

# STUDENT LEADERSHIP PERCEPTIONS REGARDING RESILIENCE AND SELF-EFFICACY

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*Resilience and self-efficacy are emerging issues in student-leadership literature. As malleable skills, these concepts show potential to positively influence leadership development and appropriately prepare students for engagement with an increasingly diverse workforce and social change beyond graduation. This qualitative study utilized open-ended interviews and directed content analysis to explore leadership perceptions of female college students (n=6) at a regional, public university in Northwest Louisiana. The student narratives are consistent with previous research demonstrating the importance of relationship building, personal characteristics, and external influences in student leadership perceptions. Additionally, this investigation extends the research by giving specific consideration to the concepts of resilience and self-efficacy within the students' narratives. Observations regarding differences in gender and race are also noted where appropriate.*

In their efforts to prepare all college students for a diverse workforce and complex social issues following graduation, student affairs practitioners appropriately attend to leadership development on college campuses. However, leadership and its development have proven to be complex concepts which have multiple influences and evade clear definitions (Northouse, 2007). In recent studies, self-efficacy and resilience have demonstrated an influence on leadership development (Hannah, Avolio, Luthans, & Harms, 2008; Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011). The current study

proposes to extend the investigation into the relationship among self-efficacy, resilience, and leadership with specific focus on female college students. Expanding the investigation into the role of self-efficacy and resilience in leadership behavior would enhance our understanding of the phenomenon and provide information to student leadership development efforts. These considerations may serve not only to prepare student leaders, but also to minimize barriers, such as lack of confidence, role expectations, and biases which limit leadership opportunities for women (Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Haber, 2011).

According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy is the individual's belief about his or her capabilities to affect change. Several investigations (Dugan, Komives, & Segar, 2008; Haber, 2012; McCormick, Tanguma, & Lopez-Forment, 2002; Shertzer & Schuh, 2004) have explored the relationship between college student beliefs and leadership development. These explorations conclude that students' beliefs about their abilities influence their leadership choices, behaviors, and development. Shertzer and Schuh (2004) assert there are empowering-versus-constraining beliefs which either enhance or inhibit student action with respect to leadership opportunities. Gender differences have been noted in the relationship between leadership and self-efficacy in college students. Women report lower levels of self-efficacy despite higher levels of leadership capacity (Dugan et al., 2008) and no differences in the number of leadership roles in which they engage (McCormick et al., 2002).

Generally viewed as a process for effectively adapting to significant stressors, resilience has proven to be a difficult concept to define (Richardson, 2002). Current thinking is that resilience is more than a response to or simple recovery from difficult circumstances, but a process of adaptation and growth which builds upon internal strengths (Richardson, 2002). While much of the resilience literature is situated in developmental and clinical psychology (Windle, 2010), a review of the literature reveals emerging interest between resilience and outcomes in higher education. For example, a review reveals investigations into academic outcomes (Cassidy, 2015), adjustment to the college environment (Pidgeon, Rowe, Stapleton, Magyar, & Lo, 2014), and coping skills in college students (Hartley, 2012). In a study of college students of color, Brown (2008) reported

interpersonal interactions and social supports contribute to an individual's resilience. These studies indicate resilience provides protection against social and environmental stressors. While resilience in leadership has been explored in relation to job satisfaction, job performance, work/life happiness and organizational commitment (Luthans & Youseff-Morgan, 2017), investigations into the potential influence of resilience on student leadership are limited.

Cassidy (2015) and Schwarzer and Warner (2013) assert a positive relationship between self-efficacy and resilience. That is, when faced with challenges, individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy cope better and are more resilient. Less efficacious individuals show less ability to cope with challenges. These studies are important to the current investigation in that they add to an understanding of the relationship between resilience and self-efficacy. The relationship may be instrumental in understanding college students' adjustment as much of their stress, and subsequently, their ability or desire to engage in leadership opportunities arises from academic tasks. While the existing literature provides some guidance on the potential influence of self-efficacy and resilience on leadership in college students, additional information is needed to better understand how these constructs influence leadership development. Gaining a better understanding of the relationship may inform student leadership development efforts and prepare future leaders.

## **METHOD**

### *Participants*

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, students from a regional public university in Northwest Louisiana participated in the investigation. According to Robinson (2014), a sample size between 3 and 16 is sufficient when results target a specific group and are not intended to generalize to the larger population. A convenience sampling strategy was intentionally selected as the objective was to gather in-depth information and a rich understanding of students' lived experiences (Klenke, 2015). The participants were recruited through chain-referral sampling, beginning with two students known by the researcher. Snowball sampling identified additional participants as each of the initial students referred other female students. A total of six students participated in the

study. Prior to beginning each interview, the students were informed of the purpose of the study, confidentiality and its limits, and the voluntary nature of their participation.

Although small, this sample of students reflected the characteristics relevant to the study; that is, all participants were female, from diverse backgrounds and had varying experiences with leadership. Additionally, all participants represented a variety of academic majors, ranging in age from 22 to 26 years. The students' experience included formal and informal leadership positions in employment, athletics, academic organizations, honor societies, and Greek organizations. Half of the participants had leadership experience, both prior to and during college. Two of the participants engaged in leadership experiences only after beginning college. The final participant identified minimal experience related to her off-campus job. Four of the participants were seniors and two were recent graduates with plans to enter graduate school. Half of the participants identified as Caucasian. Of the three other participants, one identified as Hispanic, one identified as Indian, and one identified as African American. The two graduate students were also international students and had lived in the United States for the past six years.

### *Procedures*

While leadership perceptions can be investigated through either quantitative or qualitative methods, the researchers determined qualitative methodology to be the most appropriate, as the primary objective was to identify and understand rather than quantify college students' perceptions of leadership (Creswell, 2013). The exploration incorporated the researcher's observations with a semi-structured interview. The interview protocol comprised of five demographic questions and seven broad questions about their perceptions of leadership as well as their personal leadership experience. The five demographic questions were used to establish rapport with the participants and thus increase trustworthiness (Klenke, 2015). The interview protocol, adapted from Armino, Carter, Jones, Kruger, Lucas, Washington, Young, and Scott (2000), can be found in the Appendix. Although the interview protocol was administered consistently to all participants, the researcher remained flexible and rephrased or clarified questions in an effort to further ensure trustworthiness (Klenke, 2015).

The student interviews were audio recorded and the recordings transcribed via computer-assisted transcription (Trint.com). The researcher edited the text of the transcribed interviews for accuracy and analyzed the transcripts using directed content analysis. As described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), this process utilizes categories which are defined before and during the analysis and derived from theory rather than from the data. A review of college student leadership literature revealed several primary concepts related to college student leadership development, including relationship building, personal characteristics, influences, and leadership outcomes. These categories were further explored for examples or concepts related to self-efficacy and resilience within the students' narratives.

To analyze the themes, the researcher initially read all six transcriptions twice to become familiar with both the content and the context in which it was presented. The researcher then re-read all the transcripts to identify content matching associated concepts identified in the literature. Each of the six transcripts was evaluated and highlighted for one major category prior to considering a subsequent category. Each of the six transcripts was then coded for each of the four major categories. Examples of self-efficacy and resilience were coded separately within each of the major categories.

## **RESULTS**

Despite unique personalities and backgrounds, similarities emerged in responses to the broad concept of leadership. Further, these responses were consistent with themes from college student leadership literature which conceptualizes leadership as relational, a developmental process, and focused on shared values and goals. For instance, beyond their personal characteristics, all participants provided examples of building relationships with supportive individuals which was understood as foundational to their own leadership development. Additionally, all students framed their leadership development in terms of their connection with or impact on others, and they seemed to consider the outcomes of their performance in their evaluation of their leadership outcomes. Of particular interest to this investigation, concepts associated with self-efficacy and resilience were also interwoven into the narratives.

Themes of self-efficacy and resilience were heard in Sarah's narrative, especially in her interactions with others and decisions to make different

choices for herself. Sarah, a Caucasian student, is completing her final semester of study. She reported gradually assuming several leadership positions on campus, both formal and informal, especially in response to others communicating confidence in her. Throughout the interview, she was quiet and reserved. She responded to the inquiries with a questioning intonation that seemed to seek validation of her responses. Unlike other students interviewed, her initial description of leadership was one of position. Yet, she also revealed experiences in which she characterized a leader as a caring friend or a mentor who “helps you be better.” She believed females frequently feel “intimidated,” resulting in males dominating or taking the lead. However, she also acknowledged overcoming this apprehensive attitude by developing trusting relationships which facilitated her ability to “push through” her “comfort zone” and become more engaged. When discussing the impact of a trusted mentor she stated, “I think really anybody could be a leader if they really pushed towards it. Because I know when I started college, I was never going to be in any leadership position and I’d kinda go to class, go home.” Sarah recognized her own lack of confidence and responded to trusting relationships to assist in the development of her self-efficacy. Interestingly, once she found her voice, Sarah indicated that her confidence grew with each positive experience. By her account, this internal change resulted through others listening to her and validating her own voice. She stated, “A lot of the time, you’re not always heard, and to have someone listen to you helps create change in you.”

The ability to adapt was also seen in the narrative of Ann, a graduate student. Raised in Africa, Ann identified as Indian. She was lively and opinionated during the interview. Ann readily acknowledged both her struggle with the strongly defined gender roles in her native culture and with acclimating to Western culture. She desired not to be confined by a rigid gender role yet struggled to resist her habitual behaviors and perceptions of others’ expectations. By “coming from such a narrow place,” so different from her current environment, she was fearful to practice autonomy and exert her own voice. Being open to and accepting of others’ perspectives allowed her to re-evaluate and learn to see challenges and criticism as a path forward rather than a constraining belief. She now welcomes challenge and chooses “not to be afraid.”

Mary, an African American student, was soft-spoken and mildly deferential in her manner. While she had the least formal experience in a leadership role at college, Mary emphasized the importance of positive interpersonal experiences and cultural values to effective leadership. She commented that the relationship “establishes everything. If you’re not comfortable with someone, if you don’t respect someone, they are not a leader to you.” However, in contrast to Sarah who pushed herself, actively seeking interactions to spark internal change and involvement, Mary did not actively pursue any type of leadership position. Mary acknowledged her shyness, but also observed differences in values between leadership approaches within the African American and Caucasian communities which may have also inhibited her involvement. Mary described leadership on campus as focused on the individual. By contrast, she described a collectivistic approach to African American leadership when she stated, “We shoulder the burden together . . . you know, we all try to come to aid when needed . . . Because, it’s been, this has been instilled in us, like, if this person fails, we all fail. It’s a team effort.” Further, Mary expressed her belief that a more collectivist approach helps African Americans to adapt and confront social challenges.

Growth through adversity, a foundational concept of resilience, was seen in two of the narratives (Ungar, 2014). One of these students, Bea, was extremely open and gregarious. She was mildly tangential and laughed easily. By contrast, Beth presented as very soft-spoken and slightly disengaged. Both described being bullied as young adolescents and the subsequent negative impact on their beliefs about themselves. Despite the negative impact, each described later influences which strengthened them. For example, following years of bullying and internalizing others’ beliefs that she was incapable, Bea participated in a Louisiana Youth Seminar. She credited this experience with changing her beliefs about herself. Bea stated, “actually hearing ‘you can do this’ and ‘you’re capable’” provided the opportunity to reframe previous negative beliefs to more positive, productive beliefs. Through being encouraged and socially supported, Bea began to view her behaviors as leadership potential and strengths rather than her previously held belief as something “wrong with her.” Beth had a similar realization in her beliefs about her ability to lead following exposure to a supportive, caring campus environment. She defined

the supportive environment as one “that appreciates you and what you are doing.” Once she felt less isolated, her self-efficacy reportedly improved, and she voluntarily took on leadership roles in several organizations.

Amelia’s narrative illustrated optimism or a positive outlook as a concept which has been associated with self-efficacy and resilience (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). Haber (2011) also revealed positivity as an interpersonal characteristic consistent with student perceptions of leadership. Amelia, a graduate student from Mexico, presented as very soft-spoken and reflective in her responses. Like Ann, Amelia described needing to adapt to her environment. However, she drew a connection between positivity and forward thinking to “adapting and overcoming.” Amelia revealed she attended a very expensive and demanding high school: one she would not have been able to attend without a scholarship. She felt extreme pressure, did not feel a sense of belonging, and was challenged to fit into the demanding environment. However, she found guidance in her athletic trainer/life coach who provided a positive worldview and taught her to “keep it positive.” More than social support, he provided a model for positivity and forward thinking. That is, her coach instructed her on how to look beyond current challenges, recognize her ability to adapt, and persevere.

### **LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS**

In addition to the small sample size, there are several limitations related to the sample in this study. All six participants in this study were upperclassmen at a single regional university. Further, the majority of the participants were actively involved in student leadership on campus. As a result, the consistency of their responses and uniformity of themes may be related to their individual stage of leadership development and current lifestyle activities. Additional studies to include both a wider age range of participants and those not actively engaged in student activities may address potential differences in identity development.

### **DISCUSSION**

Interviews of the six women revealed themes of self-efficacy and resilience woven into their leadership narratives. The students described various themes which fell into several categories, including adapting to change, overcoming obstacles, growing through adversity during college,



and having a positive frame of reference and future orientation. The narratives illustrated leadership outcomes resulting from the interactions of their internal characteristics with external influences, such as social interactions, culture, and supportive environments. All students referred to a caring environment and the development of supportive relationships as foundational in their personal and leadership development.

Many of their descriptions parallel resilience theory. Resilience theory conceptualizes resilience as a process of adaptation and growth which builds upon internal strengths (Richardson, 2002; Ungar, 2014). This conceptualization encompasses self-efficacy beliefs in that efficacy beliefs determine not only how you think, but also how (if) you choose to act (Schwarzer & Warner, 2013). For example, some students recognized negative beliefs about themselves which limited their interaction, personal growth, and leadership development. However, encouragement and social support facilitated a re-evaluation of their perceptions, allowed new decisions, and increased their engagement in leadership opportunities. As a result, most of these women were able to move beyond challenges, engage, and grow in their leadership development. These students' narratives reflect positivity, another concept associated with students' perceptions of leadership (Haber, 2011). Accessing positive emotions, especially in times of stress, leads to a strengthening of personal resources and facilitates adaptive coping (Fredrickson, 2001). Sarah's narrative illustrates this growth in her description of gaining confidence and increasing engagement. As she stated, "I mean you can see at least a slight change in their perspective, their outlook, being leaders . . . You can really see growth in them."

With increasing diversity on campuses and in the workforce, it is important to consider racial, cultural, and gender influences in leadership development (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). Two students noted how their cultural beliefs created barriers to their integration into a different cultural environment. Ann initially struggled with individuating from her family's gender expectations and worked to assimilate values from the Western culture. While Ann was able to successfully challenge her beliefs regarding rigid gender roles and become successfully involved, Mary remained disengaged on campus. One explanation may be found in her acknowledgment of differences between the individualism of the

Caucasian community and the collectivism of the African American community. With the primary focus on the individual in the leadership position rather than on the common goal, some students may feel less motivated to engage, especially with regard to student leadership and the development of a campus community.

Listening to students' experiences provides student affairs practitioners with some insights into the complexity of leadership development and the important roles self-efficacy and resilience play in leadership development. As illustrated by these students' narratives, an inclusive, supportive climate is instrumental in developing an individual student's belief not only in their own capabilities, but also in the ability to adapt to change and grow through adversity. These skills will serve them well on-campus, but more importantly, as future leaders in negotiating the challenges associated with a diverse, global environment and the complex issues surrounding social change.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview Protocol

Intro to study and informed consent:

alias: \_\_\_\_\_

Age:

Classification:

Gender

Race:

Leadership Roles:

1. Many concepts come to mind when we think of the role of a leader. In broad terms, share with me what you think of when you consider leadership or the role of a leader. Share an example.
2. Complete this sentence: "When serving in a leadership role, I...: (Consider follow up questions based upon initial response, i.e., formal v. informal; "type," cohesion, common goal, etc.)
3. To what do you attribute this ability or skill? (Possible follow ups: models, values, innate, etc.)
4. What are some of the changes in your perceptions or skills since you've been in college? Or changes that you've seen in others during their college experience?
5. Consider the setting in which you are a leader. What is the setting or culture of that organization? How does it feel to be a part of this organization?
6. Within your organization, do you see any differences in the ways leadership occurs for men and women? (Follow up questions regarding motivation? Perception of others? Expectations?)
7. Within your organization, do you see any differences in the ways leadership occurs for students of color and white students? (Follow up questions regarding motivation, perception of others, expectations?)