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ARTICLES

Women and Leadership: A Developmental Paradox?

Dana Heller Levitt

In this article, the author explores the nature of leadership from a gendered perspective, specifically addressing leadership challenges for women. Leadership challenges, gender stereotypes, and definitions of leadership are discussed. Recommendations for professional redefinition of leadership within the counseling profession and strategies for successful negotiation of leadership roles are provided.

Traditional definitions of leadership are challenged by the changing demographic of society in the United States, increasing numbers of women in leadership roles in the counseling profession, and shifting expectations in the workplace. Women are more present in the workforce now than at any time in history. A study of U.S. medical school faculty in 1985 and in 2006 indicated only a minimal increase in the percentage of female faculty who were full professors, rising from 10% in 1985 to 12% in 2006 (Mayer, Files, Ko, & Blair, 2008). From a historical perspective, it is noteworthy that 25 of the 42 women who have ever served as presidents or prime ministers assumed these roles in the 1990s (Carli & Eagly, 2001). A 2001 report issued by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics indicated that women made up 47% of all workers and had earned 51% of all bachelor's degrees, 45% of all advanced degrees, 42% of all doctoral degrees, and 43% of all professional degrees (Carli & Eagly, 2001). It would therefore be reasonable to expect that a large number of professional women are currently in the workforce and may be seeking or placed into leadership roles. Within professional associations, women are likewise taking on more leadership roles. The American Counseling Association (ACA) had five female presidents between its founding in 1952 and 1980 (Black & Magnuson, 2005); within the last 30 years (1981–2010), 21 women have held this leadership position. Women have held leadership positions in ACA divisions, branches, and other entities in increasing numbers over the last several years (ACA, 2010). This increase does not include *positional leadership* whereby

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women serve in nonelected or untitled leadership roles but nevertheless make significant contributions to the profession (Black & Magnuson, 2005).

Although the face of leadership within the counseling profession has changed, the degree to which leadership roles and functions have kept pace with women's experiences remains questionable. Traditional leadership models and expectations are still in place, presenting challenges for women in such roles. The purpose of this article is to discuss the nature of leadership in the counseling profession from a gendered perspective. An overview of the challenges and realities begins the discussion, followed by definitions of leadership and leadership styles. An exploration of gender stereotypes about leadership serves as a foundation for positing new leadership definitions and strategies for successful negotiation of leadership roles.

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

In the United States, career expectations for both women and men have shifted over time. Counselors currently entering the profession have been educated with a professional emphasis on social justice and advocacy, thus emphasizing more directly a leadership role in professional organizations and with clients. From the standpoint of providing direct counseling services, career exploration and development may now include clients' ambitions to assume leadership; counselors must be prepared to work with clients as they enter and navigate the workforce and deal with the expectations for leadership in their selected fields. Challenges for women of balancing motherhood, career and personal ambitions, and personal schemas are significant counseling concerns (Blair-Loy, 2003; Medina & Magnuson, 2009). If women are in professions in which leadership is expected, additional concerns related to this pressure may be raised in counseling.

As reflected in the title of their article *Doing Gender*, C. West and Zimmerman (1987) suggested that gender is in fact an action that allows individuals to ascribe meaning to daily functions and describe the way that specific gender roles enable and enhance certain functions. Bem (1974) began the discussion on gender in the late 1970s and presented a gender continuum. She suggested that *androgyny* is the sought-after perspective to highlight the best of a person's masculine and feminine sides, rather than the traditionally prescribed focus on gender roles for men and women. The androgynous approach is meant to liberate men and women to more freely express themselves and their masculine and feminine qualities.

Feminism, through the women's movement, has maintained a focus on women's equality and rights within society (Staggenborg, 1998). From a movement born of the effort to eradicate gendered oppression and discrimination and to equalize the power differential with men, feminism has transformed into a celebration of women. Over time, feminists rallied for women's rights to

vote and for equal pay in the workplace. Neofeminists today approach feminism from a “watchdog” perspective, ensuring that emerging generations are granted the same opportunities as women who have benefited from feminist movements. Neofeminists further promote profeminist agendas, including the support of women as public leaders in society (Staggenborg, 1998). Although feminism remains strong, gender-laden messages in the media and in daily interactions may confuse women. Traditional perspectives and gender roles may be denigrated by some and expected by others. Thus, the female leader is left in a quandary.

As gender, an issue worthy of regard, has received more attention, gender’s role in career transitions, career choice, and career success has been studied. Several studies in the counseling literature have addressed such issues as gender role orientation and its role in the counseling relationship (Ametrano & Pappas, 1996; Seem & Johnson, 1998), gender role perspectives of counselors and clients (Hoffman, 2006a, 2006b; Hoffman, Hattie, & Borders, 2005), and sex and gender in counselor supervision (e.g., Seem & Johnson, 1998). Also of note are the career development, experience, and performance of counselor educators with respect to gender. New studies have emerged regarding the experiences of female counselor educators, including mentoring (Gibson, 2004), gender and racial bias (Bradley, 2005), career satisfaction (Hill, 2009), and balance of work and family (Medina & Magnuson, 2009).

The increasing volume of literature addressing the career experiences of women in counseling and counselor education suggests that women are assuming leadership roles in the counseling profession. The balance of career and family is one of the most extensively documented challenges for women (Blair-Loy, 2003; Medina & Magnuson, 2009; Murray, 2006; Steiner, 2006; Warner, 2005). A woman who is married, employed, and the parent of young children tends to have the greatest amount of stress in achieving balance among these three roles (Blair-Loy, 2003). Involvement in dynamic leadership roles in the workplace or in professional associations may raise stress levels even higher. Motherhood challenges women in general and, in a more specific way, women in leadership positions. Socially constructed and gender-stereotyped expectations about motherhood do not typically include the additional responsibility of professional leadership or career attention (Medina & Magnuson, 2009; Steiner, 2006).

There is limited research addressing women’s leadership, particularly within the counseling profession. Black and Magnuson (2005) provided a glimpse of leadership trends within ACA and the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision. They suggested that leadership is more traditionally viewed as holding elected and appointed positions, which does not account for the positional leadership of women who contribute behind the scenes. The feminist research in the counseling profession is similarly limited, and this lack may have the unintended consequence of silencing gender as a construct worthy of discussion and exploration (Murray, 2006).

Learning how to be a leader may present yet another challenge for female counselors. Mentoring is an important process in the counseling profession. Mentoring relationships help emerging counselors to develop their interests and make important professional contributions. Without female leader role models of their own, many women may not know how to mentor (Humble, Solomon, Allen, Blaisure, & Johnson, 2006). Considered within the framework of feminism, mentoring itself may be counter to ideals of equality by virtue of the imbalance of power inherent in the relationship. However, such an assumption is based on the traditional notion of mentoring relationships in which there is a teacher and a student. As I discuss later in this article, perhaps a redefinition of mentoring relationships is needed to ensure equality for women as they enter into leadership positions.

Wary of being perceived as having a separatist attitude, many women tacitly agree to “play the game,” whose rules were made by the men who typically held the power, and attempt to get ahead professionally by following the traditionally male-oriented routes to success. Other women may feel marginalized by this perspective and fear that they will not be able to get ahead without sacrificing family, relationships, or their personal well-being. Many men are faced with an even greater challenge to uphold the masculine gender role expectation to be career-driven and success-oriented, when in fact they may prefer to spend more time with family, friends, and generally nurturing themselves and their relationships (Staggenborg, 1998). Through historical examples, role models, and traditional mentorship relations, women may receive the message that assuming leadership means they must sacrifice in other areas of their life.

LEADERSHIP: DEFINITIONS, STYLES, AND THEORY

Perhaps the definitions and portrayal of leadership are in need of exploration to address their inherent challenges to women. Examining traditional definitions of leadership, leadership styles, and the role of gender in leadership provides a foundation for understanding these challenges and creates a platform for opportunities for reform and support.

Leadership Defined

J. D. West, Osborn, and Bubenzer (2003) suggested three leadership dimensions: context, vision, and action. *Context* involves exploration of the population or task, *vision* reflects work to achieve an intended goal, and *action* moves people and process toward change and improvement. Leadership requires one to be an advocate for a profession, a cause, or a task (J. D. West et al., 2003). Similarly, Borders and Shoffner (2003) defined leaders as individuals who are change agents, social activists, and catalysts in their disciplines.

In the counseling profession, leaders may be in various positions and serve myriad functions. Counselors working in the front lines in schools and com-

munity mental health agencies, students in counselor preparation programs, and counselor educators may all serve as leaders. They lead students, clients, communities, and emerging professionals through their daily acts, service to professional associations, and volunteer work in many capacities. Given these functions, leadership may be a sought-after quality for counselors. The degree to which a counselor's daily work is construed as fulfilling a leadership role may be a reflection of the profession's definition.

Leadership Styles

It is perhaps the manner in which one leads that distinguishes style and perception of ability. Collaborative, transformational, and context-driven leadership styles are inherently geared toward stereotyped interpersonal leadership styles attributed to women. At odds with the traditional view of how women should behave are the characteristically male leadership styles that are driven by authoritarianism and swift decision making. A qualitative study of eight female leaders suggested that women's leadership attributes and behaviors are actually an interaction between personal, interpersonal, and professional domains (Black & Magnuson, 2005). Black and Magnuson (2005) highlighted authenticity, compassion, and vision, respectively, with the three domains they identified. It might even be suggested that the traditional hierarchical model of leadership, challenged by feminist efforts to equalize power (Humble et al., 2006), runs counter to the actual lived experience of women's leadership.

An individual's leadership style reflects a unique combination of personality traits and professional goals and vision (Black & Magnuson, 2005). It is assumed that leadership style will correlate with success. Yet, the myriad books describing leaders across disciplines do not advocate a specific leadership style (e.g., J. D. West et al., 2003).

Leadership Theory: The Role of Gender

Leadership, by implication, suggests power. Yet, power comes in many forms and, historically, addresses issues of oppression. Dimensions of race, gender, and class have been conduits of oppression. Gender has not been fully explored within the context of oppression and may have a place in discussions of hierarchy and power (Murray, 2006).

Stepping into a leadership role can be a means of exerting power over traditionally oppressed groups or, conversely, a means of reacting to one's own history of oppression and thereby exerting one's first experience with power. Multiple cultural identities have challenged the stereotypes of leadership. For example, Bradley (2005) discussed the traditional stereotypes for professional African American women as either "Mammy" or "Sapphire," referencing instead the nurturing and strength they bring to their professional roles. There are penalties for holding professional roles that by nature do not fit with the stereotypes of African American women, including criticism by other

African Americans for fulfilling stereotypes or abandoning cultural ideals and preconceived expectations that African American women cannot be effective leaders. One may surmise from Bradley's position that professional African American women may not be inclined to assume traditional, male-defined leadership roles within the counseling profession because of the perceptions that others may hold of them.

Exerting power and assuming leadership roles as traditionally defined run counter to women's development and their orientations toward relationship (Gilligan, 1982). Traditional masculine and feminine traits are stereotyped in terms of leadership potential. Women in leadership positions are often expected to demonstrate typical masculine traits such as decisiveness, authority, and directness. Women are perceived to work from a care and relational orientation, and these traits may be inconsistent with the traditional concept of leadership (Gilligan, 1982). However, concepts of patriarchal power and hegemonic masculinity challenge women to uphold traditional gender role expectations (Coleman, 2003). Participants in a qualitative study of female head teachers in England and Wales found advantageous ways to step outside of the male role (Coleman, 2003). Several participants in this study discussed using "feminine wiles" and having different interactions with men to achieve their professional functions.

Whether decisiveness, authority, and directness are indeed reserved for men and masculine behavior is a multilayered question that addresses surface behaviors and, more deeply, effective leadership styles. Research regarding women's tendencies to develop in relation to one another and to value these relationships more than goals and outcomes (Gilligan, 1982) seems to uphold stereotyped perspectives of facilitative leadership. A woman who finds ways to use her femininity to her advantage is seen as relying on seductive trickery (Coleman, 2003), whereas a man exerting his masculinity may be seen as practicing smart leadership and getting ahead. The counseling profession's responsibilities to foster equality, cultural relativism, and personal agency propel professional counselors toward an examination of roles to better prepare future female leaders within the profession.

MOVING FORWARD: REDEFINING LEADERSHIP

There are distinct challenges for women who wish to assume leadership positions, either by choice or by nature of their abilities. As a profession, counseling has a responsibility to promote discussions regarding equality and opportunity for leadership positions and to explore a redefinition of how counselors may effectively lead in various ways. The profession must move beyond leadership stereotypes to which female leaders may conform and promote the strengths of each individual. Similarly, consistent with the profession's multicultural and social justice emphases, provisions must be

made to consider individuals' personal strengths rather than assume that they must change to effectively lead.

Beyond Stereotypes

To begin, the profession may benefit by further exploring women as women and then as leaders. Limited research exists regarding women in professional positions within the counseling profession. The current literature provides guidelines for working with women who are struggling with career–life balance concerns (Medina & Magnuson, 2009). Perhaps counselors could turn their attention to their own career–life balance and related gender issues reflected in their professional work roles and functions. Greater attention to counselor values, beliefs, and personal experience is warranted to ensure effective counseling practice. Moreover, counselors who are leaders could explore their beliefs regarding gender and how they might make positive contributions to the profession.

Stereotyped gender perspectives are generally unintentional and based largely on personal belief systems and experiences (Staggenborg, 1998). Counselor preparation programs seek to be mindful of reducing bias and increasing opportunities to address issues regarding bias within the counseling process. Yet, the expectations and public image of professional counseling leaders may be rooted in traditional concepts of leadership roles. Perhaps the counseling profession should call on leaders, regardless of their sex or their gender role, to break these barriers and proudly celebrate their natural styles and beliefs. The profession might even benefit from female leaders who, as a way to validate women engaging in similar struggles, publicly share the challenges they face in their effort to balance multiple roles and responsibilities (Steiner, 2006).

Professional Definitions and Responsibilities

Leaders in the counseling profession and beyond are more aligned with traditionally masculine models of success. Current popular literature (Blair-Loy, 2003; Steiner, 2006) highlights the challenges for women, in particular, to balance personal and professional roles in order to be successful. Mainstream authors (e.g., Warner, 2005) have suggested that organizational and societal infrastructures must change if women and men are to be equally successful. Providing child care at conferences, offering flexible work schedules, and identifying differential markers for success and accomplishment have been recommended (Levitt & Hermon, 2009). To a degree, these recommendations may challenge feminism and the expectation for women to balance multiple roles and responsibilities, whereas, traditionally, men have not been expected to deal with balance issues. To a larger degree, these recommendations call for advocacy for women in the counseling profession. Addressing the profession's infrastructure is itself a task for leadership, regardless of leaders' sex or gender role.

Feminism, multiculturalism, and the many other defining factors that provide guidance to daily work in the counseling profession should be reviewed

and incorporated in leadership actions. It is not just the visible leaders who hold offices, but also the positional leaders behind the scenes who push them forward. The notions of radical feminism need not strictly apply; rather, the suggestion is to explore the ways that women may find opportunities in their personal and professional lives to advance the causes close to their hearts. Defining leadership in terms of action and style rather than position and power is a framework that the counseling profession may endorse. Even exploration of the professional literature can have an impact on this perspective. Exploring gender differences with respect to social context, not simply a male–female dichotomy, may provide greater meaning in the explorations of human development and counseling phenomena (Yoder & Kahn, 2003).

Mentoring and Modeling

The research has suggested that mentoring provides new challenges for counselor educators and counselors. Professionals may have different mentoring needs at various points in their careers. Yet, mentoring is nevertheless needed throughout the career, particularly for women. Female faculty across disciplines who engaged in mentoring as both mentors and mentees reported a feeling of connection within this relationship (Gibson, 2004). Models for mentorship are traditionally masculine in nature and do not embrace a more interpersonal approach and function for this relationship (Mayer et al., 2008). The most effective mentoring may follow more feminist-oriented principles. Themes in feminist mentoring include self-disclosing to nurture relationships, analyzing power, dealing with resistance to feminism, and working toward social change (Humble et al., 2006).

Mentoring is a responsibility of the counseling profession, the onus of which is on both mentor and mentee. Emerging leaders are encouraged to find and choose mentors who can facilitate mentoring opportunities for development and growth (Black & Magnuson, 2005). Mentors are encouraged to consider traditional mentoring relationships, multiple mentors, and peers as mentors (Mayer et al., 2008). The mentoring process may then more naturally evolve to provide guidance to female leaders and to continue to shape professional perceptions of leadership.

Feminism

Finally, it may be time for the counseling profession to officially embrace feminist principles of equality, empowerment, and opportunity in practice. From a broader professional perspective, the feminist ideals of equality and balance of power must be demonstrated by male and female leaders alike. Emerging leaders should embrace a relational orientation, particularly given the context of the counseling profession and its tenets. Feminist principles of leadership, much like feminist theory in counseling, encourage men and women to more fully explore their potential and how they are facilitating change in individuals, organiza-

tions, systems, and societies. Exploring the demands of societal expectations for motherhood may be just one aspect of the process (Medina & Magnuson, 2009). As practitioners, counselors should be encouraged to focus attention on their personal beliefs about motherhood, women, and career aspirations.

Feminist research, although emerging in prominence, is nevertheless still limited. Such absence sends a subversive message about the value of gendered professional considerations (Murray, 2006). Professional literature may be another means to increase attention to gender issues for counseling professionals as well as clients. Feminist mentoring, as previously discussed, may be an avenue to promote feminist research and feminist themes in the next generation of counseling professionals (Humble et al., 2006).

CONCLUSION

My own experiences as a career-oriented woman prompted this article. I saw myself as a positional leader who made contributions behind the scenes while pushing others into the spotlight. As a young counselor educator, I was a mentor and model for young female students and was exploring the balance of career, leadership, and family. This balance was most seriously challenged when I was elected to a state leadership position within one year of having a child. As a woman, counselor, mother, educator, partner, and leader, I assumed responsibility for modeling, as feminism once affirmed, that women could have it all without a price.

Adhering to fundamental principles and personal beliefs is easier in theory than in practice. Even in the current social climate, women are still disadvantaged if they elect to pursue the traditional masculine version of professional success as well as the feminine ideal of personal satisfaction. Seeing the two visions as intertwined rather than at odds is ultimately the responsibility of the individual. As a profession of informed helpers, counselors can encourage a broader both-and rather than either-or exploration of the career–life balance challenge of women moving forward in their career.

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