



# The Impact of Systemic Factors on Mid-Level Women Leadership Advancement in Higher Education Administration through the Lens of Degendering Organizational Resilience Model

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this study was to understand systemic factors that impact the progression of women beyond middle level administrative roles within four year higher education institutions. There is currently a wide body of research addressing the shortage of women in senior leadership positions in higher education but a gap exists in research covering systemic factors affecting the advancement of mid-level women leaders. This study included female mid-level administrators from two four-year universities: one PWI and one HBCU. Qualitative research design through the feminist lens of Degendering Organizational Resilience guided this study. This study identified salient factors and practices including gendered leadership, traditional culture, invited but not accepted, degendered language, imposition of gendered expectations and “Like You” patterns that impact mid-level women leaders from advancing.*

**Keywords:** Systemic Factors, Leadership Advancement, Degendering Organizational Resilience, Higher Education

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## Introduction

Feminist research is commonly defined as research that is done by, for, and about women (Brayton, Oliver, Robins & 2021). It is a unique form of study that is distinguished through “the questions we have asked, the way we locate ourselves within our questions, and the purpose of our work.” (Maynard & Purvis, 1994 p.17). Oliver and Tremblay (2000) note three delineate principles of feminist research, the first being its double dimension. In opposition to that of regular research, its objectives include the construction of new knowledge as well as social change. Second, it is grounded in feminist beliefs and values, doing so by including feminism within the process of research by focusing on the meanings women give to their world while acknowledging that research must frequently be conducted in patriarchal institutions. The last of these three principles notes that feminist research is characterized by its diversity, noting it as both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary. It uses a variety of methodologies and constantly evolves with the concerns of women through different perspectives (Oliver & Tremblay, 2000). Thus requiring that such issues including but not limited to diversity, democratic decision making, and the empowerment of women with the inclusion of traditionally marginalized women, be addressed. Women’s desire to attend higher educational institutions created a great debate that lasted a century between the 1830s and 1840s (Gordon, 1997). Conservatives during this time believed that the role of women would be destroyed if they did more than maintain household duties (Parker, 2015). Parker (2015) states that women’s colleges were founded in the 1800’s in response to the need for women to gain access to institutions of higher learning as well as have fair treatment. As noted in Patsy Parker’s 2015 article entitled *The Historical Role of Women in Higher Education*, the move in the 1960s and 1970s toward equality in the workplace as well as education encouraged the changing of the roles of women in higher education administration and faculty. Women, now, earn and hold more bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees, yet are still underrepresented in leadership in higher education (American Council on Education, ACE, 2017 President’s Report). A study conducted by the American Council of Education, revealed that only 30% of our nation’s college and university presidents are women. This number increased only four percent since 2011 (Bartel, 2018).

Though women make up 31% of full professor positions at institutions of higher learning, according to Johnson (2016), an inexplicably small number have reached the top leadership levels at these various institutions. There are five general areas that can be blamed for women's failure to reach the upper levels of leadership within higher education: domestic responsibilities, double standards, gender stereotypes, gender biases, and inflexible workplace attitudes and structures (Rhode, 2013.). Many women in higher education institutions face stereotypes such as being more family-oriented, resulting in the time taken off from work to procreate and care for their families. This desire, therefore, leads to the interruption of their professional lives, as a result, many are not offered leadership positions (BlackChen,2015). Armenti (2004) asserts that department chairs, who tend to be men, make discretionary decisions about a woman's leave time, and women's requests are not necessarily accommodated" (p. 211). As a result, some female faculty appear particularly vulnerable in their ability to seek and receive parental leave, causing them to fear the worst for their professional development and career goals (BlackChen,2015). BlackChen (2015) explains that women achieving leadership status in higher education is contingent upon several factors; how they are perceived by society, their academic peers, their commitment to the profession, mentoring, and being qualified, to name a few. Statistics clearly indicate that while there has been progress, there is much work to be done in creating equitable systems of development and opportunity (BlackChen, 2015). Such change can be initiated by examining the systemic factors impacting middle level women leadership advancement in higher education.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### *Study Purpose / Research Questions*

The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of systemic factors as perceived by female mid-level managers towards their leadership advancement in higher education administration through a feminist lens. The study was conducted through the feminist lens of Hope Witmer's (2019) Degendering Organizational Resilience Model and specifically focused on power structure, practices, and language components.

Research Questions were; (1) How do female middle level managers perceive the impact of gendered organizational power structure on women leadership advancement in higher education administration? (2) How do female middle level managers perceive the impact of practices and institutional ethos on women leadership advancement in higher education administration? (3) How do female middle level managers perceive the impact of organizational language on women leadership advancement in higher education?

### *Theoretical Framework / Literature Review*

As noted in Mary Maynard and June Purvis'(1994) "Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective", feminism provides a theoretical framework that is mainly concerned with gender division and patriarchal control which assists in the understanding of the social world. Maynard and Purvis (1994) state that "feminist work must be rigorous if it is to be regarded as intellectually compelling, politically persuasive, policy relevant and meaningful to anyone other than feminists themselves". Hope Witmer created the "Degendering Organizational Resilience Model" to challenge both current and dominant conceptualizations of organizational resilience through the exploration of how gendered organizational power structures, language and practices of everyday organizational life interplay and limit inclusive constructions of organizational resilience (Witmer, 2019). Witmer (2019) uses Aesop's fable, "The Willow and the Oak" to illustrate the systemic factors presented to women by organizations, specifically, those in leadership. Witmer (2019) asserts that organizations must be as flexible as the willow tree to societal change, and as strong as the oak to sustain and thrive (Witmer, 2019). This theory aims to degender practices of resilience and introduce unifying qualities that offer stability and flexibility which in turn, would position organizations toward inclusive practices, processes, and theory of organizational resilience. This theory guided the researchers in understanding power structures, gendered practices and language favoring normative masculine organizational practices, which may restrict the systemic implementation of inclusive democratic practices that incorporate and benefit women, men and other groups subject to organizational subordination. This theory was important as it assisted the researchers with understanding the impact of systemic factors on women leadership advancement in Higher Education. By incorporating various feminist study requirements, this theory aided in the identification and analysis of resilient factors through the following three aspects; (1) power structure, to identify if equal voice and access to resources is given to people with differing levels of power according to organizational role and position, (2) gendering practices and the practicing of gender, to identify how resilience is enacted through actions and interactions, and (3) language, to identify how narratives reinforce collective practicing of masculinities and femininities that become embedded in the organization's story and culture.

Both higher education and the presidency are shifting. According to the American Council of Education (2018), over 50 % of presidents intend to leave their current presidency over the next five years, which suggests that the presidency will necessarily evolve. When these presidents vacate their current positions, there will be a plethora of opportunities for institutions to embrace diverse choices to lead institutions into the future (ACE, 2018). Wenniger and Conroy (2002) assert that women as leaders in business as well as in higher education were

perceived as incapable of being leaders because of predetermined notions about what characteristics made a successful leader. Characteristics that were traditionally masculine such as aggression, independence, and complex thinking and emotionless approaches are what good leaders were thought to possess (Wenniger & Conroy, 2002). Survey research conducted by Gerzema and D'Antonio (2013) involving 64,000 participants in 13 countries identified an overwhelming amount of dissatisfaction regarding the male-normed models of those currently in power. According to Longman (2018), many compelling arguments about the benefits of higher numbers of women in senior leadership roles have been presented.

Advancing women in leadership roles is not something to be done solely to benefit women; it is in the best interest of institutions as well as society overall. There are two approaches to leadership as proposed by Astin, Astin and Kellogg Foundation (2000) that assist in understanding the two most common approaches to leadership in higher education. Approach number one is a hierarchical model in which authority and power is assumed to be proportional to one's position in the administrative pecking order, and two, an individualistic model where "leaders" among the faculty tend to be those who have gained the most professional status and recognition. According to ACE (2018), women are more likely to serve as presidents at institution types where they are responsible for overseeing educational outcomes for marginalized populations of students, which includes post-traditional learners and students of color. Associate institutions serve a large percentage of post-traditional students, who are more likely to be women than the typical student population which may directly contribute to the success of female students more broadly, feeding back into a pipeline that holds the presidents of the future (ACE,2018). Currently, only 41 of the top 200 universities in the *Times Higher Education* (THE) World University Rankings are run by women (THE, 2021). According to THE (2021), the current number one institution, the University of Oxford, is led by political scientist Louise Richardson, while three other prestigious Ivy League institutions in the US, the University of Pennsylvania, Cornell University and Brown University, house female leaders.

Iresearch (2021) assert that understanding organizational practices and processes is essential to explaining gender inequality. The study of "gendered organizations p.1" as a specific area of scholarly inquiry, has developed over the last 15 years to further explain inequalities that women face as it relates to the hindrance of advancement due to gender structured environments (Iresearch, 2021). The concept, introduced by Joan Acker, is defined as the "advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine" (Acker 1990 p.5). Hoobler, Lemmon and Wayne, (2014) suggest that a persistent cycle of managers' assessments of female workers as lower in career motivation results in lower career development opportunities being offered; further asserting that this leads to fewer women in senior level positions. "Women's lack of ascension to higher management is at least partly explained by women not getting the opportunities and encouragement, that is, the critical organizational development necessary to aspire to upper management positions" (Hoobler, Lemmon & Wayne, 2014 p.64). Another characteristic to note in regard to the gendered organizational system that negatively affects women leadership advancement is, "second generation gender bias" (O'neil & Hopkins, 2015 p.16). O'neil and Hopkins (2015) describe this as a more discreet bias that has mostly replaced overt discrimination with more subtle, less visible forms of prejudice.

Joan Acker (1990) explains that the gendering of institutions and organizations occurs through the following processes. First, the division of men and women into distinctly different realms, in terms of the type of labor performed, physical work locations, and acceptable behaviors and emotions. Second, she states that the symbols and images, such as language and culture, are constructed that reinforce these divisions. Third, gendering processes occur in interpersonal interactions between and among women and men. She explains that individual identities also promote and reinforce gendered outcomes to the extent that people enact and internalize gender specific scripts for behavior. Lastly, gender constitutes one of the fundamental organizing elements of creating organizational structures (Acker, 1990). Acker (1990) compares organizations to illustrate the logic of organizational structures, asserting that jobs, work rules, contracts, evaluation systems, and firm cultures are not gender neutral. Rather, advocating that gender constitutes a meaningful analytic category asserting that a gendered substructure undergirds the entire bureaucratic organizational system forming a masculine substructure centered around the interests of men (Acker, 1990). Therefore, asserting that gender inequality stems from the very organization of bureaucracies rather than being produced solely by the actions of particular gendered individuals enacting gendered scripts for behavior within them (Iresearch, 2021).

According to Wharton's (2012) and Risman's (2004) integrative approaches, gender is seen as potentially operating at multiple levels. Within an organizational context, in structural terms, it is explored by looking at gender differences in access to power; while at a cultural level, it can be seen as reflected in gendered narratives explaining the absence of women in senior positions (O'Connor, 2010). Thus, according to Williams, Muller, and Kilanski (2012), at an individual level, gendered selves are constructed within a particular society, and these may be reflected in gendered organizational narratives depicting women as 'the problem'. In addition, cultural beliefs or stereotypes about men and women, and their relationship with organizational power exist, and these are reflected in and reinforced by the wider societal allocation of power and resources (O'Connor, 2010). This multilayered

nature of gender can at first glance underline the difficulty of initiating change. However, that very complexity also offers possibilities in that change may occur at any one of these levels.

This multilevel approach to gender is in a wider conceptual context, thus at a structural level, the concept of patriarchy is briefly explored, recognizing its limitations and strengths, relating it to the gender order, inequality regimes and intersectionality (Williams, Muller, and Kilanski, 2012). O'Connor (2010) states that it has long been recognized that men's relationships with other men are a key factor in perpetuating male dominance, a phenomenon referred to in various terms including homosocial behavior. Such behavior ties into an institution's ethos. Kezar (2007) stated, "In many ways, defining an institution's ethos is like trying to illustrate a scent: people can sense it but struggle to give a clear picture of its qualities." Institutional ethos is defined as implicit or unwritten codes that include cultural values, norms, religious precepts, and taboos (Reflectlearn, 2021), and is extremely important in transmitting the most fundamental values of a university (Lozano & Calabuig).

A campus's ethos "provides clues about the institution's moral character and imposes a coherence on collective experience by reconciling individual and group roles with the institution's aspirations and public image" (Kuh, 1993 p.73), and establishes deep bonds among its membership that enhances group performance (Ziglar, 2018). According to Voronov and Weber (2016), ethos has two essential components, emotional which relates to emotional energy it provides members of an institution, and the moral justification it provides for the investment of that emotional energy. Ethos is central to understanding lived experiences and the emotional dynamics of institutions and operates at a preconscious level in an unobtrusive manner (Voronov & Weber, 2016). Resulting in, as stated by Ziglar (2018), most members being unaware of how their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are shaped by the ethos of the institution.

A study conducted by Wilcox and Ebbs (1992) observed that institutions with a strong positive ethos were led by individuals who were able to articulate the shared values of the community in such a way that shows respect for others and a sense of fairness. Kanter (1977) argued that, to a certain degree, organizations mold their workers into who they are. What appear to be sex differences in the work behavior arise as responses to structural conditions; to one's place in the organization. Meaning, a large measure of the responsibility for the behaviors people engages in at work and their fate inside organizations is in the structure of work systems themselves (Kanter, 1977). Kezar (2007) argued that ethos does not develop on its own and requires that educators tend to an institution's ethos in a way that both policies and practices align with it.

CASOS (2021) defines organizational language as the discourse organizations produce to communicate with their internal and external audiences. Organizations are socially constructed from networks of conversations or dialogues the intertextuality, continuities, and consistencies of which serve to maintain and objectify reality for participants. Allen (2012) describes it as a mantra, expressed in often used catch phrases and philosophies that constantly flow through an organization and are eventually adopted and interpreted as actions to be followed. They eventually become part of everyday lexicon and cultural idioms that people hear streaming from the highest levels, forming a platform for what the organization believes and expects of its people (Allen, 2012), and becoming the basis for all transactions and business (Pangaro & Geoghegan, 2002). Organizations create their own internal language to solve specific problems which serves as a kind of shorthand used daily, knowing it will be clearly understood (Pangaro & Geoghegan, 2002).

Women face significant barriers to their equal participation in society. While some of these barriers are easy to see, a recent study conducted by The World Bank (2019), exposes a new line of research uncovering a surprising and less obvious possibility: the very structure of certain languages may shape gender norms in a way that limits women's opportunities. 38% of the world's population speaks a gendered language which classify objects as either masculine or feminine, resulting in worse labor market participation rates for women and more regressive gender norms (TWB, 2019).

Language is the key to a person's self-identity. It enables the person to express emotions, share feelings, tell stories, and convey complex messages and knowledge (Kim & Mattila, 2011). According to the National Business Research Institute (2021), staff members need to understand terminology and concepts to properly communicate as effective communication is critical to the efficient functioning of an organization and satisfaction of employees that is known as the building block of an organization.

Ozier and Jakiela, two economists for The World Bank (2019), conducted a study at a Policy Research conference. They were able to take newly constructed data and relate it to outcomes for women, specifically female labor force participation, educational achievement, and gender norms. Their findings showed that grammatical gender is associated with a nearly 15%-point gap in female labor force participation relative to men, even after controlling for various geographic and economic factors that could be driving the difference (TWB, 2019). As previously noted, attitudes toward women are also influenced by gendered languages which assists with explaining how gendered languages could translate into outcomes like lower female labor force participation. Drawing on data from the World Values Survey conducted by Ozier and Jakiela (2019), results found that those who speak a gendered language are more likely to agree with statements like "On the whole, men make better business executives than women do" or "when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women."

Moreover, women are just as likely as men to hold these attitudes, suggesting just how pervasive the effect of language is on beliefs (TWB, 2019).

## METHODS

The methodology utilized in this study was a phenomenological design to extract common themes in understanding the impact of systemic factors on mid-level women leadership advancement in Higher Education through the feminist perspective. The participants were interviewed with the intention of gaining pertinent information from their lived experiences in reference to their experience with systemic barriers as women in leadership in higher education. The research explored the following questions; (1) How do female level managers perceive the impact of gendered organizational power structure on women leadership advancement in higher education administration; (2) How do female level managers perceive the impact of practices and institutional ethos on women leadership advancement in higher education administration; and (3) How do they perceive the impact of organizational language on their leadership advancement.

### *Qualitative Methodology*

This qualitative study used the Degendered Organizational Resilience Model Framework from a feminist perspective. According to Maynard (1994), qualitative data methods are preferred when conducting feminist research. The idea that this method is most effective is rooted in the belief that quantitative research represents a “masculinist” form of knowing with emphasis on the detachment of the researcher with the collection and measurement being based on more objective social facts by way of a value-free form of data collection. While a qualitative approach in contrast, takes a more subjective approach to experiences and meaning of participants' experiences (Maynard, 1994). Maynard (1994) asserts that using a qualitative approach can offer a number of benefits for the researcher including the opportunity to create a much-needed bond between the researcher and the researched, which allows a level of comfort for the researcher to expose more than what may have been intended. Along with this, is the benefit of getting more of the information that the researcher needs in order to provide the desired knowledge that feminists wish to make available. With the merging of the Degendering Organizational Resilience Model with a feminist approach, the researchers were able to explore and examine the impact that theoretical underpinnings of systemic factors including language, cultural and structural conditions and practices have on the advancement of mid-level women leaders in higher education.

The researchers assumed that the study participants were honest in their responses to the interview questions. To mitigate any biases, the researchers were sensitive to participants' responses, and bracketed personal feelings resulting from responses.

### *Site Selection*

The researchers selected two sites for this study. One site classified as a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) and one classified as a Predominately White Institution (PWI). For the sake of confidentiality of both institutions and participants, the two institutions used were referred to as Institution A, and Institution B. Institution A is a PWI and is included in the elite group of R-1: Doctoral Universities, distinguished as Highest Research Activity by the Carnegie Classification, and has a long history of producing leaders in public service, academics and business. Currently, the school has over 24,000 students and is ranked as one of the nation's fastest growing institutions. Institution B is an HBCU that is rich in the tradition of educating young men and women for leadership. With an enrollment around 8,000, this institution is classified as one of the top HBCUs in the nation and offers 45 undergraduate degrees, 48 graduate programs, and 19 online programs.

### *Population and Sample Selection*

This study focused on a specific group of women in mid-level positions of leadership from two universities. The study participants encompassed middle management administrators in higher education including women holding the position of Dean, Department Chair, Assistant Dean, Program Director, Assistant Vice President and had been employed in the institution for five years. The study excluded higher level administrative roles including provosts and presidents.

The study utilized the purposive sampling technique. The inclusion criteria for this study for determining participants were as follows: Must have been a female faculty member holding the role of Dean, Department Chair, Assistant Dean, Program Director, Assistant Vice President and has been employed in the institution for five years on an academic track. The researchers identified a gatekeeper at each institution who assisted in providing contact information for persons meeting the aforementioned criteria. Ten participants were selected until saturation was reached at both institutions. Information including an introduction of the researchers, program, and study overview were sent to the gatekeepers for distribution and also to participants individually along with a link for participants to sign up for an interview time and/or request for more information.

### **Data Collection**

With the approval of Institutional Review Boards (IRB), the researchers conducted virtual one-on-one interviews which lasted between 60-90 minutes each. Before each interview began, an audio consent as well as a participant consent form for the research was discussed with the participants and signed by the participants and the researchers. The researchers reviewed the intended purpose of the study with each participant to ensure that they were fully aware of what the agreement to be a participant entailed. Upon completion of consent, the researchers reviewed the audio consent form as well as the research participant consent form while answering any questions or concerns the participants may have had before signing each form formally agreeing to be a part of the study. Each participant was also informed that the recording was used for transcription purposes and that memo or jotting down of notes electronically would also take place during the interview to ensure details were captured. Lastly, the researchers assured each participant that their identity would be held confidential and audio, transcriptions, and written memos would be held under password protection in the custody of the researchers.

The researchers ensured that each participant was comfortable by asking if they had any resistance to participate in the study. Once the participants confirmed that they were comfortable, the researchers asked the questions from the interview guide. The interview questions were formulated around Witmer's (2019) Degendering Organizational Resilience Model with specific emphasis on power structure, actions and ethos, and language. The researchers began each interview with demographic questions and continued to lead into open-ended questions about the experiences of mid-level women administrators in higher education and their perceptions of the impact of the aforementioned areas on their advancement. Memos were jotted down during the interviews. Voice inflections were also observed regarding the participant's willingness to respond to each question. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim by hand by the researchers immediately after each interview. Both participants, and the researchers kept their cameras on for transparency.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected from each participant's interview was analyzed in reference to the study's three research questions. Once all interviews were completed, they were transcribed verbatim manually along with the researcher notes and observations. Constant comparative analysis on research notes, observations and interview transcripts were utilized to identify recurring or unique themes. In keeping with Luke, Torres, and Arminio (2006), recommendations for constant comparative analysis, the researchers collected and analyzed the data simultaneously at "all stages of the data collection and interpretation process resulting in the identification of codes.

As the researchers read through the transcriptions and research notes, elemental coding was used to initiate coding. Saldana (2016) defines elemental coding as a primary approach to qualitative data analysis. This method of coding has basic but intentional filters for cycling through the data and building a foundation for the subsequent cycles of coding. After which In-vivo coding was utilized for cycle one of coding in order to notate common words or phrases from each participant's response verbatim. In-Vivo coding comes from the root meaning of "in that which is alive," and as a code refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the actual transcript as spoken by the participant (Saldana, 2016).

Words or phrases used were the actual terms or phrases stated verbatim by the participants. This method of coding was used as it was more likely to capture the meanings inherent in people's experience.

The other method of coding used for this study was "open coding" or Initial Coding as referred to by Charmaz (2014). In the initial coding, the qualitative data was broken down into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences. The goal of this Initial Coding, particularly for grounded theory studies, was to consistently have an open mind to the theoretical directions as implied by the interpretation of the data (Saldana, 2016). This coding method provided the researchers with the opportunity to fully reflect and gain greater insight into the contents of the data. The Focused Coding technique was used to search for the most frequent or significant codes to develop the most salient categories in the data corpus and required decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense. Focused Coding is a second cycle analytic process, and its goal was to develop categories without distracting attention to their properties and dimensions. This method was utilized by the researchers in order to assess comparability and transferability of the participant's data.

The researchers digested, reflected and compared the transcripts of the participant's interviews and memos to capture consistent themes throughout the data in order to attempt to gain useful information that can successfully add to the current body of knowledge by filling in the gap in the current literature pertaining to the impact of systemic factors on mid-level women leadership advancement in higher education administration.

### **Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of a study is important to evaluating its worth. Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that findings of any research should meet the criteria of credibility, transferability, and dependability. Mary Maynard (1994) notes that there are key issues important to feminism if feminist work is to be taken seriously and found influential. The researchers took note of these key issues and worked to incorporate them by encouraging women participating in this study to speak about their own conditions, utilizing a framework that was concerned with gender divisions,

women’s oppression or patriarchal control which informs women’s understanding of the social world. Women in this study were able to disclose how their own social situations, their everyday world is organized and determined by social processes which are not knowable through the ordinary means through that which are found in the everyday world (Maynard,1994).

Data triangulation was used to verify the responses of the participants of the study and to ensure clarity when transcribing what was stated during the interviews. Three collection methods were used to collect data: (a) one-on-one interviews with the participants (b) observations of participants during interviews (c) document analysis. The third collection method included transcribing the interviews conducted and compared to the recordings and provided to the participants for verification.

To establish credibility, a variety of measures were utilized throughout the study. Member checking and peer examination were used to ensure accuracy and to enhance credibility (Creswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researchers also included all of the participants’ perspectives by using verbatim phrases from interviews to illustrate the themes presented in the findings. Results were sent to all participating women for additional validation.

## QUALITATIVE RESULTS

### Description of Participants:

This study includes ten (10) full-time currently employed middle level administrators from Program Directors to Deans, and Assistant Vice President from the institutions. Table 1 is a demographic description of the representative sample of the administrators interviewed. Study participants identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms.

Pseudo Name	Age	Race	Position
Hestia	50-55	White	Associate Director
Hebe	40-45	White	Associate Prof.; Director; Asst. Dean
Leto	40-45	White	Associate Dean
Nemesis	55-60	African American	Assistant Dean
Rhea	50-55	White	Director
Aphrodite	45-50	African American	Instructor; Undergraduate Program Coordinator
Demeter	40-45	African American	Associate Professor; Assistant Department Chair
Artemis	50-55	African American	Director
Hera	40-45	African American	Associate Professor, Department Chair
Athena	40-45	British Caribbean	Assistant Vice President, Director

**Table 1: Participants Demographic Information**

### Phenomenological Analysis

Research Question 1 is: How do female middle level managers perceive the impact of gendered organizational power structure on women leadership advancement in higher education administration? The purpose of this research question was to identify the impact that gendered organizational power structures have on the advancement of middle level women leadership advancement in higher education. This was executed by asking participants questions regarding their perceptions of distribution of power, influence, and power to resources within their institution. The information obtained aided in examining established gendered organizational hierarchies and roles. Three themes emerged through the analysis process: Gendered Leadership, Traditional Culture, invited but not accepted.

### Theme 1: Gendered Leadership

Participants were asked a series of questions regarding gendered organizations and its relevance to their institutional experiences. One commonality amongst the responses was Gendered leadership. The participants described what leadership looked like above their position within the organization’s hierarchy as male dominated. Nemesis described her institution’s leadership as predominantly white and male. She further explained how women are expected to act like women and not in the same way that a male counterpart is allowed to act to not be read differently, also noting that women should not claim the same privileges as male leaders. Nemesis stated:

I think when you're in an organization, where the upper hierarchies are predominantly male in my case, usually white and male. And then you've got different kinds of encounters there's a kind of implied norm, but there's also a way that if you interact, the same way that a male chair would, for example as a woman you're going to be read differently, sometimes so. yeah right so that that's actually kind of gendered like. it's never defined but there's a presumption and there's also a presumption that you're not supposed to claim the same privileges or ways of acting if you don't fit it.

Leto gave an account of a personal experience that she had with gendered leadership in her institution. She explained that after the death of her Dean, she became the head of the department. However, after many years of serving, she was blind-sided and seemingly demoted without good reasoning, as they gave the incoming male a Senior Associate Dean position, over her Associate Dean title. She explained that the department had been running smoothly prior to the addition to leadership, also noting her seniority and dedication to the institution. Leto further noted that none of her many responsibilities were lessened, only her position within the hierarchy. Leto explained:

Up until a few years ago, there was no one above me. I was considered the higher of the rest of the ranking officers and because there was a white male and of course it's always about a power trip, they added the title of Senior Associate Dean, so my title is Associate Dean, that means that he's Senior Associate Dean. I initially felt slighted because first of all, he had no administrative experience, none whatsoever. And all of a sudden, this was a power trip and that's strictly what it was, and even when I expressed it, I was told that you know, this is something you know I need. I need somebody to be in charge when I'm away. Well you know what the place had been running itself and I was in charge, so why would it be any different. So had they not added the Senior, we would have been on the same level and not like this hierarchy he put in place.

Rhea acknowledged the gendered leadership within her institution as well. She recounted her experience at an annual beginning of the year function at her institution where all of the staff gathers, and everyone is introduced. She explained that leaders are introduced and brought out on stage to greet everyone. She noted the noticeable gender gap that existed, referring to the few minorities seen in the group as "tokens". Rhea noted that every now and then a white woman or an Asian man would be introduced but it was as if they were there just to give off the idea of diversity. Rhea accounted:

They always have a Back to School faculty meeting every fall and. I remember you always go in there and every time they do like, that sort of weird like, announcement of all the Deans and they come on stage and I don't know if they do that at Jackson state, but they do, that here a lot. And it was all the white guys like white men and then occasionally there was like, one white woman, or like one Asian man or you know there's always a token.

## **Theme 2: Traditional Culture**

The women in this study were asked about the culture of their institutions and any experiences they could recount to determine if there was any link between the culture of an institution and the advancement of mid-level women leadership. The consensus of the participants illustrated characteristics of traditional academia culture and some women even described it as such. Hestia discussed how her institution is known for being a traditional institution from its student body being predominantly white to its leadership and overall culture; noting men typically hold the higher positions in leadership contributing to the lack of inclusiveness in leadership. She discussed the need for more inclusion and disclosed that her university is making strides to cancel out their traditional practices to become more inclusive and diverse not just with gender but race as well. Hestia stated:

You know, in some ways the University is a primarily white institution, in some ways, we're very traditional in other ways. The institution is striving to be as inclusive as possible. I think in many ways, our institution recognizes the important role that the University has given our troubled history, particularly with race; um I think we've recognized that and we try. Not sure we're doing great every time, but we try.

Rhea also noted a traditional culture within her institution emphasizing the methods used for advancement within her institution's administration. She asserts that it is a very close-knit culture that operates mainly based on who knows who. Asserting that if you are not available to interject yourself in these traditional practices of socializing, you will not get very far within leadership. Rhea stated that most of the administrators at her institution knew each other prior to their employment at the institution. Noting that many of them had already met and established rapport during college. Rhea explained:

It's a traditional culture that has a lot to do with who you know, and how long you've been there right and so there's a lot of emphasis on relationships and that's both good and bad right? It means that you know people and sometimes they'll give you the benefit of the doubt, but it also means if you don't spend a lot of the time with things like "how's your mama?" and all those relationships then you're not necessarily going to get anywhere on that. So I think that's used to be a very closed shop, and I think there have been some other folks coming in, but

there's still a core of that, like they've known each other for years, like they went to college with each other.

Leto explained her institution's culture as traditional and expressed it as one that promotes based more on gender and network rather than experience. She explained that hard work is not the basis for which people within her institution are promoted, in fact, work ethic may have no bearing on advancement. She also asserts that she thinks that it has to do with gender, race, and perception. Leto stated:

I just think that we are traditional in a sense that sometimes, you feel that you can work as hard as you want and you still won't get the recognition that you deserve and I think that has mostly to do with race and gender and how you are perceived. Because you can have somebody that's in the majority group and it's all about their personality and how they interact with you, but at the same time, you see they're not doing the work. But they get their praise, but their praises are sung to the highest level and so that's what has been mostly my experience.

### **Theme 3: Invited but not Accepted**

The last theme to arise for research question one was the idea of being invited to the table as a woman, but not being accepted. In other words, the participants gave accounts of being silenced or disregarded as it relates to inclusion amongst male leaders. Rhea explained her experience with the struggle of resistance from male leaders within her institution. She explained that when in the presence of male leaders, there is an atmosphere of conducting yourself accordingly. Meaning, just because a woman holds the position, does not mean power and respect are equally distributed. She also noted that race may play a part in expectations as well. She stated:

There is a presumption that you're not supposed to conduct yourself a certain way. Like, you can have a seat at the table, but don't touch anything. In the same way you know, I think it's also race like I don't think it's just gender.

Athena gave a personal account that she encountered within her position at her institution. She discussed an instance when a man tried to dismiss her and noted "buzzwords" that men use as a tactic to silence women within a masculine setting, promoting the idea of women being too emotional to lead. She went on to note the importance of pushing back on these ideas and making sure that the point is made clearly and understood, not because of gender, but passion for the job at hand. Athena stated:

Yes, um I do think, so I do think you mentioned this earlier. Sometimes men, when you go to them to express your point of view, the first thing that comes out of the mouth, the first line of defense is oh "you're emotional." yeah well no, there's a difference between emotion and passion right; so I am passionate about this because you made me feel a certain way, so I am expressing myself but for them, because you're a woman, they use the term emotional. I don't let that deter me because I know it's a buzzword for you (men) to get me to stop arguing my point now. I'm going to still do it because guess what, I'm passionate about this right. And I'm going to make sure that you understand where I'm coming from.

Research Question 2 states: How do female middle level managers perceive the impact of practices and institutional ethos on women leadership advancement in higher education administration? The purpose of this research question was to understand how women perceived the impact of practices and institutional ethos. Two themes emerged through the analysis process: Imposing Gendered Expectations, and "Like You" Patterns. The themes provide data to assist in identifying systemic factors within the organizational structure that contribute to the advancement of women in mid-level leadership within the domain of "Practices" in the Witmer (2019) framework.

### **Theme 4: Imposing Gendered Expectations**

The women were asked about policies that may impact their ability to move beyond mid-level leadership. The majority of the participants stated that they could not think of one that is directly linked to gender bias. However, there was a consensus of the existence of gendered expectations within their institutions. During an interview, Hebe acknowledged that she was a single woman with no children. When asked about gendered policies, she could not think of one, but she did however, state a common practice that she has noticed and been subjected to.; the idea that because she is single with no children, she is available to do various tasks as needed after hours. This practice limits personal time when research can be completed to fulfill the tenure expectations required for advancement. Hebe said that she is often asked to use her free time to entertain potential faculty on behalf of her institution, noting that rather than having to work around being a mother, she is expected to always be available. This

institutional practice does not leave a lot of time for research or commitment towards tenure requirements that lead to advancement. Hebe stated:

But I don't think that I've necessarily had issues with that (policy). I think I probably get more expectation to do things at night, weekends, early mornings, because I am single and I don't have children the fact that I am female I think that's part of it, too, but like there's a lot of "can you take this faculty candidate out to dinner tonight." I would personally feel like more than other people I've been asked to take faculty out or faculty candidates and department chair candidates and other candidates out to meals after hours. This consumes a lot of my free time doesn't leave much time for anything else. And I'm not a morning person so when I'm asked to do breakfast that is not something that fits to me, but I think it's because I don't have to worry about getting the kids to school or those sorts of things so, yeah.

Another participant, Nemesis, gave an observation that was common amongst the women at her institution, demonstrating how institutional practices affect an institution's ethos.

Meaning, the upholding of a specific practice has molded the way that a particular area is defined. In this case, Nemesis discussed the perception of what is deemed as professional and acceptable for women to wear as opposed to how men are able to dress and still be looked at as professional and remain respected. Nemesis stated:

I feel like in my role Gender wise you know it's really important that I dress professionally and that I know that there's an image, I guess and yeah, then there are guys around here that are in their, you know shorts and T shirts and beards so I don't know it's kind of a double standardly they can come to work like that nobody's gonna be like me go home and change. If I were to do that, I would be so uncomfortable I wouldn't even know myself. I would not be perceived as the professional that I am. But those men that come, aren't treated any differently, and are still able to function as leaders and people still respect them as leaders.

Athena discussed how avoiding gender issues presents a problem for women within her institution. She states that it is important for people to acknowledge them and not brush them off as if they will just go away. She explains that biases are ingrained, and proper training needs to be done within institutions to promote growth and opportunities for women to advance. Athena stated:

When institutions don't check themselves, when they don't have open dialogue about these conversations, when they are pushed off under the rug it hinders inclusion, you know advancement. You know, when a woman come and say hey I didn't do this, rather than dealing with it, they push it onto the rug right, and so you have a lot of it cropping up rather than dealing with it having open dialogues and I also think that HR not necessarily a policy, but their practices, sometimes affect those type of things right. And, the training like I said, the implicit bias training in making sure that everyone in the organization, are aware, you know here, here are some examples of explicit biases and we are going to have them right? but it's how to recognize them, and when you recognize them what do you do. Because they're ingrained in us because, like I said from the Church, from our parents, from our family, from the Community, you know the different things that have influenced our biases right.

### **Theme 5: "Like You" Patterns**

The last theme for research question two was the consensus that a woman's gender does in fact impact her professional development. The participants of this study linked factors such as lack of mentorship, heavy workload, race, perceptions, and tone to gendering practices that affect the professional development of women, thus impacting advancement. Rhea referenced studies that she has read in regards to the idea of mentoring people "like you". She pointed out that the majority of people holding higher level positions in higher education are men. Further noting that with this practice, a pattern is formed. She expressed the importance of pushing back against such practices to stop the replication and acknowledge that women can be. She posits:

Sure they do you know I mean they've done some studies that you know if you mentor people who are, like you, you know, like that is the pattern, then, if most people who are in those positions are men, Then they're going to look for folks who remind them of themselves at that age, so there is some evidence of that in terms of study... But I think that's one of the most difficult stereotypes, is simply this replication of people who look like you, seeing that the people in the room, are all the same race in the same gender...And you have to make a concentrated effort to think about it and to build a diverse pool to do that.

Hestia noted the fact that women are often overwhelmed with the bulk of the work in academia. Pointing out that the women within institutions are often the ones who have to handle student support. She states the importance of acknowledging this ongoing pattern and suggests hiring professional graduate students to lighten the load so that women can focus on developing their careers. Hestia states:

That in traditional academics those women in assistant Associate Professor roles that are striving towards a Chair or Dean role, I think that they get slowed down by the extra Labor. Not recognizing this kind of Labor not including things like student support and tenure and promotion guidelines. And I understand that to obtain the position, you have to do research, but then you know let's hire some professional student advisors. Let's provide support for students that doesn't disproportionately fall on the female faculty.

Research Question 3 states: How do female middle level managers perceive the impact of organizational language on women leadership advancement in higher education?

### **Theme 6: Degendered Language**

The purpose of this research question was to identify and understand how women perceive the impact of organizational language towards the advancement of leadership in higher education administration. One theme emerged through the analysis process: degendered language. The theme provided data that rejected the idea of organizational language as a systemic factor hindering mid-level leadership advancement in higher education. The participants all came to the consensus that organizational language is no longer a barrier within their institutions. Hestia noted that the language has been changed due to the hard work of the previous generation of women that worked at her institution, noting her own mother as one of them. Hestia stated: “now that's [language] pretty engendering. Probably because you know people like my mom and previous generations for screaming at them.”

Artemis too stated the language has taken a turn for the better. She affirms that she has not heard any gender biased position titles or language. She does suggest that though the language has changed as it relates to position requirements, making the positions more “inclusive” for applicants, the bias comes in during the selection process. Artemis stated: “What they do is you know they do the job description, you know it doesn't matter who you are at first, you have the qualities, you know you can apply they don't say only males, or only if you're female you apply.”

Rhea talked about the change in gendered language, noting that titles have dropped the gendered pronouns to appear more inclusive.” However she notes that a change in position title does not mean a change in practice, adding that there are still implicit gender positions. Rhea stated:

They've gotten rid of most of that. They just say chair, they don't say person or Chairman here they just say the Chair, or the director or the Vice Chancellor or you know they don't have those gendered names for them anymore, which is good. That doesn't mean that there are those implicit gendered positions we talked about.

The majority of the participants shared the same consensus of gendered leadership within their organizations. Their experiences highlight the major components of Hope Witmer's 2019 Degendering Organizational Resilience Model by confirming organizational structure, practices, and language contribute to systemic factors that impact the advancement of mid-level women leadership advancement in higher education administration.

## **DISCUSSION**

The major findings of this research provide an awareness of the lived experiences of the impact of systemic factors on Mid-Level Women Leaders serving in administrative roles in higher education through the feminist perspective. The findings were then analyzed and categorized based on Hope Witmer's (2019) DOR Framework. Research states that there has been limited studies done on women leaders serving in mid-level positions in higher education as well as little study focusing on the impact of systemic factors on their advancement. Thus, data for this study was collected from ten women who are currently holding middle level leadership positions: five from a PWI, and five from an HBCU.

### ***Gendered Leadership***

Participants were asked a series of questions regarding gendered organizations and its relevance to their institutional experiences. The responses for this question aided the researchers in understanding the organizational structure of their institution. Research has shown that the organizational structures of an organization play a key role in the advancement of women. With these gender norms deeply embedded within the organization of higher education, it is important to analyze structure as it is the basis of systemic factors on advancement of women

leaders. One commonality amongst the responses was Gendered leadership. The participants described what leadership looked like above their position within the organization's hierarchy as male dominated. The analysis of the study found that a majority of the women had been affected directly or indirectly by the male dominated leadership. O'neil and Hopkins (2015) state that a characteristic of the gendered organizational system that negatively affects women in the workplace is second generation gender bias. Participants discussed some of their experiences as it relates to being overlooked for positions based on gender, the underlying presumptions that hinder advancement, and the influence of race.

### ***Traditional Culture***

Organizational structures within higher education are generally guided by traditional, male-centered thinking (Hardy, 2019). The idea that women lack required leadership qualities and skills is reinforced through societal norms, media, and masculine environments (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). The women in this study were asked about the culture of their institutions and any experiences they could recount to determine if there was any link between the culture of an institution and the advancement of mid level women leadership. The consensus of the participants illustrated characteristics of traditional academia culture which is more gender exclusive and some women even described it as such. Though more research is being done on how organizations can create a more inclusive culture, there are still cultural factors hindering the ability of progression. The participants of this study discussed how the culture of their institution is based on who you know, close knit relationships, and race. As previously noted in the research, males are still dominating senior level positions within higher education. With women juggling the heavier workloads of mid-level positions, plus possible familial responsibilities, there is not much time left for a social life. Thus, creating a barrier for any woman seeking advancement who is not already within one of the close knit groups within the organizations. These cultural practices are where systemic gaps muster the opportunity to persist. Participants noted that if you are not available to be social or are not perceived properly, you will not progress beyond within the hierarchy regardless of how hard you work. This finding adds to the current gap in the current research by identifying a second systemic factor impacting the advancement of mid-level women in leadership relating to organizational structures.

### ***"Like You" Practices***

O'Neil et al. (2008) proposed that the current structures work for those employed at the senior levels of organizations, the majority of whom are men. Thus there is no compelling rationale for changing the system since the status quo works for those in charge. They further proposed that while structures and systems may change, organizational culture and individual attitudes often lag far behind. They highlighted Virginia Schein's (1976; 2007), "think manager, think male" studies that showed that from the 1970's to the 2000's, men's attitudes about women being less suitable than men for leadership roles have remained firmly entrenched. Professional development is directly linked to the advancement of women within organizations. Researchers suggest that a vicious cycle of managers' assessments of female workers as lower in career motivation results in lower career development opportunities being offered which leads to fewer women in senior level positions (Hoobler et al., 2014). One of the themes that this study revealed was a pattern of "like you" mentoring. This is a practice in which leaders tend to mentor and promote people who remind them of themselves. This organizational practice impacts the advancement of mid-level leaders by limiting women's opportunity for growth and promoting an ongoing pattern of the promotion of the same style of biased leadership.

### ***Invited, but not Accepted***

The final theme that was discovered can be described as the idea of being invited to sit at the table but being told not to touch anything once you sit. Women gave accounts of how they are often dismissed by men or perceived as too emotional to be effective. The idea that women lack required leadership qualities and skills is reinforced through societal norms, media, and masculine environments (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Additionally, the built-in hierarchical and patriarchal systems within colleges are problematic impediments that affect upward mobility for women leaders (Gill & Jones, 2013).

The idea that women should be seen and not heard, or the "token" presence of women present a systemic factor that hinders progression. Institutions need to be conscious of the fact that just having a woman here and there does not represent inclusion. Women must feel as though they have the freedom to speak their minds and initiate change so that innovation of inclusive practices and patterns can be formed within the institution. Men must get out of the habit of promoting people like themselves and begin mentoring and molding women to progress gender inclusive leadership in senior level positions.

### ***Degendered Language***

The workplace can be a minefield for gendered language, with people using terms like businessman, man to man, manpower, and chairman (Davies, 2021). One consensus that all participants agreed on unanimously was that the presence of gender biased position titles are obsolete within their institutions. Participants stated that positions had

been revamped to be more gender neutral and inclusive. The majority of the participants stated that they had not heard gender biased titles since the beginning of their careers or at all within their career. Some participants linked this to the push back of previous generations of women, as well as people becoming more conscious of gender bias. These findings illustrate overt discussions and reflexive practices that have resulted in the elimination of one of the preconceived assumptions of gendered language's impact on the advancement of women.

### ***Recommendations based on Results of Study***

Based on the results of this study, there has been significant progress made towards removing systemic factors that impact the advancement of female mid-level leaders. The institutions used for this research show promising growth in the right direction. However, there is still much work to be done. Some participants of this study admitted that they have not paid attention to their surroundings enough to answer gender related questions without having to think hard. The problem with this is that after a moment of reflection, they were able to recall instances where some form of gender bias had occurred. This is troubling because one of the ways to push back against bias is to first be able to recognize it. While institutions were ranking more towards being inclusive organizations, it appears as though change is mostly being done to eliminate some of the more obvious systemic factors rather than the ones that expose bias institutional patterns.

While some participants were directly affected by systemic factors, others were not but offered insight on experiences that they had either seen or heard from women in other departments. With this in mind, it is recommended that this study be used as a guide for institutions to do not only an institutional gender resilience check, but also departmental. Institutions should adjust the questions to fit the different levels of their hierarchies and use the findings of this study as a guide to monitoring growth and adjust and repeat the study on an annual basis fitting of the environment. A report should be generated and analyzed just as frequently as others and can be classified as the Annual Institution Resilience Check or the IRC Report.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

This study was a qualitative research study that aimed to fill a gap in the literature and therefore, the results cannot be generalized. However, this study could be replicated in many ways as it is a strong universal foundation to utilize for institutional growth as it relates to diversity, equity, inclusion, and retention. The study could be used to identify systemic factors within a specific set of institutions i.e., only focusing on PWI's or HBCU's individually, or for a more intimate study focusing on individual departments across individual campuses. After conducting this study, a replicated study is suggested that targets the perceptions of the impact of systemic factors on the advancement of minorities within mid-level administration in higher education. A separate study should be conducted that allows for participation of men who serve in mid-level administration to identify more detailed findings and ultimately more solutions.

The replicated study should utilize the same framework that was used for this study, including the feminist lens as it promotes the purpose of creating useful knowledge which can be used to make a difference, and voice the concern that a masculinist hierarchy between theory and practice is being reproduced in academic feminism. A replicated study with similar findings could solidify the findings of this study and provide colleges, universities and all of their internal and external agents with a compact approach to aid in eliminating the remaining systemic factors hindering more women from progressing beyond mid-level administration in higher education.

## **CONCLUSION**

As research has shown, women are on a rise within academia. They are rising in graduate numbers as well as in leadership. However, there are still some barriers hindering more women from progressing towards middle level positions. This study added to an existing gap in research related to the systemic factors affecting mid-level leadership advancement in higher education. The results of this study show that it is imperative that institutions take a more detailed approach to determining what systemic factors remain within their own institutions to initiate more strategic change. Institutions must go beyond surface level solutions and implement more practices that eliminate the traditional ones that academia is known for.

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