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Full Length Research Paper

The Invisible Labor for Emerging Women Leaders: A Critical Analysis of Literature in Higher Education

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While studies focused on gender and negotiations have explored the procedures or outcomes of the negotiation, little is known about how women experience the process of negotiation for salary and compensation. This hermeneutic phenomenological study gave voice to female school superintendents' experiences with negotiation through 11 semi-structured interviews in the Midwestern US. Each 60-minute interview was recorded, transcribed, and verified. Keywords and phrases were identified, and clusters of meaning were developed to articulate themes and provide detailed descriptions of what women experienced throughout the negotiation process. Trustworthiness techniques were utilized in this study, including journaling, bridling, and member checking. Six themes emerged from the 11 semi-structured interviews: I am a Woman in a Man's World (Still), Negotiating for Myself is Uncomfortable, The School Board Holds the Cards, Experience and Salary Data are Key, Fairness is Important, and Female Leaders Need Support. Recommendations are provided to bolster support and preparation for women's participation in negotiation, including creation of network support groups, mentorship programs, and personal development opportunities, as well as further education for school boards regarding gender bias and disparity in negotiation. Recommendations are also provided for future research regarding female superintendents' experiences of negotiations.

Keywords: leadership, female superintendents, negotiation, gender, salary, compensation

While a variety of factors, including experience and qualifications, can influence employment compensation, negotiation remains key. Kugler et al.'s (2018) recent meta-analysis revealed consistent gender differences in negotiations. Their work highlights the continued inequality of resource distribution amongst males and females, which reinforces the glass ceiling and the gender wage gap. Yet little is known about female personal experiences with negotiation for compensation (in part because of their tendency not to negotiate). There is even less research on women in specified fields (e.g., K-12 administration).

In this qualitative study, the negotiation experiences of 11 female superintendents are explored. While previous studies have focused on negotiation processes or outcomes, relatively little work has focused on the lived experiences of females – particularly from rural Midwest public school systems. A phenomenological approach was therefore taken to study female superintendents' lived experiences of advancement and salary/compensation negotiation. This allows the female voice to be heard and recognized in a male-dominated world. Methodology for this study included purposeful sampling of female superintendents, whose responses to the semi-structured interviews were analyzed. Six themes emerged: I am a Woman in a Man's World (Still), Negotiating for Myself is Uncomfortable, The School Board Holds the Cards, Experience and Salary Data are Key, Fairness is Important, and Female Leaders Need Support. Limitations, recommendations for practice, and suggestions for future research are identified.

The Female Experience in School Leadership

Women entering the superintendency tend to do so later in their careers than males (Robinson et al., 2017). Alarmingly, the number of women in the superintendency does not reflect the number of women qualified to hold the position (Rodriguez, 2019; Tarbutton, 2019). This discrepancy is based on biases that influence candidate recruitment and stereotypes regarding women's capacity to be successful leaders that are still prevalent (Superville, 2017). The United States' educational system has a gendered career system that favors males over females in leadership roles at all levels (Kolb. 2012; Maranto et

al., 2019). This gender bias has implications regarding what topics can be negotiated and by whom (Kolb, 2012; Kolb & McGinn, 2009). Kolb's work called to light the "role of institutionalized social practices that sustain gender differences and inequalities" (2009, p. 515). Social reinforcement of gender distinctions has allowed "second generation gender issues [to] become embedded in institutional cultures and practices" (Kolb & McGinn, 2009, p. 5). This inequality continues even when women advance into leadership positions (Gresham & Sampson, 2019).

Women, Negotiations, Salary, and the Gender Pay Gap

Northouse (2019) drew attention to a major behavioral difference between women and men; men readily self-promote and negotiate, while women typically do not. In fact, women negotiate at a much lower rate than men (Fischer & Bajaj, 2017; Kugler et al., 2018). To complicate things further, males may be viewed as "more deserving of benefits and rewards over equivalent women" which in turn makes it more acceptable and appropriate for men to ask (Kolb 2012, p. 131). It is also suggested women hold lower pay expectations than their male counterparts, negotiate less intensely, and as a result, accept lower outcomes (Mazei et al., 2015). The likelihood of negotiating and the outcomes achieved when negotiating wage-setting arrangements can be very impactful on access to opportunities and other resources (Blau & Kahn, 2017; Northouse, 2019). Through negotiations, one may profit in ways that include improving salaries, benefits, and careers (Kugler et al., 2018).

Toosi et al. (2019) found that gender disparities in pay over a lifetime are closely connected to starting salaries. Failing to negotiate the initial salary is so significant and challenging to overcome that it has been argued the wage gap between the sexes is primarily due to discrepancies in entering salaries (Babcock & Laschever, 2007). Therefore, women need to negotiate early and consistently to improve their economic standing (Toosi et al., 2019).

The gender wage gap is ascribed to females' behavior to negotiate less regularly and less effectively than their male counterparts (Kugler et al., 2018). The differences associated with gender are influential in connection to negotiation behaviors and are also associated with the wage gap between the sexes (Catalyst, 2021). Yet, focusing on gender differences may place blame on women and in turn ignores the culture and institution that may be contributing to the wage gap (Meyerson & Fletcher, 1999). When acknowledging females' careers over their lifetimes, the ripple effect associated with the outcomes of negotiations cannot be overlooked (Pardal et al., 2020). Recognizing the impact gender differences have on negotiations helps highlight the inequitable allocation of funds between males and females while reinforcing concepts including the glass ceiling and the gender wage gap (Kugler et al., 2018).

Purpose and Rationale for the Study

While studies focused on gender and negotiations have explored the process or outcomes of the negotiation, little is known about how women experience the process of negotiation for salary and compensation. This phenomenological study gave voice to female school superintendents' experiences with negotiation. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that this exploration through qualitative research provides researchers an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of a complex issue and further insight into "the process that people experience, why they responded as they did, the context in which they responded, and their deeper thoughts and behaviors that governed their responses" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 46).

Heidegger, the father of hermeneutic phenomenology, held "the assumption that humans live in the world as interpretive beings in a continuously interpreted world" (Vagel, 2018, p. 81). Researchers use hermeneutic phenomenology to study the lived experience to get at the essence of the experience and thoughtfully describe its meaning to others, balancing interpretation with bias/assumption checking in a cyclical process (Vagel, 2018). In that way, the meaning of a lived experience is gathered and reduced to its essence to facilitate understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenology was to develop an understanding of how female superintendents experience negotiation through description and the meaning they ascribe to that process. By exploring how female school superintendents experience salary negotiations, this study fills a gap in the literature while allowing for the participants' voices and insights to be heard. In hermeneutic phenomenology's interpretive style, attention is paid to a conceptual framework for the problem (Peoples, 2021; Vagel, 2018). In this study, Kolb's (and others') work on female negotiations provides the framework for understanding this phenomenon.

Method

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that participants could provide insight into the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each of the eleven female participants was leading a public K-12 school district as a superintendent. Two rural Midwestern states were chosen for sampling because of the limited research on the topic in that demographic area. In addition, accessibility of the data to the researcher was considered. The sample was chosen to highlight the similarities and differences in salaries and negotiation processes based on salary data, in what are otherwise very similar Midwest states. Most of the participants were white, which is reflective of the general demographics of female superintendents in this area. District size ranged from approximately 176 to 25,000 students. Participant superintendent experience ranged from 4 to 18 years, total years of experience in education ranged from 16 to 39 years, and years of experience with negotiation ranged from zero to 13 years.

Procedures

Several inclusion criteria were identified, specifically: job title, gender, place of employment, and experience with negotiations. Such criteria were in place to ensure the participants selected held the position of the superintendent as their job title, were female, held employment in a public school district within the geographical region of the Midwest, and had either participated in or elected to forgo the negotiation process. The eleven participants who met the criteria were interviewed using audio and video recordings.

Interview Protocol

In phenomenological research, data are often collected through interviews with a group of people who have experienced the studied phenomenon. This interview is a conversation-based interaction where knowledge is developed as the researcher tries to understand the interviewee's point of view in her world to find meaning (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The researcher used a semi-structured interview which lasted approximately 60 minutes. Semi-structured interviews allowed for interview questions to be developed to ensure research relevancy and that the main characteristics of the study were addressed while providing the participants the opportunity to discuss other material that could be relevant to the study (Peoples, 2021).

The semi-structured interviews included five sets of questions. The questions were grouped and included questions addressing the participants' years in education, years as a superintendent, and years in the current school district; questions associated with gender and leadership addressing the participants' role as a female superintendent and obstacles they may have faced; questions related to gender and social roles/norms addressing how gender roles and social norms may have impacted their experience as a superintendent; questions related to negotiation experience(s) addressing how many times the participants had experienced negotiations and various aspects of their experience; and questions providing the opportunity to share information not previously addressed.

Data Analysis

The goal of data analysis in a phenomenological study aims to provide a comprehensive narrative drawing from essential themes identifiable to those who have experienced the phenomenon (Peoples, 2021). Each interview was recorded and analyzed using qualitative data analysis techniques. All data were treated equally during this process, as Merriam and Tisdel (2016) recommend. After identifying keywords and phrases, the researcher developed clusters of meaning to articulate themes and provide detailed descriptions of what was experienced and how it was experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Journaling and bridling were used to offset potential bias. Journaling allows the researcher to track adjustments and changes in thinking as data is analyzed and reflect on her thinking to view the phenomenon more clearly and impartially (Peoples, 2021). Bridling assists with recognizing one's beliefs to prevent them from compromising one's openness to the phenomenon and is more suitable for hermeneutic phenomenology than bracketing (Vagel, 2018).

Participants were offered opportunities to review their transcripts to help ensure the study's trustworthiness, as supported by Shenton (2004). Two participants also completed member checks. Member checks ensure internal validity by asking for feedback from the participants and checking for accuracy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Such checks help prevent misinterpretation and ensure the participants' perspectives are given while also serving as a way to identify researcher biases and misunderstandings (Maxwell, 2013). Confidentiality and anonymity were upheld through pseudonyms to protect participants.

Findings

Upon analysis of the data, six themes emerged in connection to the female superintendents' negotiation experiences. While the themes are representative of the participants' lived experiences in both states, there are noted differences between the states as well – most noticeable was the availability of data through transparency or the lack of such. Nebraska's Superintendent Pay Transparency Act places stipulations and expectations regarding publishing superintendent contracts (Gessford, 2014). Access to such contracts could allow for data analysis and the potential use of such data to become talking points during negotiations. This data is gathered into a spreadsheet that provides salaries, benefits, and days of the contract, among other things, to allow for comparability studies. Superintendents draw upon this readily available information to help them prepare for negotiations. While South Dakota requires educators' pay to be published, South Dakota does not have as robust of a policy as Nebraska. One resource commonly accessed is a salary survey created by a professional organization, which gathers self-reported pay and is shared with its members.

It is important to note that context matters in negotiations within the public educational system. There are inherent limits within the educational system. Namely, the elected members of the school board have power when working within the confines of the school board meetings and exert such influence through voting. Furthermore, as public schools are funded mainly through federal, state, and local funds, decisions are often financially driven. As the school board governs the school, the use of resources is an important responsibility to oversee (Phillips & Dorata, 2013). With only limited funds available, fiscal responsibility is taken seriously as sound management is expected (Phillips & Dorata, 2013).

I am a Woman in a Man's World (Still)

Beyond the duties associated with being a leader, the participants juggled other challenges unique to being female – challenges often related to social norms and stereotypes. Across interview participants, there was a general concern about how

they were being viewed as a leader. Considering perceptions of the superintendent's leadership abilities and success in the position are directly evaluated and often tied to negotiations, this is a valid concern. Areas addressed included acknowledging the role of gender (despite wanting to remove it from influence), facing criticism, giving extra attention to appearances, and navigating relationships.

Many of the superintendents in this study did not view their roles differently due to gender. Anne explained, "It's an awesome responsibility not to talk about being female, but just to show that you can dig in and get the work done." Jasmine and Penny expressed the desire for expectations to be the same regardless of gender and approached their positions as a job to be done. Yet, Gina voiced concern regarding the number of women holding superintendent positions in the state. She explained, "There are fewer candidates that are women… [F]ewer interviews that are women [and] … fewer selections that are women." Gina's concern alludes to potential biases in recruitment, as suggested by Superville (2017), and called attention to the gendered educational system, as noted by Maranto et al. (2019).

Female superintendents are in the minority, and that fosters challenges. Laurie explained, "You do have to kind of figure out and read people a little bit better – how they're going to react to a woman that is … in charge of a district." Mira recognized some people do not believe women should "be making that much" money. She faced a board with members "that did not feel like they needed to pay a female superintendent what men were getting paid." Jasmine also acknowledged the challenge of having to prove herself as a leader. Laurie felt things have improved for her "because I believe I've got a solid reputation established." Northouse (2019) called out empirical evidence exemplifying how gender stereotypes can influence the perception of females in positions of leadership, while Kugler et al. (2018) drew attention to how gender roles influence people's expectations of what others can and should do. While gender schema are the embedded beliefs associated with sex differences, such schema can create bias when evaluating "professional women's behavior, competence, and performance" (Kolb, 2013, p. 246). Such conditions benefit men reinforcing both status and advantages associated with superior rights due to their connection to identity with their group (Kolb & McGinn, 2009).

Despite working to demonstrate ability and professionalism, the study participants still faced criticism associated with their gender. Anne pointed out, "Stereotypes of what leadership looks like can really affect you and affect others." Cora explained she has been told several times, "You're very direct," and reflected, "I don't think they'd tell a man that." Dee shared she was told she needed "to be meaner." Heather reported being told she "wouldn't get a superintendent position because it is a male-dominated role." Then, when she did earn such a position, "the person who was there was mortified that [the board] had … hired … a woman." She added she was referred to as G.I. Jane, a reference to the term used to describe females who step out of their traditional roles and enter positions traditionally held by males as well as an allusion to the movie by the same title released in 1997 starring Demi Moore. Mira admitted having encountered being "called derogatory names" also. Stepping outside of the gender stereotypes traditionally assigned has prompted social backlash where these women in leadership have faced criticism not directly in connection to their ability in fulfilling their duties but in connection to their gender (Bernal et al., 2017; Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Chiefs, 2019; Eagly & Wood, 2013; Ibarra et al., 2013; Kennedy & Kray, 2015; Meltzer, 2018; Maranto et al., 2019; Reyes et al., 2021). Associating a job with a specific gender connects specific qualities and characteristics to fit and thus perpetuates the stereotype (Kolb & McGinn, 2009). This leads to the challenge of "redefining norms and expectations around what it takes to be seen as an appropriate fit and then to succeed" in a specific job or at a specific level (Kolb & McGinn, 2009, p. 7).

Appearances are also influential as the participants have stepped outside of the traditional stereotypes and social norms ascribed to women. Anne admitted, "Being a female in leadership… I guess it never occurred to me that it was a big deal. To some people, it is. I am very cognizant of how I come off to people." Anne continued, "I think it's very important that I dress … for my day and for what I expect." She added, "I just have to adjust my presence, and image is important." On the other hand, Dee also shared her board's discussion of a dress code and how they reminisce about the heels and skirts teachers wore years ago. While none of these participants have specifically been told how to dress, some shared that they knew of other women who have been in that very situation. Bernal et al. (2017) highlighted professional dress as well.

Stereotypes and social norms also impact how women navigate their professional relationships as they are frequently "judged on a double standard" associated with authority (Kolb & McGinn, 2009, p. 7). Dee explained, "As a woman, you're going to have to explain everything that you do," while men seem to be trusted more and not questioned. Dee further shared that there are areas her board does not trust her with, which has prompted her to delegate responsibilities to compensate. Dee added the need to coach delegates "as even though I let [them] be my voice, I have to coach [them] so we are on the same page." Coaching takes extra time and effort, recognizing social roles and the need to navigate them strategically. Mira recognized that while she has had a blessed career, "I have not been fully included" in her male counterparts' conversations. Four participants recognized the good ole boys club, with Dee explaining, "I don't go fishing or drinking, so I'm out of the loop." Laurie expressed frustration, "We are still invisible – and it's frustrating!" Such recognition illustrates the challenges stereotypes and social norms have created for women in leadership. Indeed, perceptions of women's knowledge and abilities have influenced others' beliefs regarding their competence, creating obstacles for women to navigate (Bernal et al., 2017; Ibarra et al., 2013; Northouse, 2019). Furthermore,

when women are excluded from such social activities, they are also excluded from opportunities such as relationship-building (Kolb & McGinn, 2009).

There are also relationships beyond the professional ones to consider – specifically in connection to motherhood, the social roles most commonly associated with it, and its impact on their leadership. While participants did not address regret at entering the superintendency, a sense of sadness could be heard in the interview for some. Anne recognized it is important for others to see her as a mother and acknowledged, "there's a reason there aren't very many female superintendents with kids – it's not easy. It's hard on the family. It's hard on me. [There are] sometimes when I'm not the mom I wish I was." Kelli recalled walking into a local store under new management and hearing, "Oh, these boys do have a mom!" She also shared how one of her children said, "I liked you better when you were just a principal because you were home more," and acknowledged the challenge of finding that life-work balance as well as the benefit of a supportive husband. Gina echoed this, explaining there is a price when "you're giving and giving and giving." Time is sacrificed. Gina continued, "It's sacrificed to your family. It's sacrificed to your kids…." While Barrosa and Brown (2021), Fernandez et al. (2021), Parmer (2021), and Tarr (2018) have identified motherhood and related responsibilities as elements that pull women away from work, these superintendents are recognizing the challenge and making sacrifices involving their families to meet the demands of the position.

Negotiating for Myself is Uncomfortable

Considering negotiations allow access to improved resources, tasks, and compensation (Reif & Brodbeck, 2014; Säve-Söderbergh, 2019), it is critical to participate in the process. Yet, seven of the eleven participants addressed difficulty with the process of negotiations. Participants addressed topics associated with negotiation ranging from discomfort, the impact of stereotypes and gender, and acknowledgment that it can lead to resignations.

Discomfort with negotiations is not uncommon, and participants were very candid in their responses to this topic. Dee does not consider herself "the best expert on negotiation." Cora admitted she is "not a very good negotiator for myself." Betty, Kelli, Mira, and Gina all agreed negotiations are not their favorite things. Gina shared, "I just hate going through it, and I'm glad when it's done!" These findings support Reyes et al. (2021) that negotiations can be unpleasant. Kolb and Williams (2000) pointed out a negative focus highlights perceived weaknesses in turn preventing the use of women's assets, so it is essential to take stock of one's assets and recognize their associated value while also acknowledging weaknesses.

Yet, while these superintendents are uncomfortable negotiating for themselves, three participants expressed different feelings when negotiating for or with their staff. Heather shared, "I like to negotiate for the teachers or with the teachers better than I do for myself." Penny voiced enjoyment in that experience as well. Finally, Cora admitted, "I'm much better at negotiating for my staff and my principals." Again, these findings are supported by prior research as Bear and Babcock (2017), Kugler et al. (2018), Mazei et al. (2015), and Schneider (2018) all addressed the communal or other-focused viewpoint which assists women when negotiating, as it fits more closely with their social roles.

There is more to this discrepancy. The participants shed light on this as well. Betty explained, "I don't want to appear or … give people a perception that I'm needy or feel that I'm worth more." She continued, "I don't want to draw attention to myself." Mira expanded on this thought: "I think one of the hardest things you can do is talk about yourself… It's uncomfortable when you have to talk about yourself and promote yourself." Dee added there is a "need to justify yourself and sell yourself even though we're not raised to believe it. We are raised to have … humility." Anne also echoed the need to "try to be incredibly humble." Betty acknowledged the feeling of awkwardness when "asking for that raise." Gina shared, "It makes me feel like I'm begging for more when I'm happy with what I'm getting."

Negotiation will be considered unnatural and distasteful when it is thought of as a selfish or otherwise negative activity, but women must use their voice if they want others to know their thoughts and expectations (Kolb & Williams, 2000). Reif et al. (2019) suggested women need to look at negotiations as an opportunity for open discussion. There is also the need for confidence when negotiating (Chiefs, 2019). Women must recognize their worth so as not to undervalue it (Fischer & Bajaj, 2017; Harvard, 2019; Kay & Shipman, 2014; Schneider, 2018). Knight (2017) drew attention to making sure the salary reflects the skills and knowledge possessed as well as fair market value – even if the salary offered would support a comfortable lifestyle. Again, extensive research ties to these experiences of the impact of norms and stereotypes, social backlash, and the sense of not belonging (Bernal et al., 2017; Bien et al., 2018; Cheryan & Marcus, 2020; Kugler et al., 2018; Northouse, 2019; Wynn & Correll, 2017).

Beyond the discomfort that negotiations can create, this process brings about more questions for the female superintendents. While more than one participant addressed the need to remove gender from the table and focus on the job, gender still surfaced. Dee asked, "Would my gender make a difference in my salary? Can I negotiate for more?" Betty shared, "I feel like I have to … advocate a little bit more and have to push harder. I have to fight a little bit more." Gina recalled, "There were times earlier in my career as a superintendent that I felt too much like I had to defend when I was asking for the money I was asking for." Dee also remembered someone once told her that her gender would make a difference in her salary. Gina shared an example, "I do think that some thought I was going to be cheaper, and not necessarily because I was younger and … newer to the profession – but because I was a woman." Laurie echoed experiences where others were "not giving me the same

type of attention as ...a male counterpart" received. She expounded on the impact she felt gender had made in her experience, saying, "Maybe my credibility or even skillset was overlooked." Gina acknowledged others "may need a little more time to accept you." Mira added she felt her gender also impacted the negotiation process early in her career. She continued, "I think your performance and the skills that you bring to the district, your knowledge of the district, and all of that outweigh that – eventually." Gina wondered, "Just because there are fewer of us… maybe it takes a little more effort to be seen in that more serious role or to be taken a little bit more seriously."

These comments associated with gender, as shared by the participants, are reminiscent of current research literature on gender and leadership. Previously, researchers have found that expectations associated with gender influence people's thoughts, behaviors, and leadership success beliefs (Blau & Kahn, 2017; Eagly, 2020; Seitchick, 2020). Eagly and Wood (2012) identified ways in which society supports or dismisses behavior associated with gender roles. Those women who participate in the act of negotiation make decisions to behave outside of the stereotypical female gender role, thereby pushing against their gender-based identity and running the risk of receiving social backlash (Kugler et al., 2018; Schneider, 2018; Williams & Tiedens, 2016).

Challenges associated with negotiations also led to some superintendents' resignations. Jasmine candidly explained, "There is only one way to get a raise sometimes – pack your bags." For one participant, her resignation followed the school board's reluctance to raise her pay, as the data suggested. This superintendent recalled how a board member asked her, "Do you know how much it's gonna cost to replace you?" She replied, "Yes, I do. Those are the numbers I give you every single time [we] negotiate. That's why I've been fighting with you to give me the appropriate raise!" Another participant who left a district following a contract negotiation experience explained, "It got down to negotiating for my contract and the level of … disrespect for my job and what I was doing, and I even said to a board member, is it because I am female?" These women seemed to recognize the impact low pay can have over time on one's career, as highlighted by DePaul (2020), and acted to make changes to benefit their circumstances. Additionally, Card et al. (2016) drew attention to negotiation differences associated with gender and income.

The School Board Holds the Cards

The process of negotiation involves two parties. For the participants in this study, the other party was the school board and its members. The negotiation experience is as varied as the school boards with whom superintendents negotiate. A superintendent's contract is developed and finalized through negotiation, but the relationship with the board is very impactful on both the process and the outcome. The participants shared experiences associated with poor and positive relationships and further stressed the value of that relationship in how they approach negotiations with their school board.

Heather explained, "You have your own contract. It's between you and the board what that contract looks like." Cora added, "If they want to keep somebody and they offer … extra money, it makes it tough to leave." Kelli pointed out that the process of negotiating "is such an opportune time to really show people how much they appreciate you." Laurie shared, "I'm pretty excited when that time comes around. I hope that whatever I've done up to that point in that school year, that the board recognizes it as I'm working hard and am continuing to move the district forward." She continued, expressing hope "that they're willing to give me compensation that rewards and recognizes what I'm doing." These statements support the assertions by Northouse (2018) that women are less likely to self-promote.

For some, the relationship with the board has led to positive negotiation experiences. For example, Laurie shared, "I really have never negotiated for my contract. [The school boards] have paid me well – to the point where I want to keep a very great relationship with my board." Laurie continued to explain, "I'm being paid better than most, but again, I have a doctorate. I've got some experience. I think they pay me well because they don't want me to leave." Kelli shared how her board is adamant about transparency and will provide the best offer first but has also become more generous each time. Anne shared the unique experience when her board "wanted to move me higher … and I told them we can't do that with our budget." She expressed satisfaction with her proposed salary, saying, "That's enough." She then moved attention to gaining benefits for her administrative team. Mira felt fortunate "to have people that I trust and that I believe will represent me well" on her board.

Other women have not had such positive experiences with their boards. One participant addressed how rural areas may have more old-fashioned views and how those board members will be the ones that provide pushback. Mira stressed the importance of listening and "trying to get a feel for how they were." She shared, "I think that's when I started noticing … the gender differences, how it wasn't outright spoken." Heather acknowledged she has "had a couple of board members who may have thought that a woman's role wasn't in the superintendency." Mira shared that in her experience, there were board members "that did not feel like they needed to pay a female superintendent what males were getting paid." Dee supported this view, explaining, "If I were a man, they'd have no problem – we'll give you the money. You're worth it." She went on to express frustration, saying, "I'm working hard, and that's what I've had to tell them. I really had to sell myself." Others have recalled other challenges associated with their gender. One participant admitted she was uncomfortable asking for a raise from one board. These experiences associated with pushback, gendered views, and the challenges of selling oneself to demonstrate their worthiness of the pay are reflected in the

literature as well – most notably connected with norms and stereotypes (Mazei et al., 2015; Seligman et al., 2018).

Relationships with the board are essential. Mira talked about her process of strategizing with the board President "to ensure that I'm getting an equal shake. And then to be able to allow him to speak on my behalf to the board prior to any agreements being made." Dee stressed the need to be willing to explain to the board what they are getting and remind them of all the things that are getting done because she is in that position. Mira approached things differently, saying, "I like to go in and say, you know I really appreciate the support and everything… This is what I feel would be appropriate next year." She continued, stressing to make "sure that they're clear about what they are paying for." While the dynamic of a board can change with an election, that change can also influence the negotiation experience. Mira shared that when an educated woman in a leadership position came on the board, "It made my negotiation much more fluent and engaged."

Experience and Salary Data are Key

In education, data is quite frequently sought after and analyzed for a variety of purposes. This study shows a discrepancy between the two states regarding how they report superintendents' pay and the availability of such data, which relates directly to transparency. The participants shared their experience of accepting that first contract and were able to address how their lack of experience and lack of data access could have been impactful. A closer look at the two states in connection to salary transparency and the impact on participants' experiences with negotiations was also explored.

Experience and availability of resources such as salary data make a difference in how one approaches negotiations. Several superintendents addressed how the first year differed from later years in connection to their approach. Betty explained, with the first job, I was "so thankful to get the opportunity… just whatever you [the school board] want, that's good enough. Now I better understand the whole system." Gina shared, "I was just so happy to get my first job and excited about that raise." She pointed out a significant change in pay from a principal to a superintendent, but one may not recognize the workload that goes with the pay until one experiences it. She continued, saying, "That first experience [of negotiating], you don't quite know what you're doing, whether it's a fair contract or not, versus what you were doing before. Moving from principal to superintendent is a big increase no matter what, so you're looking at the bottom line." In contrast, Betty highlighted the role experience plays, explaining, "I knew exactly where I was willing to be within [regarding the salary range]… felt less desperate… [and] had a little more power to make that decision as opposed to just take whatever they offered."

Inexperience is not helping women who are entering their first superintendent position. Research again sheds light to support the findings of this study. While Fischer and Bajaj (2017) addressed the impact of women's beliefs connected with financial need to determine if they will negotiate, Miller and Miller (2002) called attention to women's beliefs associated with luck in landing a position and fearing risk, which may jeopardize the offer. It is certainly not luck, but success that has come from "constant improvisation, negotiating opportunity, evading roadblocks, creating value" (Kolb & Williams, 2000, p. 240).

Nebraska Superintendents' Experiences

Nebraska's Superintendent Pay Transparency Act places stipulations and expectations regarding publishing superintendent contracts (Gessford, 2014). Access to such contracts could allow for data analysis and the potential use of such data to become talking points during negotiations. This data is gathered into a spreadsheet that provides salaries, benefits, and days of the contract, among other things, to allow for comparability studies. Furthermore, the provided data increases attention to pay by "breaking apart total pay packages" (Klein et al., 2021, p. 748). Superintendents draw upon this readily available information to help them prepare for negotiations. In addition, some participants reported there are districts that use law firms or private companies to draw up comparison studies for use during negotiations.

The Nebraska superintendents referenced access to data heavily. One superintendent shared how negotiations can be tense times, and she felt concerned about "What to say, what not to say. What's appropriate to say and what's not appropriate to say." Yet, when using this data, the superintendent suggested, "Just look at the numbers. Don't get into all the fluff. That can really alleviate a lot of problems with negotiations." By relying on the data, a superintendent felt "it just makes the process go a lot easier because [the board knows] you're trying to do what's best for everybody." Another superintendent agreed, saying, "I usually collect all these data points… and I share that with the board prior to negotiations." Another superintendent suggested being data-driven allows the board to see the "fair market value for the work that you're getting." Another explained that the numbers allowed her to justify whatever request she would take to the board.

Many participants stressed the value of the data by staying away from the emotional side. One superintendent expounded on this, explaining, "I prefer everything to be based on data and less on … intangible statements that are really difficult to prove." There is value in having resources that provide useful data. As one superintendent summarized, "Now I have the resources to get the numbers that I need to use … to help me negotiate – knowledge… experience in the job… I have more tools to bring to the table." Another participant recognized that her inexperience as a first-year superintendent allowed the district to "have me for really cheap labor." She continued, explaining that moving forward, we "brought the actual numbers and wanted to be at the … middle range. It was two months of back and forth at board meetings" as they worked to find an agreeable price point. She admitted that even with the data for support, this experience was "quite painful." Yet, it is

the availability of solid data that provides protection from being taken advantage of (Kolb & Williams, 2000).

South Dakota Superintendents' Experiences

While South Dakota requires educators' pay to be published, the state does not have Nebraska's robust policy. A resource often mentioned is a salary survey created by a professional organization from self-reported compensation and shared with its members.

Three of the superintendents addressed the use of data in driving their negotiation process. Two superintendents stressed market value, as well as gathering and analyzing data reflective of their district's size. There was also mention of transparency. For example, one superintendent gathered district-specific data and used the daily rate as the basis for her negotiation. She shared, "The only reason I went into negotiation was because I had [the data]."

Some superintendents expressed concern or questioned whether they were fairly compensated. One asked, "Where do I fit as far as negotiating for myself?" Another explained a significant barrier to salary negotiation "is knowing what to ask for." While others could be asked, she added that many of the men keep things "pretty close to the vest on some of their strategies." To find some answers, one superintendent logged onto the salary survey "to see where I'm at with pay, but I don't always know what that is because every district pays so differently." Another participant shared she cannot enter the negotiation process emotionally. She needs to have the mindset that she "might have to look for another job."

Fairness is Important

It is often said that fairness is a state of mind. Yet, for the participants in this study, fairness is sought after. When it comes to negotiation for salary and compensation, these female superintendents measured fairness by the numbers, their experience, and their credentials but also recognized a variety of other factors that are impactful. While different elements may be placed on the scale to help tip or balance it regarding fairness, finding a balance that is interpreted as fair is the goal – and that concern for fairness was for both parties involved. Among the participants, there have been both positive experiences and negative experiences. Yet, even when exploring the issue of fairness in connection with negotiations, participants also brought up their comfort level in negotiating and the differences within their male counterparts' contracts.

Fairness, while an element that is highly sought after, is elusive. All but four participants specifically mentioned fairness as a concern connected with negotiation. Heather explained some of the influential elements on one's contract are the "predecessor, your credentials, experience, and market value." Jasmine added that through "experience, you start understanding your worth." Gina pulled no punches when talking about contracts and negotiation as she stated, "It just needs to be fair. It just needs to be comparable." Gina further explained, "My goal is to be fairly compensated for what I've accomplished, for how satisfied they are with how I'm doing my job, and for someone with my credentials to be making."

One aspect of fairness addressed is the balance struck for the benefit of the school and the superintendent. Anne has asked her board, "what they believe is fair based on what I'm producing for them and what the market is asking for." Jasmine explained that she looks, "for that fairness in what you do for the school and what the school pays you." Jasmine added the data needs to be accurate as it makes the whole process "go a lot easier" as everyone is "trying to do what's best for everybody." Anne shared that she's had to say, "I don't think you should… go that high. I'm good where I'm at, and it's fair." She added, "My personal motivation is to be fairly compensated while the community and the board do not think I'm an overpaid, underworking slouch." She further recognized there is a fine line to maintain such balance. Cora highlighted the value of compromising as she successfully used that strategy when a board was concerned about the financial bottom line. She was able to adjust her contract in other ways as compensation.

Several participants discussed experiences where they felt they were treated fairly by their boards during the negotiation process, with some mentioning the value of relationships. For example, Cora stated that most of her boards have been generous and treated her fairly. She added, "I've taken what they've offered – except [for the one time] where I started looking at daily rates." Jasmine shared she is "perfectly happy just because of the school I was coming to" and added she felt they treated her fairly after reviewing the data. Another superintendent shared that there have been many times when the board has "given me more than I've asked for." Laurie mirrored that statement when she shared, "I have never asked for more pay, and whatever the salary is, my salary is more than the [the others' salaries in the] conference." This behavior supports the assertion by Northouse (2018) that women are less likely to self-promote. Fischer and Bajaj (2017), Odell (2020), and Reyes et al. (2021) all called attention to the value of relationships for women and the fear of harming such relationships through negotiations.

Others believed they had received unfair treatment. This belief prompted some to negotiate when they actively had not done so before. For example, Cora candidly shared she has only asked for one raise, and this request had been "based on what others are making" as she was requesting to, at minimum, match the daily rate of other male administrators within her district. Another superintendent shared it "took a lot of convincing," and she "had to pull a lot of data" for the board to recognize that they were behind in her pay. These examples demonstrate how access to data for comparison provides information that sparked active negotiation, as supported by Coglan (2018).

For others, concern regarding unfair treatment caused them to leave the district. A superintendent shared, "The [male] superintendent before me worked half-time. I got paid the same

amount he did [for working full-time]. The superintendent that followed me is paid considerably more, and he's male. I question that." Another participant did her research and "had asked for the average. [While the male] principal who was demoted got the average, [the board] would not give me the average – and they were going to make me do even more work!" It is important to do some research and discover one's alternatives as they can strengthen one's position while also focusing on one's goals (Kolb & Williams, 2000). Additionally, the authors highlighted alternatives that can "provide a litmus test for the ability of either party to walk away" from the negotiation table (p. 64). These experiences also support the literature addressing discrepancies in earnings by gender (AASA, 2021; Barroso & Brown, 2021; Catalyst, 2021; Kugler et al., 2018) as well as in gender inequality (Parmer, 2021).

For some of these women, the only way to rectify their situation was to move on. Yet, even when moving to another district, some questions are raised. For example, one participant was hired on an interim basis, but the two male predecessors before her "were given two to three-year contracts." Dee shared, "Every job that I left, they've paid my predecessor more than they paid me," and it was "a lot more, so that's tough." But, she continued, "That's motivated me to make sure that I'm … where I should be on the pay scale in comparison to my male counterparts." Again, these experiences support the literature addressing discrepancies in earnings by gender (Barroso & Brown, 2021; AASA, 2021).

Another challenge was also addressed – comfort level. Gina explained, "If you're middle of the road or there's lots of room for improvement, I would feel less comfortable asking for what I felt was fair." She continued, saying, "If they're happy with what I'm doing, it makes me a little bit more comfortable saying … we're behind the curve here." Betty shared, "I never want to ask for more than what everyone else already has – and so that's probably where I struggle the most." Kelli admitted, "I don't want some exorbitant amount more than what the teachers get, and I'm completely happy with that." She continued, "I've never thought that I deserve more than what [the board] gave me, but I would probably take less because they are so supportive." Betty shared, "I don't want to … be perceived that I'm not thankful." Cora's discomfort with one of her boards ultimately prevented her from actively entering negotiations to ask for a salary increase. Fischer and Bajaj (2017), Odell (2020), and Reyes et al. (2021) all called attention to the value of relationships for women and the impact fear of harming these relationships has on negotiations.

Women also discussed what they might know about their male counterparts' contracts and negotiations. For example, in connection to the contracts of her male counterparts, one superintendent expressed amazement at what they received and asked, "How do they talk somebody into that?" This ties into Northouse's (2019) acknowledgment that men readily self-promote and negotiate as well as the finding of Fischer and Bajaj (2017) that women may not recognize some of the elements up for negotiation.

Female Leaders Need Support

It is recognized that female superintendents are in the minority – holding 24% of the positions nationwide, according to the AASA survey in 2010 (Enfield & Gilmore, 2020, para. 5). Gina simply asked, "Women, where are you?" Indeed, part of the challenge is not negotiating for compensation, but negotiating for the right to be considered for the job (Kolb & McGinn, 2009). When questioned about support, many participants addressed the value of relationships, mentoring, and professional development.

Positions of leadership require skill in navigating people and professional relationships. Again, there are undertones of stereotypes and social roles at play within the participants' interviews. While some participants acknowledged needing just a few close friends, who often come from their professional network, others did talk about the role professional relationships play in their leadership role. Dee addressed the need to have a core team "looking out for you," while Kelli valued a "handful of other female superintendents that really are my trusted peers." Gina admitted it can get lonely at the meetings and stressed the need to "find people to support you in the areas you're less strong in." While these insights support areas that Fernandez et al. (2021) and Ibarra et al. (2013) recognized in connection to mentors or sponsors, they also call on the relational and communal nature of women (Eagly, 2020; Seitchik, 2020).

Mentors are not new within the field of education, and for some of the participants, they have directly benefited from a mentor. Some of these mentors came from a network of women, while others were well-respected males in the educational field. Kelli shared that her male mentor "was able to provide what to expect and how he has done it." Several women recognized the benefits of a strong mentor or role model. Gina, Heather, and Mira all expressed a desire to help aspiring leaders as they have been supported. Gina also wondered what support could be provided at the state level to bolster a mentoring program through more structure and attention to the negotiation process. Research recognizes that mentors serve as role models and support others early in their careers (Chiefs, 2020; Fernandez et al., 2021).

Beyond mentoring, discussion regarding professional development was also addressed. While these women are all well-educated and hold the highest leadership position within a school district, they recognize the need for general or specific professional development. Kelli shared her knowledge of an annual negotiation training hosted by one of the organizations she belongs to. Yet, there is a need for further professional development. Cora suggested professional development on how the genders look at things differently, while Mira would welcome training on navigating stereotypes. Dee would appreciate information on "what to ask for." Betty suggested

professional development on data usage for negotiations and general negotiation skills. All recognized that general or specific professional development is both vital and helpful. However, as Anne cautioned, one must critically examine it to remove the pieces that can be used while still being yourself.

There is a need to have access to leadership experiences (Meltzer, 2018) as well as opportunities through professional development and informal activities (Chiefs, 2019). Gina admitted such professional development associated with negotiations "would have been very helpful" early in her career. Laurie recognized the value of knowledge as "the more you know, the more you know." These various requests and insights tie back to the advice to acknowledge their worth in comparison to others and learn what is and is not negotiable (Fischer & Bajaj, 2017) while also supporting education (Ibarra et al., 2013) and programming to bolster leadership skills (Seligman et al., 2018; Ibarra et al., 2013).

Both women who provided member checks addressed appreciation for having an opportunity to gain the information provided and read other women's perspectives of their role as superintendents. One of the participants who completed the member check shared, "I didn't realize that there were so many of us feeling the same way and having the same issues." She added, "This makes me wonder if there are other areas of concern that we all have in common within the position." She acknowledged that the topic of negotiations "will continue to need extra support and resources." Her comments highlight the need for women to have the opportunity to visit with each other and share their experiences, perspectives, challenges, and lessons learned.

Recommendations for Practice

In light of this study's findings, the following recommendations are put forward for women leaders, employers, supervisors, organizations, and educational institutions:

1. Engage women in discussions with their female peers regarding life experiences associated with leadership, including but not limited to negotiation. Such network groups can provide needed support and information and "often occur naturally for white, heterosexual men" (Kolb & McGinn, 2009, p. 9). Talking to female colleagues allows women to share experiences and gain feedback (Kolb & Williams, 2000).

2. Create intentional support for women in connection to the experience and process of negotiation through a mentorship or sponsorship program addressing negotiation strategies to better prepare females in education for this aspect of leadership. Literature suggests inadequate opportunities to participate in networks of mentorships can have negative effects on negotiated items such as compensation and other benefits (Dreher & Cox, 1996; Seidel et. al, 2000).

3. Encourage women to seek personal development through exposure to such things as literature, conferences, and workshops addressing negotiation-related topics. It is important to note that female superintendents, a marginalized group, may need to learn how to recognize and learn how to "negotiate for authority, personal respect, access, and resources" - elements that are typically granted to the members in the dominant group (Kolb & McGinn, 2009, p. 8). Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that what is bargained for actively, as well as that which is permitted to be decided by others, will impact opportunities associated with future negotiations (Kolb & Williams, 2000).

4. Encourage school board members to seek resources to increase awareness of gender-related challenges associated with negotiation to help combat gender bias and disparity. By heightening the awareness of "factors that shape how gender gets mobilized in negotiation settings" negotiators may be able to recognize the "choices they have in the roles and positions they take up" (Kolb, 2000, p. 350).

5. Encourage school board members as well as other school leaders to examine the unspoken rules within the organization's order to uncover second-generation gender issues. Such work will allow progress to be made as a focused attempt to create gender equity can be made which will also allow opportunities to create change associated with "structures, practices, policies, and procedures" leading to greater organizational effectiveness (Deutsch, 2007, as cited in Kolb, 2013, p. 262).

Limitations of the Study

This study served to develop an understanding of how female superintendents in education experience negotiation through description and meaning drawn out of their lived experiences connected to the negotiation process. While the qualitative methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology was effective and provided valuable and insightful data in connection to the topic, the following study limitations need to be noted:

1. The research results may have limited transferability due to the small sample size.

2. The study participants represented only female superintendents in public school settings within two geographic Midwestern states, limiting access to female superintendents' perspectives and experiences in private schools and other states.

3. The study participants' experiences may be biased because the data is self-reported by participating female superintendents and based on feelings and insights into their negotiation actions and life experiences.

4. Researcher bias could have been a factor in the study as the researcher was in a life situation similar to some participants. While unintended and unintentional, participants' stories may have been analyzed through a biased lens due to the researcher's experiences. As supported by Creswell and Poth (2018) and Peoples (2021), the researcher used journaling and bridling to avoid this potential bias.

Recommendations for Further Research

The following recommendations for further research are offered to further explore female superintendents' experiences of negotiation:

1. This research could be replicated with a larger sample size of female superintendents in a broader geographical area and representing greater racial and ethnic diversity to determine if the results are consistent. Kolb and McGinn (2009) aptly pointed out that "different groups of women … are likely to be affected differentially" (p. 3).

2. Future research could examine whether rural female superintendents are impacted by lack of mobility due to other factors such as their spouse's current employment.

3. Future research could not only expand the diversity of populations examined but also different organizational settings to explore the impact of gender in connection to negotiation as Kolb suggests such avenues can assist in moving past the stereotypes and limitations of past research regarding gender and negotiations (2012, p. 127).

Conclusion

Recognizing there are fewer women than men in the role of the school superintendent, those females who reach this point have overcome odds and faced challenges to get there. The female superintendents' experiences of negotiations in this study both identify and articulate the challenges they have faced. While they shared their experiences which included both celebrations and challenges, many had the nagging question associated with the role of gender in their experience. Support to assist women in navigating negotiations is needed as it is through negotiations the opportunity to improve resources, tasks, and financial compensation is made (Reif & Brodbeck, 2014; Säve-Söderbergh, 2019).

In addition, clear information needs to be provided to eliminate the vagueness that disadvantages women – as, under those conditions, females often end up with lower income than their male counterparts (Ammerman & Groysberg, 2021). Ultimately, attention needs to be drawn to the social norms and systems that slow women's progress because as long as women face bias and discrimination based on their gender, disparities will continue (Fernandez et al., 2020). Therefore, as a society, we must recognize our biases and work to amend the stereotypes that unfairly impact women in the negotiation process. Suggestions provided could be a start to supporting women as necessary for their success in navigating negotiations.

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