Learning to Lead in Higher Education: Insights into the Family Backgrounds of Women University Presidents

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Learning to Lead in Higher Education: Insights into the Family Backgrounds of Women University Presidents

Susan R. Madsen

The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of women university presidents related to becoming leaders or learning to lead. This manuscript highlights the research focused on the immediate family backgrounds and influences on these presidents. The research question was as follows: With regard to their family backgrounds and influences, what are the lived experiences of women university presidents related to developing into the leaders they have become today?

According to Rubin (2004, p. 288), “Extraordinary challenges face higher education nationally, and leaders with exceptional capabilities are needed to help institutions meet these challenges.” Within this new and constantly changing higher educational environment, leaders must have an exceptional set of capabilities and competencies to help institutions rise to new levels of excellence and innovation. For this reason leadership development has become a critical topic in higher education.

The role and leadership abilities of university presidents and chancellors are of particular importance in higher education. The influence and power these leaders have on the direction and strategy of their institutions and the relationships they have with government officials, boards of regents, legislatures, business and community leaders, faculty, staff, and administrators are critical. Yet, even with the concern about the preparation of future educational leaders, little research explores the development of current outstanding university presidents/chancellors. Further, there is even less focus on the development of high-level women leaders in education or other arenas (e.g., government, business, non-profit). The literature continuously mentions the lack of women leaders in high-level positions and presents general strategies needed to make progress in this area; yet, few research studies have focused on the deep exploration and investigation of the backgrounds and experiences of successful women leaders. Understanding the
influences, backgrounds, and career paths of women who have succeeded in obtaining and maintaining powerful positions of influence within higher education is essential in deepening and broadening our understanding of leadership development as a whole within higher education.

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**Theoretical Framework**

Although not previously used in this type of research, the family systems theory appears to be a powerful theoretical framework for the focus of this work. This theory explains the basic management systems model of inputs, throughputs, and outputs in a family setting (Hunts & Marotz-Baden, 2003). Bowen’s (1976) family systems concepts are useful in understanding the possible influence (negative or positive) of parents, siblings, and home environment on the leadership development of women presidents. According to Rodriguez, Hildreth, and Mancuso (1999), “From a systems perspective one cannot consider the development of a single child without assuming that the behavior of any one part of a system [e.g., parents, siblings, and home environment] will influence and be influenced by all other parts of the system” (p. 457).

A few of Bowen’s concepts seem to have direct applicability to this research study: (1) differentiation, (2) separation and individuation, (3) triangulation, and (4) boundaries. First, according to Rodriguez, Hildreth, and Mancuso (1999), “individuals...can be characterized by their degree of differentiation along a spectrum ranging from fused to enmeshed, well differentiated, autonomous, and individuated” (p. 457). Differentiation is the “individual’s inner boundary separating intellect and emotion from rela-
tionships with others” (p. 457). Parents and siblings can influence the degree of differentiation an individual may have by events, circumstances, relationships, and home environment during childhood and youth. Higher differentiation means that an individual can “identify his or her own competencies, needs, and goals, and act accordingly. Well-differentiated individuals can assess others realistically and appreciate others’ differences” (p. 457). This has been found to be directly linked to an individual’s ability to make decisions and solve problems effectively.

Second, a related concept is that of separation-individuation, which is important for healthy growth and development of a child. When a child feels or believes he or she does not have an individual identity because it may be fused with that of his or her parent or family member, some of the competencies needed for effective leadership (including individual confidence) may not emerge.

Third, problems between spouses (inability to meet each other’s needs or to resolve differences) may result in triangulation to “defuse a relationship’s intensity” (Rodriquez, Hildreth, & Mancuso, 1999, p. 458). If a parent forms an alliance with a child and he or she becomes “overly involved or enmeshed with that parent” it may cause the “healthy generational boundaries to be breached” (p. 458). Finally, setting and maintaining clear and consistent (but not overly rigid) boundaries in families can provide healthy family environments and protect the differentiation of the relationships just described.

Literature Review

Literature related to the leadership development of high level women leaders in higher education is limited. However, some literature reports research on women leaders in other arenas: government, political, business, and non-profit. For this review, literature in all of these arenas was explored. Even with this expanded search, few reported information specific to the family backgrounds and possible influences they have had on the development of women leaders. Although limited, the existing literature provides insight into this phenomenon.

A seminal study exploring the development of high-level women leaders was published by Hennig and Jardim in 1977. They interviewed 25 successful women CEOs who were born in the United States between 1910 and 1915. All were first-born children, some as only-children and others the eldest in all-girl families with no more than three children. All were born into “upwardly aspiring middle-class families living on or near the eastern seaboard” (p. 77). Twenty-two of the fathers held business management positions while the other three were college administrators. All but one (a teacher) of the mothers were housewives. The educational level of 23 of the mothers was “at least equal to that of the fathers, and in 13 cases the mother’s education was in fact superior to the father’s” (p. 77). The parents’ education ranged from high school diplomas to a doctorate (held by two fa-
thers). All were American-born Caucasian couples and families, and no patterns were discovered in their religious preference. All 25 of the women remembered their childhoods as happy times. They spoke of the “closeness and warmth of their relationships with their parents, and they felt they assumed a special role in their parents’ eyes” (p. 77). These interviewees clearly identified with their fathers, which appears to have been important for their success. Interestingly, they tended to look down upon their mothers. According to the authors, CEOs recollections of their mothers were “vague and generalized” while the father-daughter relationship descriptions were rich in detail and energy. Hennig and Jardim (1977) purported that this father-daughter relationship was central in the development of skills, abilities, and perspectives needed to be successful leaders, especially at that period of time.

Five other studies provide insight into pertinent constructs related to the current study. First, Woo (1985) found that her sample (current and potential women administrators) all grew up in two-parent middle-income households with mothers who did not work outside the home. The women felt they received encouragement equally from both parents. Second, Waring (2003) interviewed 12 African American female college presidents. Eight were raised in two-parent families, two were orphans, and two were raised with single mothers (at least for some period of time) then remarried, with the step-fathers fitting into the role of surrogate fathers. All acknowledged parental support as critical to their success; however, two credited their mothers with specifically teaching them how to read people and assess situations. One cited her father and his high expectations as the reason she was motivated to excel. Third, Walton and McDade (2001) studied women chief academic officers. More than 55% were first-born children, and when in high school more than half of their mothers worked (mostly full-time). Half of the parents had at least some college education (43.5% mothers, 47.4% fathers) with more than 30% of the mothers working in education or white collar jobs and more than 65% of the fathers employed in white collar or professional jobs. Fourth, from their own research results Keown and Keown (1982) suggested that Protestant females raised by parents with some college education in a solid, suburban community may have been intrinsic factors for success in the corporate business world (p. 450). Finally, Galambos and Hughes (2000) found that some women were raised in a family environment that typically reinforced traditional hierarchical decision-making and changed only when circumstances demanded it. They explained that because of this hierarchical environment, some women had limited decision-making opportunities even though they did have responsibilities in the home. In fact because of this, they were initially overwhelmed by the responsibilities they encountered in work and volunteer leadership positions. Further, these women needed many additional leadership development opportunities to develop their decision-making skills.

It is clear, as Lorenzen (1996) stated, “a person’s inner sense of authority
will be developed during childhood in the system of family relations, when the parents express their expectations, ideas, and emotions to their child” (pp. 25–26). And, as Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries explained in an interview with Coutu (2004), the women executives she analyzed had drives that “spring from childhood patterns and experiences that have carried over into adulthood” (p. 67). In other studies women cited supportive families (especially fathers, but mothers as well) who constantly prodded them to achieve as foundational elements of success (Hartman, 1999), and a stable family environment (Coutu, 2004) and feelings of competency (Wells, 1998) as essential to their general development. Further, Stephens (2003) reported that all of the 30 women leaders (church, business, and higher education) she interviewed remembered having “strong voices and a keen sense of competency as little girls” (p. 51). These childhood years and influences are clearly important in understanding the developmental processes of effective women leaders. These studies do not report a loss of self-confidence during late childhood/early adolescence as some of the general population research has claimed (Sills, 1994).

Since the early 1900s scholars have linked birth-order position to a range of personal characteristics (Andeweg & Berg, 2003). For example, later born children have stronger social skills while first-born children are more likely to have intellectual and verbal skills. According to some of the early research, first children also seek power to make up for the low estimates of self resulting from being first-born and having all of the parents’ expectations on their shoulders. In a 1982 study, Keown and Keown interviewed 21 women executives who “entered the job market in the 1960s and achieved success in corporate management.” (p. 450). After comparing their results to those of Hennig and Jardim (1977), they concluded that “being an only or first child and having a college education are still important, but not crucial, factors for success” (p. 450). Contrary to what Hennig and Jardim had previously purported, Keown and Keown’s (1982) research suggested that being an only or the oldest child from a small family (three children or less) was no longer a crucial factor for success.

In addition to the work of Hennig and Jardim (1977), a few other studies also address the influence of mothers. Matz (2002) found that “women, whose self-confidence had been instilled mostly by their parents with mothers rated slightly higher than fathers, never lost it.” (p. iv). She claimed that the Ophelia theory that little girls lose their confidence as they grow from childhood into their teenage years and adulthood is not always the case. “This study also contradicts previous research findings that fathers offered the most encouragement.” (p. iv). Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries’ interviewees cited their mothers as being profound influences, wise, kind, and inspiring while teaching them to learn from challenges and life in general (Coutu, 2004). In Hojaard’s study (2002) the mothers of the female leaders (business, politics, and civil service) were better educated and to a lesser degree full-time housewives than the mothers of the male leaders in her sample. Finally, Robinson (1996) interviewed a sample of African
American women leaders in community colleges who, with a few exceptions, did not have fathers in their homes. She stated, “What stands out most in the stories of these women is how very close they were to their mothers. . . . Self-reliance was reinforced when they saw how their mothers and grandmothers without any assistance were able to get things done against insurmountable odds” (p. 50).

Astin and Leland (1991) found that many of the parents of the leaders (i.e., women who worked for educational and social justice) in their study “communicated the view that their daughter could do anything she wanted to. When this support came from the father, which was more often the case, it had an even greater impact on the daughter. The importance of paternal endorsement of the daughter’s intellectual strengths has been found to facilitate her intellectual achievement as well as her choice of a nontraditional field and a strong career commitment” (p. 45). According to Astin and Leland (1991), some parents actually sent mixed messages to their daughters; and, at least for the women in this study, “it had the effect of making daughters more self-determined and more autonomous” (p. 46). Cubillo (2003) also explained, “All nine women [leaders in higher education] identified their fathers as a seminal influence in their early education and subsequent careers” (p. 285). In her book Talking Leadership: Conversations with Powerful Women, one of Hartman’s (1999) interviewees stated, “Yes, my father encouraged me. I remember sitting at the dinner table when I was quite young and too shy to say anything, but I absorbed the conversations and the values” (p. 34).

Research Methods

Between January and March of 2005, 25 women university presidents were invited to participate in this research study. They were provided details of the study and were asked for a two-hour block of time to meet for in-depth interviews at their universities. The invited women served as current presidents (or a recently retired president in one case) of primarily research public and private higher educational institutions. Some presidents from teaching-focused comprehensive institutions that had a research emphasis were also invited. The list was compiled from sources including news articles, a compensation-focused 2003 issue of Chronicles of Higher Education, and online searches for women university presidents. These women were invited via email messages sent directly to them. Twelve accepted the invitation to participate. Interviews were scheduled with ten who could meet between March and June of 2005. Eight of the ten served as presidents or chancellors of strong, well-known research institutions or university systems while two were presidents of well-known teaching-focused comprehensive institutions with strong scholarship expectations. Nine of the ten served in public institutions, with one from a private. Eight were Caucasian and two were African American women. Four of these women were in their fifties and six their sixties.
This study was a qualitative interview project that used the phenomenological research approach (Wolcott, 2001). Hermeneutic phenomenology is a human science that studies individuals (Van Manen, 2001). Van Manen explained that “phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (p. 9). This approach was very applicable to understanding the experiences of these presidents in becoming leaders.

Interview questions were drafted based on phenomenological research methodology, an extensive review of the literature, and the review of other instruments measuring similar constructs for different populations or at lower levels of leadership. The open-ended probing questions were designed to extract information about the presidents’ experiences and perceptions of becoming leaders. Some follow-up questions were similar, attempting to encourage the presidents to search deeper for additional answers and rich descriptions. Questions were reviewed prior to the interviews by two experienced leadership researchers. Slight adjustments to the instrument were made based on their feedback.

The interviews lasted approximately two to three hours each. At the beginning of each interview, the president was asked to read a detailed consent form. This information was also reviewed verbally to ensure the presidents understood the form and requests. Most of the interviews were held in the presidential offices at the particular institutional location.

A number of steps were utilized to analyze the interviews. First, all interviews were transcribed in full by the researcher and a temporary assistant. Second, each interview was analyzed to categorize responses throughout the interview into specific sections. Third, all of the related responses (comments, perspectives, and stories about their mothers) from all ten interviews were then combined into separate categorized documents. Next, each interview transcription and analysis was reread to identify key ideas and phrases about the presidents’ experiences related to each particular category. Fifth, all interview phrases or statements were then grouped by topic. The primary themes that emerged from the interviews were then noted. Finally, the presidents were asked to review the themes and results via email or phone. They were asked to provide additional perspective and insight into their experiences that may not have been captured in the original interviews. Because of the large amount of data collected, only three of these themes (home and family, mothers, and fathers) are discussed in this paper.

**Results**

The results section is divided into three subsections: (1) home and family, which addresses the home environment; religious influence/activity; and birth order and sibling information; (2) the summary of data collected regarding their mothers; and (3) the information and perceptions given about their fathers.
Home and Family
All of the university presidents in this study were raised in two-parent homes. Nine of the ten were raised with their biological parents who were married before having children. One president lost both parents early in life (she never knew her mother) but was raised by relatives whom she called her parents. All described their families as modest middle-income families, with two mentioning that they were poor at times. Two others said they were probably poorer than they had thought, but they did not realize it until they were in college and met others who had so much more. One president explained, “We were okay, financially. We lived modestly. Honestly, however, I didn’t know how modestly we lived until I met rich people.” Another stated, “My needs were met. We were always well cared for and had good food. My mother and grandmother made most of my clothes. I didn’t know that everyone didn’t do that until I got to college. It was a good, loving, supportive, steady, wonderful childhood.” Another mentioned she was “raised by loving parents who encouraged and inspired” her, and who instilled in her “a lifelong love of learning.” All described their parents as loving. In describing their family’s economic conditions, seven of the women talked about the modest family vacations they had taken throughout their childhood and youth, consisting of either camping or trips to stay with and visit relatives. All participants described their homes as being generally stable, safe, supportive, and loving environments. One mentioned some turmoil and issues at times but still felt it was an enriching environment.

Eight of the ten women mentioned that their religious beliefs and church participation were important parts of their upbringing. Some described specific concepts learned through their religious activities or specific events that taught them important lessons for life. One president said she only attended church when it was convenient and was not particularly influenced by church attendance. One did not mention religious influence or issues in the interview.

Three of the ten presidents were only children. Two of these presidents believed they did not have all of the characteristics of only children because of their unique situations. One was the only child of biological parents, who died early in her life, and was raised by relatives who had other children; hence, throughout most of her upbringing, she was not an only child in the home in which she was raised. The second president was raised in a small town and grew up with a group of close-knit peers who were “much more like siblings than friends and peers.” Three presidents were the first born in families with multiple children. Hence, six of the ten were first or only children. Three of the presidents were the second siblings in their families, and one was the third child in her family. Seven of the ten presidents were raised with at least one brother, two with older and five with younger brothers. All women who had siblings had at least one brother; therefore, no presidents were born into all girl families. Three presidents had no siblings; three had one sibling; one had two siblings; two had three siblings; and one was born into a family whose parents eventually had five children.
Mothers

Nine of the ten mothers of these university presidents attended college for at least a few years after high school. One earned a master’s degree while seven completed college programs (bachelor, associate, or certificate). The types of degrees varied with two acquiring school teaching degrees; and the others completing programs in areas such as dietetics, political science, English, museum studies, nursing, home economics, and medical technology.

Eight of the ten mothers were fulltime homemakers when their children were young, while two mothers primarily worked fulltime throughout their daughters’ upbringing. One president felt this may have been an advantage in her leadership development because her “mother worked in the evenings,” and she was able to learn “a fair amount of independence and self-directedness” because of it. One of the eight fulltime mothers went back to work fulltime after her daughter started attending elementary school. Three of the eight mothers worked part-time when their children were older. As for the mother’s occupational areas, three were school teachers at some point in their adult lives; two were employed in non-administrative positions in for-profit businesses; two worked in the social work/welfare arena; two were employed in the nursing/medical field; and one mother never worked (fulltime or part-time) outside the home.

All of the university presidents described their mothers, and some did so at great length. The majority of comments were positive, loving, and understanding. Some of their short statements included the following:

- My mother felt fortunate to have me.
- My mother had high expectations for us.
- My mother instilled in me a love for learning.
- My mother loved being with me.
- My mother made happy times.
- My mother taught me things and taught me well.

One president told stories throughout the interview to describe the friendship she had with her mother. She explained,

My mother was my best friend. She was wonderful. If I didn’t want to go to school, she would call the school and tell them that I was needed for some kind of appointment. She would come and pick me up, and we would go shopping. We had fun; it was a great time.

The presidents described the types of things about their mothers that were influential and memorable to them. One woman stated,

My mother was very dedicated and skillful. She made all my clothes through high school including mock dresses. She did my hair and went with us on hikes, picnics, and huckleberry picking expeditions. She made happy times. She was always very busy, but I never had the sense she was overwhelmed. She had an amazing capacity to adjust and adapt and had a wonderful sense of humor.
Another described her mother’s influence as follows:

My mother was influential in my life. She was the only woman I knew, except for my school teachers, who had graduated from college. I was proud of that. I was proud that she expected me to graduate from college. She worked hard to make ends meet with very limited income. As I got older, I began to see how limited the resources were. I was surprised to see how invisible that was. I think people thought we had more than we did because of what she was able to do.

Her mother’s college attendance and graduation also made an impact on a president who said,

My mother graduated from college because her brothers worked to send her. They did not get to go, but she was identified out of six children of a very modest income family as the one who should go to college, and she was a woman. I always had a sense of pride that my mother had gone to college.

All of the words the women used to describe their mothers were extracted and included in Table 1. Two of the women did make some negative

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### Table 1
Descriptive words used by university presidents about their mothers

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<th>My mother was/is . . .</th>
<th>Energetic</th>
<th>Enjoyable to be around</th>
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<th>Focused on lifelong learning</th>
<th>Friendly</th>
<th>Fun</th>
<th>Great</th>
<th>Hard worker</th>
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statements (related to short term emotional instability or irrationality regarding certain issues) about their mothers, but in all cases they explained what they learned from the experience or behavior and how they now understand (at least in part) their mother’s struggles.

**Fathers**

Six of the ten fathers went to college, and two of them received master’s degrees. Their college degrees included physical education/recreation, physics, engineering, chemistry, agriculture, and secondary education. Five of the six college-educated fathers were employed in the fields of their specific degrees. Of the ten fathers, two were employed as school teachers; two worked in managing family businesses; and the others had careers in sales, the postal service, engineering, entrepreneurship, construction, farming, and manufacturing.

The presidents also described their fathers in some detail. As with the statements about their mothers, the majority of comments were positive, appreciative, and loving. Many of these statements began with “My father...” and finished with comments like the following: believed in training my mind, cared for me, encouraged me to achieve, felt education was important, focused on the importance of education, had a strong sense of responsibility to his family, had high expectations, helped make sure we had a good time, loved politics and debate, provided helpful feedback, turned inward because of the war, was flexible with roles, and yearned for more education.

These women also shared stories and perspectives related to relationships with their fathers and how their fathers helped them develop beneficial knowledge and skills. One president who described a particularly close relationship with her father said the following:

It was a very formative time. He was teaching us all of the time. His space was a sacred space of inventing and doing important things. We learned. He encouraged creativity and hands-on doing. We would pursue anything we were interested in. It didn’t matter what it was; if we were interested in it, my father made sure we did it. I think that was a really wonderful thing... I practiced problem solving all of the time with my father. He would say, ‘The worst thing that could happen is the prototype works the first time, so you don’t learn anything from it.’ He was always talking; he would be verbalizing what he was doing, thinking, and why it was so. If it worked, ‘okay;’ if it didn’t work ‘good.’ We would figure it out... My father was really a big cheerleader of mine my entire life.

Another president described the things she learned from her father at the dinner table each evening:

At the dinner table he talked about the politics of the day, all kinds of topics. It was an interesting conversation at dinner every evening. I loved to learn the argument. I had different opinions than my father about people’s needs, welfare,
and discrimination. We both loved the argument. That taught me to live in that world. I think it is so important to a child to be able to talk and discuss and be treated almost like an adult . . . to have that conversation.

Another woman told a story about her father teaching her to love learning:

He would sit me on his lap and would say, “The only thing black people have are our minds. You have to really be able to have your mind trained.” He used to play little games with me with history. “Now do you remember when Roosevelt did this?” or “When did a certain event happen in history?” I didn’t know anything about Roosevelt or many historical events at that time, but I would remember dates. He made learning fun.

One president talked about her father’s flexibility with gender roles, which appeared to have influenced her role perspectives later in life. Her father had since passed on, but she spoke lovingly of his powerful influence and delightful personality:

My father was influential in my life. He was the kind of guy who would grab a kid at a family reunion and change his or her diaper; he wasn’t hung up on roles. He was sort of the “Macho cowboy who wasn’t.” He wore cowboy boots and bow ties with his suits. He was wonderful.

Some of the fathers appeared to have a profound influence on their daughters’ desire to excel in school and attend college. One described her father as follows:

My father was a wonderful man and very smart, but he didn’t get to go to college. It was a burden that he bore throughout his life. It was a theme in his life. Even as a child he knew he was plenty smart enough to go, but he didn’t have the opportunity. The depression came, and he couldn’t go, but he desperately wanted it. He instilled that yearning and desire in my brother and me.

Another explained:

In high school my dad said, ‘When I give you a college education, no one can ever take that away from you, and I know you can take care of yourself.’ That had a real strong impact, but I think beyond that they believed that I could, if I wanted to work for it, do anything. Anything could be achieved through hard work.

One president learned from her father that “the inherent value system was that education was a great enabler; and that in order to have options, one wanted to be as well educated as possible. My father’s basic mantra was that one had to work hard and aim high.” Another said that her father taught her that “Education was always important. It is the great equalizer. The only thing others can’t take away from you is a solid foundation and education.”
Table 2
Descriptive words used by university presidents about their fathers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My father was/is . . .</th>
<th>Role model</th>
<th>Fun</th>
<th>Active</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brilliant</td>
<td></td>
<td>Great person</td>
<td>Safe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hard working</td>
<td>Serious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheerleader for me</td>
<td>Influential</td>
<td></td>
<td>Smart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committed</td>
<td>Interested in what I was doing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Stable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>Inventor</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strong convictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedicated</td>
<td>Logical and rationale</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strong personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deeply religious</td>
<td>Loving, but not warm</td>
<td></td>
<td>Supportive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging</td>
<td>Mountain man</td>
<td></td>
<td>Taskmaster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energetic</td>
<td>Old style master</td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher to me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm about expectations</td>
<td>Outgoing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Warm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm about standards</td>
<td>Patient</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wonderful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused</td>
<td>Problem-solver</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frugal</td>
<td>Proud</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the words the women used to describe their fathers were extracted and included in Table 2. As with the comments and stories about their mothers, some of the presidents did share some struggles or challenges they had seen with their fathers or that their fathers faced that made life difficult at times (e.g., failed business ventures, war experiences, yearning for different direction in life). It was clear that these women had reflected on these issues, and they verbalized a sense of understanding. They spoke of what they personally learned from seeing their fathers' struggle, and the presidents felt that observing and living through some of these helped them in their personal and professional development.

Discussion

Bowen's (1976) family systems model provided a theoretical framework for this study. Support for this model has emerged in analyzing the data. It appears that all of these women were raised in families that had relatively healthy inputs, throughputs, and outputs which resulted in the development of competencies, knowledge, and skills (including confidence) important for successful leadership. The results and discussion also provide evidence
of healthy development within the family system with regard to the concepts previously presented: differentiation, separation and individuation, triangulation, and boundaries. The positive influences of their functional family systems are evident.

All of the university presidents in this study were raised in stable, supportive, and generally loving two-parent (or guardian, in one case) modest middle-income families with some reporting serious financial struggles at various times. Most of the women felt that their religious beliefs and church participation were important and influential elements of their personal development and overall upbringing. Children raised in intact families generally feel protected, safe, and loved. This stability may encourage confidence and self-esteem. This study supports the findings found in earlier work (e.g., Hennig & Jardim, 1977; Keown and Keown, 1982; Woo, 1985) that successful women leaders are primarily raised in two-parent homes. It is important to note, however, that although Waring (2003) found this to be true in her sample of African American female college presidents, Robinson (1996) did not. Caucasian samples in various arenas (business, civil service, education, political) tend to support the findings of the current study. Existing research reported that women business leaders came from middle to upper income families with fathers who were in management or administration (Hennig & Jardim, 1977). It is clear that although most women described their families’ financial situations as modest, they did develop a middle-class value system possibly enhanced from influences at school or church. They believed in the American dream that they would have viable opportunities for success if they worked hard. They valued education (although one president was the first to attend college in her family) and had somehow instilled in them a real sense of possibility when reflecting (as children and youth) on their future opportunities. So, with only a few exceptions, women leaders tend to come from families of middle to upper income brackets or have somehow been raised with the middle-class values just discussed.

This sample had presidents who were either only children or the first, second, or third child of multiple children families. Two of the three women who were the only children in their families claimed they did not have the typical only child characteristics for various reasons. The seven women with siblings had at least one brother (older or younger). In Hennig and Jardim’s study (1977), all of the women CEOs were either only children or the eldest of all-girl families.

Nine of the ten mothers of presidents attended college compared to only six of the ten fathers. Their mothers’ higher educational backgrounds were strong influences or models for these women. Many expressed extreme pride when speaking of their mothers’ college degrees and experiences. Their college emphases/programs were traditional for women at that time. In the Hennig and Jardim (1977) study, 23 of the mothers had equal or more education that their fathers with 13 mothers having superior education to that of their fathers. The importance of at least some college education for
both parents is also addressed in other research (Hojaard, 2002; Keown & Keown, 1982; Walton & McDade, 2001).

Most of the women came from traditional homes with eight of the ten mothers as fulltime homemakers when their children were young, and at least six of the mothers were working either part time or fulltime by the time their children were in school (elementary or secondary). The mothers’ employment was very traditional for that period of time, but most appear to have worked in professional positions. When analyzing their positions (whether before or after the births of their children), most mothers had idealistic employment positions generally focused on the future, making a difference, serving others, and even changing the future. The quotes, statements, and descriptive words about their mothers show a different type of relationship and respect when compared to earlier studies (Hennig & Jardim, 1977). Although the presidents in this study viewed their mothers as loving, committed, and dedicated, most also saw them as influential, competent, strong, intelligent, and fun. Matz (2002) found in her sample that a mother’s influence was more profound as a child with regard to self-esteem and inspiration than was their father’s. Cautu (2004) also described this phenomenon. When comparing the descriptive words used to describe their mothers (Table 1) and fathers (Table 2), it appears that more of the mothers’ words focus on personal characteristics and relationships, while the words describing their fathers highlight respect, strength, high expectations, and being a protector. Although not with all words, the common themes continue to emphasize two kinds of caretaking: a mother who is affectionate and relationship-focused, and a father who is the traditional provider (e.g., food, shelter). Yet, there is a non-traditional characteristic about these fathers that will be discussed later.

The presidents described their fathers’ occupations as relatively traditional for that time period. Only six of the ten went to college; those who did majored in predominantly traditional male fields (although two became secondary school teachers). Three of the four fathers who had not gone to college had almost stronger voices regarding the importance of higher education for their daughters. The nontraditional aspect of these fathers is that most of them believed that it was vital that they teach their daughters (as well as provide encouragement, opportunities, and education for them) to become self-sufficient. After analyzing the time periods, there are a number of possible reasons for this emphasis. First, many of these fathers may have served in wars or had fathers, uncles, brothers, and friends who did. With the extended leaves and possible deaths, these fathers may have seen and felt the need for women to be prepared to support themselves and their children. Second, many of their fathers’ and grandfathers’ occupations may have been dangerous. It was not uncommon to have men die in the mines and farming accidents. Third, these fathers married more educated women who worked (at least at sometime during their lives) in professional jobs. The men may have had a conviction early on that education was as important for women as it was for men. Hennig and Jardim (1977) and Astin and
Leland (1991) reported that the father had a stronger influence on the development, aspirations, and educational goals of their daughters. The current study found a profound influence by both parents but much richer description of their mothers and their influence. It is difficult to determine, however, if the mothers were credited with a stronger influence than the fathers.

**Suggestions for Research and Limitations**

Coutu (2004) said, “When it comes to women, it’s harder to explain what makes for success; there still aren’t enough women leaders in business for researchers to make any real generalizations” (p. 66). This is also the case in higher education. In general, research on high level women leaders in higher education is rare. But even rarer are studies that report in-depth insights into women’s experiences and perspectives related to the development of leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities throughout their lives. This requires both more research using qualitative research methodologies and access to more leaders who are willing to provide detail and candor. Detailed descriptions and perspectives are essential for progress to be made. This research is important for the development of quality and effective leadership development programs, opportunities, or counsel for women during their youth, college, and workplace years and experiences.

There are several limitations to this study that should be discussed. First, although appropriate for this research methodology, this sample was small and therefore, as with other qualitative research studies, generalizability is limited. Second, the sampling method should be kept in mind. Names were collected from a variety of sources, so there were possibly ideal participant names inadvertently left off the contact list. Third, the twelve women who agreed to participate could have had slightly different experiences and perspectives than the ones that did not want to participate. The ten women interviewed could have had more positive experiences, perspectives, and memories regarding their childhood, youth, and professional leadership development experiences than those who did not participate. Women who rejected the invitation to participate cited time issues as their concern. Six women never responded to the first or second invitations. It was impossible to interview any of these women to determine any underlying reason for their declines.

**Contributions and Implications**

This study offers contributions to the higher education and management literature. First, as mentioned previously, there is limited research published in the area of the development of leadership in women university presidents, and the few existing literature pieces are dated. This research is significant and needed. Second, it provides support for possible new relationships, antecedents, determinants, and mediators in the educational
leadership arena particularly as they relate to women. Finally, it brings to the surface the complexity of leadership development and its magnitude. Although family backgrounds and influences are only a few constructs that may influence personal and professional leadership competencies for women, practitioners expecting to achieve high level abilities in the leadership arena would do well to understand these constructs.

The results of this research suggest additional implications for practitioners. The similarities in the family backgrounds and influences of the women university presidents in this study demonstrate evidence of the importance of individual upbringings on personal assumptions, potential aspirations, and leadership development, which will most likely continue to influence them throughout their lives. By understanding these influences, practitioners can design more effective interventions dependent on an individual’s background. Awareness of this information, possible strengths and weaknesses in skills, abilities, perspectives, and self-concepts can be discovered.

References


