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August, 2006

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Developing Leadership: Exploring Childhoods of Women University Presidents

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Purpose/Methodology: Researchers argue that much of who we are is developed during childhood. Yet, little exploratory research has been conducted regarding the childhood experiences, activities, personalities, and perceptions of successful leaders. I conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with ten women university presidents to investigate perceptions and experiences related to the lifetime development of leadership skills, abilities, and competencies. The lived experiences of these women were investigated using the phenomenological research methodology so that “voices” could be heard and unique insights examined. This paper explores a portion of this research focused on childhood personalities, school and other activities, influential individuals, and significant events and challenges. **Findings:** Results support the growth-task model of human development. As children, the presidents were generally obedient, reflective, observant, smart, self-directed, competitive, and moderately to highly confident. It was important for them to live up to their own expectations and those of significant adults around them. These women were involved in a variety of helpful activities as children and thrived on learning and developing new skills, knowledge, and capabilities. Other than their own parents, influential individuals during childhood included predominantly women (elementary school teachers, aunts, and grandmothers). The most helpful learning experiences involved challenging and difficult situations or events (e.g., illness, relocation, and fear). **Implications:** By understanding these influences, practitioners can design more effective interventions dependent on an individual’s background. This depth is essential for those interested in individual leadership development efforts centered on working with individuals interested in obtaining positions at the highest levels in higher education.

Keywords: Leadership, Leadership development, Higher education, Gender, Childhood

Researchers argue that much of who we are is developed during childhood (Caffarella and Olson, 1993; Hennig and Jardim, 1977). Childhood relationships and developmental activities, opportunities, and experiences (including hardships and times of pain) come together to create each human being (Cooke, 2004). Astin and Leland (1991) claimed that “leaders emerge from the critical interplay of personal values and commitments, special circumstances or historical influences, and personal events that motivate and mobilize people’s actions” (p. 66). And, of course, some significant historical influences and personal events occur during childhood. However, according to Waring (2003), much of the research on leadership and management has “ignored how the personal histories of people may influence their conceptions of leadership” (p. 42). It is clear that, as Thompson and Marley’s (1999) findings suggest, research is needed on women in top management roles. And, more particularly, explorations focused on the early developmental influences of women leaders are particularly needed. Little exploratory research has been conducted exploring the childhood experiences, activities, personalities, and perceptions of success leaders, in part because leadership development is an “unintended consequence of many activities” throughout the life cycle (Sagaria, 1988, p. 9).

Bennis and Goldsmith (2003) argued that “immediate demands for leadership confront us daily. Our cities are in crisis, our communities face turmoil, our political, religious, and business leaders are repeatedly charged with ethical violations, and the world’s multiple demands require our immediate attention” (p. xi-xii). Further, according to Adler (1998), “Today’s meaning of the word ‘leader’...has the sense of someone who sets ideas, people, organizations, and societies in motion; someone who takes the worlds of ideas, people, organizations, and society on a journey” (p. 140). These researchers contend that to effectively lead such a journey requires a wide variety of leadership skills, abilities, and competencies that are typically developed throughout an individual’s life. The development of these in childhood is the particular focus of this study. As Matz (2001) asserted,

Women are entering professions and taking on leadership positions, and it is necessary to learn about those who have succeeded and what affected their growth and development. It is vital for the advancement of women’s rights and the development of young girls to understand the foundation of successful women and the early experiences that instilled self-confidence and leadership traits. (pp. 3-4)

I conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with ten women university presidents to investigate their perceptions and experiences related to the development of leadership skills, abilities, and competencies throughout their lives. This paper explores a portion of this research focused on the childhood experiences, characteristics, and memories of women university presidents as they relate directly or indirectly to possible leadership development influences. It does not focus on insights related to family influences (parents, siblings, extended family, and home

environment) but instead centers on childhood personalities, school and other activities, influential individuals, and significant events and challenges.

The Growth-Task Model of Human Development

Although a number of theories and models were explored as a foundation for this research study, the Weick's 1983 growth-task model of human development provides the most effective and applicable theoretical framework. In fact, the childhood development experienced by the presidents in the current study is partially explained through this model. Galambos, Hughes, and Lind (2000) used this model as a theoretical basis for an exploratory study that "examined socialization influences and participation in political and community activism on the personal development of female social work students." (p. 19). They explored the impact of these types of activities on the development of women specifically in the areas of leadership, influence, use of power, and collaboration. When exploring their childhoods and youth, they found that the changes experienced by the women in their study were explained through Weick's growth-task model of human development.

This model assumes that individuals are capable of continual development and recognizes that, as a common life force, all human beings possess an inherent "push for growth" (Weick, 1983). These life forces serve as a "catalyst for developmental change, which is further stimulated by innate curiosity, and for stimulation, and a desire for fulfillment" (Galambos and Hughes, p. 22). Weick (1983) explained that an assumption of this theory is that people are imaginative, self-motivating, inquisitive, and curious, and that individuals experience ongoing and continuous development because of these attributes. Weick challenged the linear approach to human development. According to Galambos and Hughes (2000), no one task dominates in this model. Instead, development is viewed as non-linear and cyclical. Growth is a cluster of developmental tasks that form cyclical themes. The bottom-line is that "growth occurs when task areas are challenged" (Galambos and Hughes, 2000, p. 22).

Weick's model also proposed that growth and development later in life is more related to the reworking of growth tasks already experienced than the assumption of new roles. As adults the growth-task model "views adult development as centering around tasks of adulthood with five basic themes: the capacity for intimacy, the capacity to nurture, engagement in productive activity, establishment of balance between dependence and independence, and the capacity to transcend personal concerns" (Galambos and Hughes, 2000, p. 22). An underlining assumption of this model is that growth and development (positive and negative) experiences are important elements within this cyclical, non-linear process. And, that those driving internal desires for growth and improvement can be met through appropriate "tasks" (situations, experiences, assignments). Weick (1983) argues that life events should be viewed as a process in a larger context. She also purports that "true adaptation, whether psychological or physiological, requires us to build and maintain a central core of meaning or stability but at the same time to be prepared to make at least marginal shifts in that core" (p. 133). Through learning to adapt throughout childhood and youth, an adult should be able to have a "free-flowing exploration of self in relation to others" (p. 136).

Weick (1983) also believed that the growth-task model supported gender differences in development, and that growth was explained through exposure to societal roles. She also warned that when individuals are constantly exposed to role definitions that are more constrained, it may "shape the nature of the growth experience or prevent growth and development of certain tasks" (Galambos and Hughes, 2000, p. 23). Weick argues that the underlying theme of the growth-task model is empowerment. She explained that individuals, who can see and understand their own situations and learn with and from the natural flows and changes of life, actually experience this power. Childhood is a time that these experiences could have a profound influence.

Childhood Influences

The literature is clear that all types of childhood experiences are critically important to an individual's growth and development. Caffarella and Olson (1993) explained that early socialization in life regarding the concept of "being" is central to women. Hennig and Jardim (1977) interviewed 25 CEOs about their early experiences to discover commonalities that would help explain how what may have contributed to the success they achieved as well as how and why they chose their careers. They found that "events occurring and experiences undergone in childhood and adolescence play an essential and enduring part in a person's mature life" (p. 68). Further, Lorenzen (1996) claimed that "to bring along one's history is an inseparable part of any kind of professional life" (p. 24). And, the better one understands that personal history represents a part of the present, the better one will be able to embark on his or her professional role.

This review will discuss the past literature with regard to the following: 1) childhood personalities and perceptions, 2) childhood school and activities, and 3) influential individuals during childhood (beyond immediate

family members). It is important to note, however, that there are few studies that have focused on the childhoods of successful women leaders in any realm (corporate, higher education, public, and non-profit).

Childhood Personalities and Perceptions

Although not specifically focused on higher educational leadership, one of the most seminal works in the area of women and leadership is the 1977 Hennig and Jardim qualitative study of 25 women CEOs. The authors argued that successful leaders in business and non-profit administration include some of the more masculine attributes (e.g., the drive to achieve, an orientation to task, the desire to be respected for one's abilities, enjoyment of competition, and a capacity to take risk). And, the development of these qualities begins during childhood. In their study, Hennig and Jardim (1977) found that as young girls these CEOs possessed and highly valued these traits and capabilities. In addition, as ten- and eleven-year-olds these CEOs thought of themselves as successful and able. Yet, they felt somehow frustrated, restricted, and limited. The women said that they were basically happy during childhood, "somewhat arrogant toward their peers and held in high esteem by their parents and teachers" (p. 91). Hennig and Jardim found that these women (as children) saw examples around them of how women were inferior to men. They highly admired their fathers and their occupations and activities.

A few other studies also highlight childhood personalities and attributes of successful women leaders. First, Baraka-Love (1986, as cited in Wells, 1998) studied successful women leaders in a variety of fields and discovered that women leaders were achievement-oriented during their school years which contributed to their growth, development, and success. Second, Stephens (2003) studied 35 powerful women leaders in church, business and higher education and found that they did not spend their childhoods under a spotlight. In fact, few of them were on athletic teams or in debate clubs. Stephens claimed that because of this they had the capacity to come and go from the spotlight easily (possibly an important characteristic for educational leaders). However, all of these women remembered having "strong voices and a keen sense of competency as little girls." (p. 51). They did make some notable achievements throughout childhood and youth and displayed confidence in themselves. Yet, contrasting Hennig and Jardim's research, Stephens (2003) noted that she did not sense strong competitiveness in any of the women; they did not compare their own achievements to others. Third, Robinson (1996) studied 14 African American women leaders in community colleges and found that from the time they were small children, "most recognized 'leadership' as a social phenomenon and a personal quality" (p. 49). Generally these women knew "(some as early as age five) that they were leaders among their friends and classmates" (p. 49). These women (as children) were somehow taught that leadership was an honor and a duty for one with ability.

Some of the research also discussed general struggles (particularly self-esteem and ambition) girls typically have during childhood. Sills (1994) cited research that discussed the decrease of self-esteem in girls between the ages of 11 and 14. They lose their "enthusiasm for school, giving up their dreams of independence and career, and dropping out into a dead-end life" (p. 6). Interestingly, it appears that the majority of the eight- and nine-year-olds (in a 1992 American Association of University Women study) felt confident, assertive, and authoritative. Sill (1994) claimed that there were activities and experiences that can help prevent this loss of female self-fulfillment and leadership and discussed the importance of looking for ways to challenge and motivate young girls during the middle school years. Fels (2004) studied ambition in women and found that "women too frequently seek to deflect attention from themselves" (p. 54). She cited studies that demonstrated that the "daily texture of women's lives from childhood on is infiltrated with microencounters in which quiet withdrawal and the ceding of available attention to others is expected—particularly in the presence of men" (p. 54). She argued that this constant "ceding of available attention to others" decreases desires to participate in opportunities that may help young women develop important skills and competencies needed for effective leadership in the future.

School and Activities

Only a few studies addressed the possible influence of childhood activities on women leaders. Kenke (1996) reported that the cognitive and conceptual skills important for effective leadership (specifically decision-making and establishing a vision) are developed in a variety of ways (family activities and interactions, school experiences and projects, social and community groups) throughout an individual's lifetime. Cubillo and Brown (2003) reported that the women in her sample provided insights into their early leadership influences. She found that their early histories with regard to their childhood school and activities as well as their familial support were important in "shaping their thinking and enabling them to aspire to higher education and role achievement" (p. 289). The majority of women leaders in Rayburn, Goetz, and Osman's (2001) sample reported that they first learned leadership skills in school and home with only a few adding work, community, and religious or spiritual settings to the list. Cornwall (1993) asserted that "women leaders and managers today learned to compete in school" (p. 184). She explained that these women's abilities and ideas took them to the head of the class. In an educational leader sample, Robinson's (1996)

found that the women “sought education in virtually all their experiences” (p. 52). Throughout their childhoods, all the women were avid readers. They were also strongly encouraged to educate themselves in every possible way including formal education. Finally, Cohen et al. (1996) reported that leadership opportunities in school bolstered girls’ competence and increased actual influence. Yet, it is important to note the educational research stating that although girls have stronger verbal skills than boys do during childhood, they continue to get less recognition than boys (Fels, 2004). She explained, “Teachers praise boys more than girls, give boys more academic help, and are more likely to accept boys’ comments during classroom discussion.” (p. 52).

In the previously described Hennig and Jardim (1977) study, the CEO’s childhood experiences and career behaviors were more masculine than feminine. As little girls they were able to participate in activities typically reserved for boys. Their fathers confirmed their rights to move beyond the traditional female types of activities for that time period which, according to Hennig and Jardim, “remained with them throughout their careers” (p. 82). During their elementary school years, these girls were high achievers. They were at the head of their class and social leaders. They were members of many organizations and clubs and became leaders: Brownies, Campfire Girls, 4-H, church groups, class presidencies, and school organizations. Team games were important to all of them and “they remembered the deep dissatisfaction they felt over the restrictions placed upon them at the elementary level” (p. 87).

A few other authors (Kelinski, Mayer, and Kuo-Lane, 2001; Rayburn et al, 2001) also wrote of the influence of sports during childhood. Kelinski et al. (2001) explained that “sports participation may be a potential factor in eliminating stereotypical gender-based schematic processing.” Women who had played sports perceived themselves as “having the same advantages as men in terms of fostering moral development, leadership, socialization, and health and fitness” (pp. 7-8). They claimed that the benefits of lessons learned in sports may enhance “organizational roles in the work place for both females and males” (Kelinski et al., 2001, p. 8).

Influential Individuals

Again, the literature related to influential individuals in the childhoods of successful women leaders is sparse and provides very little detail. Cohen et al. (1996) reported that mentors were crucial to girls’ development of sense of self. Baraka-Love (1986, as cited in Wells, 1998) found that successful women leaders had positive role models throughout childhood and youth. Stephens (2003) found that often women leaders had a single aunt or mentor who offered them a broader vision of womanhood. Interestingly, in a study of successful women entrepreneurs, Wells (1998) found that women did not speak of any “school-type experiences or relationships with teachers as role models or mentors to them at young ages” (p. 123). The women in this study appeared to have more fun making money or doing adult things when they were young. Wells concluded that “school was not important or a source of inspiration for these women” (p. 123).

Hartman (1999) interviewed a variety of women leaders and found that they drew their strength from many. These women cited the importance of support from families, friends, and community to their development as leaders. Hartman also found that obstacles, challenges, and compromises were also important learning tools. Robinson (1996) explained that her sample of African American community college leaders received (as young girls) the message that they needed to get an education so they could be self-reliant. As young girls they saw how, without any assistance, their mothers and grandmothers were able to accomplish things even against insurmountable odds. Hennig and Jardim (1977) found that as young girls the CEOs in their sample had a sense of trust and security which was attributed to the openness of their relationships with their parents. Their parents encouraged them to “deal with adults on a person-to-person basis, and most of them said that as small children they were more comfortable with adults than with their peers” (p. 86). This strong preference for adults appeared to be an advantage because they had more confidence in dealing with authority figures like teachers. They perceived a lack of interaction with children of their own age at times.

Research Methods

This study draws on data I collected (between March and June of 2005) through in-depth two to three hour interviews with women university presidents. I provided 25 presidents with details of the study and invited them to be participants. Twelve accepted the invitation to participate, and I scheduled interviews with the ten who could meet first. I conducted all interviews on a one-to-one basis with most being held at the president’s university office. Nine were presidents of public universities while one led a private post-secondary institution. Eight of the ten served as presidents or chancellors of strong, well-known research institutions or university systems while two were presidents of teaching-focused comprehensive institutions with strong scholarship expectations. Eight were Caucasian and two were African American women. Four of these women were in their fifties and six their sixties.

I used the phenomenological research approach to design and conduct this qualitative interview project (Wolcott, 2001). Van Manen (2001) explained that “phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (p. 9). Brunner (1998) supported this general approach by discussing the importance of understanding people’s experiences as opposed to merely focusing on what they do. Connelly and Clandinin (1988, as cited in Cooke, 2004) stated that “the knowledge that emerges from this personalized form of research is of a practical nature...that can yield unique insights into the development of practical wisdom” (p. 6). This approach appeared to be very applicable to understanding the experiences of these presidents in becoming leaders. It allowed these women to “voice their beliefs and interpretations of leadership” (Aldoory, 1998, p. 75) as well as to describe their journeys to their current positions of leadership in higher education. Each president used her own “voice” to describe her thoughts, perceptions, and experiences. And, as Cubillo and Brown (2003) described, “telling stories makes life experiences assessable in potentially relevant and meaningful ways” (p. 283).

I drafted interview questions based on this research methodology, an extensive review of the literature, and the review of other instruments measuring similar constructs for different populations or at lower levels of leadership. They were open-ended probing questions designed to extract all types of information about the presidents’ experiences and perceptions before becoming leaders. I designed some similar follow-up questions to encourage the presidents to search deeper for additional answers and rich descriptions. Two experienced leadership researchers reviewed the questions prior to the interviews, and I made slight adjustments to the instrument based on their feedback.

The analysis of the data included a number of detailed steps. A temporary research assistant and I first transcribed the interviews, and then I analyzed each interview to categorize responses. I then combined all of the related responses (comments, perspectives, and stories) from the ten interviews into separate categorized documents. Next, I reread each interview transcription and analysis to identify key ideas and phrases about the presidents’ experiences related to each category, and then assembled all interview phrases or statements by topic. The emerging themes were then noted. Finally, I asked the presidents to review the themes and results and then provide corrections or additional perspective and insight that may not have been captured in the original interviews. As mentioned previously, this paper focuses on only a portion of the data collected.

There are a few limitations that should be presented. First, generalizability is limited because of the research methodology utilized for this research. This research was exploratory in nature so finding commonalities through emerging themes, not generalizability, was the primary focus of this research. Second, the participants were a convenient sample. The ten women who agreed to participate could have had different experiences, perspectives, and memories regarding their childhood experiences than other presidents. Third, because of the age of the women in this sample (which are the approximate ages of current women presidents today) this research becomes a study of a generation (mostly pre-Title IX) and these women were primarily surrounded by traditional roles for women. Research on the next generation may have resulted in different findings. Finally, these findings are only a portion of a larger array of findings dealing with the entire lifetime development of leadership skills, abilities, and competencies. Understanding the full meaning of childhood to the overall lifetime development of these university presidents would be enhanced by simultaneously considering the information gained about each stage of development. However, these considerations are beyond the scope of this paper.

Research Findings

This results section is divided into four subsections: 1) childhood personalities; 2) childhood school and other activities; 3) influential individuals; and 4) significant events, challenges, and opportunities.

Childhood Personalities

I asked the ten women to describe their childhood personalities to the best of their recollection. One of the major themes that emerged from these descriptions was that, as a whole, these women were very obedient as children. They obeyed and respected their parents, teachers, religious leaders, neighbors, and adult relatives and friends. To emphasize how obedient they were, a number of presidents gave examples of the worst things they did during childhood. One president explained, “The most rebellious thing I did was to take a flashlight to bed and read under the covers.” Another stated, “The worst thing I ever did as a kid was when I was about five. We lived in a house that was just down the road and across a highway from a park. I was told never to go down there and cross that street. I took my little brother to the playground. My mother came to get us in a police car.” Only one of the ten presidents described herself as having a rebellious streak; yet, from her description she was still generally obedient. It is important to note that, although some presidents actually used the word “obedient”, some provided descriptions

of doing or not doing certain things out of respect—not just blind obedience. This finding provides an example of their observant and reflective natures which are discussed next.

A second major theme revolved around the presidents' reflective and observant natures as children. They were concerned about understanding what types of behavior would bring the best results from others around them. One presented explained,

I'm a very observant person and learned this from an early age; I watch people carefully, and in watching, I sort of learned what to do and how to do it...I was reflective. I give the credit to the church. I grew up in Methodist church and we had some very intelligent pastors who did a lot of sermons that weren't hell, fire, and brimstone.

I grew up in more of a reflective environment. I thought about what people do, why they do it, and such.

Another said, "Being prepared mentally, paying attention, being ready to trace the argument or the reasons and so forth was important. That's why I loved math so much. It was a heaven sent discipline because it was so logical. I loved it!" A president of a large university in the east mentioned, "I stepped in the shadows of people I liked and trusted and followed their footsteps." Most of the presidents had a strong desire to please others and to live up to others' positive expectations.

When I asked them whether they were shy or outgoing, the presidents differed in their responses. One woman stated, "I'm not painfully shy, but as a young person growing up I always liked to watch what was going on around me and figure out what's happening before I jump in." Another explained, "I was not shy or outgoing; I was probably a pretty reticent person but I wasn't shy. I could do public speaking and so forth but I definitely was not a social butterfly...I had confidence in my ability to do the work. I knew I was smart." A third reflected, "I was shy in some social situations that were undefined, but I was never shy in school when I knew the boundaries." Another said, "I was always comfortable by myself for long periods of time; it is not punishment to be sent to my room to read all day."

Overall, these women had a variety of childhood personality traits. For example, some stated that they were outgoing and "bossy." One president explained, "Although I was not as aggressive as some of my friends, I was opinionated, outgoing, and competitive." Another reflected, "If you were to ask my childhood friends what I was like, they would say I was bossy yet fun. I liked to be in charge so everything was organized." Others said they were actually bashful and reserved. And, while some described themselves as extroverts, others described themselves as introverts. However, as children the presidents were obedient and/or respectful, reflective, smart, self-directed, helpful, moderately to highly competitive, and concerned about pleasing and meeting the expectations of respected adults. Although some talked about areas of possible insecurity or lack of confidence, all described themselves as confident (or as having high self-esteem) with regard to many situations and environments. It was also clear that these young girls also had high expectations for themselves. I extracted and compiled all of the words the presidents used to describe their own childhood personalities and created Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive words used by university presidents about their own childhood personalities

<i>As a child I was (or had)...</i>		
A desire to please others	Eager	Observant
A follower	Embracing the world	Opinionated
A high achiever	Ernest student	Outgoing
A lack of confidence	Friends	Persevering
A love for learning	Good self-esteem	Practical
Achievement-oriented	Good student	Reflective
An active mind	Helpful	Reticent
An introvert	High self-expectations	Self-directed
Autonomous	Independent	Sensitive
Bashful	Logical	Shy in undefined situations
Competitive	Mentally prepared	Slightly rebellious
Confident	Motivated	Smart
Conscientious	Never lonely	Timid
Dependable	Obedient	Uncomfortable in the spotlight

School and Other Activities

I asked the women to describe their experiences and perceptions of school and other childhood activities. The first theme that emerged was their positive feelings regarding school and learning. All ten presidents said they

enjoyed school. Most described themselves as model students who enjoyed learning. One explained that she “found joy from thinking, reading, and learning,” while another stated, “I loved school and absolutely yearned for learning.” Nine of the ten presidents specifically mentioned an intense love of reading. One said,

I loved reading. I was a huge user of the library. I would ride bikes to the library and come home with a mountain of books and devour them. I have very strong images of not wanting to come to dinner and walking around with a book in my hand, fiction mostly, the Nancy Drew, classic stuff that kids read.

All embodied a strong commitment for education and understood (as young children) the importance of education in life. Six specifically mentioned the benefit of having wonderful, caring teachers. Eight explained that their teachers liked or appreciated them for their abilities and contributions. Seven explained that doing well in school came fairly easily for them, and that they “flourished in school.” Four spoke of specific recognition and awards that were meaningful and provided support for understanding and acknowledging their intellectual and social competence and abilities. Three presidents stated that it was in elementary school that they began learning that “women could do anything.” Interestingly, these statements were made exclusively by the presidents who attended all female-led schools. A majority of the presidents also spoke of their involvement in school activities as children (plays, clubs, service, and such) were important in their personal development.

When I asked about their involvement in sports, most presidents described the lack of organized team sports that were available at that time. A number of presidents talked about the historical emphasis of girls’ participation in individual (not team) sports. As one president in her mid-sixties explained,

Girls were expected to excel in individual ways because it was before the advent of sports. My father was adamant about girls not doing things that made them sweat. He was very opposed to this. I think this was one of the problems of early women leaders. We didn’t have a lot of experiences with teams, a lot of early women had trouble understanding victory and getting any satisfaction from it. In fact, we saw some real grandstanding and in some cases disastrous women presidents in the very beginning. They needed some feedback that was satisfying and it only came if they did it. At that time you only played solos, sang solos, and had the “one” part, because these were the roles open to women.

Only three described sports team involvement during childhood but eight described themselves as being physically active in general.

When asked if they were competitive, eight said they were moderately to highly competitive while they other two said they were somewhat competitive during childhood. The women who participated in organized sports felt they were very competitive; however, other presidents described their competitiveness in other realms including excelling in school, obtaining first chair in bands and orchestras, speech contests, card and board games, and leading roles in plays and dance recitals. A number of women said they were competitive with themselves, meaning that they set high goals and worked to achieve them. One president said, “I always felt competitive, but there weren’t many group activities or competitive activities for girls and women, especially as a child. I had to be competitive with myself like in meeting the standards or getting good grades” It was clear that these women enjoyed (while many actually thrived) challenging themselves and others. One president explained, “I always performed my best when I was in a competitive situation of some kind. It seemed to give me extra energy and motivation to do well. I was very achievement-oriented, probably an overachiever, and enjoyed the challenge of opportunities that asked for my best.”

Other activities the presidents mentioned are listed in Table 2. When asked if they believed these childhood activities were helpful in developing important skills and abilities necessary for effective leadership, all generally agreed. These women felt many of the activities helped them develop confidence, people skills, organizational skills, presentation skills and more. As children, eight of the women were involved in musical activities (e.g., piano, choir, band, and orchestra) and half were involved in Girl Scouts. One explained,

I got pushed into doing the kinds of things that helped me grow up to develop confidence and public presence without every being aware of it. However, I was not different from other children in my small town. Everybody did the same things. We just assumed everybody had those kinds of experiences. It was much later that I realized I was truly blessed.

Four of the presidents mentioned that their experiences with dramatic productions were also helpful. One stated,

In sixth grade the local state college was putting on a play and needed some young girls. They selected a group of us and we went a few nights a week for practice over a long period of time. I had my own speaking roles in the play. It was a big deal. It allowed me to connect to that environment but also made me feel like I was accomplishing something, being able to do that in front of a group. It was a good experience for me.

Table 2. Childhood activities

<i>As a child I participated in...</i>		
Active things	Dance	Reading
Arts and crafts	Day camps	Roller-skating
Babysitting	Dodgeball	Sewing
Baseball	Experiments/inventing	Skiing
Bible or Hebrew school	Girl scouts/Brownie	Summer camps
Biking	Hiking	Swimming
Canning	Horse riding	Tennis lessons
Cello lessons	Outside playing	Violin lessons
Choir	Physical education	Visiting the library
Chores	Piano	
Church activities	Playing with friends	
Clubs	Plays (school and community)	

These findings support the notion that high involvement in school and other activities may be helpful for the initial development of self-esteem, self-confidence, and other competencies and skills (e.g., interpersonal, speaking, organizational, intellectual, dependability, social, teamwork, and responsibility).

Influential Individuals

This section focuses on individuals, excluding parents, who were a positive influence on the presidents as children. It is important to note, however, that all ten women spoke of the profound influence their mothers and fathers had in their development and growth.

Seven presidents spoke of the influence of some elementary school teachers. One stated, “In my life I certainly have had the great benefit of wonderful teachers.” Another president said,

My sixth grade teacher was a woman who was passionate about education. She conveyed her own personal joy and passion in the way she taught us. In some ways I think these times made up special moments for me in (what we now call) the ‘life of the mind.’ This includes being able to gain shared joy out of thinking, reading, and learning. I saw that in her, and I felt it in myself—the sheer joy that she felt was the joy that she ignited in me. I don’t think I ever had the chance to tell her that. I was much older before I realized it. It makes me want to be sure that teachers know of their potential impact.

Another president also spoke of her Catholic school sixth grade teacher. She had previously (in fourth and fifth grades) had nun teachers who were taskmasters and she felt negatively influenced by them. But, she also remembered a sixth grade teacher who was a “breath of fresh air. Learning became fun. The classroom was no longer a place of punishment and rote learning. It was a much more open and interesting experience.” One president talked about a sixth grade teacher who was single and older. Every year she picked a small group of children to provide special opportunities and attention. This teacher took her and a few other children to plays in the city. After the productions she would take them to get a special treat. According to this president,

She opened up to me a new world that I didn’t know existed. I was pretty provincial in my little neighborhood. I think that was really important to me, to reach beyond my little world. I really discovered for the first time there were people who dressed better and who lived in a different world that I did. I loved it. It was important to me to reach beyond my little world.

One president said she liked all her teachers; however, she decided that her Hebrew school teachers were most influential. When asked why, she stated that “Both of my Hebrew teachers were very influential because they were real scholars. They appreciated having kids like my brother and me in their classes. We were seriously interested in learning, and they would teach extra to be sure we learned.” One president spoke of her fifth-sixth grade teacher as having great strength. She explained that this woman taught in a room not much larger than her office and had “the strength to keep 20 little kids quiet in the fifth grade while she taught something to the sixth graders in the same room. I always admired her. I remember her style and how she would look at me to make me shut up, rather than having to do anything really rough.” Finally, one president spoke of the profound influence of a split second-third grade class. She was always asked to read to the younger grade while the teacher worked with the older grade. She stated, “I was given a lot of responsibility to do different things. I was like a teacher’s aide. She would ask me to do things that, looking back, were quite unusual for my age. With this responsibility I believe I moved into a leading-type role at a very early age. It certainly built my self-confidence.”

Extended family members were also positive influences on these women. Four specifically spoke of influential aunts. One president spoke of an aunt who had a “put together” and business-like demeanor. “I remember that I liked that. I remember admiring her brightly colored scarves.” Another was deeply influenced by an unmarried aunt who was a camp director. She was a very independent, business-type person. She explained, “We bonded; she would come over on Friday evenings for dinner. When I got big enough I would take a bus to her house. She was a big influence on my life. I loved camp.” A third president had an aunt who was “a true role model” for her. She owned a very prestigious kindergarten. At that time in the south, education in the kindergarten was really stressed. This president explained that her aunt was “a very powerful woman” in this large southern city.

She was the principal and ran the school which had 400 children. They had greatly progressed and kids started reading at four. I enjoyed seeing her do all that. The women teachers at her school had not graduated from college, but they believed in education and wanted to learn her methods. There was no nonsense allowed.

Another president spoke of the strong women on her mother’s side of the family. She spoke of one aunt being very strong and particular. Everything had to be done right. She explained,

I was absolutely scared to death of her because we had to iron our napkins perfectly. Another aunt was a first grade teacher for 50 years, while another owned a flower/gift shop and we would spend summers with her to learn how to be proper. I saw all of these women as very strong and independent, wonderful women. My mindset was that women had to be strong and competent and the backbone of the family, yet it was clear that they couldn’t do anything they wanted occupationally.

Others spoke of the strong influence of a grandmother, and they reminisced about their personalities, thoughtfulness, listening ears, and love of learning and thinking. A few presidents also briefly mentioned the subtle positive influences (primarily through acknowledgement and encouragement) of church members, neighbors, friends’ parents, and others.

A few presidents had a difficult time thinking of specific influential individuals during their childhoods. One stated, “My memories are fairly devoid of stars.” Another explained, “I have learned something from almost everybody that I have interacted with, even as a youth. I watched what people did. When they did things really well I thought about what they did and why it worked. I pondered about whether there was something that I would incorporate and I could learn from that observation. If there is anything for me that was morphomatic, it is watching, thinking, and implementing.” These examples demonstrate how these young girls observed everything around them, thought about what they saw, and arrived at personal conclusions.

Significant Events/Challenges and Opportunities

I also asked the presidents about significant events, challenges, and opportunities that they had during childhood that may have had an impact on the development of specific competencies related to leadership throughout childhood. A few spoke of issues related to serious illnesses of siblings or close relatives. They described developing sensitivity and awareness of others’ circumstances and perspectives, finding internal strength in times of difficulty, improving responsibility and dependability, and learning to change and adjust their own behaviors and expectations when situations called for doing so. One president spoke in detail of a sister’s critical lifetime health problems. Her sister was only 18 months older and this president had vivid memories of stressful times when she was only 4 or 5 years of age. She spoke of understanding the importance of taking care of herself and staying out of the way. She said, “I was okay with that. I remember adults moving around, hovering, and worrying. I was too young to be helpful in other ways, but I remember that I knew that if I stayed out of the way then it would be helpful to my family.” As she got older she spoke of understanding the importance of finding her own internal strength during times of difficulty for her family. During her older childhood years and into her teenage years she would often go places with this same sister. Her parents taught her to recite symptoms and treatments. She said, “If something happened when I was with her I could tell people all of the important information they needed to take care of her. It was a heavy responsibility, and on top of that—she was not to know.”

A number of presidents spoke of moving to new towns and schools as significant events and challenges. From these experiences they developed (at least in part) the ability and confidence to adjust to new people, places, and situations. They learned they could reach out and develop new friendships and fit into different environments and cultures. One president explained,

Moving was hard for me. I was pretty involved in different kinds of activities. It was a tough time for a young girl to move. It took me a year to create a place for myself in a new environment, but it happened. It just took a little while. At the time I didn’t think it was good for me, but in retrospect I think I understood that there were a lot more opportunities for me there. Yet, I did have to go through that transition period. It probably taught me some important things and enlarged my thinking. So, in the end it probably was good for me. I learned that I could

adjust to new places and find friends wherever I went. I have used those skills in many different ways throughout the years.

The presidents also spoke of other difficulties but mentioned what they had learned from all of these challenges. Three presidents mentioned that difficult times helped them develop leadership qualities even more than the easier times.

Five presidents (2 African American; 3 Caucasian) shared specific experiences related to moments they profoundly learned about segregation and other racial issues. The detail they used in describing specific moments was rich and interesting. It was clear these experiences have played a role in decisions they have (and continue to make) with regard to the importance of diversity issues on their campuses. For example, one Caucasian president shared the following story:

One specific incident really shaped me with regard to racial challenges. Even though we were of modest means, like most families in the south we had a black maid. Her name was Ophelia. She was in our home most days from the time I was crawling until I was seven. In many ways she raised me. I still remember so many things about household chores and cooking that she taught me. I loved her dearly. Usually Ophelia took the streetcar home, but for some reason one day my father decided to take her home, and he asked me if I would like to go. I was terribly excited and jumped into the back seat of the car. My father said, "No, you have to sit in the front seat. Ophelia will sit in the back seat." That did not make sense to me as a child because the adult sat in the front. I sat in the back and was pretty upset about it. I cried easily, and I think I cried all of the way. I was in the front seat, Ophelia was in the back, and it was just not right. When she got out of the car, my father turned to me and said something unforgettable: "If she had ridden in the front seat with me, she would be dead by morning."

It hit me to my very core in a way of understanding the injustice of the world that I lived in, where race was such an important issue. That had a huge impact on me, and it's a story I will never forget.

Again, this and other examples demonstrate the observant and reflective natures of these women as children. The previous example was of a child without race filters. She learned why her father did what he did and deeply reflected upon this for many years. From the context she then chose to eventually fight the system, not her father.

Discussion

All ten university presidents loved learning, education, and development. The growth-task model of human development recognized that "push for growth" and proposed that individuals develop because of imagination, self-motivation, inquisition, and curiosity—common attributes of those who enjoy continuous learning and growth. According to Galambos and Hughes (2000), "growth occurs when task areas are challenged" (p. 22). These women enjoyed participating in multiple activities and opportunities that pushed them to learn and grow in a variety of ways. As Weick (1983) proposed, these women's driving internal desires for growth and improvement were met through the quantity and quality of "tasks" (e.g., challenges, opportunities, events, and activities). The impact of formal and informal educational opportunities and experiences is clear. These experiences provide them with opportunities to fulfill their yearning for continual growth and development. The findings also found support for the non-linear cyclical characteristics of growth as proposed by this model. It is difficult to chart a linear course of development from each of these childhood influences but it is clear that a wide variety of individuals, characteristics, opportunities, and activities provided a rich environment for the development of important leadership skills and competencies.

This research found that as children these women presidents were respectful, reflective, observant, smart, somewhat self-directed, competitive, and self-confident in at least some arenas. They had a sense of competency, as Stephens (2003) reports. They liked to be respected for their abilities, as was also the case for Hennig and Jardim's (1977) sample, and wanted to please others who had high expectations for them. They also exhibited many of the "masculine" traits that Hennig and Jardim claimed were important for successful leadership. However, they did not necessarily think of themselves as successful and able in the same way that the 25 CEO participants. Nor did they claim to be arrogant toward their peers. Similar to Stephens (2003) study, these presidents felt smart and competent but most spoke of a few areas of insecurity during childhood. All expressed achievement-oriented tendencies as did Baraka-Love (1986, as cited in Wells, 1998). In addition, as Stephens (2003) discovered, they did not spend their childhoods in the spotlights. The presidents in this study also had humble beginnings. The women were moderately competitive which is somewhat different than the very high competitive and no competitive findings of the Hennig and Jardim (1997) and Stephen's (2003) studies, respectively. This competitiveness may be in the form of enjoying and/or thriving on challenge. This could mean that they competed with themselves to improve and that they enjoyed competing with others. This requires self-reflection and, at least in part, this may have been what allowed them to progress and develop their skills, confidence, and self-esteem. In addition, unlike the Robinson (1996) research, the

10 presidents did not describe being a “leader” when they were young although some talked about having some influence with siblings and peers. It was clear that these presidents always had high expectations for themselves. A few of the presidents spoke of a loss of self-esteem as Sills (1994) professed but many spoke of their sixth grade years (during 11-13 years of age) as an important and empowering year. Although three presidents spoke of situations or incidences where they deflected attention from themselves to others (e.g., talked friends into taking the lead in a school program instead of doing it themselves, not wanting attention given to them for good deeds or service), as Fels (2004) reported is common in women of all ages, it did not seem to affect these presidents’ achievement and accomplishment needs as well as their desires to make a difference. It is important to note, however, that these young girls did not seek formal leadership positions during childhood because opportunities for such were rare. A driving need for leadership titles and power during childhood did not emerge in the findings. However, they may have been “leading” during this time. Many may have been confident enough not to need titles to lead, which seems to be a critical skill for presidents. Their leadership tasks may have been defined as service, as the president who was asked to read to other students in her second-third grade combined class.

As various researchers (e.g., Cubillo and Brown, 2003; Kenke, 1996) have claimed, the university presidents felt that their childhood activities, schooling, and other opportunities were influential in their leadership development. Contrary to Wells (1998) women entrepreneurs, they spoke fondly of school experiences and of their desire and passion for learning and succeeding in the school environment. They also reported, as did Rayburn et al. (2001), that school and home were the most important arenas for learning leadership skills throughout childhood, while work, community, and religious settings provided some opportunities as well. This research also supports Robinson’s (1996) finding that women leaders as children were avid readers and sought education in their various experiences. This research supports the notion that school experiences and reading during childhood had an impact on these leaders. They found joy in these activities because of their desire to learn, their interest and curiosity, their sense of competition (even with themselves), their love of challenges and achievement, and their desire to keep their minds busy and active. The leadership opportunities the women did have during childhood helped build their feelings of competence and confidence, as Cohen et al., (1996) found. Contrary to Fels (2004), these presidents did not speak of feeling that they received less attention and recognition than boys in their classes. Similar to Hennig and Jardim’s (1977) sample, these presidents were members of many organizations and clubs and, in addition, participated in all types of other activities such as music lessons, sports activities, and dramatic productions. Each provided them with developmental opportunities for growth in skills related to speaking, organization, interpersonal, teamwork, networking, responsibility, delegation, motivating others, internal strength, persistence, and more. Unlike Hennig and Jardim’s participants, these presidents did not voice dissatisfaction over restrictions placed upon them during childhood. These women felt they had many opportunities for growth and development in a variety of arenas.

Unlike Wells (1998), the women presidents in this study spoke often and highly of the influence of school teachers and experiences in their personal development. Outside their immediate families, the most influential individuals included female teachers, aunts, and grandmothers. Because of their descriptions, many of these individuals were single and a living model of service, which was somewhat counter to traditional roles at that time. So, in spite of their obedience they may have had some contrast to the “rule.” Hennig and Jardim (1977) spoke primarily about the influence of fathers and males in CEOs upbringing. In fact, they saw women as inferior to men in most ways. In the current study, the positive influence of women in their lives was very clear. Women were not generally seen as inferior. These presidents had examples (role models, mentors) who were strong and competent women. As did Hartman’s (1999) interviewees, these women also drew their strength from a wide variety of individuals (families, friends, teachers, peers, and community) as opposed to one particular individual.

Some of the most influential and memorable learning and development events for these women were challenging, difficult, and traumatic times. As children, these women developed the ability to learn from all types of experiences. This stemmed from their reflective and observant natures as discussed earlier. Some attributed the development of this ability to their parents, religious leaders, teachers, relatives, and others. All presidents agreed that the ability to learn and change from all types of experiences is an extremely helpful ability in developing the kinds of skills most beneficial for effective and successful leadership throughout life.

In addition to the discussed findings, it may be important for readers to consider a primary and alternative hypothesis of this research study. A reasonable primary hypothesis for this paper is the notion that each stage of development (such as childhood) contributes in some way to a president’s growth and development as a leader. Past research and these findings appear to support this view. However, there is also some evidence in these research findings that suggest that there may be another explanation or hypotheses also at work. This is that leaders’ perceptions of childhood are continually revised as a result of what they have learned from each stage of development or from their ongoing reflections about significant life experiences. Throughout their lives, the powerfulness of their reflective natures may have altered their recollections and perceptions, and the meaning of

their childhood experiences may have shifted. Both explanations are important to consider in understanding the lived experiences of these women.

Contributions and Implications

It is clear that research on high level women leaders in higher education is limited; yet, even rarer are studies focused on in-depth insights into women's experiences and perspectives related to the development of leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities throughout their lives. Hence, more research utilizing rigorous qualitative research methodologies is needed. In addition, more current and past women leaders must be willing to provide detail and candor. Finally, it is clear from this study and the review of the literature that similar research needs to be conducted with the next generation of women university presidents, particularly on issues such as race-class and sports participation.

This study offers contributions to the management and higher education literature as well as scholars and practitioners. Particularly related to women, it provides support for possible new relationships, antecedents, determinants, and mediators in the educational leadership arena. There are only a few pieces currently published in the area of developing leadership as they relate to women university presidents; hence, this research is significant and needed. However, it is important to note that although universities and schools have much in common, leading educational institutions may require different types of leaders than other kinds of organizations. This research also brings to light the complexity and magnitude of effective leadership development. Although childhood influences only scratch the surface in truly understanding all the things that have an effect on developing leadership throughout a woman's life, practitioners would do well to understand them if they expect to achieve advanced abilities in the leadership development arena. The similarities in childhood influences of the women university presidents demonstrate evidence of the importance of individual upbringings and experiences on personal assumptions, potential aspirations, and leadership development. As other researchers have argued, these can continue to influence individuals throughout their lifetimes.

This research is important for the development of quality and effective leadership development programs and opportunities. It is also useful for counseling young women (youth, college, and workplace) and parents as it continues to become more important for women to develop the skills and confidence necessary to make a difference in various arenas. In fact, by understanding these influences, practitioners can design more effective interventions dependent on an individual's background. By being aware of this information, possible strengths and weaknesses (often hidden) in skills, abilities, perspectives, and self-concepts can be discovered. This depth is essential for practitioners interested in individual leadership development efforts (most likely focused on management or executive coaching) centered on working with individuals interested in obtaining positions at the highest levels in higher educational institutions. Understanding backgrounds of women can help in designing more effective one-on-one strategies for performance improvement.

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Funding for this research provided by the following: Woodbury Family Trust in Orem, Utah; School of Business, Utah Valley State College, Orem, Utah; and Utah Valley State College Presidential Scholarship Fund