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# Gendered Administration: A Naturalistic Study

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**A** former department chairperson, male, puts it this way: "At the present time, there is really only one 'reading' of the text which is the web of relationships between administrators in higher education—that is the 'male reading'." He had simply never thought about it, he said, until he began reading deconstructionist and feminist criticism, but under the influence of these, he soon began to realize that his functioning as an administrator was in accordance with his ideas of "author"-ity, the "authors" of which, in this society, are male. The interviews which are the basis of this study bear out his observations. Narratives of higher education administration are both presently and historically under male authorship.

In this paper, I wish to describe responses out of six interviews with higher education administrators, interviews for which the fulcrum question was: "How does gender affect the workings of higher education administration?" These administrators are all working on one campus—SUNY College at Buffalo. Therefore, this study is idiographic in nature, claiming only transferability. S.U.C.B. is an urban campus whose student body numbers about 12,000, whose faculty numbers around 400, and whose administrative staff numbers around 100. The president on this campus is a male. The provost and the Vice-President for Academic Affairs are male, while the three deans are female.

For this study, I interviewed three females and three males; two of these males are either presently or formerly department chairpersons. I shall call their administrative offices low-level administration. One male is in high-level administration. Two females are in high-level administration and the third is in mid-level administration. Mid and high-level administration includes positions at the level of associate dean and above. This hierarchical view of administration reflects its traditional narrative supported by power distribution, scope of responsibility, and salary.

Content analysis of the interview materials yielded this category system of issues which provides the organizational skeleton of this paper:

1. Undergirding Framework
2. Infrastructures
3. Speech Patterns
4. Operational Styles
5. Conflict
6. Dress

Since some of the material these respondents supplied would be politically sensitive for them in their present positions, I have not quoted them directly, but rather only by designation. Their exact positions are not as important to this study as are their genders and their experiences in higher education administration. I shall refer to them as FA, (Female A), FB, FC, and as MA (Male A), MB, MC. The interviews are recorded in my extensive notes which effectively substantiate materials quoted.

### I. UNDERGIRDING FRAME OF THE NARRATIVE— TRADITION APPLIED:

It was most interesting to note commonalties among the responses. One over-arching observation about them is that all six respondents accepted as given the existence of a set of traditionally male and female characteristics and applied some or all of these to administration. These indeed were the framework for their responses. These characteristics sets emerged out of the interview texts and displayed such little variance from respondent to respondent that I could confidently assemble them into the following profiles. For females, they were:

1. "Peacemaking" (confrontation avoided until it is a last resort) as a primary mode of operation.
2. Undeveloped "killer instinct."
3. Moderate language, in terms of "swear words," but a tendency toward hyperbole, e.g., "wonderful, marvelous, divine."
4. Tendency toward passiveness and toward speech patterns which denigrate authority, e.g., "if you don't mind, in my limited experience, maybe I'm wrong, but...."
5. "Niceness" (e.g., politeness, accommodation, graciousness).
6. Acceptance as a general response on all levels.
7. Non-linear style of operation.
8. Tendency to try seeing every side before making decisions.
9. Nurturing as an administrative style.
10. Enculturated tendency to put one's own needs aside for those of others.
11. Tendency to *take* blame before *assigning* blame.

For males, the characteristics profile was:

1. Aggressiveness or even recalcitrance.
2. Confrontationalism as a mode of operation.
3. Developed "killer instinct."
4. "Author"-itarianism.
5. Immoderate language, in terms of "swear" words, but little hyperbole.
6. Linear style of operation.

7. Non-vacillation in decision-making.
8. A style demanding accountability as opposed to a nurturing style.
9. Centricity of personal needs, especially with regard to time.
10. Tendency to *assign* blame before *taking* blame.
11. An enculturated sense of “entitlement” in their use of clerical services, in their time budgeting, and in their sense of personal relationship to the rest of the organization. (“Entitlement” is defined in this study as the presumption of a to have needs/wants met, given high priority, and taken seriously.)

In his interview, MA made the generalized comment that female administrators tended to “out-male” the males in order to compensate. This comment was either repeated in some manner or affirmed by the other five respondents. MA’s analysis was that since administration is male “authored,” providing the model female administrators have to emulate, many females go overboard in their attempts to embody the model. FA told about another female administrator who started meetings with sports scores and statistics, who bragged about drinking, and whose discourse was peppered with “swear words”—who obviously wanted to embody what she identified as a macho male profile. FB commented that the traditional male-female relationship pattern is still dominant as did FC and MC. FB defined that pattern as men talking more than women and women being expected to serve...as note-takers, coffee bringers, or hard-copy data suppliers. MC cited as evidence, against gender as an influential factor, the number of female administrators on campus...“many of whom are taken seriously.” (When this last part of the statement was pointed out to him, he laughingly admitted that perhaps gender was more meaningful to him than he had thought!)

One of the male respondents, MB, stalwartly declared, in response to the fulcrum question, that in his personal experience, he had seen no difference between males and females as administrators. He maintained that stance all the way through the interview, but what emerged from our discourse was that he meant that he had not seen women overtly prejudiced against as administrators, though he had seen racial prejudice occur. One of his reiterations went something like this: “There are no differences in style. There were two women administrators here whom people were inclined to ‘see’ as soft, but they were not. They soon showed that they had the same characteristics that any administrator who rises to the top has. They were efficient, hard-nosed, tough, aggressive, intelligent, authoritative....” Though he had denied that he accepted any traditional profiles of maleness and femaleness, he was, of course, identifying excellent administrators as those embodying that same set of traditionally male characteristics. “Women have traditionally had to overcompensate when they are in administrative positions,” he said. An interesting counterpoint to MB’s discourse is FB’s comment that when men say, “I treat women just like I treat anyone else,” they mean, “I treat women just like I treat any other people who have less power than I—children, students, clerical people—any others.” FB seemed to have been aware of some overtly prejudicial behavior.

It was overwhelmingly obvious that all six of these people operated out of the belief that gender is basic to people’s functioning and certainly to people’s functioning as administrators. In fact, one might make this general statement concerning these six interviews: A major portion of the effect gender has on the workings of higher administration lies in the perceptions administrators develop about each other in terms of individual embodiment of *or* violation of enculturated expectations for males and females as applied to administration.

Unfortunately, all the female respondents felt that they were basically trapped in the “damned if you do; damned if you don’t” syndrome. They felt that if they consciously enacted the male model, they were perceived derogatorily as unfeminine—“bitch” was a word often used by several of these respondents. If they did not enact that model, they were perceived

as weak, manipulable, indeed even incompetent. FB spoke about research she had read which substantiated her belief that when females take the very same "talk time" and make the very same demands as their male colleagues, they are perceived as over-aggressive and unfeminine by colleagues of *both genders*. These sentiments from the female respondents were borne out by male respondents. MC said that he definitely had to admit that he cannot tolerate direct commands and confrontationalism from female colleagues nearly as well as he can from males. He does not like these things from either gender, but he finds them really offensive from females. He believes that women are "capable of victories but at great cost to themselves in the eyes of their fellow administrators." MA observed that when a female administrator puts him on telephone hold, he finds himself immediately thinking, "Bitch...!" When a male administrator puts him on telephone hold in the same way, he tends to think about how very busy administrators always are. (His own honesty here seemed instructive to him.)

MB observed that women administrators have traditionally had to overcompensate. He felt that female administrators are in general overly competitive, most notably with each other. He related that he has heard numerous women observe that they do not like to work for other women because of this competitive quality.

FC concurred with a like observation about women not liking to work for other women. She connected this to her own problems of friendship. As a successful female administrator, she feels that she has to alter the ways that she deals with other women who do not have her status. Her friendships with secretaries have had to disappear because she questions how much she can "let her hair down" with them. She wonders where she can go for friendship because she feels she has limited options.

FB and FC both indicated that they would like to feel support and closeness from other female administrators. FC mentioned her desire for "mentoring;" FB mentioned that she felt female administrators must support each other in a mission to educate colleagues about appropriateness in relationships among administrators. FC said that she always makes the effort to reinforce female colleagues by recognizing them when they speak in meetings, whether or not she is facilitating. "There is a difference," said FB, "in the way males and females are regarded institutionally. Just now, females can have the advantage at hiring time because of Affirmative Action guidelines. Everyone wants a female or a minority person. After hiring time, though, it's more difficult for females to make their voices heard. They have to work harder to develop strategies to do it—not because of intellectually activated discrimination, but because of enculturation. Things are getting better, though not as quickly as I would like."

## II. INFRASTRUCTURES OF THE NARRATIVE— "GOOD OL' BOYS—and girls":

A common behavior of both male and female administrators which kept cropping up in the interviews was the tendency to protect each other from threats outside the "good ol' boy" administrative network. One of the respondents, FC, stated her belief that there are presently two "good ol' boy" administrative networks on campus which are in a continuing power struggle. She thinks that only the "new" network includes females, though she does not consider herself included in it. Other female respondents did consider themselves generally part of the network. In acknowledging the existence of the "good ol' boy" phenomenon in higher education administration, these male and female administrators were united in their observations. MA's metaphor for it was, he laughingly confessed, a male one—"circling the wagons" to stave off the attackers. Every respondent, not just FC, displayed awareness that sometimes the "good ol' boys" shut out the "good ol' girls," but not apropos situations containing threats from outside. Then the females are always within the circle.

Two of the females concurred that the shut outs occur most often in times of crisis when

there are heavy decisions to be made, especially concerning money. “Males do money” was the way FB put it. In other words, when decisions involve money, males traditionally have the “author”-ity, and females have to work harder to make their voices heard. The entitlement trait in the male profile emerges to work against the voices of females.

FC spoke extensively about the “unwritten rules of administrative discourse” that seem to her a deepseated, unspoken body of knowledge that males possess. She told about going often into meetings prior to which she has understood, as the intent of the meeting, putting all the aspects of a situation on the table so that decisions can be consensually made. She soon realizes as she “reads” the proceedings, that there is another agenda entirely—one which has been agreed on through the “good ol’ boy” network by caucusing or even by unspoken agreement. Her summary comments at the end of her interview were devoted to these “unwritten rules and expectations” for she wishes that they could be made explicit so every administrator can make decisions about them as ways of operating. “Making them explicit would offer all administrators the opportunity to think about them as a way of operating rather than as *the* way things are.” She expressed, however, little hope that this will occur because of the difficulty involved for any person in “stepping outside” and making judgments about the paradigm governing what one is occupied in doing. Her final comment was that a female still has to consciously emulate what is generally accepted as good administration—the male “authoring”—if she wants to be “inside the circle.” FC feels that it is obvious that a person has to be inside the circle, be “within,” before she *or* he can effect change.

### III. DISCOURSE OF THE NARRATIVE— SPEECH CHARACTERISTICS:

FB spoke extensively about that concept mentioned above, the concept of a female administrator’s voice. She addressed it in practical, physical terms, actually. “When I function as an administrator, I have to ‘clean’ my speech patterns of the kinds of things which lessen my authority—‘if you don’t mind’, for instance. The [speech] model we identify as male *is* more effective. ‘Womantalk’ is not aggressive, so women have had to re-style their talk. Men get more talk time and get taken more seriously. Accomplished women have learned to ‘talk like men’, but they still have to overcome their gendered speech patterns if their voices are to be heard equally.” The factor of gender, she thinks, is always present. As mentioned above, women who re-style their speech behaviors to be equal with males are often judged as over-assertive by both females and males. “All successful people have to find out what works, but women’s ranges of options are smaller. They have to develop a style which is assertive but not aggressive.” What women can learn is to keep the authority in their speech **and** to assert authority in other, more subtle ways, according to FB. She cited space arrangements—one’s seating choice, amount of table space one’s notes and other equipment take, and one’s posture and body language. Occupation of space equates to perceived power and posture establishes protection over that power. Females must learn to use these things as effectively as do males at the conference table.

It was interesting to note that FC and FA both addressed the same issue—alteration of speech patterns—as did MC. FC said that she actually was physically affected by her efforts to make alterations, that she’d had an illness which she felt was caused by efforts to speak in ways that were contrary to her natural speech patterns and, by extension, to her nature. (By natural, she may mean enculturated. She admitted that possibility.) FA said that she was very conscious of the tag phrases which were interpreted as weakening the discourse of female administrators, e.g., “if you don’t mind, or perhaps it could be that...,” and that she worked to avoid them.

MC said that he wanted female administrators to divest their speech of hyperbole which he feels gives the impression of “capriciousness and emotionality” and prevents female

administrators from being taken seriously. On the other hand, he is against aggressive speech from either gender. "It's not a virtue to be aggressive, though it is a virtue to be confrontational when necessary...No matter how much we demur, we still expect a traditional set of characteristics from female administrators. Males moderate their language when talking to women because of it."

FC concurred with this observation about males changing their language for females. "It is hard for women to get appropriate feedback. Male supervisors deal with women differently. They don't give constructive feedback because they are afraid of emotional reactions to it. Sometimes they don't know how to articulate what women need to know—about agendas as well as function."

#### IV. ACTION IN THE NARRATIVE— OPERATIONAL STYLES:

An issue addressed in all the interviews was that of operational styles. Five of the respondents agreed that there was some difference in operational style between males and females. Males tend to be linear in their approaches to time and task. They tend to guard the centrality of their own time needs as well as all their other needs. This might mean that they are less willing than are female administrators to spend time with faculty members who have concerns but not crises. They also are better at shutting all else out until a specific task gets done.

FA said that all male administrators in her experience try to work on one thing at a time until it is finished whereas the female pattern is to have several things going at once. Her metaphor for it was the tricks involved in cooking a meal and getting everything on the table equally cooked and warm. Women, she thought, are enculturated to work this way by their training in traditional female roles. She commented that her best preparation for being an administrator has been child-raising with its crisis orientation, its demand that one put aside one's own needs to minister to the needs of others, and its requirement that one develop the capacity for unconditional acceptance and regard when dealing with others. MA unwittingly agreed with her assessment of this linear quality when he said that an administrator has to budget time so that one task at a time gets finished inasmuch as possible. That, to him, is the only efficient way to operate. FB, though, emphasized the fact that she believes the best administrators are those who have combined the characteristics of the male and female traditional profiles. As FC put it, "*Effective* administration is what we need to define. It is a challenge for us as women to articulate a female model. There are some assumptions about female administration, that it features consensus and inclusion, for example, but does administration really *have* a definition?"

MC celebrated the capacity of female administrators for flexibility. "At least, they make you think they are more flexible, so they are less apt to close doors. I can function on a committee made up of all females, but I have trouble functioning on an all male committee." He thinks males are less afraid to hurt people's feelings and that allows them to defend a linear style's prioritization demands.

This was reminiscent of what FA was the first to mention—that the male "reading" of administration incorporates a developed "killer instinct. (That term is defined as determination to attain one's objective, even if it means that others suffer. It also means the willingness to do battle to the [professional] death). The "killer instinct" is not on any list of desirable female characteristics; a woman with a developed "killer instinct" is considered societally abnormal.

The differences, then, in operating styles have to do with the opposition between linear styles and flexible, multi-leveled styles. Males seem more effective at guarding their time and priority needs. Females seem more flexible and able to handle several things at once.

## V. CONFLICT IN THE NARRATIVE— REVENGE vs. PUNISHMENT:

Mention of the “killer instinct” brought up an issue in several of the interviews—revenge. FA discussed the concept of “getting even” as an expected part of administration. First, she seemed certain that whenever there is conflict, the loser expects recriminations. Second, she seemed certain that the absence of such recriminations coming from an administrator who has won is interpreted as weakness. Third, she felt that those same recriminations coming from a woman administrator are often interpreted as female vindictiveness. This dilemma is a disturbing one for her because it seems to offer few options. She connected the whole thing to the ability to display unconditional regard. When conflict has occurred and been resolved, women administrators, in her experience, are more capable of “forgiving and forgetting.” She told the story of a situation on another campus which ended in victory for a high-level female administrator. The losers in the conflict expected to lose their jobs, but the administrator instead retained those who were effective in their positions by using a clear criteria set.

In the course of this study, it occurred to me that the traditional concept of “author-ity” has included judgment and punishment as components. I submit that acts of retribution on the part of “author”-ity figures may be culturally viewed as *punishment rather than revenge*, acts which “author”-ity figures are not only entitled to perform, but obligated to perform. When that speculation was presented to FC, she commented that male administrators are generally so accepting of the present “reading,” that she doubts their ability to even articulate this kind of reasoning. “It’s just the way things are....”

The desire expressed by all the female respondents for a new articulation of the model, a new “reading” of the texts of administration, would involve re-thinking the issue of revenge and punishment. It would involve a re-thinking of the issue of conflict in general. All the respondents accepted as inevitable the need for confrontation in the workings of higher education administration. It was characterized in a continuum—from a “virtue” and to a last resort. MC, who has lived in Japan, spoke about the fact that confrontation can occur in the Japanese culture without visible aggressiveness, but that the American culture has no language subsystem to facilitate non-aggressive confrontation. Perhaps female administrators could supply a means for non-aggressive confrontation.

No narrative is without conflict. The best administrators seem to have a variety of ways to deal with it, a combination of characteristics.

## VI. COSTUMING IN THE NARRATIVE— DRESSING FOR SUCCESS:

The subject of dress emerged in three of these interviews. Two of the females felt that women still have to dress “professionally” in order to be taken seriously. Professional dress includes suits, conservative colors (for one), and conservative accessories. Dress, for women, has to do with power. Women who are not conservative, neat, and well-groomed denigrate their “author”-ity. FC cited comments that are made about female looks, dress, and hair which are never made about males. “Comments are made about males, but not in the same vein or even in the same tones. Sloppiness or lack of style seems to be regarded as rather endearing in males. In females, it is not. There is the issue of how one responds to such comments....” FC seems to think that negative responses to derogatory comments about female dress are a part of the obligation on the part of women administrators to educate this special population on appropriate ways of interaction between males and females. That obligation was articulated in FB’s summary comments, also.

### VIII. THE END— FOR THIS READING OF THE NARRATIVE:

After I had done all the interviews for this study, one of the respondents gave me an issue of the Northern Arizona Faculty Women's Association *Newsletter* dated April 14, 1989. The issue was devoted to women in higher education. It dealt with so many of the same issues which are treated in this study and it contained so many similar statements to those of my respondents that I was stunned. It seems that five years has brought very little change in the reading—at least between these two documents. FB had said that she saw change, but it was not happening fast enough. One must wonder if it is happening at all!

My summary statement concerning these six interviews remains the same:

A major portion of the effect gender has on the workings of higher administration lies in the perceptions administrators develop about each other in terms of individual embodiment of *or* violation of enculturated expectations for males and females as applied to administration.

I would echo the respondent who expressed the desire to see unspoken, unwritten sets of rules and expectations made explicit so that administrators can “think about them as *a* way of operating rather than *the* way.” My respondents agree that the best administrator is the administrator who combines effective operating strategies from male and female paradigms. In order to intentionally do so, a person would have to be able to perceive that there is more than one *way*, articulate, and select his or her own way without fearing negative feedback. Perhaps that can happen in some agenda narrative of the future!

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### REFERENCES AND NOTES

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