

“What about Your Kids and Your Husband?”: Gender-Blind Sexism in Women Higher Education Administrators’ Narratives

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Women leaders report facing many systemic inequalities such as unequal family responsibilities, differing and unfair expectations of them as leaders, backbiting from colleagues and subordinates, and a lack of support and encouragement. This qualitative research study’s conceptual framework hinges on feminist narrative analysis research, focusing on women administrators’ perceptions of gender’s influences on their work experiences. Patterns in participants’ narratives reveal gender-blind sexism, which is sexism that renders itself invisible or uneasily detectable, and a pattern of resistance to this and other oppressive experiences by developing overall transformative and feminist leadership styles. The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand gender-blind scripts revealed in participants’ stories about the intersections of gender and their work lives. Through sharing and analyzing participants’ narratives, this researcher derived recommendations for equitable policies and practices in higher education settings.

Keywords: *women higher education administrators; gender; leadership; women leaders; narrative analysis research; gender-blind sexism; feminist leadership*

Many research studies on women leaders compare women leaders to men leaders and describe gendered leadership stereotypes. Eagly and Johnson (1990) conducted a meta-analysis of the 162 available studies, conducted from 1961–1987, that compared men’s and women’s leadership styles. Eagly and Johnson found that leadership styles were gender stereotypic in laboratory experiments, and women tended to develop interpersonal and democratic styles while men tended to use task-oriented and authoritative approaches. Eagly and Karau (1991) conducted a second meta-analysis of 54 studies on men and women leaders in collaborative work settings, finding that men tended to take on leadership roles more than women did in short-term groups and groups completing tasks not requiring highly interactive collaborations. Appelbaum et al. (2003) and Kezar (2014) found that women were likely to serve as social leaders, encouraging harmony and understanding among group members and sharing perspectives. Many of these studies were conducted in laboratory settings with student participants rather than with actual leaders in real-world contexts.

Researchers have made cases for gender-neutral forms of leadership and rejected stereotypical ideas of masculine and feminine leadership. For example, Van Engen et al.’s (2001) meta-analysis of studies published between 1987 and 2000 found that men and women leaders do not differ in many important respects such as style and career trajectories. Rather than classify leaders as displaying more masculine or feminine styles, and thus, reinforcing social constructions of being a woman or a man leader, researchers found that those described as “effective leaders” displayed the best qualities of both sexes’ “stereotypical” behaviors, making a case for androgynous leadership (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Helgesen, 2011; Sargent, 1981).

However, the vast majority of research on gender and leadership in the higher education context has sought to describe the differences in experience and approach of men and women leaders. Researchers found that women administrators tend to be less satisfied than men administrators because of salaries, lack of opportunities for promotions, and job duties (Fields, 2000; Fraser & Hodge, 2000; Redmond et al., 2017). Researchers have consistently discussed that women higher education leaders find themselves in a double bind: “As women, they are expected to be communal, collaborative, and democratic: but as managers, they are expected to be agentic and authoritative” (Haveman & Beresford, 2012, p. 125). If women display stereotypical feminine characteristics such “caring, consultative style, they are called weak and indecisive; when they adopt traditional authoritarian and directive behaviors, they are criticized for being too heavy-handed” (Bornstein, 2008, p. 172). These circumstances place women administrators in double binds that present varying degrees of adversity, depending on their circumstances. Women leaders report facing many systemic inequalities such as unequal family responsibilities, differing and unfair expectations of them as leaders, backbiting from colleagues and subordinates, and a lack of support and encouragement (Dunn et al., 2014; Pasquerella & Clauss-Ehlers, 2017).

This qualitative research study’s conceptual framework hinges on feminist narrative analysis research, focusing on women administrators’ perceptions of how gender influences their work experiences. Patterns in participants’ narratives reveal gender-blind sexism, which is sexism that renders itself invisible or uneasily detectable, and a pattern of resistance to this and other oppressive experiences by developing overall transformative and feminist leadership styles. The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand gender-blind scripts revealed in participants’ stories about the intersections of gender and their work lives. Through sharing and analyzing participants’ narratives, this researcher derived recommendations for equitable policies and practices in higher education settings.

Methodology

The researcher obtained appropriate Institutional Review Board approval and used approved consent protocol to explore the central research question: what do women higher education leaders' narratives reveal about gender's intersection with women's work lives? Participants were selected through a convenience sampling method, snowball sampling, whereby participants recommended other participants. The researcher interviewed, using open-ended prompts and follow-up questions, six participants who held director-level and higher positions at higher education institutions. Participants were asked questions about their work lives' intersections with their gender and prompted to tell stories about these intersections. Participants represented regions throughout the United States. Providing contextual information whenever possible, the researcher also used vague identifiers and pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Using a narrative analysis methodology, the researcher sought to discover intertextuality among the participants' narratives, focusing on common patterns of emergent themes and structures that revealed gender-blind scripts.

Qualitative research is quite different than quantitative research, and different constructs of reliability and validity are appropriate (Clandinin, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Goodley et al., 2004). For example, narrative research studies may have as few as one participant (Clandinin, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The authenticity of this qualitative study is underpinned by systematic and trustworthy processes. Transcription is interpretation and, thus, was methodically conducted with several re-listening sessions to create transcripts as close to the participants' original meanings as possible. Codes were systematically developed through first and second order analysis coding (Gioia et al., 2013) and subsequently themes emerged from these codes. Analyzing the emergent themes, the researcher provided extensive and rich descriptions of stories, often using participants' own words. The researcher engaged in member checking, creating collaborative relationships with participants, and conducted interviews in a conversational style, encouraging dialogue then and later during drafts of analyses. Clandinin et al. (2007) and Deyhle (1995) contend that researchers must collaborate with participants and treat them equitably and "well beyond the ethical considerations called for in formal processes and in signed commitments to protect participants from harm" (Clandinin et al., 2007, p. 30). The researcher took steps to avoid reinforcing marginalization. Gready (2008) argued, "Voice can no longer, if it could ever really, be considered a simplistic form of power. ... Voice without control may be worse than silence" (p. 147). As an ongoing part of this research methodology, this researcher kept a journal of progress, reactions, and potential researcher bias in this process, and then the researcher took action to ensure it was the participants' narratives and intended meanings that came through in the analysis and not simply the researcher's own agenda. This researcher reflected on her own positionality as a middle-class, genderqueer professional with multiple ethnicities as she analyzed these narratives, recognizing the "need to respect the authenticity and integrity of participants' stories, to see them as subjects creating their own history rather than objects of research" (Casey, 1995, pp. 231-2). Participants already have voices; thus, it is not the researcher's duty to give them voice.

Participants

Table 1

Participants

Pseudonym	Age Group	Position	Institution	Race
Maria	50's	President	Community College	Black
Rae	50's	Vice President	Community College	White
Angela	60's	Dean	University	White
Ashley	40's	Dean	Community College	White
Morgan	30's	Director	College	White
Jenny	30's	Director	Community College	White

Research Problematics and Limitations

There are limitations and problems in qualitative research and narrative analysis that will likely never be resolved. This study is limited because it does not make broad generalizations about populations, which many argue is an advantage of qualitative research (Clandinin, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Goodley, et al. (2004) posited that an advantage of narrative research is its “specificity not generalization – amenable to specific description and explanation of a few people rather than the representative generalities of a wider population” (pp. 97-8). Although people with similar social identities share comparable experiences and perspectives, qualitative studies’ conclusions cannot be applied simplistically to everyone with similar identities. Still, this study has an element of transferability in relation to the larger context of the research conducted on this topic and to larger social and institutional issues (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin, et al., 2007). Further, though this study explores the intersectionality of gender and work lives, it is limited as its aims were not to analyze the intersections of all aspects of participants’ identities and their work lives.

Theoretical Framework: Gender-Blind Sexism

Sexism is often discussed in terms of bias or discrimination based on gender. Women face the reality of living in a patriarchal society in which anything associated with women or girls or socially constructed as “feminine” is often debased and devalued. While women experience explicit forms of sexism and are reporting these instances more often as a result of the “#MeToo Movement,” they also face sexism that is not specifically named and is the result of a patriarchal system that puts men at an advantage and women at a disadvantage in professional and social contexts. Stoll (2013) argued that sexism is rooted in systemic social practices and structures and cultural values. In other words, this is not simply a matter of individuals who are biased or sexist; it is a matter of systemic sexism. According to Broido et al.’s (2015) description of modern sexism, “women, as well as men, often mistakenly look at sexist dynamics one at a time, and do not recognize the constraints of an interlocking system of oppression” (p. 599). Sturm (2001) contended that instances of “second generation employment discrimination” included sexual harassment and “discriminatory exclusion;” importantly, Sturm’s analysis of case law found that

“unequal treatment may result from cognitive or unconscious bias, rather than deliberate, intentional exclusion” (p. 460). Instances of sexist behavior are often the result of implicit biases, of which the people involved may not be aware (Swim & Cohen, 1997).

This study’s feminist conceptual framework heavily relies upon Stoll et al.’s (2016) application of Bonilla-Silva’s (1997) concept of color-blind racism to develop a framework to describe gender-blind ideology. This ideology

serves to explain/justify women’s subordination [that] underlies these [gender-based] inequalities. Furthermore, we believe this ideology is best understood not as the consequence of sexist attitudes on the part of prejudiced individuals, but as both the reflection of a patriarchal social system conducive to rape and sexual assault and the ‘organizational map’ (Bonilla-Silva, 1997) that guides how individuals act toward gender and gender inequality within that system. (pp. 28-29)

While Stoll et al. (2016) focused on applying this framework to myths about sexual assault, this researcher sought to apply this framework to women higher education administrators’ narratives about intersections of gender and work experiences.

Results and Discussion

Applications of Gender-Blind Frames to Narratives

The researcher noted that the four gender-blind sexism scripts described by Stoll et al. (2016) emerged from the coding process and subsequent theme development. These were abstract liberalism, naturalization of sexism, cultural sexism, and minimization of sexism. Abstract liberalism was reflected in the participants’ stories via descriptions of career “choices” and opportunities offered to men and women. One participant discussed a leadership development program at her institution with nearly all men participants, which is explained as women’s lack of interest in the program. Naturalization of sexism and cultural sexism often overlapped in these narratives. Social constructions and biological explanations of motherhood pervade these narratives. Women were viewed as maternal in their leadership approaches and careers, often making sacrifices for their families to fulfill the cultural and biological role of mother. Cultural sexism most frequently appeared in the narratives with leadership being associated with maleness. Women did not “fit” the schema for leader—looks (e.g., maleness) or easily move in social circles of men—specific social gatherings to which women are not invited. The minimization of sexism were rationalizations for potentially visible sexism. For example, two participants discussed either experiencing or witnessing situations where women were denied promotions, and men administrators made excuses for this such as “protecting” the woman by not promoting her. In another case, the excuse was given that the women candidates did not interview well.

Conflation of Gender-Blind Frames

Gender-blind frames of abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural sexism, and minimization of sexism often overlap and/or conflate. Overall themes of invisibility and uncertainty about linkages between gender and work experiences pervade these narratives. This has been referenced and discussed in various ways in the literature such as the “glass ceiling” or simply “invisible barriers” (Diehl, 2014; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Díez et al., 2009; Moncayo Orjuela & Zuluaga, 2015). There may be an appearance of sexism or discriminatory behavior, yet the participant is unable to

say that the event or the experience is the result of bias. Nevertheless, there is a strong feeling that there is some form of bias or discrimination working behind the scenes. Morgan narrated a story about several interim administrators at her college. Of the four interim administrators, two were women, and two were men. The men were hired as permanent administrators while the women's positions were dissolved. Morgan related:

Those who were most highly qualified were the two female candidates and had more longevity at the institution and had more experience. And it was very apparent across the campus who the more qualified candidates were. So in my cadre of individuals I work with, we thought there was some discrimination bias there.

When asked if she thought this situation were an example of implicit or explicit bias/discrimination, Morgan replied:

It was an intentional decision to not hire the two female employees. It was in their mind a good ol' boys club kind of thing. I don't think it was an intentionally male/female thing. It was more of a comrade thing. It just so happened that those two male colleagues were friends and were more, had traveled in the same circles more frequently than the female leaders did. I think it was indirectly due to their gender. Socially though, I don't think those females would have been invited into that inner circle of executive leadership, so I can't say that it was directly but it was indirectly because of their gender. But that was confirmed to me that was the predominate decision because those individuals fit in better with the executive leaders' mindset and thought process and goals, where they thought the institution would be going, and that was the reason they selected those two individuals. They didn't say it was because of gender, but they said that is what they had gathered through interviews. They covered their tracks, and that is what was conveyed to us.

This narrative revealed multiple frames, including the naturalism, cultural, and minimization of sexism frames. The naturalism and cultural frames relate to the idea of "fit." These women administrators, despite their professional experience, backgrounds, and years of service at this institution, do not "fit in" as administrators. According to this participant, for example, the women administrators would not have fit in or have been welcomed at the senior men administrators' social events or informal gatherings. Diehl (2014) and Growe & Montgomery (1999) discussed the phenomenon where upwardly mobile women tend not to be invited to men administrators' social events, leading to these women not gaining the same social capital as upwardly mobile men do. These women did not fit into these men upper administrators' ideas about the institution's goals and direction while the men who they hired reflected the ideas the men upper administrators had for the institution's future direction. Morgan described the senior leadership team, composed of men, as covering "their tracks" through these rationalizations, and they minimize (minimization of sexism) the thoughts of several people on campus. This is not about gender, they explained; it is about these women not being good fits and about how they interviewed.

Rae told a story of being denied a promotion and the dynamics that played out between her and the man administrator who decided not to promote her despite a recommendation from a hiring committee.

I applied for the position. ... I went through the entire search, and I was told that I was the chosen candidate by my boss but that [senior administrator] was going on a [vacation], and he wanted to talk to me in two weeks before I was offered the position. So I thought, gosh. That was kind of like weird. What's that all about? Then I was told, 'He just felt a little worried about you. We're going to get a new vice president, and you're not in a tenured position. So he just wants to talk to you about it.' So the two weeks go by. I meet with him,

and I go into his office. And I never so much feel like a powerless position at work. You know where this person in power is male quite frankly and, you know, in this position of power and I [am] walking in expecting one thing, and he tells me that he is cancelling the search, and he is waiting for the vice president to come. But [sighs] the way the whole situation was handled was awful, and really has nothing to do with your research. But what I am talking about is that experience and never really understanding why. You know, and wondering... and it all just seems like there's this big lie on the line that doesn't have anything to do with gender. But that situation when I was sitting there. I felt like it was gender. Because I have this powerful male, and I am in the room with him by myself. And I am speechless. And I can't even speak. I don't know why. I don't know why that happened to me, but it's like the word, 'Oh.' Like I didn't think I could... I didn't feel like I could speak up. I was so mad at myself when it was all over, and I walked out. Then what do you do? Do you call back and fight for yourself, but it's too late?

Swim and Hyers (1999) and Broido et al. (2015) discuss a variety of fears such as being retaliated against or shunned that lead to women's not responding to or confronting explicit or even these more implicit forms of sexism. Broido et al. pointed to the literature that suggests there is a "struggle between a woman's desire to challenge sexism and the social pressures not to respond" (p. 601). Moreover, multiple frames of gender-blind sexism are clear in Rae's narrative. Rae's story suggests elements of the cultural sexism and minimization frames. Though the hiring committee recommended Rae, the man administrator in this narrative plays the role of benevolent patriarch and canceled the search because he is "looking out for" Rae because she does not have tenure and there is going to be a new vice president. Glick & Fiske (1996) argued:

benevolent sexism as a set of interrelated attitudes toward women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles but that are subjectively positive in feeling tone (for the perceiver) and also tend to elicit behaviors typically categorized as prosocial (e.g., helping) or intimacy seeking (e.g., self-disclosure). (p. 491)

Rae's narrative revealed that benevolent sexism's "consequences are often damaging. Benevolent sexism is not necessarily experienced as benevolent by the recipient" (Glick & Fiske, 1996, pp. 491–492). Rae's not being seen as the right person for this job because she did not have tenure (cultural sexism) and the rationalization for this decision (minimization of sexism) had serious consequences. She did not receive a promotion for which she had worked and subsequently applied and was recommended.

Abstract Liberalism

Abstract liberalism manifested itself in participants' descriptions and stories about "choices" related to leadership or education and through ideas that all "have access to equal opportunities or have autonomous choice in matters of residence or access to resources" (Stoll et al., 2016, p. 30). Maria discussed choice in her narrative about her leadership trajectory.

It was certainly more of a challenge for me than it would have been for a man who either had a wife, just like [my supervisor] at the time, who could just be home with the kid and expect them to move when he moved. That was not my situation and ... I was unwilling to move them. Some people will pick their families up and just go for the next opportunity. I knew I wanted to be a president, but not at the sacrifice of my family. So I drew a circle around where I lived, and I said, these are the institutions that I'm going to keep my eyes on because I can drive to them and not disrupt my kids, but so yes, I think it is certainly a

great challenge. I do think there are other people that choose and make different choices, but for me personally, I knew that I was going to be limited in my opportunities because I wasn't willing to pick up and move to the next state for that next job.

Maria's situation is indicative of what other researchers have found about academic women who seek career advancement. Researchers reported that women academics and women pursuing administrative careers must be willing to relocate in order to obtain positions for which others are competing and to advance their careers (Lepkowski, 2009; McLean, 2010). Rosenfeld and Jones (1987) found that women employed in higher education were less likely to relocate than men were, particularly near the beginning of their careers. Additionally, the willingness to relocate was about the same for men and women after they had been working in their fields for some time (Rosenfeld & Jones, 1987). Shauman and Xie (1996) found that women working in higher education who are also mothers are much less likely to move for career opportunities than men in general or women without children. Rosenfeld & Jones (1987) reported that "not just actual mobility, but also being perceived as potentially mobile can enhance career progress" (p. 493). Maria ultimately achieved her goal of securing a senior-level administrative position although she admitted that this was more challenging for her because of her lack of geographical mobility.

Some might conceive this as simply Maria's personal choice, which over-simplifies factors that lead to these types of decisions. Allen et al. (2009) discussed the challenging choices that women administrators must make while balancing their personal and work lives. They frame these "choices" as "personal." Although women certainly have agency, a patriarchal social structure masks the true extent to which these are simply personal choices. For instance, these decisions reflect Maria's construction of "a good mother." Mothers are expected to make sacrifices while fathers are expected to provide for the family, and these fathers would not necessarily see "moves" as sacrifices but obligatory for the economic good of the family.

Other participants challenged abstract liberalist practices. Jenny confronted the argument of reverse discrimination. The college attorney told her that she could not offer scholarships specifically designated for women or minorities. The college attorney implied that these scholarships give advantages to minority groups over others, leading to potential legal concerns. "And so, our general counsel ... will not allow us to do a scholarship just for women, or just for a certain minority, and so one of the issues that I highlighted was why this was." She conducted her own legal research. "I looked at U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights as a primer on that." She challenged this prohibition because of her "interest in creating scholarships in fields where women are under-represented like CTE [career and technical education] fields." Despite no statute or policy against scholarships for women or minorities, the college attorney thwarted Jenny's efforts, which both minimalizes and denies gender and race as issues related to access to educational opportunities. Reverse discrimination as an ideology does not recognize systemic discrimination, which often keeps minorities and women out of higher education and tracks them away from particular careers.

Naturalization

Many societies commonly accept essentialist and biological explanations for women's "natural" characteristics. Stoll et al. (2016) argued, in applying the naturalization frame to gender-blind sexism, "Obviously, there is also widespread appeal for using this same logic when it comes to gender, although in the case of gender (as opposed to race presently), there tends to be far less stigma for privileging biological explanations of social differences" (p. 30). Participants

experienced the naturalization frame in relation to their identities as mothers. Jenny told a story about her experiences as a new mother and her views of larger societal issues.

I think it's important to acknowledge some of the difficulties women have ... who are pregnant or starting their families. Um... just because everyone is just really ginger around you. I recall people thought I had cancer or something like I was really delicate. I worry that I wasn't being given serious projects because of the idea that I would be going on maternity leave, you know, for twelve weeks. Because the idea that I wasn't invited to evening events and so forth with administration because people think, she's got young children at home, which I did, and it was a pain to have babysitters because my husband works at night.

Jenny recognized that others' preconceived notions about what women can do while being pregnant or mothers, in effect, hold women back. Acknowledging a need for equity, not just fair treatment for women, Jenny also saw this as a policy concern related to equal access to benefits that would assist employees as parents and workers.

Maria also experienced attempts at "holding her back" because of notions of mothers' natural roles. She told a story about a conversation with the administrator to whom she reported at the time. She told him that she intended to pursue a doctorate and to take a significant course load. She reported his response: "Well, what about your kids and your husband?" And I just looked at him like, what, what are you saying to me?" His assumption was that Maria had a family to tend to, and focusing on her career and furthering her education were not things that she was at liberty to do. Maria talked about motherhood being an issue because "it is more acceptable for the mother to stay with them when they get sick," and there are responsibilities to take children "to places that hinders your ability to stay late or come in early." The naturalization frame infers that it is naturally a mother's responsibility/role to do these things despite possible career consequences, and men are not expected to make similar sacrifices for their children and families. These comments also reflect cultural sexism, demonstrating that Maria did not represent the "ideal worker/ideal leader" who is "a White man who is totally dedicated to the work and who has no responsibilities for children or family demands other than earning a living" (Acker, 2006, p. 448).

Cultural Sexism

The naturalization framework and cultural sexism framework are alike in many ways, but the cultural framework extends beyond biology. Cultural sexism reflects justifications for gender inequality based on cultural notions of gender differences. According to Stoll et al. (2016):

The same logic used to buttress claims about gender and sexism using the naturalization framework is still present, but unlike naturalization, which views these differences as the outgrowth of organic or biological processes, cultural sexism views differences as the result of social processes that distinguish certain types of men and women. (p. 31)

Ashley suggested that being a woman influenced the way she leads. She attributed much of this to stereotypes and social and cultural constructions of being a woman and being a woman leader. Role congruity theory suggests that people positively perceive other people and groups when these people and groups display characteristics and behavior that match their stereotypical social roles (Eagly et al., 2000). Buckling (2014) and Eagly and Karau (2002) further developed this theory in their discussions of bias and discrimination against women leaders when social expectations for female behavior conflicts with behaviors or characteristics related to leadership. Participants in this study faced role incongruities and discussed how their characteristics matched social

expectations for women's behavior while recognizing consequences for women whose behavior does not match social expectations. Ashley narrated:

I feel like there's an influence though in the way I lead. I think women lead differently than men lead. And I think that ... we have strengths and weaknesses, and some are unique to gender to some extent. That's not always the case. But you know, that's maybe a stereotype to some extent, but I do feel like overall that women tend to be more compassionate leaders, and more understanding of other life circumstances that people that report to them may experience. And again, that's not always true, but I think, you know, for me it is anyway [with] the people that, that I've had as leaders. So I found that, um, that that's what has been my experience and I feel like I'm a compassionate leader and an understanding leader. And part of that is due to being a woman.

Ashley recognized stereotypes about women and men as leaders, and she saw herself and others fulfilling these stereotypes, reflecting both the naturalization and cultural frames of gender-blind sexism. Women are naturally "compassionate" and "understanding," yet she mentioned twice that this is not always true, suggesting that there is a cultural component related to these expectations. She shared further that this is likely something that people do not consider (e.g., implicit bias) and witnessed harsh reactions when women leaders do not fulfill stereotypes.

Probably, and again, they probably do not even think; people don't realize that they expect. ... Just to throw out a random example, say somebody's kid is sick, and they expect that their boss to be understanding that they're going to have to take all of this time off. I think that they would expect a woman leader to be more understanding of that than a male leader, as maybe a fellow mom or just somebody who is a woman and that, you know, they might have a man [supervisor and] think he just doesn't understand and have a woman [supervisor and] think she's a bitch, you know? Um, and, and I don't think people really think that through as being, I expect something different from a woman than a man. But I do think that that is true. ... I think men, it's more acceptable for them to be more hardcore about things. ... I think when you see a woman who really is strong and very assertive and, and that kind of thing, oftentimes she does get labeled or you know, people think that's, you know, a bad quality in a woman, and they think it's a good quality of the man. And I think that's still the case even now.

Ashley articulated the naturalization and cultural frames of sexism, even being enacted by other women in this case. Women are "supposed" to be more understanding of life circumstances and make more allowances for employees. When women violate these stereotypes, they are labeled a "bitch."

Reflecting a role congruent identity, Rae described herself as a "sensitive" leader/supervisor and was hesitant to attribute her kindness and sensitivity to being a woman although she explained why she believed this is a strength rather than a weakness.

I think that sometimes that what can be misunderstood is sensitivity. ... Maybe some of the characteristics that I have appear as a sign of weakness. When it's not, in fact, it's just the characteristics that I have. I don't know if it's based on gender. I sort of think it is. If you look at gender studies, every female is this way or every male is this way, as we know, stereotypically, you know, stereotypically, I am probably that stereotypical, sensitive... you know, I try to be really kind. You know, I'm not really aggressive. ... I feel like that is misinterpreted many times... as a sign of weakness. I think it's misinterpreted, and I have to work at being over-aggressive. [Laughs] It's just not my makeup but, to me, I think it's unnecessary to think that someone has to be that way in order to be a good leader. ...

[Sensitivity is] very much a strength because I take the time to listen to people. I feel like it has made me because not just because of those characteristics I mentioned. I really like work people and help them develop. This is going to sound like I am being biased. Sometimes I get the feeling that some people are just really based on their individual selves. ... And I don't know if that's because I am a woman or not.

Rae saw being sensitive, supportive, and kind as strengths for leaders, resisting gender stereotypes that suggest that these characteristics are feminine and, therefore, signs of weakness. Rae mentioned that subordinates and colleagues could misread her characteristics rather than see them as advantageous for a leader; she listens to and cares about others. However, women administrators are placed in a double-bind by the expectation that women leaders will be kind and empathetic when, for example, circumstances may call for transactional, directive, and situational leadership approaches.

Angela's narrative reflected the "tendency" for women to be collaborative, kind, and gentle in their approaches to supervising others while men leaders tend to be "tougher" and may come across as abrasive, which may be socially acceptable for men leaders but not for women leaders.

I think women pay attention to things that men don't. For various reasons, including being socialized to please but also thinking about our own safety, I think we read a room more quickly than men do. Men have a tendency to be more direct, which sometimes gives the appearance of confidence but sometimes seems insensitive or harsh. I try to be direct and transparent but not cruel or uncaring. Male administrators are often viewed as just 'telling it like it is.' Women who are direct can be read as going against the stereotype that they need to be nurturing and compassionate. So for me, it's not that I want to emulate that type of male-oriented leadership model where emotion and kindness have to be sublimated because they're viewed as a sign of weakness. I want to learn from that model, but that's not exactly how I want to do things.

As a leader, she attempted a balancing act of being "direct and transparent" while also caring. Eagly (2007) suggested:

Tension between the communal qualities that people prefer in women and the predominantly agentic qualities they expect in leaders produces cross-pressures on female leaders. They often experience disapproval for their more masculine behaviors, such as asserting clear-cut authority over others, as well as for their more feminine behaviors, such as being especially supportive of others. (p. 4)

This tension is echoed throughout these narratives as when Ashley discussed women leaders who faced challenges when asserting their authority or holding followers accountable. Despite these tensions, these participants described their leadership styles as more transformative and democratic leaders than their men counterparts.

Minimization of Sexism

Minimization of sexism can come in a variety of forms from denials that sexism persists in today's society to rationalizations for women's marginalization (Stoll et al., 2016). Stoll et al. (2016) used the example that women are less likely to pursue majors or careers in math and engineering, not due to sexism or women being systematically "tracked out of" these fields but "because women are just not as good as men at math and science" (p. 31). Morgan's experience reflects this in the selection of leadership development program candidates.

There have been leadership academies and executive leadership academies, and the individuals I see going through those academies are predominately male. And those are academies where you would submit your resumes and applications. And then a committee goes through and selects them. And they have some sort of ranking criteria, and they are looking for individuals who would show good growth potential to become leaders at this institution. And they could see a good fit in different types of forward movement. So I almost feel like that selection process, I don't know what that criteria is, that selection process may be a little bit more, I can't say that for sure, but I would say that the majority, that predominately, I would say 80% of them are male.

Men being leaders or being seen as potential leaders is naturalized and deemed culturally acceptable rather than being interrogated in terms of the social, cultural, and historical realities behind these "choices." Morgan's example is constructed merely as an individual choice rather than an issue of access or tracking. Sexism is minimized through rationalizations of the lack of women's involvement in the academy due to their lack of interest and adeptness in leadership.

Conclusion and Implications for Further Study and for Policy

These women higher education leaders narrated stories reflecting all the gender-blind sexism scripts defined by Stoll (2013), and these scripts frequently overlapped. These instances often left the participants uncertain about whether a particular situation was related to gender; other times, it was clear to them that gender was a factor although unnamed. In both cases, these situations left unsettling feelings for the participants. This is not to say that the participants were disempowered or felt unsurmountable setbacks. These women possess substantial agency; after all, they all hold or went on to hold senior-level administrative positions at higher education institutions. Moreover, their experiences often led them to be mindful of the challenges that women and other marginalized groups face. Some of the participants made explicit connections between the challenges they faced related to being women to their own ethical and transformational leadership styles and practices; however, there are likely other factors such as personality and other experiences (e.g., positive role models) that influenced their leadership styles and practices.

This study suggests many topics for further research and implications for policy. The gender-blind framework developed by Stoll (2013) and Stoll et al. (2016) could be applied/transferred to other circumstances and to other groups of women. Future studies could focus on more diverse populations of women such as women leaders of color, LGBTQ leaders, and K-12 leaders. Researchers may discover ways that gender-blind frames influence the lives of both men and women. These potential studies along with this one could aid policymakers and higher education leaders in developing policies and engaging in practices to create equitable work environments with attention to supporting families and creating environments conducive to happy and productive work lives. These policies and practices include family leave policies that are supportive of all genders, equitable and fair hiring policies and practices, anti-discrimination policies, implicit bias training, and other periodic professional development focused on equity and inclusion topics. Equity and Inclusion Offices can be helpful in providing leadership for these initiatives and in developing strategic plans to create and maintain diverse and inclusive workplaces. Leaders must be willing to examine their own contexts, collaborate with all constituencies, and reflect upon their own implicit biases to develop policies and practices that make sense for their organization and that will lead to greater equity and better environments on their campuses. Cultures do not change overnight, so commitment to long-term investigations of

best practices for mitigating implicit biases is necessary because they cannot be completely eliminated. This study highlights the importance of interrogating gender-blind frames, which reflect implicit biases, calling attention to these, and acting to subvert the possible oppressive forces that they represent.

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