Full Length Research Paper

The Role of Interpreters in Sense-Making by Women Leaders

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In this study, we examine individual sense-making by women leaders using meta-synthesis, a modification of meta-ethnography, to analyze 11 vignettes written by women leaders published in three prior studies. The data were coded and the text analyzed, to create a new interpretation from the existing qualitative studies. Two theoretical lenses informed this study: gendered leadership in education contexts and sense-making. The data were organized into five categories and common to all was the finding that the women leaders tested their perceptions of events as a form of sense-making. Using Dervin's (2003) "situations-gaps-users" model we determined that most of the women relied upon *interpreters* (who in general are neither formal mentors nor advisors) to help them bridge information gaps.

Key words: gendered leadership, women leaders, meta-synthesis, sense-making, interpreters.

Introduction

Our inquiry journey began two decades ago when we began to document and analyze our own leadership challenges. As women in leadership positions, we recognized that we shared some common beliefs and strategies for considering problems in our respective institutions. We learned through extended conversations that we could trust and rely upon one another for insight and support. Since that time, three studies on the topic of the roles of women in leadership have been published (Tarule, Applegate, Earley, & Blackwell, 2009; Applegate, Earley, & Tarule, 2011; Earley, Applegate, & Tarule, 2011). In each, we presented vignettes, told to us or written by women leaders at our request, and analyzed and detailed the themes within them. The three earlier studies were bounded by topics. The first was an exploration of how a non-proximate network of women leaders, meeting two or three times a year, evolved into an opportunity for discourse on leadership challenges. For the second study, we invited women to describe events that challenged their leadership. The third work had a more specific focus in which women leaders wrote essays about if and how they engaged in professional relationship building.

The present study is the result of a series of conversations among the three of us about the arrival of a new administrator on one of our campuses. She came from a corporate background and her observations about the university's operations were orthogonal to perspectives of other administrators and faculty (this is not a case of right or wrong, merely different). This event and our previous scholarship led us to speculate on the following question: When women move into new leadership roles, what steps, if any, do they take to make sense of events and actions in new contexts and new surroundings? We turned to meta-synthesis "as an alternative strategy for moving [our] work forward rather than continuing to conduct serialized investigations" (Finfgeld, 2003, p. 898). Finfgeld (2003), further, noted that it is appropriate for this type of work to be informed by the researchers' earlier incremental work (p.898).

Methods

Theoretical Framework

Our perspective for this study was informed by two theoretical lenses: gendered leadership in educational contexts and how sense-making informs women leaders' actions in their specific

contexts. By gendered leadership we suggest that some leadership styles are gender related, but not gender specific (Tarule et al.2009).Women leaders have been identified in the literature as being likely to value relationships as a central element of their leadership (Helgesen,1995). More recent research examined gender related leadership behaviors in context and suggested that women emphasize communal behaviors over agentic ones in their leadership style (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Madden (2011) builds on what these communal behaviors might entail by identifying particular "patterns associated with gender" (p. 326), such as valuing institutional transformation, an emphasis on the importance of understanding power relationships, and specifically, relevant to this study, a pattern of "defining situations rather than being defined by them, emphasizing that survival depends on interpretation and the meanings applied to situations" (p. 326).

Sense-making, or how leaders create meaning about situations that face them, is a particular focus of this study and the second theoretical lens. Grounded in a constructivist perspective in which individuals are seen as constructing their world view, sense-making is a "social, ongoing, and retrospective process grounded in individual identities that involves noticing and selecting cues in the environment for interpretation and results in enactment of that interpretation in practice" (Suspuitsyna, 2011 p. 407).We are drawn to this definition because it posits that sense-making may occur after an event and upon further reflection on it. To this, we add Dervin's situations-gaps-users model (Dervin, 2003, p 256). Describing the core elements of this model, she writes:

- That sense-making is situational and will be predicated by situational conditions.
- That the gaps seen at a specific moment by an observer will depend on where that observer is in time-space and how he or she sees time-space. Thus, different observers will see different gaps.
- That even supposing two people see the same gap, the ways in which they bridge that gap will be different depending on where they are in time-space, where they have been, and where they are going [author's italics] (p. 256).

Written to explain and account for aspects of sense-making from the perspective of how individuals receive information, this model was developed to apply to events as they happen in specific contexts. Dervin (2003) writes that "Sense-Making assumes that information seeking and use is not transmission-receiving activity but rather constructing activity—the personal creating of sense" (p. 255). Our expectation was that we would find examples in our data that conformed to this model. This was often the case, however we also found that individuals we labeled as interpreters were available in various situations to help build the understanding bridge. Moreover, we determined that interpreters could be helpful to women leaders as they reflected on events as they are unfolding or after they occurred.

Data Sources and Mode of Inquiry

Data for this study were 14 vignettes gathered and analyzed in our three previous studies (the first study used five vignettes, the second four, and for the third we analyzed five). We looked at them anew, with the new research question in mind. These vignettes were written at three different times and are bounded by the words of the women who wrote them. That is, we did not return to the authors of these vignettes for clarifications or further elaboration on the social context in which they occurred. The purpose of this study was to re-analyze existing data rather than to gather new information that would emerge if the original authors were asked to discuss their vignettes as much as a decade after they were originally written. Thus, we relied entirely on the narratives—or words of the informants—for this study. Our methodological approach was informed by Norblit and Hare's (1988) description of meta-ethnography, which allowed us to reanalyze our original 14 vignettes and "compare and analyze texts, creating new interpretations in the process" (p. 9) or to draw conclusions by "translating studies into one another" (p. 24). Finfgeld (2003) describes the distinction between quantitative meta-analysis and meta-synthesis as this: In a meta-analysis the goal is aggregation and reanalysis of data whereas the goal of meta-synthesis is translating and interpreting (p. 894).

We employed a modification of Norblit and Hare's (1988) seven- phase, ordered approach to conducting a meta-ethnography. The seven phases are: (a) identifying an area of interest; (b) identifying studies or data for the analysis; (c) reading the studies (in this case the focus was on the 14 vignettes); (d) determining if they are related; (e) translating the data in the vignettes into one another; (f) conducing the synthesis; and (g) presenting the results (pp. 26-29). This study is not a true meta-analysis because we did not identify an issue of interest and mine the literature for appropriate studies to synthesize; hence, our work is more appropriately a meta-synthesis that was guided in part by Norblit and Hare's framework. As noted previously, our data were from three existing studies that we co-authored. Given our initial decision to focus this analysis of existing data from our earlier works, we combined phases one through four related to data collection and at the end of four we determined that 11 of the 14 vignettes were similar enough for further analysis. The three excluded vignettes were ones where the author was an observer of events rather than a participant. As such, it was not an account of personal events and did not describe how the author's actions were influenced by sense-making. To analyze the data (phases five and six of the meta-ethnographic protocol), we used narrative coding because of the nature of our data (vignettes), its utility in deconstructing personal stories, and its appropriateness for "critical feminist studies" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 109). We first looked for a theme or themes that were common to the events described in the vignettes and determined that the 11 vignettes fit into five categories: introducing change, assuming a new leadership position, the nexus of personal and professional behaviors, being surprised

by an explanation of events from another source, and attempting to make sense of a situation absent a communication bridge For the next phase of the analysis we returned to the elements of Dervin's sense-making model and identified instances in each vignette that were situational, the understanding was informed by the moment, there was a gap in understanding, and the gap was bridged (2003, p. 256). As discussed below we found that in these 11 events when a woman leader was engaging in sense-making as a way of interpret*ing* events, there frequently was an interpret*er* in the background who helped create the bridge of understanding suggested by Dervin's model.

Findings

As noted in the prior section, we determined that the 11 vignettes could be placed into five categories and common to all categories was the concept that these women leaders tested their perceptions of events as a form of sense-making and, in doing so, they relied upon interpreters to help them make sense of these events in context. We further determined that the interpreter need not be co-located with the leader but may be non-proximate—separated by geography, time, and, often, by role. In this context we define interpreter as someone who helps another understand or make sense of events by testing that colleague's perceptions, offering alternative explanations, translating perplexing events into something knowable, or, in Dervin's terms, creating a communication bridge. We distinguish interpreters from either advisors or mentors. The role of an interpreter is to help another individual explore and consider competing reasons for leadership challenges, but the interpreter normally does not offer advice on how to resolve them. Thus, an interpreter might become an advisor, but an advisor rarely is an interpreter.

Ridenour and Newman (2008) present the concept of peer debriefing in qualitative research suggesting that this is a strategy to help avoid interpreting the data solely from the researcher's own "need base" (p. 58). This is an interesting concept and useful to consider here because leaders who seek information about events and their meaning are engaging in a form of qualitative inquiry. However, if we accept the definition of "peer" as someone of equal standing with another, it is more limiting than the notion of an interpreter. In the vignettes we analyzed the interpreter was not always an equal in the organization. The value of an interpreter is helping the leader engage in sense-making and is not limited by an individual's role or status. We readily concede that our research questions could apply to male leaders and leaders in other educational settings. However, for this work we limited our attention, with one exception, to the experiences of women in higher education contexts. In the section that follows, the results of the meta-synthesis, organized by the five categories, are presented.

Introducing Change

At some point in her leadership, a woman must direct and manage change. When change needs to occur there are a myriad of forces and factors working against the change. Many interpreters may be available to help clarify events but a leader may or may not listen to those interpreters. Here, two vignettes describe how women leaders introduced and attempted to implement change. One cultivated interpreters in the change process; the other ignored them. The first case is of a president's decision to close an under enrolled engineering department; the reorganization of a college by a dean is described in the second case.

Change Vignette 1 (from Earley, et al., 2011)

This vignette involves a university president who knew that closing an academic program would be difficult so when she undertook this process, she involved a broad array of stakeholders. She spent considerable time developing relationships with some of the resistant faculty in the department. In her own words:

> For me, it is the web of relationships that makes organizations, and perhaps also their leaders, function. Dealing with people and making decisions in one area impacts many others, sometimes in ways that cannot be anticipated. It is the relationships that hold everyone together… (p. 249).

By developing a web of relationships, she encountered interpreters who helped her anticipate the unexpected. In this instance, these relationships made change possible. Each event or incident in the process of closing a program created a situation where a gap in communication and understanding might exist and would need to be bridged. Collectively, the actions of interpreters created a richer understanding of the university and revealed ways to meet this woman president's goal of closing a program. The matter of bridging an information gap was particularly clear when addressing the future of faculty in that program. She learned that a senior faculty member in the program to be closed (Engineering) was highly regarded by the Physics faculty and with this information was able to move him to that unit. She wrote, "He shared with me that he was glad to move to a department where he was so well-regarded. And, he thanked me for the respect with which I handled the entire matter" (p. 249).

Change Vignette 2 (from Tarule, et al., 2009)

This event also is about organizational change. In this case, a dean attempted to implement a new vision and direction for her college. It is an example where attempted collaborative planning did not go well. The dean's own interpretation of events that thwarted her goals reflects a dichotomy between what individuals wanted and what the organization needed. The dean interpreted her relationship with the faculty as a power struggle that destroyed attempts to build community. As this dean questioned in the vignette she wrote:

Is it possible that in trying to be collaborative, I gave the impression of lack of leadership and indecision, thereby causing the faculty to engage in endless debate? Did the listeners perceive my willingness to share power as a sign of weakness because of a belief that real leaders don't share power? (p. 42)

She continued, "They not only resisted change but actively undermined any efforts that might result in diminishing their influence on the college" (p. 42). This dean's attempt to reorganize the college ultimately was not successful. In this case, the dean focused on interpret*ing* events, did not see the communication gap before her and, as such, if an interpreter was available to help bridge the gap, she did not acknowledge her or him. She wrote of being perplexed when her successor as dean was able to undertake a similar exercise with apparent ease suggesting that even after the fact this woman leader was unable to find a way to bridge one or more information gaps.

Assuming a New Leadership Role
In three of the vignettes, women discussed challenges that occurred when they assumed a leadership position at a new institution of higher education. Two of the women were provosts and one a new dean of education. The experiences of the two provosts were similar but with different outcomes. In the case of the dean, she found interpreters to help her make sense of the dynamics on her campus through conversations with female contacts who were leaders in other universities and organizations in other states.

New role vignette 1 (from Earley et al., 2011)
In this vignette a new woman provost recounted to us her experience being continually challenged by a male administrator who was the inside candidate for her job. Her sense-making of the situation led to seeing the behaviors of this man as indicative of lack of respect for her. She was irritated if he did not provide her with information about the institution that would be important to her and equally irritated when he did present information in what she felt was a condescending manner.

> There were too many incidents when his apparent hostility toward her made learning the new job harder. [He] would not respond to her requests for information or when he did, he provided only partial information that did not include sufficient detail for her to understand the issue fully or to make a reasoned decision based on evidence. (p. 245)

Clearly there was a communication gap and the provost recognized it, however she was not able to construct a needed information bridge. Although she described being worried that she would not be able to create the professional relationship she and the other administrator needed to advance the goals of the university, it was not apparent that she was willing to use this male administrator as an interpreter. She also recognized that as the new leader, "she needed positive working relationships with everyone who reported to her and knew that [his] actions were

being observed by them" (p. 246). This final point is telling. We speculate that she either isolated herself from potential interpreters or no one was willing to step into that role. In either case the consequence was the same, a constructive information flow and level of trust could not be built.

New Role Vignette 2 (from Earley et al., 2011)
The events in this vignette also involve a provost who described arriving on campus to lead what she described as a very dysfunctional group of deans and senior faculty. She detailed various strategies intended to change a culture of sniping, back-door deals, and begging-based budgets (p. 247). One was establishing a transparent budgeting process for the institution. However, her work was undone when budget cuts needed to be made and the culture reverted back to what she described as "some sleazy politician's ward!" (p. 247). After a year an interpreter emerged who explained that her efforts had been unsuccessful because, at that institution, "the provost is staff to the president" (p. 248). Thus, although she held the title of provost, she was not perceived as having the role or power of a budget decision maker. In this situation, the culture of competition for resources resulted in every individual who wanted funding for a pet project acting as an interpreter, but their focus on personal agendas resulted in shaky information bridges.

New Role Vignette 3 (from Applegate et al., 2011)
This vignette was written by a woman reflecting on her first year as a dean. In it she writes about her sense that gender was a significant factor in the power and privilege dynamics of her institution. This woman realized the need for interpreters but found them outside her institution through a forum of women higher education leaders.

> My membership in that community or network was an invaluable component in my own growth and development as an academic leader…The dialogue and the work were exhilarating, enlightening, troubling, hard. But along with what we accomplished for the profession, I gained a new perspective on my own institution and the practices in it. (p. 157)

Although these interpreters were at different institutions, in different states, and met face-to-face only several times a year at profession for professional conferences, they helped the new dean make sense of her challenges and from that to identify the strategies she would use on her campus. This is a somewhat different twist on Dervin's model because the events were described after the fact and the interpretation came later rather than at the moment. This suggests, however, that communication bridges might be able to occur at a point after the gap occurs and illustrates retrospective sense-making (Suspitsyma, 2011).

Nexus of Personal and Professional Behaviors
We cannot draw a line or build a wall between our professional and private lives. Although they are separate, one is bound to

influence the other. The two vignettes in this category describe situations when personal and professional behaviors overlapped.

Personal and Professional Vignette 1 (from Tarule et al., 2009)
This recounts the dissolution of a marriage and the woman leader's attempt to conduct business as usual and not share her personal pain with others at her university. This leader recognized and used interpreters, who presented themselves in a variety of forms.

> For reasons unknown to me at the time, I did not want to share my personal pain with my university colleagues. Now I know that I was afraid my personal issues would reflect badly upon me in the public realm, that there would be untoward gossip and speculation about me, and those kinds of hallway conversations might lead to considerations about me as a dean that would make me appear weak or worse. (p.35)

She observed that this fear initially caused her to be unwilling to ask for help during this time of extreme emotional stress and thus she did not see potential interpreters who might have been around her. However, after some months she realized:

> It was time to trust my friends with my private pain. It was time to let my colleagues see my vulnerabilities. Through them I could gauge with whom and in what ways I needed to share my personal life with my campus. (p. 36)

This woman leader recognized she faced an information gap in regard to handling the nexus of her personal and professional lives, but she was initially unable to see that interpreters were available to her. It is another example of interpreters being present at a later time and their ability to create a bridge or to make sense of events that affected the woman leader's private and professional lives.

Personal and Professional Vignette 2 (from Applegate et al., 2011). The final vignette in this section also involves loss. This is a description of a group of women K-12 principals who met about once a month for a group dinner. They were essentially a group of interpreters, each helping the others with leadership challenges. The narrator writes:

> Whoever had an issue, an idea, or a frustration would bring it to the group. Often we started by simply reviewing events of the past month. Someone would begin, usually in an incredulous tone, describing something that had happened, mostly a decision by the superintendent or an action by the school board. We would analyze why those moves by the district—or individuals—were being made at that time. Among the four or five of us there were strikingly different perspectives. Eventually we began to identify those perspectives as strengths: one of us always cast analysis within a political framework; another within an organizational behavior one; a third within an individual, psychological one; and a fourth took a political/financial view.

> The perspectives of my colleagues and friends taught me something and always inspired a new way to understand my work in the context of the district and in relation to other school leaders. (p. 155)

These women had become personal friends and the narrator writes that one of the group succumbed to a serious illness and after her loss the dinner group disbanded. At the time of the writing, the narrator was attempting to make sense of the loss of her friend and the loss of her group of interpreters. These descriptions reinforces Dervin's model of bridging information gaps within situational contexts. However, it adds another dimension, that absent certain context, individuals do not continue to function as interpreters.

Surprised by an Explanation of Events From Another Source
Sometimes an interpreter appears and brings something to the attention of a leader; this was the case in two of the vignettes, both written by education deans. In one situation a gap is bridged by the observations of a person in a junior role. In the other, the woman leader is shaken when a colleague voices a point of view that the woman narrator believed she should have seen herself.

Surprised Vignette 1 (from Applegate et al., 2011)
In this situation, a dean writes of agreeing to become the mentor of a young faculty member who wanted to move into an administrative role. It was the mentee who became the interpreter:

> One day, after she had sat in at a …meeting of department chairs in my college [she] asked me about the levels of participation in that group. She observed that of the eight chairs that I inherited from my predecessor, all but one was male and all were White. She also remarked that the one woman attending was an acting chair, not a permanent appointment, and was silent unless I called on her. [She] asked if I was comfortable with being the first woman dean and having a nearly all-male set of department heads.

> Her observations prompted me to ask myself how I could have a leadership team that looked like this in a college with a student population nearly 80% female and 36% minority. (p 154)

The mentee also provided some institutional scuttlebutt alerting the dean to possible retirements of some department chairs. With this information the dean made it a priority to diversify her leadership team and did so over the year that followed. This vignette illustrates a situation where the interpreter was not a peer in the sense of having a role equal to that of the dean. This vignette conforms to Dervin's model and goes further by detailing how the leader was able to act on the information offered by the interpreter.

Surprised Vignette 2 (from Tarule et al., 2009)
This vignette describes dynamics in a search committee for a new provost. Written by one of only two women on a 15 member committee, it details the impact of the woman who became an interpreter in the group when she observed subtle and not so subtle gender bias in the search process. The narrator described a meeting of the search committee in which a headhunter asked a question and the other female member of the committee responded:

> [Headhunter:] If the provost candidate is a woman are there qualities or expectations that should be included? My colleague dean leaned forward, 'Huh?' she said, 'The qualities for a woman provost would be *exactly* the same as the ones for *any* provost!' (p. 44)

The writer acknowledged that she had missed this point entirely:

> Driving home, I can barely stand the fact that I totally missed her very accurate and acute observation and comment. Worse I *was*, just before she spoke, actually thinking about what different qualities might be relevant…Am I beginning to unwittingly or unconsciously think more and more like the majority of leaders, primarily male, with whom I have been working my many years of being a dean? (pp. 44-45)

Dervin (2003) observes that her sense-making model may be used "to predict information seeking and using behaviors [and] must use situational conditions as predictors rather than traditional measures as demography and personality" (p. 255). However, this vignette, like the prior one, suggests that a leader may become so comfortable in her role that she misses certain information gaps when they occur.

Becoming Her Own Interpreter
As we discussed, in some cases a leader will be surprised by the presence of an interpreter. We found in two of the vignettes, the leaders appeared to be their own interpreters. That is, if an interpreter was present, the writers did not acknowledge one in the written vignettes. Each involves a clash in values and expectations between a dean and her president. This raises the question for us of whether an individual ever can be her own interpreter.

Becoming Vignette 1 (from Applegate et al., 2011). The writer of this vignette is an education dean who recounts being called to a meeting by her president where she was asked to account for data that she had not seen. As she described the event:

> [I] was not offered any time to present contextual information, nor was there any discussion of how [I] might work with the president and provost to address the data and subsequent perceptions. [I] left the meeting feeling angry and betrayed. (p. 250)

She found herself interpreting events at the meeting and as a result of that reflection developed a strategy to present a different perspective on the health of her college. At a subsequent meeting with the president and his leadership team she was able to present her own data with details and contextual information along with a list of suggestions, which appeared to address the president's concerns. Although the dean noted that her president had a history of basing decisions on anecdotal information and publicly criticizing members of his administrative team (p. 249), she was taken aback by his confrontational attitude in the first meeting. Other than this observation, there is no evidence of an interpreter who could bridge what could be described as a gap in information between the dean and the president. As a result, the dean had the challenge of interpreting how the president's information about the college shaped his view of it and then crafting a reply to him in a manner and format that would allow him to make sense of the new information.

Becoming Vignette 2 (from Tarule et al., 2009)
This vignette involves a clash of values between a dean and her president. The president had encouraged the deans to speak out on important issues, in particular he wanted more press coverage of faculty and student work that would enhance the university's public image. With that in mind, the dean wrote an editorial defending the values of her college regarding a state policy that she and her faculty felt would be detrimental to their goals and purposes. After her editorial was published she learned that a close friend of the governor was championing the legislation and the president of the university felt the editorial reflected negatively on the governor and, in turn, on his presidency. Quickly, the dean saw that she had stepped into a political minefield. Later she reflected, "…I asked myself if the values of my college were out of sync with the provost and president, and if so, what would this mean for my leadership" (p. 39). As the dean wrote in her narrative, she gathered information about the pending legislation from resources inside and outside the college and felt she was well informed on the matter. As such, she was gathering and interpreting the information she needed for her editorial. What she did not have was an interpreter who could alert her to the connection between the president and a state legislator.

These two vignettes raise the issue of whether the leader can be her own interpreter. There is no question that in these two situations the leader reflected on very challenging events and in one case approached the situation with new data. In the second example the dean came to a troubling conclusion that she and her college may have values orthogonal to the values of the president and provost. As Ridenour (personal communication April 26, 2012) observed, an interpreter introduces a sense of validity into the leader's understanding of events. The logic of this point is strong and helps refine the distinction between self-reflection and sense-making informed by the perspectives of others.

This meta-synthesis reveals that in the majority of the vignettes women leaders found colleagues at their institution who would

be their interpreters—and several were surprised by this revelation. One story involved a group of women K-12 administrators who worked in the same community but not in the same school. Another vignette recounted the experience of a woman leader who turned to colleagues in other institutions and other parts of the country to help her make sense of stressful events in her life. In that original work (Tarule et al., 2009) we concluded that women seek and find comfort and advice from what we termed "non-proximate" colleagues. We now see with this meta-synthesis and new translation of our original data that these non-proximate colleagues also may assume the role of interpreters and their distance allows them to offer a useful perspective that may not be visible to those who are close to challenging events.

Observations

On one level, this study applied a methodology rarely used in education—the meta-synthesis—to existing qualitative data. Exclusive of the matter of the selection of studies, we followed Norblit and Hare's (1988) seven-phase process for conducting a meta-ethnography. For the analysis, we adopted Dervin's (2003) situations-gaps-uses sense-making model and used narrative analysis (Saldaña, 2009) to reveal new findings in pre-existing qualitative research.

Of the 11 vignettes analyzed for this study, for the most part we found only evidence of one or two interpretative events in each. We believe that in more complex organizational descriptions a range of interpreters may appear; this was the case in the vignette written by a provost who was confronted with multiple administrators begging for special favors. Thus, it is important for the leader to check perceptions and assumptions when developing confidants. Part of perception-checking is learning who to trust and who not to trust. As an experienced leader advised a new leader: "Trust everyone and trust no one until you really are able to find those few people you can count on to tell you the truth" (J. H. Applegate, February 2012, personal communication). The president who struggled with closing a department in her college spent time listening to the voices on her campus—and there were as many interpretations as there were voices. For her it was more than merely a matter of whom to trust. It also demonstrated the need to assure the campus community that she would listen to multiple interpretations before the process of closing the engineering program began.

We acknowledge there are limitations to this study. As we noted in our discussion of the analytic framework, this work is informed by the logic of the meta-analysis but unlike the meta-analysis our work is "interpretive rather than aggregative" (Finfgeld, 2003, p. 894). The data for this ethnographic synthesis and analysis were taken from 11 of 14 vignettes in three studies conducted by us during the last decade and, as such, this work is not a true meta-analysis. Because meta-ethnography is not a well-defined, broadly used method in the field of education, our intent was to conduct a synthesis of qualitative studies in a more limited and controlled setting. The

data for the analysis presented here were all based on convenience samples and we three authors were involved in the initial gathering and examination of those data. For the most part, the subjects in the vignettes were women in higher education and there is limited diversity among the subjects. Nevertheless, the institutions in which the vignettes occurred were public and private, large and small, and geographically diverse. We readily concede that the phenomenon of a leader relying on an interpreter is undoubtedly not limited to women administrators or to women in higher education.

Analysis of these vignettes suggests that interpreters are essential to sense-making and that they may perform an important role in bridging an information gap. Leaders who are unaware of this possibility or who believe that the leader must "know all" not only impoverish the potential for understanding their organization and the processes within it, but also may soon find that their decisions or attempts at change are being viewed in ways the leader did not expect. The themes in this text illustrate the kinds of challenges some leaders face. Examining them from both theoretical and reflexive positions enables us to think carefully and critically about the many facets of leadership from new angles.

The importance of interpreters as individuals who help leaders make sense of their environments, has mostly been under emphasized, under examined and/or viewed as a negative attribute to the leader's behavior. In contrast, this study suggests that the role of interpreter is critical for both the new and experienced leader and may introduce a validity check into her interpretation or sense-making of events. As we observed in one of our earlier works, "(w)e became more and more convinced of the value and power that is represented in our collaborative and supportive kinship" (Tarule et al., (2009), p. 46-47). Were the role of the interpreter better understood as an important feature of leadership, mentoring and leadership development programs could do more to help leaders consider how to identify and engage interpreters in the process of building healthy organizations.

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