Women who are successful in powerful positions define power as "power to" get things done with others, something more easily done for women than for men because women do not view themselves as powerful. They work using a collaborative, inclusive, consensus-building model with their own voice being used in concert with the others rather than in authority over or dominance over others.

BY POWER DEFINED: Women in the Superintendency

by C. Cryss Brunner

In the jargon of modern American committee life and of general responsible social relationships, a phrase has crept in the last few years, "from where I sit." It is often said half-jokingly, and yet it implies a total change in point of view. As one adds with a grin, or a half-smile, or perhaps a little rueful twist to the mouth, "from where I sit," this is an admission that no person ever sees more than part of the truth, that the contribution of one sex, or one culture, or one scientific discipline that may itself cross both sex and cultural lines, is always partial, and must always wait upon the contribution of others for a fuller truth.[1]

This article was written from the standpoint of a white woman of middle age, of an American, and of an educational administrator. It must be acknowledged that as a white American female educational administrator, I am privileged and powerful when compared to most women. I have been educated by and later co-opted into the basically white male world of educational administration so that "where I sit" has been altered over time and should be held suspect by those wishing a "woman's point of view."

As a white woman author, a woman of privilege and power as compared to most women, I have used a language which, as Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, is part of the "white-male-is-norm ideology,"[2] and which is used predominantly as a way to reify established power relations. This dilemma was intensified when I found myself writing uncritically and thus putting myself in a dominant position in relationship not only to those who par-

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ticipated in the study, but [also] in a dominant position in relationship to the reader. The narrative represents an earnest but necessarily incomplete effort to establish a degree of equity for those who participated in the study. These raw voices that yelled, whispered, calmly spoke, or in other ways communicated with me from the field are vivid and much more alive than any other part of my research experience, and thus, my "narration is never a passive reflection of a reality."[3] I still hear the voices in my mind, waking and sleeping. I doubt they will ever allow me undisturbed rest. Hear them . . .

Q. If you were to advise women who wanted to be superintendents of schools, what advice would you give them?
A. *[quietly] I don't know. . . .*
Q. Are women disadvantaged?
A. *YES! . . . . they can hardly get the jobs—my girlfriend has tried! [with exasperation]*
Q. Why not?
A. *[almost shouting] BECAUSE THEY ARE WOMEN. . . ! THERE'S LOTS OF THEM OUT THERE—THAT HAVE ADMINISTRATIVE DEGREES. . .*

My own life history, in fact, includes several attempts to become either an assistant superintendent or superintendent, including being a finalist in the selection process. As of this writing, I am neither, and it is my hope that this research will be helpful not only to me, but [also] to other women seeking the position of superintendent of schools. My research, then, was altered by my own desires and aspirations, and even though it is full of the voices of others, it is my study, my understanding of other voices, and the reflection of what I have decided to share with the reader.

Need for the Study

Currently the canon in educational administration asserts a desire to attract the best candidates for administration positions in education.[4] This canon is asserted while tremendously capable women are not being hired. The overwhelmingly prevalent practice of hiring men rather than women for administrative positions is a common event. This regular practice of hiring men rather than women is based on shared beliefs and values which are taken as given—not questioned. There is a need, then, to reexamine and rethink this seemingly non-problematic practice and the discourse surrounding it. As Hochshild points out, ". . .when evidence leads us to expect something that does not happen, an investigation may be warranted."[5] It is this thought that drew me to a discrepant event, one which does not happen with any regularity—that is, the selection of a woman as superintendent of schools in a single community.

Theoretical Perspective

When faced with the fact that around ninety-seven percent of superintendents of schools are men, the obvious question is "why?"[6] Although experience as a building-level administrator is not always a requirement for superintendency credentials, at a practical level it certainly is a pre-requisite. Thus, the low number of women as principals—a fact which is difficult to explain when the vast majority of the pool from which building-level administrators are hired is female—would be an obvious reason for the low number of women in the superintendency. Other rationales such as lack of support from network/mentors, lack of role models, and family demands have been offered as explanations.[7] In my judgment, however, these rationales are insufficient to explain the low number of women in the superintendency.

A neglected but important theoretical perspective suggests that cultures, communities and "professions are constituted by what is said and done in their name."[8] This perspective

suggests that the hiring of superintendents of schools can be explained by examining the regularities in what is said (discourse) and done (practice) in the community power network or "circuits of power."[9] [Clegg defines circuits of power as rings of social integration complete with normative rules which fix relations of meaning and membership.] Further, because there is evidence that women "see, value and know" their world differently than men[10], I will investigate the possibility that communities contain both a "male circuit of power" and a "female circuit of power" accommodating different normative rules, understandings, and conceptions of power and its use.

The educational administration profession or community can be viewed as one circuit of power, and it is a male-dominated circuit of power. Cherryholmes states that "professions are constituted by what is said and done in their name."[11] He continues by adding that consistencies in what is said and done are based on shared beliefs and values. Large areas of agreement about how to proceed in education become the basis for conflict resolution. The rule of thumb is to ask: How was this done before? Areas of agreement about how to proceed in educational practice include: ". . .structured use of textbooks in classrooms, instruction based on learning objectives, educational practice guided by research findings, standardized approaches to research design and program development, learning as acquisition of a positive body of knowledge and skills,"[12] and the hiring of school personnel according to written and unwritten standards. To the extent that beliefs and values that establish those standards are male-defined or androcentric, the educational administration community is dominated by a male circuit of power.

The broader community served by professional educational administration can be viewed as another circuit of power. Such communities are also constituted by consistencies in what is said and done [discursive practices]. These consistencies in what is said and done are based on shared beliefs and values—and comprise the political culture of the community. There is both overt and covert agreement in a given culture about how to proceed in all the activities of daily life. Areas of conflict many times are resolved by reflecting on what was done before. Areas of agreement may include notions of what church is socially acceptable, what neighborhood is the "best" one for residence, which group of people is "the" group at the top of the community, which character traits are valued for parenting, and which characteristics are seen as appropriate for the superintendent of schools. Although a simplified example, it is apparent that when a newcomer moves into a community, if they are to be accepted, they must pay attention to the normative values and discursive practices of that community. Certain social skills which include the ability to be sensitive and adaptive to an environment are important as people move into any setting or culture as a newcomer.

The dominant circuits of power within both the educational administration profession and the local communities normally are dominated by the values, norms, and understandings of white men. Because traditional patterns of discourse in the "male circuits of power" restrict access, women who do become part of those networks—usually in relatively subordinate positions—must initially become familiar with ongoing practices. A woman whom I interviewed said it this way:

I learned a long time ago that when you go into a new area you get acquainted with the woodwork before you change much . . . don't make any big moves.

Getting "acquainted with the woodwork" is another way of saying that a person wishing acceptance by a community or culture must learn the written and unwritten standards of that culture and act within them. Knowledge and practice of shared beliefs and values allows one to belong to a culture or community and attain access to its dominant circuit of power. An ability

to articulate common discourse in a way that is familiar to those of a particular culture can provide access to that culture. The male culture of educational administration has its own peculiar "woodwork." Women wishing access to that male culture and the male circuit of power must learn the discourse common to that community. But access for women into the male circuit of power is complicated by the fact that female aspirants most often come from backgrounds having different norms, values, and understanding; they have developed different discursive practices that constitute the "female circuit of power."

The female circuit of power has its own set of consistencies in what is said and done. These practices are ones which women have been socialized to embrace. Their practices include comfort with subordination, something unheard of in the male circuit of power. It would appear, then, that the two circuits of power are incompatible. For a woman to move from a female circuit where she is comfortable with subordination, into a male circuit which sees subordination as a weakness seems an unlikely event. It is this unlikely, discrepant event which is the focus of this study. A close examination of such an event in one setting may reveal the transformation which a woman must make when moving from the female circuit of power to the male circuit of power, or it may uncover the circumstances which allow this event to occur. In research, then, we should be ". . .encouraged to search for conflict, dissensus, contradiction, resistance to power, and the possible benefits derived from such a search."[13]

In addition, it is important to adopt a theoretical perspective which recognizes multiple realities and is open to the possibility that certain types of discourse and practice can overcome the common constraints that block women's mobility into supervisory roles. That is, while such explanations as "lack of support from networks/mentors, lack of role models, and family demands" explain only the under-representation of women, a perspective that examines various discursive practices and power networks recognizes that, while predominant discursive practices and power networks constrain women's opportunities, other discursive practices and power relations can make women's access to positions of authority possible. Thus, my research question asks not only about the constraints on women but also what it is about the regularities in discourse and practice in relationship to power in a particular community that would allow a woman to be selected for the position of superintendent of schools when around ninety-seven percent of the time a man is selected.

With this question established, it is hypothesized that the definition of power is gender specific. That is, that women define power as "power to," as collaborative and inclusive in nature, while men define power as "power over," as a form of domination which insures that one person can cause another to do whatever the dominant person desires. The "power over" model remains in place in most communities because it insures that the power hierarchy will remain in place. Those in power will remain in power and the commitment on the part of those in power to remain there is great for obvious reasons—the greatest of which is wealth.

Further, it is hypothesized; that *circuits of power* exist in the world of men and in the world of women; that the definition of power in the male circuit of power is "power-over," while the definition of power in the female circuit of power is "power-to;"[14] and, that the discursive practices of men and women in their separate circuits of power are different just as the languages from one culture to another are different. The experiences of women in their circuit of power train them to "sound" a certain way, to view power a particular way, and to interact in relationships in a specific way. As anyone placed in a foreign culture does not "fit," a woman placed in an unfamiliar circuit of power (male) will not blend unless she makes radical adaptations in the way she sounds, perceives, and interacts. Finally, it is

hypothesized that if a woman is co-opted into the male circuit of power giving her access to positions viewed as powerful by a white male-dominated culture, she must abandon her own circuit of power, and adopt new discursive practices surrounding the concept of power. The test of these hypotheses is not a traditional experimental design but was a critical ethnography of a single site—a particular educational community/culture and the fuller community/culture in which it is embedded, where a woman has become superintendent of schools. The framework used for this critical ethnography is a conceptualization of power borrowed from political science power research, in general, and, in part, more specifically from the work of Stewart Clegg, *Frameworks of Power.*[15]

Power Research

Stewart Clegg[16] and Thomas E. Wartenberg[17] divide the literature on power along two trajectories which represent its dualistic nature. One trajectory defines power as the ability to do something—the "power to." The other trajectory defines power as control, command or dominion over others—the "power over." Hannah Pitkin's[18] work supports this division when emphasizing that the idea of power in "power to" is significantly different from the idea of power in "power over."

It is the "power over" definition of power which has dominated the discussion of community power by political scientists and sociologists.[19] Theories grounded in the belief that power is defined as domination involve a specific type of relationship between people, one that is "hierarchical in virtue of one person's ability to affect the other without the other's being able to reciprocate."[20] Theories that fall into this category include: elite theory[21], pluralism[22], and economistic theory.[23] However, this traditional, dominant discourse by political scientists is slowly being replaced by current literature which asserts that power be conceptualized as "power to."[24]

The development of a female circuit of power which defines power as "power to" follows the thinking of Nancy Hartsock[25] when she calls for a theory of power for women—a theory which begins from the experience and point of view of the dominated. "Such theories would give attention not only to the ways women are dominated, but also to their capacities, abilities, and strengths. . . [These] theories would use these capacities as guides for a potential transformation of power relationships—that is, for the empowerment of women."[26]

Research Objectives

The literature on women in the superintendency is clear.[27] If a woman wishes to be a superintendent of schools, her chances are poor. Some studies offer rationales such as lack of support from networks/mentors, lack of role models, and family demands for the fact that so few women become superintendents of schools.[28] It is the judgment of this researcher that none of these rationales are sufficient to explain this dilemma. There is a need for a fresh description of this aged problem.

Such a perspective should accomplish the following:
1. The development of a male "circuit of power" and a female "circuit of power" in a community/culture ["New View"] where a woman [Dr. Mary Osburn] is the superintendent of schools.
2. The establishment of a definition of the concept of power, and a description of the discursive practices related to the concept of power by men in a male "circuit of power" and by women in a female "circuit of power".
3. The establishment of the definition and use of power by one woman [Dr. Mary Osburn] in a superintendency.

Critical ethnography is the principal method employed in the research to accomplish these objectives. An ethnography ties together fieldwork and culture[29], and a critical ethnography ties together fieldwork and culture while taking the critical position against racism, sexism, and classism. This particular study takes a critical position against sexism. Three primary methods of data collection were utilized for this critical ethnography: non-standardized interviews; nonparticipant and participant observation, and document/record review and analysis. Document and record reviews and interviews have complementary strengths and weaknesses and served to strengthen each other. In addition, non-participant and participant observation were employed when possible to serve as triangulation.

From the Field: What is Power?

It is the more inclusive definition of power which I believe makes "New View" [the chosen field site] receptive to the idea that placement of women in positions of power is appropriate. In order to determine whether an inclusive definition of power is necessary to allow women into the circuit of power typically constructed solely of men, I spent hours in interviews listening to definitions and descriptions of power. In addition, many hours were spent with Dr. Mary Osburn in order to determine her definition and application of power.

Women Define Power

After establishing a list of women who were considered powerful in New View, I asked each one to define power. The answers came in many forms, but most stated that it is the ability to get things done. Elaborations on that statement were made when I asked participants to talk about how things get done. Those elaborations include: ". . .getting things done through consensus building." ". . .through someone who empowers others." "The ability to find the people who can help get it done." "I always think about who will work with me to get something done." "I stay in the background to get things done . . . to start things . . . motivate." "In order to get things done, I believe you have to be a servant." All respondents in the female circuits (community and school settings) of power viewed power as an active term. In addition, they described the action as collaborative and inclusive in nature. None of them perceived themselves as powerful in their own right. Most expressed surprise that their names appeared on the "circuits of power" list. They could imagine that people appreciated their work or the time they spent in community service, but they did not view themselves as powerful. Comments that expressed these themes follow: "I don't see myself as a power person, I see myself as a popular person." I don't think about power that much. I don't think about power over someone else or influencing anyone in my day to day life." "I think more of the responsibility of my position rather than the power of it."

Men Define Power

After establishing a list of men who were considered powerful in New View, I asked each one to define power. The definitions they offered most often included the concept of influence. When asking respondents how they influence others they replied: ". . .you influence by gaining authority, getting into a position of responsibility." ". . .if someone is so good that everyone is afraid he will go somewhere else. It's okay to be an SOB if you are right 100% of the time, but you better be right." "There are people who grab the reins of a project and push it and keep pushing it till it's done. They are more or less consensus people until they reach a certain point. They finally reach a level of frustration where they say, 'Hey, I'm tired of sitting around here talking about this thing. Let's get it done.' Then he is sort of like a bull and others follow." "My power and influence come from my position." ". . .the application of knowledge through political connections . . . you influence because you work hard and know more than other people. Knowledge is power. That's all it is. The person who works hard is going to

override people who sit on their butts . . . it must be a broad knowledge base—a cross-section of everything." "You persuade by explaining your position, by talking others into going along so they want to take part and believe in what they are doing. Hopefully, you don't have to tell them they have to do it because they only do it halfheartedly."

For the men in the male circuits (community and school settings) of power, being informed was the most common method of influence. Information and knowledge elevate people to privileged positions—positions in which they are able to convince others of their own leadership. There was much less discussion from the men about getting things done. It was implied that something happens after someone is established as the leader—that others follow the leader. Only one of the men talked about collaboration, but interestingly, he did not see collaboration as powerful.

Dr. Osburn Defines Power

When asked to define power Dr. Osburn replied with a definition of action, "Power is the ability to achieve desired outcomes. It is executed in a number of ways. I would say it is situational, not autocratic or conciliatory." When asked to elaborate on ways she achieves desired outcomes she continues, "I have the ability to organize people in a manner that achieves desired goals—that manner being the ability to lead people to consensus . . . I bring together the people who will be affected by the decision and say, 'Here is the perceived problem—is this really the problem?' You may find that it is not the real problem, so you come to consensus about what the real problem is. Then you discuss many solutions to come up with a solution which benefits the most people—especially who is affected by it. It needs to be for the greatest good."

Obviously, as was true for other women of power, Dr. Osburn had a collaborative, "power to" definition of power. Clearly, she took her definition into practice. Her practical application went to the extreme of consensus-building even at the level of determining the nature and articulation of the problem. In addition, Dr. Osburn was similar to other women in the study when she added, "It is difficult for me to say that I have power." This perception of self may be necessary for a person to be truly collaborative. One who views self as powerful more naturally believes other input as less important than one's own. True collaboration occurs when all participants are viewed as equally as possible.

Dr. Osburn's commitment to collaboration was vividly revealed when she shared, "One of the harder things to do is to support a decision that you wouldn't have made yourself but have given someone else the opportunity to make it so you need to support it . . . I think that the decision I make is the decision to make a decision collaboratively. Then I give up the right to the final decision. I must support whatever is decided."

Others View Dr. Osburn's Use of Power

It was apparent when talking with people around Dr. Osburn that she was accurate in her reporting of her own use of power. Each person interviewed, from the community-at-large or from the education community, male or female, referred to her as a collaborator/consensus-builder. Responses included: "Dr. Osburn wields power through other people. She is a very capable leader." "She is less than direct—more of a background substance that she possesses that is not confrontational, not frontal. She uses her people be they volunteers or professionals, very effectively in that sense. Mary is a real good leader. She resisted the temptation to take the front position and recognized that the win had to be in a plurality. . . She listens, collaborates, gets the best out of the people who are available to her." "I have rarely seen someone work as effectively as she does in two areas: a) building consensus and

laying the foundation in moving things in the direction that she wants them to move, but one step at a time, and b) in her delegation of authority to cause the people who work for her to be highly motivated. . ." "She is quietly persistent . . . I've seen this quiet persistence on committees, etc. I don't know how she describes herself. She is a collaborator." "Mary is a quietly powerful person. She does not wield the power."

Has Dr. Osburn's Definition and Use of Power Changed?

Dr. Osburn did not believe that her use of power has changed over the years of her career. She reported that she was collaborative when teaching. "When I was a classroom teacher, I had students help establish how the classroom ran. When accomplishing a task I was a collaborator. You can accomplish change if you involve people in that change process."

People who knew or worked with Dr. Osburn agreed with her assertions. "She hasn't changed. She has changed her focus because she has to consider the whole district." "No, she hasn't changed. When she made decisions as high school principal she got input and background before making decisions. She has an open door even as a superintendent. She hasn't changed."

Reactions to the Study

Reaction Number One: Power is defined differently by women than men.

The basic definition of power differs dependent upon gender. Women in circuits of power, in a given setting, define the concept of power differently than men in circuits of power in the same setting. In addition, women in positions of leadership in a given educational setting define power differently than men in positions of leadership in the same educational setting.

Women in circuits of power and those in positions of educational leadership in a given setting define power as the ability to get things done through collaboration and consensus building, while men in circuits of power and those in positions of educational leadership in a given setting define power as the ability to influence or lead others by having more information and knowledge than others. Women define power as "power to," that is, as the ability to empower others to make their own decisions collaboratively and to carry them out through a collective, inclusive model. Men, on the other hand, view power as "power over," or the ability to convince others to do as they wish through any means necessary. These findings are consistent across virtually all interviewees, and, thus, result in a "male definition" of power as "power over" and a "female definition" of power as "power to."

Reaction Number Two: When women operate according to the female concept of power their chances to acquire positions of power increase dramatically.

Since using the reputational method resulted in lists of people viewed as successfully powerful, my impression, contrary to what was hypothesized, is that the female definition of power—"power to"—allows women success and access to positions of power while the male definition of power—"power over"—is important for men to hold if they want to be considered successful and have access to positions of power.

Reaction Number Three: Women who attain positions of power are most successful when they adopt female approaches to power which stress collaboration, inclusion, and consensus-building—models based on the belief that one person is not more powerful than another.

"Power to" women, who are successful in their powerful positions, get things done with others. This collaborative role is comfortable for them because they do not view themselves as powerful. These women work using a collaborative, inclusive,

consensus-building model with their own voices heard in concert with the others rather than in authority over or dominance over others. Thus, contrary to the hypothesis, when successful women become a part of a male-dominated circuit of power, they retain their "feminine" use and definition of power as opposed to adopting the "male" use and definition of power.

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