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**“We are going to be okay”:
Women* Senior Administrators in Higher Education
during Times of Crisis**



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Roadmap

- + Background & Motivation
- + Purpose & Research Questions
- + Researcher Reflexivity
- + Methods
- + Findings
- + Significance
- + Limitations & Future Research



Background & Motivation

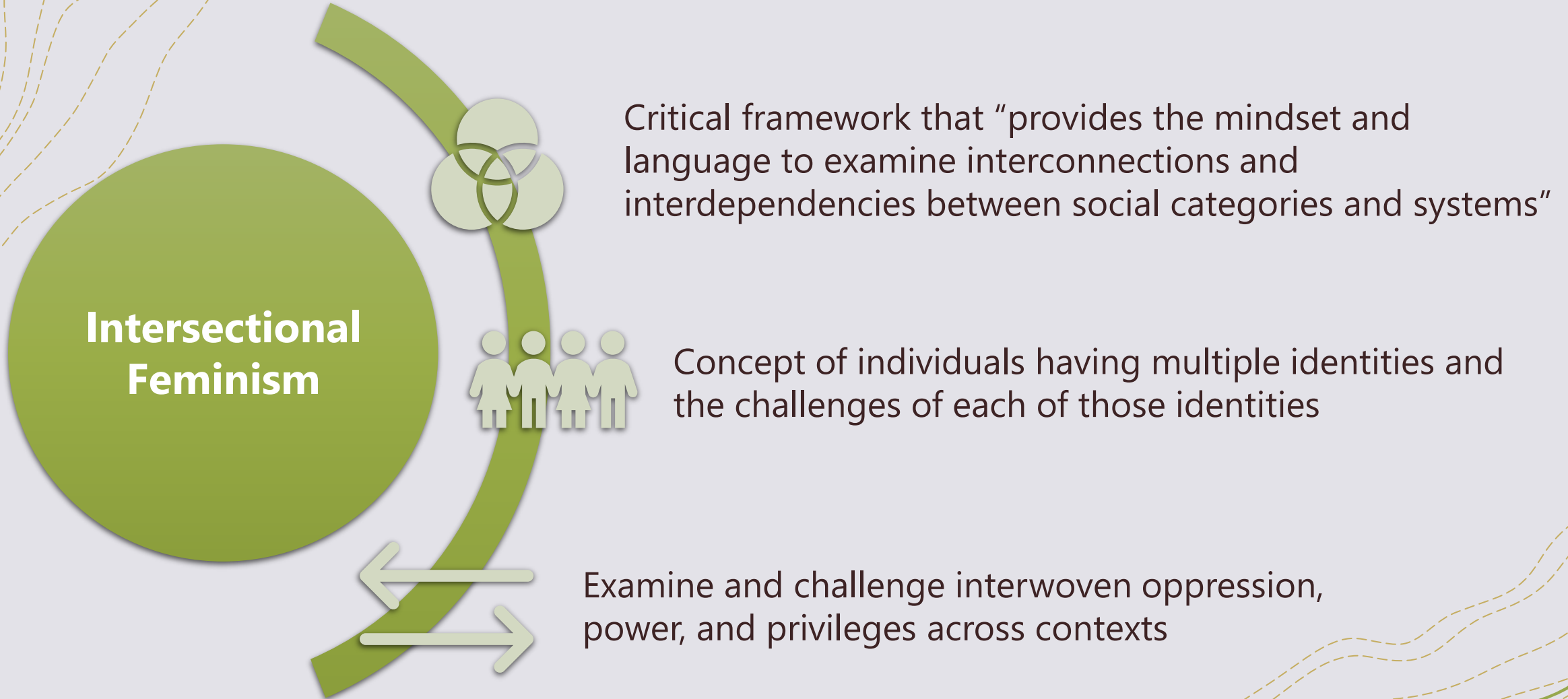
- + There continues to be significant barriers impacting the progression and persistence of women in higher education administration, resulting in **an inequality in the representation of women in these roles** (Klenke, 2017).
- + Research has highlighted that women are often given **leadership roles in higher risk situations and times of crisis, a phenomenon known as the “glass cliff”** (Bruckmüller et al., 2014).
- + As the United States finds itself amidst crises in the last year, including social unrest surrounding **racism, political upheaval, and the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of leadership has become even more vital.**
- + Bannerji et al. (1992) notes **that universities are “sites for the reproduction of power and privilege”** (pg. 5).

Purpose

This paper aims to **highlight ways women* leaders navigate times of crisis**, specifically racial and political unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to **persist in their senior leadership roles** in higher education administration.



Conceptual Framework



(Breslin et al., 2017; Carastathis, 2014; Hancock, 2007)

Research Questions

RQ1: What leadership characteristics do women senior leaders in higher education administration aim to embody during times of crisis?

RQ2: How does the personal mission and vision of women leaders in higher education administration roles impact their actions and response during times of crisis?

Researchers Reflexivity

Researcher 1

- + White woman, second-year Ph.D. student
- + Background in K-12 administration and nonprofit leadership
- + Interaction with 2 of 3 participants prior to study
- + Breaking of the third wall during interviews

Researcher 2

- + White woman, second-year Ph.D. student
- + Experience teaching in K-12 public schools
- + Various leadership roles

Researcher 3

- + White, man, second-year Ph.D. student
- + Background in K-12 teaching and administration

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)



Methods

- + Qualitative phenomenological study
- + Convenience snowball sampling
- + Series of two semi-structured interviews
 - + Via video conferencing
 - + 3 months between rounds interviews
 - + First in March 2020
 - + Second in September 2020

(Billups, 2020; Creswell, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2019)

Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Age Range	Race	Type of Institution	Experience in Higher Education Administration	Role Description
Fey	60-65 yrs.	White	Research I, PWI	24 years	Supports the faculty and curriculum by providing leadership to university's campuses and academic programs
Mary	65-70 yrs.	White	Research I, PWI	37 years	Responsible for providing strategic direction for neighborhood and civic engagement initiatives
Quinn	60-65 yrs.	White	Research I, PWI	17 years	Manages administrative functions and strategic components of the college, as well as leading fundraising and donor cultivation

Data Analysis

- + First Round of Coding
 - + Open Coding: In Vivo & Values
- + Code mapping and landscaping
- + Second Round of Coding
 - + Axial Coding

(Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2015)

Trustworthiness

- + Engaged in reflective journaling using analytic memos during the coding process
- + Peer debriefing, including workshopping codes and categories with colleagues
- + Triangulation with memos
- + Thick description enhanced by field notes

(Billups, 2019; Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2015)

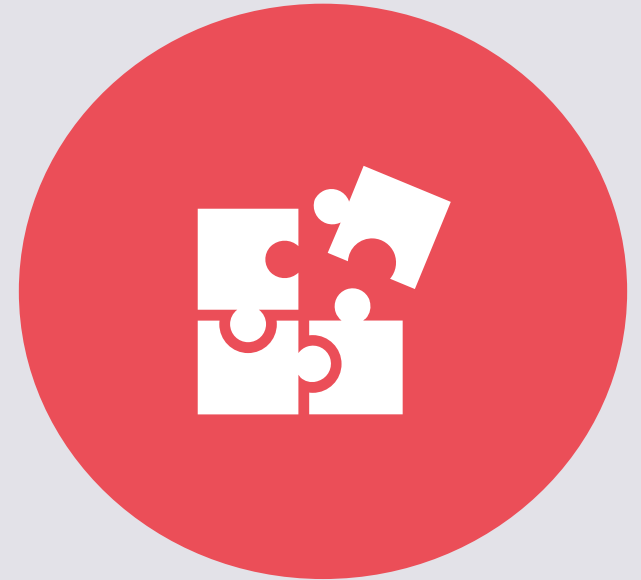
Findings



**LEADERSHIP
CHARACTERISTICS**



“TRAINED FOR THIS”



**MISSION ALIGNMENT
AND FIT**

Findings



**LEADERSHIP
CHARACTERISTICS**

Leading with Compassion

Leading by Example

Leading Through Partnership

Findings

Leading with Compassion

One of the things that I have found myself doing is actually not on a political level at all, but on a **humane level**. In March, when we went into lockdown mode, the first week I wrote to my staff, which is about 30 people give or take, and I just wrote an email for Monday morning saying, **'Hey, it's going to be okay.'** You know? And then the second week I wrote another email to kind of say, "Hey, we're going to be okay." So here we are, it's week 27 and every Sunday I write an email to the staff that gets sent at six o'clock in the morning on Monday morning to my entire staff saying, **'it's going to be okay. You guys are great. I really appreciate who you are.'** (MaryInt2)



**LEADERSHIP
CHARACTERISTICS**

Findings

Leading by Example



**LEADERSHIP
CHARACTERISTICS**

The idea that if I was on a plane that was going down, that the first thing I would do would not be to help my child is like, 'You've got to be joking.' I just can't even imagine that. But the truth of the matter is that **you have to take care of yourself, put your own mask on first,** before you can help anybody else... I have been all about taking care of other people, my children, my students, organizations that I support, whatever. And I should do all of that, yes, but I am better at doing that, **I'm a better person, I'm a happier person, which enables other people to be better,** if I put my own mask on first...it's made me a better leader, it's made me show up well. **You need to show up well as a leader.** (FeyInt1)

Findings

Leading Through Partnership

...shortly after George Floyd, we had those couple of sessions. We internally in the school wanted to **look at systemic and structural issues of racism in our school**, and then take a look systematically at our policies and practices and all that. So **we're not experts**, none of us are. So I've **contracted with a company**. I think it's the [Name of Organization], they're professionals at doing...critical conversations. (QuinnInt1)



**LEADERSHIP
CHARACTERISTICS**

Findings



“TRAINED FOR THIS”

Athletics, Teams, and Role Modeling

- As a former athlete, you have to perform...if you're used to **performing under pressure**, that's really good training for this, that capacity to say, 'Yeah, okay, I'm tired, but the clock will go out by whatever time'... **People who crumble under that pressure**. And so for me, the athletic training was part of that. (FeyInt2)
- I learned a lot from them about their dealing with crises and working under pressure.... I had **good role models**. And then I think just throughout my career, I just had different mentors at various stages of my career and **watched and learned from them** (QuinnInt2)

Findings

Knowing the Possibilities and Acting

- We knew we were heading into something that was going to be different, right?... I would say this over and over and over again, **COVID simply amplified.** If you had a problem before, COVID just put a finer point on it, just amplified it in a way that nothing else quite can. **So, any change, any problems that you had, any issues ...** are just going to be amplified by a crisis like COVID (FeyInt2)



"TRAINED FOR THIS"

Findings

As a leader I'm supposed to have my **own personal mission** of what I'm about... I don't have that well-crafted yet, but I think that I, for whatever reason, get a kick out of making things run really well, and creating environments where other really smart people can do their best work. **I think that my job is to create an environment ... to succeed and excel, and that means removing barriers, that means enabling people** (FeyInt1).

...find where your best self is. We all can do certain things, but you can get into situations where you're performing in a particular role, and it's not a particular part of you that makes you feel good, that makes you feel your most creative. ... turns out that I'm **my best self** when I'm part of a team, I'm my best self when I'm thinking and coordinating things and bringing plans together and motivating people...I **had a mission**... to be as part of a team, as a leader, and encouraging people to think outside the box (MaryInt1).



**MISSION
ALIGNMENT
AND FIT**

Limitations

- + Small-scale study with all White women participants
- + At a single PWI in the mid-Atlantic region
- + Findings may not be applicable in K-12 settings

Implications and Future Research Directions

- + **Future Leaders:** Leadership needs to plan for future crises.
- + **Future Leaders:** Leading with compassion needs to be valued and viewed as a non-gendered crisis leadership skill.
- + **Future Research:** There is a need for more research specific to women and women from diverse social groups in higher education crisis management.
- + **Future Research:** There is a need for a post-pandemic reflection on what lessons have been learned in crisis management for leadership in higher education administration.

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