

1 Introduction

On January 12, 2016, Marcy Onieal – the manager of the Town of Waynesville, North Carolina – closed the monthly council meeting by requesting a point of privilege. She began by saying, “I have no additional reports tonight, but if I may take a brief moment, I would simply like to address the elephant in the room, since I have apparently become that elephant.”

Onieal had been hired in 2012 as a change agent for the town. The previous manager had served for 20 years, during which time the town had no performance evaluation system and the paychecks of 150 employees were individually signed by the former manager. Onieal had accomplished the job she was hired to do, including implementing employee performance evaluation, restructuring the public works department, and creating a nepotism policy.

But in December 2015, the *Smoky Mountain News* ran the headline, “Still Trapped by the Delicate Dance of a New Town Manager, Waynesville’s Marcy Onieal Faces a Double-Edged Sword Daily.” The article reported employee complaints about Onieal’s leadership style and how it differed in comparison with that of her predecessor: “For nearly two decades, the town had hummed along comfortably under the guiding hand of Lee Galloway. He was easygoing, affable, paternal – a boss people were happy to work for their entire careers.” The article continued, “Onieal has a no-nonsense, brass-tacks, analytical style that some aren’t used to, especially in a woman in a small Southern town. A workaholic by nature, Onieal is faster-paced, more formal, more business-like than employees were used to.” Marcy Onieal was fired by the Board of Aldermen on January 15, 2016.

Onieal’s experiences provide a perfect Rorschach test for a range of theories that seek to explain gender imbalance in organizational leadership. Her actions as a leader evoked role congruity theory, in which her behavior as a leader contradicted cultural norms for women as nurturing, accommodating, and acquiescent (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Eagly and Carli, 2003). The approbation of the former male manager’s informal and paternal style is consistent with status theory, which posits that cultural beliefs assign competence and social significance to certain social groups – most notably men – rather than to their disproportionate grip on power and resources (Ridgeway, 2001: 27). As role congruity theory would predict, Onieal’s behavior as a leader violates her status as a woman, triggering dislike and, ultimately, backlash (Correll and Ridgeway, 2003). The reference to the former manager as being paternal evokes Camilla Stivers’ *Gender Images in Public Administration*, which contends that masculine imagery dominates public administration practice, challenging the ability of women to lead (Hutchinson, Walker, and McKenzie, 2014). And being hired

Smith
Excerpt

[More Information](#)

2

Elements in Public and Nonprofit Administration

after a long-term public manager and charged to make significant organizational changes represents a classic glass cliff scenario, in which women disproportionately land leadership positions that are professionally precarious (Ryan and Haslam, 2007).

While these theories provide snippets of insight about gender-imbalanced public sector leadership, they do not, either singly or taken together, explain the persistent gender imbalance in public sector leadership. After all, women receive a higher percentage of Master of Public Administration (MPA) degrees than do men,¹ and desirable traits for public managers have evolved into a balance of culturally feminine and masculine traits (Duehr and Bono, 2006). Yet women still lag far behind men in their representation at the top of public and private organizations. Because no single theory can fully address this pervasive problem, we adopt a problem-driven approach to understanding gender-imbalanced public sector leadership.

Problem-driven research was first articulated by business professors Gerald Davis and Christopher Marquis in 2005 in an article in *Organization Science*. Davis and Marquis argued that organizational theory should move away from research that deductively tests a single theory; in their minds, doing so had produced little theoretical innovation in the field, and consequently, stale theories of resource dependency, new institutionalism, and population ecology were cited routinely without any evidence of their validity. This engagement and attachment to older theories produced variations – such as “reruns of old classics” featuring familiar plot twists and turns – that did little to provide a deeper understanding of important social problems. As an alternative, Davis and Marquis advocated for a problem-driven approach that would seek to explain the “whys” of real-world phenomena, with an emphasis on explanatory mechanisms. In the process, problem-driven research would eschew single theories in favor of a range of explanatory frameworks that uncovered the mechanisms of phenomena, namely, the “cogs and wheels behind the regression coefficient.”

Gender-imbalanced public sector leadership is ripe for problem-driven research, albeit not a common topic for public administration scholars. More often than not, public administration scholars examine issues related to representative bureaucracy, gender dynamics in public organizations, and the effects of diversity management within organizations (DeHart-Davis et al., 2018). While these are important topics, the “whys” of gender-imbalanced public sector leadership remain elusive, even as women remain underrepresented as leaders of federal, state, and local government. Thus, our objective in writing

¹ www.naspaa.org/sites/default/files/docs/2018-12/2016-17-accr-data-report-final.pdf

this Element is to explore a range of potential explanations for gender-imbalanced leadership in the public sector to move us closer to a holistic explanation of why gender-imbalanced public sector leadership persists.

Having decided on a problem-driven approach to gender-imbalanced public sector leadership, our next tactic was to narrow the scope of our investigation to local government management. Local government management is, in many ways, an ideal laboratory for researching gender-imbalanced public sector leadership. It is the unit of government with which citizens have the most direct contact, whether paying utility bills, receiving healthcare, or reporting crimes in their neighborhood. Local government is also highly varied in functions making generalizability less of an issue (Nelson and Stenberg, 2017). Finally, the chief administrative officers² who run cities and counties remain overwhelmingly male,³ despite the many affinity groups, leadership trainings, and opinion pieces seeking to diversify local government management.

We also chose to use multiple methods to investigate gender-imbalanced local government management. This choice enables us to examine gender imbalance from different angles and generate a more comprehensive picture of the problem. Accordingly, qualitative analysis of interviews with thirty female local government professionals allowed us to discern patterns of comments that shed light on the nature of local government management, as well as barriers to pursuing the top job. Analysis of the resumes of forty-one North Carolina county managers enabled us to detect gender differences in career paths that possibly preclude a higher percentage of women in top positions. Finally, we analyze secondary data collected on local government managers of 100 counties and 332 cities in North Carolina using the glass cliff theory as our explanatory framework. Glass cliff theory argues that women are more likely to land leadership positions in organizations with declining performance or circumstances that create higher professional risk. Using hierarchical binary logistic regression, we seek to explain the appointment of women as city and county managers as a function of measures of financial, political, and legal risk.

We report our findings in the following pages, which we begin by making the case that gender-balanced leadership is intrinsically valuable, beyond utilitarian arguments that focus on the benefits of women in leadership positions. Next comes a brief overview of the theoretical reasons why there are so few women in public service leadership positions. The following section is a history of the long and slow ascent of women in local government management positions. A discussion of the interview data follows, demonstrating the considerable

² We use the terms “chief administrative officers” and “city/county managers” interchangeably.

³ <https://icma.org/data-icma-women-members-profession>

Smith
Excerpt
[More Information](#)

4 *Elements in Public and Nonprofit Administration*

challenges faced by women who become local government managers. These themes will be familiar to scholars of gender in public administration but will also add fresh angles to existing theoretical narratives. Next, the sequence analysis of resumes reveals distinct career paths for women and men in reaching the managerial stage and suggests some ways that this may affect gender balance. Our exploration of secondary data follows, testing for the existence of a glass cliff in local government management and raising questions about the opportunities that exist in pursuing more or less risky positions. The final section is on implications of our findings for local government and public service.

2 The Need for Gender-Balanced Public Sector Leadership

After significant progress during the last century, the trajectory to gender balance has appreciably slowed. World Economic Forum's 2018 Gender Gap Report – tracking gender gap on the dimensions of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment – notes, “Overall the gender gap has been reduced by 0.03% since last year and by 3.6% since 2006 . . . with current trends, the overall global gender gap can be closed in 108 years (p. 15).” Catalyst, a nonprofit focused on advocacy for women in the workplace, draws upon data on S&P 500 companies to show that the proportion of women dwindles as one moves up the hierarchy, with only 5 percent of chief executive officers (CEOs) being women. An Ernst and Young report (2017) notes that the percentage of women in public sector leadership positions globally hovers at about 30 percent. DeHart-Davis et al. (2018) provide similar statistics for US public sector leadership with women comprising 30 percent of senior executive service positions in the federal government (Ricucci, 2009) and 30 percent of US state agency heads (Bowling et al., 2006)

The need for gender balance in public sector leadership should not be a contested proposition. Indeed, we accept the need for gender balance in other domains. Most of us, for example, accept the desirability of gender balance in human population on an axiomatic basis, without a need for well-developed arguments and evidence. The gender-balance proposition in public leadership, however, faces a court of skeptics. In a recent review of public sector diversity research, DeHart-Davis et al. (2018) elaborate on two prominent lines of argument in the public administration literature aimed at the skeptics. The first of these lines of argument, the theoretical lens based on representative bureaucracy, has a long history in public administration literature. The second, the so-called business case for diversity management, draws upon a range of

social psychological theories to argue that women bring unique skills and talents to leadership that make them a valuable asset to organizations (Herring, 2009).

Despite significant differences in theoretical terms and framing, there are remarkable lines of similarity between arguments based on representative bureaucracy and business case theories. Both sets of theories take an instrumental approach, theorizing that gender balance and gender representation lead to desirable social, public policy, or organizational outcomes. Although empirical research in different contexts provides support for these theories, there are notable instances of findings that run counter to theoretical expectations. Some of these inconsistencies can be overcome by better incorporating contextual factors. For example, organizational socialization can weaken the effects of active representation defined as the propensity of members of underrepresented groups to act on behalf of others from the group (Saidel and Losocco, 2005; Wilkins and Williams, 2009). Other inconsistencies may need careful consideration of underlying assumptions and theoretical framework. The concept of active representation based on a singular and binary conception of gender has been challenged by intersectionality theorists who argue that other aspects that confer marginal status (e.g., race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation) also need attention (see Breslin, Pandey, and Riccucci, 2017). Theories attempting to provide a business case for gender balance likewise run into problems. Business case theories for gender balance expressed in terms of valuable end goals – whether these goals are social, organizational, or public policy outcomes – have to contend with the mediating and moderating role of gender diversity because these effects may not be in alignment with valued outcomes (Breslin, Pandey, and Pandey, 2017).

How should we view the issue of gender balance in public sector leadership then? The ideal of gender balance in public sector leadership should have the same “taken-for-granted” sense as our expectations of gender balance in the human population. Thus, we should accept gender balance as a terminal value and view the lack of gender balance as a problem that needs vigorous engagement and attention. Such a perspective opens us up to the reality of the gendered nature of organizations and other institutions and invites us to consider how to reform and address the inequities perpetuated by the path-dependent nature of gendered organizations and institutions. Consider a simple example. In many western countries with high levels of gender equality, women continue to be underrepresented in science and technology. Many answers are offered for this state of affairs, among them the so-called “leaky pipeline.” Contrast this with the state of affairs in former Eastern European countries. A recent edition of the *Economist* notes the following, “Eastern Europe bucks the global trend,

Smith
Excerpt
[More Information](#)

6 *Elements in Public and Nonprofit Administration*

according to a recent report from Leiden University in the Netherlands. In Lithuania, 57% of scientists and engineers are women. Bulgaria and Latvia follow close behind, at 52%.” This balanced state of affairs is not a result of programs to plug the “leaky pipeline” or other liberal initiatives. Instead, it is the result of choices made decades ago under Soviet influence to require gender balance.

Gender balance in public leadership, thus, should be regarded as a terminal value and not instrumental as is the case in prominent theories. If we see gender balance as a terminal value, then addressing the accompanying organizational, social, and structural barriers to achieving it become imperative. Accordingly, we make the enabling assumption that gender-balanced public sector leadership is right regardless of the instrumental benefits that it brings, and we thus seek to uncover a range of factors driving gender imbalance in public leadership, focusing on the case of local government management.

3 Why Do So Few Women Lead?

Before delving into the history of women in local government leadership, let us briefly review the theories of why there are so few women in leadership positions. Three key theories – on social roles, social status, and stereotyping – give us complementary viewpoints on the challenges that women face in ascending the organizational ladder.

Social roles delineate expectations for people who occupy a position or social category (Eagly and Karau, 2002: 574). Historical divisions of labor drive gendered social roles, with women serving as homemakers and men as breadwinners (Eagly and Kite, 1987; Stivers, 2002). This divided labor has translated to beliefs that women do and should behave communally and men do and should behave agentic. Communal attributes include being helpful, nurturing, gentle (Johnson et al., 2008), friendly, unselfish, concerned with others, and emotionally expressive (Eagly and Johnson, 1990). Agentic behaviors incorporate independence, mastery, assertiveness, and competence (Eagly et al., 1992); dominance (Williams and Tiedens, 2015), strength, masculinity, and tyranny (Johnson et al., 2008); control, aggression, ambition, forcefulness, and self-sufficiency (Brems and Johnson, 1990). Because leadership is associated with agentic attributes, women who engage in the agentic behavior required of leaders violate gender role expectations (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Eagly and Carli, 2003). The act of merely assuming a leadership role incurs gender penalties, as male leaders tend to be more favorably evaluated than female leaders, an advantage that intensifies in male-dominated environments (Eagly, Makhijani, and Klonsky, 1992). Social role incongruity may be one reason that women are

less likely to bend rules as they ascend the organizational ladder, because doing so involves the exercise of discretionary power that violates social roles (Portillo and DeHart-Davis, 2009).

Status theory argues that widely held cultural beliefs inhere competence and social significance to certain categories of people rather than to the disproportionate power or resources they hold. Gender comprises one type of social hierarchy, with men holding a higher status than women. While status beliefs are held at the cultural or societal level, individuals vary in alignment to their own beliefs (Ridgeway, 2001: 643). Like social role theory, status theory predicts a backlash against women who behave agentically. But status theory adds the violation of social hierarchy, with women asserting authority over others, to the reasons that female leaders elicit negative reactions and resistance (Ridgeway, 2001: 648). Under these circumstances, women are less likely to pursue top positions or they encounter much greater barriers after reaching those positions.

Gender stereotype theory also seeks to explain the dearth of women in leadership positions. As Madeline Heilman identified in 2001, stereotypes are beliefs about how groups of people do act (descriptive stereotypes) and should act (prescriptive stereotypes). Gender stereotypes encompass beliefs that women are (and should be) “kind, helpful, sympathetic, and concerned about others,” while men are (and should be) “aggressive, forceful, independent, and decisive” (Heilman, 2001: 658). When women assume leadership positions, they violate both descriptive and prescriptive beliefs about feminine behavior and thus encounter disapproval that can culminate in negative evaluations, professional successes being marginalized, less cooperation and poorer attitudes from employees, and dislike and derogation (Heilman, 2001: 661–670).

These theories all seek to shed light on gender-imbalanced organizational leadership but employ slightly different explanatory lenses for doing so: the constrained societal roles that women are expected to fulfill, the lower social status ascribed to women, and categories of beliefs about how women do and should behave all challenge the ability of women to behave as leaders. As we progress through the Element, we will see all of these angles represented, beginning with the history of women in local government management.

4 Women in Local Government Management: A Historical Overview

A formal awareness of gender-imbalanced leadership in local government management dates back to 1973, during a time of both social turmoil and social progress. Congress had passed the Equal Employment Opportunity Act the year

Smith
Excerpt
[More Information](#)

8 *Elements in Public and Nonprofit Administration*

prior; President Nixon appointed the first female cabinet secretary; and Billy Jean King defeated Bobby Riggs in a Battle of the Sexes tennis match. The Vietnam War ended as the Cold War raged, the Watergate investigations kicked into gear, and oil and gas prices were astronomical. The nation was engaged in an internal struggle with its own traditions, norms, and deeply cherished beliefs.

During this time of social upheaval, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) devoted a special issue in its magazine *Public Management* to the status of women in the profession (1973). The article, written by then-staffer Claire Rubin, calculated an abysmal 1 percent of ICMA membership comprising women, including only 15 of 2,523 US cities run by women, and only 24 elected women mayors.

ICMA followed up this special issue by forming the first Task Force on Women in the Profession in 1974, which issued its report in 1976. At the time, ICMA's membership of 2,802 chief administrative officers included only 36 women, roughly 1 percent. The task force report characterized obstacles faced by women as pre-entry barriers and post-entry barriers. The term "pre-entry barriers" described broader social forces, both formal and informal, that stood in the way of women obtaining managerial positions, for example, lack of educational opportunities and a lack of role models. The report also identified seven post-entry barriers, which affect women after they enter the local government workforce. Notable among these barriers were differential performance expectations, stereotypes, and role expectations. Women were expected to work "smarter and harder" and with less support from the organization. The task force documented a range of rampant stereotypes about women that had an invisible but profound effect on opportunities available to them in the management profession. In an insightful comment on gendered role expectations and the need to change them, the report noted, "it is necessary for women and men to consciously examine the stereotypes and myths surrounding working women to see if there is any validity, and not to generalize that all women fit certain assumptions" (p. 8).

In 1978, women still made up only about 10 percent of municipal managers at the department head level or above (Burns, 1980). By 1986, there were more than 100 female city managers (Slack, 1987), showing incremental progress, but still fewer than 10 percent. Ten years later, there were 432 women city managers in ICMA's database, making up 12.1 percent of total chief administrative officers (CAOs) (Fox and Schuhmann, 1999).

The second ICMA Task Force on Women in the Profession issued its report in 2014 under the leadership of Bonnie Svrcek, ICMA's second female president, and chaired by Pamela Antil and Tamara Letourneau (ICMA, 2014). With sixty-eight task force members at hand, the report highlighted inequities of senior

level recruitment in the city management profession that effectively discriminated against women candidates. At the time of the 2014 report, 14.4 percent of ICMA's member CAOs were women, representing roughly 516 members. The 2014 report presented widespread perceptions of gender bias by elected leadership at the local level and strongly recommended expanding gender bias awareness and anti-harassment training to elected officials. Referring to the first task force report, the second task force acknowledged lowering pre-entry social barriers but underscored the persistence of age-old barriers, including the role of elected officials that tend to be mostly male in the selection of the local government manager, the protégé (or "good old boy") system, female stereotypes, and lack of upward mobility assignments for women (p. 33).

Women now make up only 17 percent of city or county managers,⁴ and women of color comprise a miniscule 1.39 percent of managers (ICMA, 2012). While these percentages are abysmally small, they nonetheless represent gains for local government management, a profession that has been slow to incorporate women into its leadership ranks. We next venture into the patterns of interview results that reveal possible explanations for why local government management has been so slow to become gender inclusive.

5 Gendered Career Paths in Local Government Management

Currently, women make up almost half the labor force in the United States and have been earning more undergraduate and graduate degrees than men for quite some time (Catalyst, 2019). Even with these advances though, gender diversity in the upper levels of public sector organizations remains elusive (Ricucci, 2009). While existing research has examined the individual, organizational, and institutional factors associated with attaining leadership positions, less is known about the career paths that lead to these positions (Acker, 1990; Bowling, Kelleher, and Jones, 2006; Smith and Monaghan, 2013). We use sequence analysis methods to examine the career paths of forty-one women and men who have reached top-level positions in county governments in the US state of North Carolina. While some studies have examined career paths in public service (e.g., Watson and Hassett, 2004; Buckwalter and Parsons, 2000), to our knowledge, none of these studies have employed sequence analysis techniques. The purpose of our career path analysis is to identify types of career patterns in local government and the extent to which there are gender differences in careers in this sector.

⁴ <https://icma.org/data-icma-women-members-profession>

Smith
Excerpt
[More Information](#)

10 *Elements in Public and Nonprofit Administration*

Our findings suggest there are two types of careers that lead to the top-level county manager positions and that the careers of the women and the men who hold these positions differ based on gender. Next, we describe the data and methods used in our career path analysis, present our results, and offer concluding remarks.

5.1 Data and Methods

Our sample comprises complete career paths for forty-one individuals who held county manager positions in North Carolina county governments. To generate career histories, we used resumes provided by the county managers. To gather resumes, the research team sent email requests to all 100 county managers in the US state of North Carolina between fall 2018 and spring 2019. We followed our first email request with two follow-up email requests. In the end, we received 41 resumes (41 percent of county managers). In addition to resumes, we used LinkedIn profiles and internet searches to confirm information about the managers' careers as well as demographic characteristics.

While a sample size of forty-one career histories for county managers in North Carolina is small, this sample provides ample opportunity to investigate career patterns in public service for several reasons.⁵ First, by restricting our sample to a particular type of local government manager in a single US state – county managers in North Carolina – we control for variation in careers that may occur because of geography or type of local government (i.e., county vs. city). Second, using geographic and local government type restrictions limits our sampling frame to only 100 individuals (all 100 county managers in North Carolina). While 41 resumes is a small number, it is more than 40 percent of the population of county managers in North Carolina. Finally, with its highly professionalized workforce and strong county government system, county managers in North Carolina can be considered an extreme case allowing for detailed examination of careers in local government, particularly with respect to gender imbalances in leadership (Patton, 1990).

Resumes were coded to establish a complete career path for each individual. For each year of employment through March 2019, the type of employment was coded from a set of ten categories. *Local government manager* included top-level positions such as city, county, or town manager. *Local government second-level manager* included positions such as assistant town manager or deputy town manager. *Local government other* included any other local government employment. For example, positions such as budget analyst or planner were

⁵ We follow Blair-Loy's (1999) sample selection rationale in her examination of career patterns for fifty-six women in finance careers.