There's No Place Like Home? The Effects of Childhood Themes On Women's Aspirations Toward Leadership Roles

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The Effects of Childhood Themes On Women’s Aspirations Toward Leadership Roles  

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This qualitative study explores the impact of childhood themes on women’s aspirations toward leadership as suggested by the Eccles Model of Achievement Related Choices. Using intensity sampling, the research solicits childhood gender-related experiences of women in leadership and non-leadership roles through interviews, focus groups, check lists, self-esteem measures and journaling. Using a phenomenological approach, themes prevalent in the childhood homes of the participants are identified, coded, sorted and compared. The findings indicate that the messages sent to the participants about their own capabilities and the expectations their parents held for them are of greatest impact. These messages form the women’s values regarding education, career choice and leadership potential.

Dorothy’s words in the 1939 MGM silver screen adaptation of L. Frank Baum’s tale The Wizard of Oz (as she is about to click her heels and leave the Emerald City) should be a cause of concern for all women. After her victory over the wicked witch, her battle with the haunted forest and her confrontation with the winged monkeys, she tells Glinda, the good witch, and the Tin Man how the experience has changed her. When the Tin Man asks what she has learned, she states, “If I ever go looking for my heart’s desire again, I won’t look any further than my own back yard” (Warner Home Video, 1999).

This portrayal of female acquiescence is one of many that permeate our fairy tales, childhood films and television shows. These gender-biased messages are peppered with themes of dependence and helplessness. Although they may be subliminal, they are in our homes, our libraries and our schools, through the words we use, and the roles we play. These themes of female helplessness and male dominance continue to influence children, shaping their opinions of male and female roles and influencing their feelings of self-worth, self-esteem, self-confidence and aspirations for leadership. The effects of these messages may play a part in the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles.
About the Authors

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Although women have made gains, the shortage of women in leadership remains a far-reaching concern (Addi-Raccah & Ayalon, 2002; Lublin & Brewer, 2003; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000). Literature indicates there continues to be an underrepresentation of women leaders in the fields of business, science, medicine, education, research and public office (Addi-Raccah & Ayalon, 2002; Bloot & Browne, 1996; Brunner, Grogan, & Prince, 2003; Coleman, 2003; Fitzgerald, 2003; Johnson, 1999; Lublin & Brewer, 2003; McCabe, 2001; Morrison, White & Van Velsor, 1992; Skinner, Robinson, Brown, & Cates, 1999; Skrla et al., 2000; Tesch, Wood, Helwig, & Nattinger, 1995). Many of these authors indicate that both external and internal barriers may influence this underrepresentation.

External barriers are obstacles to advancement that exist outside the control and influence of the individual seeking advancement and include sex-role stereotyping and discrimination (Hudak, 2001). Gender-bias is defined as prejudice towards a specific gender without just cause. One bias reflects the belief that men make better leaders than women. This misconception can be a fundamental obstacle when selecting leaders (Lublin & Brewer, 2003). Perceived preference for male vs. female leadership style serves as an external barrier for women on the climb (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999). Walby (1990) argues that the criteria used to recruit and hire administrators favor men over women. Hearn (1990) and Shepard (1999) also assert that the external barriers of recruitment, selection, evaluation and reward systems in most school districts ensure that women are less likely to serve in a leadership capacity. Brunner et al. (2003), in their study of women superintendents, state that since men have dominated the role for so long, they have become the standard for the position.

Although external barriers persist, internal barriers are also present. Internal barriers refer to the personal conflicts experienced by females and the internalization of values which women or society create, choose, exercise, or maintain (Hudak, 2001). Internal barriers such as poor self-image, poor self-esteem, socialized role expectations, and modest career goals that inhibit women from aspiring toward leadership roles are also prevalent (Fitzgerald, 2003; Gardiner, Enomoto & Grogan, 2000; Golub & Canty, 1982; Hansot & Tyack, 1981; Hudak, 2001; Shakeshaft, 1987; Tindall et al., 1978).

Although research supports the notion that women are successfully advancing in leadership positions, it also shows that they still do not aspire to leadership roles as often as men (Skrla et al., 2000). For example, the superintendency remains male dominated with the selection of females increasing from 11% in 1930 to only 14% in 2000 (Brunner et al., 2003). Causes remain a topic of inquiry. Many are convinced that equality among the sexes, or gender equity, is no longer a critical issue. After all, more women now hold highly influential, high paying jobs (Hudak, 2001). Although this may be true, women in leadership positions still do not approach a level proportionate to men (Hudak, 2001) and continue to remain underpaid as well as underrepresented (Brunner et al., 2003). Supportive evidence sug-
gests problems still exist with how men and women are socialized, creating internal, gender-biased values, which inhibit females from seeking leadership status.

Rhodes (2004), in his book *Taking Sex Differences Seriously*, argues that differences between men and women are “hardwired” genetically, rather than a mindful choice. He asserts that cultural pressures force women to work outside the home when that is not what they really want to do. He discards the idea of socialization, states that men are innately more competitive and aggressive, and considers these characteristics in females as uncommon. However, researchers have explored the socialization factors that influence both sexes, including parental attitudes, post-school opportunities, gender roles portrayed in the media and existing inequalities by gender in the family and workplace (Tinklin, Croxford, Ducklin, & Frame, 2001). This study acknowledges that there may be differences in the way we are hardwired but holds that the influence of social factors plays a major role. It is not the purpose of this study to support or negate the fact that differences may exist between males and females; rather this research delves more deeply into the influence of societal factors on the choices women make.

The belief held by men and women that males are dominant and females are helpless begins in childhood. Gender researchers conducted a unique study involving 1,100 elementary school children (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). The children were asked what life would be like if they woke up one morning and were the opposite gender. The responses were disturbing.

Forty-two percent of the girls stated something positive about being male. They said they would be more secure, would not worry so much about what people thought about them, would be treated with more respect and would make more money. Ninety-five percent of the boys could not think of one advantage to being female. In fact, 16% of the boys indicated that they would rather commit suicide. One boy responded “I would kill myself right away by setting myself on fire so no one knew” (Sadker & Sadker, 1994, p. 84).

Through words, literature, movies, television and music children are surrounded by themes of male dominance and female helplessness. Of strong impact are the messages containing gender-biased themes sent to children by parents during their formative years. These childhood themes defined as both covert and overt, take hold rapidly and strongly influence the attitudes children carry with them into adulthood and ultimately affect the career choices they make.

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

Eccles’ (1987, 1994) Theoretical Model of Achievement-Related Choices conceptualizes gender differences in achievement patterns in terms of choice and takes us beyond the question “Why aren’t women more like men?” to the question “Why do women and men make the choices they
There's No Place Like Home? 45
do?” It examines socializers and their impact on women’s self-perceptions and capabilities. The purpose of this study is to illuminate the Theoretical Model of Achievement-Related Choices (Eccles, 1994) by exploring the relationship between gender-related childhood themes and women’s aspirations toward leadership. This theory purports that the socialization that occurs in a child’s formative years strongly impacts adult behavior. In order to explicate this theory, early childhood gender-based messages of women in leadership and non-leadership roles are compared. The goal of this study is two-fold: (a) to identify the themes prevalent in the childhood homes of women in leadership and non-leadership positions, and (b) to determine if there is a relationship between these themes and the participants’ aspirations for leadership.

Literature Review
Theoretical frameworks support the influence of society and culture on the aspirations of women towards leadership positions (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Eccles, 1987; Lewin, 1938; Weiner, 1974). Theorists acknowledge the effects of social and cultural influence on adult behavior (Eccles & Hoffman, 1984; Huston, 1983). Gender theory, socialization theory, and achievement theory attempt to explain the influence of early childhood experiences on adult career choices: however, these theories fail to take into account the societal influence on the definitions of achievement. Eccles’ Expectancy X Value Theory (1987, 1994) acknowledges the influence of socialization on achievement relating specifically to task value and task cost.

The Expectancy X Value Theory (Eccles et al., 1983) is a theoretical model of achievement-related choices that addresses gender differences in educational and career selection. Instead of looking at why women are not more like men, the model theorizes as to why women make the choices that they do, lending support to the effects of socialized internal barriers (Eccles et al., 1983).

The Eccles model links achievement-related beliefs, outcomes, and goals to interpretative systems like causal attributions, to the input of socializers (primarily parents and teachers), to gender role beliefs, to self-perceptions and self-concept, and to one’s perceptions of the task itself. The model specifies that the choice to engage in an achievement-related task is the result of two sets of beliefs: the individual’s expectations for success (self-confidence) and the extent to which the individual values the task. Task self-confidence and subjective task value are powerfully influenced by gender socialization processes, including messages from parents, teachers, textbooks, and the mass media (Eccles, 1994).

The foundation of the model is based on the interplay of four factors: (a) gender and cultural stereotypes, (b) beliefs and behaviors of the child’s primary socializers, (c) the child’s self-perceived aptitudes or locus of self-esteem, and (d) the child’s experiences related to achievement. These conditions or events are peppered by the child’s perceptions and interpretations of these beliefs, expectations, attitudes, gender roles and stereotypes.
Based on this interplay, the child develops an expectation for task success and learns to place a certain value on the task based on these experiences. Each of these factors or themes are assumed to influence both the expectations one holds for future success at the various achievement-related options and the subjective value one attaches to these various options. Therefore, this model predicts that women will most likely apply for positions that they think they can master and that have high task value for them. Women’s expectations for success depend on their confidence in their intellectual abilities and on their estimation of the difficulty of the position.

Gender-Role Stereotypes

Gender-role stereotypes are defined as jobs, activities, tasks or expectations attributed to one sex. Gender-role stereotypes can result in ill-conceived perceptions of the talents or capabilities of the individual. Because men and women are socialized differently, they acquire different self-concepts, different patterns of expectations for success and different values and goals (Eccles, 1994).

Research shows the effects of gender-role stereotypes on career aspirations. Females in educational leadership have increased during the last decade; however, since the education profession is more than 70% female, they remain proportionally underrepresented. Women constitute approximately 14% of the superintendents in the 14,000 U.S school districts (Brunner et al., 2003; Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000; National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). The superintendency continues to top the list of the most gender-stratified executive positions in the country (Björk, 1999; Kawakami, White, & Langer, 2000). Men are 20 times more likely to advance from teaching to the top leadership role in schools than are women (Skrla, 1999). These facts remain even though there are a larger number of female students in educational administration doctoral programs than males (Grogan, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1990).

Socializers’ Beliefs and Behaviors

Socializers are individuals who communicate powerful messages about competencies and expectations. The beliefs and behaviors of these individuals can highly affect the beliefs and attitudes regarding the competencies of others through the messages they send (Eccles, 1994).

Research indicates that men are perceived to be more capable of leading than women (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson & Rosenkrantz, 1972). Tindall et al. (1978) found that men were ranked higher by men and by women in terms of leadership in small task groups. Golub and Canty (1982) hypothesized that if sex role expectations influence the assumption of leadership, and if women as well as men believe that women do not make good leaders, they will defer to men whenever men are present. Neither study pursued the dynamics behind these behaviors but only guessed at the
forces at play. In both studies, females deferred leadership to males (Golub & Canty, 1982; Tindall et al., 1978).

**Differential Aptitudes**

Perceptions about one’s capabilities and talents can be termed differential aptitudes. A person’s self-concept or perceived aptitude for a specific task influences task selection (Eccles, 1994). Perceived self-concept relative to aspirations for leadership has been investigated (Golub & Canty, 1982; Hansot & Tyack, 1981; Hudak, 2001; Shakeshaft, 1987; Skrla et al., 2000; Tindall et al., 1978). A lack of confidence is a recurring explanation offered for women’s underrepresentation in leadership roles. This perceived lack of aptitude affects a woman’s motivation to seek leadership positions. As Merrick (2002) stated: “Many women have bought into a self-defeating paradigm: a fear of success, a reluctance to legitimize the exercising of authority, a tendency toward self-minimalization” (p. 95). This reflects the belief that women are faced with barriers that keep them from entering into leadership roles, even with the proven success of the skills they bring to an organization.

**Previous Achievement-Related Experiences**

Gender roles mandate different primary activities for women and men, and these gender roles influence the definition one has of successful performance of those activities (Eccles, 1994). Research indicates that previous achievement-related experiences send messages of expected success or failure in those areas. Denmark (1993) stated that typical female socialization does not promote leadership ability in the workforce, but instead prepares women for domestic roles as wives and mothers or in lower level traditional jobs. Shakeshaft (1989) asserted that women are limited by societal expectations, parental guidance, self-aspirations, and society’s attitude toward appropriate male and female roles. Men, she stated, are socialized to seek professional success while women are socialized to assume the traditional role of homemaker and mother.

The preceding literature review suggests the following research questions for this study:

- What themes were prevalent in the childhood homes of the women participants?
- To what extent did these themes influence attitudes of the participants toward leadership?
- Is there a significant difference between the childhood themes of leaders and non-leaders?

**Methodology**

This study utilizes a qualitative methodology based on phenomenology, a search for meaning over a search for rules (Creswell, 1994; Shank, 2002).
Qualitative methods humanize situations and focus more on process rather than product. Dilthey (1961) first proposed that we seek Verstehen (understanding) of human beings by empathizing with them. Phenomenology involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Oiler, 1986). In support of the Eccles et al. (1983) and Eccles (1994) Theoretical Model of Achievement-Related Choices, we investigated the influence of early childhood themes on women’s aspirations for leadership and non-leadership positions utilizing a qualitative, descriptive approach. Interviews, focus groups, self-esteem measures, gender-message checklists, and journaling were utilized.

**Research Design**

An intensity sampling was used for selecting the participants. This method, as described by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Patton (1990), involved selecting participants representing “information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely . . . but not unusual cases” (Patton, 1990, p. 171). Eight Caucasian participants were selected. Two females held senior positions in business, including a CEO and a bank president. Two held senior positions in education, including a principal and a dean. Of the four non-leaders, two were in education and two were in business. None of the participants anticipated movement in their careers at this life stage.

Each completed an informed consent form and participated in a 90 minute semi-structured interview. The interviews were closer to conversations among colleagues, exploring the research questions, rather than the traditional format of “expert” researcher questioning research “subjects.” This collaborative technique has been discussed and supported by many as a successful research interviewing technique (Chirban, 1996; Fontana & Frey, 1994; Kvale, 1996; Lincoln, 1993; McCracken, 1988; Mischler, 1986; Scheurich, 1995).

The study used open-ended interviews, which were tape recorded and later transcribed. The participants journaled by narrating and reflecting on any gender-related experiences they encountered during a two-week period. Journaling, a powerful way for individuals to give accounts of their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998), enabled the participants to take notice of the world around them through a new lens which is key to understanding the world (Shank, 2002).

All completed the 25 items of the short form of the Index of Self-Esteem (ISE), developed by Hudson and Proctor (1976), that measures the evaluative component of self-concept. Scores of the leaders and non-leaders were compared and a gender-message checklist was completed to investigate the themes related to gender present in their childhood homes.

Two 90 to 100 minute focus groups followed, involving both those in leadership roles and those in non-leadership positions. This allowed leaders and non-leaders to compare childhood events illuminating more fully
individual experiences and their affect on aspirations and career choices. Focus group prompts elicited individual gender-biased experiences. Member checks were used throughout.

Data Analysis

Data analysis, data collection, data interpretation, and narrative report writing occurred simultaneously. The information collected from the interviews, journals, focus groups and assessment protocols were sorted into categories (Creswell, 1994). This analysis identified themes, issues, and recurring motifs (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). A coding procedure isolated, counted, and interpreted the themes or categories that formed the basis for the emerging story. The process involved “segmenting” the information (Tesch, 1990), developing “coding categories” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), and “generating categories, themes, or patterns” (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). The codes included: EL-Education Leader, BL-Business Leader, EN-Education Non-Leader and BN-Business Non-Leader. Pseudonyms were assigned. Education coding included: D-Doctoral Degree, B-Bachelor Degree, M-Master Degree, HS-High School Diploma, #-highest grade completed. Others included M and F for male and female, Y and N for yes and no, M and D for married or divorced. Table I shows participants’ demographic information and educational levels of their parents.

Results

In this study, we examine the impact of childhood themes conveyed by a purposive sample of women relative to the Eccles Model of Achievement-Related Choices (1987, 1994). We discern childhood themes and socializers and the comparative effect of these agents on the adult women’s career choices and perceived options. The data gathered conveyed early life themes and experiences that provided an understanding of the influences of early childhood messages on career choices. Meanings and interpretations are reviewed relative to the key components of the Eccles Model of Achievement Related Choices (1987, 1994).

Gender-Role Stereotypes

Male and Female Roles

Within gender-role stereotypes, several sub-themes emerge: (a) male/female roles; (b) dominance, submissiveness, and helplessness; and (c) occupational choices. The literature shows that by age five, children have clearly defined gender-role stereotypes regarding appropriate behaviors and traits (Huston, 1983). Parents can either encourage or discourage the individual from considering or dispelling gender-role stereotypes. In addi-
Table 1
Distribution of Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>EL 1 Mia</th>
<th>EL 2 Linda</th>
<th>BL 1 Kate</th>
<th>BL 2 Millie</th>
<th>EN 1 Tracy</th>
<th>EN2 Karen</th>
<th>BN1 Beth</th>
<th>BN 2 Rose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>HS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Choice</td>
<td>Director Spec. Ed.</td>
<td>HS Dean</td>
<td>CEO Credit Union</td>
<td>Bank Pres.</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>School Psycho.</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Domestic Engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth Order/# of Siblings</td>
<td>4/6</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>3/3</td>
<td>2/2</td>
<td>6/6</td>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>1/2</td>
<td>6/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling Sex</td>
<td>3 F, 3 M</td>
<td>2 F, 3 M</td>
<td>1 F, 2 M</td>
<td>1 F, 1 M</td>
<td>4 F, 2 M</td>
<td>2 F, 1 M</td>
<td>2 F</td>
<td>6 F, 3 M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s Education</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>9th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s Education</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>6th</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>9th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
tion, children appear to monitor their behaviors and aspirations in terms of these stereotypes (Eccles & Hoffman, 1984; Huston, 1983). These gender-role stereotypes were abundant in all but one of the eight participant’s childhood homes.

Rose’s (BN2) experiences regarding expected gender-roles in her home is typical of the stories told by the participants. Rose’s (BN2) parents sent her messages of very specific male and female expected roles in the household, ones that were strongly gender-biased. She explains, “We all had chores. The boys did the lawn and the garbage but they could run off any time they wanted. The girls stayed home until the chores were done. My father would book us for babysitting jobs. If we had plans we had to cancel them.” The females in Rose’s (BN2) home were sent a clear message that their place was maintaining the household. The boys’ script included independence and the girls’ script did not.

The gender-related messages sent to the women of the leader group are characterized by different themes. Mia (EL1) states, “I think gender roles were subtle. My dad was not a handyman. My mom could take apart a lamp and a toaster and put them back together. Everybody was different in my family and no one fit into gender stereotypes.” Social agents can either encourage or discourage individuals from developing gender-role stereotypic beliefs. Mia was raised in a home where gender role deviant options were legitimized. This environment, free from gender-biased messages, permeated into her adult life. She stated “As an adult, I have always fought those gender stereotypes. I have always done guy things just to show I could do it.”

Although the messages sent regarding male and female roles differed, the expected role in the family appears to have little to do with the individuals’ aspirations later in life. Engaging in typical male-female tasks and responsibilities in the home did not inhibit a woman from aspiring to educational and career achievement. Other messages appear to have a greater effect.

Dominance, Submissiveness and Helplessness
The themes of male dominance, female submissiveness and helplessness are evident in the research data. Beth (BN1), a member of the non-leader group, grew up seeing her mother as an “ogre” and her father as the submissive parent. Beth was belittled and criticized by her parents; she received approval only when she cleaned, cooked or did laundry. She explains, “My father was just a delightful man but my mother was overpowering, overbearing, wicked and controlling. I think she took his self-worth away. They were both critical and demanding.” Beth’s scripts include a very dominant mother who did not foster independence or self-worth in her children. The male-female roles she experienced carried atypical themes of female-dominance and male-helplessness.

The theme of parental dominance did not necessarily indicate gender-bias or social scripts dictating helplessness or submissiveness. Kate
BL1), the CEO of a credit union, experienced gender-stereotypes in the roles of her mother and father, but believes that expectations for all siblings were the same and did not differ because of gender. “My dad was definitely dominant. He would come home, have a Manhattan and watch TV. My mom would prepare meals. She did everything and was definitely submissive. Even with this, I wasn’t treated any differently than my brothers.”

Millie (BL2), the president of a bank, shared a different story. She revealed a family environment reflecting a strong work ethic and maternal strength. She saw her mother as the parent in command. She explained, “She was the dominant parent. My father was very giving. He never said no to me. My mother was tougher. The combination worked. She was a strong influence in our lives.” Dominant mothers and dominant fathers were mixed equally among the groups. The person in charge did not appear to affect the career goals of the participants studied. The messages, however, sent by these individuals involving the capabilities and expectations of the females had a major impact.

**Occupational Choice**

The Eccles (1994) model emphasizes parents as role models. They are sources of reinforcement, providers of information, and primary resources for opportunities for their children. Occupational choice, then, can be greatly influenced by parents’ gender-stereotypic role expectations. Karen (EN2) shared that her parents expected her to go to college. She was also expected to enter into the field of education or nursing. Her brother was expected to enter into law. Beth (BN1), the product of a highly critical home environment without encouragement for higher education or a career, works in a home furnishings store. Her occupational choice mirrors her expected role in her childhood home. In her current household she maintains the same role as she did when she was a child. She receives personal gratification for keeping a clean home, cooking elaborate meals and decorating exquisitely. Beth’s occupational choice reflects a gender-stereotypic role that was reinforced during her childhood. Beth’s experiences show the force of family processes (e.g., parents’ role modeling, attitudes, and behaviors) that contributed to her occupational identities and choices. This scenario supports the primacy of parents in shaping children’s career aspirations (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993; Grotevant & Cooper, 1988).

Tracy (EN1) attributed career guidance to parochial school and her extended family. She relates that her mother’s side valued education. Her father’s side, however, expressed that it was “ludicrous that a female would get an education.” Tracy, a teacher with no aspirations for administrative leadership, has shied away from leadership paths and admitted to being fearful of such endeavors. She is submissive to her husband and her son although she reports feeling this is wrong. The input of her parents, their gender-role beliefs, and their perceptions of her self-worth have all played an important role in Tracy’s life choices.
Socializers’ Beliefs and Behaviors

Perceived Expectations
Within the socializers’ beliefs and behaviors, both perceived expectations and perceived field of options emerged as sub-themes. Although the majority of the participants’ parents did not graduate from college, their educational aspirations for their children played a critical role in their educational and career choices. Beth (BN1) recalled no direct influence from her parents. “My parents had no career aspirations for me. They never suggested college.” Tracy’s (EN1) social reality was one of self-preservation and survival. The messages sent to her by her mother were selfish but delivered the nuance of being strong and self-sufficient. She shared her experiences during her focus group discussion. “My father never had any interest in my schooling. My mother pushed me to go to college so she could collect the Social Security check.” Tracy’s (EN1) encouragement by her mother to go to college was a result of her mother’s need for financial help rather than for career aspirations for her daughter. The childhood theme of self-preservation also contributed to Tracy’s choice to reach a level of education that would enable her to improve her life condition. She selected education because it fit the stereotypic gender-role schema. She reported she did not feel capable of leadership and saw men as more able to lead. She states “We were brought up to believe that women are here to wait on the men.”

Perceived Field of Options
A person’s perceived field of options is defined as the educational and career opportunities believed to be available. The interplay of one’s perceived options, expectancies for success at those options, short and long range goals and gender-role self schema are influenced by the behaviors and goals of one’s socializers. The options presented as available, attainable and appropriate were ingrained in the messages sent to the women participants and strongly influenced their career choices.

Kate (BL1) acknowledges strong parental support for college and open career options, a strong theme among the participants currently in leadership roles. “It was expected for all of us to go to school. I was ready to graduate and we began to talk about college. They let us all grow in our own directions.” Millie (BL2) was provided encouragement and support to “go where no woman has ever gone before.” Mia’s (EL1) story is another demonstration of open options and encouragement. Although she selected education as her career path, she expressed an interest in politics and leadership at an early age.

Parents may influence options considered through less direct, more psychological means. Providing or withholding support for various alternatives can have a lasting impact (Eccles, 1987). Linda (EL2) states, “I was going to be a teacher since I was old enough to talk. My parents bought me...
the chalkboard and everything I needed for playing school.” These messages had a strong effect.

Five of the eight participants had parents with college aspirations for them and the same five completed college. Once again, this supports the Eccles’ theory, linking the individual’s expectations for success and the importance or value the individual attaches to the various options perceived as available by the individual. Socializers, primarily parents and teachers, are assumed to influence both the expectations one holds for future success at the various achievement-related options and the subjective value one attaches to the options. These expectations and the value attached to the various options, in turn, influence choice among these options according to Eccles’ (1994) theory.

**Differential Aptitudes**

**Perceptions of Competency**

Within differential aptitudes, perceptions of competency and general self-schema were sub-themes. Perception of competency is defined as the opinion one has regarding one’s capabilities. If females think more effort is needed to succeed as an engineer or a doctor than as an elementary teacher, or a nurse, they may opt for the more female-stereotypical occupations, especially if they place high importance on having a career compatible with their anticipated family roles (Eccles, 1987). Self-esteem or self-confidence, then, may be better termed expectations for success. Eccles (1987) theorizes that this expectation for success is related to the socialization process. A woman’s self-esteem typically may not suffer because she chooses one occupation over another because she is socialized to accept certain roles.

In order to assess perceived competency or self-esteem, all participants completed the Index of Self-Esteem (ISE). Seven of the eight participants’ scores indicated a positive self-concept or self-satisfaction within the groups. When the scores of the total group were examined, a difference was evident in three of the scores. The scores did not indicate significantly low self-esteem; however, the participants with the lowest self-esteem ratings described their mothers in negative terms including such descriptors as weak, submissive, critical, or docile. They described their fathers as the dominant parent. Because females are typically stereotyped as less competent than males, incorporation of gender-role stereotypes, in the case of their mothers, into one’s self concept could lead girls to have less confidence in their general intellectual abilities than boys. This, in turn, could lead girls to have lower expectations for success at difficult academic and vocational activities (Eccles, 1987).

This research indicates an association between parents’ perceptions of their children’s skills and the adults’ own perceptions of their skills and self-concepts. Although the participants’ scores on the ISE indicate no sig-
significant self-esteem problems, the statements they made indicate otherwise, supporting the strong impact of childhood themes on the women’s beliefs regarding what they can and cannot do.

Tracy (EN1), whose home was characterized by a very dominant, abusive father and submissive mother, summarizes this belief when she states, “I would have liked to have gone into either medicine or nursing, but I didn’t have enough confidence. Family support just wasn’t there.” Tracy pursued teaching and shied away from leadership. Tracy’s score on the self-esteem measure reflects the lowest self-esteem. She described herself as “withdrawn” and is currently on medication for depression.

**General Self-Schema**

Self-schema is defined as a person’s self-image. This image consists of many component parts including the schema regarding the proper roles of men and women and their short and long-term goals. This self-schema can change over time as goals and family roles change.

Karen’s (EN2) story demonstrates this concept. She was sent the message that women are teachers or nurses and men are leaders. She stated that she would “rather work for a man than a woman,” sharing that women are “much too critical.” Karen’s assimilation of socialized gender role schema had a powerful effect. She rejected activities classified as typically male.

Along with parental beliefs and expectations, task value also plays an important role. Eccles (1987, 1994) acknowledged that career options may not be considered because they do not fit the individual’s gender role schema. Denmark (1993) stated that typical female socialization prepares women for domestic roles as wives and mothers or in lower level traditional jobs in the workforce. Both Karen (EN2) and Tracy (EN1) selected occupations where they could balance the roles of motherhood and a career. Their self-schema included aspirations for higher education and a career; however, these aspirations were peppered with the socialized gender-responsibilities of homemaker and mother.

**Previous Achievement-Related Experiences**

**Parental Relationships**

Parental relationships and affective memories emerge as sub-themes. Parental beliefs regarding gender-roles and career expectations influenced the life choices of the participants. Linda (EL2) views her mother as dedicating her life to her children and as a nurturing individual. Millie (BL2) witnessed a strong work ethic from her mother and a message of equality. She states, “My mother was a strong figure in my life. She worked so we could go to private high schools and colleges. She was a central figure. She taught us never to quit.” Millie (BL2) saw her as strong, valuing both education and career. This gender message played an important role in Millie’s (BL2) educational and career aspirations.
The maternal perceptions of the leader group all portray a positive image. The perceptions of others were quite different. Tracy (EN1) describes her mother as a survivor but sees her as powerless. “My mother was a very weak person. When there was a crisis in my family, my older sister came to the rescue.” Beth (BN1) reveals damaging perceptions of her mother. “My mother was wicked and critical. She was controlling and diminished my father’s self-worth. I never respected or admired her.”

The women who view their mothers as supportive and nurturing show the greatest achievement-related gains. All four of the leader-groups describe their mothers in positive terms. They completed college and are working in professional management fields. The women who see their mothers in a negative way have neither achieved management positions nor see themselves doing so.

Affective Memories
Affective memories are defined as those emotional recollections that have impacted the individual. Mortimer, Lorence and Kumka (1986) found that higher levels of emotional support and attachment to parents have been linked to greater career maturity. These findings further suggest that certain affective dimensions of the parent-child relationship might modify the messages that parents transmit to their children, children’s receptivity to these messages, or both.

Mia (EL1) saw her father as strong and supportive of her mother as she entered the teaching field later in life. “My mother went to Duquesne to get a teaching degree. It took her 10 years. It was interesting watching my dad support her efforts.” Mia’s (EL1) experiences with her parents were positive and socialized her to view her world and its options without gender-bias. This gender-role deviance contributes strongly to Mia’s gender-free perceptions of career options and opportunities.

Aspirations Toward Leadership
The Eccles Theory (1987, 1994) legitimizes females’ choices as valuable on their own terms rather than as a reflection or distortion of male choices or values; however, this research indicates that, for many, these choices are based on a somewhat distorted perception of the female’s true competencies.

Women in this study who view their mothers as strong, independent, hard-working and successful completed college and pursued leadership positions. Mia (EL1) and Linda (EL2) selected the field of education, primarily female-dominated, and aspired to and obtained positions in a still male-dominated administrative arena. Millie (BL2) climbed her way to the top position in the banking business. Mia (EL1) stated her life “would have been easier” if she were male, reflecting on the gender-issues she faced as she entered into educational administration. “I was the first female administrator in the area. I didn’t get invited to ‘guy’ things such as golf outings.”
Although she did enter into the leadership arena of education, Mia expressed a desire early on to go into politics but ultimately did not.

Linda (EL2) reflects that her career selection was based on a female-typical choice. "I probably would have done something different because men weren’t elementary teachers then." Linda’s movement into educational leadership, a predominately male-dominated arena, reflects her early parental messages of college and career expectations. She attributes her movement into leadership as a result of male administrators who saw her potential and mentored her. Millie (BL2) sees her womanhood as contributing to her leadership success. "I would hope that if I were a man I could have accomplished as much as I have as a woman." Although Millie denies being "handed anything," she attributes much of her success in the banking business to male mentors who saw her potential and encouraged her along the way. She describes difficulties she faced entering into a predominately male-dominated field. "I was the first college-educated female hired." She experienced isolation and jealousy until she was able to prove her capabilities. "I ate lunch by myself. The women resented me."

The non-leader group envisions a different scenario had they been born male. Karen (EN2), who shied away from leadership positions, states, "If I were born male, I would probably be a lawyer. I would probably have been steered into management." Karen envisions herself capable of leadership if she were a man. She states that she "does not want that responsibility" and is fearful of "staff supervision" and "speaking in front of groups." She does not see those fears existing if she were male.

Beth (BN 1) evidences self-deprecating comments in her vision of being born male. "Since I am not easily educated, I don’t think I would be successful in administration. As a male I probably would have been educated and very successful." Beth equates maleness with the ability to be educated. These projections on being male support this research in its search to ferret out the impact of childhood themes on women’s aspirations for leadership.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The results illuminate the relationship between early childhood themes and the adult women’s aspirations for educational and vocational achievement. It supports Eccles’ (1987, 1994) theory that women’s aspirations for leadership are not sex based differences, but differ among women based on the influences of early childhood experiences, primarily parental expectations. The findings suggest that these messages are a result of the parents’ expectations and not parental modeling of typical gender-roles. That is, when the parents endorsed gender-biased themes of female helplessness or submissiveness, the females see themselves as helpless or submissive as they entered into adulthood; they also made educational, career and leadership choices based on these socialized competencies. When the themes of female heartiness, independence, and expected educational achievement are
prevalent, the women’s educational, career and leadership choices reflect those themes. The findings of this research are discussed relative to the themes or messages that prevailed in the childhood homes of the women participants.

**Childhood Messages Regarding Career Options**

**Highly Impact Career Choice**

The research supports Eccles’ (1987, 1994) theory suggesting that women enter into occupational fields that are closely tied to parental messages regarding their place and expected capabilities. Five of the eight participants were expected to go to college. These five achieve that expectation. Two of the eight were socialized for domestic roles and pursued careers linked to this area. Participants selected domestic fields when those areas were reinforced in their childhood homes. Higher education and professional careers were pursued when viewed as viable options.

The impact of childhood messages as evidenced in the Eccles (1987, 1994) theory and as clarified in this research, is supported by the developmental theory of Super (1990). The theory recognizes the family as a strong influence on self-concept and on career maturity. Empirical literature also gives credence to the primacy of parents in shaping children’s career aspirations (Grotevant & Cooper, 1988; Mortimer et al., 1986; Schulenberg, Vondracek, & Crouter, 1984). Much of the literature, however, focuses on the structural features of the family, such as socioeconomic status or parental occupation, rather than the parental socialization process (Grotevant & Cooper, 1988; Schulenberg et al., 1984). Findings of this sociological literature indicate that the parents’ level of education and occupational status are associated with children’s educational and occupational aspirations. This is not a finding of the current study. Family processes including expectations, attitudes and behaviors have proven to have impacted educational and career aspirations and not parental levels of education or career choice. In fact, only two participants had a parent who earned a college degree. Fourteen of the 16 parents represented in this study had a high school education or less.

**Females are More Likely to Choose Higher Education When Parental Expectations Include this Aspiration**

Eccles’ (1994) model acknowledges the influence of one’s parents, teachers, role models, and peers on educational and occupational decision-making. The research acknowledges the importance of these intimates but has identified the role of parents as the strongest socializer impacting lifelong career decision-making choices. Five of the participants state that college was not an option; it was an expectation, and they lived up to that expectation. Parental expectations have been shown to have an over-riding effect on the adult woman’s career selection and her ability to move into leader-
ship roles. Several investigators have documented a positive link between parents’ expectations for their children’s eventual educational attainment and the children’s own educational expectations and self-concepts (Halle, Kurtz-Costes & Mahoney, 1997; Phillips, 1987). This research and the research of Eccles (1987, 1994) confirm the powerful influence of parental expectations on educational attainment.

It is critical to note that the gender-roles played by the parents of the participants did not indicate a pattern in the educational and career outcomes of the women interviewed. All eight participants reported the typical male-female gender-roles of father as breadwinner and mother as homemaker as apparent in their homes. This stereotypical role modeling did not impact the women’s educational or occupational choices. The educational level of the parent also did not predict the educational achievement of the child. What influenced them significantly were the expectations that their parents had for them. If the parents expected higher educational goals, the women attained them. If the parents did not place value on higher education attainment, neither did the children. The groundwork for future leadership aspirations was woven into the messages sent about viable career options, educational worth, and themes of female success and independence.

**Women are Less Likely to Aspire to Leadership Roles When Sent Messages of Female Helplessness**

The research shows a relationship between the childhood themes regarding the role of the female and themes of helplessness and submissiveness, either sent directly or observed in mothers. The three participants, who grew up in homes where females were taught to be submissive, did not aspire to leadership roles. The non-leaders have also transmitted the notion of females as submissive in their current homes. Research demonstrates that sexual inequality still occurs between husbands and wives and reveals itself in the different ways that parents treat male and female children (Atwood, 2001). This parental bias puts daughters at a disadvantage.

According to Dowling (1981), helplessness is a socialized typical feminine behavior. Tibbetts (1980) suggests that women have been socialized to experience satisfaction and achievement vicariously by functioning in a supportive or submissive capacity. Tracy (EN1), Beth (BN1), and Rose (BN2) were socialized to experience satisfaction by taking care of household chores. Tracy (EN1) and Rose (BN2) were also socialized with the idea that men are in charge. These theoretical constructs all support the Eccles’ Theory (1987, 1994) showing the consequences of socialized helplessness on women’s career choice making ability. Dowling (1981) terms this the “Cinderella Complex,” stating that women learn early in life not to have high self-esteem and to be helpless. This behavior, as illuminated, presents a conflict for the female as she attempts to enter and advance within a male-dominated hierarchy.
Women are More Likely to Choose Careers that They are Socialized to Value

Women make decisions based on the value they learn to place on certain tasks and on their learned confidence in their ability to complete the task. These beliefs have been strongly influenced by parental expectations and impact women’s movements into leadership positions. Four of the participants entered into the field of education because it was an expected choice for women. Three participants explained that they valued their career selection because it allowed them to balance a career with motherhood. Two participants remain in education and one in house cleaning because of the flexibility those careers provide in managing dual roles. This research supports Eccles’ Theory (1994) showing that choice regarding career decisions is based on a balance between task value and task cost. The choice options, however, are strongly influenced by socializers, primarily parents.

Shakeshaft (1989) asserted that women are limited by societal expectations, parental guidance, self-aspirations and society’s attitude toward appropriate male and female roles. Men are socialized to seek professional success, while women are socialized to assume the traditional role of homemaker and mother. Finding a balance, then, between family and career remains a compelling task for women. Since females are traditionally expected to manage the home and the children, aspirations for a career with additional leadership responsibilities may not be valued over family obligations. Marriage and family responsibilities are commonly accepted as one of the most significant barriers to female movement into leadership. Women are taught to value the domestic role and are unable to maintain a balance between the two, therefore, abandon plans for career advancement.

A Woman’s Self-esteem is Directly Related to Her Perceptions of Her Mother

The research brought to light the subtle, yet deep, effects of negative maternal memories on the adult women’s self-esteem. When memories were compared to the scores on the Index of Self-Esteem, a relationship was evident. The women who used negative referents to describe their mothers were also the women whose scores on the ISE indicated lowest self-esteem. These women were members of the non-leader group. Perceived maternal helplessness or submissiveness affected the beliefs these women held regarding their own strengths, talents and educational worth.

According to Betz (1994), the important variable influencing individuals’ perceived range of career options is not their measured abilities, but their beliefs concerning their competence in various domains. If the women in this study received negative female references and messages of female helplessness and submissiveness, it would be postulated that they would develop low self-efficacy expectations in regards to career choice and leadership aspirations. The results of this investigation supports this point, at least in our limited sample. The messages sent to Tracy (EN1), Beth (BN1),
and Rose (BN2) resulted in lower self-esteem scores and no expectations for leadership roles.

**Mentors are Needed for Women to Move Into Leadership Roles**

The educational and career paths chosen by the leaders were strongly influenced by their parents’ expectations. The groundwork was set by the themes of achievement permeating their homes. Mentors persuaded the women to take that first step into leadership. Encouragement and confidence in the women’s abilities were paramount in the women’s choice to opt in to leadership. The leaders had strong parental encouragement. Their success in leadership was a result of the interplay between their abilities and their capabilities as perceived by their male mentors.

**Future Research**

The research findings make salient the importance of parental messages on the educational and career choices of adult women. The implications are quite complex and reveal the need for further investigation in many areas. Further investigations illuminating the gender messages in today’s homes are recommended. A qualitative study involving young parents may be useful in assessing the messages present in early childhood homes. Identifying children’s gender-role perceptions may also be useful in further revealing the messages regarding gender sent to children.

The findings also suggest further investigation into the relationship between parental expectations and women’s leadership aspirations. Given the apparent link between perceived self-worth and movement into administration, a more comprehensive look at self-esteem may be enlightening. An attempt to measure the individual’s perceived competencies rather than feelings of worth may ferret out the socialization influence and give a more complete picture of the women’s assessments of personal abilities.

To develop effective intervention strategies, researchers need to look to theoretical models of sex typing, stereotyping, and discrimination. To date, no known research is available that investigates models of attitude change and children (Bigler, 1999). Cognitive-developmental perspectives might be useful in examining the cognitive processes involved in the revision of children’s gender-role beliefs (Liben & Bigler, 1987). Understanding the cognitive processes involved in the re-teaching of revised gender messages seems crucial for designing effective intervention strategies.

**Implications for Leadership Development**

Using the dimensions of the Eccles Theory (1987, 1994) as a guide, recommendations for change follow. Gender-role stereotypes, socializers’ beliefs and behaviors, differential aptitudes, and achievement-related experiences are discussed across various life sectors. These variables could articulate the changes that may encourage women to opt in to leadership.
Bigler (1999) stated that gender stereotyping is both pervasive among children and resistant to change. This research also shows the lasting impact of the socialized gender-bias that takes root in early childhood. Changing the parental messages sent to children will not be an easy task. Parent education is necessary to inform parents of the impact of words, actions, and expectations. Efforts focused on addressing new parents through school systems may be a first step. By creating a gender-fair environment in schools and communicating messages of female strength and heartiness, we may begin to weaken the messages of gender-bias existing in the homes of young children.

In order to change how girls perceive themselves and their capabilities, we need to provide new social scripts that illuminate the strengths and talents of the female gender. Social Stories Unlimited (Gray, 1995) is an approach to teaching social skills through improved social understanding. Social stories can send gender-free messages and themes of educational and career options to children. Delivering new, gender-fair messages regarding abilities and career options is paramount.

Administrators have a responsibility to facilitate a school environment in which all stakeholders know that equity is a high priority. Climate, curriculum, instruction and career options are areas where gender equity must take precedence. Mewborn (1999) suggested solutions for creating a gender-equitable school environment. She suggested replacing instructional materials that contain evidence of gender bias including: sexist language, photos or stereotypical roles. Career days are suggested as a means of opening options to girls. Instruction needs to be tailored to provide equitable teaching practices.

Summary

Using the Eccles Model of Achievement Related Choices (1987, 1994) as a guide, the study ascertains the effects of early childhood themes on women’s aspirations toward leadership. It illuminates the relationship between the messages women receive and the educational and career choices they make. Themes prevalent in the women’s early childhood homes regarding gender-roles, expectations for success, and career aspirations influence the choices the women make in their personal and career paths. Role models in regards to parental education or parental careers does not prove to affect the women’s educational or vocational aspirations and neither did gender-stereotyped role models of the parents. The messages sent to these women about their own capabilities, and the expectations their parents held for them were of greatest impact. These women did not model their parents, but, rather, modeled the expectations their parents had for them. These expectations or messages determined what choices the women made regarding their educational and career goals. They formed the women’s values and lifelong perceptions regarding education, career choice and leadership.
There's No Place Like Home?

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