Full Length Research Paper

Influences of Early Life Experiences on the Generative Leadership Roles of Four Female Professors of Educational Leadership

Sandra Tonnsen, Ann Alexander, Kathleen Topolka-Jorissen, and Jacque Jacobs

Sandra Tonnsen, Ph.D., is an associate professor in Educational Leadership and Foundations
Western Carolina University,Cullowhee, NC
E-mail: tonnsen@wcu.edu
Ann E. Alexander, Ph.D. is an associate professor in Educational Leadership and Foundations
Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC
E-mail: aalexander@wcu.edu
Kathleen Topolka-Jorissen is an assistant professor in Educational Leadership and Foundations
Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC
E-mail: ktjorissen@email.wcu.edu
Jacqueline E. Jacobs is a professor in Educational Leadership and Foundations
Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC
E-mail: jjacobs@wcu.edu

This study examined the influences of early life experiences on the development of leadership in four female professors of educational leadership. The findings of this naturalistic study suggest that early influences related to achievement, affiliation, and power are precursors of generativity on the part of these leaders. Understanding self as leader through reflection and critical examination can provide insight into those early experiences that can help girls and young women develop their leadership capacity. The authors conclude with a discussion of implications for leadership preparation and further research.

Key words: women leaders, generative leadership, leadership development, mentoring

Introduction

"By reflecting on...our own lives, we can identify the points along the road of leadership that have served in some way to propel or compel us to where we are today" (Stavem, 2008, p. 73).

The concept of journeying conveys thoughts of experiences that influence our lives, of the joys and trials of day-to-day living, of travels and explorations which help to explain our current approaches to life. For adults who have reached what Erikson (1950) identified as the adult stage of Generativity versus Stagnation, the work of this stage can be particularly rewarding, as adults engage in the work of "guiding the next generation" (Erikson, 1950, p. 267). Assuming the responsibilities of parenthood is the most common act of adults in this stage. However, examples of generativity can also be seen in organizations in which leaders attend to and care for the mission and the employees, in contrast to "less healthy individuals who seek power to overcome a perceived inadequacy" (Slater, 2003, p. 57). This difference is an important one for organizational leaders, to be sure. And it may be even more critical in the preparation of future leaders, as faculty in leadership preparation programs strive to develop leaders who understand generativity.

Although the generativity/stagnation conflict has been examined from a range of perspectives, the literature in the field of educational leadership in general is sparse, and it is non-existent in the studies of women in educational leadership. Urging scholars to explore this area, Slater (2003) advocated the use of identity theory to study leaders, stating, "There is a need to do longitudinal studies especially since generativity develops over time and relates early experiences to later psychosocial conflicts" (p. 64). Interested in exploring the development of generativity in women educational leaders, we undertook an examination of the life histories of four professors

of educational leadership. Our purpose was to explore the early life experiences of female professors of educational leadership to identify antecedents of generativity. To provide specificity to our investigative framework, we used the definitions of McClelland (1980) and Peterson and Stewart (1996), to answer the following questions:

1. How did the participants perceive their early experience of achievement?
2. How did the participants perceive their early experience of affiliation?
3. How did the participants perceive their early experience of power?

Background

Erikson's (1968) concept of generativity is "…primarily the concern for establishing and guiding the next generation" (p. 138). Generativity occurs typically in middle age, following the formation of a sense of identity in adolescence, continuing into young adulthood. This sense of identity, in turn, contributes to the development of an intimate relationship with another. As one develops, his or her span of influence widens and he or she becomes more interested in caring for others, hence contributing to the success of future generations (Peterson & Stewart, 1996). Generativity also includes an individual's ability or motivation to be productive and creative. It is the opposite of a "…pervading sense of stagnation, boredom, and interpersonal impoverishment" (Erikson, p. 138).

In describing his eight-stage theory of the human life cycle, Erikson (1950) encouraged other scholars to identify precursors of each stage (Slater, 2003). Since then, several researchers have explored precursors of the Generativity versus Stagnation stage (Peterson & Stewart, 1996; Slater, 2003). Erikson (1968) elaborated on the fifth stage, Identity versus Identity Diffusion, and proposed *leader and followership versus authority confusion* which Slater (2003) suggested as a conflict that serves as a precursor to generativity versus stagnation. McAdams (2006) delineated research that has shown generativity to be associated with parenting patterns, social support, and involvement in religious and civic organizations. The complexity of studying identity development related to generativity was reinforced by McAdams (2006), who stated, "A judicious reading of the empirical literature suggests that generativity may be a multifaceted developmental task for adults expressed unevenly across life domains and over time and contoured by a wide range of contextual variables" (p. 83). Among the challenges is that of addressing the role of gender in identity development. That women may develop differently from men has been proposed by several scholars. Josselson (1996), for example, proposed that women may develop through a weaving of strands, rather than in a structured progression of stages.

An instrument designed to help researchers understand generativity, the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), assesses four dimensions of generativity: *teaching or advising others, concern for others, broad societal concerns,* and *personal productivity* (Peterson & Stewart, 1996). Included in the *teaching and advising others* category are mentoring and guiding another adult. Concerns for others encompasses "…acts of kindness, care giving, concern, or help…" (p. 20). Adults who display broad societal concerns are interested in human welfare and believe "…that humans are good and will survive as a species" (p. 21). Personal productivity is characterized by a desire to leave behind something that is tangible and enduring or something that positively affects the future.

Theoretical Framework

Peterson and Stewart (1996) have tied McClelland's (1980) concepts of achievement, affiliation, and power motivation to Erikson's generative model. They found that "…generativity at mid-life was related to a combination of adolescent scores on achievement, affiliation, and power motivation" (p. 21). For McClelland, achievement is the need individuals have to excel. He found that people with high needs for achievement typically are involved in work that has at least a moderate success probability. They also require feedback so that they can assess their level of achievement. Individuals with a high affiliation need are those who seek harmony with other people. They are, in general, willing to conform to group norms and need to be accepted by others. People motivated by power either need personal power or social (or institutional) power; those needing personal power are interested in directing other people. Those who need to "organize the efforts of others to further the goals of the organization" (NetMBA, n.d., ¶ 4) have a need for social or institutional power. These concepts, then, provided the framework for this study and for understanding the data collected.

Research Design and Methods

This study had its genesis in the lived experiences of four female faculty members (the authors) in a small regional university who teach in Educational Leadership programs. The purpose was to explore the childhood experiences of female professors of educational leadership to identify antecedents of generativity as defined by McClelland (1980) and Peterson and Stewart (1996).

Study Questions

The study was designed to answer three questions:

1. How did the participants perceive their early experience of achievement?
2. How did the participants perceive their early experience of affiliation?
3. How did the participants perceive their early experience of power?

Research Methods

The study utilized naturalistic inquiry to satisfy the purpose and answer the study questions. The design, therefore, was not determined entirely a priori, but "emerged as the study proceeded" (Lincoln & Guba, p. 11). At the foundation of the method, however, was the intention to elicit, through multiple formats, the participants' life stories. McAdams (2006) outlined the benefits of using life story research in the study of generativity. First, life stories can elucidate developmental factors that served as precursors to generativity and thus lead to testable hypotheses. Secondly, the self-constructed narrative identities of generative adults evolve over time, as individuals integrate and organize the multiple experiences of a lifetime into themes. McAdams (2006) summarized the importance of using life stories by saying, "Research has suggested that individual differences in adults' life stories are related to important features of their personalities, their lives, and the worlds within which they live" (p. 87).

In the process of developing an evolving data gathering method, then, the researchers used an iterative process of debriefing, "to determine the next steps in the emerging methodological design" (Lincoln & Guba, p. 308). The study began with an unprompted writing focused on the participants' career paths. As a product of analyses of these writings, further questions evolved concerning demographics, especially families, early lives, school activities, early jobs, and accomplishments. Next, a 20 item survey was developed, piloted, and revised in order to clarify questions and collect the same demographic data from each participant. As those data were tabulated and analyzed, a long semi-structured interview protocol with 36 questions and possible follow-up questions was developed and tested that helped the participants reflect on their lives and careers. These interviews were conducted over a two month span and each lasted approximately two hours. They were tape recorded and then transcribed. Each interviewee read their transcript for accuracy and transcripts were corrected as noted. In summary, data for this study were collected by an unprompted writing, a demographic survey, and a semi-structured long interview.

Data Analysis

All data were analyzed using a continuous inductive process. Data analysis was collaborative, and a shared understanding of the data developed among the four researchers. The demographic data were combined and charted for comparison purposes. Text was coded by the researchers using the activities of data coding, memoing, data display and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to address the research questions. Reduction was done so that an independent auditor could verify coding results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The themes were collapsed and participant analysis and third-party analysis compared to further hone the themes. A non-participant analyzed the transcripts. The data from the survey and unprompted writing were used to modify and further elucidate the emerging themes.

Standards of Quality for the Conclusions

Several tactics were use to ensure the quality of the conclusions. Miles and Huberman's (1994) "five main, somewhat overlapping, issues" (p. 277) were used as indicators of quality. Objectivity and confirmability were addressed by describing general methods and procedures. The researchers described and agreed upon the sequence of data collection, processing, condensing and drawing conclusions. To support the reliability/dependability of the research, the research questions were clarified, roles as participant-researchers were defined, and coding checks conducted, including the inclusion of a third-party auditor. Internal credibility was ensured by making comparisons between and among subjects, writing comprehensive accounts, and utilizing member checks. Every effort was made to adequately describe our lives and our experiences so that comparisons to other professors/leaders could be made. Utilization and application were addressed by making the findings accessible to potential users by presenting findings at female leadership conferences and by speaking with colleagues and students about the impact of early leadership development on generativity.

Participants

The participants are four women (the authors), ranging in age from 59 to 64, and because of our ages, we grew up in the same social context, at a time of great social change and particularly the women's movement. Although two grew up in the south, one grew up in the north and one in mid-America, we all experienced similar childhood and adolescent events. All have been married, but none are currently married. Three are divorced and one is widowed. Two have grown children; the other two have no children. All grew up in middle-class, two parent families which faced financial or family crises during their youth. Our career paths took us from practitioner/administrator to professors, back to administrator, and finally we all returned to academia.

Findings

Transcript analyses of the interviews related to the conceptual framework of McClelland's (1980) theory indicated that all four participants displayed achievement, affiliation, and power needs early in their lives and continuing throughout their careers. Determining whether a particular behavior would best be classified as one or the other was sometimes difficult especially as it related to affiliation and power. It was clear that many times these factors were entwined, with participants using their abilities in affiliation to gain power.

Achievement Motivation

Peterson and Stewart (1996) viewed achievement motivation as "… a concern for performing according to standards of excellence or meeting self-imposed requirements of good performance" (p. 25). Greene and DeBacker (2004) speculated that achievement motivation for women is "…impacted by whether or not they… considered intellectual achievement to be appropriate for women" (p. 93). Jacobs (2006) expanded the

concept more recently, stating, "If more girls and young women are to become leaders for our society, it appears critical that they have the opportunity in their formative years, particularly through their educational environments, to develop their intellect, abilities, and skills to be leaders as adults. Confidence in one's ability to lead may be as important as the knowledge and skills to do so" (¶ 4). The participants in this study appear to have high levels of achievement motivation, believing that it is not only "appropriate" for women to be achievers, but also that it is imperative for them to be so. Regarding academics in their youth, all of them were publicly schooled and earned "good" to "excellent" grades. One participant said, "I actually have very fond memories of my 5th-7th grade years. I think it's sort of when I came into my own in a number of different ways." She won the school, district, and regional spelling bees and came in second in the state. Another participant won the science fair in middle school.

They were all very involved in activities in and out of school. Together, they were involved in 23 different extracurricular activities. One participated in 10, two participated in 13, and one participated in 15. The activities ranged from sports to annual staff to student government to choir and band to drama club. One participant said, "When I think about how I always overbook myself, I remember that I've always been busy. I was always in a bunch of activities and carrying a bunch of books. I was busy all the time with activities and my list of activities in the yearbook was the longest of any." As far as early work experience, all held paid jobs in their adolescence. These jobs included babysitter, greenhouse worker, grocery store clerk, medical office assistant, camp counselor, and choir director.

Affiliation Motivation
Affiliation motivation describes the need individuals have "…to establish, maintain, or restore positive affective relationships with other people" (Peterson & Stewart, p. 26). Looking at the participants' families, all of us reported experiencing the powerful influences of both our mother and father. It has been suggested that one advantage young girls have over young boys is that whereas boys see only their fathers as role models, girls see both their mothers and fathers as such. One of us remembered, "My mother was the one who kind of kept things in balance, kept life in balance, did all the right things as a mother, reading bedtime stories, setting up routines, helping us with homework, sewing clothes, all those things, but also had and has a real independent streak." Speaking of her father, one participant said, "I think his influence on me clearly strengthened what I think is a strong skill set for me – my organization skills." Our pragmatism seems to come from our fathers. This theme was best summarized with the observation, "I think my dad just accepted it as what happens in life. I credit my father with just being very, very pragmatic." Examples of role models were teachers and parents. Other heroes included people who did good things for others, e.g. Roy Rogers, Dale Evans, and Madame Curie. All of the women had mentors early in life, in addition to their

parents, who positively influenced their development – a high school band director, a piano teacher, and other teachers at various levels. The participants in this study, from their early beginnings, described themselves as, first, being close with their families and later, being active in organizations related to church and school, including scouting and involvement in the YMCA. They sought out opportunities to establish relationships with others and affiliated with others who positively influenced their lives.

Power Motivation
Power motivation revolves around the need to "…impact, control, or influence…"
(Peterson & Stewart, p. 26) another person or organization. As adolescents and young adults, the participants in this study were influential. All of them reported taking on leadership roles in the clubs they belonged to, in student council, and in church. Their early career aspirations were varied. One stated, "I went through a period when I thought it would be very glamorous to be a nun. That didn't last long." Another said, "I wanted to be an actress; I had leading roles in both middle and high school." Yet another stated, "I was always going to be a teacher…I can remember sitting on the bunk bed playing school and I had made my own little grade book and I would make up all these lessons. Then I would grade them and some kids would fail and some kids would pass." One wanted to be a doctor, like her father. And one, whose mother had a significant influence in her life, said, "I never wanted to be anything. I always just wanted to be like Momma." These early aspirations demonstrated that these women saw themselves as being able to have an impact on, and influence over, others.

Another dimension of power comes from the point where the participants realized their own power. All of them were empowered by an early unpleasant, tragic, or life-altering event. One woman lost the hearing in an ear after a tonsillectomy at age nine until she was 12. When asked how she dealt with it, she said simply, "I accommodated pretty fast…by just turning my head and doing that kind of thing." A second event occurred when the participant was 13 and she made a bad decision. "That was a pretty significant event because…it was…my first awareness of actually having some control in my life, that I could make some decisions…it was also during that time…that I remember standing at the dining table and saying to my mother, 'I want to be somebody…'." When describing a house fire that left her grandmother and grandfather homeless, a woman said, "I don't remember dealing with it…I felt sorry for them, and I didn't know what was going to happen to them…it was just something that happened and you go on."

Then, finally, when describing a serious car accident at about the age of 11, one woman said, "I remember feeling afraid that my parents would die. I'd been…a spoiled child. But I became more aware that they might need my help in just doing daily things. I became aware that family was incredibly important…and because I was the oldest daughter, I needed to

accept responsibility and try to help out where that had never been an expectation before."

Discussion and Implications

That early life experiences with achievement, affiliation, and power may be precursors to female generativity is evidenced in this study. As participant-researchers, we concluded that we are leaders who displayed a need for achievement, affiliation, and power early in our lives. We worked hard to succeed academically and took on jobs as very young teenagers where we learned more about taking care of others. We participated in a variety of activities that honed our skills, especially our interpersonal ones, which are incredibly important in fulfilling achievement, affiliation, and power needs.

Furthermore, there appears to be a reciprocal relationship among these three needs for the participant-researchers in this study. One said, "Our accomplishments made us feel empowered. Feeling empowered made it easier for us to accomplish things. A sense of empowerment and success boosted our confidence and helped us develop relationships with others." All of us returned to academia after successful careers as educational leaders because we were concerned about, and interested in, developing new leaders in education. Our actions and the rationale behind those actions affirm one of Erikson's (1968) conclusions about human development, "I am what survives me" (p. 141). That is to say, we believe it is important to use our past experiences and knowledge to help novice leaders, especially women, to develop to their full potential. Language in our interviews and experiences illustrates this tendency toward generativity. One said, "I've always seen myself as a teacher while holding administrative positions; I help others; I'm a developer." Another described her experience as a superintendent as unusual: she formed a leadership academy and instead of hiring a facilitator, taught the future leaders of the district herself. One of us described herself as having an emotional and intellectual investment in her students. Another talked about her ability to provide authentic learning to students, stating she enjoyed "…giving them experiences they are likely to encounter in their lives of leadership." Several of us talked specifically about mentoring students both formally and informally; one spoke of "…helping students write proposals for conferences, publishing articles with students, taking students to conferences, and either co-presenting with them or supporting them during their presentations."

We also clearly communicate our maternal side even though two of us have never been mothers. One observed that for all of us "helping female junior colleagues negotiate the tenure and promotion process boosted our confidence and helped us develop relationships with others." Another described part of her role as superintendent as "…supporting employees who were ill or reeling from tragedies in their lives." Still another spoke about "…balancing the need to give direct corrective feedback while helping the individual see past the pain and embarrassment of his/her mistakes," a common task among us.

Summary

Through extensive analysis in a naturalistic study, it appears that there is importance in helping others to reflect upon and examine their early life influences as they relate to their development as leaders. Additionally, expanding the knowledge based of those positive early life experiences and understanding these influences can help parents and educators who are actively helping girls and young women on their life journeys.

The findings hold several implications for educational leadership programs. Selection of candidates, for example, is traditionally based on criteria that include standardized test scores, letters of recommendation, undergraduate transcripts, and letters of recommendation. Another dimension that may reveal the potential for women applicants to be grounded in a generative approach to leadership may be the inclusion of a biographical essay that includes examples of achievement, affiliation, and power. Another area that might be reinforced through the findings of this study is that of guiding students in their career decision-making. Many females enter leadership preparation programs, primarily because they want to further their formal education. In fact, many will state explicitly that they have no intention of ever becoming a principal or superintendent or college president. In the context of this study, such women may be expressing a stronger orientation toward achievement and affiliation than to power. Leadership preparation programs, then, may want to re-examine how power is addressed in course content and processes, in order to provide arenas for openly exploring power as a critical leadership competency and as a positive precursor of generativity. Finally, further research on the precursors of generativity in leaders may produce additional hypotheses for further exploration of ways to strengthen the preparation of school leaders.

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