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Beyond Colleagues: Women Leaders and Work Relationships

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Framed by the Stone Center's relational-cultural theory (Fletcher, 2007), which proposes that mutual growth occurs through connection, this qualitative exploratory study examines relationships with women colleagues that contribute to the quality of women's leadership experiences in higher education. Women leaders are affected by gendered organizational culture and by stereotypes of leadership that are predominantly male. They also face contradictions concerning their relationships with each other. Women are perceived to be relationally-oriented and socially responsive, but also back-biting and competitive; expected to show relational skills, but with no acknowledgement of what their skills contribute to organizations; expected to practice solidarity but also perceived as "queen bees." In the face of these contradictions, interviews with 15 women in leadership at five U.S. universities illuminate the character and contributions of select relationships that women leaders themselves identify as contributing factors to the quality of their leadership experiences. Ten benefits, which accrue both to the women and their institutions, emerged. Two of these benefits are: (1) strategizing and problem-solving; and (2) clarity of ideas, knowledge, and perspective. The benefits loosely align with the five positive outcomes associated with the Stone Center's relational-cultural model. Results offer alternative ways to think about women leaders' work-related relationships, recasting the usually invisible skills women bring to them as skills critical to enhancing their leadership, beneficial to the organization, and a means of challenging the status quo of gendered institutional culture.

Introduction

Despite the continuing challenges, more women are moving into leadership positions in higher education. Recent evidence indicates that even when women achieve leadership roles, significant challenges to their full participation and success remain (Eagly, Gartzia, & Carli, 2014; Longman & Madsen, 2014; Turner, Norwood, & Noe, 2013; Valian, 1999). The importance of support for women in leadership roles is evident in multiple ways, such as the slow progress of gaining leadership positions (Woollen, 2016) and the many leadership development programs offered for women and the nature of the programs' content (Ibarra, Adams, & Kolb, 2013; Madsen, 2011). The present study builds on the idea that support for women leaders is important in successfully navigating the marginalization and double binds of their leadership roles.

Women more than men display behaviors that are emotionally sensitive and supportive of others. These are behaviors broadly characterized as evidence of a communal orientation (Eagly, 2009). They are relevant to the support and closeness associated with women's friendships with one another (Roseneil, 2006). Women's work-related relationships with one another could be unique and crucial in contributing to the quality of their leadership experiences. Therefore, this study investigates what women leaders identify as factors that contribute to the quality of their leadership experiences, and in particular, it probes the nature of their work relationships with other women. To enable women to speak for themselves, the study is based on qualitative interviews with 15 women leaders at five universities. Based on data that speak to women's slow progress and marginalization as leaders (Gangone & Lennon, 2014), the study is timely and, to my knowledge, unique.

This study's purpose and focus emerge from perspectives on organizational culture and the ways culture is gendered. Also relevant to the study is bias against women leaders that extends from organizational culture and that involves prevalent stereotypes of leaders. These two strands of literature convey that it is important for women leaders to have resources that counter pervasive stereotypes and negative experiences. The

third strand of literature focuses on relationships between women, both at work and, more broadly, on women's same-sex friendships, including those at work. Relational-cultural theory, the fourth and final area, provides a platform for considering the possible contributions of such relationships to the experience of women in leadership. It offers the potential for linking women's relationships with one another to empowering, positive, and reciprocal beneficial effects (Jordan, 2010; Liang et al., 2002).

Literature Review
Gendered Organizational Culture
Organizations are gendered in that people in organizations both tacitly and explicitly reinforce differential expectations and inequality between men and women (Acker, 2006; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Mills & Mills, 2000). These expectations and inequality align with and reflect the ways in which gender is constructed in society and the ways power is distributed and plays out differently for men and women (Heilman, 2012). Several researchers have examined the impact of a gendered higher education environment (Gallant, 2014; Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015; Poole, Bornholt, & Summers, 1997; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012).

Another aspect of organizational culture is the separation of the personal from the professional (Mao, 2006). The personal belongs in the private world; the professional encompasses the public work world. Relationships in the workplace are expected to be professional, aimed at getting the work done. This expectation leads to both implicit and explicit devaluation of the personal when it shows up in the organization (O'Connor, 1992). Andrew and Montague (1998) provide an example of how this expectation operates in their academic setting. They describe their own woman-to-woman friendship and how it blurred the boundaries between the public and the private, the professional and the personal, in ways that seemed to make their male colleagues uncomfortable. Their experience echoed observations by Kanter (1977) that a focus on work tasks should be primary and emotional dimensions should not enter in.

The consequences of gendered organizations for women are apparent in the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes and their negative effects on performance evaluations and career progress (Heilman, 2012), as well as in the professional adversity women describe (Diehl, 2014). As Mills and Mills (2000) observe, organizational culture is governed by both formal and informal rules, with informal rules evidenced in the formation of relationships outside the organizational structure. The old boys' network is an example of a gendered practice governed by informal rules. Looking through the lens of gender, significant organizational power is often sequestered within the informal connections among men at upper levels of leadership. These connections lead to closed networks characterized by social activities and exchange of information, often in settings that exclude women (Brass, 1985; Durbin, 2010; McDonald, 2011). The old boys' network as a privileged

set of connections is not always obvious, but it operates as a shadow image that is important to keep in mind to understand women leaders' experience.

The title of a recent web article from Forbes, "Women Leading Women: Supporters or Saboteurs?" (Turner, 2012) illustrates an image that also shadows women leaders in organizations, that of the "queen bee" (Mavin, 2008) Scholarship exploring the queen bee image (Mavin, 2008; Mavin, Williams, & Grandy, 2014) identifies that between and among some women, there are behaviors illustrative of competition with and undermining of one another. That female-to-female conflict, in particular, is viewed as problematic was affirmed in Sheppard and Aquino's (2013) study. Their study compared perceptions of conflict between women to conflicts between men and between men and women. Although the conflict scenarios were the same, conflicts between women were perceived as more problematic and with more negative organizational consequences. In general, women themselves are blamed for not supporting the progress of other women when, in fact, there is evidence that the structure and culture of organizations contribute to queen bee behaviors (Derks, Ellemers, Van Laar, & De Groot, 2011).

Leader Stereotypes and Women
A great deal of research has been devoted to the distinct challenges for women both in becoming leaders and in carrying out their leadership responsibilities. Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding biases against women leaders. The powerful norms associated differentially with gender and with leadership result in role incongruity for women leaders. Women are perceived to be more communal and men more agentic. Since leadership roles are associated with agentic behavior, there is a perceived lack of fit between women and leader roles. Given the leadership behavior stereotypes, a bias exists against women leaders. Research summarized by Eagly and Carli (2007) supports role congruity theory. The bias it helps explain continues. A meta-analysis (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011) and other discussions in the literature summarize multiple aspects of the ongoing challenges (Binns & Kerfoot, 2011; Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011), including those for women leaders in higher education (Kolodny, 1998; Madsen, 2012).

The stereotyped expectations regarding women leaders and the larger context of gendered organizational cultures are a powerful combination, and their power highlights the importance of exploring ways women leaders address them.

Women and Relationships
Women's workplace relationships serve both individual and organizational functions. They take a variety of forms such as networking (Higgins, 2007; Macoun & Miller, 2014; Poldony & Baron, 1997), mentoring (Allen & Eby, 2007; Kelch-Oliver et al, 2013; Ragins & Kram, 2007), and friendships (Eagly, 2009; Lincoln & Miller, 1979; Milner, Russell, & Siemers,

2010; Sias, Smith, & Avdeyeva, 2003). Networking and mentoring have been explored extensively, particularly in relationship to women's organizational progress, including access to leadership opportunities. Much of the literature describes women as having strong relational values and interpersonal connections that significantly influence their experiences at work (Boatwright & Forrest, 2000). Research also points to women drawing on many work relationship forms more for social support than for strictly instrumental purposes related to organizational advancement (Markiewicz, Devine, & Kausilas, 1999; Tolar, 2012; Wright & Scanlon, 1991). However, as Wright (2006) discusses, the importance of social support does not mean that women are not also drawing on relationships for instrumental purposes. The particular importance of social and emotional support for women in work settings may be partially attributed to the nature of women's experience in gendered contexts. There is logic then to the idea that if emotional support is particularly important, women may turn to other women because of their shared experiences as women.

In their investigation of peer relationships at work, Kram and Isabella (1985)distinguished between mentoring and peer relationships and identified the roles of peer relationships among both women and men at work. The continuum of peer relationships they identified included *information peer, collegial peer,* and *special peer*, with friendship included in the special peer category. The special peer category is the most intimate and therarest. Along with the functions that a special peer is defined as serving—confirmation, emotional support, and personal feedback—the descriptors that the subjects generated align with many of the descriptive characteristics of women's friendships. Sias, Gallager, Kopaneva, and Pederson (2012) distinguished workplace relationships from friendships by the fact that friendships are voluntary and personal. They are not strictly a means to achieving organizational ends. They can involve considerable emotional investment (Ibarra, 1997). Given that women leaders may be somewhat outside both formal organizational structures and informal power structures, such as the old boys' network (Gamba & Kleiner, 2001; McDonald, 2011; Searby & Tripses, 2006), they "pave alternative routes," (Ibarra, 1997, p. 91) turning to strong close ties with other women (Fritz, 1997; Wood, 2000; Wright & Scanlon, 1991). When women turn to other women, the expressive dimensions of their workplace relationships may seem akin to friendship. This would be consistent with research that concludes that, in general, women's friendships are stronger and closer than men's (Sias, 2008; Wright, 2006).

Andrew and Montague (1998) offer an autobiography of their friendship, drawing on research to put into context what they have experienced. They are faculty who work in the same academic department, and they became friends. As part of their narrative exploration, they introduce the risks and complexities their relationship seems to generate both for themselves and for their male colleagues, who seem perplexed by the blurring of professional and personal roles. The experiences they have in common within the context of work provide an important but not an exclusive basis for their friendship, which is oriented both to work tasks and to their personal connection with one another.

Common experiences as a basis for forming and deepening a friendship are significant factors in Cahill and Sias' (1997) study. In their study, the closeness of work friendships increased when work problems and frustrations increased. Since women in leadership may have particular needs for support due both to ways they are stereotyped and to common leadership challenges, colleagues who become friends could be a factor contributing to the quality of their leadership experiences.

Relational-Cultural Theory
Relational-cultural theory (Fletcher, 2007; Jordan, 2010) provides an important framework for thinking about the significance and dimensions of work relationships for women. It is focused on women's positive development through relationships (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991). It is an alternative to Western culture's restrictive emphasis on separation and individuation or autonomy as idealized outcomes for human development and talks in particular about women's greater disposition toward connectedness (Boatwright & Forrest, 2000). It "privileges connection as the primary site of human growth" (Fletcher, 2007, p. 352). The connection and the positive effect of it are labeled *growth-in-connection*. The theory focuses on the positive outcomes associated with connections that are characterized by *mutuality*. Mutuality refers to the belief that both parties believe that it is important to contribute to the other's growth. Mutual connection results in meaningful outcomes (Fletcher, 2007). These outcomes include:

- *Zest.* Connection with the other that gives both members a sense of increased energy and vitality.

- *Empowered action.* Motivation and ability to put into practice some of what was learned or experienced in the relational interaction.

- *Increased sense of worth.* Increased feelings of value that come from the experience of having used one's relational skills to achieve mutual growth-in-connection.

- *New knowledge.* Learning that comes from the experience of having co-created a new knowledge in the interaction through a fluid process in which members fully contribute their own thoughts and perspective while being influenced by the thoughts, experiences, and perspectives of the other.

- *Desire for more connection.* A desire to continue this particular connection or establish other growth-fostering connections, leading to a spiral of growth that extends outward, beyond the initial participants. (Fletcher, 2007, p. 353)

Many behaviors associated with the relationships that the theory describes are the same as those described in women's friendships: (a) registering and attending to emotional data in oneself and others, (b) demonstrating sensitivity to others, and (c) gaining something from the friendship (Fletcher, 1999; Frey, Beesley, Hurst, Saldana, & Licuanan, 2016; Roseneil, 2006).

The model for growth-in-connection is potentially significant for women in leadership and is a useful framework for this study. Evidence of the importance to women of relationships at work opens the door to the possibility of such relationships being one of the factors that contributes to the quality of women's leadership experiences. Further, as women navigate stereotypes of their leadership and the organizational marginalization associated with those stereotypes, relationships with other women are a prospective site for exploring common experiences and gaining support for their leadership and the other benefits the theory describes. In addition, the model asserts that the connections that are central to the positive outcomes are skill-based. Because women are expected to conform to agentic behaviors in order to be successful as leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and because as a norm, women are expected to be good at relationships, the contribution women make to organizations using those relational skills disappear (Fletcher, 1999). The present study has the potential to surface and make explicit the benefits of those skills, using the voices of the women themselves.

In the strands of literature presented in this review, discussion of gendered organizational culture framed a broad context that shed light on women's challenge in dealing with informal gendered rules. A second strand focused on women and leadership and identified how perceived role incongruity for women leaders intensifies the challenges of women's leadership. The third strand presented research that examined the importance and role of relationships between women, particularly in the workplace, including peer and colleague relationships that evolve into friendships. Relational-cultural theory, used as a framework for this study, suggests that there is growth that comes from women's connections to one another, underpinned by mutuality and skill. Positive outcomes are associated with relational interactions built on skills generally taken for granted in women because of assumptions made about a relational orientation that is just what women are good at.

Methods

I conducted this study to formally explore the factors that contribute to the quality of women's leadership experience and, in particular, to probe the nature of relationships with other women at work. Qualitative research methods enabled me to explore with participants the existence and nature of their particular experiences (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative methods are intended to describe, not explain (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995); therefore, because this topic has not been previously investigated, qualitative methods are a good fit. Once an area of

study is defined, the nature of the phenomena within the area is characterized based on what emerges from the participants with as little judgment as possible about what is expected (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Kvale, 1996). In keeping with Kvale's (1996) mining metaphor, which describes the intention to uncover what may not be easily tapped at the surface, the qualitative approach provided the opportunity to prompt a depth of consideration by the participants using their own voices.

Participants and Procedures

I recruited participants through my colleagues at five doctoral institutions in the U.S. A colleague at each institution assisted me in gaining access through e-mail to women in leadership positions at the level of department chair or above. I informed potential participants that the study's purpose was to identify and explore significant factors contributing to the quality of their own leadership experiences. Of the 21 women initially contacted, 18 agreed to be interviewed. To assure confidentiality and maximize participants' confidence in the study, I offered each participant the opportunity to review the transcription with identifying data removed and to remove any additional material that might compromise her identity. Ten of the women were deans, two were part of their universities' executive teams, one was an associate dean, one was a department chair, and one was a program director. Their positions were in the following areas of their universities: education, public affairs, nursing, arts and sciences, student affairs, continuing education, social sciences, communication, engineering, and health and human services. All but one had a Ph.D., and all but one had been in a faculty role at some point in their careers. Their tenure in their current position ranged from six months to 18 years, with a median of three years. Most had been in other leadership roles prior to their current one. Two self-identified as African American and the rest were Caucasian.

I conducted all 1.5 hour interviews in the participants' offices and then had the taped interview transcribed. Of the 18 taped interviews, two of the tapes were faulty, and one woman withdrew out of concern that she might be identified. Fifteen interviews were used in the analysis.

I conducted the in-depth interviews in keeping with a constructivist research model (Kvale, 1996). My intention was to discover through a ground-mapping question what participants would volunteer initially and then to explore open-endedly what was offered. In keeping with Kvale's (1996) approach, after the ground-mapping question, I focused the interview "on particular themes… neither strictly structured with standardized questions, nor entirely non-directive" (p. 31). I aimed for discovery without the imposition of received knowledge, using neutral probes at first, and then probes more directly related to relationships with other women. As the interview developed, the nature of the exchange between the participant and myself became more collaborative.

The ground-mapping question posed to participants was: What are the factors that have contributed to the quality of your leadership experiences? Thirteen of the 15 introduced relationships with women as contributors to the quality of their experience; nine did so without prompting and four did so with prompts, such as my introducing the idea of the old boys' network and then exploring what they thought of when I mentioned the idea of an old girls' network. Of the two women who did not introduce relationships with other women as a specific resource, one had entered academe during a period when she was one of the first women in her academic arena. She talked of her husband who was also in an academically-related area as her most available personal support. The other of the two women who did not introduce a specific relationship talked about the importance of relationships with others in her profession, which consisted largely of women, but she did not talk about particular women from whom she drew support.

As each interview developed, I sought both to follow their lead and deepen their consideration of the topics they introduced related to the quality of their experiences, becoming increasingly specific about my interest in relationships with other women as factors in the quality of their experiences. I reflected what they said back to them as a way to both signal my understanding and encourage their depth of response. These are examples of the ways I fostered the interactive, collaborative nature of the interview. My active role in the interview was in keeping with feminist perspectives on interviewing that Kvale (1996) discussed.

Analysis

I organized the data for analysis through the use of qualitative software. I examined interview content using a modified analytic inductive approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 2003) with subjects' own words and expressions forming trial codes. An iterative coding process that moved among data from the interviews and reflective memos to myself led to clusters of related responses. By continually comparing the clusters to one another and forming new clusters, it became possible to identify and label themes. I did the coding and theme identification independent of the outcomes identified in relational cultural theory. In this way, the participants' language was my guide as I mined the data.

Results

The initial question posed to participants was about the factors that contributed to the quality of their leadership experience; it is important to note that the participants interpreted quality to mean positive aspects of their experience. In reporting results of the interviews, I use quotes from the interviews to illustrate each of the components of the results.

First, I present categories into which the range of factors that participants volunteered cluster. Next, I discuss the salience of the organizational context for participants' leadership and how that context framed their relationships. I then focus on how the participants talk about their relationships with women in particular, and how the fact that both were women contributed

to the nature of their experiences. I next describe the characteristics of those woman-to-woman relationships that help explain how they contribute to participants' leadership, using participant language to capture the character of the relationships and their significance. I then discuss the benefits that emerged as the women talked about their relationships..

Categories of Factors Contributing to Leaders' Experiences
The factors participants viewed as contributing to the quality of their leadership experience were identified and then grouped into the following categories: (a) personal characteristics such as energy, intellectual capacity, love of problem-solving, sense of humor; (b) activities that contributed to growth and balance, such as professional development, spiritual life, having a life outside the university; (c) relationships. At some point in their interviews, all of the women volunteered some kind of relationship as a resource. Most identified several particular persons across a variety of roles, including mentors, spouses, family, colleagues, and friends.

The Relevance of Organizational Context to Leaders' Experience
Given what the literature says about challenges for women inherent in organizational culture, perhaps it is not surprising that the organizational context and its effects emerged as an important backdrop against which to understand participants' experiences. In a variety of ways, the participants collectively displayed awareness of distinct experiences that they attributed specifically to being women in significant university leadership roles. For example, although I did not specifically ask about the number of women who had played their role or similar roles, eight of the women talked about being first, and about being the only woman or one of a few women in those roles. All participants introduced gender as somehow relevant, citing many different ways they took note of it: "I'm very hesitant about calling any of the male administrators at home." Another said: "I'll be at a dean's meeting and I'll make a suggestion and I'll be ignored, and I don't even think the guys know they do it." The women of color had experienced being both a first woman and a first woman of color in several of their institutional roles. Each made observations about the intersection of race and gender, wondering which aspect of their identity might be contributing to others' views of them. In speculating about perceptions of her, one woman imagined that the views ranged from what she described as the "mammy-effect" to the image of being so strong that "you don't need any help." Her musings illustrated Patricia Hill Collins' (1990) discussion of another dimension of experience with which African American women contend, the existence of symbolic images which are part of their marginalization. Thus, the two minority women faced additional aspects of role incongruity.

What makes participants' characterization of the organizational context important is that their descriptions reveal their awareness that being a woman leader was a distinct experience that sometimes set them apart from the culture and narrowed their sphere of influence. Some experienced the stress of being

the first or the only, and of being outside what seemed to be understood among the men. They perceived the influence of gender as a given with which they had to contend. The women with whom they interacted seemed to easily understand the tensions of being a woman and a leader when most other leaders in the same organization were men, and to gain perspective, they turned to other women in particular.

Emergence of Relationships Specifically With Women as a Contributing Factor

Participants described what was distinct about the woman-to-woman relationships that contributed to the quality of their leadership experiences. One participant stated, "Women's friendships are different. The discourse around the friendship is a good deal less laconic than it is with the men I talk to about these matters." Participants described greater freedom, less boundary restriction, and more trust in relationships with women. One described being excluded from a group of male deans from across the nation and then, in contrast, characterized the relief she felt in the absence of boundaries between her and a group of three women also in comparable positions, women she described as friends. She made the point that they were distinct in what they offered her because they were women. Others described the relief of sharing with one another the experiences they felt were common to women. They valued the safety they felt with another woman as they explored the commonality of their experiences in a largely male context. They reported gaining perspective that brought factors beyond themselves into focus. One participant said, "I don't think I could have been as close in my friendship if she had not been a women. I mean, I think we shared a sense of solidarity, a recognition of... the old boys' network that existed at that institution." The identification of the importance of relationships with women in particular emerged from another participant as she reflected on what she described as male culture, the bluffing behavior that she observed as part of that culture and, in contrast, the trust she had in two workplace relationships with women from whom she drew perspective. Another described the importance of having women to draw on in this way: "I think I feel more comfortable saying, 'Let's go get a drink.' Or I can call them at night and I can be more social with them, there's a little bit more connection."

Characteristics of Leaders' Relationships to Women

To characterize the nature of their relationships, participants used a variety of labels including colleague, friend, or good friend or close friend. They moved freely between the use of "colleague" and "friend," often conflating the two in a matter-of-fact way. Sometimes they did not use a label but just described particular women and how they knew them, such as someone from the faculty, or another dean, or someone from a professional association, or a group of women. Others just used different labels at different points to describe the same person. Rather than try to pin down an exact label and its meaning, I explored the characteristics of the relationships participants introduced.

Across participants, characterizations of the nature of the relationships are revealed in descriptions such as being understood, feeling relieved, having fun, being heard, enjoyment, trusting, and sharing. Most of the women identified by the participants as their relational partners emerged from similar professional contexts, either in their own or at a comparable institution, or due to membership in a professional organization. Some women were in similar roles, such as deans, but role similarity was not always a requirement for what was shared. While participants highly valued their relationships, they were also alert to the complications of navigating conflicting situations because of their professional roles. One participant stated, "Female peers who are other deans within the institution—there's a certain point at which business becomes business."

The relationships were not always with peers in similar roles; however, the participants perceived their relationship as one of equals and one based on relevant shared experiences. One participant stated, "I think my reaction to [relationships with other women], and other women's reaction to it, is really, in large part, the shared experience reaction. It's just nice to be in an environment where people understand some of the ways, some things that you've experienced, and some things that might interest you." Another participant stated, "Here I've been able to develop a very strong network of colleagues, colleagues that were really among my closest friends… I have, in the world."

Within their relationships, the personal, including social or family activities, could be very comfortably shared. The personal was often combined with the professional. Based on beliefs about the range of professional experiences they held in common, there was no need to explain the context: "We get together for dinner and we talk about personal lives and kids, whether we're up or down, stressed or not, but [there is] also much talk about politics, the world, the campus, the community." Their relationships were based on an interest in and concern for the other person combined with obligations to the institution, the mutually relevant matters-at-hand, or a good intellectual exploration of a topic. Participant descriptions encompassed a "sort of analytical figuring out, observing the world, making sense of it, noticing-what's-happening quality," as one woman put it.

As noted earlier, gender was significant in the organizational contexts that interviewees described. The significance of gender was also apparent in the contrasting characteristics the participants noted about their relationships with women in comparison to their perceptions of the old boys' network. They described their selected workplace relationships between and among women as much more collegial and free of expectation for reciprocal favors, having little focus on the politics of connection, being less prone to positioning around power, not just one-dimensional, and as non-competitive. One woman captured in the following way her experience with other women in contrast to how she perceived the old boys' network: "That's

not been my old boys' network experience. It's been much, I don't know the words, it's just been much more external, much more, I'd say pragmatic and dogmatic, much more competitive one-upmanship." Another said: "You know, you just sort of know they do things in networking. I have observed from time to time the flapping and the indiscretions that occur. I don't feel that vulnerability with (woman's name redacted)."

The women in these interviews did not introduce the queen bee image. This may be confirmation of the peer status each assigned to the women she spoke of as a resource. Queen bee is more often a behavior that women aspiring to rise in an organization would assign to women in leadership roles. However, competition was referenced by a couple of women as a part of specific past experiences. One woman, a dean, described a group of women deans who sometimes got together. It was a group she did not enjoy because of the competition she felt. Another dean referenced the inevitability of competition with other women deans as a hazard of the role: "I do meet with other women deans on this campus, and that's very useful… but on any campus, units, no matter how alike or similar in mission, there's a certain dimension of competition."

The degree of significance that participants assigned to their connections is revealed by the nature of the language used in describing them. One participants stated, "There was a sense of this being a kind of privileged area… a shared experience at the institution that comes about because we're women, because we're female, and because we're all in leadership positions, and we're a minority, and we sense a kind of compatibility amongst us, and therefore we're going to build on that and use that." Participants described the importance of a "sense of solidarity," the chance of "making something more happen together rather than alone." They talked about "reducing isolation," "mutual recognition of female experience," and "the importance of seeing someone else survive." Against the gendered context that the women themselves identified and described, their language shed light on how much colleagues and friends mattered. Their importance as a source of ideas was highlighted

Table 1

by one woman's description of her group of friends on campus as "intellectual soul mates" and another's as a "sensational salon." One described the ability to learn from one another without the power differential inherent in a traditional mentoring relationship: "There has been embedded in the co-mentoring, the learning, and the reciprocity a deep sense of concern and affection for me, the person." One woman described her close work-based relationship as something "that goes beyond a friendship," as qualitatively different from a friendship in that "it isn't diminished, softened, feminized as friendship between women can sometimes be—it's like a balm, in an environment that truly does not understand who I am, and isn't interested in understanding who I am and whose work and purpose it is, you know, isn't to understand who I am."

There was reference to a tension for men in the organization, a tension associated with some men's appearing threatened by women in leadership roles. The awareness of that tension made some women conscious of the impact of their relationships with other women. An example came from acknowledgment by a male colleague of one of the women's group of friends. He stated, "'Oh, what are you all doing? Is this some kind of a cabal?'" Another referenced the need to be careful not to appear exclusive with her friendship so as not to "threaten the men."

Benefits That Emerged From Relationships and Their Consistency With Relational-Cultural Theory
Benefits to their own leadership and to the organization as well were features of the relationships with women the leaders described. The 10 benefits identified in Table 1 emerged as themes derived from participant interviews. While some themes overlap, listing them separately reflects my assessment of their distinctiveness. Their importance is based on the dramatic and emotional nature of the language the women used in their expression of them. Descriptions of each benefit follow, with a quote for each. Additional illustrative quotes are shown in Table 1.

Benefits of Women's Work-Related Relationships

PROCESSES	EXEMPLIFYING QUOTES
Mutuality Reciprocity	"And so you say, 'Well, I've been around that bend. Look at that!' And I say, 'I've been around this bend!' And she says, 'Okay.' And so both of us advance in terms of our own development."
Fun	"There's the shared experience thing that makes things more fun."
Continuity	"Well, I think friendships have developed out of that group as well… and yet there's a kind of continuity there…. So it functions beyond those meeting points, but those meeting points, having a continuity, having a form, were really important to me."
Validation	"They've created a space where I can take that stuff that's inside of me that isn't serving me well and look at it and have somebody else say, 'You're all right.'"

Support and Comfort	"And so she came up here the weekend before [my speech] and we sat at my kitchen table… and she was like a coach for the whole weekend… And so I was able to go into that situation with an extreme amount of confidence and be more successful than I would have been with that… that was tremendous mutual support that made… a huge difference for me."
Clarity of Ideas, Knowledge, Perspective	"I can throw something out to them….and I can have them tell me, 'That's interesting, that's not going to work,' or whatever. And they'll come at it from very different ways because all three of them are very different…. One of them will say, 'Politics won't support that,' or someone else will say, 'You're never going to get them to buy into that, or 'There nothing at the end of the road with this.'"
Safety to Ask For Help	"So it's the degree to which you're just totally exempted for whatever it is, that's important too…. You're not going to get hurt in the process."
Strategizing, Problem-Solving	"Getting people together and thinking about strategizing as to how to get things done. Strategizing. That was important because… they hadn't had [a person of color] on the board at that time."
Opportunity	"They were key in leadership opportunities that I have had in the organization."
Benefits to Organization	"It helps each of us to move in different ways within the university and to be more empowered…. I think you have the ability to have a wider impact. And to kind of have a more comprehensive understanding of the campus, which, in turn, allows you to be more political and to have, you know, just a kind of wiser judgment about things in this bigger context."

Mutuality and reciprocity include instrumental actions and the confidence of mutual support. Although the participants did not specifically express an expectation for exchange, evidence of exchange emerged in the descriptions, and reciprocity at a more personal level was apparent: "The reciprocity is in that we develop different experiences so you just share that piece of you that isn't stuck in the same place I am." Mutuality is an understanding held in common, an assumption inherent in friendship, and in some ways an extension of reciprocity. While friendship was the most common descriptor women used in talking about their relationships with women colleagues in their organization or in their professional realm, there was not an assumption that all women colleagues are friends. As one participant described it: "Well, I think that [friendship] enriches that relationship and it enables you to do additional things because friends share at a different level than colleagues." Another said that resources she called on included "a network of colleagues—colleagues that were among my closest friends I have in the world." Participants moved around in their language, sometimes conflating colleagues and friends, and in this way evidencing relationships that bridged the personal and the professional and were important for that very reason: "There was a level of the work and what the work did to me as a person, did to them as a person. They connected sort of emotionally and intellectually, affectively and cognitively to the work. That's what created the bond of lifelong friends."

Fun describes shared laughter and shared activities that derived from both strictly work activities and activities outside of work, captured by one woman who said, "And so I just enjoy them, and I'll just say 'Let's go get wine. Let's go do something.' So

that's fun. They're friends… and that group is very important to me." The activities were connected to lightening up, providing relief and a feeling of getting away. Examples include various forms of being together, such as a book group comprised primarily of women leaders where discussion often took a personal turn, leading the speaker to refer to group members becoming friends. Other examples arevacationing, going to dinner or to the theater, and shopping together.

Continuity refers to a reliable sense that important shared moments would continue. Again, the frequent reference to colleagues as friends, along with the assumption inherent in friendship as a relationship built on and evidencing continuity are relevant. In talking about the difference her relationship with a colleague made, one woman said. "I think it made a tremendous difference. Having a friendship in which you could deposit your perceptions, your criticism, your thinking—you know—about issues, where you trust the person because you have a friendship. And I think you're able to maybe go further in exploring the limits of your ideas because of that friendship."

Validation describes situations which often involved self-doubt or uncertainty about one's reading of a situation. One participant stated, "The rest of it is all the sharing, the exchange that is intangible… not something physical.... It is a reaffirmation of who I have always been." Another participant said, "I'll just pick up the phone and say, 'Am I crazy or did this—do you have a minute?' And she says [back to me], 'It's not crazy, you're not crazy, you're not crazy to not like this, this, this and this.' They [friends] in some ways affirm the reality of the experience we're having."

Support and comfort capture getting both practical and concrete direction as well as caring emotional reassurance, both offered without personally evaluative judgment. They included getting help for an upcoming speech—on a weekend, over a kitchen table—or presenting a developing idea to others, as in the following: "'Here's something I've been thinking about,' I'll say, and I can have them tell me 'That's interesting,' or 'That's not going to work.'" Comfort includes the caring experiences that participants have with one other, apparent in participants' use of language like "balm," "emotional sustenance," and "touchstone."

Clarity describes the product of an interaction that starts around a muddle, or an issue, or a difficult experience. Through the interaction, ideas are generated, knowledge is acquired, and perspective develops. As one respondent said, "[At the beginning] it might have been one issue… but the catharsis and feedback helps you crystallize on three to four fronts at a time sometimes." Another described gaining clarity as "the opportunity to learn from people whose experiences are different, but similar enough to contextualize your situation." And from another: "I get perspective because sometime it's difficult to have perspective about what I do if I'm not getting a lot of feedback."

Safety to reflect and to ask for help is both a basis for and a byproduct of interaction. Especially inside the same organization, it can feel unsafe to ask, as one woman did to a colleague: "Do you think that was really out of line? Was that sort of over the edge? Do I sound like I'm really getting on my last leg?" When support and comfort were offered, and perspective was gained through the interaction, a sense of confidence in the safety of the next interaction grew because, as one participant observed in the context of talking about feeling safe, "It's not episodic, it's continuous."

Strategizing and problem-solving often involve organizational matters. One participant shared, "When I first came, the senior administration was something to be strategized over." Another woman referenced a colleague's counsel on specific relationships she needed to develop that would benefit the division she headed. Another said, "This is not a support group, this is not just so I can have somebody I can talk to and that they listen. The two people are people who have ideas about what to do."

Opportunity has to do with things that emerge from the relationship that provided the chance to increase one's experience or to make progress toward an ambition. One respondent referenced an opportunity that stemmed from a friendship: "And yet, I would say that she was a catalyst. She said, 'Here's a course you could teach, here's how you could teach it, let's get you doing it,'…and it was out of friendship."

Benefits to the organization include comments about how the advantages gained from one's own interactions redound to a broader circle: "The most obvious thing is that everybody learns, not just me, but everybody I'm talking with and working with.

Because they see the way I'm dealing with a problem and there's one less thing they have to learn from scratch, right?"

Participants' language also revealed their leadership challenges as they described the importance of the close connections with colleagues in gaining perspective on significant and difficult experiences of their work. However, "challenges" was by no means simply a code word for impossibility, unhappiness, or stress. Collectively, participants revealed ways they thrived in their role, and ways that they felt they made a difference in their organizations.

The relationships also added to their work satisfaction, which can be viewed as an additional organizational benefit, "I think that that kind of communication [with a colleague who is a friend] is so critical, not only in one's happiness as a person, but in one's happiness and satisfaction in the role."

The benefits the women identified can be construed as a series of interactions consistently producing mutual growth, a key dimension of the relational-cultural model. Indeed, alignment with all of the principal outcomes of relational practice identified in the relational-cultural growth-in-connection model can be seen in Table 2. In this table, each of the benefits emerging from this study's interviews are further combined and clustered alongside the positive outcomes that relational-cultural theory associates with growth-in-connection. The association between benefits emerging from this study and outcomes characteristic of relational-cultural theory shows the ways that, in this study, relationships between women at work go beyond only social support. For example, strategizing and problem-solving, and benefits to the organization emerged from these women leaders. These benefits align with relational-cultural theory's empowered action outcome, indicating that the relationships women describe are not only sites for growth as a leader, they also have consequences that spiral beyond the relationship themselves.

Table 2

Relational-Cultural Outcomes and Leaders' Benefits

Relational-Cultural Outcomes	Women Leaders' Identified Benefits
Mutuality	Mutuality Reciprocity
Zest (Increased energy and vitality)	Fun Clarity of ideas, Knowledge, Perspective Opportunity
	Support and Comfort
Empowered Action (Motivation & ability to apply what is gained)	Safety to Ask for Help Strategizing and Problem Solving Benefits to Organization

Relational-Cultural Outcomes	Women Leaders' Identified Benefits
Increased Sense of Worth (A sense of growth because of interaction)	Validation
New Knowledge (Fluidly creating new possibilities together)	Clarity of Ideas, Knowledge, Perspective Strategizing and Problem-Solving
Desire for More Connection (Sense of growth that leads to wanting more and expands to others)	Continuity Organizational Benefits

Discussion

Relational-cultural theory is a suitable frame for exploring the relationships between women that contribute to the quality of their leadership experiences. The common ground that these women leaders shared seemed to be part of what oriented them to each other, and within their connections, they identified many supportive and growth-producing advantages, epitomizing the growth-in-connection at the heart of relational-cultural theory. They also found ways to address some of the limitations and challenges of their organizational cultures, believing that benefits accrued to the organization as well. The organizational benefits echo those described by Fletcher (1999, 2007), who also uses a relational-cultural frame. The benefits accruing to both individual leaders and organizations heighten the value of relational skills beyond just something women are expected to do, a value the women themselves articulate.

For nearly all of these women, there existed as a significant factor in the quality of their leadership experience a form of relationship that extended beyond simply a collegial or just another work relationship. As identified by the women themselves, the relationships they described had many of the qualities of friendship in the personal realm, and were all the more valuable to these women precisely because the relationship bridged their personal and professional experience. This bridging occurred in the face of the common organizational injunction to separate the personal from the professional. The results identify not only the merits of significant work-related relationships between women, but also the powerful difference they made to the participants in their experience of organizational culture, enabling them to talk with one another about its dimensions, sort it out, and thoughtfully strategize behavior in response to it. In this way, the study results call attention to ways women can both navigate, challenge, and alter the culture through such relationships, as O'Connor (2010), Raymond (1986) and Andrew and Montague (1998) have suggested. The results offer an important alternative way to think about work relationships between women. They confirm multiple aspects of its power to positively affect how women

experience leadership, and also its power to improve their own and their organization's effectiveness.

The results raise questions about the distinction typically made between support relationships, more often viewed as expressive relationships, and instrumental relationships. Within gendered culture, a challenge in and of itself, there is also the perception of women falling short in their leadership performance. The differences their selected work relationships, with all their expressive characteristics, made to the women in this study can be reframed as also instrumental. In fact, participants' relationships did lead to instrumental outcomes, enabling them to more fully understand and navigate their leadership experience. They reported being able to think more clearly, learn, gain and seize opportunities, and act strategically. The instrumental nature of their relationships also is apparent as they talked about the importance of their relationships for getting things done in the organization. However, they distinguished them from the old boys' network. There was not an expectation for *quid pro quo*, but there was nonetheless a reliable return. They described their woman-to-woman exchanges as more nuanced and more collective and inclusive than those with men in their leadership circle. Their important relationships with other women were still aimed not just at getting support, but also at enhancing leadership and benefiting the organization—as one said, "Doing what's important for the college." It can be argued that in order for women leaders to operate more effectively in their gendered environments, gaining emotional support and clarity is an instrumental outcome.

The results of this study indicate that the women leaders who were interviewed derive benefits from other women who understand, offer perspective, and even share common experiences of being a woman and a leader in higher education. Yet mentoring (Johnson, 2011; Searby & Tripses, 2006) and leadership development (Ely et al., 2011; Madsen, Longman, & Daniels, 2012) are resources for women leaders that have a much higher profile. Reasons for scant positive attention to the relationships focused on in this study are worth considering. The first reason concerns the prevailing workplace standard for separating the personal and the professional. The benefits seen in Table 1 can easily be construed as primarily personal. As leaders, women may tacitly understand that to call attention to their relationships with other women could violate the perception of what it is to behave objectively as a professional, adding to stereotypes they already face as leaders. The second reason is that women experience what it is to be excluded from the power relationships of men. They may not want to risk being interpreted as replicating a system in which exclusion has been part of their experience.

Reframing and surfacing what women bring to organizations through these relationships has important implications. One implication is that relationships between women leaders and their colleagues may be an alternative for challenging existing patriarchal power inherent in organizational cultures (Andrew & Montague, 1998; Jordan, 2010). O'Connor (1998) refers to the

potential for women's friendships to be sites of resistance. Making the growth-in-connection benefits of women leaders' work relationships more apparent and more transparent could enable more exploration of their importance. In addition, deliberately connecting them to organizational benefits could be a way of broadening the cultural, social, and organizational space for women's work friendships, awakening others to the specifics of their significance. It could also strengthen the instrumental bridge between the professional and the personal.

Increasing the visibility of the skills that underpin these relationships is important and also has implications. It puts the focus on the skill instead of the stereotype of relationships as "just what women do" because they are naturally relational and more expressive. Consistently and publicly drawing parallels between the skills such relationships require and the skills that facilitate workplace accomplishments could reframe their value (Fletcher, 1999, 2007).

Limitations of this study include its focus only on higher education. However, the higher education context locates the participants' experience within broadly similar cultures. In addition, hearing from the other woman in the relationships to which interviewees were referring would have added to the strength of the results. Also, the number of participants is small, although reasonable for a qualitative study. Additionally, triangulating the data would have provided additional perspectives and strengthened interpretation.

Given their character and significance for the women in leadership interviewed for this study, women-to-women relationships in organizations are a resource worth surfacing and exploring further. Additional studies could include mixed methods using validated instruments to quantify the importance of social support while also investigating in interviews leaders' perspectives on the relationships' instrumental value. It would also be informative to explore with women in business the factors contributing to the quality of the leadership experience to learn whether a different value emerges for women's relationships with other women in more rigidly hierarchical organizations. Posing a similar question to men in both universities and business would provide additional perspective on the perceptions held by participants in this study.

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