

# **“It Was Just the Right Thing to Do”: Women Higher Education**

## **Administrators Theorize Ethical Leadership**

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*This narrative research study’s purpose was to understand in better ways women higher education administrators’ theorizations of ethical leadership and their ethical leadership philosophies as reflected in their leadership practices. The principal investigator collected narratives from six women higher education administrators at the director level and above, asking questions about their backgrounds, leadership trajectories, and leadership styles and practices. Ethical leadership emerged as a key theme throughout the narratives. The women leaders described themselves as moving beyond “reciprocity,” having internalized and enacted the social responsibility ethical leadership framework. They viewed themselves as part of something larger; the ultimate goal was creating better institutions for students, faculty, and staff. They rejected motivations tied to titles or power for personal gain or prestige, exercised power to inspire and help others in order to improve their organizations, were keenly concerned with equity and fairness, and recognized that they do not live in a fair world. Facing barriers such as sexism and other forms of oppression, discrimination, and prejudice, these participants engaged in efforts to effect and lead change to benefit all, a difficult task. This study’s findings have implications for leaders of all genders, suggesting possibilities for the conscious development of ethical leadership practices and the creation of equitable, diverse, and fair workplace and learning environments.*

*Keywords: gender; leadership; ethical leadership; women higher education administrators; narrative research*

Today's higher education leaders face ethical challenges varying in degrees of seriousness from hiring and personnel issues to gun violence, immigration, and COVID-19 (AASCU, 2020; Smalley, 2020). The literature's discussions of ethical leadership frequently cite leaders' ethical dilemmas and failures (Den Hartog, 2015; Hegarty & Moccia, 2018; Hoch et al., 2016; Keck et al., 2018; Resick et al., 2013; Shakeel, et al. 2019). This narrative research study's purpose was to understand in better ways women higher education administrators' theorizations of ethical leadership and their ethical leadership philosophies as reflected in their leadership practices. Although there are discussions on women's spiritual leadership (Ramachandaran et al., 2017), women's emotionally-intelligent leadership (Miller, 2015), women's servant leadership (Molnar, 2007), and women's transformational leadership (Martin, 2015), there are gaps in the literature in women leaders' theorizations of ethics and their descriptions of ethical theories/philosophies put into practice. These findings shed light on the ethical dilemmas women higher education administrators face and their strategies for navigating these. Further, this study has practical implications for avoiding gender discrimination and achieving greater levels of equity in the field of higher education.

I collected narratives from six women higher education administrators serving at the director level and above, asking questions about their backgrounds, leadership trajectories, intersections of work lives and gender, and leadership styles and practices. Ethical leadership themes emerged through the process of coding the narratives. The narratives revealed stories of leaders who moved beyond the ethical leadership concept of "reciprocity" and who have internalized and enacted the social responsibility leadership framework. They viewed themselves as part of a bigger picture where the ultimate goal was creating better institutions for students, faculty, and staff. According to their narratives, they rejected motivations tied to titles or power

for personal gain or prestige; exercised power in order to motivate colleagues, help others, and improve their organizations; were keenly concerned with equity and fairness; and recognized that they do not live in a fair world. Facing challenges of sexism and other forms of oppression, discrimination, and prejudice, these women leaders wished to engage in efforts to benefit all, a difficult task. This study's findings has implications for leaders of all genders, suggesting possibilities for the conscious development of ethical leadership practices and the creation of equitable, diverse, and fair workplace and learning environments.

### **Literature Review**

Although women's leadership is not often described explicitly as "ethical leadership" in the literature, women higher education administrators are often characterized as ethical implicitly. Women are characterized as collaborative and helpful to others, especially to other women rising in the leadership ranks (Redmond et al., 2017; Shakeshaft et al., 2007; Ward & Eddy, 2013). Qualitative research studies underscored women higher education leaders' tendency to engage in servant leadership and transformative leadership (Dunn et al., 2014; Grady & LaCost, 2005; Martin, 2015; Medrano, 2017; Molnar, 2007; Oikelome, 2017; Pirjan, 2016; Reynolds, 2011). In many ways, servant leadership aligns with conceptualizations of ethical leadership. Servant leadership in its idealized, definitive form manifests itself in leaders' focus on the needs of constituencies above their own interests, serving as exemplars, and supporting subordinates (Mihelič et al., 2010; Dunn et al., 2014).

Although the literature emphasized women higher education administrators' being caring, collaborative, consensus-building, hard-working, and interpersonally-focused, feminist researchers and scholars problematized stereotypical or essentialist notions of being a man or woman leader (Binns & Kerfoot, 2011; Eddy, 2009; Wheat & Hill, 2016). Stereotypical views of

women leaders lead to double binds and stressful circumstances for women (Pasquerella & Clauss-Ehlers, 2017). Either a woman is not masculine enough for a leadership role or is not feminine enough for the role (Bornstein, 2008; Steinke, 2006) and is placed in a situation that is an “advantage for men and a disadvantage for ... women ... who never quite fit” (Dean et al., 2009, p. 13). Eagly (2007) found there to be “tension between the communal qualities that people prefer in women and the predominantly agentic qualities they expect in leaders,” (p. 4) creating pressure for women leaders when they emphasize their authority as leaders, which is considered masculine, as well as when they engage in supportive behavior, which is considered feminine. However, women leaders’ disadvantaged and “not-quite-fitting-in” statuses may facilitate their becoming effective leaders who are sensitive to injustice and take action against oppressive elements within organizations (Pasquerella & Clauss-Ehlers, 2017; Stainback et al., 2016). Bart and McQueen (2013) found that women business leaders make better decisions concerning multiple stakeholders. Business researchers found women-dominated boards produced higher returns on multiple key financial performance indicators than male-dominated boards (Joy et al., 2007).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Ethical leadership is defined by ethical behavior, doing what is considered “right” versus “wrong” in a particular society or culture (Mihelič et al., 2010; Trevino, 1986). In ancient Greece, Aristotle (1999) theorized ethics in relation to men at the individual level. According to the Aristotelian model, excellent character is developed through excellent behavior and virtue. Those who have excellent character do the right thing, at the right time, in the right manner. Self-control and living happy lives are examples of excellent and practical character and behavior (Aristotle, 1999). Marcus Aurelius (2013) aligned his philosophies of life and leadership to being

Stoic. Stoicism encourages one to pursue virtue, avoid evil, and focus on one's happiness. Virtue contributes to happiness, and vice contributes to unhappiness. Although these philosophers concentrated on the virtues or ethics of "great men," attributes such as serving as exemplars, having integrity, and possessing a strong moral character are applicable to women leaders, and their ideas extend beyond ancient times. However, as revealed in the narratives analyzed here, what is considered "right" is based on principles and sound judgement in particular historical and cultural contexts (Minkes et al., 1999; Sims, 1992).

For the purposes of this study, I relied on Medonca and Kanungo's (2007) theorizations of ethical leadership for organizations, which resemble in some ways servant leadership as described by qualitative researchers (Dunn et al., 2014; Molnar, 2007). Mendonca and Kanungo (2007) described two characteristics of ethical leadership related to altruism that were applied to the narratives in this study—"the norm of reciprocity and the norm of social responsibility" (p. 71). Reciprocity is a drive to do good for those who do good for us (Gouldner, 1960; Hansen et al. 2013, Hassan et al. 2013; Mendonca & Kanungo, 2007; Walumbwa et al., 2011). This reciprocity norm lends itself to resource and talent sharing, which occurs within the framework of mutual altruistic transactional leadership. The social responsibility norm—the norm most prominent in this study's narratives—asks the leader to think beyond him or herself; this ability comes from deeply held beliefs that leaders should support and promote others over considerations for their own personal benefits or publicized professional accomplishments (Berkowitz, 1972; Dunn et al., 2014; Mendonca & Kanungo, 2007; Schwartz, 1975).

In some ways, ethical leadership conflates with transformational leadership. Martin (2015) defined transformational leadership:

Transformational leadership is about building relationships among people and creating real, significant change by emphasizing values and creating a shared vision among those in the organization. Transformational leaders generally rise during times of turmoil and change in an organization. The first priority of a transformational leader is to identify and understand the needs of the individuals in the organization and then elevate those needs. By focusing on their requirements, the transformational leader motivates individuals to achieve at higher levels and to produce the type of work they did not think they could. (p. 333)

Den Hartog (2015) contended that there are important differences between transformational and ethical leadership such as ethical leadership's focus on transactional leadership. Unlike transformational leadership, ethical leadership does not emphasize change or visionary leadership or intellectual engagement with employees. Transformational leaders have altruistic motives, like ethical leaders, and live their values and vision in order to bring out the best in others. Ethical leadership, as Den Hartog argued, includes transactional modes, like reciprocating, defined as rewarding or exchanging for the accomplishment of tasks. For example, the ethical leader may give stipends for the accomplishment of additional tasks or give equity or merit raises. The values of both transformational and ethical leadership that align with serving the best interests of the institution and its constituencies are comparable (Hegarty & Moccia, 2018). Although servant, transformational, spiritual, and emotionally-intelligent leadership styles overlap in several ways with ethical leadership, ethical leadership is distinct. Den Hartog (2015) posited that ethical leaders are more than simply fair leaders. They are "focused on setting an ethical agenda and influencing followers' ethical awareness and behaviors in a much broader sense" (p. 415). Unlike leadership styles such as servant leadership and transformational

leadership, ethical leadership emphasizes “the social learning principles of role modeling and reward and punishment” (p. 415). Ethical leaders use positive and negative reinforcement and social learning principles to influence current and future behaviors.

Philosophers have conceptualized ethical leadership similarly; however, these frameworks have not been applied to studies on women higher education leaders. Hegarty and Moccia (2018) developed a general ethical leadership framework, consisting of the following characteristics: “gratitude, humility, justice, mercy and compassion, prudence and objectivity, magnanimity, integrity and resilience” (p. 2). Brenkert (2004) and Lawton and Páez (2015) argued that the ethical leader must possess integrity by being a moral example. King (2008) observed numerous managers and noted several commonalities among those deemed ethical: “honesty, loyalty, dedication to purpose, benevolence, social justice, strength of character, humility, and patience” (p. 719). This study’s participants reflect the characteristics these scholars noted and ethical leadership facilitative styles defined by Nyukorong (2014). Leaders facilitated ethical behaviors in two ways: by providing positive reinforcement for ethical behaviors and by discouraging unethical conduct (Nyukorong, 2014).

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following research questions: (1) What stories related to ethics and work do participants describe? (2) What conceptualizations of ethical leadership do these stories reveal? (3) How do women higher education administrators navigate ethical concerns and address unethical behavior at work?

### **Methodology**

I interviewed six women higher education administrators, using narrative research methodology, whereby participants responded to few prompts with extended time as needed. I

asked questions about the participants' backgrounds, their leaderships' trajectories, and their experiences with gender in work place situations. After carefully transcribing and re-listening to recordings while reviewing transcriptions, I coded transcripts and subsequently re-coded transcripts at later times to check for consistency. Themes emerged from the note-taking, research journaling, transcribing, and coding processes. Creswell (2007) described the method of narrative analytic strategy where the researcher uses "paradigm thinking to create descriptions of themes that hold across stories or taxonomies of types of stories" (p. 54). This study's paradigm is linked to ethical leadership theories translated through narratives' key themes, storylines, and dilemmas. I have focused on the narratives' content and intertextuality with the goals of bringing the narratives into "useful dialogue with each other" and understanding "more about individual and social change," which ultimately "help[s] us describe, understand and even explain important aspects of the world" (Squire et al., 2013, p. 1). Developing themes and analyses, I shared reports and quoted material with participants who affirmed and who sometimes disaffirmed my findings, offering opportunities for analysis and ethical collaboration with participants. Further, I reflected on my own positionality as a middle-class, genderqueer professional/academic leader with multiple ethnicities, and I intentionally sought to privilege participants' priorities in their narratives. This process also helped my participants and me to reflect upon and better define their leadership styles and ethics. Ensuring trustworthiness of my study, these negotiations of support and collaboration contributed to the triangulation of my research as well as the development of richer themes, contextual insights, and descriptions. Codes and themes were developed through looking for patterns and intertextuality, ultimately "breaking the data apart in analytically relevant ways in order to lead toward further questions



about the data” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 31). Coding resulted in the identification of repeated subject matter and emergent themes.

The identification of repeated subject matter thus provides a useful means of identifying key themes. Key themes may, but need not, be stories of events. In response to a variety of questions, participants may construct themselves as having particular philosophies and habitual ways of dealing with the world that constitute a projection of identity or that signal their preoccupations. (Phoenix, 2013, p. 77)

Through the process of narrating stories about their leadership and work lives, constructions of ethical selves emerged as the participants wished to be understood as ethical leaders. These dialogic processes revealed the following themes: ethical decision making, positive environments, altruism, and empowering others.

### **Participants**

The six women higher education administrators whom I interviewed served in administrative positions at the director-level or higher, representing regions from throughout the United States. Participants selected their pseudonyms, and vague identifiers were used to guard confidentiality. Participants were recruited using the snowball sampling method, which is selecting participants from people who know others who may be interested in participation in a particular research study and would be good examples or provide rich information for the study (Patton, 2002).

One participant served as a president, one as a vice president, three as deans, and one as a director. Ages spanned from 30s to 60s with one participant in her 60s, two in their 50s, two their 40s, and one in her 30s. Five participants served as community college administrators and one participant served as a university administrator. Table 1 provides a reference for each participant.

**Table 1***Participants*

Pseudonym	Age Group	Position	Institution
Maria	50s	President	Community College
Rae	50s	Vice President	Community College
Angela	60s	Dean	University
Ashley	40s	Dean	Community College
Sabrina	40s	Dean	Community College
Jenny	30s	Director	Community College

**Ethical Decision Making and Positive Environments**

This study's findings revealed significant ethical leadership themes connected to notions of fairness and equity and may be related to participants' experiences of implicit sexism and explicit bias and discrimination. Participants practiced ethical decision-making processes and creating positive work environments, all important to several frameworks discussed in the literature about ethical leadership (Dunn et al., 2014; Dworkin, 2012; Hegarty & Moccia, 2018; King, 2008; Lawton & Páez, 2015; Mendonca & Kanungo, 2007).

Angela witnessed firsthand the transformative power of ethical leadership when women leaders took on changing the status quo based on their ethical beliefs. Angela told a story about her former institution where there was a woman president and predominately female leadership team. She described their accomplishments, informed by ethical decision-making, during the few years that the president was at the university.

In those few years, we were awarded domestic partner benefits. We had extensive family leave policies. Female and male faculty received an automatic tenure extension if they

had a child or adopted a child. All these things helped with work-life balance. The institution also offered a dual-career hiring program where one option was a split-appointment so that a couple could share a 150% appointment rather than each of them having 100% appointments. In a few years, with all of these changes, it felt like a completely different campus.

Angela and a group of LGBTQ faculty previously attempted to influence institutional policy to gain domestic partner benefits. The group met regularly with the previous two presidents who were men. The men presidents' responses were, "Well, the climate in the state ... needs to change before we do that because we'll lose support from the state legislature." According to Angela, "their attitudes seemed very demeaning to us." After the new president was hired, Angela recalled the moment when she learned that she and others would have access to domestic partner benefits.

I remember reading the message on email, 'We now have domestic partner benefits,' and I remember being stunned that this had happened without a group of LGBTQ faculty and staff even meeting with the president to plead our case. I saw her walking on campus a couple of days later, and said, 'I have met you a couple of times. You probably don't remember me. But I just wanted to thank you for the domestic partner benefit package that you put through.' She looked at me said, 'it was just the right thing to do.' That is just one example of how a woman leader might find a way to do something that she believed to be a step toward equality and a better quality of life.

Despite the political risks and possible negative effects for her career, the president did what she believed to be the "right thing." Mendonca and Kanugo (2007) argued that ethical leadership is an essential component of effective leadership, and ethical leaders are highly altruistic and are

sensitive to “environmental opportunities,” situational limitations, and “the needs of followers” (p. 46). Angela emphasized the positive and social change aspects of women’s leadership and their work for equity in the patriarchal and sometimes oppressive environments in which they find themselves. The leaders whom Angela described are not just good leaders but are ethical, socially responsive, and responsible, and focused upon holistic positive institutional change.

Angela’s own ethical decision-making was influenced by aspects of her identity related to privilege and lack of privilege. Angela acknowledged her own privilege as “a white person at a predominantly white institution” as well as “class privileges that come with the sort of salary you have with a position like this.” However, Angela experienced salary discrimination in previous positions and narrated stories about salary discrimination, which also made her committed to salary equity.

The women couldn’t even keep up with their male colleagues because salary increases would be based on a percentage rather than a flat amount of money. The faculty making a higher salary keep making more, and the faculty making less just keep getting further behind.

In her roles as administrator, she confronted race- and gender-based salary inequities and made salary adjustments. This sense of fairness promoted justice as Hegarty and Moccia (2018) defined it in their conceptualization of ethical leadership: “proper application of fairness [...] promotes a sense of justice,” creating a “better workplace citizenship and transparency of individual’s value” (p. 4). Ethical treatment also motivates employees as they realize they will be rewarded fairly for their efforts (Hegarty & Moccia, 2018).

Similarly, Jenny’s narrative revealed how she used her leadership position to improve subordinates’ and colleagues’ work lives and to increase opportunities for students. Jenny told a

story about her work with a major auto association leader to establish scholarships and other incentives to encourage women and other under-represented minorities to enroll in career and technical education degree fields. She described creating scholarships for women and minorities as “making sense” and something she has “been trying to bring ... forward because [she is] sensitive to that as a woman.” Jenny demonstrated ethical leader behavior that “includes recognition of the deficiencies in the status quo, particularly in the context of the available opportunities and ... needs” (Mendonca and Kanugo, 2007, p. 59). The college’s attorney initially told Jenny that scholarships for women and under-represented groups were not permitted. Jenny challenged the status quo and did her own legal research, learning that it is permissible to offer scholarships to under-represented groups and then worked to effect change.

Jenny later narrated stories about her sensitivity toward new parents and thoughts on policies to support families and new parents. She emphasized:

There is a lot of policy that I think that has yet to be designed to help to make that [parenting] a truly equal experience. And supporting men, too, those men who are just starting their families, making sure that they’re not treated differently.

During meetings and in her role as an administrator, Jenny championed these topics, moving them forward to upper administration. She demonstrated ethical and servant leadership approaches, supporting women, under-represented students, and colleagues, even when others attempted to dissuade her.

Sabrina served as an advocate for a subordinate who was being discriminated against for her age and gender. Sabrina narrated:

We got a new maintenance leader. I have a [program] director who’s in an office with air conditioning issues. It’s either really hot or it’s cold. And for a period of time, it’s just

really hot. And I couldn't get them to address the issue. And I have good relationships with our maintenance guys. And I pulled him in, and I asked, 'What's going on? Why are we not getting any help on this?' He said, 'It's because my boss just thinks she's just menopausal, and she's just having hot flashes.' And so, when I found that out, I'm like, this we're fixing. But yeah, there are things like that, dismissal of needs because of a woman problem.

Sabrina engaged in facilitative ethical leadership when she disagreed "with unethical decisions and tr[ie]d to get them reversed" (Nyukorong, 2014, p. 59). Sabrina was not only sensitive to the need of a subordinate; she immediately took action when she learned the root of the issue, which was related to sexism. The facilities crew refused to troubleshoot the problem, dismissing it as a "woman problem" rather than a legitimate mechanical issue.

Ashley characterized the reasons she and her colleagues endeavored to set good examples for ethical behavior and to create equitable, respectful, and fair work environments. They emphasized "mutual respect." She narrated, "Perhaps for some of them they've experienced that bias and want to ensure that they're not applying it ... to anybody that they're leading or working directly with," and they are working toward this "to have the best culture possible." She stressed, "Even if there are, you know, disagreements, how we do things or what have you, I think everybody at least feels like they're respected." Resick et al. (2013) found that ethical behavior not only has the immediate influence on people in helping them but also has the influence on their future behaviors. They concluded that ethical leaders set the tone for employees and help them "make sense of ethical expectations by signaling what behaviors constitute fair, just, and morally appropriate or inappropriate conduct" (p. 967). Ashley said that she and her colleagues wished to create environments where people are treated fairly and are respected. They have a

heightened awareness of bias, possibly because they have experienced it, and they took proactive steps through their treatment of colleagues and subordinates so that they have future influence on ethical behaviors at their institution.

Despite the tone that the institution's leaders set, Ashley admitted that she and other women leaders faced challenges related to gender. Because many women were in leadership positions at this particular institution, Ashley said that there had been negative remarks about the senior leadership's composition. Ashley recently hired a director, and during the process, she was acutely aware of gender's role in her decision-making, not because she was concerned about the gender of the finalist for the position but because of those on campus who have expressed concerns about the number of women in leadership positions at the institution. She ultimately hired a woman for the position although that particular position "is a more typically male role." Although aware of possible "pushback" from the decision, she said:

I chose them as qualified applicants that had absolutely nothing to do with her gender. So ... I wasn't going to let that influence me, but I wondered if she would experience any pushback. And I, luckily, I don't think she has, but I think if she had a different personality she might have, which I think is unfortunate.

All the other candidates for this position were men, and Ashley felt pressure to hire one of the men candidates. She narrated:

I'm going to do the right thing. I'm going to do what I think is what I am supposed to do. And that's my responsibility to do the right thing by the college. And, you know, my belief, you don't hire somebody because of gender or race or any other thing. You hire them because they're the most qualified applicant for the job. And it doesn't matter if

they're from Mars. ... You hire the most qualified applicant for the job, and that's what I did, and that's what I'll continue to do.

Ashley was concerned with diversity in hiring decisions, and her way of thinking about it is, “if you have two equally qualified candidates, choose the diverse candidate.” She stressed repeatedly, “If you have unequally qualified candidates, you should always choose your most qualified candidate.” Frequently, her focus was on the institution’s and students’ best interests. “We’re supposed to be benefiting our students, and that’s what’s going to best benefit our students in my opinion.” According to Hegarty and Moccia’s (2018) conceptualization of the ethical leader, the “leader seeks the greatest good for the individual, the group, while also satisfying the mission of the organization” (p. 4). Ashley’s ethical leadership framework is doing what is ultimately best for students and for the institution, according to its mission. These participants also exemplified the ethical leader that Mendonca and Kanungo (2007) defined as the leader who views “social obligations as his/her moral duty because they serve the higher purpose of benefiting relevant others (the group or organization from which the leader is inseparable) without any calculation of personal gain in return” (p. 73). Ashley’s narrative revealed that she viewed increasing diversity at the college as part of doing “right” by the college and students, and she was consistently and ultimately concerned with doing “the right thing,” even when facing possible “pushback” for her decisions.

### **Altruism and Empowering Others**

Mendonca and Kanungo (2007) contended that there are two forms of altruism—utilitarian or mutual altruism and genuine or moral altruism. Utilitarian or mutual altruism suggests that there will be some mutual benefit in the helpful behavior provided by the leader. Genuine or moral altruism involves “internalized social responsibility norms or moral



imperatives” (Mendonca & Kanungo, 2007, p. 25). These participants have internalized a responsibility to help others, and their stories revealed that they have devoted their lives to empowering others over self-serving activities. The mutual benefit that they seek is a successful institution but not necessarily success for themselves for self-promotion’s sake, although it seemed they felt a sense of satisfaction from helping others.

Rae narrated stories about empowering others; this was an essential component to her leadership. She described sensitivity as “very much a strength” because she takes “the time to listen to people.” She related, “I really like to work with people and help them develop. This is going to sound like I am being biased. Sometimes I get the feeling that some people are just really based on their individual selves.” Rae pursued a career in higher education because a mentor encouraged her to develop a deep understanding of herself and what she wanted to do.

And this teacher, he asked me, ‘Is there something you really want to do? What have you always wanted to do?’ ... And he asked, ‘What do you want them to say at your funeral?’ And I said, ‘I just want them to say that I helped people.’ And he said, ‘What’s helped you the most?’ And I said, ‘My education.’ And that’s when something clicked in me. ... I could actually work in education, you know, and specifically higher education. ... So, it like changed my life. So, it’s so personal to me, and I am so passionate about it that this experience has really affected me greatly. ... [I]t just felt personal.

According to Shakeel et al.’s (2019) conceptual process of ethical leadership, the ethical leader facilitates the “self-actualization of followers” and aids them in achieving their goals, implying, “a certain servitude ... on the part of the leader and his utmost dedication toward his followers and the broader social environment” (p. 619). Education is a transformational calling that shaped Rae and served as a way for her to help others in their self-actualization.

Ashley echoed Rae, describing her need “to be in a field where I feel like I could make a difference.” She saw education as “one of the fields where you could make the biggest difference in this world.” She made connections between supporting and encouraging educators and staff and ethical leadership. “I think teachers have more of an impact on people than most anybody. And being able to be an administrator gives you an opportunity to have influence on a lot of different people who have influence on people.” She viewed her career with a strong ethical aspect—an altruistic one related giving of one’s self to help others grow and learn.

Maria also viewed her role as supportive and collaborative with the ultimate goal of student success. In her work with others, Maria stressed that she wanted “all the right people at the table” in order to make the best decisions for the institution. Initially, she faced the prior leader’s legacy of a dictatorial leadership style. Employees were uncomfortable being open and honest. Eventually, employees adjusted to her leadership style.

And so, I come in, ‘I’m like, I want everybody’s take. Who’s missing? Go get them.’ ...

My personal style is very collaborative, and I worked very hard that no matter if you’re staff, custodian, whoever you are, let’s drop titles and let’s just talk about what we need to do to improve student success.

Mendonca and Kanungo (2007) argued that ethical leaders need to engage in reflection to become aware of their “inadequacies” and work to compensate for these, and they should use their “institutional power” to communicate openly with constituents so that they feel free to provide suggestions (Mendonca & Kanungo, 2007, pp. 51-52). Challenging hierarchy, Maria created an environment where they would “drop titles,” concentrate on the college’s mission, and engage in open and honest communication.

Maria related, “For me it’s about the work. It’s always been about that classroom experience I had, and I realized that education really is the difference maker.” Her purpose was to use her power and authority for altruistic purposes. She narrated her reasoning for pursuing a presidency:

I wanted to be a president because then I had more opportunities to place the resources and provide more services that support not just students but faculty and staff so we could do a better job. I mean, that’s what I wanted. ... It’s not an ego thing because it’s not about me as a person. This is about the work that we do every day. ... I’m driven to do this work because what I do is important. It makes a difference not just the individual life, but in their family and then the community. And so, if you think about the important work we do, then that should be what motivates you to always look for some better way to do it or for some new thing we can do instead of just settling. ... There’s got to be a reason why you want to do it, and there’s gotta be a true connection to the work.

Maria’s ethical model of leadership followed the power dynamic Mendonca & Kanungo (2007) described where “power becomes the vehicle to serve the needs of the organization and its members. It is manifested in behaviours and feelings that serve to help and support the followers in accomplishing their tasks” (Mendonca & Kanungo, 2007, p. 51). Maria repeated throughout her narrative that administrative work should not be about “chasing” money or titles but about a true dedication to the transformative power of education and doing one’s work well. She witnessed the far-reaching effect of her and her team’s work—the positive power of education not only for the individual but also for his or her family and community.

Angela pursued a leadership position for similar reasons as Maria. However, she did not have a “straight line” leadership trajectory because she experienced challenges with male

administrator supervisors. After stints as an administrator, she would return to teaching and “not try to fight this, all this undertone of hostility and the lack of support that [she] sometimes felt.” Between administrative roles, her colleagues and even administrators would encourage her to return to administration. She concluded, “I finally decided that I just can’t retreat and do my own thing because if I want to make a difference, I will have to be in those higher levels of administration.” Angela narrated stories about her desire to make “a smoother ride for other women, other gay, lesbian, queer people.” She related, “That’s important to me to be that kind of agent for change where the implicit bias and sometimes even explicit bias isn’t as prominent for that next group of people.” Angela was a facilitative leader who defined her success through the success of others. In Dunn et al.’s (2014) study of women leaders, participants defined their successes through their facilitating the accomplishments of others, in particular their subordinates. Angela described the people she promoted as working to make progressive changes so that “this becomes the kind of place where people can reach their fullest potential, no matter what their background.” She provided examples of how her leadership team was making these types of differences. They implemented implicit bias training for all faculty and staff; diversity training for directors and chairs; and faculty professional development programs that include modules on equity and inclusion. Angela narrated:

I feel like part of what I’m trying to do is to create an environment that’s more consistent (no favors based on established social networks) and more professional. But that also means when somebody makes a misstep in how they treat others, you don’t shame them (unless their behavior is egregious and actionable) but you try to help them figure out what they did wrong and how they can correct that in the future.

She used mentoring in multiple ways: to address unethical behavior as needed and to develop subordinates. Angela also viewed a need for mentoring because of the institution's leadership composition, which was two-third male and 90% white. She concluded from this that past mentoring had been implicitly focused on replicating the race and gender of those in power; positive bias is just as functional as negative in maintaining the status quo. Her goal was "to create more of a pipeline for women leaders as well as people of color." She promoted and hired people of color, women, and LGBTQ people into leadership positions and mentored these subordinates to create a leadership pipeline. She brought members of her leadership team to meetings, took them to leadership conferences, and sent them to workshops. Ultimately, she planned to "encourage them to apply for higher-level leadership positions."

Participants sought out the field of higher education administration to help others despite the substantial workload and stress level these positions involve. They have internalized the social responsibility norm (Mendonca & Kanungo, 2007), and their narratives reveal themes of obligations to assist and facilitate the growth of others through education and leadership. They all sought to fulfill the missions of their institutions through the use of specific ethical strategies within social responsibility frameworks such as coaching and mentoring others, collaborating, listening, challenging hierarchical structures, and using power for ethical purposes such as creating more equitable environments.

### **Implications for Practice and for Further Study and Conclusions**

Higher education institutions need strong ethical leadership and resolve to be inclusive and welcoming of diverse peoples and ideas. Universities globally are striving for more equitable, diverse, and ethical environments. A good example is EU Business School, which offers programs to students from over 100 nationalities and fosters understandings among faculty

and students of diverse ideas and peoples (Murphy, 2019). Other institutions could adopt similar models and institute trainings to provide leaders and others with opportunities to develop awareness of the struggles marginalized groups face. Practical implications include ethics, equity, and inclusion training, focusing on implicit bias, hiring practices, compensation practices, social justice issues, and effective communication. In addition to integrating such training into institution practices, higher education institutions have opportunities to develop more family-friendly policies that will support employees as workers and parents. Antidiscrimination policies should be carefully written to include all marginalized groups. However, more than training and policies are needed; support mechanisms can aid employees and students of marginalized groups to thrive in higher education contexts. For instance, mentoring programs both for students and employees have the potential to scaffold leadership and ethics learning and to provide additional supports for those in marginalized groups.

In addition to these suggested practical implications, this study's trustworthiness buttresses its transferability, providing applicable insights for multiple contexts. Qualitative research is reliable based on methodology and is trustworthy based on the transferability, dependability, credibility, and confirmability of its findings (Creswell, 2007). Creswell and Creswell (2018) asserted the purpose of qualitative research is not to be generalized but to analyze lived experiences of a group of people in a particular context. Although this study may be limited by the diversity of its sample, the rich descriptions offer transferability and credibility, generating applicable insights for multiple contexts. Future ethics studies on women higher education administrators may seek more diversity in its sample such as in sexual orientation, ethnicity, institution type, and administrative position. This present study presents possibilities for further quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods studies on the differences in

conceptualizations of ethical leadership among higher education leaders of various genders. Future qualitative studies may further develop alternative frameworks for feminist ethical leadership, as well as provide additional analysis of women leaders' ethical leadership definitions and practices. Studies may also examine followers' perceptions of leaders' behaviors and descriptions of ethical leadership.

These women higher education leaders narrated stories reflecting challenges and barriers such as Angela's struggles with men supervisors and salary inequities, Sabrina's challenges with a facilities crew with sexist attitudes, Jenny's attempts to establish scholarships for under-represented groups, and Ashley's dilemma as she made a hire. The participants developed ethical leadership frameworks, reflecting altruistic motives and substantial agency in taking actions to do the right things and to correct what they viewed as "unethical." Some of the participants' experiences led them to be mindful of the challenges that women and other marginalized groups face. Some made explicit connections between the challenges they faces as women to their own ethical leadership styles and practices; however, this is not to say they used these practices because of facing challenges. There are likely other factors such as personality and other experiences (e.g., positive role models) that influenced their leadership styles and practices.

Mendonca and Kanungo (2007) defined two ethical leadership characteristics associated with altruistic leadership—"the norm of reciprocity and the norm of social responsibility" (p. 71). Reciprocity and social responsibility norms were represented through these leaders' ethical decision-making, developing subordinates, intervening in injustices, and prioritizing others' needs. These women leaders also moved beyond "reciprocity." Their leadership reflected an internalized and enacted social responsibility leadership framework. They rejected self-serving

motivations and viewed themselves as part of something greater than themselves with the ultimate goal of creating better institutions for students, faculty, and staff.



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