

Chapter 44

Women's Leadership Aspirations and Career Paths in Higher Education: Influence of Personal Factors

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to provide insight into the ways in which personal life roles such as mother, daughter, and/or spouse/partner influence the leadership aspirations of women holding senior university administrative positions (e.g., academic dean, vice president, provost). The chapter is informed by a postmodern feminist perspective and reviews literature related to pathways to the presidency, family considerations, gender roles, and geographic mobility. Findings from the literature are integrated with those of the dissertation of the second author. In keeping with a postmodern feminist perspective, the chapter concludes with recommendations for change in recruiting diverse women for higher education leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to provide insight into the ways in which personal life roles such as mother, daughter, and/or spouse/partner influence the leadership aspirations of women holding senior, or key-line, university administrative positions (e.g., academic dean, vice president, provost) in the career path to the presidency and female university presidents. Because higher education institutions, like many workplaces, tend to reify traditional gender expectations in ways that present subtle and unspoken barriers for women aspiring to leadership (Acker, 2006), this chapter explores how women make sense of and cope with the contradictory demands of work and their personal lives. The chapter begins with a brief background, presents a postmodern feminist theoretical framework, and reviews findings drawn from the literature and the second author's dissertation (Wheat, 2012). In keeping with a postmodern feminist perspective, the chapter concludes with recommendations for change.

Background

Scholars have addressed how motherhood and family relationships influence the career paths of female faculty in academia (Mason, Wolfinger & Goulden, 2013). However, the influence of university women leaders' family relationships on their career choices has been understudied and even fewer studies have addressed the influence of women's spouses/partners (Madsen, 2008; Marshall, 2009; Steinke, 2006; Switzer, 2006). There is a particular need for research that examines how personal life factors (e.g., child-rearing, spousal/partner relationships or single status, caring for elderly parents, etc.) influences female administrators' career paths and presidential aspirations (Bornstein, 2008; Madsen, 2008; Marshall, 2009; Steinke, 2006; Woollen, 2016). There is also a need for studies that seek to understand how gender intersects with the multiple dimensions of women leaders' personhood such as family status, marital status, age, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation to inform women's career path experiences and leadership aspirations (Blackmore, 1999; Bornstein, 2008; Chliwniak, 1997; Jean-Marie, 2010; Turner, 2008). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals are likely to be present in leadership positions, but may not choose to reveal their status due to "fear, perceived irrelevance, hostile work climates, antigay policies, or the leader's own identity development" (Fassinger, Shullman, & Stevenson, 2016, p. 202).

Work-life balance issues and their influence on women leaders' careers in higher education have been widely addressed in the research literature (Astin & Leland, 1991; Bornstein, 2008; Chliwniak, 1997; Cox, 2008; Eddy, 2009; Kuk & Donovan, 2004; Madsen, 2008; Marshall, 2009; Steinke, 2006; Switzer, 2006; Warner & DeFleur, 1993). Another consistent theme that has been addressed relates to the role of family relationships on women leaders' career paths (Eddy, 2009; Kuk & Donovan, 2004; Madsen, 2008; Marshall, 2009; Steinke, 2006; Switzer, 2006). Other scholars have examined the influence of parenting young and/or school-age children for female faculty (Cook, 2014; Evans & Grant, 2008; Ghodsee & Connelly, 2011; Mason & Goulden, 2002; Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden, 2013; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012; Young, 2015). Nevertheless, few scholars have examined the influence of having young and/or school-age children and the role of spouses/partners on women senior administrators' and presidents' career paths. Likewise, scholarship relating higher education leadership to LGBT identity is virtually nonexistent (Fassinger, Shullman, & Stevenson, 2016).

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