



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY

Emiola Oyefuga,
Virginia Commonwealth University,
United States

REVIEWED BY

Dolana Mogadime,
Brock University, Canada
Margaret Grogan,
Chapman University, United States

*CORRESPONDENCE

Jennifer L. Clark-Saboda
✉ jlc11@buffalo.edu

RECEIVED 06 February 2023

ACCEPTED 05 May 2023

PUBLISHED 19 May 2023

CITATION

Clark-Saboda JL and Lemke M (2023)
Revisiting Acker's gendered organizational
theory: what women overcome to stay
in the superintendency.
Front. Educ. 8:1160225.
doi: 10.3389/educ.2023.1160225

COPYRIGHT

© 2023 Clark-Saboda and Lemke. This is an
open-access article distributed under the terms
of the [Creative Commons Attribution License
\(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). The use, distribution or reproduction
in other forums is permitted, provided the
original author(s) and the copyright owner(s)
are credited and that the original publication in
this journal is cited, in accordance with
accepted academic practice. No use,
distribution or reproduction is permitted which
does not comply with these terms.

Revisiting Acker's gendered organizational theory: what women overcome to stay in the superintendency

Jennifer L. Clark-Saboda* and Melinda Lemke

Department of Educational Leadership and Policy, University at Buffalo, SUNY, Buffalo, NY, United States

Despite key improvements to social, political, and economic status, women remain underrepresented in key leadership positions across the United States, including the superintendency. Feminist research underscores that androcentric systems maintain, valorize, and reproduce the experiences and knowledge claims of upper middle-class, heterosexual, white men. Documented in related fields, gender inequity within public school systems is thus in part, the result of bias, discrimination, and highly gendered organizational practices. Part of a larger qualitative descriptive study conducted in spring 2021 of the COVID-19 pandemic, the purpose of this research was to examine normative culture within the New York State (NYS) Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) superintendency, and how professional and personal supports affect women superintendents and ultimately their decision "to stay" in their position. The guiding research question for this part of the study asked how and why the NYS BOCES superintendency was gendered? Guided by and building upon Joan Acker's gendered organizational theory, 32 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were completed with NYS BOCES women superintendents. The BOCES organization was purposefully selected, in contrast to one of the 731 NYS public school districts, because of the level of political and economic power that BOCES superintendents have at the state level – and to that end, the role of women leadership in a highly influential state educational organization. Overall, study results are consistent with Acker's research, finding that the NYS BOCES is a highly gendered organization, and also in specific ways tied to contemporary context. Chief among these included that women superintendents face countless gender inequities and barriers associated with staying in their leadership role, but professional legacy, the extent to which the work benefited families, and appropriate work-life balance were motivating factors. Concluding with implications for research and practice, study findings are significant because this study is the first to empirically examine the NYS BOCES and the career trajectories of its women superintendents – and to do so from a feminist epistemological perspective and gendered theoretical framework focused creating transformative change within research and practice.

KEYWORDS

educational leadership, educational organizations, gender inequity, gendered organizational theory, women superintendents

Introduction

In the United States, the superintendency is a position of power and prestige, of which women represent a mere 27% of all 14,000 superintendents nationally (American Association of School Administrators [AASA], 2020). Akin to leadership trends in other professions, men dominate what was described as the “most gender-stratified executive position in the country” (Skrla, 2003a, p. 103), with an estimated 80 years before women are represented proportionally (Wallace, 2015). In short, educational leadership remains a white, heterosexual, and masculinized occupation that is the result of and reinforces gendered organizational practices.

Extensive research has examined the gendered division of labor and underrepresentation of women in the superintendency (Shakeshaft, 1987; Blount, 1998; Brunner, 1998; Alston, 2000; Bjork, 2000; Young and Skrla, 2003; Tallerico and Blount, 2004; Grogan and Brunner, 2005; Dana and Bourisaw, 2006; Miller et al., 2006; Brunner and Grogan, 2007; Hawk and Martin, 2011; Klatt, 2014; Muñoz et al., 2014; Sperandio and Devdas, 2015; Miles Nash and Grogan, 2022). Widespread patriarchal beliefs operate to gender the behavior of women and men in ways that compel women to *act like men*, silence harms perpetrated, and/or prevent women altogether from better challenging hegemonic institutions and actors (Marshall, 1997; Martin, 2003). Various internal, external, and androcentric barriers also exacerbate stress placed on women who enter the position, leading to among other problems, gender biases, isolation, and loneliness (Brunner, 2000; DeVore and Martin, 2008; Garn and Brown, 2008; Montz and Wanat, 2008; Lane-Washington and Wilson-Jones, 2010; Isernhagen and Bulkin, 2013). Regardless of leadership aspirations (Blount, 1998; Glass, 2000; Polka et al., 2008; Yong-Lyun and Brunner, 2009), perseverance, resilience, and multiple positive qualities brought to the profession (Alston, 2005; Brunner and Grogan, 2007; Reed and Patterson, 2007), women continue to *leave* the superintendency (Tallerico et al., 1993; Tallerico and Burstyn, 1995; Beekley, 1999; Grogan, 2000; Robinson et al., 2017).

Despite this reality, and though research exists on mentorship (Gardiner et al., 2000; Mendez-Morse, 2004; Copeland and Calhoun, 2014), there is a paucity of knowledge on supports women utilize to overcome barriers and *stay* in the superintendency. This is significant given demands for educators “to work 24/7 may have disproportionate effects on women who, because of gendered divisions of labor, may have to care for children or family members in the home” (Jabbar et al., 2018, p. 780). Considerate of the worsening K-12 public school teacher and leadership shortage, there is further cause for concern about a deepening gap between women and men superintendents. Thus, as part of a larger qualitative study by Clark-Saboda (2022) that employed Acker’s (1990) gendered organizational theory, this article presents those findings that specifically focused on how the New York State Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (NYS BOCES) superintendency was gendered.

The following sections briefly review guiding theoretical literature, research context, and methodology. Drawing from 32 in-depth interviews with NYS BOCES respondents, the interviews were conducted starting in January 2021 and ending in March 2021. The findings underscore how a heteronormative organizational culture perpetuated the reproduction of traditional

gender scripts – ultimately putting women at a disadvantage in the workplace. Still, understanding how respondents mitigated challenges and maintained their role offers important insights into how future women superintendents can navigate this leadership position. We conclude with implications for educational research, theory, and practice.

Gendered organizational theory

Gendered organizational theory has been used by researchers to identify, assess, and eliminate invisible gender discrimination and inequity from organizations (Mills, 1988; Acker, 1990, 1992a,b, 2006a,b; Mills and Tancred, 1992; Ridgeway and Correll, 2004; Williams et al., 2012). It has been used to look at the reasons why women try to fit a workplace mold, which was “encoded in arrangements and rules supported by the assumption that work was separate from the rest of life and that it had first claim on the worker” (Acker, 1992a, p. 255). As discussed elsewhere (Jabbar et al., 2018; Holland-Iantosca and Lemke, 2022), though the term “gender” commonly is used to discuss differences between those identifying as women and men, we understand characteristics assigned to female and male genders as not inherently biological, but instead socially-, legally-, and self-constructed – yet also internalized through practices tied to traditional gender binaries. In our study, gender connotes cis-gender women and men, or those assigned female and male identity at birth, and who also have mostly aligned gender identity expression. Agreeing with Holland-Iantosca and Lemke (2022), we see the “language and actions of women and men in the workplace as not intrinsic to who they are, but tied to fluid, contested, and performative acts that comprise an androcentric gendered nature of work.” Regarding the race of the women superintendents, as of 2020, 26.7% of superintendents were women and only 4.03% were women of color (Grogan and Miles Nash, 2021). Due to the small population of women of color in the NYS BOCES superintendency, to maintain participant confidentiality demographics pertaining to the race of the women superintendents were not included.

Acker (1990) coined gendered organizations as the “advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity of men and women” within organizational spaces (p. 146). In this vein, gendered organizations constitute five processes that reproduced gender in these spaces and in turn have produced challenges to women in the superintendency. These included: 1. division of labor, or gendered divisions tied to behaviors, physical space, and established power dynamics resulting from divided labor markets, the family, and state (e.g., inequity regarding recruitment, hiring, promotion, salary, and benefits); 2. cultural symbols, or beliefs, dress, ideology, images, language, and symbols that express and reinforce gendered divisions (e.g., hegemonic masculinity typified by imagery of the attractive, authoritative, emotionless, and sexually potent leader); 3. workplace interactions, or the gendered production of social structures and relations, including those that enact dominance and submission (e.g., men to women, women to women, and men to men); 4. individual identities, or the creation of a gendered identity that may or may not include the consciousness of the existence of other components of gender and its production (e.g.,

organizational navigation is tied to normative culture, and an individual's thinking about, appearance, conduct, and rules tied to femininity and masculinity); and 5. organizational logic, or conceptualizing and producing organizations as gender-neutral, wherein jobs are available to all and jobs comprise abstract workers, void of domestic life and who are dedicated to the organization (e.g., being a woman and a mother compels a reframing of organizations as gendered and workers as bodied, thus furthering the hegemonic need to construct hierarchy in the absence of a gender).

Applying Acker's (1990) original conceptualization of gendered organizations to the BOCES permitted a mapping of each distinct process, and their interrelationship, also unveiling contemporary processes and relationships not discussed in Acker's early work. As Acker's (1990) research was conducted over 30 years ago, some findings have persisted yet also changed over time. For example, the onset of the digital age in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the current influx of social media has made access to anyone or anything, literally at your fingertips. This has brought additional challenges that were not foreseen in Acker's (1990) study, such as constant communication with the workplace through cell phones, specifically text message and access to email.

Still, this theory created a foundation for new research on one organization, the NYS BOCES, and how this specific organization was or was not gendered, and the advantages and disadvantages of women BOCES superintendents. Additionally, Acker's (1990) gendering organizational theory was used regarding the distinct job duties the NYS BOCES superintendency entailed, in conjunction with Acker's five processes, with several challenges discussed, such as hiring and recruitment, perception and reception of the women superintendent's physical appearance, parenting, work-life balance, good old boy clubs, and the identity of the women superintendent as a source of emotional support. Hence, these challenges still limit women, and can be seen as barriers to the women superintendency.

It was well recognized that the superintendency is a male-dominated profession. What was missing from the literature, which primarily focused on challenges and barriers, was the supports women put in place to navigate known challenges and remain in their position as superintendent. Moreover, a key contribution of this research is its focus on the gendered nature of organizations, specifically the NYS BOCES, an organization unique among educational organizations in NYS and across the nation. Therefore, in revisiting Acker's (1990) landmark theory, this research provides new understandings of how women mitigated organizational challenges and why they have stayed in their positions.

Research context

New York State (NYS) is a relatively large state (i.e., population, 19.45 million) and has 731 school districts, over 2,598,921 students, 4,411 public schools, 212,296 public school teachers, 359 charter schools, and over 700 superintendents (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2020). According to state snapshot data compiled every 5 years, in 2015, 30% of women were employed as NYS superintendents (New York State Council of School Superintendents [NYSCOSS], 2015). Though NYS had a women's superintendency rate 3% higher than the national average of 27%,

with the mean tenure being 5–6 years, the NYS rate has been stagnant for decades.

Coupled with teacher retirement and attrition due to burnout, also notably documented by research on accountability reform and most recently witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an estimated need for 180,000 new teachers over the next decade, or 18,000 new teachers annually (New York State United Teachers Research and Educational Services, 2018). Thus, women's under-representation in leadership could worsen in NYS before it improves. This means that analyses of gender inequity in leadership is important for this context, and also relevant for comparative state analyses.

The BOCES

The State Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) was created in 1948 by the NYS legislature to provide shared educational programs and services to local educational agencies (LEAs) across the state (Board of Cooperative Educational Services [BOCES], 2022). Designed to support multiple school districts, particularly rural, suburban, and smaller city schools, the BOCES purpose is to provide efficient, cost-affordable programs and services to districts in which two or more school districts ascertain that they have similar needs that can be serviced through a shared program or central service (New York State School Boards Association [NYSSBA], 2022). There are 37 BOCES, with a total of 109 district and deputy superintendents (dSs), assistant and associate superintendents (aSs), and other positions such as chief operating officer (COO). In January through March 2021, when this study was conducted, women held 50 of these positions.

Importantly, BOCES district superintendents (DSs) are responsible for leading both the BOCES and the LEAs within the designated NYS region. Additionally, DS' serve as a state employee and within this role, supports State Education Law, policies of the State Board of Regents and Commissioner's regulations (Board of Cooperative Educational Services [BOCES], 2022). Since the DS is a state employee and has direct interaction with NYSED and political constituents at the local and state level, they directly influence state policy and have an outreach that affects the LEAs within their region and statewide.

In 2020–2021, the BOCES serviced 38,573 career and technical education students, 16,534 students with disabilities, and 7,566 adult students (Board of Cooperative Educational Services [BOCES], 2022). BOCES services includes both instructional and non-instructional services. Instructional programs include but are not limited to career and technical education programs for high school students, services for students with disabilities, adult education, Pathways in Technology (NYS P-TECH) Program, regional summer school, professional development, and instructional technology (Board of Cooperative Educational Services [BOCES], 2022). Additionally, non-instructional support services include cost savings services for districts such as business office support, such as accounts payable, cooperative bidding and health insurance cooperatives, bus maintenance and transportation services, energy cooperatives, labor relations, school lunch coordination, administrative technology solutions and support through regional information centers, and state networks

(Board of Cooperative Educational Services [BOCES], 2022). As Acker's framework has been used in research external to the education sector, the BOCES was chosen for this study as it is a unique organization that directly influences the individual regions of NYS.

Materials and methods

This study is situated within the feminist research paradigm, which as an intellectual, legal, and on-the-ground movement, seeks to end oppression (Hooks, 2000). Specifically, this study aimed to challenge established ways of knowing, while mapping the importance of women's resistance to dominant narratives through their own stories (Woodiwiss, 2017). Thus, educational leadership (Grogan, 1996, 2000, 2003; Scott, 2003; Skrla, 2003a,b; Young and Skrla, 2003; Tallerico and Blount, 2004; Dana and Bourisaw, 2006; Sobehart, 2009; Robinson and Shakeshaft, 2015; Wallace, 2015; Robinson et al., 2017) and policy (Blackmore and Kenway, 1993; Reiger, 1993; Tallerico et al., 1993; Marshall, 1997; Anderson, 2003; Bensimon and Marshall, 2003; Mahitivanichcha and Rorrer, 2006; Marshall and Young, 2013; Jabbar et al., 2018; Lemke, 2019a,b; Lemke and Rogers, 2022) research utilizing feminist frameworks were consulted – toward the end of furthering activist research praxis and methodological convention more broadly (Dallimore, 2000; Fraser and MacDougall, 2017).

Guided by Acker's (1990) gendered organizational theory and utilized a qualitative descriptive design (Merriam, 1998; Sandelowski, 2000; Neergaard et al., 2009; Marshall and Rossman, 2016), the research purpose of this Institutional Review Board approved study entailed deconstructing supports that acted as a counterweight to identified hindrances in gendered organizational cultures – here the NYS BOCES. Used to gather detailed information about a lesser understood phenomenon (Bradshaw et al., 2017), qualitative description design was used to identify problems and support systems NYS respondents used to stay in a high-level executive position. Thus, the crux of this research turned on how respondents identified, responded to, and overcame androcentric organizational leadership cultures. To this end, the guiding research question for this part of the study asked how the NYS BOCES superintendency was gendered?

Qualitative description research was an appropriate methodological tool as it helped develop a rich understanding and nuanced description of a specific phenomenon (i.e., a gendered organization). It permitted the creation of narratives drawn directly from the superintendents' lived experiences and personal meaning-making. Furthermore, this design incorporates flexibility as core questions and findings evolve, calling on researchers to detail decision-making processes (Kim, 2016; Kim et al., 2017).

Data collection and analysis

Respondents were purposefully chosen to examine the specialized knowledge of a leadership position [i.e., DS/dS and assistant superintendent (AS)], within a bounded educational organization (i.e., NYS BOCES). Again, there are 37 BOCES in NYS, and these do not include the cities of Buffalo, New York City,

Rochester, Syracuse, and Yonkers. These cities are not included in the BOCES per the Education Law of 1950, whereby the BOCES was created to develop equal educational opportunity in small, rural school districts where services otherwise would be unavailable or not affordable to the district (Board of Cooperative Educational Services [BOCES], 2022). As of January 2021, it was determined through publicly accessible Internet webpages that within the 37 BOCES, there were 109 DS, dS, AS, and aS, and other titles, including the COO. There were 50 women who held leadership positions at the rank of superintendent, and these were comprised of DS, dS, AS, and COO. Thus, the purposeful selection of the BOCES organization, in contrast to one of the 731 NYS school districts, and the position of DS was significant as individual LEA school DS do not have the level of influence a DS does at the state level. This includes participating in monthly meetings with the Commissioner of Education and other representatives to craft and institute educational policy. Individual component DS are different in respect to their leadership scope, and geographic influence, which is on a much smaller scale, consisting of only one school district and the local community in which their district is located. Furthermore, we wanted to examine the role of women leadership in a highly influential state educational organization.

The 50 women DS' were contacted twice via email to participate in the study. The final study sample, $N = 32$, was a 64% participation rate and permitted study saturation. This number of superintendents provided varied perspectives and represent more than half of the respondents in the BOCES. All respondents received and signed informed consent forms, and also completed a short demographic questionnaire before their interviews.

As this study was completed during spring 2021 of the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted via Zoom platform. The Zoom account used for interviews followed Education Law §2-d, ensuring data privacy and security for all respondents. Guided by Acker's (1990, 2006a,b) gendering organizational theory, respondents were asked 14 essential questions about gendered organizations and supports. Though semi-structured to include probing and follow-up questions, the interview protocol also was carefully scripted and ordered to provide respondents with a sense of ease concerning sensitive topics and their anonymity (Marshall and Rossman, 2016; Bradshaw et al., 2017). Given the uniqueness of the organization, both the organization and state are named in this study. Still, as the BOCES only employs 50 women respondents, concerns about respondent safety and potential harm was a top priority. To ensure that individual superintendents could not be identified, all titles are listed generally as Superintendent 1, Superintendent 2, etc. within the findings section. Given the limited number of queer and women of color in this study, relevant demographic information also is not included.

Before interviews were conducted, the study purpose was reiterated, and verbal consent was secured. Lasting approximately 1 h and 15 min, interviews were designed to create an intimate conversation so respondents revealed "feelings, intentions, meanings, sub-contexts, or thoughts" (Lichtman, 2013, p. 190) about their experience as a BOCES superintendent. Interviews were fully transcribed (i.e., verbatim) and anonymized. Comprising 723 pages, transcribed interviews were warehoused in UBBox, a secure data protection system provided by the University at Buffalo, SUNY. All interviewee documentation and recordings will be destroyed within 3 years of this study's conclusion.

As the focus was on the women's narratives, analysis utilized a theoretically driven coding template, and *in vivo* coding that relied on words or short phrases from the participant's own language (Miles et al., 2014). Beginning with Acker's theory (i.e., five processes, division of labor, cultural symbols, workplace interactions, individual identities, and organizational logic) *a priori* macro and micro codes were developed. Line-by-line *in vivo* coding also was completed. This iterative process, which relied on both theory and the actual words of participants, included four coding rounds to interpret data and push the development of concepts that might expand upon Acker's work. Simultaneous analytic memos were written to "document the researcher's reflections about the data which were not just descriptive summaries of data but attempts to synthesize into higher-level analytic meanings" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 25). Overall, this process aimed to provide a narrative description for women's voices through writing.

Increasing trustworthiness was essential to research design and processes (Marshall, 1985). To ensure credibility and confirmability, this study included the following: an extensive literature review; most current publicly available data; creation and maintenance of an audit trail; and reflection upon the researcher positionality, such as connection to and biases about the research topic. On this last example, among the various strategies recommended for strengthening rigor and minimizing potential bias, reflexive praxis was a most crucial element. Thus, it is important to acknowledge here that as feminist researchers and practitioners, both authors are intentional about their work – meaning that their research and daily praxis is focused on how educational systems, policies, and actors, including themselves, work to eliminate gender inequity and wider structural oppression. Throughout the research process, this meant iterative reflection by the first author – a white, cisgender, heterosexual woman, who works in the organization under analysis, and the second author – a white, cisgender, and queer woman. Such reflection involved consideration of the role played by white privilege within research, and potential biases created by having a deep professional knowledge of the field through insider status (Marshall and Rossman, 2016).

Finally, to support transferability, this study focused on a specific population of respondents who worked throughout the BOCES, and all of whom provided the same data collection points. Thus, the research pool and techniques markedly strengthened the study's value (Marshall and Rossman, 2016). Finally, considering dependability, this study was completed during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, and thus there was a need to account for potential design changes (Marshall and Rossman, 2016). This included for example, additional core interview questions that addressed stresses placed on respondents, the system, and its operations during a global pandemic. The following section presents study findings.

Division of labor: same expectations, different playing field

Within organizations, the division of labor is maintained in the structures of the workplace and family, wherein men often maintain the highest rank (Acker, 1990). Findings revealed that

94% of respondents remained in their job and had the same expectations as men superintendents, but there were inherent challenges. For example, only 27% of women were DS' and though 64% of women were in leadership, they also worked under men DS'. Several respondents discussed that most of the BOCES cabinet was men. The BOCES cabinet includes but is not limited to the district superintendent, dS, ASs, human resources, finance, and curriculum leadership staff. For example, Superintendent 19 said: "the upper echelon of our organization and districts are men. ... they're all men. It's not uncommon for me to be the only female in the room." Commenting on racial dynamics, Superintendent 8 added, "it's all white, the majority of the room are white males."

Considering these disparities, respondents also discussed the need to network for higher positions.

Hiring and respect

Respondents indicated gender was a challenge in attaining a BOCES superintendency or moving up the career ladder. Superintendent 20 stated, "I was the finalist at least four times. In two of the cases, gender was the reason I was not hired. ... there was never a level playing field at either one of the finalist interviews for those positions." Similarly, Superintendent 7 commented, "it's not the work part, it's the politics; I think the gendered relations in many school districts make it exceptionally difficult and/or different for women than men in the superintendency."

Not only was gender prompting a division of labor between men and women, which also prevented women from advancing, but respondents discussed workplace pressure and the politics associated with gaining the respect of men colleagues. In fact, the term respect was used more than 50 times in interviews with Superintendent 22 driving home the point that, "you have to garner respect, and men seem to garner that respect without the underpinnings that are expected of a woman." Superintendent 23 and 24 respectively said, "if you want people to respect you, you have to earn that" and "it is a little bit of a gender issue because all of the legislators are male." Commenting at length on this problem Superintendent 27 added:

So, I will tell you my biggest complaint about being a woman superintendent is the way politicians and men in ... more authoritative positions than mine. ... if you walk into a room with your DS and you and the district attorney are sitting there, and the County Executive is sitting there, they'll go over and shake the man superintendent's hand, but they will not shake mine. ... You are overlooked.

In short, multiple respondents indicated remaining in a superintendency meant "a need to prove oneself and their worth" in ways that men did not.

Marketing and dual roles

Respondents mentioned that staying in their chosen career meant marketing themselves or publicizing their work to be noticed and for career advancement. Superintendent 27 stated, "we have

to work our asses off, make sure that we market ourselves... make sure you publicize what you can do, or you are not going to get anywhere.” Commenting on workload versus investing time to market oneself, Superintendent 4 added, “I watch other superintendents do things that make them shine... I do not have the time to elevate myself or talk about the cool things I’m doing because I’m too busy doing them.”

Relatedly, respondents discussed additional workload and dual positions tied to budgetary employment cuts. To illustrate this point, Superintendent 12 said.

So, we used to have a director in this BOCES, and we eliminated that a few years ago when I picked it up... like anything, the longer you work in an organization, the more you pick up because you learn the ropes.

Similarly, Superintendent 4 commented having to collapse jobs, “I decided the budgets were bad, so we folded the work and did it among two people instead of three.”

Some respondents specifically highlighted additional work given to them by their DS that was the DS’ responsibility. Superintendent 13 stated that the DS “shifted work my way to support the DS role because the DS deals a lot with the state, state requirements, plus BOCES requirements.” Superintendent 14 elaborated, “as an assistant superintendent, in the first two years, I was easily putting in 90 hours a week to just keep up with the workload... nobody really understood why they had asked me to do it because it was a new position.” Thus, despite shared expectations, normative organizational culture created and exacerbated challenges for women who have remained in their superintendency.

Cultural symbols: looking the part

The second process of gendering organizational theory involved gendered symbolism and imagery that is assumed to strengthen or oppose organizational processes and the division of labor (Acker, 1990, 2006a,b). For BOCES women superintendents, this entailed displaying an appearance aligned with white, middle-class, heteronormative gender roles – with approximately 50% of respondents indicating that professional image and dress was significant to their role. In addition to expected “displays” of femininity in the workplace, this also involved traditional understandings of motherhood.

Perception and reception of appearance

Interviews illustrated that perception and reception of one’s physical image, including conservative dress, hair, make-up, and weight, was key to the success of woman superintendents – and to that end, traditional, *status quo* cultural norms about beauty continued to inculcate (dis)advantages for women. Multiple statements exemplify the internal and external connections respondents made between appearance and self-worth, and thus the kind of gendered symbolism required of BOCES women superintendents. For example, Superintendent 1 said, “your looks will get you in the room; you then have 10 minutes” while Superintendent 8 added, “I’m always dressed to the T when I go to

meetings because I have to prove and look that I’m just as worthy of having this position as anybody else” (Superintendent 8). The following comments also spoke to specific forms of dress, body image, and weight: “I always have lipstick on, I have makeup on, I’m dressed up, and I’m always cognizant of how I look and sound if I’m giving a presentation.” (Superintendent 2); “it’s different for us when you are wearing a dress; I would never think of coming in with a really low-cut dress” (Superintendent 18); and “do I think a woman’s physical appearance impacts how they’re seen? I think it does... if you have insecurities and you have a bigger frame as a woman, I think that can compromise you and compromise your identity” (Superintendent 28). Finally, Superintendent 20 detailed when separate school boards did not hire her. Regarding the first scenario she said:

One board member said, you are amazing. I hated the fact that you answered all the questions with the answers I wanted. Every time you answered a question, I was hoping you would screw it up so I would have a reason to say we cannot hire her because she does not know APPR. She does not know how to do whatever, but you have made it hard on us because you are good. I cannot visualize a woman in the superintendent’s chair, and my district cannot visualize it.

Regarding the other she added:

My search consultant at the time said I hate to tell you this, but I have to because it’s the feedback they shared with me. She said they do not think you are very detail-oriented, or perhaps you do not take care of yourself very well. I said, what gave them that impression? The consultant responded, your nails. I said, what? They noticed that your cuticles were in bad shape and that you wore no nail polish and did not do your nails.

Respondents also discussed how their gender identity, as displayed through their dress and behavior, was “policed” through rumors. Discussing an interaction with a truck driver, Superintendent 15 commented, “I happened to be wearing a skirt, so the comments were made that I was leaning too provocatively into his truck to have a conversation with him.” Relaying a story about the acceptance of having lunch with a woman versus man colleague, Superintendent 7 stated that a colleague told her, “you might want to stop having a working lunch with him because people think you two might have a whole thing going on.” Superintendent 7 went on to discuss rumors that circulated about her “having an affair” with this male colleague – also indicating she was mortified that the assumption was that since she was a heterosexual woman, this was occurring.

Finally, some respondents discussed how gender and appearance directly affected their ability to attain and remain in a superintendency. Gendered biases existed about women’s ability and being on the “instructional side of the house” while men were on the “fiscal, operational, and tech side of the house.” For example, Superintendent 21 stated, “some males have outwardly said, a woman’s just not going to get that when it comes to building projects,” while Superintendent 3 relayed the following said by a male colleague about another woman, “she’s early childhood, that is so her” emphasizing the relationship of women and

early childhood education, in which women are predominately represented. Superintendent 3 continued, “if I had started the meeting, they probably would have been shocked because I am the businessperson.” Additionally, respondents discussed the need to “build out” their business credentials to be valued by their organization. Discussing her business and finance position, Superintendent 15 stated she was “on top of that, I am a female in that role and running a team of mostly males.” Thus, interviews revealed that women needed to be conscious of appearance and credentials, which were supported and/or disciplined through traditional, upper middle-class norms about masculinity and femininity. In short, women needed to “look the part,” which reinforced a highly gendered organizational structure damaging to respondents’ sense of “worthiness.”

Professional legacy, parenting, and work-life balance

Respondents talked about staying in the superintendency because of legacy, the example they set for family and society, and presence of traditional views of parenting within the workplace. Notably, 27 out of the 32 women (84%) interviewed had children and nine out of the 32 women (27%) were single mothers at some point in their career. Regardless of having children, all respondents indicated that their family and the example they set was a significant aspect of their careers.

Regarding legacy and inspiring their children to break traditional gender roles, Superintendent 3 said, “I hope that I’m showing my daughter that she can have it all, a family and a career, and showing my son women can do this.” Superintendent 25 added, “my children have never known anything other than their mother, as a leader working.” Finally, Superintendent 11 said, “I hope I did a good job with my daughter, and that she is aware.”

Tied to the respondents’ discussion of “role model parenting” and success as a leader was reflection on appropriate work-life balance. Superintendent 30 said, “working in a demanding job and motherhood is always a balancing act. I feel like I do a relatively good job of having a degree of separation” while Superintendent 2 stated, “I worked, but then I wanted to spend time with the children... hanging out and doing fun things.” Still, some respondents indicated that this balancing act was more difficult for women than men superintendents. Superintendent 25 commented, “when women are not at work, if you are a mom, you are focusing on your mom stuff. Men have the ability not to do that because somebody is holding down the fort at home.” Superintendent 27 also said, “there are many pressures on us because we’re in charge of the home, job, and the kids; we own it all, where the husbands, still to this day just go to work, so it makes rising in this profession very difficult.”

Tying work-life balance inequities directly to perceptions about the “home” Superintendent 8 asserted, “someone once said to me, you will be able to go home this weekend and rest, and I’m like, no, moms do not get to rest with the kids, right?” Superintendent 4 remarked, “there is personal stress in raising families and being the point person for our children’s athletic forms, field trip forms, and the school lunch stuff.” Such comments also tied into feelings of loss and sacrifice related to remaining in a demanding educational

leadership role. Superintendent 12 said, “as much as I love the travel, I find it valuable, it’s great networking, but it tends to stress me out when I feel like I’m missing things for my kids at home.” In a similar vein Superintendent 16 affirmed.

I feel a different sense of obligation to the time with the baby... the guilt that I carried. I had to work all day on Sunday. I just spent 8 hours that I’m not going to get back with this child. I do not know that my husband would have been upset. He would say, this is what we have to do.

Superintendent 12 concluded, “as much as we love being leaders, we often are the ones who are the primary caregivers at home, whether we put that pressure on ourselves, society puts that pressure on women” (Superintendent 12). Thus, much of the women DS’ success was tied to establishing a legacy and being a good role model for their children. Indicating reflexive self-praxis was key to staying in their role, respondents also were open about feelings of guilt, their mental load, and the ways their work-life balance was different from men counterparts.

Workplace interactions: can you hear what I can see?

Interactions between men and women, women and women, and men and men comprise “patterns that enact dominance and submission” (Acker, 1990, p. 147). In the BOCES, interactions between women and men involved men appropriating women superintendent ideas, dismissal, interruption, and inappropriate comments – in fact, 22 out of 32 women (69%) experienced these behaviors. Interactions between men and men offered advantages, whereas women and women interactions were less advantageous. Additionally, the latter of these interactions sometimes included fear, intimidation, and competition among respondents.

For example, Superintendent 22 commented, “I still see men getting more talk time, more attention, and more belief in what they’re saying without anything to back it up,” while Superintendent 4 said, “when the only male figure in the room speaks because it’s only one male and the rest are all female, everyone really listens.” Superintendent 7 also offered, “there are stories that I’ve heard of female superintendents that are spoken to in a way that they would never have been spoken to if it was a male superintendent.” Thus, respondents acknowledged navigating identifiable gender inequities within their workplace interactions and organizational culture.

Idea theft, mansplaining, and other rude behavior

Respondents discussed having to work through and process how many times their contributions were dismissed and/or they did not receive the same acknowledgment as men (and often for the same idea). As Superintendent 9 put it, “I’ll have an opinion or a point of view on something, and it will be dismissed, and then a man in the room will have the same opinion, and suddenly that’s a great idea, and you think, wait a minute, what just happened there?” Superintendent 14 affirmed, “I felt that people not only have taken my idea and shared it as their own but

have taken credit for the work that I have done, and sometimes it's other women too" while Superintendent 4 remarked, "I have some male superintendents in my classes and it's painful because they pontificate on how great they are. ... He starts bragging about how he's developed these processes and procedures. He's not even ashamed about no acknowledgment." Superintendent 17 also offered, "I've experienced situations where I've said something, and they skipped right over, and then somebody else says it, and it's oh, right."

Respondents tied lack of credit, primarily from men colleagues, to other forms of disrespect, that when "produced and reproduced in interactions on the job between colleagues" can enhance domination and subjugation (Acker, 2012), p. 216. The first of such behaviors included interruption, with the terms "interrupt/interruption" used 33 times in interviews. After detailing a story about a man who shouted at her to "finish up that conversation" because he needed the office space, Superintendent 31 said, "many times, I feel interrupted, talked over, sometimes invisible, ignored." Superintendent 29 stated, "an administrator jumped right in and cut me off as if I had not even been speaking" and similarly, Superintendent 14 mentioned, "I have often felt that I have been interrupted and that what I have to say is not important."

Another problematic interaction with men was *mansplaining* – or when a man explains something to a woman in a condescending manner that assumes she does not understand the issue (Merriam-Webster, 2023). As Superintendent 25 said, "it's 'mansplaining.' You have said something, and then some man in the room has to repeat what you said. Some, what I call old white men, I've noticed, will do that." Finally, akin to other respondent experiences, acknowledging that technology made rude behavior more commonplace Superintendent 6 commented, "I think the worst thing to ever happen to leaders is this thing (points to cell phone); it is very easy for me (meaning male colleague) to check my mail really quick." In short, a common thread was that the women, irrespective of role, had interactions with men in which their ideas were used as one's own and they also were interrupted and/or dismissed.

The harassment line

A clear complication for gender equity in working relations involves inappropriate comments, sexual joking, and harassment (Acker, 2006a). Approximately 50% of respondents discussed navigating environments where inappropriate, degrading, and "joking around" comments regularly were made by men. This includes comments that range from stereotypical assumptions about women's leadership to actual harassment. Furthermore, when it was brought to their attention as problematic, men were ambivalent about their behavior. This finding does not indicate that success as a woman superintendent means tolerance for such behavior. Rather, it underscores the need of immediate change in educational leadership organizational culture.

Respondents discussed that men colleagues made dismissive comments, but they did so, as if knowing what line not to cross. For example, Superintendent 10 shared, "as I've moved up in administration, there's been situations where men have made

comments or said things that do not cross the line of harassment but are just inappropriate." Superintendent 9 discussed how she often is referred to by men superintendents as that, "(insert man's name) superintendent's girl"; she continued that while she did not think it was harassment, it was dismissive not to use her proper title, and thus she, "called him on it." Superintendent 15 stated, "I'm commonly referred to as 'dear,' 'honey,' or 'sweetie,' from my guys, my subordinates." Superintendent 3 also offered that a man in her department kept referring to a woman as "kiddo," and thus said, "you would not call Mr. Clark*¹ kiddo, so do not call Ms. Clark* (see text footnote 1) kiddo, and remember that when you are doing our sexual harassment training."

In other situations, men colleagues clearly crossed a harassment line that included both non-verbal (i.e., staring at breasts and hand across back) (Superintendent 9 and Superintendent 10, respectively) and verbal communication. Superintendent 19 had a man superintendent say to her, "you know you can manipulate us into doing anything you want us to do, right?" Superintendent 29 relayed that a board member once said to her, "you have such pretty hair" and "how would you like to stop and have a drink with me?" She also discussed walking into a meeting once and a man superintendent stated, "What are you doing here? Should you not be back in the kitchen cooking or something?" Superintendent 8 discussed at length a situation in which a man was listening to her urinate:

There was a private bathroom stall that is, like, in a closet, but they're vending machines outside of it. And so, I go into the bathroom, I use the ladies' room, and this man made some comments about wanting to listen, listen in on me urinating, like through the door or something or another. I said listen, dude, I do not know what your problem is. I'm a professional, but more than that, the last thing you want is my husband coming up here to this office to address you in any way, shape, or form. That ended it right there.

Finally, Superintendent 20 recalled a situation wherein a man associated her appearance with his genitalia. She stated the man said, "stop; I have to tell you, every time you come within five feet of me, my balls shrink up and go inside my body." He also remarked, "you are the most masculine woman I have ever seen." Thus, respondents navigated and overcame a range of inappropriate and harassing non-verbal and verbal behavior whether from a colleague, subordinate, or board member.

Good old boy clubs and a needed sisterhood

According to Acker (2006b), "white men may devalue and exclude white women and people of color by not listening to them in meetings, by not inviting them to join a group going out for a drink after work, or by not seeking their opinions on workplace problems" (p. 451). A final key finding related to workplace interactions included that for women to remain in

¹ Pseudonym.

the superintendency meant navigating *good old boy* clubs – or organizational dynamics that allows men to routinely gain “access to information, influence, and status by maintaining networks composed largely of other men” (McDonald, 2011, p. 328). Using phrases like “good old boy” club and network, multiple respondents discussed multiple advantages afforded to BOCES men superintendents, while also detailing how women colleagues were non-supportive in ways that included competition, rumors, and intimidation.

For example, Superintendent 24 offered, “I love this region, but it is a good old boy network in every sense of the word,” Superintendent 27 said, “I do believe that the education world still is a boy’s club. You cannot get away from it. . . females have to work so much harder to rise in a world that’s predominantly male.” Superintendent 29 also remarked, “there is still a very strong old boys’ network. . . where decisions are made that are not necessarily the best, yet I am unable to influence them enough to change the decision.”

Importantly, identification of an entrenched heteropatriarchal culture occurred for women at the beginning and end of their careers. While respondents indicated they worked to navigate, resist, and improve workplace culture, some commented that a “boys will be boys” mentality pervaded the BOCES and thus provided cover and an excuse for problematic behavior. Additionally, men’s social interactions with other men both gave them an advantage and allowed them to exclude women from opportunities within the BOCES. To this point, Superintendent 22 said, “they’re likely to get it because they had a beer with the boss the other night and the woman candidate was home working hard to get better at something.” Superintendent 20 also offered, “for my first 4 years here, I attended the countywide superintendent retreat. When they switched to an all-male superintendent group, I was not longer invited. So, I talked to my boss, and he said the guys just want a guy’s weekend.”

In addition to navigating men-only networks, just under half of respondents (44%) discussed interactions with women, and the harms caused by lack of support, manipulation, rumors, and other horizontal violence. Thus, some respondents indicated that the main challenge in staying in the superintendency and/or advancement was not men, but other women. Overall, respondents acknowledged that men’s interactions with each other were more beneficial. They also indicted a need for women leaders to be more supportive of one another, especially given their shared experiences working in a historically androcentric organization.

Commenting on workplace competition, Superintendent 11 said, “women create this barrier, like this leadership where I’m better than you. . . men have it figured out in their little clicks.” Superintendent 4 similarly concluded, “women leaders need to support each other. Some of my biggest competitors are women that should be supporting me and are trying to get my job or prove that I did not do something instead of being a network of support.” Indicating that men work differently than women, Superintendent 22 remarked, “men might have disputes and things going on, but at the end of the day, they go out and have a beer, and it’s over; they tend to support each other.” She continued with “I think we stress each other out. . . We tend to take the mean girl personalities from middle school into our work environment. We need to teach women to take care of and help each other be the steppingstones, not the roadblocks.” Stating that a woman colleague routinely

attacked and spread rumors about her, Superintendent 7 said, “if I had been inclined, I could have filed a hostile work environment. She was under fire and heard word that people might have wanted me in her position, so she attempted to disassemble me.” Finally, Superintendent 1 affirmed:

You have a responsibility to promote other women. That responsibility needs to be taken seriously. Do not say bad things about other women; if you have something bad to say about somebody else, say it to their face. The way that women act, we’re our own worst enemies. To keep women in leadership roles, women must stand up for women. We also have an obligation to pay it forward, not just with other leaders but with young women, to show them what powerful women look like.

Overall, findings underscore how interactions between women and men, men and men, and women and women influenced many BOCES arenas, and related tolerance for staying in the superintendency.

Individual identities: here I am, this is me

Acker’s (1990) fourth process, individual identities, is shaped by gendered substructures outside of and constructed within the organization. A core finding was that remaining in the superintendency meant navigating workplace labeling and stereotypes, which also influenced their individual identities. Respondents also commented on the gendered organizational expectations around emotional support in the workplace. Finally, multiple respondents discussed a “24/7” work culture, and that remaining in the superintendency meant proving oneself through longer work hours.

Multiple respondents discussed the harms caused to their identities by workplace labeling and stereotypes. Respondents shared the sentiment that, “people feel they can be more dismissive of our gender” (Superintendent 29). Examples of traditional gender role labeling discussed by respondents included, but were not limited to, assertive women as “bitchy” and that women leaders need to prove themselves. Reflecting on the gendered ideas about assertiveness Superintendent 9 said,

It’s always a man saying to me, we do not want to get micromanage here. . . I often wonder, is it a female thing? If I was sitting in the room and I was a man leader and asked the same question about a procedure down in Human Resources, I might just get the answer. I think that there is a stereotype about women leaders that they are micromanage, assertive, aggressive, or nosy.

Multiple respondents also referred to the term “bitch.” Superintendent 30 said, “men can assert, and they’re considered strong and professional, and when women assert, they’re bitchy” and Superintendent 10 added, “I think the stereotype is a strong-minded, smart female can come across as aggressive or a bitch in situations when there are strong feelings or advocacy.”

Contrary to the image of an assertive “bitch” leader, respondents also contended with a constant need to prove oneself. For example, Superintendent 28 stated:

I have to prove myself constantly. I can show them data. I can prove to them that we're doing a great job. I can show them that I know what I'm talking about, but I cannot change other people, I've learned. I feel sometimes you have to prove yourself again and again, not so of a male superintendent.

Similarly Superintendent 15 remarked, “I feel like as women, we are scrutinized more and questioned more on our decisions; we must justify why we've concluded or decided more often than our male counterparts” and Superintendent 9 said, “I think it's because of my gender... I've learned you must over-prepare, but not let people know it... You have all these answers. Well, what do you know, I'm going home working like 500 h a day.” Superintendent 23 also remarked, “You could almost paralyze yourself with the work; as women, we always feel like we have to prove ourselves, work hours beyond, and always be available.” Simply put, “do women in leadership have to prove themselves more? Yes” (Superintendent 28).

Providing emotional support (in a 24/7 work culture)

Being emotionally nurturing was discussed by respondents as a “gendered expectation” that had real world consequences on their leadership identity. To begin, Superintendent 28 discussed how strength, leadership, decisiveness, and assertiveness were associated with men, while emotionality was related to women. She remarked, “yes, we are too emotional, but if I were a man, you would call it decisive, in control, and in charge.” Superintendent 6 said, “maybe this is a stereotype, but I think women go to women for support. I do not think that they see a lot of men in their life as being an emotional support or sounding board.” Finally, Superintendent 21 offered, “I think people want me to be a tax doctor, to get comfort. I think they expect more from a woman than they would from a man.”

In a similar vein, respondents discussed how emotional support was a gendered expectation of one's leadership. For example, Superintendent 9 remarked, “I know what it is to be an emotional support, and I think it could be very possible that gender plays a role in that,” while Superintendent 5 said, “women are nurturers, whether it's a stated expectation or one that evolves because of who that person is... lots of men are wonderfully nurturing, but I think there is a difference in the expectation.” Finally discussing how this gendered expectation shaped relationships with subordinates, Superintendent 2 commented, “I know that they feel comfortable coming to me, and I think they see me as a mom; they see me as a female.”

Tied to their emotional support role, which often resulted in colleagues relying upon them (and thus their time), more than that of men, findings revealed that respondents felt pressured by

a “24/7” work culture (Jabbar et al., 2018). In fact, the phrase “all the time” was used by respondents 83 times underscoring that women had to exude a workplace identity in support of an “around-the-clock” culture. Exemplifying this point, Superintendent 25 said, “I believe that the agency owns me 24 hours a day,” and Superintendent 4 offered, “my first training was with the expectation that you are on 24/7, and I never lost that.” Tied to the idea of working more was a need to prove one's dedication to their position. For example, Superintendent 17 offered, “I usually am the last person out of the BOCES” and Superintendent 26 conveyed, “you are the first one in the door, and you are the last one who leaves; if you want people to commit to your organization, you damn well better be committed.”

Working harder and longer did not necessarily equate to gender parity within the BOCES, or a more positive self-esteem. Rather the expectations of a 24/7 gendered organizational culture chipped away at respondent self-worth. In a rather matter of fact manner, Superintendent 10 stated:

I think that the truth is that women must work harder in any leadership position. People are more forgiving of men for making mistakes. In my opinion, people are more forgiving of men who put restrictions on their time, and women do not get that.

Superintendent 4 added, “you want to have that strong work ethic display that your work is so important and that you are dedicated to the organization... Men have confidence that they are in the right position. Where I approach it, it is that I have to earn it.” Similarly, Superintendent 5 explained that, “we have this tendency to feel that we have to give 110% all the time and that if we do not, someone's going to perceive that we're not working hard enough... or we live in fear that someone's going to discover that we're a fraud.” On this point, Superintendent 13 concluded, “I see women working longer hours... women, in general, have lower self-esteem, and we do not believe we can do it, so we have to work harder.” Thus, presenting a professional image that included support, knowledge, tenacity, and commitment to the organization – and doing so at all hours of the day – were key aspects of BOCES women superintendent identities.

Organizational logic: women are not abstract workers

According to Acker (1990), “gender is a constitutive element in organizational logic or the underlying assumptions and practices that construct most contemporary work organizations” (p. 147). Thus, gender neutrality is discussed in reference to an abstract, bodiless worker. Contrary to this process, BOCES women superintendents were not bodiless workers, but embraced motherhood and their identity as a woman. Also, tangible items, such as the job evaluations as referenced in Acker's gendering organizational theory, were personalized, based on the superintendent's individual and organizational goals.

Embracing motherhood

The abstract ideal worker for organizational hierarchies involved a genderless and bodiless male worker, void of children and home obligations (Acker, 1990). Yet, as already discussed (see “Cultural Symbols: Looking the Part” for respondent quotations), 27 out of the 32 women (84%) had children. Motherhood, professional legacy, and parenting not only were important symbolic aspects of women superintendents’ career trajectories, but their ability to successfully navigate that trajectory. Furthermore, establishing a healthy work-life balance was not, at least in the perspective of respondents, a major concern of men counterparts.

Thus, contrary to an abstract, genderless, and ethereal woman worker, BOCES women superintendents were highly gendered, but seemingly in a manner that supported traditional gender roles. This finding raises questions around the continued presence of white, middle-class, and heteronormative workplace conventions concerning femininity and masculinity. Specifically, what are the potential gender disciplining and policing dynamics that could emerge for women and/or men who step outside the traditional gender role scripts. Being a woman superintendent in and of itself also highlights the gendered differences through sheer underrepresentation of BOCES respondents.

Job evaluations

Respondent job evaluations illustrated that such assessments differed from BOCES to BOCES. They also differed in implementation frequency from once a year to once every four-plus years. In fact, the so-called “gender-neutral” stance of structures and processes (i.e., job evaluations) across the BOCES varied for 77% of the women.

Still, some respondents viewed the evaluative process as individualized and meaningful to their work, with 64% of the ASs using goal-based evaluations. For example, Superintendent 7 remarked.

What’s really interesting is that I feel I have a say in how I’m evaluated. . . setting my own goals with the board, providing evidence. I feel like I have a real hand in what my evaluation is, and it’s a self-evaluation.

Superintendent 25 commented, “we discuss the ratings for the superintendent and the board evaluation ratings; the board is so supportive.” Finally, Superintendent 2 offered, “we must submit our goals to the DS at the beginning of the year, and then at the end of the year, we write a written synopsis of everything we’ve achieved.” Thus, despite differences in type and implementation, respondents indicated agency around evaluation, with some developed in alignment with the distinct work needed to be done within a specific BOCES region.

Discussion

Confirming decades of prior research, women remain underrepresented in the superintendency. As less is known about why women *stay* in the superintendency, this study fills a gap in the literature, which exists on the range of supports women

utilized to overcome barriers situated to remain within their current superintendency. Though research exists on barriers such as gender inequity and bias (Dobie and Hummel, 2001; Miller et al., 2006; Garn and Brown, 2008; Bernal et al., 2017), limited research focused on supports which assisted women in staying in the position. Through a detailed, qualitative analysis of how and to what extent the women superintendents use a range of supports in a gendered organization, this study offers a contribution to established research concerning the challenges women superintendents navigate to remain in their position.

First, findings underscored that that respondents had to navigate an uneven playing field at the BOCES. Though women and men had similar job expectations, women described multiple challenges to staying in their role. Consistent with other research (Brunner, 1998, 2000; Scott, 2003; Williams et al., 2012), challenges involved being judged by their gendered presentation of dress, garnering respect from male colleagues, and the need to market oneself in ways men did not. Furthermore, most respondents indicated that they experienced gender bias from school board members (Glass, 2000; Garn and Brown, 2008), who did not perceive them as strong managers or capable of handling district finances. These findings are in line with Acker’s (1990) research, wherein the image of the top manager or CEO in an organization is a high-achieving, powerful man.

Second, in addition to facing gender bias tied to physical image (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004; Williams et al., 2012) respondents were conscious of how their appearance was received and perceived. In certain respects, normative workplace culture and the women’s identities were intertwined. As discussed by Acker (1990), the “gendered components of individual identity may include the consciousness of the existence of other components of gender” (p. 147). Yet, respondents were motivated to stay by their professional legacy, how their work benefited their families, and ability to maintain balance between their personal and professional lives. Thus, we see the intrinsic and extrinsic respondent values and how heteropatriarchal culture shapes the identity of women leaders – which begs the question of what happens to women who step outside these gendered scripts, whether at the BOCES, or similar educational organization.

Third, with respect to respondent individual identities, there were linkages between respect in the workplace, professional image, and self-worth. Thus, these findings not only reaffirm Acker’s (1990) gendered organizational theory, but indicate an intersection between processes. This evidence supports the idea that gendered substructures are “produced and reproduced in interactions on the job between colleagues: they may be person-to-person, or they may occur in group settings, both formal and informal” (Acker, 2012, p. 216). These findings also support previous research on women’s self-awareness about their physical image, proximity to, and appropriate talk behavior with men in the workplace (Brunner, 2000).

Fourth, findings highlight that respondents continue to face and must overcome workplace roadblocks that include gender bias, stereotypes, and harassment. Aligned with previous research (Acker, 1990; Ridgeway and Correll, 2004; Williams et al., 2012), respondents emphasized workplace stereotypes that situate men as technically competent and authoritative whereas

women were viewed as emotional and nurturing, though less competent – all of which, served as roadblocks to advancement, and some cases, negatively influenced women’s inferences about themselves. Akin to other research (Jabbar et al., 2018), women discussed the pressures of the 24/7 organizational culture. Essentially, respondents worked longer and harder to prove (Brunner, 2000) their worth in an androcentric culture, which was maintained by an “old boy network” that simultaneously discouraged solidarity among women workers and increased their workload.

Finally, a major finding included that respondents did not embody the abstract and genderless worker – once removed from the responsibilities of children and the home. While job evaluations varied for most respondents, some found evaluations to be individualized and in certain ways, more than a technocratic management tool. The first finding runs contrary to the kind of ideal worker described by Acker (1990). However, findings were consistent with Acker’s (1990) research wherein “explicitly being a woman and a mother exacerbates the fact that the concept of a job and real workers are deeply gendered and bodied” (p. 150). In other words, though respondents embraced the role of mother as relevant to their purpose and professional legacy, a white, middle-class, and heteronormative culture dominates this organization. Thus, women who sit outside such traditional gender scripts might be policed and/or disciplined within this and/or similar contexts.

Recommendations

Certain limitations and respective research recommendations are worth noting for conducting research on the superintendency in a similar state or organizational context, and/or expanding the scope of this study. This study does not examine and thus is lacking in a discussion of the intricacies of intersectional oppression. Put simply, more research is needed on how gender within the superintendency intersects with language, race, nationality, and sexual orientation – and factors into Acker’s five processes. Furthermore, as men comprise the majority of BOCES DS’ (i.e., 73%) and school boards, future research on the gendered expectations of men in these roles could provide insight into organizational culture and issues women overcame to remain in the superintendency.

As this study was specific to the BOCES, a unique educational service agency, findings may not be generalizable (Marshall and Rossman, 2016) to organizations² in other states. This said, research that compares the gendered politics of organizations like NYSED or state legislatures would offer a more nuanced understanding of this context. Finally, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and respondent information could be biased by the crises experienced within the U.S. educational system. Indeed, superintendents identified COVID-related mental health concerns and leadership fatigue, highlighting a need for additional research.

² States with organizations most similar to the BOCES include Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, Texas, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin (Ahearn, 2006).

Conclusion

Collectively, this study’s results are consistent with Acker’s (1990) theory of gendered organizations. In revisiting this landmark research, we found that the NYS BOCES, a unique and powerful educational organization, is gendered. This is significant because this study is the first to empirically examine this organization and the career trajectories of its women superintendents, and to do so from a feminist epistemological perspective and gendered theoretical framework. In short, this study serves as a theoretical and methodological roadmap for scholars interested in researching this topic, as well as for women who want to pursue and remain within the superintendency. Furthermore, the historical context of this study was not 1970 or even 2000; it was 2020. Thus, information on how current women superintendents mitigate long-standing challenges to stay in their positions should be viewed as a rallying cry for major change within higher educational leadership training programs and educational organizations themselves.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the University at Buffalo, SUNY Institutional Review Board. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

JC-S collected, analyzed, and organized all data, which was reviewed by ML. Both authors made a direct intellectual contribution to the work and also approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher’s note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

References

- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gen. Soc.* 4, 139–158. doi: 10.1177/089124390004002002
- Acker, J. (1992a). From sex roles to gendered institutions. *Contemp. Sociol.* 21, 565–569. doi: 10.2307/2075528
- Acker, J. (1992b). “Gendering organizational theory,” in *Gendering organizational analysis*, eds A. J. Mills and P. Tancred (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications), 248–260.
- Acker, J. (2006a). *Class questions: Feminist answers*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Acker, J. (2006b). Inequality regimes: Gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gen. Soc.* 20, 441–464. doi: 10.1177/0891243206289499
- Acker, J. (2012). Gendered organizations and intersectionality: Problems and possibilities. *Equal. Divers. Incl.: Int. J.* 31, 214–224. doi: 10.1108/02610151211209072
- Ahearn, E. (2006). *Educational service agencies: Their role in special education*. Available online at: https://nasdse.org/docs/134_d712955b-12c7-4820-9158-f043df9d5b50.pdf (accessed April 7, 2023).
- Alston, J. A. (2000). Missing from action: Where are the Black female school superintendents? *Urban Educ.* 35, 525–531. doi: 10.1177/0042085900355003
- Alston, J. A. (2005). Tempered radicals and servant leaders: Black females persevering in the superintendency. *Educ. Adm. Q.* 41, 675–688. doi: 10.1177/0013161X04274275
- American Association of School Administrators [AASA] (2020). *AASA releases key findings from American superintendent 2020 decennial study*. Alexandria, VA: AASA.
- Anderson, H. (2003). As if gender mattered: Feminism and change in higher education. *J. High. Educ.* 74, 321–336. doi: 10.1080/00221546.2003.11780849
- Beekley, C. (1999). “Dancing in red shoes: Why women leave the superintendency,” in *Sacred dreams: Women and the superintendency*, ed. C. C. Brunner (Albany, NY: SUNY Press), 161–175.
- Bensimon, E., and Marshall, C. (2003). Like it or not: Feminist critical policy analysis matters. *J. High. Educ.* 74, 337–349. doi: 10.1353/jhe.2003.0021
- Bernal, C., Monosov, N., Stencler, A., Lajoie, A., Raigoza, A., and Akhavan, N. (2017). Gender bias within the superintendency: A comparative study. *J. Sch. Adm. Res. Dev.* 2, 42–52. doi: 10.32674/jsard.v2i1.1925
- Bjork, L. G. (2000). Introduction: Women in the superintendency—Advances in research and theory. *Educ. Adm. Q.* 36, 5–17. doi: 10.1177/00131610021968877
- Blackmore, J., and Kenway, J. (1993). *Gender matters in educational administration and policy: A feminist introduction*. Brighton: Falmer Press.
- Blount, J. M. (1998). *Destined to rule the schools: Women in the superintendency*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Board of Cooperative Educational Services [BOCES] (2022). *About BOCES*. Available online at: <https://www.boces.org/about-boces/> (accessed April 7, 2023).
- Bradshaw, C., Atkinson, S., and Doody, O. (2017). Employing a qualitative description approach in health care research. *Glob. Qual. Nurs. Res.* 4, 2333393617742282. doi: 10.1177/2333393617742282
- Brunner, C. C. (1998). Respondents: Strategies for success. *J. Educ. Adm.* 36, 160–182.
- Brunner, C. C. (2000). *Principles of power: Respondents and the riddle of the heart*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Brunner, C. C., and Grogan, M. (2007). *Women leading school systems: Uncommon roads to fulfillment*. Washington, DC: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Clark-Saboda, J. L. (2022). *Women in the superintendency: Why she stays*. Ph.D. thesis. Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Copeland, S., and Calhoun, D. (2014). Perceptions of mentoring: Examining the experiences of respondents. *NCEA Int. J. Educ. Leadersh. Preparation* 9, 28–46.
- Dallimore, E. J. (2000). A feminist response to issues of validity in research. *Women's Stud. Commun.* 23, 157–181. doi: 10.1080/07491409.2000.10162567
- Dana, J. A., and Bourisaw, D. (2006). *Women in the superintendency: Discarded leadership*. Washington, DC: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- DeVore, S., and Martin, B. N. (2008). Ethical decision-making: Practices of women and men superintendents. *Adv. Women Leadersh.* 28.
- Dobie, D. E., and Hummel, B. (2001). Successful women superintendents in a gender-biased profession. *Equity Excell. Educ.* 34, 22–28.
- Fraser, H., and MacDougall, C. (2017). Doing narrative feminist research: Intersections and challenges. *Qual. Soc. Work* 16, 240–254. doi: 10.1177/1473325016658114
- Gardiner, M. E., Enomoto, E., and Grogan, M. (2000). *Coloring outside the lines: Mentoring women into school leadership*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Garn, G., and Brown, C. (2008). Women and the superintendency: Perceptions of gender bias. *J. Women Educ. Leadersh.* 62, 49–71.
- Glass, T. E. (2000). Where are all the respondents? *Sch. Adm.* 6, 28–32.
- Grogan, M. (1996). *Voices of women aspiring to the superintendency*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Grogan, M. (2000). The short tenure of a woman superintendent: A clash of gender and politics. *J. Sch. Leadersh.* 10, 104–130.
- Grogan, M. (2003). “Laying the groundwork for a reconception,” in *Reconsidering feminist research in educational leadership*, eds M. D. Young and L. Skrla (Albany, NY: SUNY Press), 9–34.
- Grogan, M., and Brunner, C. (2005). “Respondents and role conceptions: (Un)Troubling the norms,” in *The contemporary superintendent: Preparation, practice and development*, eds L. Björk and T. J. Kowalski (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin press), 227–250.
- Grogan, M., and Miles Nash, A. (2021). “Superintendents and the intersections of race, gender and district composition,” in *AASA 2020 study of the superintendent*, ed. C. H. Tienken (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield), 30–41.
- Hawk, N., and Martin, B. (2011). Understanding and reducing stress in the superintendency. *Educ. Manag. Adm. Leadersh.* 39, 364–390.
- Holland-Iantosca, M., and Lemke, M. (2022). The glass escalator and school counselling: Gender and leadership aspirations. *Gen. Educ.* 34, 852–868. doi: 10.1080/09540253.2022.2078484
- Hooks, B. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Isernhagen, J., and Bulkin, N. (2013). Comparing two respondents’ first years: Challenges and successes. *Adv. Women Leadersh.* 33, 115–121.
- Jabbar, H., Sun, W., Lemke, M., and Germain, E. (2018). Gender, markets, and inequality: A framework for examining how market-based reforms impact women leaders. *Educ. Policy* 32, 755–796. doi: 10.1177/0895904816673740
- Kim, H., Sefcik, J. S., and Bradway, C. (2017). Characteristics of qualitative descriptive studies: A systematic review. *Res. Nurs. Health* 40, 23–42. doi: 10.1002/nur.21768
- Kim, J. H. (2016). *Understanding narrative inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Klatt, R. (2014). Young superintendents with school-age children: Gendered expectations, effectiveness, and life quality in rural communities. *J. Sch. Leadersh.* 24, 452–481.
- Lane-Washington, L., and Wilson-Jones, L. (2010). Respondents: Challenges, barriers and experiences as senior level leaders. *Nat. Forum Educ. Adm. Supervis. J.* 27, 1–6. doi: 10.9204/aogh.2384
- Lemke, M. (2019a). Educators as the “front line” of human trafficking prevention: An analysis of state-level educational policy. *Leadersh. Policy Sch.* 18, 284–304. doi: 10.1080/15700763.2017.1398337
- Lemke, M. (2019b). The politics of ‘giving student victims a voice’: A feminist analysis of state trafficking policy implementation. *Am. J. Sex. Educ.* 14, 74–108. doi: 10.1080/15546128.2018.1524805
- Lemke, M., and Rogers, K. (2022). A feminist critical heuristic for educational policy analysis: U.S. social emotional learning policy. *J. Educ. Policy* 1–26. doi: 10.1080/02680939.2022.2130995
- Lichtman, M. (2013). *Qualitative research in education: A user's guide*, 3rd Edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Mahitivanichcha, K., and Rorrer, A. K. (2006). Women's choices within market constraints: Re-visioning access to and participation in the superintendency. *Educ. Adm. Q.* 42, 483–517.
- Marshall, C. (1985). Appropriate criteria of trustworthiness and goodness for qualitative research on education organizations. *Qual. Quant.* 19, 353–373.
- Marshall, C. (ed.) (1997). *Feminist critical policy analysis: A perspective from primary and secondary schooling*. Brighton: Falmer Press.
- Marshall, C., and Rossman, G. (2016). *Designing qualitative research*, 6th Edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Marshall, C., and Young, M. (2013). Policy inroads undermining women in education. *Int. J. Leadersh. Educ.* 16, 205–219.
- Martin, P. Y. (2003). “Said and done” versus “saying and doing”: Gendering practices, practicing gender at work. *Gen. Soc.* 17, 342–366. doi: 10.1177/08912432030117003002
- McDonald, S. (2011). What's in the “old boys” network? Accessing social capital in gendered and racialized networks. *Soc. Netw.* 33, 317–330. doi: 10.1016/J.SOCNET.2011.10.002

- Mendez-Morse, S. (2004). Constructing mentors: Latina educational leaders' role models and mentors. *Educ. Adm. Q.* 40, 561–590.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam-Webster (2023). *Mansplain*. Available online at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mansplain> (accessed April 7, 2023).
- Miles Nash, A., and Grogan, M. (2022). Leadership and the U.S. superintendency: Issues of race, preparation and impact. *Sch. Leadersh. Manag.* 42, 24–43. doi: 10.1080/13632434.2021.1922375
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., and Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook*, 3rd Edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Miller, S. K., Washington, Y. C., and Fiene, J. R. (2006). Respondents: Historic barriers and prospects for the future. *J. Women Educ. Leadersh.* 4, 9–31. doi: 10.1186/1471-2148-12-194
- Mills, A. (1988). "Organization, gender, and culture," in *Gendering organizational analysis*, eds A. J. Mills and P. Tancred (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications), 93–111.
- Mills, A., and Tancred, P. (1992). *Gendering organizational analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Montz, C. B., and Wanat, C. L. (2008). Slow path to the superintendency: Women's social networks and negotiation skills. *J. Women Educ. Leadersh.* 6, 29–47.
- Muñoz, A. J., Pankake, A., Ramalho, E. M., Mills, S., and Simonsson, M. (2014). A study of female central office administrators and their aspirations to the superintendency. *Educ. Manag. Adm. Leadersh.* 42, 764–784.
- Neergaard, M. A., Oleson, F., Anderson, R., and Sondergaard, J. (2009). Qualitative description: The poor cousin of health research? *BMC Med. Res. Methodol.* 9:52. doi: 10.1186/1471-2288-9-52
- New York State Council of School Superintendents [NYSCOSS] (2015). *Snapshot VIII: The ninth triennial study of school superintendents in NYS*. Albany, NY: Madison-Oneida BOCES.
- New York State Education Department [NYSED] (2020). *New York education at a glance*. Available online at: <https://data.nysed.gov/>
- New York State School Boards Association [NYSSBA] (2022). *BOCES Fact Sheet*. Available online at: <https://www.nyssba.org/about-nyssba/boces-fact-sheet/> (accessed April 7, 2023).
- New York State United Teachers Research and Educational Services (2018). *Fact sheet 19-17: Teacher shortage in New York state*. Available online at: <https://www.nysut.org/resources/all-listing/research/fact-sheets/fact-sheet-teacher-shortage-in-new-york-state> (accessed April 7, 2023).
- Polka, W., Litchka, P., and Davis, S. (2008). Respondents and the professional victim syndrome: Preparing current and aspiring superintendents to cope and succeed. *J. Women Educ. Leadersh.* 6, 293–311.
- Reed, D., and Patterson, J. (2007). Voices of resilience from successful respondents. *J. Women Educ. Leadersh.* 5, 89–100.
- Reiger, K. (1993). "The gender dynamics of organizations," in *Gender matters in educational administration and policy: A feminist introduction*, eds J. Blackmore and J. Kenway (Brighton: Falmer Press), 17–26.
- Ridgeway, C. L., and Correll, S. J. (2004). Unpacking the gender system: A theoretical perspective on gender beliefs and social relations. *Gen. Soc.* 18, 510–531. doi: 10.1177/0891243204265269
- Robinson, K. K., Shakeshaft, C., Grogan, M., and Newcomb, W. S. (2017). Necessary but not sufficient: The continuing inequality between men and women in educational leadership, findings from the AASA Mid-Decade Survey. *Front. Educ.* 2:12. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2017.00012
- Robinson, K., and Shakeshaft, C. (2015). Respondents who leave: Stress and health factors. *Plann. Chang.* 46, 440–458.
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Res. Nurs. Health* 23, 334–340.
- Scott, J. (2003). "The linguistic production of genderlessness," in *Reconsidering feminist research in educational leadership*, eds M. D. Young and L. Skrla (Albany, NY: SUNY Press), 81–102.
- Shakeshaft, C. (1987). *Women in educational administration*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Skrla, L. (2003a). "Mourning silence: Respondents (and a researcher) rethink speaking up and speaking out," in *Reconsidering feminist research in educational leadership*, eds M. D. Young and L. Skrla (Albany, NY: SUNY Press), 103–128.
- Skrla, L. (2003b). "Normalized femininity: Reconsidering research on women in the superintendency," in *Reconsidering feminist research in educational leadership*, eds M. D. Young and L. Skrla (Albany, NY: SUNY Press), 247–263.
- Sobehart, H. C. (2009). *Women leading education across the continents: Sharing spirit, fanning the flame*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Sperandio, J., and Devdas, L. (2015). Staying close to home. Women's life-choices and the superintendency. *J. Educ. Adm.* 53, 335–353. doi: 10.1108/JEA-08-2013-0088
- Tallerico, M., and Blount, J. M. (2004). Women and the superintendency: Insights from theory and history. *Educ. Adm. Q.* 40, 633–662.
- Tallerico, M., and Burstyn, J. N. (1995). The future of the superintendency: Women leaders who choose to leave. *Educ. Considerations* 22, 27–30. doi: 10.4148/0146-9282.1462
- Tallerico, M., Burstyn, J., and Poole, W. (1993). *Gender and politics at work: Why women exit the superintendency*. Fairfax, VA: National Policy Board for Educational Administration.
- Wallace, T. T. (2015). Increasing the proportion of respondents in the 21st century. *Adv. Women Leadersh.* 42–47.
- Williams, C. L., Muller, C., and Kilanski, K. (2012). Gendered organizations in the new economy. *Gen. Soc.* 26, 549–573. doi: 10.1177/0891243212445466
- Woodiwiss, J. (2017). "Challenges for feminist research: Contested stories, dominant narratives and narrative frameworks," in *Feminist narrative research: Opportunities and challenges*, eds J. Woodiwiss, K. Smith, and K. Lockwood (London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited), 13–37.
- Yong-Lyun, K. C., and Brunner, C. (2009). School administrators' career mobility to the superintendency. *J. Educ. Adm.* 47, 75–107.
- Young, M. D., and Skrla, L. (2003). "Introduction: Reconsidering feminist research in educational leadership," in *Reconsidering feminist research in educational leadership*, eds M. D. Young and L. Skrla (Albany, NY: SUNY Press), 1–4.