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THE SOCIALIZATION OF WOMEN ADMINISTRATORS IN EDUCATION: How Can They Fit In?

P. Kay Duncan

It is intriguing to note that although women constitute about 66% of the nation's K-12 instructional personnel¹ and earn more doctoral degrees than men in the field of education², they make up only 30% of the general category of personnel called school administrators.³ In fact, in an American Association of School Administrators 1989-1990 survey which included only principals, superintendents, deputy, assistant, and area superintendents, only 24% of these school administrators were women.⁴ These figures have two significant implications. The first is that women who do become administrators generally must carry out their administrative roles in situations where the majority of their fellow administrators are men. The second implication is that these women must also learn what it is to be a woman administrator, a role which can be significantly different from any previous roles they have experienced. The expectations of others for a female administrator can be extraordinary and even the woman administrator's self-imposed aspirations can be formidable.

In light of these implications it becomes apparent that a female must undergo socialization or training not only as an administrator, but more specifically as a "woman" administrator. Indeed, how does the woman administrator "fit in?"

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Individuals and organizations mirror the social system of which they are a part.⁵ Since being a man or woman is at the core of our social lives and of our inner selves, gender is among the bases of the social fiber according to Warren.⁶ Therefore, dependence upon gender and other social categories for the societal division of labor forms the underpinning of culture throughout history. Living within a society presumes, therefore, gendered interaction, conversation, and interpretation.

Young⁷ recounts the recent evolution of feminist confrontations with patriarchal constructs of women's nature. Young asserts that the dominant feminist impulse has been to deny any significant difference between women and men, primarily because for centuries men in power (philosophers, theologians, and politicians) excluded women from meaningful human enterprises. Such men have argued that women's essential natures are different from men's. According to Young the second wave of feminist theory attempted to attain women's liberation through "androgyny", a social condition of those having neither specifically feminine nor masculine characteristics. Through androgyny, women attempted to transcend gender in social situations. This was politically important as feminism asserted that women can do anything men can do and thus should not encounter discrimination, exclusion, or differential treatment.

In the past ten years, this assertion has been challenged by other interpretations of women's equality and liberation, which adds to the complexity of the issue. One such interpretation, "humanist feminism," basically regards femininity, in company with the social status and gender-specific situation of women, as constraints, even liabilities, to the advancement and autonomy of women. This version of feminism is committed to an ideal of universal humanity in which gender differences are simply accidental and which subscribes to gender neutral universal standards of excellence and achievement.⁸ Tavis,⁹ a social psychologist, terms this view "minimalist", adding that there are no significant differences between the sexes other than those temporarily imposed by society.

"Gynocentric feminism", a term coined by Young,¹⁰ does not accept the humanist ideal of gender neutral equality and has rediscovered and displayed value and virtue in feminine experience, social status, and expression. This model of feminism exalts female experience, virtues and activities and resists their exclusion, devaluation, or exploitation by a male-dominated society. Key to this feminist paradigm, according to Young, is the gender-based psychology theory of Chodorow that generally women seek to relate to others as opposed to men, who often settle for separateness. This view might be termed "maximalist", claiming that there are major, fundamental differences between men and women.¹¹

It is undeniable that in contemporary Western society the socialization of women does often contribute to the development of skills, expectations, and temperaments that are different in women than in men—profound differences that can divide men and women in their daily lives.¹² In fact, the upshot of this socialization is a gender-induced culture gap.¹³ Tavis¹⁴ indicates that for women to cope successfully with this gender-based culture gap a socialization process is needed that:

organizes for its members different influence strategies, ways of communicating, nonverbal languages, and ways of perceiving the world. Just as when in Rome most people do as Romans do, the behavior of women and men depends as much on the gender they are interacting with than (sic) on anything intrinsic about the gender they are.

Based on extensive examination of research, Tavis asserts that masculinity and femininity are not permanent personality traits; the behaviors and qualities of men and women will emerge and vary depending on the situation and the need.

Most men and women are flexible in their behaviors and display both "feminine" and "masculine" qualities. Tavis goes on to say that people who can embrace the best qualities associated with both extremes are more healthy, both mentally and physically, than those who are rigidly feminine or masculine.

Tavis presents her point in spite of current literature on women in our society that includes discussions of: a woman's morality based on responsibility and on relationships among people, rather than on separation and competition;¹⁵ women's special ways of drawing conclusions about truth, knowledge, and authority,¹⁶ and; women's use of conversation as "a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships".¹⁷

*Megatrends for Women*¹⁸ claims that women even have a different management style than men and describes "Women's Leadership Style" as open, trusting, compassionate, understanding and nourishing continual education. In fact, recent thought on women in educational administration also dwells on traditional female descriptors: nurturing, sensitive, empathetic, intuitive, compromising, caring, cooperative, and accommodative.¹⁹ However, in light of Tavis' views as well as recent management theory, it seems apparent that both women and men who embody these so-called female descriptors would benefit in their capacity as administrators.

Women As Educational Administrators

What do these socialization issues mean for women leaders in our society? What do they mean for women in educational administration? Little girls originally possess a strong will to power, autonomy and mastery (from which derive leadership, creativity, genius, original thinking, and integrity in the face of adversity). However, little girls are socialized to repress this will by participating in female-only play groups and by mimicking the women they see.²⁰ Pigford and Tonnsen²¹ in their book on women in school leadership offer that in their formative years, girls learn the importance of being polite, clean, and courteous whereas boys are encouraged to explore, to be independent, to take charge, and are allowed to be active. They go on to state that schools teach and reinforce behaviors considered to be "gender-appropriate" with boys and girls assigned gender-appropriate tasks and toys and rewarded for gender-appropriate behavior. The recent AAUW report, *How Schools Shortchange Girls*,²² substantiates this claim. Curcio, Morsink, and Bridges²³ also confirm that learned behaviors of women can be traced back to the differences in responses that teachers make to girls and boys, adding that girls developed a sort of learned helplessness when they were told they were trying hard but not making it.

Furthermore, according to Pigford and Tonnsen,²⁴ the language of society applies strict sanctions to increase the likelihood that boys and girls will engage in gender-appropriate behaviors as identified by Western society: girls who climb trees, have an interest in snakes and bugs, or play contact sports are labeled "tomboys"; boys who play with dolls, associate with girls, or prefer solitary, reflective activities to active sports are called "sissies." A recent Newsweek article²⁵ claims that for all the major advances in the status of women in the last 25 years, attitudes haven't changed all that much as our children are socialized. Girls are still raised to become wives, and sons to be sons. Society is caught in a cultural lag, still training women to be pliant and to be nice, pleasing and nurturing.²⁶ By the time girls reach adulthood, they "believe that they will be considered unfeminine if they confront conflict assertively. They do not want to be disliked, and they feel uncomfortable if other people are upset with them."²⁷

The socialization of males prepares them to be leaders while the socialization of females prepares them to be followers and helpers.²⁸ Society tends to define leadership using so-called "male" characteristics. These stereotypes can place women administrators in a dilemma. "They can be either

women or leaders; to be both is generally viewed as contradictory."²⁹ Marshall³⁰ agrees that women are constrained by cultural definitions of appropriate behavior. Northcraft and Gutek³¹ argue that the fact that men and women are viewed as different and unequal in many ways puts women at a definite disadvantage because men have more power, and thus characteristics and behavior associated with men will be valued more than characteristics associated with women. In fact, Belenky et al.³² cite extensive research on sex differences that indicates that girls and women find it more difficult than boys and men to assert their authority or to even consider themselves as authorities. Brunner and Duncan,³³ in their research on women central office administrators, found this reluctance on the part of some women to display assertive behaviors to be more a function of power and socialized reactions to that power than a matter of sex differences. They claim that there is a type of female administrator that manages her own powerlessness by asking permission of others to act and think even though she is in a position of power. These women instinctively or consciously feel they must carry out their administrative role in this manner in order to be accepted and supported in that role. Wolf asserts that many adult women are ambivalent about using power because they have repressed the will to power and the natural longing to use power.³⁴

Adkison,³⁵ presenting the critical elements of ICES, a program directed toward both individual and organizational change to mitigate discrimination, confirms that sex role socialization creates internal barriers for individuals who accept cultural prescriptions for appropriate behavior. Realistically, women who wish to become successful administrators almost have to accept these cultural prescriptions,³⁶ and thus should attempt to be resocialized by developing the skills necessary to gain entry into the male dominant culture of school administration.³⁷ However, there are many problems inherent in the process of socialization as a woman administrator. Women who adopt "masculine" behavior usually associated with leadership, might be rejected as too competitive, too aggressive, too tough. Women who display behavior generally accepted in society as feminine behavior, might be rejected as leaders. Either way, women may have to deny their identity—their core—and "may find that the cost of being at the top, in terms of their self-concept, can be extremely high".³⁸ Most women administrators are aware at some level that if they are to be accepted and supported, they must adhere to societal norms and expectations and behave as "ladies should".³⁹

Marshall⁴⁰ examined data from a field study of twenty-five women in educational administration careers from the perspective of Erving Goffman's theory. Goffman states that people who deviate from the "normal" develop management techniques which result in either their acceptance or rejection by the community or group that establishes and upholds the norms. Marshall theorizes that women administrators are perceived as unable to fill the identity norms of either "normal women" or "normal school administrators" and that after denial and retreat, acceptance of cultural and organizational norms occurs. This acceptance is often followed by alienation and rebellion. Finally, some women cope with the stigma and learn to "pass".

What this means, according to Marshall, is that women must strike a balance between being gender appropriate and nurturing without threatening their professional image. "They must avoid appearing aggressive, liberated, and uninterested in children and recipes, to avoid alienating others."⁴¹ She states that people possessing stigmas have to find ways to help others to be at ease and comfortable. She goes on to say that women administrators learn that showing anger does not improve their treatment. Successful female leaders learn to laugh about how men react to their being administrators and to display a caring, supportive impression. They distinguish themselves from other women's roles, functions and positions in the

organization by dressing more male, by socializing as a secretary in meetings, and by managing their appearance and behavior to give the appearance of unobtrusive normal women and to neutralize their sexuality.

Marshall summarizes by stating that some women school administrators, after going through a long phase of passing, as they mature or attain high positions, finally become secure enough and demonstrate their competence enough to be themselves. She emphasizes, however, that it is not enough to describe the adjustments made by women; that ways must be found to help women in career development and to overcome others' resistance to women as administrators.

Meaningful Differences

As mentioned previously, Tavris⁴² emphasizes differences of context rather than the sex differences of personality traits and ego development. To develop her argument, she cites the work of psychologist Lawrence D. Cohn who analyzed 65 studies for the extent of sex differences in personality and concluded that differences between young men and women eventually disappear with no difference between adult women and men in "maturity of thought" and complexity of reasoning. Tavris adds the two sexes also ultimately converge in moral reasoning and other dimensions of personality development. She states that context consistently overpowers personality in the pursuit of meaningful differences between men and women. By context, she is referring to everything in the environment of a person's life: work, family, class, culture, the immediate situation and its requirements, etc. The differences of consequence show up in persistent inequities in employment and work opportunities, family obligations, medical and legal obligations, and income. In other words, she sees the behavior of women and men in context as flexible behaviors rather than permanent qualities of the person or of their gender. She prefers to describe the world of men and women as cultures that are not only different but are unequal as well in power, resources, and status.

Among the differences of magnitude that Tavris⁴³ lists are some that impact the role of the woman administrator:

Caretaking

Communication

- interaction styles
- uses of talk
- power differences

Emotions

- contexts that produce them
- forms of expression

Power and status at work, in relationships, in society

"Second shift": housework, child care, family obligations

In essence, these are differences of power rather than differences of culture. For example, Tavris explains that whenever social scientists have explored many of the apparent linguistic differences between men and women, they often find that qualities assumed to be typical of women, are, instead, indicators of a power imbalance. In fact, Dr. Tavris states "women and men who are in a one-down position in a relationship, such as being witnesses in a courtroom, reveal the hesitations and uncertainties of so-called 'women's speech' [pauses, hedges, 'sort of's,' and the like]."⁴⁴

These differences of power represent complex socialization issues that can have a significant and enduring effect on women administrators.⁴⁵

Concluding Comments

Thus we return to the initial inquiry: How exactly do women administrators fit it? There are no easy answers to this question. The long-range goal for women administrators is, of

course, to reduce the power imbalance. Reducing the power imbalance would help women to attain status equity and thereby no longer have to "fit in". Female and male administrators and those who train them and mentor them must make it a primary objective to bring the existing status inequity and its accompanying socialized behaviors into full view, analyze it, discuss it, and do what they can to neutralize the inequity. It is important that both men and women administrators understand how their cultural identities as males or females interact with each other and the effects this interaction has on organizational dynamics.⁴⁶ Men and women must support one another in dealing with this interaction and striving for healthy organizational dynamics.

There are many indicators that a change is taking place which may bring status equity to women in leadership positions. The book *Megatrends for Women* reports that women are challenging the most patriarchal institutions in the country and that "the time for women to embrace their power and set their creativity free has at long last arrived."⁴⁷ Wolfe agrees, stating: "It is no longer necessary for women to ask anyone's permission for social equality."⁴⁸ In educational administration alone, the percentage of women superintendents in the U. S. has increased modestly from less than 1% in 1971 to 6% in a 1992 study.⁴⁹ There has also been a gradual increase of women assistant superintendents from 3% in 1971 to 22% in 1988. Female principals have increased from a low of 13% in the years 1973-1976 to 27% in 1990.⁵⁰ Unscientific estimates based on information from the National Association of Elementary School Principals places the percentage of females who are elementary principals near 50% in the school year 1994-1995. The numbers of women administrators in public education are, indeed, rapidly acquiring critical mass. This increase of numbers suggests that women administrators are approaching, in concert with other women in public and private life, "an open moment",⁵¹ a moment in which they will be able to neutralize the imbalance of the present.

In the meantime, females who are also administrators can enhance their socialization process if they have not already "passed", by using a full range of situation-appropriate behaviors, regardless of whether those behaviors are typically considered to be masculine or feminine. In other words, the woman administrator should learn to react appropriately to specific situations instead of to cultural or social demands for "feminine" behavior.⁵² Interviews conducted with female school leaders in 1991 in Dallas indicated that although these women believe that the major strengths they bring to their leadership roles are empathy, sensitivity, caring, nurturing, support, compassion, and patience, they also view assertiveness, confidence, high self-esteem, strength, and competence as the most important characteristics of effective women in school leadership roles.⁵³ Additional research substantiates that women should demonstrate high levels of competence and advertise that competence rather than their "differentness".⁵⁴ Women must view themselves as capable and worthy. The female administrator needs to acquire the skills—that is, the ways of talking, ways of dressing, ways of interacting, and ways of acting—necessary for success in the dominant culture while still validating her own identity and self-esteem. A recent article in *The Topeka Capital-Journal*⁵⁵ cites further advice from a clinical psychologist whose clients are women and who has studied female executives across the country: form strong friendships, allow yourself to express a wide range of emotions, put female characteristics back into your life, exercise vigorously, avoid self-blaming, nurture your self-esteem, avoid being aggressive and find a more measured style of problem solving.

The current educational environment is opportune for women as they seek to find their place in school administration. Educators are focusing on the importance of group

interactions and collaboration, leadership with mutual considerations, and supports, and organizational systems which are more open and less hierarchical in nature. These conditions stimulate a sense of belonging and power for all. If they become the norm in education, an environment will be provided which will be more supportive of women in administration. Women and men school leaders will become full partners as they seek to make a positive difference in the lives of children and co-workers. No longer will it be necessary for anyone to "fit in".

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