Women Who Lead: A Feminist Phenomenology of Crisis Leadership in Higher Education

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WOMEN WHO LEAD:
A FEMINIST PHENOMENOLOGY
OF CRISIS LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Dissertation Presented
to
The Faculty of the School of Education
Organization and Leadership Studies Department

In Partial Fulfillment
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Doctor of Education

By
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Dissertation Abstract

The landscape of higher education is rife with crisis events, ranging from the global COVID-19 pandemic to natural disasters and institutional and industry-wide scandals; yet, most institutions of higher education are unprepared to tackle these crises as they arrive. As an industry, higher education is also largely dominated by men at its upper echelons, despite being a field that is predominantly staffed by women. Amidst the backdrop of the attention COVID-19 has brought to female world leaders and the quest for parity in higher education leadership positions, this study sought to explore the lived experiences of women leaders in higher education, with a particular emphasis on leadership experiences during times of crisis, and to illuminate the challenges women may face on the path to higher education leadership and the ways in which those challenges shape their leadership preparation and philosophies.

This qualitative, feminist phenomenological study included eight women who had provided administrative leadership in a higher education setting during a crisis, all of whom participated in one semistructured interview between the months of February and March 2021. Data analysis revealed several findings as each research question was investigated. Themes such as (a) socialization as caretakers, (b) inclination toward collaboration and relationships, (c) silver linings, and (d) prior experiences offered insight into the ways women’s experiences shaped their responses to crisis. Additionally, themes including (a) the glass ceiling, (b) disconnection from authentic self, (c) discrimination, and (d) emotional and psychological toll revealed the ways women describe their encounters with patriarchy. Furthermore, themes including (a) preparedness, (b) crisis as opportunity, and (c) evolution of leadership identity gave
insight into the ways participants’ crisis experiences affected their leadership
philosophies. Finally, an exploration of the development of participants’ leadership
identities and their relationships to feminism revealed themes such as (a) motherhood and
work-life balance, (b) encounters with patriarchy, (c) critical feminism, (d) identification
as a feminist, and (e) support of feminist values.

Utilizing a critical feminist lens, this study revealed the ways in which women
leaders bring their prior experiences and values to bear in their leadership practices
during times of crisis as well as normalcy. This study also revealed the veritable
minefields participants had to navigate during their pursuit of leadership, including
diminishment of their accomplishments, harassment, and blatant acts discrimination.
Recommendations are made for higher education institutions and leaders to facilitate a
culture shift in academia, as well as areas for further research.
This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate’s dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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DEDICATION

To Kasey, Kylie, and Kayla.

You changed my world when you entered it. I do this work because of you.

I love you.
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This dissertation was a challenge intellectually, academically, and emotionally. It is a true labor of love, and I could never have done it without the love and support of so many incredible people. These acknowledgements could only begin to scratch the surface on the depths of my gratitude for the many, many people who made this possible. Not all are listed below, but all are in my heart and on my mind as I continue this journey.

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CHAPTER ONE: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Statement of the Problem

Crisis on a Global Scale

Toward the end of 2019, reports out of Wuhan, China detailed a cluster of cases of what would come to be known as COVID-19. Mere months later, the spread of a global pandemic shut down nearly the entire United States, resulting in an economic recession and over 560,000 deaths by April 2021 in the U.S. alone (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). COVID-19 developed quickly into yet another crisis, though one of immeasurable magnitude, that commanded the world’s attention. Industries across different sectors were affected in some way or another, with the higher education industry taking a global hit as many faculty, staff, and students had to turn quickly to new modalities of teaching and learning. Higher education institutions started losing money from declining enrollments and decreased housing revenues. Headlines about this global pandemic dominated every form of news and media, from constant updates on outbreak statistics to news about unemployment rates and think pieces supporting or criticizing every last detail of every organization or government’s response.

Crises are often thought of as transitory in nature, distinct events or situations that must be confronted and resolved. In reality, crisis is an enduring phenomenon, ongoing and persistent. Thus, the study of crisis has implications in the field of leadership both in theory and in practice. COVID-19 was hardly the first crisis with which leaders around the world, especially those in the higher education industry, have had to contend. However, its effects have been all-encompassing, permeating every industry and nation, fundamentally impacting the way of life for nearly every person on the planet. Leadership
has been especially important in addressing its many profound ramifications. Decisions made by leaders in higher education institutions, for example, have had far reaching implications for the future of their institutions, employees, students, and by extension, their local communities and the economy. It is in its ubiquity that the COVID-19 crisis uniquely illuminates the importance of understanding crises of all natures from a leadership perspective.

In times of crisis, people look to leaders for guidance and assurance. Crisis also leads to increased attention and scrutiny of the leaders tasked with responding and managing the crisis at hand. Amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic, much has been written on the way world leaders have reacted and the efficacy of their actions. Some have paid particular attention to female world leaders, including Tsai Ing-Wen, the first female president of Taiwan; Jacinda Ardern, the prime minister of New Zealand; and Angela Merkel, chancellor of Germany. An image of the leaders of the countries most and least affected quickly made the rounds on the internet, a striking collage of men for the former category, and women for the latter. Arwa Mahdawi (2020) of *The Guardian* referred to women as the “secret weapon” against COVID-19. In an article for *The New York Times*, Taub (2020) asked, “Why are women-led nations doing better with COVID-19?” *Fortune* offered commentary as to “Why female leaders are faring better than ‘wartime presidents’ against COVID-19” (Bell, 2020), and multiple outlets characterized these female world leaders as “shining” (White, 2020; Zalis, 2020). In fact, the data seemingly confirm this phenomenon. An analysis published by the Centre for Economic Policy Research and the World Economic Forum found that out of 194 countries, those
led by women were indeed faring better in terms of both cases and deaths in comparison to similar countries run by men (Henley, 2020).

**Crisis at Home**

Response to the COVID-19 crisis was not only the obligation of world leaders; it disrupted the status quo across countries and industries. Leaders in every corner of the world were confronted with making difficult economic and safety decisions. Institutions of higher education, which often find themselves confronting many kinds of crises, were certainly not exempt. As the virus spread across the United States, higher education leaders had to decide how to keep their communities safe and comply with local and state restrictions as some areas started locking down. Fallout included class-action lawsuits for tuition and fee refunds, layoffs, increased food insecurity, and decreased economic stability in local college towns (June, 2020).

At home, experiencing the current crisis from the viewpoint of both a student and employee in a university, I witnessed the mobilization of leadership on several fronts. As a higher education professional, I saw experts focusing on the bottom line: budgets, enrollment, and solvency. Publications focused on concerns about institutions staying afloat amid crashing enrollments and budget constraints. Despite this disheartening spotlight on fiscal matters, as a student, I had the fortune of experiencing great feminist leadership at the helm of my school, the University of San Francisco (USF) School of Education. Under the leadership of Dean Shabnam Koirala-Azad, faculty and administration in the USF School of Education provided clear communication, offered transparency, and operated from a student-first perspective. The school immediately rolled out a communication plan to keep students informed of any decisions that affected
them and provided time for students, staff, and faculty to come together as a community with the dean for a weekly “tea-time.” As classes moved online indefinitely, the school moved quickly to assess its students’ needs, sending a survey to determine what, if any, resources students required in order to continue their studies. The message from leadership was clear: we care about you, your safety, and your spiritual and emotional wellbeing. As a student, I felt supported and valued, even as I watched my colleagues across the industry endure furloughs and layoffs.

**Digging Deeper**

With women leaders so often subjected to intense scrutiny, it is encouraging to see public acknowledgement of the effectiveness of their actions. However, it is imperative to recognize the truth underlying the headlines: there is far more nuance involved in their successes than femaleness. Gender does not make one a good or bad leader; there are many factors that shape a person’s leadership ability and style. One theory, though, is that gender played a factor in these women’s paths to positions of leadership in an otherwise patriarchal landscape. In a commentary about the “exceptional work” female world leaders were doing in response to the global pandemic, Mahdawi (2020) noted that although being a woman does not automatically make one a better leader,

women generally have to be better in order to become leaders; we are held to far higher standards than men. Women are rarely able to fail up in the way men can; you have to be twice as good as a man in order to be taken half as seriously. You have to work twice as hard. (para. 8).
Hard work and strong scrutiny may in fact have prepared these women to tackle a crisis head on in a different manner than some of their male counterparts.

Higher education, like politics, is largely dominated by men at its upper echelons. Although education as a field is predominantly staffed by women, with roughly half of higher education administrator positions held by women, as ranks increase, so too does the representation of men in the higher-ranking positions. As of 2016, women held only 30.1% of presidencies across all types of higher education institutions (Johnson, 2017, p. 21). This phenomenon has been described with the phrase “the higher the fewer” to acknowledge that “even though women have higher education attainment levels than men, this is not reflected in the number of women holding positions with high faculty rank, salary, or prestige” (Johnson, 2017, p. 6). Howard and Gagliardi (2018) noted:

Data has shown that women may be in some ways more prepared than men to advance to the presidency, with greater percentages having served as an interim president, earned advanced degrees, and participated in formal leadership development opportunities – yet it is reasonable to infer from their numbers in the presidency that they are less likely than men to be placed in the position. (p. 2)

Although data show that women may be more prepared for leadership in terms of experience and credentials, they still remain underrepresented in assigned leadership positions. This raises questions around the pathways to leadership for those few women who have achieved otherwise male-dominated leadership positions. Understanding women’s pathways to leadership in the largely patriarchal institution of academia warrants an exploration of the experiences of women holding higher education leadership
positions, and the ways those experiences have shaped their own leadership practices and identities.

**Background and Need**

Ralph Gigliotti (2020a) asserted that it “is in the darkness and chaos of crisis where leadership becomes most critical, most visible, most desired” (p. 2). Recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Northern California wildfires, and the Varsity Blues admission scandal have thrown into stark relief the need to understand crisis leadership across industries. Higher education is no stranger to crises of many kinds; yet, “[m]uch of higher education treats crises as rare occurrences or as anomalies and therefore generally is not equipped or prepared to respond” (Booker, 2014, p. 17). It is the unfortunate truth that COVID-19 is only one of many crises in recent decades that have interrupted the status quo at educational institutions across the nation. From natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, to campus scandals at institutions like Penn State and the University of Missouri, to incidents of violence at places like Columbine High School and Virginia Tech University, crises in their many forms can have devastating consequences that affect not only the operations of the schools themselves, but the health and wellbeing of students, staff, faculty, and community members. And yet, as Smith and Riley (2012) pointed out:

> [There is] a dearth of literature and research that addresses the important role that school leaders must play when confronted by a crisis – those times when the domain of the school leader is the immediate present and the focus is firmly on minimising harm to individuals and ensuring the survival and recovery of the school. (p. 65)
Ralph Gigliotti (2020a) agreed: “Despite the prevalence of crisis situations within the context of American colleges and universities, the scholarly literature in this area remains scarce, and the response to organizational crisis is often the subject of widespread criticism” (p. 6). Considering the growing and “pervasive nature of higher education crises” (Gigliotti, 2016, p. 185), it seems critical to add to the canon of crisis leadership literature in the context of higher education so that higher education leaders may prepare—to the extent that they can—to address crises in their myriad forms.

Crisis, in the context of higher education in particular, refers to an “an urgent situation that requires immediate and decisive action by an organisation and, in particular, by the leaders of the organisation” (Smith & Riley, 2012, p. 58). Gigliotti (2020a) delineated between two types of crises in higher education: those that are obvious crises, and those which are less obvious. The first are what he considers obvious instances of organizational crises, such as the impact of Hurricane Maria at the University of Puerto Rico and the gymnast abuse scandals at Michigan State (Gigliotti, 2020a, p. 121). These instances “very clearly threaten individual and collective reputations, disrupt individuals’ core mission and central operations, and shine a spotlight on the messages and behaviors of formal leaders” (Gigliotti, 2020b, p. 3). There is no question in anyone’s mind from the outset that these are crises. The second type of crises are less sweeping and include the following:

Those isolated events or situations of significant magnitude that threaten reputations, impact the lives of those involved in the institution, disrupt the ways in which the organization functions, have a cascading influence on leadership
responsibilities and obligations across units/divisions, and require an immediate response from leaders. (Gigliotti, 2020a, p. 122)

These situations may involve more nuance but are no less impactful on an organization, and still require immediate and serious attention. Events of this nature are less clearly crises, but are rather defined as a crisis by the leaders and stakeholders themselves, based on the impacts that are perceived as likely. These crises may not garner the kind of national attention as obvious crises such as Penn State, nor may they have the kind of extensive repercussions as obvious crises such as Varsity Blues. However, although these crisis situations are less obvious, they are no less problematic for an institution. One example of this kind of crisis is when the dean of the University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine resigned in 2017 after an article in the Los Angeles Times detailed allegations that he had been using illicit drugs and consorted with a sex worker (Stripling, 2017). Although this scandal may not have made the kinds of national headlines or had the wide-ranging consequences of those scandals that Gigliotti defined as “obvious” crises, it still threatened reputations and impacted the lives of all those involved in the institution itself. Moreover, this event was still characterized as a crisis by stakeholders, including the national publication The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Gigliotti (2020a) also categorized different types of crises: academic, athletics, clinical, technological, facilities, financial or business, human resources (HR), leadership or governance, natural disaster, public safety, racial or identity conflict, or student affairs (Table 4.5, pp. 70-73). With the many forms that crises can take in an institution of higher education, it is surprising that more literature has not been devoted specifically to crisis leadership in higher education.
Moreover, regardless of the growing attention on the successes of women leaders around the world, a perfunctory search of the literature reveals little to no scholarship written on crisis leadership from a gendered perspective. In fact, the results return almost no literature by or about women, let alone from a critical feminist perspective. The crisis studies that have explored gender focused on perceptions of gender, rather than the gendered experiences of those who lead. Those studies that did focus on gender focused on the “glass cliff” and “think crisis-think female” paradigms, or the “tendency to place women in leadership positions at times of crisis” (Gartzia et al., 2012, p. 604; see also Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Ryan et al., 2010). These studies tended to focus on the association of female leaders with particular attributes and stereotypical gendered expectations (Ryan & Haslam, 2007; Ryan et al., 2010). However, they did not explore the actual experiences of women leaders and their paths to leadership, nor did they explore the response of women leaders to crises.

It is imperative that, given the growing numbers of female leaders across education, women’s voices and experiences are amplified, especially as they remain underrepresented (see Figures 1 and 2).
Figure 1

Institutions Served: College Presidents, by Carnegie Type and Gender

Ford (2005) made the important point that “[a]s academics in our research, we make leaders and create leadership as much as we study them. That is, we make visible something called leadership and we develop subject positions into which those who are designated organisational leaders will step” (p. 242). Given the lack of representation of women in leadership positions across higher education despite a large number of qualified candidates, examining the paths of those women who do achieve positions of leadership may help address this gap. Howard and Gagliardi (2018) found that “[i]n addition to thinking critically about the pipeline that leads to the presidency, analysis suggested that a closer look at the circumstances under which women become college
presidents would enrich our understanding of the challenges of achieving parity” (p. 4). This is especially prescient because, as they found in the follow up to the American Council on Education’s (Howard & Gagliardi, 2018) American College President Study 2017:

Women were more likely than men to have held their immediate prior position at the same institution or system where they currently served. They were also more likely than men to have participated in a leadership development program…

Taken together, these two data points suggest women may be uniquely qualified to combine formal preparation and familiarity with their institution. This might be especially helpful in leading institutions through times of crisis. (p. 3)

If women are potentially more prepared for responding to an organizational crisis, it is crucial that the literature explore the nature of their pathways to leadership, both during and outside times of crises. Representation matters, and thus far the research has failed to represent female leaders in the area of crisis leadership. The experiences of these leaders will not only offer a different perspective on leading through crisis, but may offer a learning opportunity for other leaders preparing to handle crises in their own institutions. Thus, this qualitative study not only adds to a growing body of literature on crisis leadership in higher education, but it does so from a distinctly female and feminist viewpoint. The differentiation here between female and feminist is key, as they are not interchangeable. To be female is not the same as being feminist, and both factors—neither of which are explored much in the current canon—are prominent features in this study. The female viewpoint in this instance refers to the exploration of participants’ gendered experiences, or the embodied experiences they had as someone who identifies
as a woman. The feminist viewpoint refers to the critical feminist lens through which the data were analyzed and understood. A woman who does not self-identify as a feminist may share accounts that, understood through a critical feminist lens, may be situated within the social and cultural constructions that influence the ways people interact with the world based on factors such as race, class, and gender. A woman may reveal that she was the only female-identified person in a department; a feminist lens interrogates that fact to understand the myriad potential reasons that more women did not hold positions in that same department. In order to expand the body of literature on crisis leadership in higher education to include more representation of gender, both the female and the feminist must be taken into account as distinct components.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of women leaders in higher education, with a particular emphasis on leadership experiences during times of crisis. Through semistructured interviews, this feminist phenomenological study offers narrative examples from individual women who have provided administrative leadership in a higher education setting during a crisis, while also seeking to identify common themes among them. In doing so, I sought to illuminate the challenges women may face on the path to higher education leadership and the ways in which those challenges shape their leadership preparation and philosophies.

Critical feminist theory offers insight into participants’ experiences contextualized within the systems in which they live and work. Critical feminism allows for the understanding of both the gendered experiences of the individual participants, as well as the ways in which those experiences may have intersected with other identity factors such
as race, religion, or class. In addition, feminist phenomenology allows for a critical examination of commonalities among the participants’ narratives, while simultaneously honoring each person’s lived experience as individual and unique.

By offering the narrative experiences of women who have led through crisis in a higher education setting, this study aimed to center the voices of those who are underrepresented in the current canon, thereby offering new insights into crisis leadership from a feminist perspective. Moreover, by highlighting experiences previously unseen in the literature, this study offers additional frameworks by which crisis leadership may be approached in the future, both in and out of the educational arena.

**Theoretical Framework**

To understand the experiences of women who have led during times of crisis, one must not only learn of their individual experiences, but contextualize them within the structural and cultural environments in which they occurred. To that end, this study employed a theoretical framework of critical feminist theory to explore participants’ experiences, with a particular focus on the intersecting identities, including gender, that influence the ways in which each person encounters the world around them.

**Critical Feminist Theory**

Critical feminist theory has its roots in feminism and feminist theory, as well as other critical social theories. bell hooks (2015a) offers this succinct definition of feminism: “Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (p. 1). hooks (2015b) also explained that sexism is not merely a matter of interpersonal politics:
As with other forms of group oppression, sexism is perpetuated by institutional and social structures; by the individuals who dominate, exploit, or oppress; and by the victims themselves who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo. (p. 42)

Critical theory is a school of thought that seeks to understand and analyze the underlying belief structures that influence culture and society. Bronner (2011) explained that critical theory “refuses to identify freedom with any institutional arrangement or fixed system of thought. It questions the hidden assumptions and purposes of competing theories and existing forms of practice” (p. 1). It “focused, as did feminists, on issues of social justice; on power, language and culture, asking who benefits from particular policies, practices and arrangements, how and why; who are marginalised; and whose voice dominates?” (Blackmore, 2006, p. 192). Similarly, critical race theory as a movement is “a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 3).

A cornerstone of critical feminism is intersectionality, and along these lines, it follows that critical feminism involves the analysis and scrutiny of power structures that create and sustain inequity related to gender, including in terms of its intersection with other identities, such as race, class, gender identity, and ability. Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), complicates the practice of considering factors such as race and gender as separate, distinct concepts, illuminating that “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (p. 140). Sara Ahmed’s (2009) experience highlights the importance of examining not only gender but other identities: “I was taught important lessons about how institutional worlds as life worlds take shape
around some bodies and not others” (p. 43). Like most other “feminisms,” critical feminism focuses on critiquing and breaking down patriarchal structures that lead to domination and oppression. Critical feminists are inclusive: they seek liberation for all folks, particularly those on the margins, and in doing so to overcome the label of “other.”

De Saxe (2012) explained that critical feminist theory is not prescriptive; instead, it “calls on us to reconsider our existing understandings of knowledge, power, and spaces of empowerment” (p. 183). To that end, critical feminist theory requires reflexivity, as is typical in feminist research: “When conducting research, feminist theorists position the researcher and the participant in engaged and self-reflexive activities” (de Saxe, 2014, p. 533). Bell hooks (2015a), echoed this belief by stating that “[r]adical visionary feminism encourages all of us to courageously examine our lives from the standpoint of gender, race, and class so that we can accurately understand our position within the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (p. 116). Critical feminism is a call to action, an exhortation to people to examine their own thoughts, assumptions, and actions within the context of societal expectations and power structures in order to discern the systems that perpetuate gender-based inequity and to act accordingly to dismantle those systems.

**Critical Feminist Leadership**

Because this study focused on leadership from a critical feminist perspective, it is important to understand critical feminist leadership. If leadership is the ability to influence others, then critical feminist leadership involves influencing others to work together to transform an organization or group by demolishing systems of oppression, particularly in regard to gender. Focusing on systems of oppression rather than only focusing on the individual oppressors is key; as bell hooks (2015a) pointed out, “even if
individual men divested of patriarchal privilege the system of patriarchy, sexism, and male domination would still remain intact, and women would still be exploited and/or oppressed” (p. 67). Bronner (2011) described critical theory as “[d]eeply skeptical of tradition and all absolute claims,” stating that it was “always concerned not merely with how things were but how they might be and should be” (pp. 1–2). The same can be said of critical feminist leadership, which seeks to understand the underlying structures in an organization to improve equality for all organizational members. Critical feminist leaders look to the future, to constant improvement. Practically speaking, critical feminist leadership in an organization involves equity in hiring practices, as well as inclusion and transparency in decision-making, emphasis on community and relationship building, and just processes when it comes to advancement and promotions. A critical feminist leader works to overturn patriarchal systems based on traditional, toxic ideals of “masculine” leadership, which values competition over collaboration and inflexible adherence to authoritarian attitudes over partnership. In her seminal work, *We Should All Be Feminists*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche (2015) maintained that “[a]ll of us, women and men, must do better” (p. 48). The challenge and commission for any critical feminist leader operating within a system rooted in patriarchy is to affect enduring change on behalf of and in partnership with all members of an organization, regardless of gender.

Critical feminism, and by extension critical feminist leadership, as a theoretical framework for this study are conducive to understanding and contextualizing the systems in which women higher education leaders operate and the ways they are oppressed by those same systems. In so doing, it will help avoid “mystifying the true nature of women’s varied and complex social reality. Women are divided by sexist attitudes,
racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices” (hooks, 2015b, p. 44). Women’s experiences as leaders cannot be reduced to their gender; their many intersecting identities each play a role in shaping the experiences and outcomes of each woman’s path to and through leadership. In addition, although it is imperative to contextualize the experiences of these women within the patriarchal systems in which they were situated, it is equally imperative not to understand or define their traits as leaders by what is or is not considered “male.” This not only enforces an erroneous gender binary, but it also others the women and their experiences. Pullen and Vachhani (2020) pointed out that “gendered stereotypes surrounding women’s leadership abound, deriving largely from women’s difference to men” (p. 1) and that “feminine attributes of leadership are almost exclusively defined in relation to the existing binary of masculine/feminine where the masculine dominates” (p. 5). hooks (2015b) additionally noted that “[m]uch feminist thought reflects women’s acceptance of the definition of femaleness put forth by the powerful” (p. 92). The critical feminist lens disrupts this tendency by allowing for the exploration of participants’ experiences in their own terms, in the context of, but not in contrast to, the male, patriarchal structures and leaders with which these women have worked.

**Research Questions**

This study is guided by the following central research question, which is further elucidated by three subquestions:

1. How do gendered experiences shape the ways women higher education leaders respond to crises?
a. How do women leaders within institutions of higher education describe their encounters with patriarchy, particularly in their pursuit of leadership positions?

b. How does the experience of serving as an institutional leader in a moment of crisis shape, recast, or cause a revision of women leaders’ leadership philosophies?

c. How have the intersectional identities of women higher education leaders shaped the development of their identities as leaders and their relationship, or lack thereof, to feminism?

**Delimitations**

This study has one particular delimitation that affects its applicability to the fields of leadership studies and crisis leadership as a whole. This study focused on administrative leadership in the field of higher education specifically. Although the hope was to provide insight into crisis leadership in various contexts, it must be stated that the experiences of female leaders in other industries, or indeed in academic rather than administrative leadership, may be entirely different.

**Limitations**

Feminist phenomenology as a methodology is in itself both a strength and a limitation. Although phenomenology seeks to find universal themes across the experience of a phenomenon, Gardiner (2018) pointed out that “[w]e can still learn a great deal from lived experience, without making assumptions that such experience is universal” (p. 303). This may be mitigated by the focus of feminist phenomenology on both the participants’ shared experiences as well as their individual unique stories. Additionally, Simms and
Stawarska (2013) noted that feminist phenomenology is “a necessarily incomplete process because there is always more that can be researched and thought” (p. 9). The depth of participants’ experiences cannot be reduced to a single dissertation after only one interview. Acknowledging that reality, this study aimed to offer insight into the experiences of women leaders without attempting to imply that the narratives offered are in any way the complete story, but rather my interpretation through a particular lens and at a particular point in time.

An additional limitation is the lens through with the data have been interpreted. It must be acknowledged at the forefront that the participants’ narratives have been examined through a critical feminist lens; however, not all of the participants in the study self-identify as feminists.

Although I recruited a diverse pool of participants, given the relatively small size of the participant pool and the underrepresentation of many marginalized populations in higher education, some identities were unintentionally excluded. This is critical to acknowledge, as the experiences between women may vary widely based on other intersecting identities, such as race, class, and ability. For example, the experiences of a transgender woman are likely very different from the experiences of a cisgender woman. Although I sought to identify unifying themes in the narratives of my participants, their experiences may not be representative to all female-identified leaders.

**Educational Significance**

Although there is a proliferation of research on women in leadership, as well as on crisis management, this study addressed several glaring gaps in the literature. First, there is little written on women in leadership from a critical feminist perspective. In
addition, not only is there a dearth of research on school leaders in times of crisis (Smith & Riley, 2012; Gigliotti, 2020a), but there is an almost complete absence of crisis leadership literature dedicated to the experiences of women, particularly from a gendered perspective. As Fortunato et al. (2018) pointed out, the “study of crisis management and crisis leadership is advanced by examining different crisis situations and their unique circumstances” (p. 510). This study aimed to add value to the field of leadership studies by addressing these gaps through offering insight into the experiences of women who have achieved leadership positions in education and have confronted crises in their institutions.

Additionally, this study provides alternative narratives on crisis leadership in the field of education, with the potential to offer another model by which leaders can plan their response to crises in their own institutions. Furthermore, by offering these narratives, this study has the potential to assist in the push to achieve parity in higher education leadership (see Howard & Gagliardi, 2018, p. 4) by providing insight into potential obstacles for other female leaders.

In addition to addressing these specific gaps in the literature on women in academic leadership from a critical feminist perspective and crisis leadership in education, this study aimed to add to the small but growing body of literature on critical feminism as a framework and methodology.

**Definition of Terms**

**Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC).** This acronym has recently become a more popular alternative to POC, or people of color, as it is considered more inclusive and acknowledges the disparity in the experiences of Black and Indigenous
people in the United States. It is important to note that although this term is considered more inclusive, there are critics who denounce any attempt to lump all folks together under one umbrella term (see Clarke, 2020; Garcia, 2020).

**Black, Indigenous, Women of Color (BIWOC).** As with BIPOC, this acronym is used as a more inclusive acronym than WOC, or women of color, in an effort to “recognize the erasure and particular hardships of Black people with darker skin as well as that of Indigenous people” (The Melanin Collective, n.d.; see also Clarke, 2020 and Garcia, 2020).

**Crisis.** This study adopts the definition of crisis as offered by Smith and Riley (2012): “[A]n urgent situation that requires immediate and decisive action by an organisation and, in particular, by the leaders of the organisation” (p. 58).

**Crisis Leadership.** Acts of leadership that involve the prevention, management, and response to crisis events.

**Feminism.** bell hooks (2015a) succinctly defined feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (p. 1).

**Feminist Leadership.** Leadership that is informed by the central tenets of feminist theory, including equity, social justice, and challenging traditional power dynamics.

**Leadership.** For the purposes of this study, leadership refers to “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2016, p. 6).

**Leadership Position.** Leadership position refers to a formal or “assigned” position of leadership (Northouse, 2016, p. 8).
Summary

Although COVID-19 has dominated the recent news cycle, it is by no means the first or only crisis with which the industry of higher education has had to contend. Amid this and many other crises, including natural disasters and organizational scandals that have plagued higher education, the need for strong crisis leadership has become clear. Yet, there is not a wealth of scholarship devoted to the subject of crisis leadership situated specifically within higher education. Moreover, a lack of crisis scholarship examining gendered perspectives accompanies a lack of representation of women in the upper echelons of higher education leadership. For those women who have managed to attain positions of leadership in higher education, there remains a distinct possibility that their path to leadership was met with the kind of organizational challenges that keep higher leadership positions in the hands of men. This feminist phenomenological study sought to explore the experiences of those women who have attained positions of leadership in higher education and have subsequently led through a crisis, with the aim of illuminating the ways in which the challenges they may have faced shaped their identities as leaders and, conversely, the way their identities have shaped their navigation of crisis leadership. Utilizing a framework of critical feminism, this study also situated those experiences within the social and professional structures that privilege White patriarchal values and have maintained inequity in gender representation in leadership positions.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of the Literature

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of women leaders in higher education through a critical feminist lens, with a particular emphasis on leadership experiences in times of crisis. To that end, the literature in this review has been organized into three categories: crisis leadership, feminist leadership, and critical feminism. The crisis leadership section provides an overview of best practices in crisis leadership. It then takes a narrower look at the scholarship around crisis leadership, specifically within the context of higher education. Finally, it examines the only category of crisis scholarship that looks specifically at gender, the paradigm of “think crisis-think female,” otherwise known as the glass cliff. The next section explores the scholarship around feminist leadership, offering an overview of the foundations of feminist leadership. Finally, the last section includes a deeper examination of critical feminist scholarship based on the main principles of critical feminism and concludes with a review of critical feminist scholars’ views on leadership.

Crisis Leadership

Best Practices in Crisis Leadership

An abundance of literature dedicated to exploring the myriad ways to manage and respond to crises in organizations proves that crisis response can be critical to an organization’s success. Garcia (2006) noted the following:

Effective crisis response is a competitive advantage; ineffective crisis response causes a competitive disadvantage, and can even put an enterprise’s existence in jeopardy. But many leaders who are otherwise given credit for vision, strategic
focus, and discipline preside over undisciplined crisis responses, often at great risk to their career and their company’s future. (p. 4)

Garcia further noted that it “isn't just a matter of protecting reputation. It also allows a company to get on with business faster and more effectively than if it delays its response” (p. 7). The key to organizations’ success or failure during crises comes down to leadership:

Some organizations emerge from a crisis stronger and more ready to thrive than they were before the crisis arrived. The big differentiator that separates them from companies that falter is people—how their leaders empathize, engage, motivate, and capitalize on their talents and knowledge in the face of adversity. (Haudan, 2020, p. 6)

If the key to an organization’s success is leadership, then the organization’s success in crisis can also be key to a leader’s success. Lacey (2020) pointed out that “[t]imes of crisis expose the strengths and weaknesses of a leader” (p. 1). Thus, there is a plethora of literature from leadership experts and scholars that offer steps and tips for successful management of crises and strategies for leading organizations and people through crises. Stern (2013), for instance, cautioned that there are six key challenges typical of crisis management: sensemaking; decision-making and coordination; meaning-making; crisis resolution; learning; and preparation. Haudan (2020) offered nine steps for crisis leadership:

1. Don’t ignore the anxiety people feel. This only magnifies it.
2. Actively define reality.
3. Create a new starting line with your people.
4. Use urgency as an alignment ally.
5. Establish new check-in routines.
6. Celebrate all victories, large and small.
7. Scout the possibilities.
8. Communicate the score.
9. Highlight the rays of light. (pp. 6-8)

Similarly, Koehn (2020) offered her own steps for crisis leadership, encouraging leaders to “Acknowledge people’s fears, then encourage resolve…. Give people a role and purpose…. Emphasize experimentation and learning…. Next, model the behavior you want to see,” and “[t]end to energy and emotion—yours and theirs.” Other scholars focused on leadership styles. Fernandez and Shaw (2020), for instance, recommended servant leadership as a way of empowering and involving communities affected by crisis. Others recommended authentic leadership, which “encompasses honesty, concern and benevolence towards followers and their peers” (Ahern & Loh, 2020, p. 3; see also Gigliotti, 2016, p. 195). With so many scholars offering expertise and reflections on leading through a crisis, some themes arise consistently through the literature, regardless of the industry.

Much of the scholarship agrees that leaders must confront crises in a manner that is proactive, decisive, and informed. Leaders must respond quickly when a crisis arises, which can make all the difference to the organization’s success in making it through to resolving or surviving the crisis. Garcia (2006) explained that “[w]hether an organization survives a crisis with its reputation, operations, and financial condition intact is determined less by the severity of the crisis than by the timeliness and effectiveness of
the response” (p. 4). When a crisis crops up, events must be handled swiftly and decisively, without hesitation, to disrupt regular processes. In fact, a common error in crisis management is miscalculation by leaders of their own ability to control or handle a situation, often leading to them waiting too long to suspend usual operations in favor of swift management (Garcia, 2006, p. 6).

Although it is important for leaders to act in a way that is both proactive and decisive, it is equally important for them to do so with as much information as possible. Ahern and Loh (2020) suggested that those leading during a crisis should constantly seek relevant information and intelligence regarding the crisis’s course and impact from reliable sources. This includes from health professionals, researchers, managers, industries and related sectors, but also from shared stories and experiences from international colleagues, networks and collaborative partners. Although intuition plays a role, leaders need to ultimately act in accordance with credible expertise and advice. (p. 2)

Still, leaders should not let the pursuit of information stop them from acting with necessary urgency; they must “balance expertise and analysis with experience-driven intuition, and… act decisively when urgency calls for it” (Anderson, 2018, p. 52). Ultimately, decision-making comes down to the leader, and successful leaders do not wait to be told what to do – they work proactively to identify what is most needed in the moment and they try to anticipate what will be required next. While they work collaboratively and seek advice, they are ultimately willing to make tough decisions. (Anderson, 2018, p. 53)

This is because
Speed matters, and time is a leader's enemy in a crisis. When a crisis looms, the usual business processes and decision velocities need to be suspended and decisions need to be made in ways that reassure key stakeholders that a company and its leaders: (a) understand that there's a problem; (b) take it seriously; and (c) are taking steps to address the problem. But many leaders recognize too late that business-as-usual practices have to be suspended. (Garcia, 2006, p. 5)

In responding to the onset of a crisis, leaders must balance the need to act with urgency and resolution with the important step of continuously gathering information and guidance from experts. To do this, Ahern and Loh (2020) extolled the importance of adaptability “at all levels” (p. 2). Anderson (2018) elaborated that “[g]iven that conditions in a crisis can change quickly, leaders must constantly revisit whether the strategies they have articulated are still relevant and effective, including making tough decisions about how to allocate limited resources against these strategies” (p. 51).

Part of a leader’s ability to respond quickly and decisively comes from preparation and prevention. Stern (2013) asserted that a “crucial responsibility of leaders (inside and outside of government alike) begins well before the first indications of a potential crisis” (p. 52). Stern referred to preparing as the sixth task of crisis leadership. He noted that leaders are “responsible for ensuring that the entities they lead are prepared to rise to future challenges—challenges foreseen and unforeseen alike. This is no easy task” (p. 54). Jaques (2012) pointed out that even though many tactical aspects of crisis preparedness and crisis response are typically delegated to operational managers, it is clear that strategic activities such as early problem identification, risk assessment, issue management and resource allocation
require the direct involvement or imprimatur of top management to achieve
successful crisis prevention. (p. 367)

Although leaders may not operationalize the plans and tactics an organization must use to
prepare for and prevent crises, it is their responsibility to prioritize and set strategies to
ensure preparedness. To do so, they must “ensure that an appropriate set of organizational
roles, structures, and processes are in place to enable effective functioning under crisis
conditions and to select suitable staff for key functions in that crisis organization” (Stern,
2013, p. 52). Plans must be put into place and resources must be allocated as necessary to
make sure an organization is prepared to handle any crises they cannot successfully
prevent. To do so, Stern (2013) also argued that leaders must achieve buy-in from
stakeholders, arguing that they

must remember and be able to persuade others that the cost of preparedness is an
insurance premium to be paid in times of austerity as well as prosperity, in times
of calm as well as turbulence. Failure to do so represents a significant failure of
leadership. (Stern, 2013, p. 54)

Still, as much as planning for and preventing crises are key leadership responsibilities,
“[p]lanning does not have to be rigid and should not be an obstacle to improvisation”
(Stern, 2013, p. 53). Leaders should, as the literature suggests, remain adaptable and
respond in accordance with new and updated information as they receive it. One
commonality between successful crisis leaders is the habit of reflection and learning from
a crisis (Anderson, 2018, p. 54). Anderson explained that “leaders apply diverse types of
experiences to cope with the situations they face—leveraging both traditional and indirect
experience as a starting point for action, and then adapting lessons from their experience
to current conditions” (p. 52). Jong (2020) argued that “[o]ne of the best forms of preparation for crisis management is to experience a crisis, reflect on it, and apply the learning to future crises” (“Introduction” section, para. 2). Thus, the experience of leading through a crisis is in some ways the best preparation to respond to or even prevent a future crisis.

Much of the literature also focused on the human aspects of crisis leadership, and the importance of community and collaboration. This starts by taking responsibility and doing so in a public and visible manner (Ahern & Loh, 2020). By doing so, leaders “show and model personal vulnerability. Taking responsibility also means that leaders exhibit constancy and resilience, that they are in this for the long haul and can be relied on to continue to persevere on behalf of their followers” (Ahern & Loh, 2020, p. 2). Experts also recommend that leaders demonstrate confidence and calmness to maintain vision and focus on the task at hand (Anderson, 2018; Garcia, 2006). Garcia (2006) also stressed the importance of avoiding the appearance of indifference:

[Indifference] is the single largest contributor harm in the aftermath of a crisis, especially when there are victims. Companies, governments, and leaders are forgiven when bad things happen. But they won’t be forgiven if they’re seen not to care that bad things have happened. (p. 4)

In stepping up and taking responsibility, leaders must also offer a shared vision and direction for followers. Anderson (2018) asserted that “leaders must facilitate a shared vision for what is desired throughout and following the crisis” (p. 51). Koehn (2020) also underscored that it is important to not only give direction but to remind followers that their work is vital.
Many scholars emphasize the importance of unity, collaboration, and building community as being paramount to crisis response. “A crisis of any nature requires diverse organizations and individuals to collaborate effectively and quickly” (Anderson, 2018, p. 51). Stern (2013) also noted that “crises serve as poignant reminders of the crucial role of leadership in cultivating resilient communities—communities equipped to respond to and recover from crises” (p. 51). One way to do so is to focus on building nurturing relationships (Lacey, 2020). This also fosters an understanding of the human nature of crisis. Koehn (2020) noted that crises take a toll on all of us. They are exhausting and can lead to burnout. For many, who lose loved ones, they are devastating. Thus, one critical function of leadership during intense turbulence is to keep your finger on the pulse of your people’s energy and emotions and respond as needed. (“Tend to energy” section) However, as Anderson (2018) pointed out, a leader cannot attend to the needs and emotions of others if she is not tending to her own:

Leaders who effectively cope during crisis maintain a high degree of stress tolerance by accepting the situation as difficult, grounding themselves in a higher mission or values, and drawing upon their larger community for support. Ultimately, a leader’s ability to manage the stress of a complex situation sets the tone and example for others. (p. 53)

Perhaps the most important piece of building community is establishing trust, which Wilson (2020) described as “intangible currency of immeasurable value for sustaining both democratic norms and institutions and well-functioning organisations” (p. 285). Building trust allows leaders to engage in the important tasks of community
building and moving forward with response plans. It “allows a person with less knowledge, power or ability to process complex information, to rely on another individual or institution to make decisions aligned with their well-being” (Ahern & Loh, 2020, p. 1). In fact, many of the recommended strategies, attributes, and courses of action offered by scholars and experts serve the additional purpose of building trust between a leader and the people she leads. Wilson (2020) noted that “[l]eaders’ constant attention to the critical role of unity helps builds trust” (p. 287). This is also accomplished by decisive action and providing a sense of direction and control (Ahern & Loh, 2020). However, building trust is not a one-way or one-time process. “Trust can be at a system, organizational or individual level. It can be inspired by confidence from past behaviours, however, it is also dynamic, being developed de novo from individual or organizational relationships” (Ahern & Loh, 2020, p. 1). Building trust between a leader and her community is necessary to mobilize “transformative, collective action in times of uncertainty, such as during a pandemic” (Ahern & Loh, 2020, p. 3).

Scholars also agree that communication and transparency are critical to building trust:

For followers to trust their leaders, they need access to objective information and to be able to speak up and ask questions. Being open and transparent are two of the most important behaviours leaders can demonstrate to maintain the trust of their constituents. This includes being accessible, available, open and willing to answer questions, as well as providing credible up-to-date information for their followers to consider. (Ahern & Loh, 2020, pp. 2–3)
Communication must also be an ongoing priority. “Communication should be clear, concise, and occur frequently. Truth telling is paramount. Failure to tell the truth breaks the trust employees have with their leadership” (Lacey, 2020, p. 1). Wilson (2020) pointed out that

> having credible and timely information creates the foundation for the kind of shared understanding of the nature of the problems and what needs to be done about them that is needed if mobilization of collective effort is to occur – and helps build trust. (p. 286)

In fact, much of the literature notes that communication is a critical component to crisis leadership in and of itself. Lacey (2020) noted that a “significant part of leading through a time of crisis is communication” (p. 1). Ahern and Loh (2020) argued that it is key to the success of an organization, noting that the “greater the communication and coordination, the more resilient the system is in the face of adversity” (p. 2). Koehn (2020) advised leaders that their job is

> to provide both brutal honesty—a clear accounting of the challenges your locality, company, non-profit, or team faces—and credible hope that collectively you and your people have the resources needed to meet the threats you face each day: determination, solidarity, strength, shared purpose, humanity, kindness, and resilience. (“Acknowledge people’s fears” section, para. 4).

Communication and transparency are key to building trust and moving forward as an organization and a community, and thus remain one of the most important aspects of successful crisis leadership. Just as the crisis experiences of a leader are interwoven with
those of her followers and stakeholders, so too are the tactics, skills, and priorities required for successful crisis leadership.

**Crisis Leadership in Higher Education**

As crises become more ubiquitous across the landscape of higher education, more attention has recently been paid to managing crises in these particular environments. And yet, until very recently, this was not necessarily the case. As recently as 2014, Booker noted that much of the scholarship around crisis management in schools focused specifically on primary and secondary schools and not on higher education (p. 18). In light of this finding, many higher education leaders are unprepared for crises. Booker (2014) went on to note that even though many organizations recognize the effects a crisis may have, many institutions regard crises “as rare occurrences or as anomalies and therefore generally is not equipped or prepared to respond” (p. 17; see also p. 21). He also posited that “[m]any leaders understand their current roles in normal circumstances but have limited knowledge of their roles and responsibilities during a crisis” (Booker, 2014, p. 22).

The perceived lack of preparation in higher education for crises underscores the importance of scholarship on crisis leadership specifically in higher education, as it is situated differently than other types of industries. As Booker (2014) pointed out, a “duty of care adds a dimension to crisis planning that separates institutions of higher education from business and civic organizations” (p. 17). Moreover, crises occur as frequently, if not more so, in higher education, which Gigliotti (2020b) referred to as “a pervasive condition for organizations of all kinds” (para. 1). He went on to explain that there is “much agreement among communication and leadership scholars that crises disrupt and
derail organizational practices, threaten individual and institutional reputations, and require rapid responses” (para. 1). This is particularly true right now, at the time of this writing: “The convergence of crises at this particular juncture—a global pandemic, growing economic concerns, sweeping racial unrest, heightened partisan polarization, and the ongoing impact of climate change, among others—pose tremendous challenges for institutions of higher education and their leaders” (Gigliotti, 2020b, “Theoretical integration” section, para. 3). Marshall et al. (2020) additionally pointed out that “COVID-19 further exposed myriad educational issues that existed pre-COVID… Educational leaders must address these issues during a pandemic that gave them no time to prepare” (p. 31). And yet, just as the general scholarship asserts, successful crisis leadership can be the making of both an institution and its leaders. As Marshall et al. (2020) asserted, the “hallmark of a great leader is courageous leadership during a crisis” (p. 30).

The scholarship on crisis leadership in a higher education setting shares many commonalities with the best practices shared throughout general scholarship. Most notably, Marshall et al. (2020) indicated that there are four key critical behaviors in which leaders must engage during crises: “They will need to provide clear direction, work collaboratively, communicate effectively, and be adaptive in their approach to addressing new issues as they arise” (p. 36). One common theme among the scholarship is the need for adaptability. Gigliotti (2016) explained why this is paramount in crisis leadership, as opposed to leadership during otherwise “normal” times:

The literature… is dominated by a logical, linear, and deterministic approach to leadership. In reality, however, leadership is not nearly as neat and structured as
the literature might suggest. Oftentimes a leader is expected to improvise for the sake of maintaining order and confidence. In addition to this linear approach to understanding leadership, the literature provides a prescriptive model for responding to crises as well. Nonetheless, crises themselves are by their very nature disruptive to normalcy. Crises present challenging and ambiguous situations for leaders; yet this uncertainty is antithetical to the ways in which we understand effective leaders to lead. (p. 188)

Marshall et al. (2020) emphasized this as well:

> [e]ducational leaders need to be prepared to abort and modify plans with immediacy if required. They must be willing to embrace unpredictability and have the foresight to pre-empt issues before they arise and be prepared to implement contingency plans if required. (p. 34)

As Booker (2014) pointed out,

> [i]n the case of crisis management in higher education, there is no magical formula or plan that will address all crisis events. Some institutions could suffer hardships when implementing crisis management plans. Yet, proactive crisis management plans must become the norm for universities because man-made and/or natural-made disasters are becoming increasingly frequent at institutions of higher education. (p. 21)

There is no prescriptive model a leader can use to navigate a crisis; rather, she must be prepared to pivot and adapt as the crisis evolves.

Higher education crisis leadership scholars also place a premium on preparation and prevention. Booker (2014) emphasized that this is of particular importance in an
industry that has been largely reactive rather than proactive: “Research is limited on crisis management planning in higher education because many institutions of higher education have written their crisis management plans after a crisis event occurred; a reactive approach to crisis that seems to typify crisis management” (p. 17). Booker extolled the need for having established crisis management plans prepared before a crisis strikes, which can “uncover weaknesses in the current emergency system… Once these weaknesses are identified, there should be a key and collective effort to remedy these weaknesses” (p. 18). In order to plan, Booker also recommended conducting risk assessments to account for risks and scenarios institutions have not yet encountered.

As in the general scholarship, learning and reflection are a critical component of crisis preparation. Fortunato et al. (2018) argued that the “study of crisis management and crisis leadership is advanced by examining different crisis situations and their unique circumstances” (p. 510). Booker (2014) echoed this sentiment:

[L]eadership plays a critical role in how learning is transferred to crisis management plans and how the department responds to a crisis event. It is through learned experiences from previous institutional responses to crises that leadership learns for the next crisis event. (p. 22)

Reflection does not only aid in crisis preparation, but acts as a growth tool for leaders. Gigliotti (2016) asserted that “[a]cademic leadership is a complex undertaking, one made all the more difficult due to crises, and it is through the act of self-reflection that leaders can better navigate the inevitable crises—or opportunities—of tomorrow” (p. 198). Gigliotti noted that crises provide an important opportunity for leaders to self-reflect, declaring that the “beauty of retrospection lies in the clarity of past uncertainty” (p. 191;
see also p. 197). As a tool, self-reflection allows a leader to learn from past experiences, grow as a leader, and prepare to lead through future crisis scenarios.

Scholars also agree that higher education leaders must focus on the human aspect of crisis leadership. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) argued that leaders must communicate a strategic vision that is “aligned with organizational goals and consistent with the institutional mission to reassure all stakeholders that they are following the situation, and have a strategy in place for crisis resolution” (p. 44). Gigliotti (2016) also pointed out that at times, “the human act of sharing one's personal feelings exists in tension with traditional expectations for leaders. At times gendered, both male and female leaders are challenged to perform the role of courageous leader in the face of uncertainty” (p. 194).

Vulnerability and courage remain assets for leaders across industries, including higher education. Collaboration and building community are also imperative in higher education crisis leadership. Marshall et al. (2020) asserted that leadership “should seldom be a lonely endeavor. Leaders need to take a collaborative approach to leading during crises” (p. 34). Fernandez and Shaw also pointed out that leadership of “an academic institution in a crisis is stressful, given that the role and the influence of the leader are magnified in times of change” (p. 41). However, leaders can find success by approaching crises with confidence and a spirit of collaboration (Marshall et al., 2020, p. 35). In addition, trust remains a crucial leadership asset in higher education crises. Fernandez and Shaw insisted the following:

[Integrity and credibility of the leader is important in a crisis; if the leader is not credible then the message communicated will not be perceived as credible. Those academic leaders able to communicate a compelling and thoughtful shared vision
for the institution that is realistic and attainable once the crisis dissipates can inspire faculty, staff, and students. (p. 44)

Clear and effective communication remains perhaps the most critical component of crisis leadership in higher education, both for building trust and for mobilizing plans. Marshall et al. (2020) asserted that communication is key to providing reassurance and a degree of comfort to stakeholders during periods of ambiguity and heightened anxiety. During turbulent times, communication must be clear and timely. This approach garners respect and support for leaders and fosters a sense of comfort among stakeholders that every effort is being made to manage the situation effectively. More importantly, it sends the message that they are valued. (p. 34)

It is also “imperative to communicate corrective action measures and to verify the effectiveness of corrective actions implemented” (Fortunato et al., 2018, p. 513). Transparent, unambiguous, and up-to-date communication allows a leader to establish trust with her community, implement and evaluate measures in response to crises, and take corrective action as necessary.

Despite themes that appear universal across crisis leadership literature, crisis leadership scholars also provide some recommendations that seem particular to academic leadership. In their article on academic leadership during the COVID-19 crisis, Fernandez and Shaw (2020) listed the best practices as “connecting with people as individuals and establishing mutual trust, distributing leadership throughout the organization and communicating clearly and often with all stakeholders” (p. 41). Gigliotti (2020b) pointed out that distributed leadership is common in higher education, stating
that the “very organizational structure of higher education at-large is such that leadership is distributed, decision-making is often decentralized, and institutional governance is regularly shared among multiple stakeholder groups, albeit in varying degrees based on the institutional type” (“Theoretical integration” section, para. 2). This distributed leadership is helpful for crisis management in that it puts responsibility into the hands of very capable teams. “By distributing leadership responsibilities, the teams remain motivated and incentivized since they have more latitude in problem solving than would be the case on a campus operating a top-down leadership model” (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020, p. 43).

Although more generalized crisis leadership literature focuses on followers, higher education crisis leadership scholars place an emphasis on stakeholder groups. Stakeholders are “‘any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives’” (Freeman, 1984, as cited in Friedman & Miles, 2006, p. 1). In a university setting, this can include myriad groups such as staff and faculty, students, parents, board members, and community members. Fortunato et al. (2018) insisted that the “relationship between a leader and the organization’s stakeholder groups is especially critical during times of crisis” (p. 512). This means understanding that stakeholder perceptions and expectations play an enormous role in a leader’s ability to guide her institution through crisis. Fortunato et al. pointed out that fostering mutual understanding is an important goal in crisis leadership, noting that “[r]ecognizing that the organization and the various stakeholder audiences have different goals, values, expectations, and points of view, the leadership goal ultimately is to build mutual understanding and achieve mutually beneficial outcomes” (p. 512). Leaders have a
responsibility to build trust with their stakeholders, be they internal or external, and to communicate vision and mobilize plans to affect change (Marshall et al., 2020). Stakeholders, in turn, affect outcomes through their own reactions and interpretations. “Both leaders and internal and external organizational stakeholders wander through crises, render crises meaningful, and elevate crises through our communicative engagement during these periods of unrest” (Gigliotti, 2020b, “Discussion” section, para. 1). By focusing on all stakeholders and not just followers, a leader can exert more control over a crisis through symbiotic meaning-making and facilitation of shared understandings, as well as mobilizing the right people to do the right jobs.

One final aspect of crisis leadership that higher education literature particularly emphasizes is sensemaking, which “involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). Marshall et al. (2020) insisted that it is “important to note that for leaders to set a clear direction, they must engage in sensemaking” (p. 33). Gigliotti (2020b) considered sensemaking in crisis situations a “leadership imperative, as illustrated by the many examples of leaders who misread their environment, contributing to sudden declines in trust, credibility, and perceived efficacy” (para. 1). In a study with nearly 40 senior university leaders, Gigliotti (2020b) found that

by declaring an event or situation a “crisis,” individuals with formal and informal leadership responsibilities have the ability to shape the conditions through which others experience a situation—and therefore may influence others to experience and treat specific moments and events as crises. (“Crisis as self-fulfilling prophecy” section, para. 3)
Leaders must navigate crises for themselves and others, with the additional responsibility and opportunity to shape the way stakeholders make sense of crises when they happen. By following generally recommended crisis leadership best practices, as well as utilizing distributed leadership, focusing on all stakeholders beyond followers, and engaging in sensemaking, academic leaders can situate themselves to respond more effectively to crisis situations particular to the field of higher education.

_Think Crisis-Think Female_

Although most of the literature on crisis leadership does not focus on gender, there is one concept related to the gendered experiences of women in leadership that is of particular relevance to crisis leadership. Ryan et al. (2011) noted that “research has demonstrated that the experience of female leaders is very different from that of male leaders,” and that “female leaders are often in a ‘lose-lose’ situation” (Ryan et al., 2011, pp. 470–471). Ryan et al. also noted that “when one thinks of leaders in a crisis situation, one may not expect them to have, or attribute to them, the same traits as the typical manager of a successful company” (pp. 471–472). Ryan and Haslam (2005) coined the phrase “glass cliff” as an extension of the metaphors of the “glass ceiling” and “glass elevator” as a way to explain the phenomenon of women taking on precarious leadership positions by “being preferentially placed in leadership roles that are associated with an increased risk of negative consequences” (p. 85). These two scholars explained that “compared to men, women who assume leadership offices may be differentially exposed to criticism and in greater danger of being apportioned blame for negative outcomes that were set in train well before they assumed their new roles” (p. 87).
Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) addressed this topic in a study that explored the roles of the history of an organization’s leaders’ genders and stereotypes about gender and leadership in creating the glass cliff. Previous studies explored a phenomenon coined “think manager-think male” to describe workplace attitudes that privileged male leaders over female leaders (Schein, 2001, as cited in Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) noted that in a crisis, “stereotypical assumptions of what makes a good leader are likely to change” (p. 435). In their study, they explored the idea that in times of crisis, people “think crisis-think female,” preferring stereotypically female characteristics such as “intuitive or aware of the feelings of the others” (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010, p. 435). The findings of their study confirm this notion of think crisis-think female:

In times of success, stereotypically male attributes were most important for selection of a future leader; in times of crisis, stereotypically female attributes mattered most for leader selection. Moreover, in times of crisis, participants attributed less interpersonal attributes desired in a leader in times of crisis to the male candidate than they did in times of success. (p. 447)

Moreover, Bruckmüller and Branscombe found that the glass cliff has less to do with a preference for female leadership in times of crisis, but rather a lack of trust in stereotypically male attributes; thus, “women find themselves in precarious leadership positions not because they are singled out for them, but because men no longer seem to fit” (p. 449). Women’s perceived aptitudes for leadership in these instances are defined by the perceived aptitude or lack thereof of men—in other words, not by their femaleness, but by their not-maleness.
Feminist Leadership

Feminist leadership derives from the central tenets of feminism, which has a long and varied history “represented by multiple theoretical perspectives and pedagogical approaches” (Dentith et al., 2006, p. 384). Despite the varied “feminisms” one might encounter throughout history and scholarship, they share some central principles and origins that guide both theory and action. Dentith and Peterlin (2011) explained that, generally, “feminism emanates from the knowledge garnered about the inequities and deep injustices suffered by people based on gender and sexuality in society” (p. 37). Dentith et al. (2006) also explained that though there are multiple feminisms, at the core, each one strives to describe women’s oppression, elaborate on the causes and consequences of such oppression, and suggest ways in which such oppression can be resisted and overcome through social reform and individual awareness. Thus, all feminisms, by definition, imply social action. (p. 384)

Feminism seeks to analyze and expose the systems that use the socially constructed category of gender to limit access to power and resources with the ultimate objective of both education and liberation from dominant patriarchal, hegemonic ideals (see Dentith & Peterlin, 2011; Clover et al., 2017).

Feminist leadership builds on the values and objectives that make up the foundation of feminisms. Detweiler et al. (2017) advocated for the need for feminist leadership “because current models impose oppressive and unsustainable expectations on women” (p. 457). Like feminism, though, feminist leadership must be understood to be beyond a singular prescriptive model.
Feminist leadership has been described as a fluid process practiced in personal, professional, and public spheres. Situated in light of contending and complex gendered, and social forces, and emerging from struggle, feminist leadership has no singular, overarching site or definition. Feminist leaders are theoretically informed and place gender, social justice, and change at their core, thereby making waves aimed to disrupt the shoreline of the status quo. (Clover et al., 2017, p. 29)

In an interview conducted with three self-identified feminist women who were in positions of academic administrative leadership starting in the 1990s, Bauer (2009) found that each practiced a “collaborative and consensus-building leadership style,” had to learn how to “negotiate and tolerate ambiguity when employing her leadership style in more traditional hierarchical environments,” and had received recognition for being involved in interdisciplinary work (“Conclusion” section, para. 1). Like feminism, feminist leadership has also evolved to look beyond gender when working to dismantle oppressive systems. Clover et al. (2017) pointed out that the “conversation today acknowledges the complex and intersecting axes of identity, power, and privilege (intersectionality) and aims to better understand the experiences of racialized women, women with disabilities, transgendered persons, and, in some cases, men by taking up discourses of masculinity” (p. 25). Thus, feminist leadership is about more than just exploring gendered experiences.

One of the most important themes in the scholarship is the critical distinction between feminist and feminine leadership. Clover et al. (2017) problematized the notion of leadership based on gendered traits, explaining that gender “refers to the socializing mechanisms applied to refine behaviors to meet socially and culturally constructed norms
of what it means to be male and masculine and female and feminine” (p. 22). They further clarified that “seeing traits, preferences, or behaviors as naturally feminine (and thus associated with being biologically female) may be detrimental to women who act in ways that differ from these broadly accepted gender classifications and also exclude male leaders” (p. 24). Pullen and Vachhani (2020) agreed, noting that it “is clear that the gender bind in leadership is being reinforced by a bind that juxtaposes emotion against rationality, rationality being privileged in leadership” (“From Leadership Ethics” section, para. 4). Feminist leadership is not the exclusive domain of cisgender women, nor is it about personality traits stereotypically attributed to women based on socially constructed ideas of binary gender. Thus, thinking of feminist leadership as feminine leadership is not only erroneous, but also an unjust and exclusionary practice because “using the term feminine leadership as code for more humane, participatory, democratic approaches to leadership may lead to further essentializing women’s experience and exclude men from practices of so-called feminine leadership” (Clover et al., 2017, p. 24). Ultimately, feminist leadership is not about the gender of the leader but the values and practices in which a leader engages.

Along these lines, it is also important to note that a woman attaining a leadership role does not automatically make her a feminist leader. hooks (2015a) argued that feminists are “made, not born. One does not become an advocate of feminist politics simply by having the privilege of having been born female. Like all political positions one becomes a believer in feminist politics through choice and action” (p. 7). As Blackmore (2006) pointed out, “not all women and leadership research is ‘feminist’ when gender is treated as just another variable and not an organising principle. For feminists,
leadership is about gendered power relations that impact on social justice” (p. 187).

Moreover, “[v]isibility does not equal power” (Love & Duncan, 2017, p. 1). Although attaining gender parity in leadership positions is a step in the right direction, leadership titles without actual authority not only tokenizes women but reinforces the patriarchal values and norms built into the system. Blackmore (2006) expounded:

As token women leaders have experienced, their representation without authority did not change the dominant cultures or inherent systemic biases. Legitimation issues about whose knowledge and what values are privileged were ignored; the knowledge of the ‘other’ rarely disrupted the metanarrative. (p. 194)

Furthermore, it is important to note that women in leadership positions “do not necessarily shift the power dynamic of the institution or foster new models of cooperation. Some women embrace traditional notions of leadership and fail to critically assess the institution and their own position within it” (Detweiler et al., 2017, p. 453). For those women who have been inculcated into the very patriarchal systems that privilege “masculine” behaviors and traits, their attainment of leadership positions serves only to recreate and reinforce the systems that created gender-based inequity in the first place.

One of the defining elements that differentiates feminist leadership from feminine or women’s leadership is the belief that leadership is an inherently “situated social and political practice, a habitus produced over time and not merely equated to position” (Blackmore, 2006, p. 195), which centers around activism, social justice, and emancipation (see Love & Duncan, 2017, p. 3; Dentith & Peterlin, 2011, p. 42; Pullen & Vachhani, 2020, “Introduction” section, para. 4). Clover et al. (2017) described it as “not a series of techniques or processes but a social action. Feminist leadership is a purposeful
process of engaging a group around problematic forces to render them visible and bring about, as much as possible, their demise” (p. 27). Dentith et al. (2006) expanded on this:

[F]eminist theories of leadership focus on an emancipatory approach that emerges from women’s experiences of exclusion and marginalization as leaders and as women but also, more broadly, as individuals forged by intersecting racial, class, and other identities. Therefore, feminist leadership both seeks equity and confronts the challenge of changing hegemonic practices in educational leadership. (p. 386)

Feminist leadership is not merely about inhabiting a title, but transformation of the systems that privilege patriarchal White hegemony and marginalize all others. It also holds as a central tenet “a commitment to working as allies and change agents across movements, communities, and institutions to create a broader base of equity among otherwise marginalized, ostracized, or oppressed peoples” (Clover et al., 2017, p. 27). Feminist leadership, though, does not aim to enact change only for those who identify as women; rather, it “is inclusive of all people, and targets a process of domination (sexism) as the problem rather than a group of people (men)” (Clover et al., 2017, p. 25). Feminist leadership, at its core, is about dismantling oppressive systems rather than merely lifting up a particular group of people.

Rooted deep in this aim is the call to reimagine and redefine the ways people lead. Clover et al. (2017) argued that feminist leadership “asks us to imagine how we can, individually and collaboratively, lead, learn, and educate for social and institutional change” (p. 29). Furthermore, Dentith and Peterlin (2011) stated:
We are all subjected to a local and larger context that harbors institutionalized racism, sexism and all other forms of oppression but through intentionality and openness to the thoughts of others, we can think anew, as agents and active subjects, who lean inward and but act outwardly in newly imagined ways. (pp. 51–52)

Engaging in the activism inherent in feminist leadership by extension means engaging the imagination to redefine the definition of leadership and the systems held heretofore as the norm. Importantly, though, bell hooks (2015a) offered the reminder that “[t]o be truly visionary we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality” (p. 110). A reimagined future cannot come to fruition if it is not grounded in the realities of the present.

Central to the agenda of feminist leadership and the goal of redefining what leadership means is the examination of power:

[R]elations are examined in order to challenge the tacit notions that have been unchallenged and to expose the ways that power is used to control and oppress others, particularly those who occupy the margins. The interrelationship of power and the exercise of leadership are acknowledged, but they are understood in more complex ways that traditional notions of top-down management. Power is conceived not in ways that control, but in ways that might facilitate another’s abilities or provide support and response. (Dentith et al., 2006, p. 386)

This examination of power starts with challenging the traditional notion that “power is expressed in modern organisations through hierarchy. Power is viewed as a limited commodity” (Rao & Kelleher, 2010, p. 76). In challenging hierarchical power,
feminist leaders have the opportunity to reimage power as something that can be reconstructed for positive change. Cover et al. (2017) argued that “[e]nacting power in leadership... enables us to unmask, as noted previously, systems and practices that control, oppress, and marginalize, even within their own institutions” (p. 28). However, the acceptance and utilization of power in feminist leadership cannot be taken lightly—it requires “risk taking, forethought, reflection, testing, shaping, and acting for change” (Clover et al., 2017, p. 28). Rao and Kelleher (2010) argued for a reconceptualization of power as relational and unlimited, extolling “its potential to transform relationships, and, ultimately, human organisations and institutions. Leaders need to be open to seeing the world as primarily made up of relationships” (p. 77). Similarly, Christensen (2011) advocated sharing power to “diminish the power differences between all members in a group” (p. 261) in order to reach “the ultimate goal of feminist community building, which is empowerment” (p. 264). In this way, feminist leadership has the potential to flip traditional notions of power on their head to actually empower people in an organization. In fact, Clover et al. (2017) contended that this is a primary goal of feminist leadership, stating that it is “about leveraging within people a sense of agency, a way of thinking in a problem-solving and decision-making context in order to arrive at just, responsible, and appropriate choices and actions” (p. 28). Feminist leaders do not only challenge hierarchy but utilize power in ways that are intentional, relational, and empowering.

Feminist leadership also shares some traits with effective crisis leadership. First and foremost, in line with challenging traditional hierarchical models of power, feminist leadership emphasizes collaboration. Blackmore (2006) described leadership as “a situated, social and collective practice undertaken by different people, informally and
formally, differently in different contexts” (p. 194). This is because “[f]eminist leadership practice emphasizes women’s leadership as imbued with an ethic of care, which is illustrated through a need to care for others via communication and collaboration” (Christensen, 2011, p. 256). Clover et al. (2017) described collaboration as a method for operationalizing feminist leadership:

[W]e need to see collaborative leadership through cooperation, sharing, and redistribution not as inherent biological traits of women or as the only means of leadership, but as methods aligned with and corresponding to the goals of gender justice and social change that are used when appropriate. (p. 28)

They also, however, were careful to underscore that “feminist leadership is not limited to collaboration, as leaders must strategize according to the contexts in which they find themselves” (p. 21). Feminist leaders must still provide leadership outside the collective, with collaboration as but one of many tools in their toolbox.

As with crisis leadership, feminist leaders also place value on self-reflection. One way they do this is by maintaining an awareness of their own positionalities, and the way those intersect with the duties of their jobs and communities (Christensen, 2011, p. 255). Detweiler et al. (2017) expanded on this, noting that feminist leadership capitalizes on awareness and sensitivity to material, embodied experiences—our own as well as the experiences of our students, colleagues, and community collaborators—as marked by social categories, embedded in hierarchical structures, and providing points of connection, of common political cause. (p. 460)
However, reflection must be accompanied by action and activism in feminist leadership (see Dentith et al., 2006, p. 386). “Enhanced self-reflexivity can enable feminist leaders… to work carefully, consistently, respectfully, and fairly with others” (Clover et al., 2017, p. 27). Self-reflexivity allows feminist leaders to take the knowledge they have gained through the process of reflection and enact a form of leadership that challenges patriarchal and hierarchical structures, empowers people, values collaboration, and opposes practices that impede equity and social justice.

Critical Feminism

Critical feminism builds on the general tenets of feminism by placing an emphasis on the systems that “oppress, marginalize, deny, and disenfranchise more than half of the world’s population—women as well as others who fall outside conventional masculinized ideals” (Clover et al., 2017, p. 25). Bleasdale (n.d.) explained that a critical feminist “1. Recognizes the limitations of gender as a social construct. 2. Is critical of the various waves of feminism. 3. Embraces traits that are attributed to folks who identify with marginalized genders.” She further described the four key principles of critical feminism:

1. Authentic relationships, bringing our whole person to work every day
2. Inclusion: Awareness of, and seeking opportunities for, inclusion—going beyond advocacy for underrepresented and marginalized communities to actively engaging them
3. Removing barriers to build coalition—creating community in every moment and in every possible way. Building communities in partnership with others, not in isolation, where students, teachers, administrators have equal voice in the process of education
4. Disrupting oppressive systems of education that give preferential treatment to the wealthy, white, middle to upper-class members of our society. This includes actively devaluing and contesting hegemonic leadership rooted in white supremacy. (Bleasdale, n.d.)

As an area of scholarship that has its roots in feminism, critical, and critical race theories, critical feminism is highly influenced by situated and Black feminist scholars such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, adrienne maree brown, and Patricia Hill Collins. The works of these and other scholars illustrate these four principles and the ways they are interconnected.

The principle of building authentic relationships is exemplified by adrienne maree brown’s work in *Emergent Strategy.* brown described emergent strategy as “how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for” (p. 3). She further explained that emergent strategies “are ways for humans to practice complexity and grow the future through relatively simple interactions” (p. 20). In fact, building relationships is one of the primary principles of emergent strategy. brown wrote that in order to practice emergent strategy, one must “[m]ove at the speed of trust. Focus on critical connections more than critical mass – build the resilience by building the relationships” (p. 42). Change starts small with authentic relationships based on one’s authentic self because “what we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale” (brown, 2017, p. 52). Understanding that this starts with one’s authentic self is key: “Emergent Strategy is about shifting the way we see and feel the world and each other. If we begin to understand ourselves as practice ground for transformation, we can transform the world” (brown, 2017, p. 191). By
showing up authentically in one’s work, academics, and personal lives, one builds the foundation for engaging in the other principles of critical feminism.

The cornerstone of critical feminism, and crucial to the principle of inclusion, is a focus on the intersections of gender with other marginalized identities that shape a person’s experiences in the world. Critical feminists must appreciate “the many different ingredients” of people’s identities to practice inclusion that engages rather than only advocates for marginalized people (Lorde, 2007, p. 120). This practice starts with an acknowledgement of race and racism as continued forces that shape the very systems critical feminism wishes to dismantle. This acknowledgement has often been ignored in feminist activism and scholarship, which has often focused entirely on gender and in so doing denied the lived realities and struggles of those who did not identify as White and middle class (see Lorde, 2007; hooks, 2015b). Audre Lorde (2007) called this out, asserting that it “is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians” (p. 110). By omitting factors such as race, sexuality, class, ability, and age, the relevance of feminist theory and activism dwindles because it both disregards the difference in people’s lived realities and maintains systematized oppression. Acknowledging intersectionality allows critical feminists to decenter White women rather than identifying the White middle-class experience as the norm (see Lorde, 2007, p. 117). This also facilitates coalition building; Audre Lorde warned that “[i]gnoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women’s joint power” (p. 117). In fact, refusing to recognize differences can be
weaponized as a way to maintain power imbalances by obfuscating the truth of women’s lived experiences. Lorde referred to this as “a tool of social control” (p. 122). If feminists cannot come to a full understanding of the many ways in which women are marginalized and the tools used by patriarchal powers to maintain oppression, they cannot build coalition in order to dismantle those systems. Critical feminism seeks liberation for all, regardless of identity, but to do that, critical feminists must explore the many varied ways gender intersects with other identities to shape the ways women interact with the world.

It is not enough to recognize and acknowledge difference and the varied ways one’s multiple identities influence her experience of the world. “Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic” (Lorde, 2007, p. 111). In embracing the significance of race and other identities in relation to gender, critical feminists may also avoid the common pitfall of performative allyship in the form of advocating for diversity as a “politics of feeling good, which allows people to relax and feel less threatened, as if we have already ‘solved it’, and there is nothing less to do” (Ahmed, 2009, p. 44). This kind of superficial inclusion is an act of violence against folks who identify as BIPOC, requiring them to other themselves as a way of embodying race for a White majority. Sara Ahmed (2009) explained that the language of valuing diversity is of course mainstream, and hesitates between discourses of economic value (the business case for diversity) and moral value (the social justice case). This model of diversity reifies difference as something that already exists ‘in’ the bodies of others (we are diverse because you are here). Our difference becomes their diversity. (p. 43)
Inclusion becomes less about equity and more about image, providing an excuse for organizations to avoid confronting the reality of racism (see Ahmed, 2009). Acknowledging and appreciating the differences in women allows critical feminists to move beyond a superficial concession of inclusion signified by advocacy into actual engagement of people in all their multitudes of experience to create more just and equitable systems.

Community remains a foundational principle in critical feminism, just as it is in crisis leadership. A sense of community is necessary to create the kind of structural change that is the core aim of critical feminism. Audre Lorde (2007) argued that “[w]ithout community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression” (p. 112). Underscoring the importance of community reflects an understanding of the interconnectedness of people who are doing the work: “We are constantly impacting and changing our civilization – each other, ourselves, intimates, strangers. And we are working to transform a world that is by its very nature, in a constant state of change” (brown, 2017, p. 14). hooks (2015a) expanded on the importance of community in feminist movements to end oppression, noting that by emphasizing an ethics of mutuality and interdependency feminist thinking offers us a way to end domination while simultaneously changing the impact of inequality. In a universe where mutuality is the norm, there may be times when all is not equal, but the consequence of that inequality will not be subordination, colonization, and dehumanization. (p. 117)
Building community is also good for individual growth. In fact, adrienne maree brown (2017) argued that

having community to learn with is actually really crucial for human development. It means we learn to see ideas, not just through our own singular and limited perspectives, but to see how different experiences create different ways of thinking about things, of comprehending and applying ideas. (p. 248)

brown’s recommendation was to “move from competitive ideation, trying to push our individual ideas, to collective ideation, collaborative ideation. It isn’t about having the number one best idea, but having ideas that come from, and work for, more people” (p. 59). Communities can impact larger numbers of people by utilizing collective ideation and drawing on the expertise and experiences of many (see brown, 2017, p. 158). It is also important to note that community and coalition building are impossible without the principles of building authentic relationships and inclusion beyond advocacy. hooks (2015a) explained that recognizing the impact of interconnecting identities, particularly race, strengthened the women’s movement and helped feminists move past structures that continued to give advantage to White women of privilege in order to “put in place a vision of sisterhood where all our realities could be spoken” (p. 58). Liberation cannot be achieved in isolation; in building coalition, critical feminists raise the tide for all.

The final principle Bleasdale (n.d.) identified is also a central objective of critical feminism: to disrupt and dismantle oppressive systems that maintain values rooted in White supremacist patriarchy. Audre Lorde (2007) asked, “[w]hat does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable” (pp.
110–111). To achieve the goals of critical feminism, scholars and activists alike must start with their own lived realities:

Women need to know that they can reject the powerful’s definition of their reality—that they can do so even if they are poor, exploited, or trapped in oppressive circumstances. They need to know that the exercise of this basic personal power is an act of resistance and strength. (hooks, 2015b, p. 53)

One of the major ways critical feminism disrupts oppressive systems is by challenging conventional notions of knowledge production, which have traditionally been defined by White patriarchal academia. The work of Patricia Hill Collins (1989) speaks to this extensively:

[S]pecialized thought challenging notions of Black and female inferiority is unlikely to be generated from within a white-male-controlled academic community because both the kinds of questions that could be asked and the explanations that would be found satisfying would necessarily reflect a basic lack of familiarity with Black women’s reality. (p. 752)

Collins advocated for an Afrocentric feminist epistemology rooted in concrete experience, which distinguishes between knowledge and wisdom; encourages active participation from others through dialogues as a way of assessing and validating new knowledge; adopts an ethic of caring that emphasizes the uniqueness and expression of the individual, the appropriateness of emotion, and the importance of developing empathy; and an ethic of personal accountability in which people must be accountable for their knowledge claims. Collins argued that the “existence of an independent Black women’s standpoint using an Afrocentric feminist epistemology calls into question the
content of what currently passes as truth and simultaneously challenges the process of arriving at that truth” (p. 773). Engaging in work that not only questions but reimagines traditionally accepted forms of knowledge production has significant implications. de Saxe (2012) argued that through the very acts of disrupting the canon, questioning hegemonic understandings of oppression, and taking the diverse methods and forms of resistance as a means to think differently about social justice, one can hopefully see the powerful attributes that critical feminist theory offers for fighting oppression, and working towards true liberation both inside and outside the classroom. (pp. 199–200)

Audre Lorde (2007) cautioned that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 110). Dismantling systems of oppression requires critical feminism to engage in the creation of new tools of disruption, beginning with the development of epistemologies that dispute White supremacist patriarchal definitions of knowledge production.

**Critical Feminism and Leadership**

Just as feminist leadership is built on a scaffold of feminist theory, Blackmore (2006) noted that critical feminist theory can provide “alternative approaches to rethinking leadership” (p. 192). Blackmore specifically looked at the intersection of critical and feminist theorists, and the ways they focused “on issues of social justice; on power, language and culture, asking who benefits from particular policies, practices and arrangements, how and why; who are marginalised; and whose voice dominates? Leadership was a means to address inequality” (p. 192). Critical feminist leadership is
also an inherently political act, a means to put into place systems built around the principles that form the heart of critical feminism.

adrienne maree brown (2017) discussed leadership as a part of emergent strategy, noting that she has “seen and experienced a ton of leadership development processes, and most of them ultimately seem oriented around reproducing one person’s way of being, which inevitably fails” (p. 204). This calls for a developing “a new definition of a great leader – not just one who is inspirational in speech or grand actions, but one who is inspirational in collaborative action, accountability, and vulnerability” (brown, 2017, p. 101). brown also offered this advice:

If you are in a leadership position, make sure you have a circle of people who can tell you the truth, and to whom you can speak the truth. Bring others into shared leadership with you, and/or collaborate with other formations so you don’t get too enamored of your singular vision. (p. 100)

As with other scholarship on feminist leadership as well as best practices in crisis leadership, critical feminist leadership advocates collaboration and shared or distributed leadership models. Finally, brown also discussed the value of “[f]eminine leadership (not just women leaders, but leaders who shift our understanding of how power can be held)” (p. 66). As with the scholarship on feminist leadership, brown offered the critical distinction here that women leaders are not enough; rather, attention must be paid to power and the way it is utilized. Enacting leadership with a frame of critical feminist values challenges conventional approaches to leadership, thus allowing for the rebuilding of systems as equitable, inclusive, and empowering.
Summary

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of women who have provided crisis leadership in a higher education setting through a critical feminist lens. This chapter contextualized the study by examining literature that offers best practices in crisis leadership both in general settings and in institutions of higher education. For the most part, the scholarship around crisis leadership is ungendered, which is to say that it is written primarily from a dominant, male perspective. The one area of crisis leadership scholarship that focuses on gender is the paradigm of “think crisis-think female,” or the “glass cliff.” This, however, does not explore the gendered experiences of crisis leadership, a gap that this study sought to address. This chapter further contextualized this study by providing overviews of the foundations of both feminist leadership and critical feminism, with a further examination of critical feminist views on leadership. Although these areas of scholarship do not directly address leadership during crises, this study sought to bridge these topics within the context of higher education by exploring women’s lived experiences of crisis leadership. Appendix A provides a brief overview of the themes identified in the literature.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Restatement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of women leaders in higher education, with a particular emphasis on leadership experiences during times of crisis. Through semistructured interviews, this feminist phenomenological study offers narrative examples from individual women who have provided administrative leadership in a higher education setting during a crisis, while also seeking to identify common themes among them. In doing so, this study sought to illuminate the challenges women may face on the path to higher education leadership and the ways in which those challenges shape their leadership preparation and philosophies.

The following central research question and three subquestions guided this study’s design:

1. How do gendered experiences shape the ways women higher education leaders respond to crises?
   a. How do women leaders within institutions of higher education describe their encounters with patriarchy, particularly in their pursuit of leadership positions?
   b. How does the experience of serving as an institutional leader in a moment of crisis shape, recast, or cause a revision of women leaders’ leadership philosophies?
   c. How have the intersectional identities of women higher education leaders shaped the development of their identities as leaders and their relationship, or lack thereof, to feminism?
Research Design

Qualitative research “focuses on human experience as it occurs in social life and often seeks to make sense of the social practices” (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 93). This qualitative study employed a feminist phenomenological approach in an effort to both honor the individual lived experiences of each participant, as well as understand their experiences within their broader social and professional contexts.

Feminist Phenomenology

Phenomenology’s founding is largely attributed to philosopher Edmund Husserl, whose work was expanded upon by Martin Heidegger, who practiced hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, and Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who tied phenomenology with existentialism (Gardiner, 2018, p. 293). The purpose of phenomenological study “is to explore what a particular experience means for people who have experienced a shared phenomenon so that the structure of the experience can be understood and the essence of the experience can be abstracted” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 27). Employing a phenomenological approach allows for understanding the experiences of women who have led through crisis situations. As Simms and Stawarska (2013) explained:

Qualitative, phenomenological research in the human sciences works closely with first person descriptions about specific human experiences and attempts to illuminate the complexity of the research participants’ worlds. It aims for depth and understanding of the human condition, rather than statistical validity. (p. 9)
Schües (2018) expanded on this, noting that the “phenomenological approach turns to the whole structure of an event or relation by questioning and being aware of the particular perspectives under which and event or a structure is considered” (p. 103).

Feminist phenomenology is a marriage between phenomenology and feminist theory, contextualizing the “phenomenon” being studied within the structures that privilege patriarchy and heteronormativity by examining participants’ gendered experiences. It “goes beyond classical phenomenology insofar as it also criticizes inequality and injustice in gender relations and scrutinizes the constitution of gender within the history of ideas and socioeconomic and political systems” (Schües, 2018, p. 105). Its origins date back to the 1930s in the writings of Edith Stein, although it is also often attributed to Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949) *The Second Sex*, considered a foundational text for both feminist phenomenology and second-wave feminism (Simms & Stawarska, 2013, p. 7; see also Gardiner, 2018, p. 295). Other significant works of feminist phenomenology include writings by Hannah Arendt, Iris Marion Young’s “Throwing Like a Girl,” and Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* (Gardiner, 2018; see also Shabot & Landry, 2018). Whereas classical phenomenology traditionally explores phenomena without regard to the impact of identities such as gender, feminist phenomenology includes “questions related to gendered experience and sexual difference within its field of study” (Simms & Stawarska, 2013, p. 6). By employing a feminist phenomenological approach, this study explored common themes in the participants’ narratives, with an emphasis on their gendered experiences and in the context of the largely patriarchal structures and organizations in which they were operating.
Feminist phenomenology as a methodology goes hand-in-hand with critical feminist theory because it is a critical form of phenomenology that “understands the contingencies of human experience and consciousness and works on understanding the pervasive influences of ideology, politics, language, and power structures as they construct and constrain the lived experiences of people” (Simms & Stawarska, 2013, p. 11). In the spirit of feminist research, feminist phenomenology calls on both the researcher and participants to practice reflexivity. It also honors the participants as unique individuals who are the experts of their own lived experiences:

Feminist research practice begins with understanding that human experience is embodied, inter-subjective, and contingent, and woven into personal and cultural webs of signification. The experiences of research participants have to be treated with interest, respect, and compassion, but they also have to be interpreted from a critical perspective. (Simms & Stawarska, 2013, p. 12)

Although it is important to explore the lived experiences of those who have lived through a particular phenomenon, it is also important to investigate the structures that have shaped those experiences and the subsequent meaning-making that arises. Levy (2018) explained that the “task of feminist phenomenology has been, at least in part, to excavate background assumptions and social conditions that structure and define experience in its first-person immediacy” (p. 212). To understand a phenomenon, it is critical to explore that phenomenon as first-person experiences as well as within the structures and social contexts in which it occurs.

Feminist phenomenology is also an appropriate methodology to employ in the study of leadership. Gardiner (2018) argued that “we can benefit from the depth of
thinking that phenomenological theory offers. Whether it is prejudice, power or gendered practices in the workplace, employing a feminist phenomenological lens can help us obtain insight into the theory and praxis of leadership” (p. 301). Feminist phenomenology allows for the exploration of participants’ experiences as both women and leaders. In fact, Chamarette (2018) argued that

[t]his is the aim of intersectional feminist phenomenologies of the situated, lived body: to understand the political and cultural ramifications of how bodies experience limitation and disempowerment, and to put forward a form of praxis that might expand and empower subjects and the ways in which they articulate their world-body connections. (p. 203)

Feminist phenomenology further allows for the exploration of women’s experiences as their own, distinct from but situated within a norm that is defined by White, male, and powerful. In fact, as Shabot and Landry (2018) pointed out, “[c]hanging the definition of normal experience to account for women’s experience is one of the radical endeavors of feminist phenomenology” (p. 5). In doing so, “we may reveal our own ‘normal,’ challenge it, and work to change it” (Shabot & Landry, 2018, p. 6). This methodology allows for critical interrogation of the norms in which women higher education leaders operate, with the ultimate aim of not only understanding but also developing tools to transform the structures that continue to privilege White male voices within academia. The aim of feminist phenomenology is not only to explore shared phenomena, but to do so with the aim at systemic change. It is committed to discovering and articulating how the subordination and oppression of some members of society is perpetuated; to critiquing these practices and their
consequences; to bringing to light the suffering, silencing, and increased vulnerability of individuals; to envisioning epistemological, ethical, and political ways of identifying structural alternatives; and, finally, to finding methodologies that insightfully approach experiences that may be hidden, invisible, or not to be expressed in ordinary language. (Schües, 2018, p. 105)

By employing a feminist phenomenological methodology, this study not only sheds light on the structures in which women higher education leaders operate, but offers insight into ways of dismantling oppressive patriarchal structures in academia in favor of structures that allow women to thrive.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Because an “important aspect of feminist phenomenology is describing concrete, lived experience” (Gardiner, 2018, p. 295), data for this study primarily came from semistructured interviews, with some additional supplemental demographic data collected prior to the interviews via a short questionnaire that was utilized to screen participants. Semistructured interviews allowed me to “maintain consistency across interviews and to compare responses for each question for the participants in the study” while simultaneously “making room for unexpected directions in the interview” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 127). All interviews were conducted via the video conferencing software Zoom. Interviews were conducted over Zoom because at the time of this writing, the COVID-19 pandemic remains ongoing and different states and counties are under various stages of lockdown, with travel vehemently discouraged. Interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed using transcription services via Rev.com, which
ensures strict confidentiality, including professionals who have signed nondisclosure agreements, and secure, encrypted storage and transmission of files (Rev.com, n.d.).

Once each interview was transcribed, all transcripts were reviewed and analyzed for outstanding and relevant themes. Further inductive analysis was conducted once all transcriptions had been reviewed and coded to identify emergent themes across all of the data. I manually completed all coding using both physical copies of transcripts and the coding software Quirkos as a visual tool. I also used memoing throughout the data-collection and analysis processes to both supplement the coding process and maintain academic rigor (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 23).

**Participants**

This study aimed to explore the experiences of women who have provided administrative leadership in institutions of higher education during times of crisis. For the purposes of this study, participants were chosen who have a position matching or very similar to those as defined in the *Administrators in Higher Education Survey*, as conducted by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR). These positions fall into the following categories (CUPA-HR, 2019):

- Top executive officers
- Senior institutional officers
- Academic deans
- Institutional administrators
- Heads of divisions, departments, and centers
- Academic associate/assistant deans
The survey defines a total of 202 positions, which are characterized by “primary assignments requiring management of the institution or of a customarily recognized division within it” (CUPA-HR, 2019). CUPA-HR-defined higher education administrator positions have a U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) of “Management Occupations” (BLS, 2017). SOC is the federal statistical standard used by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to conduct HR reporting for the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (NCES, n.d.; see also BLS, n.d.), thus use of these definitions allowed for consistency in participant selection. Potential participants were expected to self-select based on the CUPA-HR categories, as well as the condition that they have provided leadership during a crisis, as delineated in the recruitment flyer (see Appendix B).

Participants were primarily recruited via personal appeals to colleagues and acquaintances (see Appendix C for the recruitment email template; see also Appendix B). I also posted an appeal on LinkedIn and attempted snowball sampling via an appeal in the recruitment email (see Appendix C), but these methods yielded no interest. Further participants were recruited via personal appeals by my colleagues and dissertation chair. All interested parties received a short electronic screening questionnaire via email (see Appendix D) requesting basic biographical and professional data, including job title, as well as a brief explanation of any crisis during which they may have had a leadership role. Nine total respondents’ professional data were evaluated against the CUPA-HR job descriptions for applicability. As this study sought to understand the experiences of leaders across higher education, eight women with positions that align with CUPA-HR’s definition of higher education administration were ultimately chosen to be interviewed.
Because critical feminism and feminist phenomenology are both intersectional in nature (Ahmed, 2009; Bhattacharya, 2017; Chamarette, 2018), I also planned to choose participants based on biographical data. The aim was to recruit 10 participants in the hopes of interviewing six to eight, with 50% of participants identifying as BIPOC. Ultimately, nine potential participants submitted the screening survey, and eight were chosen who had positions that matched the CUPA-HR descriptions. Six out of eight (75%) participants identified as having at least one BIPOC race or ethnicity.

Once I identified the participants, I contacted them via email to schedule an interview over Zoom and request a signature on the consent form (see Appendix E). Interviews were scheduled for 1 hour each and lasted between approximately 40 minutes to 1 hour. Data have been stored both on a hard drive and in the cloud. Data were also anonymized to protect the participants’ identities. Participants are referenced using pseudonyms and identifying details such as location have been generalized. For example, a participant’s place of work may be referred to as a private nonprofit urban university, rather than by name. In the same manner, participants’ professional titles were generalized to match the corresponding CUPA-HR categories.

**Ethical Considerations**

In order to mitigate ethical concerns and ensure no harm was inflicted during the data-collection process, I designed an informed consent form (see Appendix E) and interview protocol (see Appendix F) in line with requirements laid out by the USF Institutional Review Board (IRB). The consent form and interview protocol were submitted to the USF IRB on January 12, 2021. On January 28, 2021, I received approval
from the USF IRB (see Appendix G), and recruitment and data collection started shortly thereafter.

The design of this study accounted for two ethical considerations in particular. First and foremost, I was cognizant of the fact that interviews may have elicited unhappy or uncomfortable memories for participants who had experienced discrimination or even trauma in their professional or personal lives. Participants were offered a thorough explanation of the study’s purpose prior to the interview process via the informed consent form (Appendix E) and were offered multiple chances via email and prior to the start of the interview to ask any questions. Participants were also allowed to pause or cancel the interview at any time, and any recordings would have been destroyed at their request. Additionally, for those participants recounting negative memories, they may still work in or have connections to the organizations in which they experienced these incidents. To account for this, data were anonymized to neutralize any concerns about participants speaking about the places in which they worked. In addition to a thorough explanation of the study, each participant was given an explanation of the anonymization process and asked to choose her own pseudonym.

**Positionality**

The genesis of this study is rooted in my professional, academic, and personal identities. In my nearly decade-long career in higher education administration, I have experienced organizational restructuring and sometimes rapid turnover of colleagues, as well as witnessed several tumultuous leadership changes at many levels. In the last 2 years alone, my organization has contended with multiple crises of differing natures, including multiple campus closures due to poor air quality generated from devastating
wild fires in Northern California in 2018 and again in 2020; a resounding vote of no confidence in the university provost, culminating in his decision to step down from the position and the formation of multiple university committees to address the concerns expressed by faculty, staff, and students; and the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing at the time of this writing, which has resulted in campus closures, a rapid shift to virtual learning, layoffs, and extreme budget cuts. My personal anecdotal experiences have varied by leader, but my observations have confirmed for me the need for strong feminist leadership that centers people over profits and amplifies marginalized voices. Academia, though it has the potential to open many doors, is a hostile environment to many who do not identify as White, male, able-bodied, cis-gender, and middle or upper class.

As a student in the Doctor of Education in Organization and Leadership program, my focus on feminist leadership studies began in earnest in the Fall semester of 2018 when I took a class on critical feminist perspectives. I have since then been involved in several courses on critical feminist research, as well as with a participatory action research study on critical feminist leadership and an autoethnographic case study of critical feminist leadership in action in the USF School of Education during the COVID-19 crisis. As a person who identifies as a critical feminist and who studies critical feminism, it is also my desire to contribute to the growing body of literature around critical feminist theory. Additionally, as noted in the limitations, I recognize that I am using a theoretical lens to explore the experiences of people who do not necessarily identify as a feminist for varying reasons. This means I may be using language to examine and make sense of the data with which the participants do not agree.
Finally, it must be acknowledged that I approach this study from a place of great privilege: As a White, straight, cis-gender, able-bodied, highly educated woman from a middle-class socioeconomic background, my own gendered experiences have likely been wildly different from some of my participants, and indeed many of the people who may read this study. It is especially critical to acknowledge that in my research I hold a certain level of power in both my position as researcher and in my whiteness, which had the potential to affect many aspects of this study, particularly the recruitment of BIPOC participants. If I am not vigilant in interrogating the ways that my whiteness, as well as the other privileged aspects of my identities, color my views of the world, then there is a distinct likelihood that this study could devolve into colonizing rather than liberating scholarship. In order to avert the potentially adverse effects of my whiteness and privilege, I employed mitigation strategies such as memo writing and reflective journaling at every step of the process from recruitment through data analysis and recommendations, as well as regular check-ins with my dissertation chair and writing partners. It is my strong belief that feminism that excludes any group of people (such as White feminism or “gender critical” feminism) is not real feminism; in choosing my participants with intention, my goal was to decenter my own whiteness to amplify the voices of my colleagues across the field of higher education. Using critical feminist theory as a framework and feminist phenomenology as a methodology, I hope this study will allow myself and others to develop a deeper, more nuanced awareness of the structures that have influenced our varying experiences and in which our privilege may have made us complicit. Engaging in this kind of self-reflexivity will allow us to move
forward with an understanding of how to create lasting structural change in our own organizations.

**Summary**

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of women higher education leaders who have experienced leading during a time of crisis. Eight women who have provided administrative leadership in a higher education setting were recruited and selected via personal appeals. Utilizing semistructured interviews, a methodology of feminist phenomenology was employed to explore participants’ gendered experiences within the context of the structures in which they operated, and analyzed for unifying themes while also maintaining regard for each person’s individual lived experience and expertise. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and data were anonymized, reviewed, and coded for relevant themes. Through the process of reviewing, analyzing, and coding the interview data, this study intended to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of crisis leadership by women in higher education.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of women leaders in higher education, with particular attention paid to leadership experiences during times of crisis. In doing so, this study sought to illuminate the challenges women may face on the path to higher education leadership, and the ways in which those challenges shape their leadership preparation and philosophies. This chapter presents the data gathered following the procedures outlined previously in Chapter 3. This chapter begins with a review of the research questions that shaped the design of the study. The next two sections provide aggregated demographic information and a very brief profile of each study participant to contextualize the data. Finally, the evidence is presented methodically by each research question.

Research Questions

The following central research question and three subquestions informed this study:

1. How do gendered experiences shape the ways women higher education leaders respond to crises?
   a. How do women leaders within institutions of higher education describe their encounters with patriarchy, particularly in their pursuit of leadership positions?
   b. How does the experience of serving as an institutional leader in a moment of crisis shape, recast, or cause a revision of women leaders’ leadership philosophies?
c. How have the intersectional identities of women higher education leaders shaped the development of their identities as leaders and their relationship, or lack thereof, to feminism?

**Participant Demographics**

This study identified eight participants, each of whom participated in one semistructured interview between February and March 2021. Every participant currently has or had a position in an institution of higher education that aligns with a position description or category as offered by CUPA-HR (2019). Each participant indicated that she uses the *she/her* or *she/ella* pronoun series; thus, throughout this study participants are referred to using either *she/her* pronouns or pseudonyms. Table 1 below illustrates the demographic data collected through the screening survey and interviews.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicana/Latina</td>
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<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White &amp; Native American</td>
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<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Southwest</td>
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<td>41+</td>
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<td>12.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Institutional Administrators</td>
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<td>37.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior Institutional &amp; Chief Functional Officers</td>
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<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top Executive Officers</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participant Profiles**

Each participant, in her many lived experiences and intersecting identities, shared unique stories and insights into her leadership and involvement in crisis situations.
Because a cornerstone of critical feminism is acknowledging the “many different ingredients” of people’s identities, it was important to contextualize each participant’s experiences within the intersections of her identities, particularly in regard to race and class (Lorde, 2007, p. 120). Below is a short profile for each participant, which offers some information to help contextualize the data with each participant’s experiences. For the purposes of protecting their confidentiality, participants are referred to by pseudonyms, as well as the CUPA-HR position category in which they serve, rather than their job titles.

Andrea

Andrea is a Chicana/Latina-identified institutional administrator at a public 4-year university in the Western region of the United States. She has approximately 16 years of experience in higher education, and currently works in faculty support. She shared her experiences leading through the COVID-19 pandemic, during which she entered her current position of leadership, as well as addressing anti-Black racism on her campus.

Annie

Annie identifies as White and Native American and has over 30 years of experience in higher education. She shared stories from leadership roles as both an academic dean and top executive officer at a private Jesuit university in the Western region of the United States. The experiences she shared about crisis leadership revolved primarily around the 2008 financial crisis.

Carol

Carol is a White-identified senior institutional and chief functional officer for a private Jesuit university in the Western region of the United States. She has 13 years of
experience in higher education. She shared her experiences of leadership during the COVID-19 crisis.

**Laura**

Laura identifies as Mexican American and works as a head of departments, divisions, and centers at a public community college in the Western region of the United States. She has approximately 24 years of experience working in higher education, and currently works in student services. The experiences she shared of crisis leadership included budget crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, and addressing anti-Black racism at her institution.

**Monica**

Monica identifies as Black/African American and has approximately 23 years of experience in higher education, working primarily in financial aid. She currently serves as an institutional administrator at a public 4-year college in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Although she remarked that over the last 10 years, she felt “like it’s been one crisis after another,” she primarily shared stories of crisis leadership around affordability crises, the loss of jobs by undocumented workers and the concerns of DACA students in the early 2000s, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Sebastian**

Sebastian is a Filipino-identified head of divisions, departments, and centers at a private nonprofit university in the Western region of the United States. She identifies as a WOC, queer, immigrant, and Pinay. She has 10 years of experience in higher education working in student affairs. She shared her experiences leading through the COVID-19 pandemic.
Tiffany

Tiffany is a Black-identified institutional administrator at a Jesuit university in the Western region of the United States. She has 15 years of experience working in financial aid in the higher education industry. The experiences she shared of crisis leadership revolved primarily around her time at a public 4-year university in the Southwest region of the United States, during which students raised concerns around their physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing after the election of Donald Trump.

Winnie

Winnie is a White-identified academic dean for a school of nursing at a public 4-year university in the Southwest region of the United States. She has 50 years of experience in higher education. She shared her encounters leading through two crises: a student who was killed, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Questions Findings

This study sought to answer four research questions—one main question supported by three subquestions—for the purpose of exploring the lived experiences of women leaders in higher education, with a particular emphasis on leadership experiences during times of crisis. In doing so, I hoped to illuminate the challenges women may face on the path to higher education leadership and the ways in which those challenges shape their leadership preparation and philosophies. The following section details the data collected through interviews with each participant in support of each research question. It is imperative to note that although themes are laid out below as distinct concepts for the sake of clarity, many of them are intrinsically and inextricably interrelated.
Research Question 1 Findings

RQ1: How do gendered experiences shape the ways women higher education leaders respond to crises?

RQ1 is the overarching question that initially drove this study, with RQ’s 1a through 1c intended to flesh out and contextualize these findings. Although each participant’s experiences differed based on the context of the crises being addressed, as well as individual factors such as position, experience, and identities, several superordinate themes emerged from the data: (a) socialization as caretakers, (b) inclination toward collaboration and relationships, (c) silver linings, and (d) prior experiences. Below is a summary of these concepts as recounted by participants.

Socialization as Caretakers

Nearly every participant indicated that her first priority in preparing to respond to the crisis at hand was people; not one participant discussed the financial wellbeing of their organizations as being at the forefront of their minds. Annie articulated this directly, explaining that her “priority was the people in the organization.” She continued, “So for me, it was preserve the people, their jobs, their wellbeing, the integrity of the programs for the students. And so that was the way I approached it.”

Winnie also noted that a priority of hers was to really focus on the wellbeing of the people in her organization:

It’s a pat answer to say we cared about the students and getting them graduated last May of course, but the other was to really help the faculty and staff who were also dealing with their kids at home and their parents and not being able to see
people. And so people were in a heightened state of anxiety all the time. So attending to that was a big deal.

For Carol, that translated into giving “people a space to name their experience. To feel heard. It became a platform for people to process so much more, you know, beyond what some of us were experiencing in terms of the pandemic.” Sebastian and Andrea were especially focused on providing support for more marginalized and impacted populations; for Sebastian, that was “students who are greatly impacted by the pandemic,” and for Andrea, the priority was to “provide support for BIPOC faculty during this time.”

Most participants agreed that their people-centered responses came down, in large part, to their gender socialization. As Andrea commented, “women are largely socialized to be real caretakers, right?” She expanded on this:

> I just think when women are leaders, they're more mindful of these kinds of things that impact a wider range of faculty experiences or the leadership they're trying to provide on campus, whether that's faculty, staff, or their colleagues, really thinking in a more broad-minded way about what that experience must be like. And what are the things that might be on their minds that are impacting their ability to do the work that they're here to do.

Annie offered a similar sentiment, reflecting that her personality as “an extremely people focused person” may have a lot to do with the way “women focus on people, on family, on community. Probably because of our socialization, not because it’s biologically essential to our nature, but it shapes us nonetheless.”

For Winnie, communication is an essential part of caring for the people in her organization. She explained, “I care about how people are told things.” She offered the
example of reorganization and making sure people did not feel as though they were “being booted,” explaining, “I think that’s because of my womanness and my experience as a woman in higher ed.”

Carol also had suspicions that her struggle with indecisiveness in responding to crisis may have had to do with being a woman. She reflected,

I think that there’s an ongoing struggle of that cultural conditioning around wanting to be, you know, kind of a people pleaser, and how that’s hard to be the one who’s making a tough call and being the one in charge.

Participants did generally not seem to think that they were biologically or inherently caretakers; rather, they speculated that their gendered experiences and the ways they were socialized as women resulted in care-taking and people-pleasing behaviors, which in turn equipped them to take a people-centered response to crisis.

**Inclination toward Collaboration and Relationships**

Several participants also brought up the impulse to collaborate in response to crisis situations. Carol said, “the desire to collaborate was really immediate,” noting that “I really leaned into relationships. So I sort of reached out to the people I collaborate with regularly.” Tiffany offered that she prioritized by working with the individuals who could help, explaining that her crisis response “came with a lot of collaboration with senior leadership and other leadership and the right healthcare individuals, and bringing in other individuals” to provide assistance to the students in crisis. Sebastian described a similar situation, noting that once she and her team had identified the students who were most impacted by the crisis, they next determined the people and departments with whom they would collaborate to help provide service to those students.
Carol’s belief is that these, too, are gendered responses. She explained,

I do think that for me, really leaning into a relationship is a gendered experience for me. I think that especially often, the people that I've really relied on and been vulnerable with are other women. So I think that my impulse toward collaboration, and toward consensus building and toward sort of empowering other people to be at the table, I think that that has been shaped by my experience of being a woman. And so I do think that it influenced my response.

In Carol’s estimation, her crisis response and leadership values were shaped by her experiences of being a woman.

*Silver Linings*

Some participants were able to find a silver lining in the midst of their crisis experiences. For some participants, dealing with crisis opened up spaces or subjects that had previously been inaccessible to them. For example, Sebastian’s experience with crisis allowed her to finally enter conversations where she was previously shut out. She explained, “I was able to contribute to that conversation about what this pandemic really tells us, you know, this is actually an opener for us to really re-evaluate who we are as institution.” Entering the conversation also allowed her to take an active role in the way this crisis could be seen as an opportunity to shape the institution’s future. As she stated, “we weren't truly equipped when this crisis happened, but we have an opportunity now to shift that and what that shifting looks like is what the conversation we had during that time.”

Similar to Sebastian, Laura asserted that the “crisis actually gave me permission to do something.” In the wake of George Floyd’s murder at the hands of a police officer,
Laura noted that she was finally able to make Black Lives Matter an institutional priority, whereas before she could not bring up the term White supremacy, explaining that “that should have been our work. That should have been a part of what we were doing and that's what I've been intentionally focusing on.” The crisis allowed her to shift the institution’s priorities and future by allowing her to engage in previously forbidden conversations.

Andrea also viewed the crisis as an opportunity to affect her organization’s future. She remarked, “I think this is an interesting time to be in where it's like, we're forced to make this unexpected change, but what is this gonna enable us to do moving forward?” The COVID-19 pandemic presented the opportunity to rethink current processes and shape a better future for the institution. In her reflections on this opportunity, she proclaimed, “We're going to change this place for the better. That's what I'm here to do.”

**Prior Experiences**

Participants also discussed the experiences that had prepared them to respond to crisis situations. The experiences that shaped these participants’ responses fell generally into two categories: professional and personal experiences.

**Professional experiences**

Some participants felt their professional experiences had primed them to tackle the crises they met. Andrea, for instance, noted that she felt ready to tackle crises around racial injustices, explaining that when it comes to the issues of race, I was well suited to step into this role because I've done a ton of training, of reading. I write and research in this area. I had a
previous role in our office of diversity equity inclusion, where I laid out a lot of the kind of programming that I'm able to offer now.

She further explained,

I think my professional experiences have prepared me well because I was in a small department that I felt was always overlooked, right? There was not a real investment in ethnic studies departments and programs on our campus for many years.

She asserted that her background in ethnic studies and experience advocating for an underrepresented department, coupled with “that intellectual training and also the community commitment, I think are gonna be really key to my ability to provide strong leadership.”

For some, their professional experiences gave them a grounding in essential communication skills. Tiffany, for instance, said her professional experiences taught her “you can’t tell someone how they feel, so how do you respond to that? So it was how to be responsive in a more empathetic, sympathetic way, without judgement.” She expanded on this, noting that her professional experiences as a woman taught her that “there’s different ways to handle a situation and making sure you have the listening skills, the communication skills to figure out where someone’s comfortable with whatever action you take.” Carol asserted that a lot of her efforts in supporting other people’s work is “just really about deep listening, it’s about creating space. It’s about kind of opening up those conversations where there are multiple points of entry, so that people can see themselves as part of that conversation.” Her professional experiences shaped her
response to the crisis and the fact that she prioritized opening up spaces for conversation with the university community.

Winnie noted that she did not feel prepared by her academic background to lead during crisis: “Well, you know, certainly getting a PhD doesn't prepare you to be a dean. Those are two separate skill sets.” Rather, her preparation came from working with and learning from other leaders throughout her professional background. She explained, “I've gotten to work with some pretty amazing leaders, and the ones that stick out in my mind, I've learned and taken something from them to become my own.” Her experiences observing and learning from other leaders helped shape her own leadership, and thus her response to crisis.

**Personal experiences**

For some, their professional experiences did not prepare them at all to handle a crisis situation. When asked how her professional background prepared her to respond to crisis, Annie stated bluntly, “It did not prepare me.” She goes on to explain that her preparation and creative approach to a demand to make budget cuts in fact came from her personal and class background:

I think that actually came from my personal background and maybe my class background, because the fact that I have been working since I was 15 years old, that I had to scrape my way through college, I think it makes you think creatively about those kinds of problems and not just, you know, sort of follow the herd.

Similar to Annie, Laura’s personal experiences through struggle shaped her ability to respond to a crisis situation in her university. She explained:
Systems in higher education, especially public ones run slow, they're bureaucratic. It's not really a place that functions fast. And so I don't think anything in my career prepared me for this. My life prepared me for this and who I am being through struggle, that prepared me for this, where I was like, I'm rolling up my sleeves and we're getting this done, because I've been through cancer, I've been through homelessness, I've been through an alcoholic father, I've been through... You know, I've been through a few things. So that to me is what actually got me through. And I have had people say, “Wow, how are you staying so strong through this?” And I'm like, 'Cause I've been through a few things, you know, but it's not my career. It's just who I am.

In reflecting on the experiences of her identities and community, Sebastian also noted that struggle shaped her own response, explaining,

this is just another layer of struggled life we've been experiencing years and years and years. It might be a little bit different of course, but I think we are built for this kind of crisis because we've seen this, we felt this, we were in this life, we've been part of crisis all our life.

Monica mentioned that her response to crisis was shaped by her experiences as a single parent. As she explained, in playing “dual roles” of mother and father, she forces herself “to always see both sides.” She also remarked on the importance of flexibility, explaining that “it's not one way. There are multiple ways to do things. And I attribute that to my being female and having to negotiate several paths. Whether it’s grocery shopping, car shopping, buying a house.”
Research Question 2 Findings

RQ1a: How do women leaders within institutions of higher education describe their encounters with patriarchy, particularly in their pursuit of leadership positions?

This question sought to understand the experiences women had while navigating their paths to leadership in the largely patriarchal structures of academia. The intentions of this question were twofold: to craft a deeper understanding of participants’ paths to leadership, and to contextualize participants’ crisis leadership experiences within the professional experiences that shaped them as leaders. The discussions around this question yielded many insights and shared experiences. Ultimately, four superordinate themes emerged from the data: (a) the glass ceiling, (b) disconnection from authentic self, (c) discrimination, and (d) emotional and psychological toll. Below is a summary of these concepts as recounted by participants. It is important to note, however, that even though these themes are addressed below as distinct concepts, they are deeply interrelated.

The Glass Ceiling

When asked point blank whether they believed their gender affected the way they were treated by their colleagues or superiors, nearly every participant responded with an unequivocal yes. The glass ceiling is a phrase commonly given to the “invisible barrier preventing women from ascending into elite leadership positions” (Northouse, 2016, p. 399), and although the phrase was coined in the 1970s, participants’ varied experiences reflect that it remains an ever-present phenomenon.

Annie, for instance, recalled that she “felt amazingly supported” at her university during the early part of her career. She continued, “I’m not sure if that had anything to do with me being a woman or what was going on, but I wasn’t feeling barriers. I was feeling
a lot of openness and support.” But, she noted, “it got more difficult the higher I went.” This difficulty became clear as the university at which she worked started a search for a new president and her name was floated as a potential candidate. She remarked that “there were people who were really kind of freaked out about that because there had never been a female president, never been a non-Jesuit.”

Other participants also remarked that they believed their gender slowed or stalled their ability to advance in their careers. Monica, for instance, felt she had to work harder than her male colleagues to advance:

Men get pushed very easily. Oh, you've been here for five years, you seem like you can do a good job. You can get a promotion. I felt like because I had to work harder, as a female, it made me a better listener, and it made me a better collaborator.

In fact, in her recollections she discussed having to go to other institutions to advance. Tiffany had a similar experience. She shared that she felt she could have advanced much sooner, but

because I was always taken as an angry or aggressive or mean person, I never in one position got the opportunity or got the awards that everyone else did just because they sat back and they were silent. And because I refused to be silent about certain treatment of women and women of color, I never was seen for an opportunity to promotion. I would actually have to leave in order to be promoted.

In order to advance their careers, both Monica and Tiffany had to seek positions in other schools because they were not being offered opportunities to advance within their current institutions.
The glass ceiling was reflected often in participants’ recollections of the lack of representation of women leaders in their own experiences, particularly BIWOC, especially as those positions went higher up the ladder. Sebastian, for instance noted that in her work in student services, she has felt that “there’s more women comrades in academia.” And yet, as she has ascended in leadership positions, the number of women she has interacted with has decreased. “But now that I’m stepping in the Dean’s office where I speak with the provost, the president, the different faculty, and most of the time, those positions are occupied by men.” Even Winnie mentioned that in the predominantly female profession of nursing, men are overrepresented as deans. Andrea recounted similar experiences, noting that although she works in a Hispanic serving institution (HSI) and spent much of her career working with students of color, as she ascended to her new position, she once again found herself in a homogenous White space:

Suddenly I find myself as the highest ranking Latina senior leader on my campus overnight. That was a really strange shift to now be back in spaces, granted it's via zoom, that's online, but to be in meetings, where often I'm the only person of color, woman of color, the only Latina, again at an HSI.

She emphasized that “it's so rare for any Latinas to basically be invited to step into a senior leadership role as I was. So it's a really rare opportunity.”

For some participants, that lack of representation resulted in negative self-perceptions and discomfiture. Laura, for instance, shared the following:

When I reflect that my first job, all the leaders were men, all the deans, all the directors, I think there's a sprinkle of women directors, but I was very, very intimidated to speak up. I mean, actually speaking up in just basic meetings I
would tremble. And so for me, just the intimidation factor was so real for me and I was so nervous to speak up.

For her, lack of women leaders, and in particular Latina leaders, throughout her career is a contributing factor to her slower journey on the path to leadership. She shared, I've had a few people say to me that I should be a college president by now and I always say, “Well, I am in the position I'm in now, because of all the circumstances of what's happened in my life.” That includes not seeing myself in those leaders too.

Monica shared a similar experience. She shared that at her first job, the lack of female leaders at the top shaped her perception for a long time of what the institution of higher education was, and what leadership must look like. When she was told 3 years was not enough experience to be considered for a director position, and a man with no financial aid experience was hired instead, she shared “I was like, oh, so experience translates into being a male. Oh, okay. Well then, I'll never be a leader, 'cause I will never be a male. That just sat with me for about two years.” Thus, not only was she prevented from taking a leadership position, but she also waited longer than she might have to pursue another leadership position. She explained that the lack of female leaders affected her own self-perception and ambition, noting “it really kind of kept me kind of locked in to not know my own strength” and that “seeing how certain institutions defined what a leader looks like, sounds like, really sort of kept me in the sense of, to be a leader you had to be male.” Moreover, seeing the lack of female leadership when she started in the industry took a toll on her desire to pursue leadership in connection to her intersecting identities. She explained, “I felt very fragile. I felt like being female, being a person of
color, and on top of that, I was a single parent. You know? So I had a lot of, what I call, strikes against me.” The glass ceiling had manifested itself as both an external and internal barrier.

This lack of representation has also led to the tokenization of women leaders of color. Sebastian, who is a young WOC, noted that “I felt like, because I'm the only one that carries those [identities], that they gave me more of a pass. I don't know if it's a good thing or not. It's almost like tokenism, I've been tokenized.” Although Sebastian recognizes this and uses this clarity to her advantage, as will be discussed further in RQ1c, she also recognized that it remains a negative aspect of her position. Monica also had misgivings about the motives behind some organizations’ hiring choices:

I feel like some places wanna hire me so they can check off a bunch of boxes. Veteran, Black, female, um, first-gen low-income background. You know, stop that. I'm not a bunch of check boxes, I'm a person. And, you know, deal with me as a person, and then we can figure out what check boxes is okay for you to check off, as far as I'm concerned.

Disconnection from Authentic Self

Another theme that came up in many participants’ narratives was an expectation or perception that in order to be leaders, they needed to perform or behave in particular ways that conformed to a White patriarchal model of leadership and a particular vision of femininity. This expectation to conform often manifested in a disconnection from participants’ authentic selves and an almost constant awareness and attention to other people’s perceptions. Monica, for instance, commented that “I’m constantly shifting who I am based on who I’m talking to,” adding that over the course of a day
I could probably be five different people. If I'm meeting with a white male… I feel like I need to be just submissive enough to not be perceived as a threat. But if I'm dealing with other people of color, I have to make sure that I am addressing the social issues to a certain aspect that's acceptable, and be political enough, that I'm accepted. And if I'm dealing with a white female, you know, does she view me as a peer or will she view me as a second-class citizen? And how do I shape that conversation?

Monica attributed her feeling that she must constantly shift the way she behaves to her experiences throughout leadership, particularly as she attained higher titles and started interacting more with people in more senior levels of leadership. She remarked, “I never feel like I can fully be myself, because I don't know what their perceptions are.” She also indicated an additional layer to this, noting that she observed markedly different behavior toward her when she was more dressed up than when she dressed down, and that she would have to dress or present herself in a certain way if she wanted something from senior leadership. This is further complicated by the widely accepted White standard of beauty; she explained,

particularly for black women, who struggle with... We don't have straight hair. Some of us do, but most of us don't have long flowing straight, or long flowing curly hair naturally. Like, that's just not in our DNA. And so the fact that we're having to constantly negotiate these conversations in 2021, is kind of ridiculous. But it is what it is.

Although Monica felt the expectation to perform femininity, Laura felt the need to perform whiteness. She explained that when she first got into leadership roles,
I observed what was happening around me and what I observed was I needed to act extremely White and I needed to code switch into a space that maybe I'm not as familiar with to learn how to speak up in meetings.

She noted that she had to learn by observation rather than by mentorship because of the lack of mentors she could relate to, explaining,

I didn't have any mentors of color, or first gen mentors, through a lot of my career, unfortunately, it just didn't land that way. I couldn't find anyone I kind of connected with, that I could ask kind of the real questions.

In this space of isolation, she felt the need to conform to the predominant White culture that surrounded her, which included getting rid of her accent. She reflected that it was not until very recently that she was able to bring her authentic self into her leadership:

I didn't actually start to bring who I was into this space until honestly, a few years ago. And it could be because, part of it is actually what's happened in the last year too, but, I think it's because I'm probably just older and more reflective and tired of switching into pretending like I'm this perfect person and you know, be able to function in this perfect system.

Andrea had similar experiences of whiteness. She explained,

There's times when I'm very aware of my being much younger than many of my senior colleagues, you know, the senior leadership roles, of being the only BIPOC person in the room, I've become a little more mindful of how I dress and my appearance and my makeup and my personal style.

She described that in the classroom setting, her normal style was “funky,” and incorporated bright colors, but in her experiences in rooms with predominantly White
leadership, she became very mindful of the ways she expressed herself in order to be
taken seriously. She explained,

in these spaces where it's a lot less diverse, [I’m] very mindful of, how do I seem
on camera? And am I coming across confidently, professionally and how I
express myself, et cetera. Right? And also being very mindful of not wanting to
be very quiet and on the edges of a meeting? But in every single meeting I'm in:
Okay, can I push myself to ask a question, to make an observation, to make
myself seen and heard in a professional way with these folks who might
otherwise, we know, be very inclined to dismiss me, my preparation, and the
work that I'm here to do.

For Sebastian, the need to conform to a dominant White model of leadership also
involved the sublimation of her identities, which included hiding her immigrant identity
by hiding her accent. This sublimation followed her home, where her partner remarked
that she was speaking in a very American way. She explained,

You don't hear that I am an immigrant woman, so that I can be validated for who I
am, but as I was trying to be perfect in this role, I was also compromising my
home. I was also compromising my identities that is so true to me, which is so
unfortunate.

She elaborated, “there's that flamboyancy of me that I could not hold anymore, because
as being a senior leader, you always have to be firm, you always have to be rigid, you
always have to act, perform a certain way,” reflecting that “so there's many of that
negotiations that I have in me either internally or externally, that I have to adopt in order
for me to secure my role as a leader.” The need to perform this White patriarchal model
of leadership led to the suppression of Sebastian's natural, authentic identities. This perception of leadership as requiring rigidity and an expression of authority was shared by multiple other participants as well. Andrea, for instance, reflected that her natural personality and the strengths that made her a supportive, positive influence for students are also antithetical to leadership. She offered,

I often think about how the parts of me that come naturally, which has to be very warm and inviting, what are the ways in which that facilitates certain kinds of student growth, but then it also can be in other spaces or say by other colleagues… kind of taken advantage of or seen as not as strong and assertive a leader.

The recognition of particular leadership expectations also comes with a vigilant awareness of other people’s perceptions. Both Tiffany and Monica commented on the tendency to perceive them as aggressive or combative. Tiffany explained her advocacy for women in her workplace:

When I understood that there was a misconception of women, I felt like I was too vocal that it became aggressive, but it was what I felt was assertive. And so people once again mistook my passion for something negative.

She elaborated:

When you're as vocal and powerful, and as you sit in your own skin, people are gonna understand you as you're fighting. And so some people are going to take that in the wrong way, and then you come off as aggressive and angry when you're just trying to open their eyes.

Monica expressed something similar:
I've had to be really careful to manage what my perceived personality is versus what my leadership style is. As an example, I'm quick to be pointed out as being an angry black woman, because I'm very much a straight shooter. I don't mince words. I don't tend to beat around the bush. I tend to just go straight and try to get to an answer.

This vigilance has led to a constant attention to how she presents herself, leading her to question:

Am I soft enough? Is my hair acceptable to being in a leadership position? Is my dress appropriate for what is being perceived as appropriate? Do I look feminine enough? Am I too masculine? Am I too hard, am I too soft, am I too brainy? Am I too not, am I not... You know? You know, not so smart enough?

For Carol, the acceptance of a White patriarchal norm has made her especially aware of who is in the room when she is participating in meetings while working from home:

I think especially during this pandemic, if I'm thinking about a meeting, if, you know, I'm imagining myself with a woman or a few other women in the meeting, I'll schedule it at a time when I know my kid could be running around. And I'm just not as worried about that as I think I am with a male colleague, especially a superior male, you know?

She elaborated that if she knows there will be a male in the room, she feels compelled to hide her “identity as a mother, and the chaos of trying to work and be a mother.”

Along with these spaces that valued White patriarchal leadership came multiple accounts by participants who they felt the need or were sometimes even advised to stifle
their natural selves, or “tone it down.” Laura, for instance, shared the story of a conference at which she was speaking and shared data on the students of color at her college and addressed it as a crisis that called for a dramatic change to the system. She recounted that afterwards a college president pulled her to the side and told her she might want to tone it down:

And I was like, “Really? Okay.” And I listened to that and I took it and I held it. And so I kind of quieted down really for 15 years from that one comment, because I'm like, “This person's a college president, very well-respected, everybody knows this person and so he's given me good solid advice.” So I did, and so I decided to tone it down and I did that for many years. And so I was sort of stuck 'cause I was wanting to serve my community, the Latino community, but also my husband's African-American, so our community, his community, my family, my in-laws, wanting to serve those two groups, I wanted to so badly, but I had to be quite careful about how to do that, how to speak up too much because of that one comment.

The advice to “tone it down” set a very careful tone for her leadership for years to come. Advice like that did not only come from male leaders. Sebastian related:

I think a big struggle where I'm at right now is a lot of the women that I look up to, we casually talk about our experience. They're older than me, they're seasoned senior leaders. There are many conversations where they've mentored me to say, you know, sometimes you just have to do it.

For her, that advice translated to the following:
Sometimes you just have to give up a little bit and that giving up means like
giving up some aspect of your identity in order for you to get to a point where
maybe when you get to that point, you can reintroduce back that identity and then
maybe you can actually create that change or lead or whatever it is.

Sebastian was advised to compromise her own identity to get to a place of leadership
where she could make the kind of impact she wants.

For some, the advice to tone it down came as advice for survival. At an event
Annie hosted, which brought in an organization to discuss domestic violence in LGBTQ
communities, a group of priests from her university came in to perform an act of protest.
In response to that, she recounted,

I remember thinking, and people saying to me, “Annie, you better knock it off.
Like you better be careful because you're inviting people, you're teaching about
things, you're raising all these issues that are really problematic to the Catholic
church, and you're just going to get the boot.”

The feeling of needing to compromise oneself to maintain her job, in fact, was
expressed by other participants as well. Monica, for instance, noted that she felt pressure
to present perfection, explaining that “you have to be this almost perfect person, to be
accepted as a leader, because you're a black female,” and disclosing that
that has always been something that I've struggled with, because I am very
concerned about being able to maintain my positions. I do walk around with a fear
of, if I cross the wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong time... That's my
livelihood.

Sebastian also reflected on this, remarking that
when we talk about survival, when we talk about how do I sustain this role, there are moments where I'm just like, maybe I should just tone down my aggression. Maybe I should tone down pushing so much of like the immigrant identity or immigrant conversation in these spaces. And so for me, there were moments where I'm just like, is it because I was scared that this position will be taken away from me or maybe I would be removed or maybe my, my functionality or my power.

The need to “survive” begat an awareness and adaptation of participants’ natural behaviors so as not to lose their jobs and thus their livelihoods.

**Discrimination**

Unsurprisingly, participants’ recollections of navigating predominantly White patriarchal spaces of leadership included stories of discrimination, which ran the gamut from microaggressions and dismissal to blatant harassment and racial discrimination. Not one participant reported that she had never experienced or witnessed acts of discrimination.

Carol works very closely with the church, and because of that she is often in a male-dominated context, and scenarios sometimes play out where her accomplishments as a scholar are diminished. She shared, for instance, that when she is at conferences, there's often still times when, you know, it's Father So-And-So or whatever, and then just Carol. Women don't get a title, even if we have advanced academic degrees. Or just little ways in which my accomplishments or authority are diminished in a very gendered way. I've definitely experienced that, and I think that that makes it hard to be a leader.
Winnie, on the other hand, is somewhat uniquely situated in comparison to other participants, in that she is in a female-dominated profession in nursing. And yet, she still experiences patriarchal dismissal of nursing as a discipline, receiving condescending comments and backhanded compliments. She refers to this as “nurses, God love ‘em” syndrome:

   It's this dismissive, like oh, yeah. And, you know, sort of a feigned respect. That feigned respect is alive and well in academics, that yeah, yes we wanna listen to everything you say, we really believe in this equality, and yes we do it, but it's just all bullshit.

Even as women with advanced academic degrees and decades of leadership experience, their accomplishments were devalued in patriarchal contexts.

   Laura experienced blatant sexual harassment, which affected the way she dressed and comported herself. She shared,

   I went into a director role in my 20s, I was pretty young for being in a director role, and several sexist comments were made towards me by older men. And these are the men I had to work with every day and then you just kind of eat it. You're like, okay, that guy just said something totally inappropriate to me, but I've got to work with him every day, and I didn't report it because I didn't know that I could, you know, and you just take it and that does something to your psyche, where then I'm like, okay. I'm not gonna wear this top today because of that statement he made yesterday, so let me find something that's like a little longer, that kind of covers up a little bit more.
Laura’s experiences with these inappropriate comments made her extremely aware of how she dressed and what she looked like and simultaneously disempowered her from advocating for herself.

Andrea also offered an example of a racist incident that happened to a colleague:

We had an incident on our campus where a colleague was told by someone who financially contributes to our institution that Latinas don't have the DNA for success. And the person who heard this was the only Latina in the room, no one challenged this comment. No one said anything about it.

When the person tried to bring in HR, nothing happened. It was not until students found out and got involved and protested that the person was held to account. Impacts of statements like these, as well as an institution’s lack of response, have far-reaching consequences, beyond those of just the person directly attacked.

**Emotional and Psychological Toll**

The themes discovered in RQ1a are inextricably linked, and in many ways culminate, in the final theme, the emotional and psychological toll taken by these experiences with patriarchy. Figure 3 provides a visual illustration of the fact that the glass ceiling, disconnection from one’s authentic self, and discrimination can exact an emotional and/or psychological cost.
Figure 3

*Relationship Between Glass Ceiling, Disconnection from Authentic Self, Discrimination, and Emotional/Psychological Toll*

The language participants used to describe their experiences included consuming, exhausting, draining, and demoralizing.

Annie commented on the political aspect of leadership, remarking that “at a certain point in leadership roles, you have to deal with a lot of nonsense. And it takes up a lot of emotional space.” She elaborated that in some institutions, people in leadership engage in a lot of power struggles. When you get into a leadership role and you have other sort of parallel people in the organization, and egos come into play, it’s extremely draining and negative. And, you know, you want to spend your time on positive institution building efforts, but somebody over there is upset because they don’t have the spotlight on them, or they want more power or they want more budget or whatever. And so that’s the underside of it.

When these power dynamics are not contained, Annie explained, they are “incredibly draining and consuming.”
Sebastian also commented on the impact of having to repress her authentic identities to conform to White patriarchal expectations of leadership, reflecting, “there were moments that I regret and I'm just like, ooh, maybe I've toned down a little bit. Maybe I'm submitting myself through the systems of white supremacy and patriarchy just for my survival.” These reflections indicated a sense of isolation:

I think it's also as a place where it's traumatizing thing, especially for women of color when you're striving to change the landscape of what the leadership should be, but then you get to the point that it's like, I'm not the only one who is changing the landscape of leadership here, who are my advocates and the folks that share my identities.

Those experiences that put her into survival mode have also made her question whether higher education leadership is worth it. She mused, “I’m hoping I don’t get to that point. I’m hoping that I’m not having an exit point.”

For Monica, her constant awareness of other people’s perceptions has had an impact on her personal life as well. She explained,

I think I'm more cautious in personal relationships. I don't have as many friends. I think that's in part because it's hard for me to separate the two. It's hard for me to say, this is the one persona that I carry when I'm at work, and then here's a persona that I carry at, in my personal life.

She elaborated, “if I'm being very honest about it, I've sort of narrowed my friend circle. Not sort of narrowed. I've narrowed my friend circle. To people who I don't work with.”

Moreover, the vigilant attention Monica has paid to how she presents herself and how people perceive her physically has affected her longevity in positions. She explained,
It's also one of the reasons why I don't stay anywhere for very long, 'cause I get frustrated. And I'm not one of those people who are gonna sit around and fight, fight, fight, fight, fight. I'll look and be like, I can't do this anymore. I - and it's not because I can't. I won't do this anymore. And I'll just pack up and I'll just go. Be like, I'll just take another job. Y'all can have this.

Thus, the emotional toll has impacted her professional success.

The impact of discrimination was especially profound, both for those who experienced it directly and those who witnessed it as a consistent feature of their professional lives. Andrea, for example, discussed the influence of those experiences on her self-perception, remarking “there's all the time in meetings those slight ... the microaggressions, right? That leave you questioning, why did they say that to me? What does exactly does that mean?” Laura expressed a similar sentiment and noted that these experiences seemed especially harsh in the light of hindsight. She observed,

those little, those microaggressions that happen to you as a female, they shift your confidence in a way that at the time I thought we just dress differently, barrel through this. But when I reflect back on it, I’m like, yeah, that was messed up. She added that even though she kept moving, “it hurts, those moments they mess with you.” In her reflections, she realized those moments affected when and how she spoke up, the way she dressed, and the way she interacted particularly with her male colleagues.

Tiffany also commented on her experiences as a WOC confronting racism in her leadership journey, and the ways they led her to question herself:

that definitely changed me. I can say it impacted me negatively and positively, because you don't never understand why someone treats you the way they treat
you because of who you are, but you are who you are. So then you begin to
question who you are. So I learned from that to never question who I am and
always to understand who another individual is as well without questioning the
simplicity.

Although Tiffany remarked on the positive outcomes she found, her journey to
that resilience was hard won. Of discrimination, Annie also reflected that
witnessing enough of it over the years is demoralizing. I mean, it’s demoralizing
for anyone to witness that anyone is mistreated based on their gender, race,
sexuality, any category. So it’s empowering when you can stop it and it’s
disempowering when you can’t.

The way participants described their encounters with patriarchy indicate consequences
beyond simply slowing or halting their paths to leadership.

Research Question 3 Findings

RQ1b: How does the experience of serving as an institutional leader in a moment
of crisis shape, recast, or cause a revision of women leaders’ leadership philosophies?

This research question explored the way women experienced leadership during
crises and the effects of these experiences on their leadership practices moving forward.
Three themes emerged from the analysis of the data: (a) preparedness, (b) crisis as
opportunity, and (c) evolution of leadership identity. Below is a summary of these
concepts as recounted by participants.

Preparedness

A couple participants articulated that their experiences of leading during times of
crisis gave them the sense that they should always be prepared, as one cannot predict
when the next crisis might happen. Monica, for instance, stated that bluntly, saying that “I always want to operate like something could happen. Right? I always find myself saying, let’s be proactive in what we do.” She elaborated on this:

In a crisis situation, you wanna have something that you can reach back and say, okay, in our rethinking before this happened, we had some plans in place. Like, no one plans for a pandemic in California, but everybody planned for earthquakes. So what can you learn from other potential crises that you can feed into this conversation?

Because Andrea came into her role in the middle of the crisis, her leadership identity has been shaped by the sense that the landscape of higher education is changing. She explained, “We're never returning to the old normal. And so it's gonna be about always adapting to what's the new normal gonna look like and how do we stay fresh for that? How do we keep on our toes?” As the COVID-19 crisis continues to unfold, she is keenly aware of the mercurial situation in which she finds herself leading. Tiffany, on the other hand, approaches this in a slightly different way, noting that “I wouldn’t say I will be more prepared, but I’m more experienced. And so now my reactions are gonna be a little different, more strategic than emotional.” Her experience has shaped how she will move forward and prepare to face additional crises.

Crisis as Opportunity

Several participants also approached crisis leadership as an opportunity. Monica, for instance, built on her philosophy of preparedness by sharing that her own experiences of crisis presented the opportunity for her to prepare for future crises. For instance, a 3-month shutdown from a tornado in the 1990s prepared her to work remotely in future
scenarios, including the COVID-19 pandemic. As she put it, “so I think every- every crisis is an opportunity for- for learning and for growth.” Similarly, the sense of preparedness gave Andrea the additional sense that the situation in which she finds herself could give the opportunity for organizational improvement:

We still don't know how this pandemic is unfolding. What new crises are gonna emerge, what the new contours are, how this is gonna change, work-life balance, you know, and remote versus face-to-face, are there things that we're forced to do now that are gonna help us think more creatively in the long term?

For others, the crises during which they are leading gave them the opportunity to embrace aspects of their leadership that had heretofore been suppressed. Sebastian explained,

the pandemic gave me a voice. And I’ll explain this more because it might sound odd when I say the pandemic gave me voice, but there were moments, pre-pandemic where I wasn’t invited in spaces that I should be invited, and maybe because I’ve been aggressive in many ways.

Because of COVID-19, Sebastian was being given the opportunity to enter conversations as an institutional leader in which she had previously been shut out. She elaborated, “there was opportunities for me as a leader, I was able to really harness why I am as a person.” Laura saw the pandemic as an opportunity to bring her full authentic self to her leadership. She explained,

last year with all of the activity happening in our world in terms of the racial tension that's been occurring, that to me was like, oh, I can actually be who I fully am. And now I could actually speak about these injustices and actually use the
word white supremacy at the workplace. There were things that happened that
allowed me to really be emboldened to speak to who I am.

**Evolution of Leadership Identity**

For several participants, the experiences of leading through a crisis have
facilitated an evolution in their leadership identities. Annie, for instance, noted that her
experience gave her confidence as a risk-taker:

I think that way of pausing and thinking about alternative ways to resolve
problems was affected by that 2008 moment, you know, that and risk-taking.
Because it was a huge risk for me as a relatively young Dean to say to the
university leadership, ‘Well, I don't really want to do it that way. You know, let's
try this other way that takes care of people.’ And that having succeeded gave me a
great deal of confidence going forward. Even though sometimes you take risks,
you take risks and they failed, but nonetheless, it was definitely worth the risk. So
it made me more confident about risk-taking.

Tiffany similarly felt more emboldened to speak up, explaining,

I tend to use my voice more powerful, where I catch people off guard and that's
going back up the chain. And so it changed me because I feel like I'm in a
position to talk for people who don't feel comfortable talking for themselves.

Crisis, in essence, emboldened Tiffany’s advocacy.

For Carol, leading through the COVID-19 pandemic has helped her connect to her
vulnerable side. She explained,

I think that the interplay of my personal life and my professional life that's been
intensified during the pandemic, I think that I have accepted the way in which a
vulnerability can help me as a leader. Because I think that it can create those spaces where people see themselves as part of the conversation and feel valued, and feel like they can bring their full selves to the work.

Bringing her full self to work has also meant bringing her full self to her personal life. She remarked, “I feel really proud at moments when I know that my kid and my husband see the way that my work is important to me, and that's another dimension of who I am, that they can also love.” Sebastian’s experiences enabled her to “expand [her] contribution as a woman,” explaining,

I think it strengthened my communication too, I've become more empathetic being a woman. I think that's also part of my core as a woman, being empathetic, communication. I think I was already engaged as a woman, but being a woman leader in crisis, you know, that higher engagement is and strong commitment really show us in crisis.

Leading through the COVID-19 pandemic also gave Carol space to reflect on a potential area of growth. She explained,

I do think that it’s made me examine that issue of decisiveness, trusting myself. 'Cause I think that even in the most intentional process of collaborating and consensus building, that there is a responsibility that falls on a person in a leadership role to make and communicate a decision. And that's something that this has showed me that it's something that I struggle with.

Crisis leadership has also led to reflection on Sebastian’s part. She noted that,
I think before, I was aspiring for leadership because I was looking for validation. I was looking for a space in the society that I too can make it, that for me to get to a leadership role, that in a way I am also equally valuable.

Her experiences, though, have led to an evolution in the way she values herself as a leader, and a question as to where she must be to make an impact. As she explained, after all these iterations of experience, and finding other spaces where I feel like I am needed, I am wanted, that my worth is appreciated, that I see leadership as different or being in a leadership role is different now. Like, I feel like I can do all of these things without being in this role or without being in higher ed.

For Monica, crisis leadership has led to an evolution of her general practices:

I do think having gone through these different levels and different types of crises have really helped shape how I just function in general. You know, be prepared. Be open. Be understanding. And be willing to accept there's nothing you can do but ride it out. Like, you can't change it. And it's been really helpful to me.

**Research Question 4 Findings**

RQ1c: How have the intersectional identities of women higher education leaders shaped the development of their identities as leaders and their relationship, or lack thereof, to feminism?

This research question explored participants’ intersectional identities and the formation of their identities as leaders, as well as their relationships to feminism. The data collected from the interviews revealed themes under two distinct umbrellas. First, analysis on the development of leadership identities yielded three themes: (a) motherhood and work-life balance, (b) encounters with patriarchy, and (c) critical feminism. Next,
analysis of participants’ relationships to feminism resulted in two themes: (d) identification as a feminist, and (e) support of feminist values. Below is a summary of these concepts as recounted by participants.

**Motherhood and Work-Life Balance**

Multiple participants brought up the idea of work-life balance, especially in relation to motherhood. Winnie referred to the integration of personal and professional lives as “strength that a woman can bring to leadership,” noting that she believes many women try to maintain separate personal and professional lives “because they're afraid that their womanness, whatever that is, is going to bleed into their professional demeanor.” But by keeping those two things separate, she warned, those women “are missing out on learning of how their professional life impacts their personal life and vice versa.”

Others, however, expressed concerns over their ability—or inability—to balance work and life. Monica, for instance, reflected that because I had a kid, and I always had to make sure he was protected. So, yeah, my career always came first. And I'm starting to realize that that's not the way I should be living. I need a bit of work-life balance. I'm getting there, too. I'm getting there.

Over the course of her crisis leadership experiences, Carol noted some negative impact on her personal life, as it threw into relief that she has never had balance in terms of work and parenting: “to see the ways in which it’s really impossible to hold it all together all the time, you know, the parenting and being a leader,” adding that “I’ve struggled a lot in kind of moments of regret. Of feeling like, did I focus too much on work and not enough
on, you know, being a mom? Being a spouse. Mostly it comes up around motherhood, by far.”

For Annie, motherhood shaped her perspective:

Because I could empathize with the parenting roles that many of the other people in the community were playing, or other caregiving roles that they play, whether for their own aging parents or the variety of ways that we care give, I think, I was quite sensitive to those and wanted to support people as they endeavored to be caregivers.

However, motherhood also played a central role in her decision not to pursue higher leadership titles. She explained, “at a certain point, I think if you’re also a caregiver, you sort of go, okay, I don’t have time for this. I don’t have time for this, the negative aspects of leadership to consume my emotional space and wellbeing.” Annie chose her own emotional wellbeing as a caregiver over ambition.

Encounters with Patriarchy

In a prime illustration of the interconnection of the research questions that drove this study, the ways in which participants encountered patriarchy had an influence on their leadership identities. Monica, for instance, pursued leadership partially because of the extreme emphasis on hierarchy in academia. She explained, “you can't really do a lot of that type of work when you're not in a leadership position. Just because it just doesn't seem to carry the same weight,” adding that because a title of assistant director meant she was largely ignored in decision-making spaces, “I was like, okay. They'll listen to me with a title, I should probably go ahead and pursue.”
Sebastian also noticed that she was being held to a different set of standards than her male colleagues. She shared the story of a colleague who has been promoted many times over his career and recently got a new position. When she asked about his qualifications for the position, she was told that he was able to do the job because he had a PhD. For her own promotions, she was told “you're hardworking. You're patient, you're humble. Therefore, we should promote you, or we should give you this access.”

Several participants who are WOC relayed experiences of being dismissed or having their qualifications questioned, which resulted in the feeling that they needed to prove themselves as leaders. Sebastian recounted the following:

In the Philippines, the women hold such a strong leadership role in the household. And so for me coming here and say that I can be a leader and being shut down, I have to pull it back a little bit, but then at the same time, I also have to push it a little bit and say, no, these are my identities. And that's the reason why I should be a leader.

Andrea shared:

When I think about being a woman in higher ed, for me, it's very intertwined with my being a woman of color. And just really being attuned to instances where I feel like I've been dismissed, disregarded, not taken seriously or people don't expect much.

For her, this awareness made her feel as though she must be visible in her leadership to make sure her voice is heard and that she makes conspicuous contributions in meetings. She shared,
So it's really just been, I think for me a journey to assert myself as a woman. And sometimes I even wanna say that it's about in the face with men, and getting talked over or interrupted by dudes, which happens all the time, but also with other women. Really just holding your ground and learning to be very strong in that regard.

Andrea also admitted that these experiences are intimidating, remarking that it's hard to be a new leader, figuring out my leadership voice, using what I know as a woman of color leader in this institution. And to be doing this work very assertively and know you're gonna ruffle some feathers because that's always a part of like any kind of diversity work, but just having the confidence and the support to know, I'm gonna do this, right? And this is my vision for this campus.

Tiffany remarked on the very blatant dismissal of her knowledge and leadership as an African American woman, including a story where she was completely left out of a conversation by a person who lied to others by claiming he tried to help her but that “I was resistant to change. And he thought it was because I was an African American female, they thought getting help was as sign of weakness.” She shared, “being a woman of color, it's always assumed that without even knowing you that you can't hold the same weight as others and someone else is going to have to pick up your weight and explain it.” She shared that these experiences with racism impacted her personally and made her question herself, whether she could have done something different. However, she shared, Your actions are not a trigger to someone's ignorance. And so, it's understanding how important it is to persevere from that type of situation or that type of thinking
and how important it is to stand in your own skin and know that you are equally as talented.

For some participants, one additional byproduct of these struggles with patriarchy was a motivation to succeed. Tiffany offered:

Because others don't seem to want to understand outside of their bubble, the impact that it has on it is, is my motivation and which I think ultimately leads to my success, because I'm so adamant to show you what a woman can do and show you what we are not. I think my passion in doing that only strives to help me find ways to be more innovative, to find ways to be more crafty only so I can prove you wrong and I can disrupt the narrative.

Monica similarly wanted to prove people wrong who had told her that as a Black woman she would not be taken seriously as a director of financial aid. But rather than hold her back, it steeled her resolve. She said, “I got tired of people telling me what I couldn’t do, you know? And I really wanted to prove them wrong, because I can do it, and I have done it, and I will continue to do it.” She also felt a sense of responsibility to make change, remarking,

It's really important that I do a good job, because people are sort of craving for this voice in leadership that says, “You can be here, and you can be okay.” And so for me, it's like, we still as women have a lot of glass ceilings to crack, much less get through. I'm at that point where I'm still feeling like, if we can just crack them a little bit, and maybe one or two of us get through.
**Critical Feminism**

Discussions about participants’ leadership identities also brought up parallels to critical feminist values. Values like collaboration, relationship building, and community were mentioned often as participants shared their leadership philosophies and identities. Moreover, a commitment to social justice and utilizing leadership as a way to enact change reflected the critical feminist belief of leadership as an inherently political act. Carol, in fact, attributed her leadership commitments of collaboration, consensus building, and vulnerability to her own commitments to feminism and her gender.

Commitment to people, collaboration, and building authentic relationships are foundational principles of critical feminism, and several participants also expressed that these values are foundational to their leadership philosophies or styles. Andrea, for instance, explained that one of the main tenets of her leadership philosophy is to be sincerely engaged in collaboration, and the thing about being a leader is that you don’t have to have all the answers. You’re not doing it alone. Part of being a leader is pulling together a really strong ream. A lot of folks who provide you with different perspectives, viewpoints, alternative things to talk about, who challenge you on certain difficult decisions.

Carol also noted a commitment to collaboration as a principle she relies on heavily as part of her leadership. Additionally, she noted the principle of consensus-building, remarking that her work is about “building consensus, building bridges, empowering people to do the work where they are.”

In prioritizing crisis response, Carol also brought the principle of relationship building to bear, mentioning that “I definitely think for me, specifically with this crisis, it
was making sure that people had a forum to be heard, to get answers. So I would say that the principle of transparency and trust, and relationship would be primary.” Annie also believes in leadership as building relationships. When asked about her leadership philosophy, she explained, “I don’t think of it as leadership, but just sort of a way of working with people.” Some of this philosophy comes from the way she approached the community that made up her university: as a family. She explained,

The community that makes up the university is sort of like a big family and you have some crazy people and you have people of all kinds of different personalities and points of view, and yet you want to embrace and get your arms around that community to leverage it to the best it can be.

Along these lines, several participants cited connections to particular communities as reasons for pursuing careers in higher education and positions of leadership. For Sebastian, that connection started in her own undergraduate studies; she reflected that she wanted to work in student services because

I also see the value of the outside the classroom space. And that was something that was so uniquely gifted to me when I was an undergrad, a lot of my connection, a lot of my sense of belonging really stemmed from the outside the classroom experience.

Laura shared a similar experience, explaining that as a first-generation college student, she did not know what she was doing and did not have anyone to ask. She shared,

Once I survived that first year of college, I said to myself, wow, I gotta get more of my family and more of my community into this college thing. And so I
immediately knew that I wanted to have some role in higher education and outreach in particular to do outreach.

She also shared that her vision was
to do outreach into the agricultural community I grew up in, to inform them about the benefits of college and how it could lift you out of poverty. I was already lifting my family out of poverty just by having jobs in a larger city that was not agricultural. So I had already saw the trajectory of what was gonna happen for my life and my career.

The benefits she felt from pursuing education convinced her that this was the career for her. Monica noted something similar:

I felt like it was a good opportunity for me to show some leadership in terms of, this is what we can do. This is an option for us. And we don't have to worry about our not-so-great K-12 backgrounds. So it was a chance for me to sort of, what I call, give back to my community without actually having to go home to do so.

Andrea similarly chose to pursue a leadership position because of her connection to the community of students, colleagues, and staff on her campus, which is an HSI. She explained that especially in recent years under the political climate with the Trump administration,

I feel like having that connection with the students, with the community that we have… that's where the meaning was where I felt like, okay, this is a small part of the world that I can contribute to, that I know I'm helping other students find their success, playing a small role in them figuring out what they wanna go on to do.
An additional factor for some participants in the formation of their leadership identities was the importance of visibility. Laura, for instance, shared the story of a young woman whom she mentored who was inspired by her story as a Latina in a dean position. When she reflected on her experience with that young woman, she realized that she had never in her career met a Latina dean. She shared,

the importance of me being me, and saying who I am is important rather than trying to code switch and not hiding who I really am, so that to me became a really important moment for me to understand my story, and understand the stories of my family members.

Sebastian also shared that

when you aspire for something, you also reflect who are the people that I'm gonna inspire as well. And so I always planted my seed, like if I'm able to be in this role, how much more of another woman of color, a woman of immigrant identity, could also aspire and see me in this role and say, I can be that way. I can also be in that.

One of the most prominent parallels to critical feminism is the sense of leadership as an inherently political act. Almost all the participants indicated that they had entered higher education or leadership out of a desire to make a positive impact. Monica, for instance, noted that she pursued leadership because

I thought there was a better way to do things. I thought there was a better way to reach students. Not that what we were doing was wrong, but there was just room for change and opportunity for development in how we communicate with students and how we talk about certain things.
She added, “I just felt like, if I was there to help maybe start those conversations earlier, maybe we could change the trajectory of students actually thinking college was an option for them.” Tiffany similarly found passion in helping students access higher education. She shared,

I felt it was like my due diligence, my passion to kind of understand the different barriers that people were encountering and then making sure I changed that barrier or changed that culture to allow accessibility on different levels. So that transition into my passion and then me seeking further and delving into different processes which elevated my career.

Annie shared that she came from “a very difficult financial background and a single-parent environment, living in poverty, being on food stamps, you know, a variety of financial difficulties over time.” She noted of her class background:

I think that that gave me a great deal of empathy for an understanding for students who are working their way through. And so I do think that it influenced my approach to various policy issues and the decisions that needed to be made for the university that have coming form that class background was significant.

She offered that that

one of the great things about leadership is that you can use whatever power or authority you have to try to be fair and bring about just outcomes for people in the community. So, I mean, my approach was, once I was in a position of significant authority, to try to protect people [from discrimination and harassment].

For her, leadership translated into the power to protect and empower others. Carol offered a similar sentiment, sharing that
I think there are ways in which I've found the visibility that I have, and the resources that I have, can be used to support the visibility and enhance the resources of others, especially those who don't have visibility and resources. So in a way, it creates opportunities to create a more just community.

She also shared that using the visibility and the power that I have in a way that builds up the common good, in a way, that challenges some of the aspects of academic that honestly, I have struggled with myself and not really been drawn to.

Those aspects she challenges include the very hierarchical nature of academia and male domination. She added, “part of being a leader is, how can I transform a system that is, in a lot of ways, unjust.”

Andrea was given the opportunity to step into the role she currently occupies and felt that “the opportunity to be a Latina doing this faculty support work with the social justice and equity training and mindset that I have, um, impacting a much broader set of colleagues was too good, an opportunity to pass up.” She expressed that her leadership philosophy includes a desire not only to empower others, but to disrupt current systems:

I'm always thinking, how do we get people through to their goals and higher ed, not so that they can replicate the same systems that we've been trying to navigate, but rather how do we get them there to success so that the pathways are wider and change for the better and allow more people to come along with us.

Laura similarly was offered opportunities to step into leadership positions that enabled her to question the system and to “understand and listen to the forms of systemic
oppression in our leadership roles and how we change them and how we can keep
pushing until we change them.” She added,

when you bring who you are into a space that has been structured in such a way
for so many years, that they’re not used to it, so kind of breaking the mold has
been my mission for the last really year, is breaking the dominant mold around
what leadership should look like.

Sebastian shared that she entered the higher education profession out of a desire
to have an impact and added that “aspiring to be a leader was something that if I truly
want to create the change that I want for my community, a leadership role should be
something that I aspire for.” Despite her encounters with patriarchy and discrimination,
she resolved to use her leadership to create change within the system. She admitted that
she has been tokenized, but she also admitted to using that to her advantage, explaining:
what I've been doing is I've been hiring a lot of women of color in my team. I've
been hiring folks that carries identities or folks that may not necessarily be
represented in those spaces. So I'm shifting it because now I do have that ability
to shift, maybe discreetly or not discreetly, but I think that's where the beauty of
like, because they think that, oh, they're doing great because they've actually hired
me and I'm a person of color. But for me, my response to that is like, I'm gonna
reshift some of this landscape, like, let me see my folks be in these spaces as well.
Sebastian’s commitment to positive change and shifting the landscape of higher
education is a clear example of critical feminism.
Identification as a Feminist

When asked whether they identified as feminists, five out of eight participants answered in the absolute affirmative. For some of them, that identification was linked very closely to their family experiences. Annie, for instance, explained, “I think I was really socialized, at least within my family, toward feminism, because my mother was clearly, even though she didn’t necessarily frame it in that language, she was sort of bucking the trends very early on.” It was not only her mother, though, that helped Annie develop a relationship to feminism. She said, “my father articulated to me that he was a feminist,” and that even though he had not been educated or socialized toward feminism, she recalled him talking to her about it at a young age. Andrea similarly had strong family influence in her identification as a feminist. She shared,

I come from a very strong line of women, very opinionated, outspoken, feisty women. My grandmother, my mother really just instilled a sense in me that you, wherever you are, you deserve to be there, speak up, ask for what you need, be very upfront in advocating for yourself.

The support of the women in her family instilled these values in her at an early age.

Conversely, Carol described the experience of wanting to oppose what she observed at home, explaining,

Before I named what feminism was to me, I saw the patterns around gender within my own family structure and my community, and definitely I wanted to resist. And going off and getting an education was part of that resistance for me. Having options in terms of my own career. So it was a very practical thing.
Carol’s reflections on her observations helped her develop a feminist identity before she even had language around it.

Several participants noted affirmation of their feminist identities when they encountered feminism as part of their academic studies. For Annie, her identification as a feminist was already strong going into school, and then within her academic discipline she studied gender issues and went on to teach courses and develop programs around gender. For Andrea, her academic studies helped give language to the values she had seen embodied in her family:

Once I got further into my education was really learning about the history of different waves of feminism, different feminist epistemologies and especially getting in touch with Chicana feminist theory, was also very influential and I was able to put names and concepts to some of the actions that I had seen take place by the strong women in my life previously.

Carol also described encountering feminist theory and feminist social movements in school and reported drawing on those in both her academic studies and, later, her professional research.

Tiffany’s connection to feminism and her belief in empowering women in the workplace was strengthened in a professional setting through mentorship. As she explained, she had a supervisor who understood her point of view. She clarified that had that supervisor not sat with her and understood her, she might not also recognize when someone else needed the same mentorship and support. She reflected,

It's always just that piece or just doing that one little act of taking someone to the side and helping them where you feel the assistance is needed. So I think that
shaped me as well. Because no person is incapable of doing a job if they had the right information.

Mentorship helped Tiffany grow as both a leader and a feminist.

Support of Feminist Values

Three participants indicated that they do not consider themselves feminists. However, when asked to elaborate, each indicated that she believed in feminist values; rather, they did not feel they could fully assume the label because they felt they did not fully embody all that feminism represents to them. For Sebastian, the term “feminism” is a relatively new one, and although she has been exploring what it means to be a feminist, she still does not consider it one of the identities she holds at the forefront, explaining “I don’t feel the texture of that yet in my life.” She clarified,

Maybe I have attributes of being a feminist, but I'm also on the fence of, I don't want to carry an identity that I don't have full ownership or full knowledge of it. And I think that's why when I introduce myself, I always hold on, like my queerness, my woman of color, my Pinay identity, my immigrant identity, because these are four identities that has been part of my life and I've explored. Although Sebastian expressed distinctly feminist values, for her, the term and identity are too new and too academic to yet feel comfortable expressing that as an identity.

Laura’s perception of feminism shapes the fact that she does not identify as a feminist. She explained,

I wouldn't call myself a feminist because I feel like feminists are individuals that are—this is my perception—that are really dedicated to the cause, for speaking up
for females and having all the knowledge and having all the information and focusing on changing those policies and laws. That's not what I'm doing in terms of my career chosen career.

And yet, Laura stated that she does see herself as a “feminist by example,” noting that “I do think that I break down barriers of what it means to be a woman in the workspace, so in that perspective, I do feel like I am pieces of a feminist.”

For Monica, her hesitation to call herself a feminist comes from deeply rooted perceptions of gender roles based in her family experiences as a child in a very patriarchal household:

I grew up sort of thinking, okay, I can grow up and do all these things, but I still have to be submissive if I want to be happily married. And so I feel like I need to shave that piece out, and not be so submissive to men, in order to consider myself a feminist.

Yet, Monica is not opposed to feminism: “I support the feminist movement and all the things that it represents, but I couldn't comfortably say that I was a feminist, no.” For these three participants, the fact that they do not self-identify as feminists has nothing to do with rejection of feminist values, but rather their perceptions of what it means to be and fully embody feminism.

**Summary**

Findings from interviews included several superordinate themes per research question, some of which comprise multiple subthemes. Appendix H provides a brief overview of the themes identified in the findings, organized by research question. Although each research question yielded its own themes, the research questions and
themes that were subsequently identified are by nature intertwined, so although the findings have been depicted individually, the themes must be understood as being interrelated and in conversation with each other.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of women leaders in higher education, with particular attention paid to their experiences of leadership during times of crisis. In doing so, this study sought to illuminate the challenges women may face on the path to higher education leadership, and the ways in which those challenges shape their leadership preparation and philosophies. The study was guided by the following four research questions, comprising one overarching question and three subquestions intended to contextualize and build on the main question:

1. How do gendered experiences shape the ways women higher education leaders respond to crises?
   a. How do women leaders within institutions of higher education describe their encounters with patriarchy, particularly in their pursuit of leadership positions?
   b. How does the experience of serving as an institutional leader in a moment of crisis shape, recast, or cause a revision of women leaders’ leadership philosophies?
   c. How have the intersectional identities of women higher education leaders shaped the development of their identities as leaders and their relationship, or lack thereof, to feminism?

To answer these research questions, eight people were chosen to participate in semistructured interviews that lasted approximately 1 hour. Participants had to identify as women and have provided administrative leadership in institutions of higher education
during times of crisis. To identify positions of “administrative leadership,” position titles were compared to the 202 positions defined in the *Administrators in Higher Education Survey*, as conducted by CUPA-HR, which fall into the following categories (CUPA-HR, 2019):

- Top executive officers
- Senior institutional officers
- Academic deans
- Institutional administrators
- Heads of divisions, departments, and centers
- Academic associate/assistant deans

Because critical feminism and feminist phenomenology are both intersectional in nature (Ahmed, 2009; Bhattacharya, 2017; Chamarette, 2018), the study also sought to recruit at least 50% BIPOC women. Ultimately, six out of eight (75%) participants identified as having at least one BIPOC race or ethnicity.

The interview protocol was designed to explore participants’ paths to leadership; their experiences in leadership positions, including during crisis events; and the “many different ingredients” of their identities, including their identities as leaders (Lorde, 2007, p. 120). Employing a lens of critical feminism and a methodology of feminist phenomenology, the narrative examples provided during the interviews were then analyzed to identify common themes, with an emphasis on gendered experiences, and contextualized within the largely patriarchal structures and organizations in which they were operating.
Chapter 4 presented the data collected during the interview process. Below are discussions and conclusions of the findings for each research question, as well as recommendations for best practices and future research.

**Discussion**

**Research Question 1**

Four superordinate themes emerged from the data that addressed the question of how gendered experiences shaped the way participants responded to crises: (a) socialization as caretakers, (b) inclination toward collaboration and relationships, (c) silver linings, and (d) prior experiences. The first two themes address the ways women lead, the next addresses their responses during crisis events, and the last addresses those factors that prepare—or do not prepare—women for crisis leadership.

Although several of the crisis events discussed by participants had the potential to impact organizations fiscally, nearly every single participant made it abundantly clear that her prime concern was the safety and physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing of the people in her orbit, which reflects the crisis leadership best practices of attending to the human aspects of crises (see Ahern & Loh, 2020; Anderson, 2018; Koehn, 2020; Lacey, 2020; Stern, 2013; Wilson, 2020). Interestingly, though, several participants reflected that her desire to care take was not necessarily because of her gender but because of *gender socialization*, or the fact that women are socialized to focus on and care for people. As Annie mentioned, the impulse to care for others is not “biologically essential to our nature,” but rather a socialized trait that shapes the way women interact and respond to crisis events. When responding to crisis events, several participants displayed the preference for collaboration and leaning on relationships rather than
authoritarian decision-making or operating in isolation. Valuing collaboration and relationship building is a cornerstone of feminist leadership, as well as crisis leadership, particularly in higher education. This is of particular interest because, as will be discussed further with Research Question 1c, not every participant identifies as a feminist. However, even those who do not consider themselves to be feminists say they support feminist values; the data discussed in Chapter 4 illustrate the presence of those values in the ways these women prioritized and mobilized their crisis responses.

It is remarkable to note that even in the face of crisis, several participants found the silver lining. Both Sebastian and Laura were able to take the opportunity of the COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis of anti-Black racism on campus to assert their voices where they were previously shut down. Noting that the “crisis actually gave me permission to do something,” Laura capitalized on the opportunity to make Black Lives Matter an institutional priority in a space where previously she was expected to keep quiet and not ruffle any feathers. Sebastian similarly was able to take the opportunity to advocate for student services that students had been asking for and which she had been supporting for long before the pandemic hit. Andrea also took the opportunity to reimagine processes to shape a better future for her university. These women, in the face of crisis, asked how they could take the cards they were dealt and rearrange them to improve the lives of the people in their institutions.

One of the common best practices in crisis leadership, and particularly in crisis leadership in a higher education setting, is preparation and prevention. Booker (2014) pointed out that “proactive crisis management plans must become the norm for universities because man-made and/or natural-made disasters are becoming increasingly
frequent at institutions of higher education” (p. 21). The prevalence of crises in institutions of higher education was made clear by the breadth of experiences covered by participants, ranging from the all-encompassing COVID-19 pandemic to isolated incidents on specific campuses. Moreover, more than one participant remarked on the amount of crises she had met in her time in higher education. And yet, not one person mentioned that any form of crisis management plan had been in place for any of the crises discussed during their interviews. Some participants did remark on the preparation they had received over the course of their careers in terms of learning from other leaders, advocating for underrepresented programs, academic preparation, and strengthening important crisis leadership skills like communication.

Others, however, stated categorically that they were not professionally prepared for crisis leadership. For them, they found their preparation came from their personal backgrounds, and in particular, their experiences with struggle. Annie, for instance, mentioned that her working-class background is what gave her the ability to creatively address budget shortfalls rather than laying off employees. Laura’s personal experiences, having “been through a few things,” gave her the strength and resilience to roll up her sleeves and do the work that needed to be done. For participants who had lived through struggle, their personal experiences are what shaped their ability to respond and lead through crisis events with compassion and with people at the center of their priorities.

**Research Question 1a**

This research question explored the experiences of women who have navigated a path to leadership in the largely patriarchal institution of higher education. Four deeply interrelated themes emerged: (a) the glass ceiling, (b) disconnection from authentic self,
(c) discrimination, and (d) emotional and psychological toll. The first three themes address the experiences women have had while navigating their paths to leadership, and the final theme addresses the fallout from those experiences.

When asked candidly whether they thought their gender had an effect on the way they were treated by their colleagues and superiors, every participant responded in the affirmative. In fact, most of them responded with an unequivocal and resounding yes. One of the ways this manifested itself was through the experience of a glass ceiling, or an “invisible barrier preventing women from ascending into elite leadership positions” (Northouse, 2016, p. 399). Multiple participants experienced the phenomenon of “the higher the fewer,” mentioning that although they had support in the early stages of their leadership, the higher they went the more difficult it became to advance (Johnson, 2017, p. 6). Monica also noticed that she had male colleagues who advanced with more ease than she did, and she and Tiffany both mentioned having to leave their institutions in order to pursue more advanced titles. Several participants also remarked on the lack of representation of women, and particularly WOC, in leadership spaces. For some, this had the consequence of not only intimidating them, but shaping the belief that leadership by default translated to mean male.

In the face of operating within these largely homogenous White, male spaces, participants also expressed an expectation to conform to particular ideals of leadership, which sometimes meant having to stifle their own instincts, passions, and personalities. Several participants shared that they felt the need to perform whiteness, or femininity, or an ideal of leadership that did not come naturally to them. This also led to a vigilant awareness for some participants of who is in the room and how they are being perceived,
manifesting in consistent shifts in behavior and code switching. Some were also advised to “tone it down” when it came to the work about which they were passionate, so as to not ruffle any feathers. Toning it down also became a survival strategy; Annie, Monica, and Sebastian all brought up concerns about losing their jobs. Being in a constant state of survival mode cannot be conducive to creative or authentic leadership, and by extension can erode the trust and sense of community that is foundational in crisis leadership and critical feminist leadership.

All participants also shared stories about experiencing and/or witnessing acts of discrimination. These acts ranged in flagrancy from microaggressions and acts of dismissal to blatant sexual harassment and acts of racism. Even Winnie, who unlike the other participants works in the chiefly woman-dominated discipline of nursing, regularly experiences acts of dismissal, which she referred to as “nurses, God love ‘em” syndrome, in which people pay backhanded compliments and feigned respect to the profession. Experiences like this can be very isolating, especially when the institution not only turns a blind eye to cultures that foster this kind of behavior, but refuses to respond when informed directly. Even in Andrea’s story, where a blatant act of racism was reported to HR, it took the backlash of an entire community to induce a response from the institution. Not only have participants been on the receiving end of discriminatory behavior, but they have, in some instances, done so with the tacit acquiescence of their institutions.

Encounters with the glass ceiling, a disconnection from one’s authentic self, and suffering acts of discrimination all take an emotional and psychological toll. Participants described their experiences as draining, traumatizing, and exhausting. Moreover, these acts took a toll on participants’ confidence, leading them to question themselves and the
experiences they have had and prompting them to police their own actions and appearances so as not to invite certain behaviors. In reflecting back, Laura shared “it hurts, those moments they mess with you.” The effects of those encounters are not fleeting; they sat with participants long after they had finished. That these women were still able to connect to community and build relationships amidst toxic and hostile organizational cultures is a feat in and of itself and speaks to the strength of their characters and values, as well as the champions they had on their sides.

Research Question 1b

Three themes emerged from analysis of the data that addressed how experiences of crisis leadership influenced or modified participants’ leadership philosophies: (a) preparedness, (b) crisis as opportunity, and (c) evolution of leadership identity. The first two themes address the way participants approach leadership in light of their crisis experiences. The last theme addresses the way participants’ own leadership identities evolved as the result of their crisis leadership experiences.

Although none of the participants indicated an extreme revision of their leadership philosophies, two in particular mentioned that they feel the need to always be prepared for the next crisis situation and the somewhat mercurial nature of the higher education landscape. Monica, who remarked that over the last 10 years she felt “like it’s been one crisis after another,” operates in a state of alert vigilance: “I always want to operate like something could happen.” Andrea similarly shared the sentiment that she operates under the question of “How do we keep on our toes?” Although this level of vigilance may have the potential to be exhausting, it also speaks to participants’ strengths in their willingness and abilities to tackle the next crisis. Along a similar vein, and in
alignment with the evidence collected in answer to RQ1, several participants also have learned to approach crisis as an opportunity for learning, growth, and advocacy. Their leadership philosophies have evolved to embrace the use of their voices in the face of a crisis, and to embrace flexibility as a way to not only address a crisis at hand but think innovatively about the future of their institutions and what it means to work in a modern context.

Rather than causing a revision or evolution of leadership philosophies, participants’ experiences seemed to have a more significant effect on their leadership identities. This manifested itself in several ways. For Annie, she gained confidence as a risk-taker in the wake of her successful and creative approach to addressing enormous budget shortfalls during the 2008 financial crisis. Tiffany also gained confidence, explaining that she uses her voice more powerfully, particularly in situations where she is addressing her own leadership. For Carol and Sebastian, crisis leadership strengthened their leadership identities as women. Carol found strength in her vulnerability and bringing her full authentic self to work, and Sebastian indicated that she had strengthened her communication, empathy, and engagement as a woman. Crisis leadership also offered the opportunity to some participants for reflection on their leadership. For Sebastian, her experiences caused her to reflect on her reasons for pursuing higher education and leadership in the first place. Carol, on the other hand, reflected on places where she feels she could use some growth, namely, in her ability to be decisive and to trust herself. For these women, experiences with crisis leadership may not have changed how they lead per se, but it did affect the way they see themselves as leaders.
That participants were able to find opportunities and spaces to grow throughout their crisis experiences, even in environments that are not necessarily designed to allow them to thrive in their authentic leadership identities, illustrates a fortitude that makes them especially strong as crisis leaders. If, as Stern (2013) asserted, “crises serve as poignant reminders of the crucial role of leadership in cultivating resilient communities—communities equipped to respond to and recover from crises” (p. 51), then these leaders exemplify that role. Resilient leaders cultivate resilient communities. Moreover, that their crisis experiences did not fundamentally change their leadership practices challenges the notion of crisis leadership as distinct from leadership during times of normalcy. The values and practices they brought to the table as leaders proved to be assets in their crisis leadership experiences.

**Research Question 1c**

Research Question 1c sought to explore participants’ leadership identities and their relationships to feminism with respect to the ways these have been shaped by their intersecting personal identities. Five total themes emerged from the evidence. Analysis of leadership identities yielded three themes: (a) motherhood and work-life balance, (b) encounters with patriarchy, and (c) critical feminism. Analysis of participants’ relationships to feminism yielded two themes: (d) identification as a feminist, and (e) support of feminist values. The first two themes address the ways their experiences as women, and particularly as women in higher education, shaped their leadership identities. The next theme addresses the leadership values participants addressed that align with critical feminist leadership. Finally, the last two themes address the role feminism plays consciously in participants’ lives.
In discussions of their leadership philosophies and experiences, multiple participants brought up the ways motherhood shaped their approaches to leadership, along with the concept of work-life balance. Although Winnie extolled the virtues of integrating one’s personal and professional lives, the others expressed concerns about an inability to balance their work lives with their home lives. For Monica and Carol, these reflections sometimes accompanied a sense of regret or questions as to where they would be if they had not placed such emphasis on work. For Annie, the responsibilities of caregiving took precedence over the potential to pursue a higher leadership title and the negative aspects of leadership. She chose her emotional wellbeing as a caregiver because, in her experience, she could not have both that, and ambition and leadership.

In an illustration of the interconnectedness of the themes that emerged from all of the research questions, participants’ encounters with patriarchy throughout their careers also had an impact on their leadership identities. For instance, the hierarchical nature of academia gave Monica the sense that to be taken seriously, she would need to attain a certain level of title. In fact, not being taken seriously was an issue several participants encountered, with people questioning their abilities, dismissing them, or disregarding their leadership and experience. For some participants, these acts of dismissal and disregard intimidated them, but also made them feel as though they needed to be more assertive in exercising their voice and advocating for themselves. For others, these experiences spurred them on, making them determined to succeed and prove critics wrong. These findings are disquieting; it is in many ways a wonder that any women make it to leadership positions in the first place when one reflects on the many ways the systems in which they work operate to diminish and subdue them. It must also be noted
that although some participants found resolve in the face of these obstacles, one must not just applaud these experiences as fortifying or character building. Considering that their strengths as leaders stemmed from their values, one may argue that they achieved success in spite of, rather than because of, these encounters with patriarchy.

In discussing their leadership philosophies and identities, participants shared several values that align very closely with critical feminism. Several participants indicated a commitment to collaboration and building strong relationships, especially when it came time to craft a crisis response. Community was also a major component of many participants’ leadership philosophies, as well as their motives for pursuing careers in higher education and leadership in the first place. For several, having a deep connection to particular communities not only propelled them into higher education leadership, it made them reflect on the important roles they played as visible leaders for other young WOC who may someday aspire to leadership. This sense of community is a significant theme throughout their leadership paths; their devotion to community not only shaped their leadership identities and practices, but for some, it also set them on their career paths as well as formed their crisis response. Considering that community is a significant component of crisis leadership best practices as well as feminist leadership and critical feminist values, it is no wonder that it played such a critical component in participants’ leadership experiences.

Significantly, nearly every participant cited a desire to transform or disrupt flawed and exclusionary systems as a reason for pursuing higher education as a career, and saw leadership as a necessary component to change making. This translates to them using their influence and power to question unjust systems and make changes from within. For
Sebastian, for instance, this meant capitalizing on the ways her leadership tokenized her as an immigrant WOC to hire more people who hold similar identities. These patterns of disruption in an effort to “create a more just community” not only illustrate leadership as a political act, but, in the spirit of critical feminism, reimagines and redefines what leadership looks like (see Blackmore, 2006, pg. 192).

Interestingly, although most participants expressed values that align with critical feminism and feminist values, only five of them consider themselves to be feminists. The five who do identify as feminists cited influences within their families, academic studies, and professional experiences as being formative to their feminist identities. Many of them discussed strong women in their lives, including mothers, grandmothers, and supervisors. Andrea, Carol, and Annie also encountered feminist theory in school, which additionally helped shape their pursuits as scholars. Although three participants indicated that they do not identify as feminists, all three expressed alignments with feminist values. They indicated that although they do not yet feel ownership over the label of feminist, they recognize in themselves attributes of feminism and believe in the importance of empowering women. Laura, for instance, described herself as “pieces of a feminist.”

Leaders do not need to claim the label of feminist to employ feminist or critical feminist leadership practices; these three leaders exemplify critical feminist leadership through their commitment to community, collaboration, and creating change, regardless of how they identify. These commitments serve as leadership strengths in times of crisis as well as in times of normalcy; whether or not they used the specific language of feminism to articulate their commitments, each participant illustrated the ways in which feminist leadership and critical feminism can strengthen crisis response.
Conclusions and Implications

Data gathered during this study reflected crisis as “a pervasive condition” in institutions of higher education (Gigliotti, 2020b, para. 1). These data also reflected that leaders in these organizations remained unprepared, despite the recommendations of crisis leadership scholars to prepare for emerging crises using methods such as crisis management planning and risk assessments (see Booker, 2014; Fortunato et al., 2018; Gigliotti, 2016). That said, just as feminist leadership encourages a reimagining of what leadership looks like, the data in this study also suggest the reimagining of what crisis leadership and preparation looks like.

It is worth noting that several participants called on their personal experiences of struggle rather than their professional or academic experiences in preparing their responses to crisis. These experiences not only helped them to focus on the people in their organizations, but to approach crisis leadership with creativity, optimism, and resilience. Their ability to think outside the box, to find opportunity amidst adversity, and to do so with humans at the heart of their strategies came not from prescriptive practices or rigid ideals of how to lead, but from their lived experiences as whole beings, informed and influenced by their gender, race, class, and the many other ingredients that comprise their identities. It is no coincidence that women who place people at the center of their everyday leadership practices bring that compassion to their practices as crisis leaders.

The central research question that guided the design of this study asked how gendered experiences shape the ways women higher education leaders respond to crises. The data reflected that these experiences did not shape their crisis response in a vacuum; rather, they shaped their identities and philosophies as leaders overall. Participants responded to
crisis as they would in times of calm: with compassion and regard for the people they lead.

Given that women remain underrepresented in the upper echelons of higher education leadership, Howard and Gagliardi (2018) recommended that “a closer look at the circumstances under which women become college presidents would enrich our understanding of the challenges of achieving parity” (p. 4). With that in mind, this study also sought to explore the nature of the pathways to leadership navigated by those women who have achieved leadership positions. What became clear through the data analysis is that higher education must engage in a meaningful and deliberate culture shift in order to engage—and retain—more women leaders, and especially BIWOC leaders. For the eight women who participated in this study, their paths to leadership were less of a road and more of a minefield. Even for those who were offered opportunities to advance rather than seeking them out, experiences with discrimination and expectations to conform to White patriarchal standards created obstacles, or at the very least certainly did not assist, on their journeys. Given that participants’ varied experiences reflected similar themes, it is conceivable that for all of those who navigate these obstacles and make it to leadership positions, there are likely many who chose not to move forward or even left higher education because of toxic environments where they were not empowered to advocate or stand up for themselves or to bring their full authentic selves to their work. Howard and Gagliardi asked why there are not more women in leadership positions, but considering the experiences detailed herein, one may just as easily ask why there are any women who choose leadership, considering the pitfalls of the leadership journey.
One of the ways to shift the culture in academia is to shift the idea of what “good” leadership looks like. If higher education can divest itself of masculinized ideals of leadership, a critical feminist framework for leadership could create spaces for the parity that Howard and Gagliardi recognized as missing from higher education leadership. Part of this involves recognizing the disparate standards to which men and women are held, as illustrated by the data in this study. A prime example of this is Sebastian’s story of a male colleague getting a promotion because he has a PhD, whereas she got promoted because of stereotypically feminine values and traits. Sebastian’s story made one thing very clear: it is not that the playing field is not level, it is that they are on two different playing fields, even though they are in the same arena. To achieve parity in leadership, it must be achieved in the standards by which folks are evaluated for hiring and leadership. Perhaps, though, people should be held to the standards of critical feminist leaders: the values of collaboration, community, and self-reflexivity are not only strong feminist leadership traits, but strong crisis leadership traits as well. Those who are chosen to lead because they embody the traits of a critical feminist leader will by nature be prepared to lead in the crisis-heavy environment of academia.

Finally, one of the most critical ways in which the culture in academia and higher education leadership must shift is in the deliberate and mindful hiring and promotion of women, particularly WOC. Representation matters. The experiences participants shared revealed that a lack of women, especially WOC, in leadership positions proved to be a roadblock in many ways and influenced the way some participants even understood what leadership means. The intentional development and preparation of women, particularly BIWOC of many different backgrounds, for leadership positions would not only facilitate
a shift away from hegemonic White patriarchal ideals of leadership, but convey the value of alternative leadership ideals. In doing so, this would not only open up opportunities for parity but encourage younger generations to aspire to leadership positions.

This study also has implications for the ways in which leadership and crisis leadership can be studied and understood. Traditional models of leadership, and even the majority of the canon around crisis leadership, treat crisis leadership and “normal” leadership as entirely distinct. In reimagining leadership and crisis leadership, the data in this study also offer the opportunity to reimagine those two things as two sides of the same coin, rather than as two discrete concepts. The participants in this study did not suddenly transform their leadership practices in the face of crisis; rather, they brought to bear the values with which they already operated, and called on the skills and expertise they had cultivated throughout their personal, academic, and professional experiences to inform their response. Although their focus may have shifted to concentrate on those things that delineate crisis situations from times of calm, their priorities and practices were rooted in the same values that shape their leadership at all times.

**Recommendations**

*For Senior Leadership in Institutions of Higher Education*

The data presented in this study reflect an urgent and crucial need for a culture shift in academia. This culture shift must start at the top; institutions must not rely on the emotional and intellectual labor of those who are being most marginalized by their organizational practices to make that shift for them. The first step in this culture shift must include policies and practices that not only decry harassment and discrimination, but actively counteract these behaviors through initiatives that include education and
practices rooted in transformative justice principles to emphasize accountability and change over punishment. It is not enough to merely condemn acts of abuse; if institutional practices do not align with institutional policies that prohibit these behaviors, then marginalized members of these institutions will continue to endure these acts. This means holding HR groups accountable for the policies they are charged with upholding. The story Andrea shared about her friend’s encounter with HR is an atrocious example of the ways people can continue to suffer from harassment even when they have reported discriminating behaviors. It should not have taken an uproar on the part of the students to provoke an institutional response. Institutions must take responsibility for the ways in which their practices enable a culture of misogyny and racism to flourish and work to actively bring those practices to an end.

Aside from taking measures to hold accountable the people who do perpetrate acts of racism, sexism, and discrimination, institutions must work to actively get out ahead of these behaviors and work in earnest to prevent them. Part of this entails consistent and frequent messaging that not only condemns the behaviors that lead to the toxic environments that inhibit the ability for many to flourish, but also advocates for behaviors and practices throughout the institution that actively support and facilitate a culture of respect, appreciation, and community. This could also entail mandatory training beyond antiharassment workshops. Institutions should include their communities in work that actively pursues antiracism, antisexism, and antidiscrimination. Institutions should partner with offices of diversity, equity, and inclusion to craft curricula that involve the entire community in shifting institutional culture to one of respect, trust, and care.
Facilitating a cultural shift away from White hegemonic patriarchal ideals starts with attracting, retaining, and developing leaders who epitomize the critical feminist values that beget strong leadership and crisis response. Part of this must involve recognizing the expertise already available to an institution. At least two participants indicated that in order to advance, they needed to seek employment at different institutions. Attention should be paid to internal candidates who show not only promise, but a sense of dedication to their work and the people of the institution, and internal pathways for promotion should be made available to all interested parties. This includes mentorship and development of leadership skills, as well as training on institutional processes.

Additionally, more emphasis should be put on the soft skills leaders bring to the table before they encounter crisis. For most participants, their leadership philosophies did not change drastically in the wake of crisis experiences. Instead, they brought to bear the values with which they already lead, and put focus on communication, collaboration, relationships and community building, and consensus building. These practices are invaluable in times of crisis as well as calm and should be considered important traits to consider in hiring decisions. This also involves the recognition of the strengths that diversity of experience brings to an institution. Disrupting hegemony and patriarchy means more than just “ticking off boxes,” it requires deliberately and intentionally crafting leadership teams that comprise many different identities, including (but certainly not limited to) racial and ethnic background, gender, class, and ability. Each participant’s unique background gave her a particular lens through which she understood and
approached crisis situations, and which helped her to do so with compassion, creativity, and empathy.

Administrators should also be aware of whose voices are not present in the room during decision-making and make concerted efforts to bring in people with expertise, regardless of their titles. For several participants, crisis situations opened up opportunities to have their voices heard and advocacy recognized. Yet, it should not take a crisis to listen to those with expertise and connections to their school communities. Conscientiously involving people of many backgrounds and positions in decision-making not only serves institutions by increasing the depth and breadth of knowledge in the room, but also advances a necessary culture shift by diversifying power structures and increasing visibility for people who have been traditionally left out of the conversation.

*For Women Leaders*

For women who have already attained positions of leadership, one of the most important acts they can engage in is mentoring other women. Offering mentorship programs would be one way to develop leadership in-house, while offering women an opportunity to learn how to navigate the unspoken rules and expectations of an organization. Moreover, holding women-identified spaces would open space for women to not only engage in mentorship but to be in community with each other, to build relationships across institutions and provide emotional support. Building and strengthening relationships is not only a way to support the mental and emotional wellbeing of women leaders, but as participant’s experiences have proven, it strengthens leadership and crisis response as well. Holding women-identified spaces and mentorship programs will also increase the visibility of women leaders, lending a very important
hand in encouraging more women and others of marginalized genders to seek leadership positions. Some participants who navigated their leadership paths in male-dominated spaces had to divest themselves of the perception that leadership automatically translates to male. Increasing the visibility and availability of women leaders will by extension increase the pipeline of women who are interested in leadership and who believe leadership to be attainable. Mentorship also has the potential to encourage women’s identities as feminists, as in Tiffany’s experience, or at the very least can help cultivate the kinds of critical feminist values that make for strong leadership both in and out of crisis.

For Critical Feminist Scholars and Activists

What does a feminist look like? Not all participants associated themselves with the term feminist, but they all espouse values that align with feminist values. In order to advance critical feminist models of leadership, it will be imperative to recognize these feminist traits even in those who do not self-identify as feminists. This does not apply only to women, but certainly also to other people with marginalized genders, and even cisgender men. bell hooks (2015a) advised that “feminism is for everybody;” so, therefore, should feminist leadership be.

One theme that arose consistently when participants were asked their reasons for pursuing leadership was a desire to create change and a recognition that they required a particular level of leadership or title to enact that change. Critical feminist scholars and activists should focus efforts not only on getting women and feminists into leadership positions, but also empowering folks who are not in leadership positions or the upper echelons of leadership to create and enact change. One should not have to hold an official
leadership position—or even aspire to leadership—to have one’s voice heard and valued. A focus on empowering and developing the skills of those who are not in leadership positions will contribute to the culture shift that is crucial for higher education to undergo to create spaces for women and underrepresented leaders to flourish.

**For Further Research**

Although this study included participants from multiple regions in the United States, most of them are based in the West. It would be interesting, therefore, to explore the leadership experiences of people from a more diverse swath of regions, to examine whether region has an effect. Similarly, an exploration of women’s experiences in other countries could provide further insight into the landscape of higher education and the status of women leaders in other parts of the world. Furthermore, this study included no participants from for-profit institutions; exploration of whether the ways the culture of for-profit higher education bear out on women’s leadership experiences, particularly in crisis situations, may yield different results. Responses about leadership priorities may vary in spaces where profit margins are more aggressively protected.

Several participants mentioned their own sense of impostor syndrome, although those mentions were generally not substantive. Further exploration of this phenomenon may be warranted, as impostor syndrome may have a significant impact on women’s leadership identities and comfort in spaces of leadership. In addition, specific studies on the impact of representation and mentorship on the numbers of women, and especially BIWOC leaders, could prove significantly helpful in addressing the gap between the number of qualified women in the leadership pipeline and the number of women who make it to the upper echelons of leadership. Moreover, this study found that participants’
leadership experiences took an emotional and psychological toll that some described as exhausting and demoralizing, and which led to at least one participant choosing not to pursue further advancement. A focused study on the repercussions that these leadership experiences can have on women’s emotional and psychological wellbeing could offer valuable insight into what some refer to as a leaking pipeline, wherein women are not making it into leadership positions although they are qualified (Northouse, 2016, p. 399).

Finally, although this study focused on the intersectional experiences of women leaders, only a couple participants brought up sexual orientation and the design of this study did not specifically seek out experiences around sexual orientation. Given its impact on the ways in which people may be treated, further exploration of this subject should specifically consider sexual orientation and include participants with diverse experiences in that regard.

Concluding Thoughts

This study was designed to advance the field of organization and leadership by focusing on the lived experiences of women who have provided crisis leadership in institutions of higher education and their paths to leadership in an industry where women remain underrepresented in the upper echelons of leadership. By exploring the lived experiences of women leaders in higher education, particularly during a crisis, this study aimed to illuminate the challenges women may face on their paths to higher education leadership. The data collected were significant but unfortunately unsurprising; in the year 2021, women still navigate paths to higher education leadership that privilege White patriarchal ideals over authentic expressions of values shaped by a diversity of backgrounds and experiences. Although the data herein do not tell every woman’s story,
they tell many women’s stories. Participants shared stories of discrimination, harassment, obstructions to advancement, and the dismissal and diminishment of their accomplishments and qualifications, among many other challenges. If organizations such as the American Council on Education want to understand how to achieve gender parity in leadership, they must first interrogate the ways in which the condition of leadership in academia is hostile toward women, and especially WOC. Annie was certainly not the first woman to choose her own wellbeing over pursuing further advancement, and she will not be the last. Women will continue to drop out of the pipeline until wellbeing and leadership are no longer mutually exclusive conditions. Achieving gender parity in academia will require a culture shift that addresses the roots of these issues.

Significantly, the women interviewed in this study managed to bring their authentic selves and their values into their leadership, despite environments that actively discouraged doing so. Those experiences and values in turn shaped their responses to crises in ways that made them more creative, resilient, and empathetic. The women in this study proved that crisis leadership does not necessitate practices and attributes that are distinct from “regular” leadership, but rather that can be part and parcel of one’s leadership identity. In fact, the women in this study proved that crisis leadership and “regular” leadership do not have to be distinct; they brought to bear values and experiences that made them strong leaders all around.

Although this study was not explicitly about the COVID-19 crisis, it was conceived of and written during this particular crisis, and many participants detailed their experiences with COVID-19 specifically. That this study was conducted during a worldwide event that has led to a reimagining of the workplace across industries is
particularly compelling. Crisis leadership and critical feminist leadership are nonprescriptive, but the experiences shared here may help reimagine what our understanding of leadership looks like, both in and out of crisis.
References


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de Saxe, J. G. (2014). What’s critical feminism doing in a field like teacher education?


https://doi.org/10.1177/194277511100600201


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https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-020-04526-0


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https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715020929151

### APPENDIX A

**SUMMARY OF THEMES IDENTIFIED IN THE LITERATURE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Haudan, 2020</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lacey, 2020</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Successful crisis management and leadership</td>
<td>Ahern &amp; Loh, 2020</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Fernandez &amp; Shaw, 2020</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Gigliotti, 2016</td>
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<td>Haudan, 2020</td>
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<td>Koehn, 2020</td>
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<td>Stern, 2013</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Proaction, decisiveness, and informed decision-making</td>
<td>Ahern &amp; Loh, 2020</td>
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<td>Anderson, 2018</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Garcia, 2006</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Preparation and prevention</td>
<td>Anderson, 2018</td>
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<td>Jacques, 2012</td>
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<td>Jong, 2020</td>
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<td>Stern, 2013</td>
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<td>Community and collaboration</td>
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<td>Ahern &amp; Loh, 2020</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Anderson, 2018</td>
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<td>Garcia, 2006</td>
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<td>Koehn, 2020</td>
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<td>Stern, 2013</td>
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<td>Wilson, 2020</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ahern &amp; Loh, 2020</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Crisis Leadership: CL in Higher Education | Growing need for crisis preparation in HE | Koehn, 2020  
Lacey, 2020 |
| Commonalities with general best practices | Marshall et al., 2020 |
| Common best practices: Adaptability | Booker, 2014  
Gigliotti, 2016 |
| Common best practices: Preparation and prevention | Booker, 2014 |
| Common best practices: Learning and reflection | Booker, 2014  
Fortunato et al., 2018  
Gigliotti, 2016 |
| Common best practices: Human aspects of leadership | Fernandez & Shaw, 2020  
Gigliotti, 2016  
Marshall et al., 2020 |
| Common best practices: Communication | Fortunato et al., 2018  
Marshall et al., 2020 |
| Distributed leadership | Fernandez & Shaw, 2020  
Gigliotti, 2020b |
| Stakeholder emphasis | Fortunato et al., 2018  
Gigliotti, 2020b  
Marshall et al., 2020 |
| Sensemaking | Gigliotti, 2020b  
Marshall et al., 2020 |
| Crisis Leadership: The glass cliff | Ryan et al., 2011  
Ryan & Haslam, 205 |
| Think Crisis-Think Female | Think crisis-Think female | Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010  
|                          |                          | Ryan & Haslam, 2005 |
| Feminist Leadership      | Feminist theory          | Clover et al., 2017  
|                          |                          | Dentith et al., 2006  
|                          |                          | Dentith & Peterlin, 2011 |
| Foundations of feminist leadership | Bauer, 2009  
|                          |                          | Clover et al., 2017  
|                          |                          | Detweiler, 2017 |
| Feminist vs. feminine    | Blackmore, 2006          | Clover et al., 2017  
|                          |                          | Detweiler et al., 2017  
|                          |                          | hooks, 2015a  
|                          |                          | Love & Duncan, 2017  
|                          |                          | Pullen & Vachhani, 2020 |
| Leadership as a political act | Blackmore, 2006  
|                          |                          | Clover et al., 2017  
|                          |                          | Dentith et al., 2006  
|                          |                          | Dentith & Peterlin, 2011  
|                          |                          | Love & Duncan, 2017  
|                          |                          | Pullen & Vachhani, 2020 |
| Reimagining leadership   | Clover et al., 2017      | Dentith & Peterlin, 2011  
|                          |                          | hooks, 2015a |
| Examination of power     | Christensen, 2011        | Clover et al., 2017  
|                          |                          | Dentith et al., 2006  
<p>|                          |                          | Rao &amp; Kelleher, 2010 |</p>
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<th>Reimagining leadership</th>
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<td>Emergent strategy</td>
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<td>Critical Feminism</td>
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<td>Bleasdale, n.d.</td>
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<td>Clover et al., 2017</td>
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<td>Building authentic relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Ahmed, 2009</td>
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<td></td>
<td>hooks, 2015b</td>
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<td>Lorde, 2007</td>
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<td>Building coalition/community</td>
<td>brown, 2017</td>
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<td>Disrupting oppressive systems</td>
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<td>de Saxe, 2012</td>
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<td>Commonalities with crisis leadership: Collaboration</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Christensen, 2011</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Clover et al., 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commonalities with crisis leadership: Self-reflection</td>
<td>Christensen, 2011</td>
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<td>Clover et al., 2017</td>
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<td>Dentith et al., 2006</td>
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<td>Detweiler et al., 2017</td>
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</table>
CALLING ALL WOMEN HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERS!

ARE YOU, OR HAVE YOU HELD A POSITION IN ONE OF THE FOLLOWING CATEGORIES?

- Top Executive Officers
- Senior Institutional Officers
- Academic Deans
- Institutional Administrators
- Heads of Divisions, Departments, and Centers
- Academic Associate/Assistant Deans

Please consider participating in an interview for my doctoral dissertation research, a phenomenological study of women higher education leaders who have led through crisis.


Questions? Email Ingrid McVanner at ihmcvanner@usfca.edu

Study approved through the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board
Greetings [Insert Name],

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Ingrid McVanner, and I am a doctoral student in the University of San Francisco’s Organization and Leadership program. I am currently conducting research for my dissertation, which focuses on women’s administrative leadership in higher education during times of crisis. I am writing to you today because I would like to set up a one-hour interview with you to discuss your experiences as a woman in higher education leadership.

Higher education as an industry has seen its fair share of crises, and yet there is little scholarship exploring the experiences of leaders during these times. Moreover, I have found very little research on the experiences of women who have provided crisis leadership. Now more than ever, I believe it is essential to share the voices and experiences of those women who have had the challenging task of providing crisis leadership in a higher education setting.

Participation in the research will involve a recorded Zoom interview of approximately one hour. If you think you may be able to participate, please fill out this short survey: http://bit.ly/mcvanner_study

Thank you for your consideration. I am so looking forward to sharing the vital lessons we can learn from the collective experiences of women leaders. If you have any questions at all, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind Regards,

Ingrid

P.S. If you know anyone else who may be interested in participating in this research, please consider forwarding this email or the attached infographic.
APPENDIX D

SCREENING SURVEY SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS

Women’s Crisis Leadership in Higher Education

Thank you so much for your interest in participating in my dissertation research!

Higher education as an industry has seen its fair share of crises, and yet there is little scholarship exploring the experiences of leaders during these times. Moreover, I have found very little research on the experiences of women who have provided crisis leadership. Now more than ever, I believe it is essential to share the voices and experiences of those women who have had the challenging task of providing crisis leadership in a higher education setting. If you have served in a leadership position in an institution of higher education during a crisis, please consider sharing your experiences with me. Interviews will last approximately one hour.

If you are interested in participating, please submit your responses to the questions below. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at ihmcvanner@usfca.edu.

Biographical Information

1) Full Name
2) Age
3) If you are comfortable doing so, please provide your pronouns
4) Race and/or Ethnicity
5) Highest degree earned

**Background/Professional Information**

Smith and Riley (2012) define a crisis as “an urgent situation that requires immediate and decisive action by an organisation and, in particular, by the leaders of the organisation”.

Please provide some information below on your experiences leading through crisis in a higher education setting.

6) Name of institution at which your experience took place

7) Your institutional title during which you provided crisis leadership

8) Please provide a brief (1-2 sentence) explanation of the crisis or crises during which you provided leadership.

**Contact Information**

9) Email address

10) Phone number
APPENDIX E

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study titled “Critical Feminist Leadership In Times Of Crisis: A Phenomenological Study” conducted by Ingrid McVanner, a doctoral student in the Department of Leadership Studies at the University of San Francisco. This faculty supervisor for this study is Genevieve Negrón-Gonzales, a professor in the Department of Leadership Studies at the University of San Francisco.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:

The purpose of this research study is to explore the lived experiences of women leaders in higher education, with a particular emphasis on leadership experiences during times of crisis.

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:

During this study, the following will happen:

You will be asked to sit for one interview, to take place virtually, during which we will discuss your experiences providing administrative leadership in an institution of higher
education, with particular emphasis on your experiences during a crisis. You will also be requested to provide a pseudonym by which you wish to be referred.

**DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:**

Your participation in this study will involve one interview session, expected to last approximately one hour. The study will take place over Zoom; your interview will be recorded and transcribed for analysis.

**POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:**

The research procedures described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts: you are being asked to reflect upon and share your professional experiences providing administrative leadership during a crisis. To that end, you may experience some discomfort in recalling experiences that may not have been positive. There may also be some risk sharing negative experiences about an institution with which you are still associated; however, the anonymization of your data is expected to mitigate this risk. If you wish, you may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty.

**BENEFITS:**

You will receive no direct benefit from your participation in this study, other than the opportunity to reflect on your own professional experiences; however, the possible benefits to others include contributions to gaps in literature in both critical feminist
leadership studies and crisis leadership studies. By sharing your leadership experiences, the researcher hopes to also contribute to a deeper understanding of how to address the gap in women’s representation in the upper echelons of higher education leadership.

**PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:**

Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report published, no information will be included that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. Specifically, all information will be stored on a password-protected computer and any printouts in a locked file cabinet accessible only to the principal investigator. Consent forms and any other identifiable data will be destroyed in 2 years from the date of data collection. Recordings of interviews will be destroyed after 10 years.

**COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:**

There is no payment or other form of compensation for your participation in this study.

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:**

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate without penalty. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

**OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:**
Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: Ingrid McVanner at (415) 867-9294 or ihmcvanner@usfca.edu, or the faculty supervisor, Dr. Genevieve Negrón-Gonzales at gnegrongonzales@usfca.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

____________________________________

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE

DATE
APPENDIX F
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Research Questions:

1. How do gendered experiences shape the ways women higher education leaders respond to crises?
   a. How do women leaders within institutions of higher education describe their encounters with patriarchy, particularly in their pursuit of leadership positions?
   b. How does the experience of serving as an institutional leader in a moment of crisis shape, recast, or cause a revision of women leaders’ leadership philosophies?
   c. How have the intersectional identities of women higher education leaders shaped the development of their identities as leaders and their relationship, or lack thereof, to feminism?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Protocol</th>
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<tr>
<td>Thank you so much for spending your valuable time with me and for being willing to share your experiences. This research is going to fill several gaps in leadership studies literature, and your experiences are going to be invaluable in forming an understanding of the way women experience leadership in higher education, particularly during times of crisis. Before we get started, are there any questions that I can answer for you?</td>
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</table>
| Introduction/Warm Up | • Tell me a little bit about how you got into the field of higher education (“HE”).
  o Why did you pursue a career in HE?
  o How long have you worked in HE?
  • How did you decide to pursue a position of leadership in your institution?
  o How long were you into your higher education career before you pursued leadership? How long before you attained a leadership position? |
| How do gendered experiences shape the ways women higher education leaders respond to crises? | • Please tell me about the crisis or crises you have encountered as a leader.  
  o How did you respond to this event/these events?  
• How had your professional experiences prepared – or not prepared – you to respond to the crisis or crises?  
• In what ways was your response to the crisis or crises shaped by your professional experiences as a woman? |
| --- | --- |
| How do women leaders within institutions of higher education describe their encounters with patriarchy, particularly in their pursuit of leadership positions? | • What impact, if any, has being a woman had on your career in HE?  
  o Reflecting back on your career in HE, how do you feel your gender affected the way you were treated by your colleagues or superiors?  
• In what ways have your gender shaped or affected your path to leadership?  
• Did you ever experience or witness any discrimination based on gender?  
  o What about other identity factors such as race or sexual orientation? |
| How does the experience of serving as an institutional leader in a moment of crisis shape, recast, or cause a revision of women leaders’ leadership philosophies? | • What is your leadership philosophy?  
• How did your leadership philosophy evolve or change, if at all, after your experiences leading through a crisis? |
| How have the intersectional identities of women higher education leaders shaped the development of their identities as leaders and their relationship, or lack thereof, to feminism? | • How has your identity as a leader been shaped by your personal identities such as your gender, race, sexual orientation, and class?  
• How have your personal identities been affected by your identity as a leader?  
• Do you consider yourself a feminist?  
  o How has this been shaped by your identities? |
| Closing | • What are your strengths as a leader?  
• Is there anything else that you’d like to add? |
APPENDIX G

IRB APPROVAL

Attachments:
- Expedited Review/approved by Chair - IRB ID: 1530.pdf

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

IRBPHS - Approval Notification

To: Ingrid McKeever
From: Richard Gregory Johnson III, IRB Chair
Subject: Protocol #1530
Date: 01/30/2021

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) has reviewed your request for human subjects approval regarding your study.

Your research (IRB Protocol #1530) titled "Critical Feminist Leadership in Times of Crisis: A Feminist Phenomenological Study" has been approved by the IRB Chair under the rules for expedited review on 01/30/2021.

Any modifications, adverse reactions, or complications must be reported using a modification application to the IRBPHS within ten (10) working days.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRBPHS via email at IRBPHS@usfca.edu. Please include the Protocol number assigned to your application in your correspondence.

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish you much success in your research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Richard Gregory Johnson III
Professor & Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
University of San Francisco
irbphs@usfca.edu
IRBPHS Website
## APPENDIX H

### SUMMARY OF THEMES IDENTIFIED IN THE FINDINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ 1: How do gendered experiences shape the ways women higher education leaders respond to crises?</td>
<td>Socialization as caretakers</td>
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<td>Inclination toward collaboration &amp; relationships</td>
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<td>Silver linings</td>
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<td>Prior experiences</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Professional Experiences</td>
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<td>• Personal Experiences</td>
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<td>RQ1a: How do women leaders within institutions of higher education describe their encounters with patriarchy, particularly in their pursuit of leadership positions?</td>
<td>The glass ceiling</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Obstruction to advancement</td>
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<td>• Lack of female/BIWOC representation in leadership</td>
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<td>Disconnection from authentic self</td>
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<td>• Code switching/Performing</td>
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<td>• Awareness of others’ perceptions</td>
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<td>• Survival</td>
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<td>Emotional &amp; psychological toll</td>
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<td>RQ1b: How does the experience of serving as an institutional leader in a moment of crisis shape, recast, or cause a revision of women leaders’ leadership philosophies?</td>
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<td>Evolution of leadership identity</td>
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<td>RQ 1c: How have the intersectional identities of women higher education leaders shaped the development of their identities as leaders and their relationship, or lack thereof, to feminism?</td>
<td>Motherhood &amp; work-life balance</td>
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<td>Encounters with patriarchy</td>
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<td>• Dismissal/questioning of one’s qualifications</td>
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<td>• Need to prove oneself</td>
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<td>• Motivation to succeed</td>
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<td>Critical feminism</td>
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<td>• Commitment to people, collaboration, &amp; relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connection to community</td>
<td>Leadership as a political act</td>
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<td><strong>Relationship to feminism:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Identification as feminist</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Family influence</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Academic/professional influence</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship to feminism:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Support of feminist values</td>
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