

## ***Power and Leadership: A Perspective from College Women***

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### Summary

This article deals with an analysis of career choices and the relationship of women to concepts of power and leadership within college administration. The author examines the incongruity of the values and beliefs women tend to hold regarding power and leadership with those of the bureaucratic system and how this incongruity ultimately affects career choices. The purpose of her study is to harmonize the values women hold with those of the bureaucracy's. This change should involve a change in the system's values, not in the women's values.

### Introduction

This article is based on my thesis, "Power and Leadership: A Perspective from College Women" (1993), which is an analysis of career choices and concepts of power and leadership of college women with administrative responsibility at Vancouver Community College. By investigating the fit between women's values and concepts of power and leadership and those of the bureaucratic system and how this fit affects their career choices, the study addresses the under-representation of women at the top of organizational hierarchies.

The purpose of the study is to provide a rationale for changing existing patriarchal, hierarchical, bureaucratic systems. I focus specifically on changing college administrative systems into systems that will be more comfortable for women by inclusion of values that women tend to hold. My initial research question was "Why are there so few women at the top of organizational hierarchies?" The literature suggests various answers to this question. Of these I was most interested in women's choices. To investigate these choices I developed the question "Does a bureaucratic organizational structure interfere with women's interest in and access to formal organizational authority?" In order to answer this question I needed to ask these questions: "How do women's values and concepts of power and leadership fit with those of the patriarchal, hierarchical, bureaucratic system?" and "How does this fit affect their access to organizational authority?"

### Context

I investigated the research questions using background from four areas of literature: organizational theory, feminist perspectives, barriers to women in educational administration, and women's leadership. Organizational theory (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980; Mintzberg, 1983; Morgan, 1986) provides the language and frameworks for studying and critiquing organizations, specifically bureaucratic organizations. Bureaucracies are based on scientific management theory and have hierarchical organizational structures. Tasks and areas of responsibility are clearly defined and the lines of responsibility run vertically between subordinates and superiority.

Power in the hierarchy is based on positional authority. Ferguson (1984), in a feminist critique of bureaucracy, says that it is dehumanizing through its cult of rationality which

is “the subjection of very intimate aspects of human relationships, emotions, and identity to the reign of commerce and technique” (p.52).

I chose a socialist feminist perspective which suggests changing organizations from within to be compatible to both women and men. This socialist feminist perspective emphasizes the need to fit the system to women rather than fitting them to the system. This perspective suggests that the hierarchical system does not serve all men either. Both men’s and women’s experiences should be valued to create a balanced organization.

The literature on barriers to women in educational administration suggests two categories of reasons why there are so few women at the top of hierarchies: institutional barriers and women themselves. Institutional barriers include discriminatory hiring practice, job structure which limits people with family responsibilities, and time-in-line requirements to move successfully up the hierarchy. Many of these are related to the nature of the bureaucratic system. However, even if some of these institutional barriers were removed by initiatives such as affirmative action and employment equity, women themselves may still not apply for administrative positions. Studies show that women may choose not to apply for administrative positions due to their socialization to “appropriate” roles for women. They may have psychological barriers such as fear of power and conflict, or lack of confidence in their abilities. This study challenges the literature on women’s psychological barriers by investigating women’s choices as active resistance to joining a system which does not fit their values.

The literature on women’s leadership is based on research on women’s development which shows that men and women tend to reach different “highest” stages of moral development (Gilligan, 1982). Women tend to reach an ethic of care and connection which leads to empowerment or “power with,” and men tend to reach an ethic of justice and rights which leads to control or “power over.” Studies of women’s epistemological development (Belenky et al., 1986) show that women tend to be “connected” knowers, that is, knowers who base their knowing on relationship rather than on impersonal rules. My research joins other women’s leadership studies (Desjardins, 1989; Cross & Ravekes, 1990; Helgesen, 1990) which use the language from the research on women’s moral and epistemological development.

#### Theoretical Framework

To analyze the fit of women’s concepts of power and leadership to the concepts traditionally found in bureaucracies I constructed a theoretical framework of leadership (see diagram). I constructed this framework by applying theories of women’s moral and epistemological development to concepts of power and leadership. I developed three leadership categories: 1) separate leadership based on the ethic of justice and rights, 2) connected leadership based on the ethic of care and connection, and 3) constructed leadership based on a balance between the ethic of justice and rights and the ethic of care and connection. The overlapping circles illustrate that the dichotomous categories of separate and connected leadership are really regions and that leaders do not necessarily manifest these characteristics in a dichotomous way but most likely in some combination

of the regions. Some leaders are more separate or connected in their styles than others. I suggest that the region of overlap (constructed leadership) is the ideal.

Separate leadership is traditional, bureaucratic “command and control” type of leadership, where position in the hierarchy is of prime importance. Power is based on position or authority, power “over others” is used to control. Separate leaders are bosses, separate from those they lead. They do not share the power and therefore make decisions alone and shoulder the responsibility for those decisions. They need to appear decisive. They use the ethic of justice and rights in a rational manner to make their decision. They value objectivity. This kind of leadership is essential in a bureaucratic system. It is part of the system’s values. Separate leadership skills are the most visibly valued in a bureaucratic system.

But the system would not survive without the values of connected leadership. Connected leadership skills are not articulated as clearly as separate leadership skills; they therefore are invisible as valued skills. Connected leadership is based on the ethic of care and connection. Power is “with others.” Connected leaders see themselves as group members with a responsibility to facilitate making things happen with those around them. They share responsibility for decisions with others since they collaborate and consult in a democratic way. They value others’ points of view and look at the emotional as well as the rational side of issues. They do not view themselves hierarchical, but as part of a complex web of relationships.

The best leaders balance the skills of separate and connected leadership, and are best described as constructed leaders. Constructed leaders balance the bureaucratic values of productivity, efficiency and rationality with the organic, humanistic values of connection, caring and responsibility to others. Constructed leaders may hold positions in a hierarchy but view themselves as centrally connected in a web-like way within that hierarchy. They know when to be the boss and when to be part of the team. They value and make clear their point of view but are open to others’ views as well. They know when to solve problems alone and when to use others’ expertise. Constructed leaders use power in context, recognizing when to use “power over” and when to use “power with.” They balance authority with influence, and facilitation and empowerment with control. They share power and responsibility when appropriate. Constructed leaders recognize that some decisions are made alone and some by the group. They make rational decision, taking into consideration the human relationships affected by those decision and the responsibilities involved with those decision. Objectivity and subjectivity are balanced. This form of leadership is very powerful and empowering since it balances the bureaucratic values of productivity, efficiency and rationality with the organic, humanistic values of connection, caring and responsibility.

## Method

To pursue my questions I chose the bureaucratic institution in which I worked, Vancouver Community College. I collected my data in 1992. I surveyed 71 women who were either administrators with instructional backgrounds, current faculty with administrative responsibilities, or faculty who had recently had administrative

responsibility. The response rate was 87% and of those who responded I chose 15 to interview in-depth. These 15 represented 4 levels of the college hierarchy (instructor, department head/chair, division chair, administrator) and a mix of those who planned to go up the hierarchy, those who were not sure and those who would not. The qualitative approach addressed the complexity and depth needed to answer the research questions. By listening to stories of their lives within the college I investigated their career choices and their concepts of power and leadership.

#### Data Analysis and Conclusions

All the women interviewed based their career choices on opportunity rather than on long-range planning. At the time of the interviews many of the reasons given by those choosing not to continue up the hierarchy relate to the nature of the patriarchal, hierarchical, bureaucratic system. These women perceive patriarchal barriers such as the traditional leadership processes and the old boys' network that holds the power. Other reasons for not going on reflect the effect of the hierarchy, such things as dislike of ladder climbing, loss of connection to students, inflexible organizational structure, and bureaucratic processes. Bureaucratic processes are seen to result in loss of creativity, increased stress, and excessive time required for administrative responsibilities.

My thesis concludes that women tend to have different concepts of power and leadership than those traditionally found in the bureaucratic system. Further, the fit, or lack thereof, between women's concepts of power and leadership and those of the bureaucratic system does affect their career choices. In the bureaucratic system, separate values and concepts of power and leadership predominate. The women interviewed have connected values and concepts of power and leadership. The most common definition of power by those interviewed is the ability to make things happen. When they talk about their own leadership they use words like share power, empower, give away power, multiply power, and they say they do this by consulting, facilitating, and listening, and by being democratic, collegial, and part of a group. All the interviewees emphasized the importance of interpersonal skills. They care for the people around them. Some of them are more connected leaders than others but, to some extent, they all share connected values.

Based on the career choices data, there are three categories of women. First, there are those who would not choose to go on further up the hierarchy because they see a misfit between their values and those of the system. For example, Felicity says "I think it would be difficult for me to work in that kind of system. I think I would just start yelling and screaming at people."

Second, there are those who choose to go on further up the hierarchy because, either they do not recognize any misfit between their values and the values of the system or they recognize the misfit but are willing and able to adjust. For example, Candice says "I would be very careful in a position of Division Chair...I would play the game."

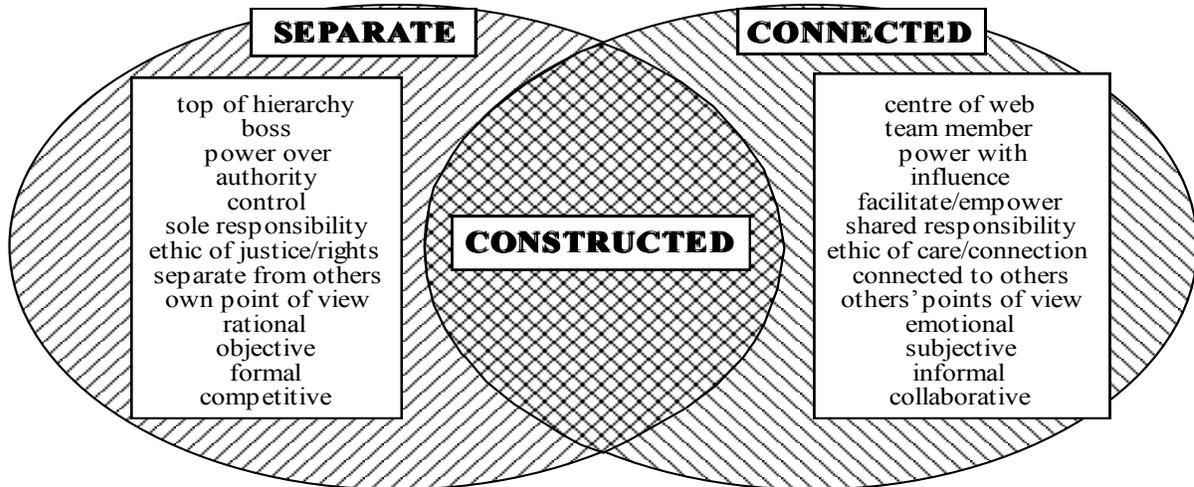
Third, there are those who choose to go up the hierarchy, recognizing the misfit between their values and those of the system but determined to change it by entering the

administrative hierarchy. For example, Heather says “we need people to infiltrate, posing as the traditional style and then changing women from inside.” Until there are more women in this third category, there will continue to be few women at the top of hierarchies. Women in the first category will continue to choose not to move up the hierarchy if system changes are not made, and the number of women in the second category is small. Women in the third category tend to move into either of the first two categories, that is, 1) burnout and get out or 2) get absorbed into the system and perpetuate it.

Some of the women interviewed in this study perceive that the women who are fitting into the system by rising up the hierarchy are learning the values of the system. Women near the top of the hierarchy are seen to abandon their connected values and use only separate leadership skills. But in the interview the women near the top demonstrated their belief in connected values. I think those connected values are not visible since they are not the values of the system. There are two factors to this invisibility. First, the women near the top behave in ways that emphasize their separate skills and hide their connected skills. Second, other people expect to see separate skills when they observe people near the top of the hierarchy.

Women who move up the career ladder learn the system. Some of them may not change the system because it works for them. Since they learn it so well, and because they also have connected skills, they are strong, powerful, and competent. Until they make their connected skills and values more visible, there will be no change to the system. It is difficult to make visible the skills that women tend to have, since they are not the skills valued in the system. My thesis recommends working towards changing the present system by starting to visibly include connected values. To do this will require both women and men with connected leadership skills making these skills visible by sharing power and actively working to change the system. A college administrative system which balances separate and connected leadership would be a constructed system which would more effectively meet the diverse needs of its community. The system needs to be changed to fit women. Fitting women to the system must stop.

# LEADERSHIP



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