characteristics of the role were part of the women's descriptions of the construction of the superintendency, the presence of women was also explicitly included. Further, the study participants described the superintendent's role as a changing and extremely complex one. These multifarious constructions of the superintendency seem to strongly support Blumberg's (1985) description of the superintendency as a "conceptually 'sloppy' office" (p. 12).

Interactions of the Constructions of Female Gender and the Superintendency

As with their descriptions of the social constructions of female gender and the superintendent's role, the study participants' portrayals of the interactions between the constructions of femaleness and the superintendency were multidimensional and, at times, seemingly contradictory. In some places during the interviews, the study participants talked

directly about the interactions of constructions. In other places, they told stories and gave examples that illustrated the ways in which the constructions interacted. This section begins with a subsection on opposing constructions in which all three participants talk about the oppositional nature of the constructions of femininity and the superintendency. Following this subsection are two others, social discourse and leadership style, that outline specific areas in which the interviewees experienced those oppositional constructions.

Opposing Constructions of Femininity and the Superintendency

During the course of our interviews, all three study participants talked directly about the manifestations of opposing social constructions of the female gender and the superintendent's role. One participant put it this way:

> The passivity that we see in the general perspective for the woman is antithetical to what we would expect the role of the superintendent to be, which would be more aggressive, more assertive, more intervening. I have been told that I needed to be more assertive, speak up more—which, then when I did it, it seemed like I got slapped back down.

Similarly, a second study participant said, "The normal expectations that you would have for somebody in a CEO role, the dynamics of what happens with that sometimes get gender-driven." This same participant elaborated by saying, "It's that old description—if a man goes after things one hundred percent, he's aggressive; if a woman goes after it a hundred percent, she a bitch." The third participant, also, described trying to find a balance between acting authoritatively and being perceived as "cold and hard." She said that when directness comes from a woman other people are "very threatened by that."

These women's comments seemed to reflect clearly the double bind described by Tannen (1994). When they, as women, exercised the authority of their position, others saw this behavior

as unfeminine. When these powerful women behaved in ways that were seen as appropriately feminine, they were viewed as weak.

Social Discourse

In addition to their general descriptions of the double bind created by the interacting social constructions of femininity and the superintendency, the study participants also talked about specific arenas in which the oppositional nature of these constructions was acutely felt. Social situations connected to their jobs as superintendents proved particularly problematic. In these social settings, rituals and ways of easing social discourse appeared to be based on a male model. One participant called these rituals "back-slapping and storytelling" and described herself as an unwilling participant: "I can think of one male administrator who was a very good joke teller and back-slapper, and he was pretty highly regarded. He spent a lot of time just telling stories. . . but it was something I just couldn't do." In much the same way, a second participant described what she seemed to see as a male administrator's advantage in social situations:

> This may be where women get caught . . . because I think men generally do a better job of going external and taking care of the politics. They'll go play golf. They'll go sit down at the coffee shop, and shoot pool with the neighbor, and go to the football game. I don't think women do this, and it hurts them. We are going to have to do more of the coffee shop stuff.

Another participant bluntly disagreed with this view. She said, "I refused to go to those coffee shop places. I would have felt most uncomfortable, and they [the male community members] would have."

All three interviewees, however, seemed to agree that social discourse in the superintendency was based on a male model that generally was not compatible with women's preferred styles. One interviewee summed it up this way: "The strategies that men typically use [are] what is needed to be heard and well received by the people in power." This finding appears to support West and Zimmerman's (1992) theory of doing gender, that is, "standardized social occasions provide stages for evocations of the 'essential female and male natures' " (p. 24). The study participants seemed to see the coffee shop as a metaphor for just such a standardized social occasion.

Leadership Style

A second specific area in which the participants talked about the interactions of the social constructions of the female gender and the superintendency was leadership style. While previous research studies have yielded mixed findings about material differences in men's and women's leadership styles in educational organizations (see, for example, Andrews & Basom, 1994; Eagly, Karau, & Johnson, 1992; Helgesen, 1990; Shakeshaft, 1987), these women former superintendents appeared to feel that these differences exist.

Authority versus collaboration. One area of difference in leadership style that the interviewees talked about was their own trusting, collaborative style that ran counter to the expectations of authoritarianism inherent in the superintendent's role. One participant put it this way, "My personal [style] is supportive and nurturing, . . . [but] my role was given to me in some pretty specific directives. I was told [by the board] to be more assertive, more aggressive."

A slightly different view came from another interviewee who contrasted her "site-based" approach with that of the previous superintendent. She said, "People did not even go to the bathroom in that district without the superintendent's permission. . . . I felt that with site based

[decision making], I would not need to be doing that, but it took me a long time to change it." In another interview, this same participant talked about working to change the administrative culture of her district from "a climate of fear" to one of trust and collaboration. The third study participant also talked about her collaborative leadership style as "involving people in the process" and "working well together as a team," in contrast to her male authoritarian predecessors in that district who "grabbed you in the office and evaluated you based on how many negative phone calls they had received about you." These women's descriptions of their leadership styles as collaborative seem to be consistent with what other researchers have found about women in school leadership: "Building community is an essential part of a woman administrator's style" (Shakeshaft, 1987, p. 197).

Instructional versus operational focus. A second dimension of leadership style that the women study participants discussed was their perception that the women educational leaders they knew, including themselves, had a much stronger instructional focus than did men administrators who had more of an operational focus—as one participant put it, "[Men were] more focused on finance or sports." This topic was the subject of an exchange between the three women during the focus group interview in which they speculated how women's and men's leadership might have evolved in these ways. One participant began this portion of the conversation by saying,

> Thinking back about all the conversations, and through many, many years, the conversations initiated by men generally were not about kids—in collegial discussion. Unless it was [sports] scores, but not about academic achievement . . . I'm reflecting in terms of the things that we've learned about culture and how kids are raised, and typically

> men anywhere are going to end up focusing on sports. What kind of models have they had? And what kind of models have we [women] had?

Another participant responded by saying, "Women will have come up [to the superintendency] through some instructional route, legitimately, and will have done double to get there. Men—most of them were coaches." The third participant added, about conversations with the other superintendents in a region where she was the only woman superintendent, "Some of them [male superintendents] would go so far as to say it's nice to have someone with us who knows curriculum."

This seemingly clear-cut contrast that the participants saw between the women's instructional focus and men's focus on finance and sports supports what Helgesen (1990) observed about sports-oriented conversation in business settings:

> Football was assumed to parallel business in a number of ways: its organization structure, its tenacious focus on objective, its obsession with blocking the competition, its emphasis on the deployment of efficient units, and its need for team players who do what they're told and do not question the coach . . . Even the financial rewards of business success, money, is often one-dimensionally described as "just a way of keeping score." (p. 36)

Helgeson went on to add that "football is not business" (p. 36). For the study participants, neither football nor money appeared to define the business of educating children, in apparent contrast to what they saw as the typical male superintendent's focus. Thus, in talking about instructional versus operational focus in leadership style, as in discussing other aspects of the interactions between the social constructions of the female gender and the superintendency, the study participants used language that suggested opposing forces. The familiar double bind of

being simultaneously female and in charge (Tannen, 1994; Shakeshaft, 1987) was, therefore, very much in evidence in the women's stories.

Conclusion

In the introductory section to this paper, I described my original motivation for designing and conducting this study of the perceptions of women superintendents about the operation of social constructions in their work lives. That is, prompted by a seemingly incongruous remark made about a woman superintendent, I wanted to find out what was going on with these social constructions from the perspectives of women superintendents themselves. Some of the things I found to be going on in the women study participants' professional lives have been outlined, then, in this paper. In attempting to lay out these women's perceptions about the social constructions of femaleness, the superintendency, and the interactions of femininity with the superintendency in some sense-making format, I have tried to fulfill what Guba (1990) described as the purpose of qualitative inquiry, i.e., to form "more informed and sophisticated constructions than anyone, including the investigator, held prior to the inquiry" (p. 90).

One of those more informed constructions I now hold is that these women who had been successful public school superintendents seemed to simultaneously embrace and reject the prevailing constructions of femaleness. That is, in some cases, stereotypically feminine characteristics were described as points of pride and sources of strength. For example, in describing their leadership styles, the participants described themselves as nurturing, collaborative, and relationally oriented—all stereotypically female qualities. Further, the women presented this style as an effective one and contrasted it to what they felt was the less effective, typically male, authoritarian style. However, while the generally accepted constructions of

femaleness were described as strengths, as in the preceding example, the interviewees in other cases emphatically rejected these constructions.

Another, and similar, more informed construction I now hold is that the women I interviewed were aware of the discriminatory nature of the social constructions of the superintendency and dealt with these as part of the fabric of their day-to-day lives in the superintendency. Thus, the regional education service center director's remark about a district not being "ready for a woman superintendent," had the study participants overheard it, would have most likely not surprised them. I hope, though, and I think it is probable based on what I learned from my conversations with these women, that they would have resisted accepting that particular construction as truth.

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Footnotes

[1]Regional Education Service Centers are intermediate arms of state education agencies. They provide a variety of technical, instructional, and developmental services for regionally grouped independent school districts. These centers are similar in organization and operation to Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) and county departments of education.

[2]Legitimate criticisms of totalizing constructions of femininity as "fragile, white, and not too bright" (Dill, 1987, p. 105) have been made by female scholars of color. As Ladner (1987) and hooks (1984) have pointed out, stereotypical descriptions of American womanhood do not take into account the inter-relatedness of sex, race, and class oppression. Lather (1991), similarly, has said that neither gender nor race stand alone; they are always interactive. Thus, my entire discussion of the social construction of the female gender might more accurately be termed "the social construction of the white, privileged, female gender."

[3]Chirban's (1996) interactive-relational (I:R) approach to interviewing is designed to balance the professional responsibility of the researcher with the goal of understanding the interviewee. Following this approach, six characteristics and qualities of the interviewer—self awareness, authenticity, attunement, posturing in the interaction, engagement of relational dynamics, and integration of the researcher's person in the process—can be tailored to achieve the goals of the interview through two components, the interaction and the relationship. The I:R approach, according to Chirban, allows the interviewer "by drawing on personal resourcefulness, . . .[to]access information that would not emerge through formal questioning alone" (p. 7).

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