

*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Making Meaning of Barriers and Adversity: Experiences of Women Leaders in Higher Education**

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Extensive research has demonstrated that women aspiring to and serving as leaders face many barriers, which creates a glass ceiling effect for women's advancement into top leadership positions. In higher education, women hold only 26 percent of all college and university presidencies. The objective of this qualitative study was to discover the meaning of adversity for women leaders in higher education. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 26 women in senior leadership roles in higher education. The research question was "How do women leaders in higher education make meaning of adversity?" Participants reported experiencing wide-ranging types of adversity, including gender-based leadership barriers. While adversity had a generally positive effect on participant identity, it had disparate effects on self-esteem, power, connections to others, and worldviews. The common thread was that adversity can lead to growth and opportunity but such benefits are intertwined with pain and loss.

**Keywords:** women in leadership, adversity, higher education, meaning making

### **Introduction**

Women leaders face barriers which operate at all levels of society—individual, organizational, and societal (Diehl, in press). Barriers affecting women at an individual level include work-family conflict (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008; Poduval & Poduval, 2009; Williams, 2001) and communication style (Violanti & Jurczak, 2011). Barriers within organizations include tokenism (Broughton & Miller, 2009; Kanter, 1977; King, Hebl, George, & Matusik, 2010), exclusion from informal networks (Catalyst, 2004), lack of mentorship opportunities (Catalyst, 2004; McDonald & Westphal, 2013), lack of sponsorship (Hewlett, Peraino, Sherbin, & Sumberg, 2010; Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010), the dynamic that women "get disappeared" (Fletcher, 2001, p. 3) in organizations when contributing relationally, salary inequalities (Compton & Palmer, 2009; Kulich, Trojanowski, Ryan, Alexander Haslam, & Renneboog, 2011), gender discrimination (Diehl, 2013; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013), and workplace harassment (Diehl, 2013). At the societal level, cultural constraints on women's own choices (Haveman & Beresford, 2012; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007), the association of leadership perceptions with masculinity (Lucas & Baxter, 2012; Schein, 2001), and gender stereotyping (Hofstede, 2009; Pittinsky, Bacon, & Welle, 2007; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007) may impede women from moving forward to top leadership positions. In total, at least 13 distinct types of gender-based leadership barriers have been identified in the literature (Diehl, in press).

Although any of these barriers may hinder individual women's advancement and success in leadership, taken together, gender-based leadership barriers contribute to the glass ceiling (Cook & Glass, 2014). The glass ceiling is an invisible barrier built into the social structure of organizations that women face in gaining entry into top management positions regardless of their accomplishments or merits (Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, & Vanneman, 2001; Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986; U.S. Department of Labor, 1991). This glass ceiling for top leadership positions is evident across a spectrum of occupations, fields, and organization types (Lennon, 2013; Rhode & Kellerman, 2007; The White House Project, 2009), including higher education (American Council on Education, 2012; King & Gomez, 2008; The White House Project, 2009). Women's progress in gaining entry into top leadership positions at colleges and universities has been slow. By 2011, the percentage of presidents who were women had risen to only 26 percent (American Council on Education, 2012).

### **Meaning of Adversity**

Although women face many barriers in leadership work, existing research gives limited insight into how women leaders make meaning of barriers and other adversity they may face. Empirical research on how adult-aged individuals construct meaning of adversity suggests that adversity leads to both positive and negative meanings. Johnston's (2003) study of 20 adults found that adversity was constructed as a turning toward the adversity, a dwelling in the adversity, and a calling out from the adversity. Some viewed their adversity experiences as

permanent, inescapable losses, whereas others found hidden opportunities, new directions, liberation, and deeper meaning in life (Johnston, 2003). McMillen's (1999) meta-analysis of prior studies of individuals who had endured a variety of adversities found that individuals both benefitted from and were harmed by adversity. Several processes seem to account for the reports of benefit: purposeful changes in life structure, changes in the views of others and the world, receipt of support, and the search for meaning in adversity (McMillen, 1999). Seery, Holman, and Silver (2010) conducted a four year longitudinal study and found that individuals with some lifetime history of adversity reported better mental health and well-being than those with a high history of adversity and those with no history of adversity. The researchers concluded that while exposure to adversity typically predicts negative effects on mental health and well-being, adversity may also foster subsequent resilience with advantages to health and well-being (Seery et al., 2010).

Beatty (2001) conducted a qualitative study on the meaning of adversity specific to women leaders, six secondary principals. The principals embraced failure as essential to the learning process and saw adversity experiences as unclear and messy when they were occurring, but in retrospect as purposeful and strengthening to them as individuals. Beatty concluded that leaders who have experienced adversity may make meaning by choosing to deny their experiences or by being defined or redefined by them, bringing about an awareness that was not previously known.

### **Study Objectives**

Given the limited research on the meaning of adversity and the relatively small number of women who have advanced to top leadership in higher education, further insight on the personal implications of adversity and barriers may be gleaned from the stories of women who have attained such positions. This goal of this study is to examine how women leaders in higher education make meaning of adversity. This article begins to shed light on this question through an in-depth qualitative study of women in senior leadership positions in higher education in order to better illuminate the little understood perceptions of adversity, including implications for their lives and interaction with others.

### **Data and Methods**

To find out how women in influential leadership positions in higher education make meaning of adversity, barriers, and obstacles, I conducted face-to-face interviews with 26 women presidents, provosts, and vice presidents from a variety of Mid-Atlantic institutions in the United States. These women ranged in age from 39 to 79 and had worked in higher education administration anywhere from 1 year to 36 years, with an average of 20 years. All participants but one (a retired president) were active in their positions at the time of the interview. I employed maximum variation sampling to capture central themes of adversity which cut across a great deal of

variation amongst participants. Participants varied in their leadership roles (president, external affairs, academic affairs, financial/administrative, information technology, student affairs, executive vice president); personal characteristics (age, race/ethnicity, marital status, parental status, education, professional experience); and higher education institution type (associate's, baccalaureate, master's, doctoral-granting), size (small, medium, large), control (public, private not-for-profit, private for-profit), and setting (city, suburb, town, rural) (see Diehl, 2013, for detailed sample description).

The research question was: "How do women leaders in higher education make meaning of adversity?" Anticipating that women may not use the term "adversity" to describe significant difficulty in the workplace, I included the words "barrier" and "obstacle" in my interview questions. I used a semi-structured interview guide that included questions focusing on significant episodes of personal and professional adversity as well as professional barriers and obstacles the women had encountered. The hour-long interviews were recorded, and I personally transcribed the audio recordings.

The interview data were analyzed in several steps using Patton's (2002) content analysis methodology. First, I created a classification system by coding the interview transcripts with labels that corresponded to themes. I then performed a logical analysis across the themes to explore their interconnections, which allowed me to generate new insights to organize the data. This is a logical process in which potential categories are created by crossing each theme with each of the other themes (Patton, 2002). Lastly, I performed an interpretative analysis to more fully understand the meanings in the data. Interpretation goes beyond descriptive data by attaching significance to what was found, finding meanings, offering explanations, and drawing conclusions (Patton, 2002).

To ensure accuracy and transparency throughout the process of data analysis, I sent both transcripts and preliminary findings to participants for their feedback. After reviewing transcripts, a few participants shared additional feedback and clarifications with me, which were added to transcripts used for analysis. A number of the women in this study also shared feedback on preliminary findings. In general, participants seemed to understand, appreciate, and relate to findings, indicating that statements attributed to them were "accurate" and that findings were "interesting," "fascinating," and "impressive."

### **Results**

The women leaders in this study shared stories of significant adversity or challenge in their personal and professional lives. Participants had encountered 21 distinct types of adversity. Fifteen of these were professional adversities (e.g., discrimination, unsupportive leadership, advancement issues); five were personal adversities (e.g., relationship conflict, family challenges, serious health issues); while one type, work-family conflict, crosses both the personal and professional domains. The women also reported experiencing professional barriers

and obstacles resulting from their gender, such as discrimination, exclusion from informal networks, tokenism, lack of mentoring, workplace harassment, and salary inequalities (see Diehl, 2013, for complete listing and description of adversity types).

These adversities led to multiple meanings in the lives of participants. These meanings are organized by three societal levels: micro (individual), meso (group), and macro (societal), as shown in Figure 1.

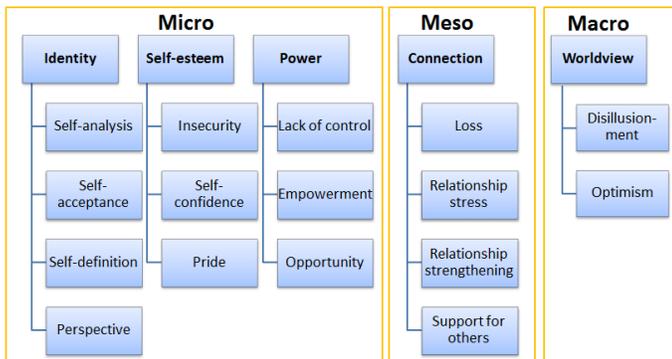


Figure 1. Meanings of adversity by level of society.

### Identity

All participants mentioned some aspect of how their experience with adversity related to their identity. Although the experience of going through adversity was trying, the changes in identity which resulted were generally positive. Participants used their experiences with adversity to analyze themselves (*self-analysis*), accept themselves (*self-acceptance*), define themselves (*self-definition*), and gain *perspective* over what was important in their lives.

**Self-analysis.** Half of the participants spoke of how adversity led them to give serious thought to their own character, actions, and motives. Through this reflection process, many gained knowledge about themselves, and some became open to changing themselves to overcome the adversity. In reflecting on their experiences with adversity, several women discovered their own identities and strengths. Through her experience of running construction projects, Carla found that she could do more than she thought:

I grew up thinking I would never do anything but be a teacher. At my age, most girls went to school for nursing or education. ... It's really taught me that I can do what I want to do, and I can do things that I never knew I could do.

Upon reflection, other participants realized they had inner strength and courage. As a result of working for a disrespectful boss, Kelly discovered that she could “survive some tough times.” Similarly, Wendy discovered that she is a survivor after her experience with a serious car accident: “I was so thrown initially. I'm like, ‘Oh my god, I could have died.’ ... I evolved from that into: ‘I survived. I'm a survivor.’”

While the self-knowledge gained by some participants was positive, for others, adversity was a more humbling experience. As a result of her experience with cancer, Claudia discovered that she “can get sick just like everybody else.”

For some women, the self-analysis process did not end with knowledge gained about self. These participants became open to change, as Frances articulated:

That obstacle might be there for a reason. ... You have to really think about what are people telling you. It's one thing if one person says it. If it comes across in other areas, well, I think you need to be open to changing or growing a little bit.

**Self-acceptance.** Several participants spoke about learning to accept that that they could not control or fix everything in their lives. Nina was verbally attacked by a male colleague and then not supported when she reported the incident. Nina found it difficult to accept that she could not fix the situation: “I couldn't fix it, and I had a really hard time with that. So I think getting me to accept that I can't fix everything, and that sometimes the right thing is to leave a situation.”

**Self-definition.** Over half of the participants described how they defined themselves, not allowing adverse situations or people to limit who they could become. Some experienced overt discouragement in high school or college which they used to prove their naysayers wrong. Anne did not allow discouraging teachers define what she could do: “People told me along the way I couldn't do something, and that was very motivational to get it done.” Others experienced this naysaying attitude in the workplace. Even though she experienced discrimination and harassment, Lillian didn't let others define what she could do. Lillian shared how she handled discriminatory attitudes: “It just made me mad, so of course, I was going to show them that I could do it.” Many women made deliberate and proactive choices to define themselves. Ava shared that she does not allow adversities to be a part of who she is: “I don't dwell on them at all.” Brenda discussed how she separated her identity from her role as president when her institution had to cut personnel: “The only way you can do those things is to say, ‘This is not me doing this. This is not about me.’”

**Perspective.** Many participants spoke about gaining perspective over what is important in their lives through their experiences with adversity. Those who experienced life and death adversities gained greater clarity in other aspects of their lives. Wendy's car accident gave her perspective about her life: “Everything became clearer in life, and I realized I didn't want to be in [my] marriage anymore.” Adversities that were life-altering, but not life-threatening also enabled participants to put minor problems into perspective. Olivia shared that after being forced to leave her job, she realized that “small situations” are “not as important. They're little things. I take them into perspective now.”

## Self-esteem

Most participants discussed how their adversities led to positive and negative effects on their self-esteem. On the negative side, participants experienced feelings of *insecurity* resulting from the difficulty or trauma. On the positive side, participants developed *self-confidence* and *pride* when they learned to manage or overcome the adversity.

**Insecurity.** For a majority of participants, adversity led to insecurity, a concept that encompasses a number of distinct feelings including self-doubt, shame, inferiority, stress, loneliness, disappointment, and failure. Participants experienced a loss of self-confidence as a result of these feelings, as Eileen discussed: “You begin to accept and become more complacent. It isn't the right answer, but it's how you survive.” Many participants spent much time questioning how they could have prevented their adverse situations. Some concluded that they were to blame, despite evidence to the contrary. Marcy described her self-examination: “Could I have done better? Should I have done better? Did I shoot myself in the foot sometime?”

For a few participants insecurity was manifest as a sense of shame, as Nina expressed in regards to enduring the verbal attack of a male colleague: “I felt dirty I felt like I was the instigator.” For others, insecurity was manifest physically through weight gain, appetite, lack of sleep, stress, and slumping posture. Gina mentioned the stress she endured while working for a verbally abusive supervisor: “It affected me personally just in sleep deprivation, appetite, anxiety.”

Another type of insecurity which participants discussed was loneliness. Lillian described the loneliness which resulted from serving on a male-dominated leadership team and being excluded from male-dominated social events: “You don't get the social interaction out of your job that most males get.” Participants who serve as presidents, such as Claudia, do not have peers within their own institution. Claudia articulated her feelings of loneliness and insecurity: “[The presidency] is the loneliest place I can imagine. ... Sometimes I feel like, ‘My god, who can I ask about this?’”

Several women felt an intense need for privacy for self-protection. Evelyn discussed how “scary” it is to serve in a leadership position in which “everybody's watching your every move.” Some participants with serious health issues chose not to share their diagnoses with their campus communities to protect themselves from criticism regarding their leadership. As Claudia explained, “I didn't want the campus to know I was sick so they wouldn't think I wasn't making good decisions because of that.” A few women noted the importance of sharing their struggles with trusted family and friends, but as Brenda stated, “Other than that, I think a line of privacy where people don't go is important.”

**Self-confidence.** Another aspect of self-esteem which over half of the participants developed was self-confidence. Many participants discussed feeling “stronger” and “tougher”

and gaining “confidence” as a result of navigating through adverse experiences. Overcoming barriers or difficult obstacles resulted in an increase in overall self-esteem. Vivian described that going away to a four year college against the advice of her counselor increased her confidence: “I felt better about myself, more power, more capable.”

Some participants found that their adversities could be managed but not overcome. Developing the emotional strength and skills to manage adversity led to an increase in self-confidence. Evelyn noted that growing up with a drug-addicted mother “made me strong.” She further explained how this experience has allowed her to handle situations that are not easy or clear:

I will listen and listen and listen and understand in most situations why people make the decisions that they do. ... I always believe people deserve second chances because there are always circumstances around the reasons why people make decisions.

A few participants shared their experiences in eliminating programs, sports teams, and positions to keep their institutions afloat financially. Such decisions were more than difficult, they were “painful” as Claudia described. However, making decisions which saved their institutions led to an increase in self-confidence. As Claudia further explained, “It's allowed me to have confidence that when I think a decision is right, trust it.”

**Pride.** Several participants discussed feelings of pride and fulfillment when they accomplished things they did not know they could. Those who persevered through challenging educational programs and job searches felt a great sense of accomplishment. Sherry spoke about her feeling of accomplishment after going through six interviews before being offered a position:

I knew some of my fellow job candidates, and I saw people get hired who I knew did not have the skill set that I had. And it's been wonderful to be a successful president. So there. [Laughs] That's my revenge...I got the right presidency.

Beyond a personal sense of accomplishment, some participants also experienced pride for their families and their culture. Frances explained that completing a full-time doctoral program while working full time and raising three children led to pride for self, family, and “the culture for women.”

## Power

Power concerns what an individual can or can't do. Some participants experienced a *lack of control* over aspects of their lives, while others experienced *empowerment* and new *opportunity*. Some women experienced both lack of control and empowerment as a result of the same experience. In these situations, when participants could not control one aspect of their lives as a result of adversity, they focused on what they could control.

**Lack of control.** About half of the participants experienced lack of control or disempowerment as a result of their adversities, meaning that they felt a lack of power to freely choose, achieve, influence, or direct events in their lives. This was especially evident for individuals who went through traumatic adversities such as serious injury or illness, miscarriage, job loss, and loss of spouse or partner. Prior to their experiences, these women thought that they had a good deal of control and power. However, after dealing with adversity, they became keenly aware of their inability to control their lives, as Marcy described: "I used to think, in all honesty, if you are intelligent, if you are honest, and if you are a hard worker, you'd be fine. I don't believe that anymore." After having had academic and career success, participants who suffered miscarriages and infertility found it especially difficult to handle the inability to have children. Sherry shared her story of being unable achieve this life goal:

I became pregnant, but I miscarried. ... I had so many tumors in my uterus that I couldn't carry a child. Right after miscarrying, I also had to have a hysterectomy. ... That was my first "failure" in life. I had made it through all of my academic preparation. I had had Fulbrights and all these grants. I had lived abroad successfully. ... I'd bought a house. I prepared everything to start a family. It was the first disconnect between setting goals and achieving them.

Several participants spoke about the frustration of being unable to control their working conditions. Claudia, a university president, described her inability to control her own agenda:

The day I come in with is not the day I get. It's close, but it's changed because of this emergency or that emergency. ... When this semester's over, it's been about whatever it needed to be about, but not what I wanted it to be about.

This inability to control working conditions includes lack of freedom to advance or not advance within an organization. Lillian described the lack of opportunities at her institution: "I've talked to my boss about career goals, and he's just said, 'Well, there's nothing for you here.'" Eileen was given no other choice but to accept a position as vice president, "I didn't want it. I refused it, and I was basically told, 'You will do it.'"

**Empowerment.** More than half of participants felt empowered as a result of their experiences, meaning that they had gained power or control over aspects of their lives. Some described the self-reliance gained through surviving adversities, as Faith experienced after the loss of her husband at a young age: "It made me self-reliant." Others developed resilience, which is the ability to "rebound and keep going" when things don't work out as expected, as Frances articulated.

Many participants found they were empowered through the leadership skills they developed as a result of professional adversity. Navigating through a particular experience of adversity led to insight and new skills which participants could use to address subsequent challenging issues. As Isabelle expressed, "I've been able to look back on it and use in other

situations that are similar." Some participants gained ability to make tough decisions and to implement change in the workplace. As Wendy stated, "It's really empowered me to just be very professionally direct with people." For Ava, overcoming the perception that her promotion was a demotion resulted in her ability "to make the tough calls" and to hold her own with her board. Others became more assertive. By standing up to a disrespectful supervisor, Kelly learned "to not be afraid to speak my truth ... and to not be afraid to showcase my work."

Individuals in this study were also empowered when they learned how to be prepared for adversity or barriers. Some participants of a minority race discussed how they had learned to "embrace" discrimination and "be prepared," as Isabelle described. Participants also learned how to deal with gender-based leadership barriers, such as exclusion from informal networks. For example, Olivia built a network of women to get around the "good old boys' network."

Participants who felt disempowered in one area of their lives were empowered when they discovered what they could control. After Phyllis was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, she started to control what she could. As she stated, she "started sleeping more [and] not sweating the small stuff." Teresa noted the importance of remembering that individuals can control their own destiny:

If you get fired, you get demoted, you don't get the job you want, it may be for a large variety of reasons, but it's never because one person has prevented you from doing that. ... You control your own destiny, and don't give that over to anybody else.

**Opportunity.** About one quarter of the participants expressed that their experiences with adversity led to new opportunities. These women viewed adversity as a catalyst which made it possible to do something new or different. However, participants described opportunity in the context of adversity as intertwined with pain and loss. As Sherry stated, "Adversity brings opportunity as well as challenge and pain, if you could get through it." Faith elaborated on how her world both contracted and expanded after losing her husband:

On an emotional level, [my world] contracted enormously. But it expanded professionally and to some extent personally ... In many ways, my life was very much enriched because of moving into administration and having the freedom to travel and not feel that I was neglecting either my husband or my children.

Some participants found that professional adversity was a catalyst for professional growth and more challenging work. Gina spoke about how she turned serving as the first female vice president at her institution into an opportunity: "I was then frequently called to be the one to substitute for the president if there was a speaking engagement. ... I seized it as a wonderful, amazing opportunity to take full advantage of."

Several participants were able to recast barriers as opportunities. When asked if she had experienced any barriers or obstacles in her position, Wendy shared that she does not define difficult situations as barriers. Instead she uses her energy to turn would-be barriers “into an opportunity.”

### **Connection**

A majority of participants described how their experiences impacted how they relate to other people, both positively and negatively. On the negative side, some participants experienced *loss* and *relationship stress*. On the positive side, several participants experienced *relationship strengthening* and the ability to provide *support for others*.

**Loss.** Several participants described losing connections to others due to various circumstances, such as death, miscarriage, jealousy, or job loss. Faith shared that the death of her husband was “the greatest loss in my life,” while Marcy stated that as a result of her job loss, “I miss my team.”

Some women lost connections to people who were not directly involved in the adversity. In Faith’s case, without her husband, she no longer felt comfortable participating in couple’s activities, and therefore lost connections to friends: “For a while, I agreed to continue [to] play bridge with a friend. But it wasn’t the same, and so gradually I just felt the need to find my own space and time.”

A few participants dealt with infertility and miscarriage. This type of loss was especially difficult for participants because there were no memorials to publicly grieve the loss. For example, Darlene described the grief she endured in private after suffering a miscarriage:

You feel like you can’t tell people because you didn’t share your greatest joy with them. [So] why are you going to say, “Well, somehow you’re weren’t good enough, or you weren’t trustworthy enough then, when I got pregnant, now I’m going to tell you about my miscarriage?”

**Relationship stress.** About one quarter of participants described how adversity had caused connections to others to be strained. Several experienced strained family relationships when the adverse situation demanded so much time and attention that it left the women with little energy for members of their families. Nina discussed the negative impact on her children: “My kids suffered in the sense that I wasn’t present for them like I could have been otherwise because I had so much going on in my head that I couldn’t shut down.”

Strained relationships also occurred when partners were unable to provide emotional support. Some participants found it difficult to share workplace struggles when their partners lacked sufficient background to understand and empathize. For example, a few women had husbands with blue-collar jobs, which were very unlike the white-collar environment of higher education administration. As Eileen stated, “You can’t empathize if you have no experience or no context.” In Evelyn’s case, discussing workplace adversity with her

husband caused a strained in her marriage when her husband wanted to interfere:

He wanted to give [my boss] a piece of his mind. ... Often times what we take home from work are the bad stories, the negative things and if it’s a person that doesn’t like to hear that, then they’re going to tell you to quit your job. They’re not going to tell you how to handle it.

**Relationship strengthening.** A couple participants described how their adversities had caused connections to others to be strengthened. Whereas for some women talking about workplace adversity with a partner strained the relationship, Darlene noted that “talking about issues related to adversity with your spouse or partner does good things for your relationship in terms of strengthening it.” Whether such conversations strengthen or strain a relationship “depends on your partner” as Evelyn stated.

Professional relationships were also strengthened as a result of adversity. Eileen spoke about the cohesiveness her team developed in handling a crisis involving accounting errors which were attributable to her predecessor: “It definitely brought my team together ... like the football mentality--we succeed or fail together.”

**Support for others.** More than half of participants expressed that going through adversity allowed them to support others, in ways such as having empathy, providing encouragement, mentoring, promoting workplace inclusiveness, and preventing mistreatment. Frances articulated that her experiences helped her to “become more supportive [and] to encourage others.” Olivia shared how she plans to protect other women as a result of her own experience: “I will not allow another woman to be subjected to what I was subjected to.”

Some participants developed empathy, support, and patience for others. Darlene stated that “I’m more empathetic with my friends and colleagues who are going through work transitions.” Phyllis discussed how her experience with multiple sclerosis made her “more aware and sensitive to another group of folks that have a lot of invisible barriers.”

Dealing with adversity made it possible for participants to encourage others going through similar struggles. Evelyn shared how her experience growing up with a drug-addicted mother helps her to relate to students at her institution: “They come in here saying they can’t do it, and I say, ‘Boy, do I have a story for you.’” Some women were also able to use their experiences to mentor others, helping them to avoid mistakes and encouraging them to take on new opportunities. As Teresa stated, “I see it as my obligation to turn around and do what I can to help [other people] transition through advice, through opportunities, through clear and forthright feedback.”

Not only did experiencing adversity allow participants to provide support to individuals, it also allowed them to support others through institutional policy or culture change. Evelyn

explained that her own experience with salary inequalities led her to push for better salary and benefit policies for employees in her institution: “The benefits wouldn’t have been implemented if there wasn’t ... a woman or somebody that had family concerns that needed to be addressed.”

### **Worldview**

Half of study participants discussed how their adversities related to their views of the world. For some, experiences with adversity led to a sense of *disillusionment* with the way that the world operates. For others, adversity led to an *optimism* of the world and why things happen.

**Disillusionment.** Some participants expressed a sense of disillusionment when their experiences did not match a more idealized pre-existing worldview. As a result of their adversities, several came to believe that things don’t happen for a reason. As Wendy explained, “I don’t think there’s a god that says, ‘Okay, she’s going to be an accident today,’ or ‘Her marriage is not going to work out.’ Things just happen.” Ava shared a similar belief when asked how she made sense of the abuse she experienced as a child: “I don’t think you make sense of that. That was a bad thing to happen, but bad things happen to people.”

Prior to going through adversity, some participants believed in the goodness of humanity. These participants experienced a sense of disillusionment when good didn’t happen in their lives and when they were mistreated by others. Eileen shared her experience of disillusionment: “My perspective changed, and sadly you begin to realize that good doesn’t always prevail.” Olivia also experienced disillusionment: “My perception has always been, as I was growing up, that everybody in the world was nice, and then you find out, not everyone is.”

The disillusionment which some participants experienced was an awareness of problems in the world. These participants translated this realization that other people do indeed have serious challenges and difficulties into an obligation to provide assistance and encouragement. As Lillian explained, “People need to be watched out for. Not everyone is tough and can handle things on their own.” Sherry also came to understand that problems happen to everybody:

I figured problems came in small sizes, and maybe people were making more of them than they should, and you have to kind of be knocked on your butt by something before you understand it can happen.

**Optimism.** After going through adversity, several participants retained or gained optimistic views of the world and why things happen. In some cases, participants viewed experiences with adversity through the lens of pre-existing faith or beliefs. Instead of focusing on the negative outcomes of adversity, holding firm to faith enabled participants to focus on the benefits of the adverse experience. As Phyllis stated: “I have a firm belief things happen for a reason. I’ve got a very

deep faith. ... [The adversity] has helped me develop sensitivity to people that I wouldn’t have necessarily had.”

In other cases, participants used their optimistic beliefs to recast their adversity more positively. Jacklyn discussed her belief that “every experience teaches you something.” As she further elaborated, “Obstacles either help you grow or help you make a decision about moving on to something else.” Similarly, several participants found that adversity can have positive outcomes. As Teresa stated, “the worst of times can actually turn out to be the most beneficial of times.”

Some participants gained optimism when an unexpected positive result occurred. One participant developed an optimism about what other people could do. Through her experience in working with a difficult boss, Evelyn learned that it was possible for an adult to change: “Over the last 15 years, I have seen him change significantly. And I didn’t know that could happen.”

While for some participants adversity caused a sense of disillusionment when outcomes did not match pre-existing beliefs, other participants experienced a confirmation of their beliefs. In Marcy’s case, the person who had caused her harm was removed from his position. As she shared, “Your mother always tells you that people that do bad things will get their [reward] but you never think you’ll see it in your life. But we did.”

Participants who retained optimistic worldviews experienced increased self-confidence and felt empowered as a result of their adversities. As Kelly described, “The more difficult times you’re able to go through, the more you’re able to look back and learn from those experiences. ... I’m able to think back, ‘Okay, I got through this and this and this and this, I can get through this one next.’”

### **Discussion**

There are five themes which emerge from the meanings formed by the women in this study. First, out of adversity comes opportunity or growth if you survive it. This appeared to be especially evident for those who suffered some of the harshest forms of adversity, such as child abuse, death of spouse, life-threatening accident, infertility, and severe institutional financial crises. These women chose to redefine or recast themselves after their experiences and found new identities and meanings for their lives. As a result, they were empowered and discovered new opportunities in life.

Second, perspective matters. How an individual views a situation often defines what one does with it. Several women in this study discussed not seeing barriers in their personal or professional lives. This was the case even though they experienced difficult situations. They chose to not view difficulties as barriers. In some cases, the women did not expend effort to acknowledge the troublesome situations. In other cases, the women chose to reframe their negative experiences by focusing on positive aspects. In general, when

encountering difficulties, these women chose to keep moving. They also considered how to work with or around difficult situations and how to turn them into opportunities.

Third, privacy in adversity is important. Many participants, most notably the presidents in this study, held very public positions. Several presidents expressed that privacy was necessary, but not always available, when dealing with adversity. For some, privacy meant sharing struggles with only a few, trusted friends so that their ability to lead would not be questioned. For others, finding time to be alone and reflect was important. When adversity was public knowledge, such as the possible elimination of programs, the women also had to deal with being offered opinions no matter where they were, both inside and outside of the workplace.

Fourth, finding a meaning for adversity or concluding that none exists relates to self-esteem and empowerment. Those who had settled on a reason for their experience or concluded that there was no reason experienced an increase in self-esteem and empowerment. Coming to a sense of closure seemed to enable participants to move past the adversity. Often the meanings were positive, such as new opportunities, self-confidence, or the ability to support others. However, not all meanings were highly positive. In some cases, participants made sense of their adversity with the realization that bad stuff exists in the world and that problems happen to everyone, including them. In other cases, meanings included being forced to make decisions that they did not want to make, such as leaving their jobs. Concluding that no particular meaning could be attributed to their adversity also resulted in increased self-esteem and empowerment. Conversely, those who were not able to make sense of their adversities experienced a decrease in self-esteem and empowerment. It seems that this lack of closure resulted in a sense of insecurity or lack of ability to control their lives. Many of these participants were still working through and processing their experiences with adversity, even though some of the experiences had occurred years in the past. In this study, meanings involving identity, connection and worldview did not appear to depend on the participant's ability to make sense of or find a meaning for their experiences. Participants who made sense of their experiences and participants who did not make sense of their experiences defined themselves in spite of adverse people or situations and used their experiences to support others. In addition, participants in both groups came to hold both disillusioned and optimistic worldviews.

Finally, participants in this study are survivors. These women did something relatively few women have done. They overcame adversity, navigated through obstacles, and broke through barriers to attain senior leadership positions in higher education. Although some participants aspired to further climb the career ladder but found that they had hit the "ceiling," all participants have survived and most have even thrived in spite of the adversity they have faced.

## Conclusion

How women leaders construct the meaning of adversity and barriers they face has received relatively little attention in prior research. In this study, I have sought to address this gap by deconstructing the ways that adversity and barriers manifest as meanings in the lives of women leaders in higher education. Although adversity had a generally positive effect on participant identity, it had disparate effects on self-esteem, power, connections to others, and worldviews.

These findings reflect the experiences of women leaders in a particular context. Future research could examine women leaders in settings outside of higher education, in mid-level positions, and in regions across the United States and around the world. Additionally, future research could examine how male leaders make meaning of adversity to compare to the experiences of women. Given the dearth of women in top leadership, it is clear that more research is needed to study the impact of adversity and barriers on women leaders as well as how such challenges may be overcome.

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